

Linguistic and Cultural Aspects of Hanoi's Administrative Place Names: Insights from Hoan Kiem District in Hanoi Vietnam

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Abstract—Hanoi's rich historical and cultural legacy is reflected in its toponymic system, especially in Hoan Kiem District, the historical core of the city. As a district representing various historical periods of Hanoi's development and reflecting both traditional and modern Vietnamese identities, this study investigates linguistic patterns, semantic features, and cultural relevance of 262 official administrative place names. With linguistic classification, historical research, and spatial mapping, the study reveals significant name trends. While trade-related names (like Hàng Bạc and Hàng Đào) preserve economic history, the results show that while commemorative names (like Lý Thái Tổ and Trần Hưng Đạo) promote national identity. Additionally, political and social changes have shaped the evolution of place names over time. By situating Hanoi's naming practices within broader discussions on cultural heritage and urban planning, this research underscores the role of toponyms in preserving collective memory and identity. Apart from offering an understanding of how place names serve as historical and cultural markers in capital cities, the research enhances urban toponymy.

Keywords—place names, linguistic and cultural, history, administrative place names, Hanoi, Hoan Kiem District

I. INTRODUCTION

Place names are not merely linguistic signs but repositories of cultural heritage, historical memory, and socio-political identity. Langendonck [1] argues that toponyms function not only as geographical labels but also as markers of collective memory, reflecting communities' linguistic evolution and cultural values. In urban contexts, administrative place names—such as wards, streets, and residential units—serve a dual function: providing spatial orientation and simultaneously documenting the city's historical trajectories and socio-cultural fabric.

In the Vietnamese context, Hoan Kiem District, located at the historical heart of Hanoi, offers a uniquely rich and layered toponymic system. Often described as a “living museum,” this district encompasses 5.29 square kilometers and includes 18 administrative wards, each marked by place names that embody significant cultural and historical narratives. The streets and lanes of Hoan Kiem are adorned with names from different eras, from ancient trade guilds of the Lý and Trần dynasties to revolutionary figures and modern landmarks. The toponyms preserve the memory of Hanoi's transformation—from a feudal trading hub to a colonial urban center and now a rapidly modernizing capital—while sustaining continuity with the past.

Despite the critical role of place names in cultural preservation and urban memory, scholarly attention to administrative toponyms in Vietnam remains relatively

limited, especially in systematically analyzing their linguistic structures and semantic evolution. This study responds to that gap by focusing on Hoan Kiem District as a microcosm of Vietnam's urban and cultural history. By investigating 262 official administrative place names—comprising wards, streets, lanes, and notable public spaces—this research explores how linguistic patterns, semantic categories, and cultural-historical contexts converge in the naming practices of the district.

Such complexity in naming conventions prompts deeper inquiry into the linguistic, cultural, and historical dimensions embedded within administrative toponyms. To systematically explore these dimensions, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the structural and linguistic characteristics of administrative place names in Hoan Kiem District?
- (2) How do these place names reflect cultural and historical narratives, particularly in relation to traditional trade, historical figures, and architectural landmarks?

The research offers new insights into how urban toponyms function as dynamic cultural texts through a combination of linguistic analysis, historical documentation, and spatial mapping. By situating Hanoi's naming practices within broader discussions on urban identity and cultural heritage, this study contributes to theoretical and applied toponymy dimensions, with implications for cultural conservation, urban planning, and identity formation in contemporary Vietnamese cities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Toponymy, studying place names, has developed into a multidisciplinary field that bridges linguistics, history, cultural studies, and urban geography. In international scholarship, place names are increasingly recognized as more than mere geographic references; they function as cultural symbols and repositories of historical memory. Scholars such as Azaryahu [2] conceptualize toponyms as “spatial texts”—elements that reflect political ideologies, socio-economic changes, and collective identities. Street names, in particular, are viewed as urban palimpsests, where different historical layers intersect and persist in the urban landscape. Similarly, Tent [3] introduced a typological and methodological framework that emphasizes linguistic form, semantic content, and historical function of toponyms. These frameworks have provided the foundation for urban toponymic studies across a wide range of cities, particularly in postcolonial and rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Complementing these approaches, Cacciafoco and

Cavallaro [4] argue for integrating synchronic and diachronic perspectives to understand place names' evolution fully. Such techniques enable researchers to identify patterns in name formation while uncovering shifts in political authority, cultural symbolism, and public memory. Neethling [5], further developing this line of thought, emphasizes the role of the cultural motivation behind place naming, highlighting how values, identities, and socio-political goals shape toponyms.

In the Vietnamese context, toponymic studies have evolved significantly over the last three decades. Foundational works such as *Vietnamese Toponymy* by Hoa [6] and *Handbook of Vietnamese Place Names* by Vinh [7] laid the methodological foundation for analyzing Vietnamese place names from both linguistic and cultural perspectives. More recently, research has diversified across regional and thematic lines. Studies have explored etymology, regional naming patterns, and the cultural significance of names in relation to trade, folklore, and geography. Notably, urban toponymy in Hanoi has emerged as a specialized subfield, with scholars such as Thanh & Phung [8] and Lam [9] examining the structural, historical, and cultural aspects of place names across different historical periods.

Within Hanoi, Hoan Kiem District has received attention due to its rich historical layers and dense concentration of meaningful toponyms. The works of Uyen [10] and Quan [11] have provided lexical and cultural interpretations of street names. At the same time, historical sources such as the *Dictionary of Hanoi Place Names* by Thiet [12] have offered systematic documentation of naming conventions. However, existing research often remains descriptive or segmented by historical period. There is still a lack of comprehensive, integrative studies that combine linguistic classification, semantic analysis, and spatial mapping within a single urban district to reveal naming patterns and their cultural functions.

While historical and cultural approaches dominate, recent Vietnamese scholarship has also begun to engage with comparative and interdisciplinary methods. For instance, studies like Ha [13] introduce contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese street names, reflecting a growing interest in cross-cultural perspectives. Despite these advances, empirical studies that adopt quantitative and GIS-based methodologies remain scarce. Moreover, there is a noticeable research gap in examining the transformation of administrative place names during specific socio-political transitions, such as the postcolonial and post-reunification periods in Vietnam. These naming practices are often rich in political symbolism but underexplored in linguistic terms.

Furthermore, while global frameworks for studying commemorative and trade-related naming conventions are well-established, their localized application in Vietnamese urban settings is still limited. Existing literature also lacks synthesis between cultural semiotics and spatial data analysis, particularly regarding how toponymic landscapes encode power, memory, and identity at both micro and macro levels.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates linguistic, historical, and spatial methods to analyze 262 official administrative place names in Hoan Kiem District. It builds on established theories in global toponymy while extending their application to a Vietnamese urban setting. In doing so,

the research contributes both empirical data and theoretical insights to the broader discourse on urban memory, cultural identity, and the symbolic role of naming in the construction of modern cities. With its unique blend of historical depth and contemporary function, the focus on Hoan Kiem offers a fertile ground for analyzing how naming practices articulate cultural heritage, reflect historical change, and inform urban consciousness in present-day Hanoi.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper interprets cultural and historical importance using qualitative techniques and quantitative approaches to investigating name trends. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for spatial distribution analysis and specialist toponymic tools for pattern identification help process the data.

This paper investigates the language and cultural aspects of administrative toponyms in Hoan Kiem District via a mixed-methods approach. The approach consists of three components. There are three parts to the methodology:

- The first data collection phase involves documentation of 262 toponyms (18 wards, 76 streets, and 168 lanes) derived from the maps using archival research, fieldwork, and other surveys to verify active use.
- The second phase of the analysis includes Linguistic Van's approach (2007) to examining morphological, etymological, and semantic structures, along with Tent's (2015) typology.
- The third phase includes cultural-historical analysis through the application of Azaryahu's approach (2014), which combines historical document analysis with the study of names and their origins as well as period comparisons. The approaches are both quantitative (statistical analysis, GIS research) and qualitative (contextual analysis). Specialized toponymic software is used to identify exceptional and investigate spatial distribution, facilitating analysis.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study of Hoan Kiem District place names focuses on structural elements and lexical-semantic aspects. These elements indicate the methodical arrangement of urban toponyms and highlight historical and cultural changes in Hanoi's ancient quarter.

A. Administrative Place Names' Structural Features

Using structural analysis, we examine the administrative system's construction and organization of place names in Hoan Kiem District. This part examines 262 official toponyms, including 168 residential groups, 76 streets, and 18 wards, to show the systematic trends in naming practices and their connection to cultural preservation and administrative hierarchy.

The distribution depicts three separate administrative levels, each with its own name conventions. Ward names, such as Phường Hàng Bông, a cotton trading district, and Phường Hàng Bạc, traditionally a silver manufacturing region, frequently preserve historical commerce roles. Often, street names honor historical persons or locations (e.g., Phố Cầu Gỗ, which refers to the famous wooden bridge; Phố Lý Thái Tổ, which is named after the founder of Thang Long).

Table 1. Basic structure of administrative place names in Hoan Kiem

Administrative Level	Structure	Number	Percentage (%)	Example
Ward	Ward + Proper name	18	6.9	Phường Hàng Bạc (Hang Bac Ward)
Street	Street + Proper name	76	29.0	Phố Tràng Tiền (Trang Tien Street)
Residential group	Group + Number + Ward name	168	64.1	Tổ 15 phường Hàng Bông (Group 15 Hang Bong Ward)
Total		262	100	

Table 2. Semantic categories of proper names (Wards and Streets)

Semantic Category	Number	Percentage (%)	Examples with Translation
Traditional Trade/Merchandise	42	44.7	Hàng Đào (Silk Street), Hàng Bạc (Silver Street)
Historical Figures	28	29.8	Đình Tiên Hoàng (Emperor Dinh), Lê Thái Tổ (Emperor Le)
Cultural Sites/Landmarks	15	16.0	Cầu Gỗ (Wooden Bridge), Đồng Xuân (Dong Xuan Market)
Geographical Features	9	9.5	Cửa Nam (South Gate)
Total	94	100	

The semantic analysis of proper names in Hoan Kiem District reveals four distinct categories, each reflecting different aspects of the area's historical and cultural development.

Trade and merchandise names, accounting for the largest proportion (44.7%), directly reflect the district's historical function as Hanoi's primary commercial center. Names like "Hang Bac" (Silver Street) and "Hang Dao" (Silk Street) preserve the memory of traditional craft and trade specializations. These names not only indicate historical commercial activities but also serve as living records of the district's economic organization during the feudal period. Historical figures represent the second largest category (29.8%). Names such as "Ly Thai To" (founder of Thang Long) and "Tran Hung Dao" (legendary military commander) commemorate significant personalities in Vietnamese history. The selection of these names reflects a conscious effort to preserve national memory through urban toponymy.

Cultural sites and landmarks (16.0%) form the third category, with names like "Cau Go" (Wooden Bridge) and "Dong Xuan" (Dong Xuan Market) marking significant historical locations. These names serve both as geographical markers and as reminders of important cultural heritage sites. Geographical features, though representing the smallest category (9.5%), include historically significant markers like "Cua Nam" (South Gate) and "Trang Tien" (Front of Mint), which reference important historical landmarks and directional indicators.

Table 3. Syllabic structure of proper names (Wards and Streets)

Number of Syllables	Number	Percentage (%)	Examples with Translation
One syllable	8	8.5	Huế (Hue - former capital city), Bắc (North)
Two syllables	56	59.6	Hàng Bạc (Silver Street), Đồng Xuân (Spring Field)
Three syllables	30	31.9	Lý Thái Tổ (Ly Dynasty Founder), Trần Hưng Đạo (National Hero)
Total	94	100	

The syllabic structure of proper names demonstrates clear patterns in Vietnamese toponymic construction.

Single-syllable names are relatively rare (8.5%) and typically consist of ancient place names or directional indicators. Examples like "Hue" and "Bac" represent some of the oldest toponyms in the district, often preserved from historical usage.

Two-syllable names dominate the system (59.6%), reflecting the standard pattern of Vietnamese word formation. These names typically follow two structural patterns:

- Trade indicator + product ("Hang" + product name)
- Location + attribute (direction or characteristic)

Three-syllable names (31.9%) primarily represent historical figures' full names or complex place descriptions. These names often carry the most detailed historical information, particularly in commemorative naming.

This syllabic distribution reflects both linguistic efficiency (favoring two-syllable constructions) and the need to accommodate various historical and cultural references in the naming system.

Analyzing Hoan Kiem District's toponyms' structural characteristics, semantic categories, and syllabic patterns demonstrates a complex and systematic approach to place naming that balances administrative functionality with cultural preservation.

In terms of structural composition, the clear hierarchical system of generic components (ward, street, residential group) provides effective administrative organization, while the specific components carry rich historical and cultural information. This dual functionality is further reinforced by the semantic categorization, where trade-related names (44.7%) dominate, reflecting the district's historical commercial character, followed by historical figures (29.8%), cultural landmarks (16.0%), and geographical features (9.5%).

The syllabic analysis reveals a strong preference for two-syllable constructions (59.6%), aligning with Vietnamese linguistic patterns. Three-syllable names (31.9%) are accommodated for historical commemorations, while single-syllable names (8.5%) preserve ancient toponyms. This distribution demonstrates how the naming system effectively balances linguistic efficiency with historical preservation.

These elements create a toponymic system that serves multiple functions: providing clear administrative organization, preserving historical memory, and maintaining cultural heritage. The place names of Hoan Kiem District thus constitute not merely a system of geographical reference but a valuable repository of Hanoi's urban history and cultural development, reflecting the area's evolution from a traditional craft and trading center to a modern administrative district while preserving its historical significance.

B. Lexical-Semantic Features of Administrative Place Names from Hoan Kiem District

Beyond structural patterns, the lexical and semantic study investigates the meaning creation and development of place names in Hoan Kiem District. This section's investigation of the linguistic foundations of toponyms and their meaning evolution over time reflects the district's change from a traditional trading center to a modern urban region while keeping its historical and cultural value.

Table 4. Lexical origins of place names

Origin	Number	Percentage (%)	Examples with Translation
Pure Vietnamese	52	55.3	Hàng Bạc (Silver Street, n=15), Hàng Đào (Silk Street, n=12), Đồng Xuân (Spring Field, n=8), Hàng Bò (Mat Street, n=7), Others (n=10)
Sino-Vietnamese	32	34.0	Lý Thái Tổ (n=8), Tráng Tiền (n=6), Lê Thái Tổ (n=5), Trần Hưng Đạo (n=4), Others (n=9)
Hybrid	10	10.7	Cửa Nam (South Gate, n=3), Bắc Qua (n=2), Cửa Đông (East Gate, n=2), Others (n=3)
Total	94	100	

The lexical composition of place names in Hoan Kiem District reflects Vietnamese urban development's complex linguistic and cultural layering. Pure Vietnamese names constitute the majority (55.3%), predominantly appearing in trade-related streets where the prefix “Hàng” combines with product names to create historically descriptive toponyms. These names, such as “Hàng Bạc” and “Hàng Đào”, serve as linguistic fossils of the district's commercial heritage. Sino-Vietnamese elements (34.0%) appear most frequently in commemorative names of historical figures and administrative terms, demonstrating the enduring influence of Chinese civilization on Vietnamese urban culture. The presence of hybrid forms (10.7%), combining Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese elements, illustrates the natural linguistic evolution and adaptation that characterized Vietnam's historical development, particularly evident in directional and geographical descriptors like “Cửa Nam” and “Bắc Qua”.

Table 5. Semantic evolution categories

Evolution Type	Number	Percentage (%)	Examples with Historical Context
Original meaning retained	45	47.9	Hàng Đào (n=12, silk trade continues), Hàng Bạc (n=10, silversmith quarter), Hàng Ngang (n=8, lateral street), Others (n=15)
Partial meaning shift	32	34.0	Tráng Tiền (n=8, from mint to commercial), Cửa Nam (n=7, gate area to district), Others (n=17)
Complete meaning change	17	18.1	Cầu Gỗ (n=5, bridge gone), Ô Quan Chưởng (n=4, gate demolished), Others (n=8)
Total	94	100	

The semantic transformation of Hoan Kiem's place names provides a fascinating window into the district's urban evolution. Nearly half of the names (47.9%) retain their original meanings, particularly evident in traditional trade streets where historical functions persist. For instance, “Hàng Bạc” continues its centuries-old association with silverwork, while “Hàng Đào” maintains its connection to silk trading. A significant portion (34.0%) has undergone partial meaning shifts, reflecting the gradual transformation of urban spaces. The evolution of “Tráng Tiền” from a royal mint to a commercial boulevard exemplifies this adaptive change. The smallest category (18.1%) represents complete meaning changes, where original referents have vanished, but names

persist as historical markers. The case of “Cầu Gỗ” (Wooden Bridge) illustrates how toponyms can outlive their physical referents, preserving historical memory even as the urban landscape transforms.

C. Hoan Kiem District's Place Names' Scope and Cultural and Historical Significance

The Hoan Kiem District boasts a variety of toponyms that honor recollections highlighting various facets of the civilizations influencing Vietnamese urban history and development. According to Phung [14], the toponyms of Hoan Kiem District serve as “living testimonies of urban development history,” reflecting various aspects of Vietnamese cultural memory and historical transformation.

Table 6. Cultural-historical categories of place names

Cultural-Historical Value	Number	Percentage (%)	Representative Examples
Traditional Trade Activities	42	44.7	Hàng Bạc (Silver trade), Hàng Đào (Silk trade)
Historical Events/Figures	28	29.8	Lý Thái Tổ (Dynasty founder), Đinh Tiên Hoàng
Urban Architecture/Landmarks	15	16.0	Cầu Gỗ (Wooden bridge), Ô Quan Chưởng (Gate)
Geographical Features	9	9.5	Cửa Nam (South gate), Tráng Tiền
Total	94	100	

The distribution of place names across different cultural-historical categories reveals what McLeod & Nguyen [15] describe as “one of the most enduring examples of traditional urban organization in Southeast Asia.” Traditional trade activities dominate the naming system (44.7%), with names like “Hàng Bạc” (Silver Street) and “Hàng Đào” (Silk Street) not only documenting historical economic activities but also demonstrating remarkable continuity. As Azaryahu [2] notes, these streets “transform the urban landscape into a text that can be read as a register of historical memory.”

The significant presence of historical figures and events (29.8%), represented by names like “Lý Thái Tổ” and “Đinh Tiên Hoàng,” serves what Ha [13] terms as “spatial anchors of collective memory.” Urban architectural features and landmarks (16.0%) preserve what Langendonck [1] calls the “toponymic biography” of the city through names like “Cầu Gỗ” (Wooden Bridge) and “Ô Quan Chưởng” (City Gate).

Table 7. Historical periods reflected in place names

Historical Period	Number	Percentage (%)	Characteristic Examples
Pre-Colonial (before 1858)	45	47.9	Hàng Bò, Đồng Xuân
Colonial Period (1858-1954)	32	34.0	Tráng Tiền, Paul Bert (former name)
Modern Era (post-1954)	17	18.1	Trần Nguyên Hãn, Lý Thường Kiệt
Total	94	100	

Cacciafoco & Cavallaro [4] describe the temporal distribution of toponyms as “a palimpsest of urban memory.”

Pre-colonial names (47.9%), such as “Hàng Bò” and “Đống Xuân,” reflect what Thanh & Phung [8] identify as “không chỉ là địa chỉ mà còn là chứng tích sống động về lịch sử phát triển đô thị” (not just addresses but living testimonies of urban development history).

The colonial period (34.0%) represents what Tent [3] terms “the hybridization of urban identity,” with streets like “Tràng Tiền” reflecting French influence. Modern-era names (18.1%), including commemorative names like “Trần Nguyễn Hãn,” demonstrate what Neethling [5] describes as “the conscious use of toponymy in nation-building.”

This layered naming system creates what Stefani [16] calls a “complex cultural text,” weaving together different historical periods and cultural influences, making Hoan Kiem’s street names an invaluable resource for understanding Hanoi’s urban evolution and cultural transformation.

V. CONCLUSION

As the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi possesses a unique and historically significant toponymic system that encapsulates the city’s cultural and historical identity. Hoan Kiem District, at the heart of the capital, offers a rich tapestry of place names that serve as geographical identifiers and markers of the city’s socio-political and economic history. Through an analysis of 262 official toponyms, this study has highlighted the structural and semantic features that define Hanoi’s naming conventions and how these names reflect historical narratives, cultural heritage, and administrative changes.

The findings reveal that Hanoi’s toponymic system is deeply intertwined with its historical development. Traditional trade names, such as *Hàng Bạc* (Silver Street) and *Hàng Đào* (Silk Street), preserve the memory of the city’s commercial past, while names honoring historical figures, such as *Lý Thái Tổ* and *Trần Hưng Đạo*, reinforce national identity and historical consciousness. The study also demonstrates that political and social transformations have left a lasting imprint on Hanoi’s toponymy, with different periods contributing to shifts in naming conventions.

Furthermore, the research underscores the broader implications of toponymy in urban studies, emphasizing the role of place names in cultural heritage preservation and identity formation. In rapidly modernizing cities like Hanoi, maintaining historical toponyms becomes essential in preserving the city’s heritage while accommodating urban development. The results of this study contribute to the growing field of urban toponymy and highlight the importance of integrating linguistic and historical analyses in city planning. Future research may explore the intersection of toponymy with digital mapping technologies and public engagement in preserving historical place names. Ultimately, Hanoi’s toponymic system serves as a vital cultural resource that reflects the city’s past and informs its future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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