

Preserving and Promoting Traditional Culture associated with Sustainable Tourism Development: Challenges and Potential in Tua Chua, Vietnam

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Abstract

Tourism serves as a fundamental catalyst for socio-economic development, yet its rapid expansion often necessitates a balanced approach to safeguard traditional values. In the highland district of Tua Chua, Dien Bien Province, the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities like the Mong, Dao, and Kho Mu presents a unique paradigm where tourism and cultural preservation interact and influence each other. This study aims to investigate the potentials and challenges of preserving traditional cultural heritage within the framework of sustainable tourism development in this region. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study utilized purposive sampling to engage 12 key informants, including cultural experts, local authorities, and community representatives (artisans, village elders, and homestay owners). Data collection was conducted from January 2024 to August 2025 through field surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The gathered data underwent thematic analysis, integrated with an analytical framework based on UNESCO's cultural conservation standards (2003) and the United Nations' sustainable tourism principles (1987). The findings identify ten distinctive traditional cultural elements including festivals, handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, and vernacular architecture that hold significant potential for experiential and heritage tourism. However, the research also delineates six critical challenges: the gradual erosion of cultural authenticity due to "staged authenticity" and commercialization, severe topographical and infrastructural constraints, inadequacies in cultural management, low levels of local community participation, fragmented promotion strategies, and emerging environmental sanitation concerns. The results affirm that the preservation of traditional culture can only be effective when harmoniously integrated into a comprehensive sustainable tourism strategy. To mitigate the risk of cultural degradation and loss of authenticity, it is imperative to shift from state-dependent conservation to community-based management models. This research provides a strategic roadmap for local authorities to balance economic growth with cultural integrity, emphasizing that infrastructure improvement and human resource training are vital for the long-term viability of Tua Chua as a sustainable tourism destination.

Keywords: Cultural preservation, challenges, sustainable tourism, ethnic minorities, Tua Chua, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

Globally, tourism is recognized as a fundamental instrument for national development, spanning both social and economic dimensions [1]. Within this developmental framework, the relationship between tourism and cultural

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preservation is inherently symbiotic; as Smith posits, cultural heritage and tourism interact dynamically, exerting a reciprocal influence on one another [2].

In the context of the Vietnamese highlands, Tua Chua District (Dien Bien Province) emerges as a significant cultural reservoir. The region possesses substantial potential rooted in the traditional identities of ethnic minority groups, notably the Mong, Dao, and Kho Mu whose unique cultural features serve as the foundation for distinctive experiential tourism products. However, the rapid expansion of the tourism sector has precipitated emerging environmental and cultural concerns [3]. These negative externalities necessitate a transition toward sustainable tourism, defined as the preservation of future opportunities while simultaneously meeting the contemporary needs of tourists and host communities [4]. That why the integration of circular economies into sustainable tourism development has become a necessary strategy to mitigate environmental impacts that also promote local prosperity [5]. Furthermore, the digital transformation of ethnic tourism also plays a pivotal role in modern preservation, utilizing technologies allow for the vivid reproduction of historical spaces and traditional practices, making heritage more accessible and interactive for a global audience [6]. While social media enables the co-creation of tourism experiences, it also presents the challenge of staged authenticity where cultural elements may be commercialized or modified to meet the expectations of the digital market [7].

In Tua Chua, the preservation and promotion of traditional culture face substantial challenges that threaten the authenticity and continuity of heritage. Despite the district's potential, there is a critical need for an accurate examination of the obstacles preventing the harmonious integration of cultural values into tourism. Understanding these localized barriers is essential for addressing the broader systemic challenges of achieving sustainable development in mountainous ethnic regions.

Consequently, this study aims to systematically identify the cultural potentials, assess the current status of heritage conservation, and recognize the multifaceted challenges of preserving traditional culture in the specific context of sustainable tourism development in Tua Chua. By employing a qualitative research approach involving cultural experts and local communities, the research seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical sustainability and practical heritage management.

The findings of this research hold strong practical significance for local authorities and tourism managers. By offering a rigorous discussion on the tensions between economic growth and cultural integrity, the research provides a strategic orientation for policy formulation. Ultimately, this research contributes to the development of integrated strategies that safeguard traditional cultural values including the capacity for inheritance, transmission, and social continuity while fostering a sustainable and resilient tourism economy in the Northwest region of Vietnam.

2. Literature

2.1. Preserving Traditional Culture

Culture is a comprehensive system of ideas, inspirations, actions, and human creativity within social life [8]. Culture includes inherited thoughts, traditions, customs, and values that shaped by a collective or community group. It also includes elements such as knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, and customs transmitted through society [9]. This indicates that culture comprises both tangible and intangible components. The preservation of traditional culture (including both tangible and intangible heritage) is not limited to safeguarding artifacts, festivals, or customs, it also entails maintaining the capacity for inheritance, transmission, social continuity, and cultural meaning within community life [10].

Preserving traditional culture plays a particularly important role in tourism development. Traditional cultural elements constitute a significant component of tourist motivation [11]. Tourists often visit historical and cultural sites to explore new cultures, acquire knowledge, and gain diverse experiences [12]. Studies addressing the challenges of cultural tourism argue that commercialization may lead to the loss of cultural meaning for local communities [13]. Furthermore, studies in the post-pandemic era have highlighted the importance of resiliency and cultural revitalization as active, community-led processes [14]. Rather than being passive victims of crisis, local communities act as agents of change, using diversified livelihoods and grassroots initiatives to reclaim cultural identities. Effective preservation in this era often requires a knowledge management framework that integrates traditional lifestyles and spiritual beliefs into unique tourism artifacts, thereby fostering economic resilience and social empowerment [15].

While the advent of Fourth Industrial Revolution has further revolutionized preservation through digital transformation [6]. However, this digital shift demands a digital tourism governance approach that prioritizes integrity, transparency, and participatory dialogue through decentralized platforms like social media which accelerate the risk of staged authenticity [7]. Besides, preservation must be integrated into a resource-sharing mechanism that balances power dynamics between diverse ethnic groups and enhances overall industry innovation [16]. Additionally, the opening of communities to tourism may reduce the authenticity of cultural elements. Therefore, examining the preservation of traditional cultural elements in relation to sustainable tourism development is essential to ensure the effective transmission of cultural values to future generations in parallel with societal development as well as emerging issues related to digital transformation, community participation, resource sharing, and cultural authenticity in the context of sustainable tourism development.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable Tourism is regarded as an ideal model for developing countries. This approach not only generates purely economic benefits but also contributes to the development of social, environmental, and cultural dimensions, thereby effectively addressing global challenges [17].

The concept of sustainability emerged within the term of sustainable development. According to the highest and most frequently cited definition proposed by the Brundtland Commission in the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development of the United Nations: "Our Common Future (1987)", sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development arose from the recognition of the limitations of growth that relies primarily on economic perspectives. Therefore, sustainable development encompasses economic growth, but also includes social progress and advancement while ensuring environmental protection [18].

The core principles of sustainable tourism include resource conservation, ecosystem protection, and the minimization of environmental impacts [19]. These principles are essential for achieving sustainable tourism development, with an emphasis on economic viability, social equity, and environmental conservation [20]. In terms of economic sector, recent academic discourse suggests a shift from growth-oriented models toward more restorative frameworks [21] such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) model, which fosters economic resilience in community-based tourism by diversifying livelihoods and adding value to local biological and cultural resources [15].

Prioritizing social and cultural sustainability in tourism development is crucial for empowering local communities to preserve their traditional cultural heritage. This is one of the fundamental elements of sustainable tourism proposed by UNWTO regarding social and cultural sustainability, which emphasizes encouraging the active participation of local communities in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of sustainable development. Furthermore, integrating the cultural heritage of ethnic minority groups into tourism development can make a positive contribution to local sustainable development and support the preservation of historical and cultural sites.

In the post-pandemic era, the focus has expanded to include tourism resiliency, envisioning local communities not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents of change [14]. This involves inclusive tourism strategies that support the social and economic integration of marginalized groups, specifically by challenging dominant power relations and facilitating community self-representation [22].

Cultural conservation is a key aspect of sustainable tourism development, encompassing the protection and enhancement of the integrity of cultural values. Sustainable planning and management of cultural heritage play an

important role in addressing challenges such as overtourism, ensuring that tourism development not only controls tourism-related pressures but also fosters long-term and sustainable tourism models [23].

In summary, sustainable tourism development prioritizes economic, cultural, social, and environmental sustainability, in which harmonious tourism development generates economic benefits while ensuring the long-term preservation of cultural, social, and environmental values.

Accordingly, basing on cultural conservation studies by UNESCO (2003), sustainable tourism principles of UN (1987), and the works of various scholars [10,18], this study employs an analytical framework that focuses on achieving a balance among economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions in the sustainable tourism development of Tua Chua.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Study Design

This research adopted a qualitative research approach. Data were conducted over an extended period from January 2025 to August 2025. The research design followed a thematic and interpretive trajectory, focusing on identifying potentials and recognizing systemic challenges in preserving traditional culture associated with sustainable tourism. The research integrated both primary fieldwork and secondary literature review, utilizing data from the 2024 Cultural Heritage Inventory of Tua Chua District and official socio-economic reports to establish a longitudinal perspective.

3.2. Tools and Techniques

Triangulation of data was achieved through multiple qualitative techniques:

Literature review: The research conducted systematic analysis of national and international academic journals, as well as official publications from the Dien Bien Provincial People's Committee and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam.

Field observations: Two fieldworks (one in January and the other in August 2025) were taken to observe the tangible and intangible cultural values and how they are preserved and promoted via tourism by the Hmong, Thai, and Dao ethnic groups.

Primary Inquiries: The research collected the primary data by using in-depth interviews and to gather nuanced perspectives from stakeholders.

Thematic Analysis: Data were synthesized through a coding process, where qualitative quotations were interpreted and organized into overarching themes to identify emerging issues such as "staged authenticity" and cultural erosion [13].

3.3. Sampling

The research employed a purposive sampling technique to select a cohort of 12 information-rich participants, ensuring a comprehensive representation of sectors involved in the cultural-tourism nexus [24]. This sample included: (i) local authorities responsible for cultural and tourism management; (ii) community stakeholders, including village elders from Lao Xa Phinh, Ta Sin Thang, and Huoi So; and (iii) direct practitioners such as farmers, artisans, ritual specialists, and homestay owners in Ta Phin Commune.

A snowball sampling technique was applied to recruit 12 research participants. Interviews were conducted face to face, both in January and August 2025, lasting 45-60 minutes each. Initial participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network. Following the first interview, participants were asked to refer other individuals who met the research's inclusion criteria, thereby facilitating the identification and recruitment of subsequent participants with similar characteristics for interview participation. Data saturation was determined in accordance with (Saunders et al., 2019)'s data saturation model through an iterative process of concurrent data collection and analysis. After 12 interviews, no new codes or themes emerged, which was taken as an indication of data saturation. Two additional interviews were subsequently conducted to confirm this saturation. This approach ensured that thematic redundancy was rigorously established rather than relying solely on a general claim of saturation. Consequently, this research only uses the first 12 interviews for analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data acquisition was supported by digital audio recording devices and field-based documentation tools to ensure the high-fidelity capture of qualitative narratives. For data processing, thematic coding and data cleaning procedures were applied to categorize the qualitative inputs. The analytical framework was grounded in the cultural conservation standards of UNESCO (2003) and the sustainable tourism principles of the United Nations (1987) to evaluate the balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions [10, 18, 24]. These categories were then organized into overarching themes to identify key issues. Subsequently, the themes were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn in alignment with the research questions.

3.5. Ethics

This research was supported by the Asia Research Support Center-Vietnam National University, Hanoi, with funding from the CHEY Institute for Advanced Studies, grant number CA.24.02A.

To ensure scientific integrity and ethical rigor, all primary data collection activities were conducted with the informed participation of the subjects. All interviews were fully documented with the consent of the participants, and audio recordings were utilized solely for academic coding and cleaning purposes. Data confidentiality was maintained through anonymized referencing (e.g., Interviewee 1, 2, etc.), ensuring that the insights provided by local residents and officials were treated with professional sensitivity and in alignment with social science research ethics.

4. Results, Discussions, and Implications

4.1. Results

Current Status of Traditional Cultural Preservation in Tua Chua

Tua Chua is a mountainous district of Dien Bien Province, Vietnam, home to eight major ethnic groups. The Hmong account for 73% of the population, followed by the Thai (15.6%), the Kinh (4.6%), the Dao (4.2%), the Hoa (1.4%), the Kho Mu (0.7%), the Khang (0.2%), and the Phu La (0.2%). Other ethnic groups, including the E Đe, Tay, and Muong, represent 0.1% of the population [25].

The tangible cultural heritage of Tua Chua reflects the district's natural conditions, geographical characteristics, and the daily lives of local residents. The intangible cultural heritage system of the district's ethnic minorities is exceptionally rich and diverse. According to the 2024 Cultural Heritage Inventory of Tua Chua District, various forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as languages and scripts, folklore, performing arts, social practices and belief systems, traditional festivals, traditional crafts, and indigenous knowledge that are still preserved and maintained in the everyday cultural practices of ethnic minority communities. Several heritage elements have been recognized as National Intangible Cultural Heritage, including the art of crafting and performing the Hmong Khen, the Hmong blacksmithing craft, the traditional embroidered shoe-making of the Hoa (Xa Phang), and the Tu Cai ritual of the Dao.

Efforts to safeguard and promote ethnic cultural values in Tua Chua have received considerable attention. This is reflected in local government policies aimed at implementing traditional cultural preservation activities, such as safeguarding distinctive ethnic markets including Ta Sin Thang Market and Xa Nhe Market and developing characteristic tourism products associated with ethnic minority cultures. Examples include experiential tourism linked to the Spring Festival (Gau Tao Festival) and community-based tourism activities in Ta Phin Village, Ta Phin Commune.

The district has strengthened communication, promotion, and tourism marketing through the organization

of annual cultural, sports, and tourism weeks; dissemination via mass media; publication of promotional materials; installation of advertising panels; and promotion through the district’s official website, provincial departments, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Zalo. Collaboration with provincial newspapers and radio stations, as well as famtrip programs, has further enhanced tourism promotion. The district also actively showcases cultural and tourism products at fairs and exhibitions to introduce local agricultural goods, handicrafts, and tourism potential to visitors from within and beyond the province.

Educational activities aimed at transmitting intangible cultural heritage have also been implemented. In 2024, seven traditional cultural training classes were organized, including: two classes teaching the Dao script; one class on crafting the Hmong Khen which is a traditional mouth organ; one class on the Hmong blacksmithing craft; one class teaching the traditional embroidered shoe-making of the Hoa (Xa Phang); one class on crafting and performing the Tinh Tau lute of the Thai people; and one class on traditional bamboo weaving of the Khơ Mú, conducted in the communes of Huoi So, Muong Bang, Muong Dun, Xa Nhe, and Lao Xa Phinh [25].

Cultural potentials for tourism development in Tua Chua

Table 1. Cultural potentials for tourism development in Tua Chua

TT	Cultural Elements	Tourism Potentials
1	Ethnic groups	Tua Chua is home to eight major ethnic groups including Hmong, Thai, Dao, Hoa, Khơ Mú possessing distinctive and rich cultural identities that offer strong potential for cultural and experiential tourism.
2	Festivals	The district hosts a wide range of traditional festivals representing diverse ethnic cultures. These include the Zu Su Festival (organized on the 17th-18th day of the ninth lunar month) and the Du Tau Festival (sixth-seventh lunar months) of the Hmong; the Ban Vuong Worship Ritual, Fire Jumping Festival, and Cap Sac Ceremony of the Dao; and the Xen Ban Ceremony, New Rice Celebration, and Han Khuong Festival of the Thai. These festivals provide abundant resources for festival tourism and cultural interpretation activities.
3	Traditional Handicrafts	Traditional handicrafts demonstrate high potential for craft-based tourism. Notable examples include:

TT	Cultural Elements	Tourism Potentials
		the Hoa ethnic embroidery craft (recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage); Hmong flute-making in Song Un village (Muong Bang Commune); Hmong embroidery and brocade weaving in Ta La Cao village; Hmong blacksmithing in De Dang village (Sinh Phinh Commune), recognized as a provincial-level traditional craft; as well as basketry, carpentry, Do paper-making, and textile weaving of various ethnic groups.
4	Cuisine	Indigenous cuisines offer opportunities for culinary tourism. Representative dishes include: from the Hmong (Men Men which is steamed cornmeal, sticky rice cake, maize wine, Thang Co soup); from the Dao (buffalo meat, free-range chicken); from the Thai (grilled meat, dried meat, sausage, bamboo-tube rice, buffalo skin soup, sticky rice dishes, fish salad, buffalo -meat salad).
5	Traditional costumes	Traditional costumes are well-preserved and highly distinctive. The Hoa ethnic attire includes gender-differentiated shirts, trousers, and embroidered shoes. Hmong women’s clothing features a truncated conical pleated skirt with dense embroidery in dominant colors such as blue, red, white, and yellow, primarily using handwoven hemp fabric. Dao traditional attire, with minimal gender differences, typically includes black indigo garments decorated with pink silk strips, purple-edged collars and cuffs, and a square black headscarf. These costumes have strong appeal for fashion tourism, photography tourism, and cultural exhibition.
6	Traditional architecture	Vernacular architectural forms reflect cultural values and living practices. Hmong houses are built with wooden frames, wooden walls, earthen floors, and low roofs. Dao houses are also wooden but constructed on cement foundations, often elevated with corridors. Thai stilt houses, typically with 3, 5, or 7 compartments and four symbolic roof corners, provide valuable potential for developing homestay tourism and cultural experience tours.
7	Indigenous knowledge	Indigenous knowledge systems provide opportunities for cultural-ecological tourism. Examples include: Thai traditional medicine for

TT	Cultural Elements	Tourism Potentials
		treating back pain, liver diseases, and herbal bath therapies; Dao calendrical knowledge based on the Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches to determine auspicious times; Hmong traditional medicine for treating tuberculosis, kidney stones, and other ailments.
8	Folk Games	Folk games enrich community-based tourism activities. Hmong games include Pa Pao Throwing, Spinning tops, and Chicken shuttlecock kicking. Dao games include Con throwing, Push stick, and variations of Con throwing. Thai ethnic communities possess diverse and engaging folk games such as Con Throwing, To Ma Le game, tug of war, stick pushing, cockfighting, stilts walking, spinning, flag stealing, and chess-like game.
9	Traditional folk performing arts	Hmong rituals and performing arts include wedding songs, funeral chants, antiphonal singing, housewarming songs, and traditional musical instruments such as the Khen (Hmong reed-pipe), mouth harp, and leaf flute, as well as Khen dances and umbrella dances. Dao artistic traditions include flutes, drums, handbells, folk singing, bell dancing, and sword dancing. These offer substantial potential for cultural shows and heritage tourism.
10	Beliefs and rituals	Folk beliefs exhibit unique cultural traits among ethnic groups. Hmong marriage customs occur only in spring and avoid months with thunderstorms. Dao marriage customs emphasize ancestral reverence and community cohesion, without strict taboos on dates. Thai marriage practices typically involve two ceremonies, first at the bride's home, followed 1-2 years later by a more elaborate celebration. These practices support the development of ethnographic tourism and cultural heritage studies.

Source: Compiled by the authors

While the cultural potential is immense, transforming these values into tourism products reveals complex power dynamics and conflicts in resource sharing between communities. The absence of transparent mechanisms for resource sharing, such as rotating cultural festivals among different ethnic communes exacerbates underlying interest conflicts. So, tourism development will only benefit a powerful minority rather than promoting collective prosperity for all ethnic groups [16].

Challenges in preserving traditional cultural values associated with sustainable tourism development in Tua Chua, Vietnam

Data collected from observations, field notes, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews were synthesized and analyzed. A thematic analysis approach was applied, in which each quotation was interpreted and coded to identify emerging themes. The findings indicate that the preservation of traditional cultural values in connection with sustainable tourism development in Tua Chua is currently confronted with multiple challenges. These challenges include the erosion of traditional cultural elements, constraints arising from natural conditions and topographical features, limited participation of local communities, issues in cultural management and preservation, inadequacies in tourism promotion and marketing, and environmental sanitation concerns.

One of the most significant challenges faced by Tua Chua involves the gradual decline and disappearance of traditional cultural values. This challenge is illustrated through key excerpts derived from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and field journals, as presented below:

“The primary reasons stem from strong cultural interchange, which has led to the introduction of new and unfamiliar cultural elements into the daily lives of ethnic minority communities. In addition, the outmigration of young people to urban areas for work and livelihood opportunities has reduced opportunities for cultural transmission between generations. As living standards improve, local residents no longer maintain traditional crafts such as the Mong blacksmithing craft or the embroidered-shoe making of the Xa Phang people. Traditional ethnic costumes-once meticulously handcrafted with distinctive patterns serving as cultural identifiers-are now disappearing and at risk of being lost. Local people no longer devote sufficient time to practicing traditional crafts; everyday clothing and agricultural tools can simply be purchased at local markets” (Interviewee 1).

“Market mechanisms and the broader integration process have contributed to the erosion of many traditional cultural values, including costumes, handicrafts, and customary practices, as residents devote less time to maintaining them. Additionally, the risks associated with uncontrolled tourism development may lead to the commercialization of culture, ultimately compromising the authenticity and originality of traditional cultural values” (Interviewee 2).

The challenge of cultural erosion has been highlighted in the study by MacCannel et al., which examines the authenticity of cultural elements [13]. Another challenge faced by Tua Chua relates to its natural conditions and topography, which pose significant constraints to both the preservation of traditional cultural values and the development of tourism. This issue can be understood through key excerpts from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, as follows:

“Natural conditions and topographical factors also constitute major challenges in preserving the cultural values of ethnic minority groups in Tua Chua. Many villages located in remote and isolated areas (such as Ta Sin Thang and Lao Xa Phinh communes) lack adequate transportation infrastructure, electricity, and internet access, making tourism connectivity difficult” (Interviewee 3).

“Conservation projects often rely on state funding, while local resources remain limited. Tua Chua, being a high-mountain district with steep terrain and difficult transportation, faces challenges in attracting tourists. Tourism services such as accommodation, food, and cultural performances are often repetitive, insufficiently diverse, and lack coordination” (Interviewee 4).

Challenges faced by Tua Chua in managing the preservation of traditional cultural values and the development of tourism were identified through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, as follows:

“The efforts to preserve and promote the cultural values of ethnic minority groups in Tua Chua have not yet produced significant results. Many cultural preservation policies and programs linked to tourism development by the local government have not been fully implemented, and numerous traditional cultural values have not been situated within authentic community living environments” (Interviewee 5).

“Furthermore, sustainable tourism development policies have not been effectively invested in; tourism human resources remain insufficient, service infrastructure is limited, and local residents have not been adequately guided or encouraged to participate widely in sustainable tourism development” (Interviewee 6).

The active participation of local communities in preserving traditional cultural values and promoting sustainable tourism constitutes a significant challenge for Tua Chua. This challenge is illustrated by several key excerpts from in-depth interviews, field observations, and notes:

“...Local communities have not fully engaged in activities to preserve traditional cultural values or promote sustainable tourism. Community members exhibit limited awareness and capacity to apply policies for safeguarding and maintaining the traditional cultural values of their ethnic groups” (Interviewee 7).

“...Tourism human resources in Tua Chua, primarily local community members, have not received formal training in tourism. Local residents face limitations in operating and managing tourism products and services effectively” (Interviewee 8).

Additionally, challenges in tourism promotion, marketing, and the application of information technology have been identified as obstacles to preserving and enhancing the cultural values of ethnic minority groups in Tua Chua in connection with tourism development. These challenges are reflected in the following excerpts from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions:

“Promotion and publicity efforts have not been truly effective. Despite ongoing initiatives, the promotion, coordination, and marketing of Tua Chua to a broad tourist audience remain limited, and the district’s full potential has yet to be exploited” (Interviewee 9).

“...The lack of a systematic strategy has resulted in cultural tourism products in Tua Chua not being developed as an integrated system, relying mainly on historical sites without deeply engaging with indigenous culture. Technological limitations, such as minimal use of digital tools to promote the culture of ethnic minorities to international visitors or to engage younger audiences through smart devices, have not been adequately addressed” (Interviewee 10).

Another significant challenge concerns environmental sanitation in Tua Chua, which affects the development of sustainable tourism. Key excerpts from in-depth interviews are as follows:

“...Environmental sanitation in some areas has not been adequately addressed, affecting tourists’ experiences and the destination’s image” (Interviewee 11).

“...Occasionally, tourists express dissatisfaction with the quality of environmental sanitation in ethnic minority villages in Tua Chua, such as the cleanliness of livestock pens, household compounds, and public sanitation areas” (Interviewee 12).

4.2. Discussions and Implications

The empirical evidence from this study delineates a complex landscape for sustainable tourism in Tua Chua, characterized by a dichotomy between high cultural potential and systemic developmental barriers. The research identified ten distinctive traditional cultural elements ranging from vernacular architecture and indigenous knowledge to ethnic festivals and crafts that constitute a robust foundation for experiential tourism. Concurrently, the research synthesized six critical challenges: the erosion of cultural authenticity, natural and topographical constraints, management inadequacies, low community engagement, fragmented promotion, and environmental sanitation concerns.

The interpretation of these findings suggests that the preservation of traditional culture in Tua Chua is currently at a precarious crossroads. The erosion of traditional cultural values is not merely a byproduct of time but a consequence of strong cultural interchange and the outmigration of the youth, which disrupts the intergenerational transmission of heritage. Furthermore, the fragmented terrain and harsh climate of the high-mountainous district act as structural inhibitors, where the lack of transportation and digital infrastructure hinders tourism connectivity. Most critically, the transition of cultural practices from authentic community living environments to commercialized tourism performances represents a significant risk to the region's cultural depth. Without a long-term strategy that links preservation to

economic incentives, the local heritage remains vulnerable to the pressures of a market economy.

These findings resonate with and extend several key theoretical frameworks in the field of cultural tourism. The observed commercialization of performances in Tua Chua provides contemporary evidence for MacCannell's concept of "staged authenticity," where the quest for tourist-oriented presentation leads to the loss of original cultural meaning [13]. Specifically, field observations in Tua Chua reveal several manifestations of staged authenticity. Traditional Hmong brocade weaving is often demonstrated to tourists using simplified production processes and commercially sourced materials. Ritual performances involving the Hmong Khen and Thai Tinh Tau lute are increasingly detached from their original ceremonial contexts and presented as scheduled tourism entertainment. Similarly, some traditional houses in Ta Phin have been modified into homestays that retain ethnic architectural features while adapting interior spaces to meet tourist expectation and satisfaction.

This study also validates the assertions of Smith, who posits that tourism and cultural heritage interact in a reciprocal and often tense relationship [2]. Furthermore, the environmental and cultural externalities identified in this research echo the warnings of Weaver regarding the negative impacts of rapid tourism development in the absence of a sustainable approach [3]. The management gaps identified, specifically the overlapping responsibilities among administrative levels, align with the challenges of implementing sustainable tourism indicators in cultural destinations as discussed by Lozano-Oyola et al. [4].

The implications of this research are twofold. Theoretically, it affirms that tourism and cultural heritage interact with and influence each other [2], requiring a management approach that transcends mere economic metrics. Practically, the findings suggest that preserving traditional culture in the pursuit of sustainable tourism can only be achieved through a harmonious integration of conservation into broader development strategies. This necessitates a shift in policy focus toward raising community awareness, investing in resilient tourism infrastructure, and providing formal training in tourism for local residents. To prevent the loss of "authenticity and originality" [13], authorities must ensure that cultural values remain situated within authentic community living environments rather than being relegated to commercialized performances.

To achieve a harmonious tourism development that ensures the long-term preservation of cultural and social values, local authorities must shift toward community-based tourism management models. This requires prioritizing community capacity building and formal tourism training to empower residents as the primary custodians of their heritage.

In the short term, the initial focus must be on the digital transformation of ethnic tourism by establishing a standardized database of intangible cultural heritage [6]. This involves training community members in basic digital

tools and social media management to enable them to represent their own heritage without external distortion [7]. In the medium term, tourism planning should incorporate circular economy principles through resource-efficient production, waste reduction, and sustainable management practices, while digital tourism governance systems can improve transparency and stakeholder participation. The effort of maintaining and promoting the value of cultural heritage for tourism development continues to have some constraints. This vital effort has only concentrated on a few ethnic groups, and its implementation has been uneven and incomplete. Traditional cultural heritage values of ethnic groups have been inventoried but not effectively preserved or promoted, resulting in a lack of unique local tourism products. Some cultural heritages are not consistently exercised by the community, resulting in their decline and decreased attractiveness to tourists; tourism products based on ethnic groups' cultural resources remain boring and unappealing [26].

Furthermore, addressing youth out-migration should become a strategic priority. Rather than viewing migration solely as a threat to cultural continuity, local authorities can promote place-based entrepreneurship by encouraging young people to engage in tourism-related social enterprises, digital heritage promotion. Such initiatives can create new employment opportunities while strengthening intergenerational cultural transmission. The adoption of the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) model may further diversify local livelihoods by linking tourism with highland agriculture and traditional handicrafts, thereby improving household income and reducing economic dependence on seasonal tourism activities.

To create sustainable financing mechanisms, financial support should be mobilized through national target programs, public-private partnerships, and preferential credit schemes for ethnic minority households and tourism-related small enterprises to encourage investment in heritage conservation and sustainable tourism services. Policies to preserve and promote ethnic minority' cultural values should align with national, ethnic, and regional development policies, with a focus on comprehensiveness and distinctive qualities [27].

5. Conclusion

This study has systematically investigated the nexus between cultural preservation and sustainable tourism in Tua Chua district. The research identified ten distinctive traditional cultural elements and six major challenges. These findings confirm that while Tua Chua possesses a rich cultural reservoir, the gradual decline and disappearance of traditional cultural values presents a critical threat to its developmental trajectory.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of sustainable development by providing valuable guidance for local authorities in balancing cultural preservation with economic growth. It bridges the gap between international sustainability principles [10, 18] and

localized ethnic contexts in Vietnam. By identifying the specific barriers to local community participation and the risks of "staged authenticity" [13], the research offers a strategic framework for the formulation of more appropriate policies. Ultimately, this work serves as a foundational reference for transforming Tua Chua into a leading destination for sustainable cultural tourism in the Northwest region, ensuring that the district's heritage is not only preserved but also serves as a catalyst for social and environmental progress [19, 24].

While providing deep contextual insights, this research is bounded by its qualitative approach, with data analysis primarily derived from purposive in-depth interviews and field observations in specific communes such as Ta Phin and Lao Xa Phinh. The research's scope is geographically focused on the highland conditions of Tua Chua, which may limit the direct generalizability of its findings to other regions with different socio-economic profiles. Furthermore, the research captures a specific temporal snapshot (in 2025), which may not fully account for the long-term impacts of evolving market mechanisms on ethnic minority traditions.

Future studies should consider employing quantitative methods combined with assessments from the perspectives of experts and tourism businesses to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the socio-economic impact of cultural preservation in Tua Chua in the long periods. Such research will be vital for refining sustainable planning and management strategies to mitigate the risks of overtourism and cultural degradation [23].



Picture 2. The local residents weaving brocades



Picture 3. The local market

Appendix A. The fieldwork's pictures.



Picture 1. The research group taking photo with local resident.

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