

Cultural Characteristics and Livelihood Adaptations of the Thuan Hung Rice Paper-Making Village Community in the Current Context.

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Abstract:

This study focuses on analyzing the cultural characteristics and livelihood adaptation mechanisms of the Thuan Hung rice paper-making village community (Can Tho City) in the context of modernization and tourism development. The research results show that the village culture is a product of a long-term adaptation process to the delta's riverine ecosystem, reflected in the exquisite craftsmanship and diverse product range. Regarding livelihoods, the community demonstrates high dynamism by applying a mixed livelihood strategy, combining traditional crafts with business activities to maintain stable income for the majority of surveyed households (n = 30). Notably, although no households were registered for professional tourism activities at the time of the 2024 survey, 60% expressed their intention to participate in the future, marking a shift in perception from purely production to experiential service economics. However, the deterioration of road transport infrastructure and limitations in communication and marketing skills are practical barriers that need to be addressed. For sustainable development, the economic interests of the community must be closely linked to the preservation of national intangible cultural heritage through professional community tourism models, helping to harmoniously resolve the relationship between preservation and livelihoods.

Keywords: *Thuan Hung rice paper making village, livelihood adaptation, craft village tourism, intangible cultural heritage*

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Problem Statement

In the context of globalization and modernization, traditional craft villages are facing a dual challenge: preserving their heritage from the risk of extinction and maintaining their livelihoods in the face of competitive pressure from industrial products. According to the Yang et al. (2018) emphasize that heritage preservation requires a comprehensive policy, while Partarakis et al. (2025) argue that sustainable development requires a roadmap that combines traditional techniques and innovation.

In Vietnam, craft village tourism is considered a priority direction to simultaneously address the two challenges mentioned above. Yen & Trinh (2023) affirmed that this model brings dual benefits to the economy and society, but also requires close coordination among all levels, sectors, and businesses. At the institutional level, Government Decree 52/2018/ND-CP has created a legal framework with policies supporting land, credit, trade promotion, and human resource training for recognized craft villages (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2022). However, the gap between policy regulations and the actual accessibility for small-scale production households has not yet been completely resolved.

In the Mekong Delta, research by Quyen & Khanjanusthiti (2015) on the ancient village of Dong Hoa Hiep shows that craft village tourism can restore cultural values, but also poses the risk of commercializing heritage if not properly controlled. Thuan Hung rice paper-making village (Can Tho city) is a typical example of both this challenge and opportunity. Lac et al. (2025) argue that craft villages need to shift from spontaneous to professional tourism, but if the relationship between preservation and livelihood is not harmoniously resolved, granting heritage status may create conflicts of interest and harm community livelihoods (Liu et al., 2022). Based on the practical experience of Thuan Hung rice paper-making village, this study focuses on answering three questions:

1. How are the distinctive cultural characteristics of Thuan Hung rice paper-making village formed and maintained in the context of modernization?
2. What strategies have communities adopted to ensure stable incomes in the face of market pressures?
3. What barriers and conditions determine the ability of craft villages to transform from purely production-based to sustainable community-based tourism models?

Theoretical basis

Theories of cultural regions

The theory of cultural regions provides an analytical framework for cultural characteristics associated with geographical and historical space. Wissler (1923) developed the theory of cultural diffusion, explaining the mechanism of cultural region formation through historical contact and economic exchange. From a cultural geography perspective, Sauer (1925) affirmed the organic link between the natural environment and cultural activities, providing a solid basis for cultural zoning based on natural landscapes. When applied to the study of craft village tourism, the theory of cultural regions helps analyze the characteristics of destinations and develop unique tourism products based on regional identity, ensuring authenticity in the visitor experience (Kinh, 2015).

Theories of Livelihoods and Livelihood Adaptation

According to Chambers & Conway (1992), livelihoods are not only income but also include access to and use of five core capital sources: human capital, social capital, natural capital, financial capital, and physical capital. In the context of climate change and economic restructuring, the concept of livelihood adaptation becomes urgent. Wang (2025) research on household behavior in rural tourism development clarified how households adjust their livelihood strategies to cope with market fluctuations. Scheyvens (2002) also affirmed that sustainable livelihoods in tourism require income diversification to mitigate risks.

Research Methodology

Data collection methods

This study uses an exploratory descriptive design to build an initial picture of the cultural characteristics and livelihood adaptations in Thuan Hung rice paper-making village, thereby laying the foundation for larger-scale studies in the future. Secondary data were collected from reports of the Thot Not District Economic Department, Plan 163/KH-UBND of the Thot Not District People's Committee (2024), and domestic and international academic studies on craft village tourism.

Primary data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire survey of 30 households engaged in traditional crafts in the craft village. The unit of analysis was the household (rather than the individual), reflecting the collective nature of household-based production in traditional craft villages. In this qualitative and quantitative descriptive survey, a sample size of 30 units was considered sufficient to apply basic descriptive statistics according to the minimum threshold of the central limit theorem (Saunders et al., 2003). More importantly, with a total of 63 regularly producing households according

to the Thot Not District Economic Department Report (2023), the sample of 30 households achieved a coverage rate of nearly 48% of the population, which is a highly significant rate in small-scale community surveys (Creswell, 2003). A convenience sampling method was applied to optimize costs and field time, consistent with the survey objectives of the study. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = very poor, 5 = very good) is used to measure people's assessment of labor productivity and infrastructure.

In addition to questionnaire surveys, the author conducted non-participant observation during field trips in 2024, focusing on handicraft production processes, road traffic conditions, and spontaneous tourism activities. The observation results were used to compare and enrich the quantitative data from the questionnaires.

Data Analysis Methods

Secondary data were analyzed through a literature review to identify research gaps. Primary data were entered and coded using IBM SPSS 23.0 software. Categorical variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Likert scale data were processed using mean values, reflecting the general community's assessment trends regarding labor capacity and infrastructure conditions in craft villages. To interpret the results of the 5-point Likert scale, the study applied the following classification convention based on mean values: 1.00-1.80 = Very Poor; 1.81-2.60 = Poor; 2.61-3.40 = Average; 3.41-4.20 = Good; 4.21-5.00 = Very Good (Likert, 1932).

Research results and discussion

Ecological space and formation history

Brief introduction to Thuan Hung rice paper-making village

Thuan Hung rice paper making village, located in Thuan Hung ward, Can Tho city, boasts a history of over 200 years. Local people say that the rice paper-making craft here began in the first half of the 19th century, when their ancestors came to reclaim land and establish settlements in Southern Vietnam. In 2023, Thuan Hung rice paper making village, located in Thot Not district¹, Can Tho city, was included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

¹ Despite the administrative reorganization implemented on 1 July 2025, this study uses the former administrative boundaries of Thot Not District, Can Tho City, to maintain consistency with the legal and administrative documents referenced in the research.

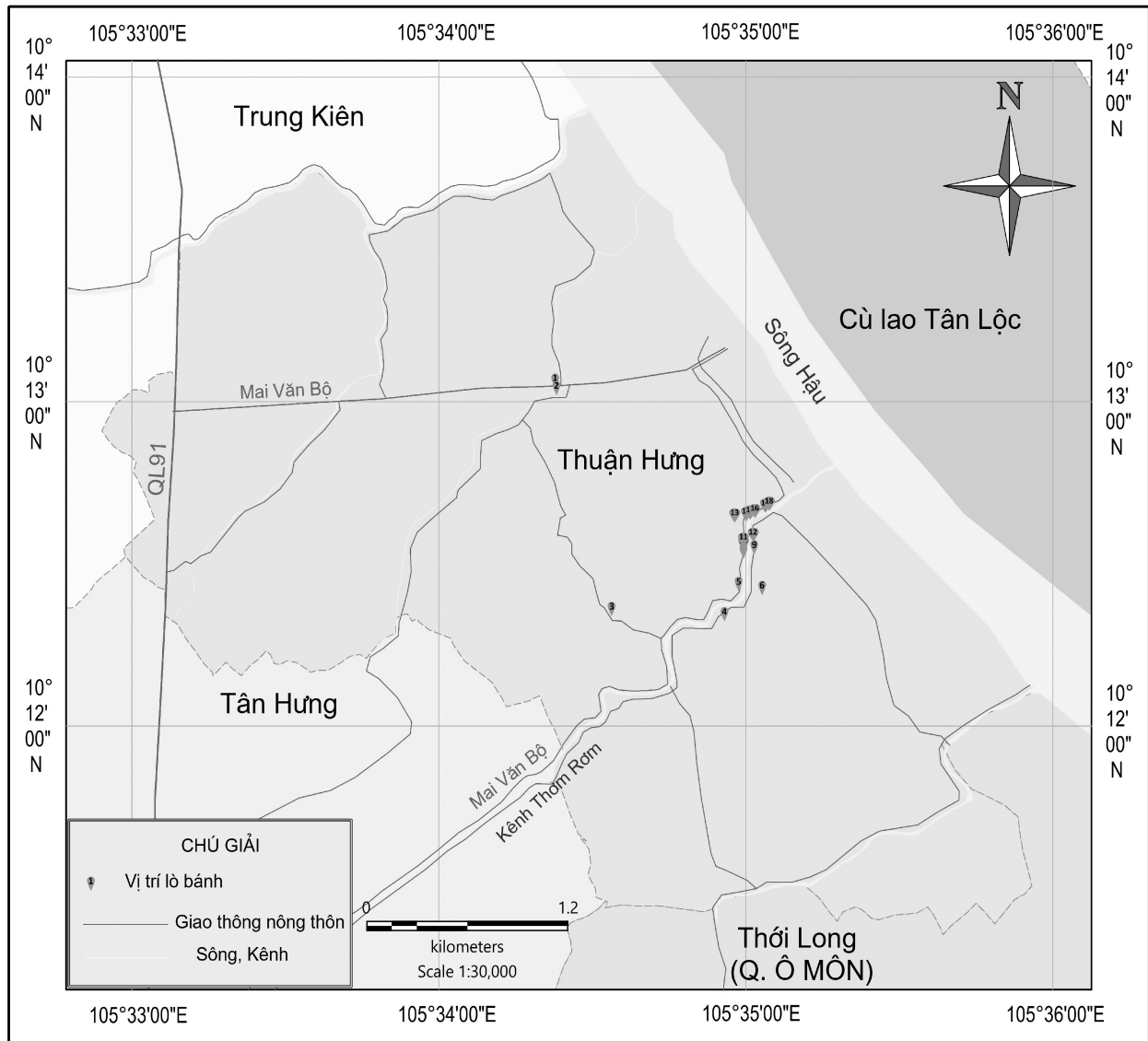


Figure 1. Map of Thuan Hung rice paper-making village.

(Source: Author, 2024)

Ecological space and natural adaptation

The cultural characteristics of Thuan Hung rice paper-making village are shaped and determined by the geographical and ecological factors of the Mekong Delta region. Its favorable geographical location, situated along both banks of the Thot Not River and about 2.3 km from the Hau River, connected to a complex network of canals and waterways, facilitates transportation and distribution of products. The people adapt to the tropical monsoon climate, taking advantage of the high number of sunshine hours (1,400-3,000 hours/year) for drying rice paper. In addition, the alluvial soil of the Mekong River provides an abundant and high-quality source of rice, combined with local ingredients

such as coconut and banana, creating a rich source of raw materials for the development of the rice paper-making craft in Thuan Hung.

Survey results on production infrastructure show that people are very satisfied with the current natural conditions and infrastructure. The waterway transportation system and raw material sources are both rated very well ($M = 4.60$). However, field observations and interviews with residents reveal that the infrastructure in the craft village is not entirely stable. Residents reported that rice, the main ingredient for rice paper production, is heavily affected by unstable market prices. Furthermore, field observations noted that some sections of roads in the craft village show signs of deterioration, landslides, and cracks due to subsidence along the Thot Not River, affecting the transportation of raw materials and the consumption of finished products.

Demographic characteristics and professional competence

Size and characteristics of the professional community

The primary social unit of the Thuan Hung rice paper-making community consists of approximately 63 households engaged in regular production and 40 households engaged in seasonal production (mainly during Tet), employing about 600 regular workers. Despite the impact of urbanization, the people of Thuan Hung maintain a stable traditional craft with the participation of multiple generations. The demographic characteristics of the survey participants ($n = 30$) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the survey sample

| Characteristic | Category | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Sex | Men | 12 | 40.0 |
| | Women | 18 | 60.0 |
| Age group | Ages 30–39 | 4 | 13.3 |
| | Ages 40–59 | 17 | 56.7 |
| | Over 59 years old | 9 | 30.0 |
| Educational level | High school and below | 29 | 96.7 |
| | Intermediate level | 1 | 3.3 |
| Occupation | Business, trade | 22 | 73.3 |
| | Workers, agriculture | 8 | 26.7 |

| Characteristic | Category | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Monthly income | 4-7.9 million VND | 15 | 50.0 |
| | 8-12 million VND | 12 | 40.0 |
| | Over 12 million VND | 3 | 10.0 |
| Total | | 30 | 100.0 |

(Source: Author, 2024)

Practical capacity and social capital of traditional craft villages

Based on the survey results of 30 households, the professional capacity and social capital of the people in Thuan Hung rice paper-making village are expressed through evaluation indicators on a 5-point Likert scale. Table 2 summarizes the average values obtained from the survey.

Table 2. Summary of Likert values for community capacity and infrastructure

| Evaluation criteria | Average value (M) | Rating |
|---|-------------------|-----------|
| Transportation system and raw material sources for production | 4.60 | Very good |
| Skills and professional experience in the craft | 4.20 | Good |
| Current living standards of the household | 3.80 | Good |
| Communication, marketing, and customer service skills | 3.50 | Average |

(Source: Author, 2024)

Regarding professional skills, villagers rated their work experience and skill level as good ($M = 4.20$). This result is consistent with the author's field observations: in this craft village, some villagers have been recognized by the local government as artisans, possessing many years of experience in the craft and traditional techniques in rice paper production.

Regarding communication skills, this index was rated at an average to above-average level by the people ($M = 3.50$). The survey results show a clear disparity between professional production skills and communication and marketing skills among people in handicraft villages, especially in the context of expanding trade and developing service activities related to handicraft village tourism.

Regarding living standards, residents rate their current living standards as good (M=3.80), indicating the role of traditional crafts in maintaining the livelihoods of local households. Especially during the Lunar New Year, which is the peak season for the craft village, it attracts over 800 workers due to a 50% increase in demand for rice paper compared to normal days.

Livelihoods, markets, and tourism status

Production process

Despite being affected by industrialization, leading to the introduction of machinery (4 households use machines), the majority of people still maintain traditional manual methods to preserve the distinctive flavors passed down through generations.

The traditional rice paper-making process in Thuan Hung reflects the sophistication of folk knowledge in each stage of production. The people of Thuan Hung select harvested rice that has been stored for a period of time, ensuring it's not too old, then soak it overnight. After milling, the rice is mixed with spices such as salt and sesame seeds, then spread on a stretched cloth and baked in a rice husk oven. After being spread out, the rice paper is dried on leaf racks in the sun for 15 to 20 minutes. The creativity in the cultural activities of the people of Thuan Hung is shown through the diversity of products: savory rice paper, regular rice paper, rice paper for spring rolls, coconut rice paper, and sweet rice paper (which has higher economic value).

Adapting the livelihoods of people in handicraft villages

Production activities provide a stable income of 4 to 12 million VND/month for 90% of surveyed households, with 50% earning between 4 and 7.9 million VND. To maintain traditional cultural activities in the face of market risks, 73.3% of those engaged in the craft combine it with business/trading, and 26.7% combine it with agriculture/work as a factory worker.

Consumer market

Product distribution activities in Thuan Hung rice paper-making village still clearly reflect the traditional market culture of the riverine region. The main consumption channel remains traditional, with 93.3% of products sold through traditional markets or traders buying directly from producers, and only 6.7% reaching supermarkets.

Current situation and aspirations for participation in tourism activities

In Thuan Hung rice paper making village, as of the survey date in 2024, 100% of the sample (n = 30) residents had not yet participated in officially registered tourism activities.

Existing tourist activities in the village are mostly spontaneous, with no households registered as tourism businesses according to regulations.¹

Nevertheless, there has been a clear shift in livelihood mindset: up to 60% of households (18 people) affirmed their intention to participate in tourism in the future. For the 40% of households (12 people) who have not yet intended to participate, the main reason stems from objective physical barriers (houses far from the center, narrow and difficult roads) rather than a lack of demand. This data shows that the Thuan Hung community is in a pre-transition phase, ready to expand its cultural space from closed-loop production to performance and experiential spaces for tourists.

Discussion, solutions, and recommendations

Infrastructure, production space, and tourism

Although locals appreciate the waterway transportation system and raw materials (M = 4.60), field observations have noted erosion and degradation of some road sections along the Thot Not River, creating a clear conflict between production needs and tourism access needs. Liu et al. (2022) warned that the gap between heritage recognition and economic reality could create conflicts of interest if not addressed by specific policies. Institutionally, plan 163/KH-UBND assigned the District Economic Department to coordinate with relevant units to invest in improving the infrastructure of craft villages associated with tourism development, using state budget and socialized resources (People's Committee of Thot Not District, 2024). Article 14 of Decree 52/2018/ND-CP specifically stipulates support for investment in roads, electricity, and clean water for recognized craft villages (Development of Rural Industries, 2018). This is an existing legal mechanism that local authorities need to prioritize activating to bridge the gap between tourism development potential and reality in Thuan Hung.

Market and product branding

The fact that 93.3% of products are consumed through traditional markets and traders shows that the community still relies on the old distribution network instead of expanding into the tourism or modern retail segments, which only account for 6.7%. This dependence reduces competitiveness against pressure from cheap industrial products (Partarakis et al., 2025) and limits the added value of intangible heritage. Simultaneously, Article 9 of Decree 52/2018/ND-CP stipulates that the state supports up to 50% of the costs for designing product models, packaging, building brands, and registering collective trademarks for craft

¹ By the time this paper was completed (2025–2026), some spontaneous experiential tourism activities had emerged in the village, reflecting a very early stage of the transformation process.

village establishments (Development of Rural Industries, 2018). Implementing these two mechanisms simultaneously will help products meet supermarket standards and become valuable tourist souvenirs.

Community Capacity and Digital Transformation

Communication and marketing skills are only at an average level ($M = 3.50$), while 96.7% of the workforce has a high school education or lower, which is the biggest practical barrier for 60% of households wishing to participate in tourism. This situation is consistent with the findings of Vaculikova et al. (2020) on the lack of digital marketing skills in Vietnamese craft villages. People's Committee of Thot Not District (2024) assigned the Thot Not District Culture - Sports - Broadcasting Center to lead training in tourism service skills, guiding artisans and households to collect experience fees from visitors. Article 11 of Decree 52/2018/ND-CP stipulates that people working in traditional crafts in craft villages are supported with vocational training from the local budget. Prioritizing training for the 60% of households ready to participate in tourism, combined with equipping them with skills to use digital platforms to promote products and book experiences online, is the shortest path to transforming intentions into concrete economic actions.

Conclusion

This study clarifies the relationship between cultural characteristics, livelihood adaptation, and tourism potential in Thuan Hung rice paper making village. The village culture is formed through a long process of adaptation to the riverine ecosystem of the Mekong Delta, reflected in the sophisticated handcrafted production process passed down through generations and recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2023. Regarding livelihoods, 73.3% of households apply a mixed strategy to maintain a stable income, reflecting the high dynamism of the community in the face of market pressures. Although no households had officially registered for tourism at the time of the 2024 survey, 60% expressed their intention to participate, indicating that the community is in a positive pre-transition phase.

However, the study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. The data is time-sensitive (2024), the sample size is small ($n = 30$) with a convenience sampling method, and it only surveys the supply side without measuring tourist demand. The study also did not conduct a comparative analysis with similar craft villages in the Mekong Delta and did not quantitatively assess the economic impact of tourism on household income. Further research directions need to expand the random sample, add tourist surveys, and analyze the tourism value chain of craft villages to provide more comprehensive policy evidence.

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