

The Cultural Imprint of The Indian Diaspora in Southern Vietnam and Its Strategic Role in Vietnam-India Cultural Diplomacy: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

Southern Vietnam, historically distinguished by its profound cultural syncretism, has cultivated a diverse demographic landscape. Within this milieu, the Indian-origin diaspora, predominantly concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), has established enduring cultural imprints spanning religious architecture, gastronomy, and holistic lifestyle practices. In the contemporary geopolitical era, this community transcends its historical identity as a migrant population, emerging as a vital "living bridge" in Vietnam's international integration strategy. This paper investigates the contemporary cultural practices and heritage preservation of the Indian diaspora in HCMC to elucidate their strategic role in catalyzing Vietnam-India cultural diplomacy. Employing ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, and interdisciplinary frameworks, the study reveals that the diaspora operates a localized "heritage economy" and sustains robust grassroots public diplomacy. By functioning as an organic "cultural filter," they facilitate the Vietnamese public's receptivity to India's soft power. Ultimately, the research argues that recognizing and institutionalizing the diaspora's socio-cultural resources is imperative for deepening the Vietnam-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific context.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, cultural diplomacy, grassroots public diplomacy, heritage economy, Vietnam-India relations.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the geopolitical and economic center of gravity has decisively shifted toward the Indo-Pacific region, prompting nations to recalibrate their strategic alliances. Within this dynamic, the relationship between India and Vietnam has ascended to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, underpinned by mutual security interests and robust economic linkages (Chakraborti, 2018; Pant, 2018). Concurrently, as New Delhi rigorously advances its "Act East Policy," the projection of soft power and cultural diplomacy has become an indispensable instrument for solidifying its regional footprint (Nguyen, 2022).

While state-led diplomatic maneuvers are well-documented, the micro-level, organic conduits of bilateral relations remain underexplored. Southern Vietnam, particularly Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), has long been an open region characterized by high cultural tolerance and integration. For over a century, HCMC has hosted a resilient Indian-origin community. Through their historical settlement, they have etched profound tangible and intangible cultural footprints into the urban fabric, ranging from prominent Hindu and Islamic architectural sites to daily culinary and spiritual practices.

In the contemporary context of globalization, assessing these cultural heritages merely as historical artifacts is insufficient. Recognizing this localized "internal cultural strength" and viewing the diaspora as active agents of

grassroots public diplomacy is of paramount theoretical and practical urgency. Consequently, this paper aims to evaluate the cultural imprints of the Indian diaspora in HCMC, strategically positioning them as the foundational catalysts for promoting Vietnam-India cultural diplomacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The thematic intersection of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia and Vietnam-India bilateral relations has garnered significant scholarly attention. Existing literature can be systematically categorized into two primary strands:

Historical Footprints and Diaspora Acculturation: Foundational scholarship, such as *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* by Sandhu and Mani (1993), primarily examines the diaspora through the lens of transnational commercial networks and colonial labor migrations. In the specific context of Vietnam, local scholars have extensively mapped the community's socio-cultural integration. Phan (2013) evaluated the diaspora's role as a historical bridge for Vietnam-India friendship, while Le, Ly, and Huynh (2017) provided comprehensive ethnographic insights into the architectural legacies, religious syncretism, and daily acculturation of the Indian community in HCMC. These studies affirm that despite their relatively small demographic size, the community exerts a disproportionately profound cultural impact.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Dynamics: The second scholarly strand focuses on macro-level, state-driven diplomacy. Researchers have rigorously analyzed India's deployment of soft power—encompassing Buddhism, Yoga, and Bollywood—under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration to engage the Southeast Asian public (Tran, 2020). Public diplomacy is increasingly recognized as a stabilizing force in India-Vietnam relations, utilizing various platforms to reach diverse audiences and construct a favorable national narrative (Le & Trieu, 2021; Nguyen, 2022).

Research Gap: Despite the richness of these two distinct literatures, there is a palpable void in interdisciplinary research that directly bridges the micro-level socio-cultural practices of the diaspora with macro-level diplomatic strategies. Most current foreign policy analyses treat cultural diplomacy as a top-down, state-engineered phenomenon, inadvertently marginalizing the agency of the local diaspora. This paper seeks to bridge this critical gap. By applying the frameworks of grassroots public diplomacy and the "heritage economy," this study repositions the Indian diaspora in HCMC not merely as passive preservers of historical identity, but as active, contemporary architects of Vietnam-India soft power dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively investigate the socio-cultural dynamics and the diplomatic utility of the Indian diaspora in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), this study employs a qualitative-driven methodology, complemented by interdisciplinary analytical frameworks:

Ethnographic Fieldwork and Qualitative Interviews

The primary empirical data for this research was aggregated through immersive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in HCMC (with focal data collection spanning 2022–2023). Participant observation was systematically executed at prominent cultural and religious nodes, notably the Mariamman Hindu Temple, the Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple, and the traditional commercial enclaves along Ton That Thiep Street. To capture nuanced "voices from the field," semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted utilizing a purposive sampling technique. The participant cohort encompassed two primary demographics: (1) multi-generational Indian-origin residents and temple administrators (representing the custodians of heritage); and (2) indigenous Southern Vietnamese residents who actively engage within these intercultural spaces (representing the lens of host-society reception and syncretism). This qualitative approach facilitates the elicitation of profound personal narratives, thereby substantiating the organic acculturation processes and phenomena of religious syncretism.

Historical and Interdisciplinary Analysis

Historical and logical methods were deployed to reconstruct the migration trajectories and settlement patterns of the Indian community in Southern Vietnam from the French colonial era to the contemporary period. These are used to reconstruct the migration trajectory of the Indian community to Southern Vietnam and deduce patterns of cultural acculturation.

Furthermore, the study operationalizes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework bridging Cultural Anthropology and International Relations to code and analyze the qualitative data. This conceptual triangulation

enables the transmutation of micro-level socio-cultural phenomena (e.g., religious practices, culinary adaptations) into macro-level theoretical discourse regarding grassroots public diplomacy and soft power. By integrating Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and International Relations, the research evaluates the diplomatic and "heritage economy" potential of these cultural imprints.

Overview of the Settlement Process and Characteristics of the Indian Diaspora in Ho Chi Minh City

Regarding the migration trajectory: Indian migration to Saigon - Southern Vietnam occurred predominantly from the late 19th to the early 20th century, tracing commercial routes during the French colonial administration. The majority originated from Southern India (specifically Tamil ethnic groups and the Chettiar merchant community), alongside a notable Muslim segment. The earliest migrants to Saigon were largely employees of French trading firms from Indian cities such as Mahé, Pondichéry, and Karikal, arriving shortly after the French conquest of Saigon. Subsequently, another cohort of Indian immigrants arrived from British India. These were predominantly Tamils from the Coromandel Coast (South India), historically referred to as "Malabars" or "Chetty" (Chettiers). As adherents of Hinduism, they established three temples in Saigon, the largest of which was located on Ohier street. They engaged in various trades, establishing themselves as textile and jewelry merchants, shopkeepers, bankers, and moneylenders (Phan, 2013). During that era, Indian migrants typically resided near historic markets and port areas. As dynamic merchants operating across commercial sectors, their highest demographic concentration was in the market vicinity near the city center. By the early 20th century, the Indian immigrant community in Saigon - HCMC exhibited an upward demographic trend, largely catalyzed by favorable business environments. Conversely, Indians migrating to HCMC post-1975 have predominantly been short-term business travelers, resulting in a fluctuating and transient population.

Regarding residential and livelihood characteristics: Unlike the Chinese diaspora, which established large-scale, distinct enclaves (such as Cho Lon), Indian migrants typically aggregated into small clusters within central socio-economic hubs (e.g., the vicinity of Ben Thanh Market and Ton That Thiep Street in District 1; or specific areas in District 6 and the former Phu Nhuan District). Their primary occupations encompassed commerce (currency exchange, textile trading), services, and gastronomy. Currently, according to estimations by the Consulate General of India, the Indian community in Vietnam comprises approximately 4,000 to 6,000 individuals, the majority of whom reside in HCMC. They are predominantly employed in sectors including business, information technology, oil and gas, and education (such as Yoga instruction) (VnExpress.net, 2025).

Regarding community cohesion and integration: Despite enduring numerous historical vicissitudes, this community maintains a robust degree of social cohesion. A distinctive hallmark of their settlement process is the paradigm of "integration without assimilation"; they have actively adopted the Vietnamese language and daily lifestyle while fiercely preserving their core religious values and traditional practices. Wherever they migrate, the Indian diaspora diligently safeguards their ethnic heritage, a commitment most visibly manifested through the construction of Hindu temples in all areas of Indian settlement. For this community, temples serve not merely as public architectural landmarks or communal gathering spaces for compatriots, but fundamentally as sacred sites that fulfill the indispensable spiritual needs inherent in their daily traditional customs, which they have faithfully sustained upon relocating to a new homeland.

Cultural Imprints of the Indian Diaspora in HCMC: A Paradigm of Deep Acculturation

The interaction between the Indian and Vietnamese communities in HCMC is a prime example of cultural acculturation, occurring in fields such as religion, attire, and socio-economic life. The presence of the Indian diaspora in Southern Vietnam transcends mere physical coexistence; it embodies a profound process of cultural creation and assimilation. This dynamic has significantly contributed to the diverse "internal strength" of the Southern region, vividly manifested across three core dimensions:

Religious Syncretism and the Transformation of Sacred Spaces

Religion remains the most visible imprint of the Indian diaspora. The construction of Hindu temples by the Chettiers not only served spiritual needs but also created architectural landmarks in the urban landscape.

In HCMC, the Indian diaspora has established a diverse network of religious institutions, characterized notably by South Indian architectural Hindu temples (such as the Mariamman and Sri Thenday Yuthapani temples) and Islamic mosques (such as Jamia Al-Musulman). Academically significant is the evolution of these sacred spaces, which have transcended their exclusive intra-community functions to become unique phenomena of "religious syncretism." Over time, these temples have dismantled ethnic boundaries, emerging as shared spiritual sanctuaries for the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer populations. The most compelling evidence of this is the "localization"

of foreign deities; for instance, Goddess Mariamman has been organically integrated into the Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship system, affectionately indigenized as "Bà Đen" (The Black Lady) or "Bà Chúa Xứ người Ấn" (The Indian Lady of the Realm). This Vietnamization not only reflects cultural exchange but also profoundly affirms the tolerance, openness, and exceptional religious integrative capacity of Southern Vietnam (Tran, 2005).

Today, temples like the Mariamman Temple and Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple are not merely places of worship for the Indian community but have also been embraced by the local Vietnamese population, demonstrating profound religious syncretism. This shared spiritual space highlights the inclusive nature of Southern Vietnamese culture and ensures the preservation of Indian heritage within a foreign metropolis.

Culinary Diplomacy and Ecological Adaptation

Gastronomy functions as an efficacious "friendly cultural ambassador," facilitating the deep penetration of Indian culture into urban life. Characterized by the utilization of hot spices, curry powder, and Halal ingredients, Indian cuisine has firmly taken root in Southern Vietnam—ranging from historical street food vendors to contemporary upscale restaurants in Districts 1 and 6. Notably, this is not a rigid replication but a dynamic process of "cultural hybridization" and ecological adaptation. The Southern populace adopted the curry dish yet ingeniously modified it: incorporating coconut milk, attenuating the intense spiciness to suit the local palate, and pairing it with baguettes (a vestige of French colonial culture) or traditional fresh rice noodles (*bún*). This culinary flexibility exemplifies the Indian community's exceptional adaptive capacity, transforming food into a resilient and versatile instrument of grassroots public diplomacy.

Indian culinary traditions have permeated the local food scene, with Indian restaurants and spices becoming an integral part of HCMC's multicultural gastronomy. Furthermore, the daily lifestyle, including traditional attire and communal festivities, reflects a unique blend of maintaining core Indian values while harmonizing with Vietnamese customs. This dynamic acculturation facilitates mutual understanding and fosters grassroots-level connections.

Festive Performativity and Urban Multiculturalism

Despite navigating the rhythmic complexities of a modernized metropolis, the Indian diaspora rigorously sustains traditional cultural practices, including Diwali (Festival of Lights), Pongal (Harvest Festival), Holi (Festival of Colors), and customary chariot processions. In recent years, the Holi festival, typically observed in March, has been elevated into large-scale cultural promotion events in HCMC, alongside intimate community gatherings. The Consulate General of India in HCMC also celebrated Diwali, one of the most important festivals of India, symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. It is a time of joy, unity, and renewal, celebrated by millions across the world through the lighting of lamps, sharing of sweets, and exchange of goodwill. The celebration was organized as part of the Consulate's ongoing efforts to promote people-to-people exchanges and share the richness and vibrancy of Indian culture with the community in HCMC.

These festivals encapsulate profound humanistic philosophies: blurring social and class boundaries, fostering societal cohesion, and celebrating renewal. Crucially, these festive performances are not isolated enclaves; they increasingly attract the enthusiastic participation of the indigenous population. This open interaction injects vibrant hues into the city, thereby completing the tapestry of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious urban culture in HCMC (Sandhu & Mani, 1993).

The Diaspora's Role in Enhancing Vietnam-India Cultural Diplomacy

In the 21st century, the bilateral relationship has evolved into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. India's "Act East Policy" places Vietnam as a pivotal state in its regional strategy. To solidify this partnership, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has heavily deployed soft power resources, leveraging cultural diplomacy via Buddhism, Yoga, and traditional medicine. Since the end of the Cold War, India has aimed to maximize its role as a peaceful power, using cultural diplomacy to enhance the Vietnamese public's understanding of Indian culture.

In the context of the evolving Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and India, cultural diplomacy and soft power have emerged as indispensable catalysts (Chakraborti, 2018). While the Government of India has proactively deployed top-down strategies through its "Act East Policy" (Nguyen, 2022), it is the Indian diaspora in HCMC that functions as practical "cultural ambassadors." They operationalize grassroots public diplomacy across several critical domains, bridging state-level ambitions with local realities.

A Living Bridge in People-to-People Diplomacy

Although the Indian diaspora in HCMC is demographically modest, it demonstrates profound social cohesion and structural integration (Phan, 2013). Rather than residing in isolated enclaves, they proactively curate spaces for direct cultural exchange with the indigenous population, effectively rendering Indian culture an intimate component of the Southern urban fabric. Particularly in recent years, the "cultural ambassador" role of the Indian community has been actualized through a series of concrete grassroots public diplomacy initiatives:

Cultural dissemination through expanded traditional festivals: Indian cultural events are no longer confined within the community but have evolved into inclusive public exchange activities. For instance, the Festival of Lights (Diwali) is co-organized annually on a large scale by the community and the Consulate General of India in HCMC, directly introducing diverse traditional aesthetics to the Vietnamese public (Ky Thu, 2025). Notably, the Thai Pongal Harvest Festival 2026, organized by the Tamil community, the Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam (INCHAM), and the Consulate General, marked its 10th consecutive occurrence in HCMC. This event not only preserves ethnic identity but also incorporates mental well-being practices such as yoga and meditation, while fostering dialogues among Vietnamese and Indian students, scholars, and enterprises (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM, 2026).

Intimate engagement with local friendship organizations: The Indian-origin community and INCHAM consistently play a pivotal role in collaborating with the city's administration. During the commemorative events for India's 76th Republic Day and the 35th anniversary of the Vietnam-India Friendship Association in HCMC (early 2025), numerous Indian-origin collectives and individuals were honored with Certificates of Merit by the HCMC People's Committee for their outstanding and pragmatic contributions to people-to-people diplomacy, philanthropy, and the strengthening of bilateral friendship (Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations [VUFO], 2025).

Forging strategic "soft bridges": From a macroscopic perspective, these grassroots diplomatic activities resonate seamlessly with state-level bilateral development orientations. According to a commentary in the *Communist Review* (2026), leveraging the roles of Indian-origin entrepreneurs, journalists, and scholars in Vietnam is synonymous with constructing "soft bridges." This constitutes a core channel for deepening socio-cultural influence, transforming people-to-people exchange values into robust "soft power dynamics" that consolidate the Vietnam-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the era of global geopolitical reconfiguration (Tap chi Cong san, 2026).

The vibrant presence and dynamic activities of the Indian diaspora substantiate that grassroots public diplomacy provides the most flexible, authentic, and enduring foundation for sustaining mutual understanding between the two nations (Le & Trieu, 2021).

Fostering Cultural Tourism and the "Heritage Economy"

The architectural heritage established by early Indian migrants transcends mere spiritual utility to become robust magnets for cultural tourism. In recent decades, the central area of HCMC around Ton That Thiep street, Truong Dinh street, and Ben Thanh market (District 1) has organically evolved into a "Little India" enclave. This vibrant sphere is characterized by a network of Halal and authentic Indian restaurants, traditional spice shops, and historical Hindu temples such as the Sri Thenday Yuthapani (Phan, 2013; Tong, n.d.). This spatial configuration plays a pivotal role in the local "heritage economy." Furthermore, the Indian business diaspora, primarily through the Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam (INCHAM), has actively collaborated with municipal authorities and the Consulate General of India to promote cultural tourism circuits. By transforming these tangible and intangible heritages into competitive advantages, they project a powerful message of a multicultural, safe, and hospitable HCMC for South Asian tourists, thereby stimulating bilateral economic integration and bolstering foreign investor confidence (Tap chi Cong san, 2026).

Catalyzing the Dissemination of Cinema and Popular Arts

A vivid and emblematic manifestation of popular cultural exchange in recent years is the "Namaste Vietnam Festival." Initiated and organized annually in HCMC since 2022, this festival has evolved into a large-scale platform for cinematic and cultural diplomacy (Ky Thu, 2025; Vietnam News Agency [VNA], 2024). The festival not only screens critically acclaimed Bollywood productions but also facilitates direct interactions between prominent Indian filmmakers, actors, and the Vietnamese public. The enthusiastic reception from HCMC residents is not coincidental; it stems from an organic "cultural filter" cultivated through generations of coexistence with the indigenous Indian diaspora (Le, Ly, & Huynh, 2017). This daily socio-cultural interaction has culturally primed Vietnamese audiences, enabling them to easily empathize with the aesthetic values, musical traditions, and familial philosophies seamlessly conveyed through Indian cinema.

A Foundational Pillar for the Promotion of Yoga and Holistic Lifestyles

The exponential proliferation of Yoga practices in HCMC stands as a hallmark of India's soft power diplomacy, substantially buttressed by the continuous grassroots contributions of Indian expatriate professionals and instructors. A prime exemplar of this is the annual "International Day of Yoga," co-organized by the Consulate General of India and the HCMC Union of Friendship Organizations (HUFO). Notably, recent iterations, such as the 9th edition in 2023 at Le Loi Boulevard and the 10th edition in 2024 at Nguyen Hue Walking Street, have mobilized thousands of participants in mass demonstrations, disseminating the ethos of "One World, One Health" (HCMCPV, 2023; VNA, 2024). Indian Yoga masters operating within local fitness infrastructures serve as grassroots ambassadors. They transmit not merely physical postures but also the underlying holistic philosophies of balance and traditional wellness (Ayurveda). Their continuous localized engagement ensures that Yoga practices in Vietnam retain their authentic cultural depth, thereby advancing India's soft power in a sustainable and culturally respectful manner (Nguyen, 2022).

Overall, while state-led initiatives are vital, the Indian diaspora in HCMC operates as an organic, everyday diplomatic force. They are a "living bridge" that operationalizes cultural diplomacy and the heritage economy. The cultural cooperation between Vietnam and India has seen remarkable achievements in the first two decades of the 21st century. The ongoing acculturation and physical presence of the diaspora in HCMC make India's soft power tangible. By actively participating in local society while maintaining their heritage, they create an environment of mutual trust—a critical foundation for robust economic and political ties.

Discussion: The Intersection of Heritage Economy and Cultural Diplomacy

Quantitative Indicators of Cultural Persistence and Economic Integration

The resilience of the Indian diaspora in Southern Vietnam is not merely an abstract cultural phenomenon but is strongly supported by quantitative indicators of their socio-economic and religious integration. According to recent demographic estimations and field surveys within HCMC's central districts (specifically District 1, District 3, and Phu Nhuận), the Indian-origin population maintains a modest yet highly cohesive presence, comprising approximately 2,000 to 3,000 long-term residents and descendants of early migrants.

Despite their relatively small demographic footprint compared to the Chinese diaspora, their spatial and cultural impact is disproportionately profound. A spatial analysis of HCMC reveals that there are currently three major active Hindu temples (Mariamman, Sri Thenday Yuthapani, and Subramaniam Swamy) situated in premium urban locations, alongside numerous Islamic mosques established by Tamil Muslims. Furthermore, a survey of the local culinary and service sectors indicates that Indian-owned businesses—ranging from traditional textile shops on Ton That Thiep Street to a burgeoning network of authentic Indian restaurants—have grown by an estimated 20% over the last decade. This steady economic integration creates a localized "heritage economy," where traditional culture becomes a tangible asset for urban tourism and cross-cultural consumption.

Voices from the Field: Qualitative Insights on Acculturation

To comprehend the depth of this cultural acculturation, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted, yielding profound insights from the "living bridges" themselves. The qualitative data illuminates a dual process: the preservation of core Indian spiritual identity alongside a fluid adaptation to Southern Vietnamese lifestyle.

An in-depth interview with Mr. R., a third-generation Tamil temple administrator at the Mariamman Temple, highlights this syncretism:

"My grandfather came to Saigon in the 1920s. We have always maintained our daily pujas and traditional festivals like Deepavali just as we would in Tamil Nadu. However, look around the temple today—more than 70% of the devotees offering incense and prayers to the Goddess Mariamman are local Vietnamese. They call her 'Bà Ân' (The Indian Lady) and believe she protects their businesses. Our temple is no longer just an Indian space; it has become a shared sacred space for the Saigon people." (Fieldwork notes, HCMC, 2023).

This shared spiritual practice is a testament to the inclusive nature of Southern Vietnamese culture. It demonstrates that the host society does not merely tolerate the minority culture but actively incorporates it into its own spiritual worldview.

Similarly, Mrs. K., an Indian-origin textile merchant whose family has operated in District 1 for over fifty years, reflects on the socio-economic blending:

"We speak Vietnamese fluently with a Southern accent, and we eat phở as often as we eat curry. Yet, when Indian business delegations or tourists visit HCMC, we are their first point of contact. We understand both the Indian mindset and the Vietnamese market dynamics. We are the natural translators, not just of language, but of culture and commerce." (Fieldwork notes, HCMC, 2023).

Cultural integration is not merely a unidirectional process initiated by the Indian diaspora; it is equally characterized by the proactive and reverent reception from the indigenous population. Field observations at the Mariamman Temple (District 1) indicate that a significant proportion of the worshippers are ethnically Vietnamese. Sharing her spiritual experience, Ms. Nguyen Thi L. (48 years old, a local merchant in District 1) articulated:

"I have been visiting this 'Indian Lady's Temple' for over a decade, usually on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month. Although she is an Indian deity, to local merchants like us, she is as sacred and protective of the people as the Vietnamese Mother Goddesses or Lady of the Realm (Bà Chúa Xứ). We come here to offer incense and flowers, and it brings a profound sense of inner peace. In this sacred space, there is no distinction between Vietnamese, Chinese, or Indian devotees; anyone with a sincere heart is welcome to worship." (Fieldwork notes, HCMC, 2023).

Through the qualitative lens and voices from the field, the acculturation process of the Indian diaspora in HCMC emerges as a dynamic, lived reality. The narratives from both the Indian community and the local populace substantiate a paradigm of "organic integration." Within this framework, ethnic, linguistic, and religious barriers are effectively dissolved through the sharing of sacred spaces, the syncretism of daily lifestyles, and a mutual empathy regarding humanistic philosophies. It is precisely these micro-level, quotidian interactions that have quietly constructed a robust socio-psychological foundation. This localized environment serves as an ideal conduit, enabling India's "soft power" values to organically take root and proliferate within the host community.

Strategic Implications for Vietnam-India Soft Power Dynamics

Synthesizing the quantitative presence and qualitative narratives, it becomes evident that the Indian diaspora in HCMC is an underutilized strategic asset in the broader context of Vietnam-India cultural diplomacy.

While state-level initiatives under India's "Act East Policy" have successfully utilized Yoga, Buddhism, and Bollywood as vectors of soft power, these top-down approaches often require substantial institutional investment. Conversely, the diaspora represents a "bottom-up" public diplomacy model. They possess high cultural authenticity and local trust—two metrics that are notoriously difficult to artificially manufacture in international relations.

By officially recognizing and promoting sites like the Chettiar temples and the Indian commercial enclaves as integral parts of HCMC's heritage, policymakers can achieve a dual objective. Firstly, it enhances the city's cosmopolitan appeal, attracting international tourism and Indian foreign direct investment (FDI). Secondly, it sends a powerful diplomatic message to New Delhi: that Vietnam is not only a geopolitical partner in the Indo-Pacific architecture but a safe, nurturing, and historically deeply connected home for the Indian people. The diaspora, therefore, transitions from being passive preservers of history to active agents in shaping the 21st-century Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing upon the analysis of the Indian diaspora's role in shaping cultural diplomacy in HCMC, this study delineates several strategic propositions to optimize this socio-cultural resource:

Transnational Cultural Space Preservation and Urban Planning: Municipal authorities in HCMC should consider formally recognizing and integrating the "Little India" enclave (surrounding Ben Thanh market) into the city's strategic cultural tourism master plan. Rather than isolating individual monuments for preservation, policy frameworks should support the sustainment of traditional livelihood networks (culinary, spices, handicrafts). This approach fosters a "living heritage ecosystem," mitigating the risks of hyper-commercialization that could erode authentic identity.

Institutionalizing Grassroots Public Diplomacy Initiatives: It is imperative to establish a more systematic and rigorous coordination mechanism among the Consulate General of India, the Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam (INCHAM), and the HCMC Union of Friendship Organizations (HUFO). The inception of a "Vietnam-India Cultural and Economic Facilitation Fund" could provide sustainable sponsorship for youth exchanges, academic mobility, and annual cultural phenomena (e.g., the Namaste Vietnam Festival), thereby transmuting spontaneous grassroots initiatives into systemic diplomatic strategies.

Leveraging the Diaspora's Intellectual Capital: Policymakers should amplify the roles of Indian-origin intellectuals, technological professionals, and healthcare practitioners (including Ayurveda specialists) operating in Southern Vietnam. Encouraging their active participation in bilateral advisory councils will effectively transform human capital circulation into a pivotal diplomatic asset.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that, the cultural imprints of the Indian diaspora in Southern Vietnam, particularly within HCMC, transcend mere historical remnants of past migrations; they have organically evolved into a dynamic

geopolitical and cultural entity in the contemporary landscape. This community effectively operationalizes its role as a "living bridge," functioning as a highly authentic and resilient network of grassroots public diplomacy. Through their seamless socio-spatial integration, the curation of a localized heritage economy, the catalytic dissemination of popular arts, and the promotion of holistic lifestyles, they have constructed an organic "cultural filter." This mechanism enables the Vietnamese public to naturally internalize India's soft power. In an era where the global geo-strategic center of gravity is decisively pivoting towards the Indo-Pacific, acknowledging and strategically harnessing the intrinsic capabilities of the Indian diaspora in Vietnam will serve as the quintessential catalyst for actualizing and deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two nations, from a bottom-up framework.

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