



## From potential to practice: Assessing the management of heritage communication at the Ham Rong Historical-Cultural Relic Site in Thanh Hoa Province

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### Abstract

The Ham Rong Historical-Cultural Relic Site in Thanh Hoa Province carries many layers of heritage value, including revolutionary history, Dong Son archaeology, Buddhist spirituality, geological features, and the architecture of an ancient village. However, the management of heritage communication at the site does not yet match this rich potential. From the perspective of cultural heritage management theory and modern communication studies, this article assesses the current state of heritage communication management at Ham Rong based on a quantitative survey of 177 tourists and in-depth interviews with three interpretation officers at the Ham Rong site, conducted in 2026. The findings reveal a structural paradox: while the direct visitor experience receives moderately positive ratings, with 74.6% of tourists willing to recommend the site, the external communication system remains weak in digital application, multilingual content, signage, and channel integration. The article argues that the main gap lies in the institutional and organisational arrangements rather than in human attitude or heritage substance, and it identifies four priority directions for reform.

**Keywords:** Heritage communication management, Ham Rong relic site, intangible cultural heritage, digital communication, Thanh Hoa Province

### Introduction

Heritage communication has become a central function of heritage management in Vietnam, especially since the issuance of the Law on Cultural Heritage 2024, which devotes Article 26 to the promotion of heritage values and Article 86 to communication, education, and the use of digital platforms in heritage activities (National Assembly, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>. In the context of rising cultural tourism and rapid digital transformation, the way a heritage site communicates with the public has become a decisive factor in turning heritage potential into social and economic value.

Within this context, the Ham Rong Historical-Cultural Relic Site in Hamrong Ward, Thanh Hoa Province, occupies a special position. According to Decision No. 581/QĐ-UBND dated 12 February 2019 of the People's Committee of Thanh Hoa Province, the relic complex includes eight component sites: Ham Rong Bridge, Ham Rong Mountain, Long Quang Cave, Quyet Thang Hill, Truc Lam Ham Rong Zen Monastery, the Temple dedicated to Heroic Vietnamese Mothers and Revolutionary Martyrs, the Ancient Village of Dong Son, and Ngoc Mountain (People's Committee of Thanh Hoa, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>. The site combines revolutionary history (the 1965 victory in defending Ham Rong Bridge), archaeology of international value (the cradle of the Dong Son bronze culture), Buddhist spirituality, and a karst landscape along the Ma River.

Despite this potential, several studies and field reports have noted that the heritage communication function at Ham Rong is still underdeveloped, especially when compared with other historical complexes such as Hue, Hoi An, and the Thang Long Imperial Citadel. While previous research on heritage in Thanh Hoa has focused mainly on conservation, archaeology, and tourism planning, fewer studies have placed the communication function at the centre of analysis. This article aims to address that gap. It

identifies the current state of heritage communication management at Ham Rong from the perspective of cultural heritage management theory, and it analyses the structural causes of the gap between heritage potential and communication practice. The findings are intended to serve as an empirical basis for policy reform at provincial heritage sites in Vietnam.

### Theoretical Basis and Research Approach

This study draws on two related theoretical strands. The first is the theory of heritage interpretation and communication. Freeman Tilden's classic principles emphasise that effective heritage interpretation does not simply transfer factual information; it should provoke reflection, reveal deeper meaning, and connect the heritage object with the lived experience of the visitor (Tilden, 1977, pp. 8-13) <sup>[9]</sup>. From this perspective, heritage communication is not a marketing tool added to the heritage site, but a core function that gives meaning to the heritage in the eyes of contemporary publics. The second strand is the theory of communication management. According to Nguyen Van Dung and Do Thi Thu Hang, communication management can be analysed through a five-step cycle of planning, organising, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating, supported by SWOT analysis and SMART objective setting (Nguyen & Do, 2012, pp. 45-60) <sup>[6]</sup>. When applied to heritage sites, this cycle covers the formulation of a communication strategy, the construction of a competent organisational unit, the development of content and channels, the monitoring of outputs, and the evaluation of social impact.

This article combines the two strands in a single analytical framework. It treats heritage communication not as an abstract value statement but as a working management function that must be observed at the institutional, content, channel, and audience levels. This framework is consistent

with the 2003 UNESCO Convention, which defines intangible cultural heritage as a living set of practices and expressions that communities continuously recreate in interaction with their environment (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 2-3) [10]. It also follows the spirit of Smith (2006, pp. 44-46), who argues that heritage value is not a fixed attribute but is constructed through discourse, practice, and social recognition [8].

### Research Methods

The empirical part of this article is based on a mixed-methods design carried out in 2026 at the Ham Rong site. The quantitative component used a structured questionnaire of 42 items, including single-choice, multiple-choice, five-point Likert, and open questions. A sample of 177 tourists was surveyed at the site. The sample reflects a diverse demographic profile. By gender, 55.9% are male, 42.9% are female, and 1.1% identify as other. By education, 48.6% hold a bachelor's degree and 15.8% hold a postgraduate degree. By occupation, 36.7% are pupils or students. By residence, 32.2% live in Thanh Hoa Province, 22.6% come from other northern provinces, and 19.8% are international visitors. Notably, 51.4% are first-time visitors. The data were processed using descriptive statistics and cross-analysis by residence group.

The qualitative component consisted of in-depth interviews with three interpretation officers working at the Ham Rong site, all of whom are specialists at the Hamrong Ward Public Service Provision Centre: Ms. Pham Thi Huong Ly, with a degree in Cultural Studies; Ms. Tran Thi Ngan, with a degree in Cultural Management; and Ms. Pham Thi Hang, with a degree in History. The interviews followed a semi-structured guide that covered the five management functions used in the conceptual framework. The Likert scale was interpreted in five classification bands of 0.8-point width: 1.00 to 1.80 very poor, 1.81 to 2.60 poor, 2.61 to 3.40 average, 3.41 to 4.20 good, and 4.21 to 5.00 very good.

### Results and Analysis

#### Visitor Channels and Digital Behaviour

The survey identifies a clear gap between how visitors actually learn about the site and where the site invests its communication efforts. When asked about the channels through which they learned about Ham Rong, 48.0% of tourists named friends or relatives, 40.7% named social media, 23.2% named tour operators, 19.8% named schools or workplaces, 19.2% named press and television, and only 8.5% named leaflets or printed posters at the site.

The behaviour of pre-trip information search confirms the dominance of digital platforms. Google leads with 75.1% of responses, followed by Facebook at 74.6%, Zalo at 43.5%, YouTube at 41.8%, and TikTok at 33.9%. However, all three officers confirm that the site does not yet have an official website, an official Facebook page, a QR-code system, or any dedicated mobile application. Ms. Pham Thi Hang reported that she had used her own money to buy video equipment and posted content on her personal account, but admitted that this was a private effort and was not sustainable. This mismatch between visitor behaviour and institutional presence is the structural origin of the low ratings later observed for digital indicators.

### Content and Form of Communication

The survey applied a five-point Likert scale to 15 indicators covering content, form, and effectiveness of communication. Only one indicator reached the "good" band: "reflects the historical and cultural value of the site" at 3.41 points. Eight indicators fell within the "average" band (2.61 to 3.40), and six indicators fell within the "poor" band (2.08 to 2.58). No indicator reached the "very good" level.

The three highest-rated indicators are all linked to the substance of the heritage and to direct human interaction: reflection of historical and cultural value at 3.41 points, traditional educational value at 3.36 points, and quality of direct narration by guides at 3.36 points. By contrast, the three lowest-rated indicators are all related to technical infrastructure and language access: multilingual versions at 2.08 points, effective digital application at 2.20 points, and clear signage at 2.30 points.

International visitors, who account for 19.8% of the sample, rated the multilingual indicator at only 1.69 points, the lowest score in the entire dataset. This finding directly confirms that the site is not yet able to serve international audiences. An open-ended question on content needs further sharpens the picture: 66.1% of tourists wish for stories of battles and revolutionary heroes, 61.0% for historical images, 53.1% for video documentaries, 47.5% for digital maps and virtual tours, and 46.3% for content about Dong Son culture.

### Management Functions

The interviews with Ms. Ly, Ms. Ngan, and Ms. Hang expose a coherent set of weaknesses across all five management functions. In terms of planning, all three officers agreed that the site has neither a short-term nor a long-term communication strategy. Communication activities are organised in response to events such as the annual commemoration of the 1965 victory, rather than guided by a written plan with SMART objectives and a defined budget. In terms of organisation, no specialised unit or full-time staff member is in charge of communication; the few activities that take place are carried out by administrative or interpretation staff in addition to their regular duties.

In terms of resources, the site does not have a separate budget line for communication. All three officers identified financial shortage as a critical barrier. Ms. Hang summarised the situation in a striking phrase: "There is a lack of people, a lack of money, and a lack of equipment, and every communication effort depends on personal enthusiasm." This statement points to the deep institutional nature of the problem. In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the unit has no KPIs and no system for measuring communication outputs; quality is judged by intuition and informal feedback. This finding is consistent with the survey result, in which the indicator "level of integration among communication channels" received only 2.20 points and the indicator "level of information updating" received 2.22 points, both in the poor band.

In terms of coordination, links with travel agencies, schools, the local community, and digital companies are weak and occasional. The Likert indicator "coordination with businesses, education, and the press" stands at 2.53 points, with 51.4% of tourists rating it at 1 or 2 points.

### Visitor Experience and the Structural Paradox

Despite the weak external communication system, the direct visitor experience at the site is rated more positively. After the visit, 59.3% of tourists reported a positive emotional response, and 74.6% expressed willingness to recommend the site to others. The indicator “service attitude of staff” reached 3.53 points, the highest score in the management section. This produces a structural paradox: when visitors arrive at the site, the on-site experience is reasonably strong, but the external reach of the communication system is weak. The natural willingness of nearly three quarters of tourists to recommend the site is not converted into systematic online presence or amplified word-of-mouth. This finding suggests that the bottleneck is institutional, not motivational.

### SWOT Synthesis

A SWOT analysis based on the above data can be summarised as follows. The strengths of the site are the diversity of heritage values, the broad public recognition of the 1965 victory, the positive service attitude of staff, and the favourable legal framework provided by the Law on Cultural Heritage 2024. The weaknesses include the absence of a written strategy, the lack of a specialised communication unit, the near-zero digital presence, the limited multilingual content, the fragmented signage system, and the absence of monitoring tools. The opportunities are the rising trend of cultural tourism, the readiness of digital audiences (with more than 70% of respondents using Google and Facebook), the still-unused international potential of Dong Son heritage, and the favourable provincial tourism policy. The threats include competition from beach tourism within the same province, competition from better-communicated heritage sites elsewhere, fast technological change, and the risk of commercial dilution of heritage values.

### Discussion

The results above support three main observations. First, the gap between potential and practice at Ham Rong is mainly institutional. The heritage substance is rich, the direct human interaction at the site is positive, and the legal framework is in place. What is missing is the management architecture that would turn these conditions into a sustainable communication system. Without a strategy, a dedicated unit, a separate budget, and an evaluation framework, even good intentions cannot scale.

Second, awareness alone is not enough. All three officers clearly understand the importance of communication and identify the same weaknesses. However, their awareness is not supported by the institutional conditions needed for implementation. This finding refines a common assumption in heritage discourse: the priority issue at provincial sites is not to raise awareness about communication, but to create the structural conditions in which existing awareness can become effective practice.

Third, the case of Ham Rong has wider implications for provincial heritage sites in Vietnam. Compared with leading sites such as Hue, Hoi An, and the Thang Long Imperial Citadel, the gap is not in the value of the heritage but in the maturity of the communication system. Closing this gap requires sustained institutional reform, including a dedicated communication unit, an explicit budget line, a digital

infrastructure baseline, and a formal inter-agency coordination mechanism. These reforms align with the orientation of the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage and recent national resolutions on cultural development.

### Conclusions

The Ham Rong Historical-Cultural Relic Site holds heritage value of national importance and significant tourism potential. However, the assessment based on the 2026 survey of 177 tourists and the in-depth interviews with three interpretation officers at the Ham Rong site shows that the heritage communication function remains at an average-to-poor level overall. The site performs well on the human and substantive dimensions, but performs poorly on the institutional, digital, multilingual, and infrastructural dimensions.

Four priority directions emerge from the analysis. First, the site needs a written communication strategy with clear objectives, indicators, and timelines. Second, it needs a dedicated communication and marketing unit with three to five trained staff. Third, it needs a digital baseline that includes an official website, a verified social media presence, a QR-based interpretation system, and multilingual content. Fourth, it needs a formal coordination framework that brings together the management board, the provincial cultural authorities, travel businesses, schools, and the local community.

The Ham Rong case suggests a broader lesson for the management of heritage communication at provincial sites in Vietnam. The key challenge is not the value of the heritage or the goodwill of the people who work with it, but the institutional system that connects the two. When this system is in place, the natural willingness of visitors to engage with and share heritage can be turned into a sustainable communication ecosystem.

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