# Challenges in conserving Intangible Cultural Heritage in Vietnam as seen from the Van Phuc Silk Village

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## **Abstract**

Traditional handicrafts in Ha Dong, Van Phuc, Vietnam, are the subject of this study. Crafts are portable and manufactured by craftsmen with artistic and manual talents, serving immediate demands and are traded and exchanged. They may exhibit cultural significance and symbolic values of gender, age, ethnicity, and nationalism, forming part of social and religious beliefs. Unfortunately, growing industrialization, globalisation, and commodification have limited them. The Van Phuc village is a great case study for how it survived and developed during urbanisation and industrialization. Applying qualitative research, data was collected through offline observations, interviews, and document analysis from 2017-2021. This study found that lack of basic infrastructure, less competitive products, traditional crafts style, and anxiety for future succession have inhibited the village's promotion of its values. To help stakeholders understand and safeguard the village, some implications are proposed.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Vietnam, Silk Making, Traditional Handicraft, Van Phuc

#### Introduction

A stunning piece of news aired on VTV1 in late 2017 when my family and I were watching television. The report claimed that a well-known Vietnamese corporation called Khai Silk had been deceiving Vietnamese consumers for decades. This company so repackaged low-cost Chinese silk with 'Made in Vietnam' labels and sold it in Vietnam for four- or five-times the original cost. Because of this encounter, I felt compelled to learn more about Van Phuc Village, the centre for artisanal silk production in Vietnam.

Handicrafts are defined as items that are portable and made with artistic and manual skills by artisans. Their functions are to satisfy immediate needs and are regarded as trade goods and exchange commodities. Some kinds of handicrafts might represent cultural significance and symbolic values of gender, age, ethnic, and national identity, thereby becoming integral part of social and religious beliefs (Hitchcock et al., 2010). As a result, they have been

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part of cultural heritage and traditions that are bestowed from generation to generation. It is critical to recognise that there is a need to conserve traditional knowledge and skills to maintain the identity of communities (Nguyen et al., 2023; Shafi et al., 2021; Nguyen & Phan, 2021). In fact, the traditional handicraft sector is believed to have made vital contributions to the social, economic, and cultural development of communities (Cuaton, 2019; Yang et al., 2018; Aguirre & Lopez, 2017). For example, this sector has employed many rural workers, generated more income, and promoted traditional and cultural values in different countries (Shafi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018).

On the flip side, the handicraft sector has been constrained by some barriers and challenges, including rapid industrialisation, globalisation, and commodification (Pratima, 2015; Yongzhong et al., 2018). Furthermore, this industry has faced a poor infrastructure system, insufficient support from various governmental institutions, the shortage of adequate training and entrepreneurial skills and poor attitude from members of the public (Grobar, 2019; Hassan et al., 2017; Yongzhong et al., 2018; Suja, 2014). As a result, the handicraft sector lags, halting the abilities of artisans to evolve into medium- and large-scale producers supported by technology and effective marketing tactics and distribution systems (Benson, 2014; Thirumaran et al., 2014; Vadakepat, 2013).

Vietnam has achieved substantial achievements in producing and exporting its handicrafts to the world. For example, different kinds of handicrafts from Vietnam have been very prevalent in many cities around the world. It is likely that you will find 'made in Vietnam' stickers on products sold at Walmart, Marshall's, and The Junior Maxx. The strong growth of Vietnamese handicraft is believed to have been linked to changes made by the Doi moi (Reform) in 1986 (Szydlowski, 2008). The reform has turned Vietnam from a stagnant, centrally planned Soviet-style economy into a macroeconomic stability to a mixed market-orientated economy (Kokko, 1998). The economic growth can be split into three phases: a centrally planned mechanism, market mechanism, and global economic integration (Bui, 2009). The reform has also assisted Vietnam in gaining better access to the global economy with capital and foreign investors (Suntikul, Butler & Airey, 2010). Despite the global economic crisis in the 2000s, Vietnam's economy remained resilient at around 6% (Hampton, Jeyacheya & Long, 2017). However, the Vietnamese handicraft sector has been seriously impacted by industrialisation and urbanisation, as other developing countries have dealt with (Yang et al., 2018; Forero-Montaa et al., 2018). Many industrialised products have captured the market, making it difficult for traditional craft communities to make a living.

In Vietnam, Hanoi is considered the largest concentration of craft villages with approximately 1350 villages, making up approximately 59% of the total number of villages in the country. Among them, 277 villages are recognised as traditional craft villages including Bat Trang ceramics, Phu Vinh bamboo, Dai Dong embroidery, Chuong hat making, Lai Xa photography, to name but a few (Thanh et al., 2020). In terms of silk, Van Phuc is considered home to silk handicraft in Vietnam, just around 10 km from the centre of the Hanoi capital. The village has been producing silk for a very long time in Vietnam and its products have been renowned nationally and internationally (Nguyen, 2022). Unfortunately, the recent years have seen some serious challenges and barriers facing the village. As a result, this article focusses on examining the challenges in protecting and promoting the village of Van Phuc silk crafts in

Vietnam. Concerning the structure of the article, apart from this introduction, this paper explains why the Van Phuc village is chosen as a typical example for this study by showing its typical values and problems. The next section represents the existing literature review; therefore, a research gap is withdrawn. The study continues with the research findings and discussions before it is wrapped up with some implications and future research directions.

# Van Phuc village: A remarkable case study

Van Phuc village may be found in the commune of the same name in the Ha Dong district of Hanoi. For the past thousand years, residents of this village have been weaving silk into various goods. The village's past is claimed by the well-known legend of *A La Thi Nuong*. She taught the Van Phuc people how to make silk garments and accessories. After her death, she was revered as Thành Hoàng Làng (Village Goddess) (Nguyen et al., 2022).

The tradition of manufacturing silk products in Van Phuc was widely mentioned in Vietnamese folklores. Notably, there was a well-known Vietnamese folk song stating that:

"Hỡi người bạn cũ lâu năm
Tình tơ có nhớ nghĩa tằm hay chăng?
Lâu năm thì mặc lâu năm
Tình tơ vẫn nhớ nghĩa tằm không quên"
[Hey, my old dear friends
Does the silk still remember the silkworm?
Although a long time has passed,
The silk still misses the silkworm]

The folk song serves as a testament to the intimate connection between the silkworm and the production of silk, symbolising enduring camaraderie among longstanding companions. Van Phuc silk has been showcased at numerous international exhibitions in the past. In 1898, artists from Van Phuc were invited to participate in the French Trade Exhibition held in the city of Marseille. Additionally, they were involved in the International Tourism Fair held in San Francisco, United States, in the year 1902. Between the years 1932 and 1945, artisans from Van Phuc, both male and female, participated in many international exhibitions held in Paris (France) and Jakarta (Indonesia) (Nguyen Thang, 2010; Nguyen, 2016).

Van Phuc Village holds significant historical importance as a site of revolution inside Vietnam. During the August Revolution in 1945, a significant number of individuals residing in the region actively enlisted in the armed forces and engaged in combat against the Japanese invaders. Significantly, after the establishment of the Vietnam Democratic Republic on 2 September 1945, President Ho Chi Minh took up residence at Van Phuc and issued a proclamation urging the nation to fight the French invasion in December 1946. Furthermore, it is worth noting that some esteemed military leaders, like Nguyen Van Cu, Ngo Gia Tu, Hoang Van Thu, Truong Chinh, and Nguyen Luong Bang, have previously been associated with this village (Dinh Thuan, 2021; Nguyen, 2020). According to Dang Loan (2013), Van Phuc holds the distinction of being recognised as the oldest silk town in Vietnam. Moreover, it has gained popularity as a notable tourist destination in the city of Hanoi. Nevertheless, the village has recently faced a series of obstacles in sustaining its status, primarily due to intense competition from other commercialised products.

## Literature review

The concept 'craft village' is widely used in Vietnam. Vuong (2002) contends that traditional craft village is a centre of craft production with many artisans and households. They usually have the same craft ancestors and rules to maintain craft production secrecy. There are two types of craft villages in Vietnam: traditional villages and non-traditional villages. A village is considered traditional if it meets three criteria as follows: (1) It has been developing for at least 50 years; (2) It must produce typical and original craft products, and (3) there is at least one senior artisan in the village. Meanwhile, a nontraditional craft village is to meet new demands of the market and the availability of input materials (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2008).

Since there is an abundance of craft villages throughout Vietnam, these villages have attracted a great deal of attention from many researchers and scholars. First, the development of tourism in traditional handicraft villages has been extensively studied. For instance, Nguyet (2002) and Hau and Anh (2012) contend that it is critical to propose feasible measures and solutions to manage and develop a tourism village efficiently and sustainably to meet the demand of domestic and international visitors. Other studies examine the development potentials of Chuon Ngo carving village (Bui, 2010); the production of typical and specialised products for visitors based on the strengths of the locality (Dang & Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen, 2019); the development of tourism activities in Dong Thap province (Triet, 2016); the traditional village in the context of modern and economic commodities (Le, 2018; Ho, 2020; Hoa 2022); the evaluation of some services in the Da Nang city craft village (Thang, 2022; Ngan, 20222) as well as the development and conservation of the craft village (Nhan, 2020). In addition, a study by Phat (2022) puts more emphasis on collaboration between different stakeholders in the development of tourism in Quang Binh province, particularly the role of government in the management and facilitation of village tourism activities (Nguyen, 2019). Second, some fundamental aspects of handicraft villages such as historical, cultural, and geographical elements need to be explored, thus bringing competitive advantages (Tran, 2019; Bui, 2011), several factors of legislation, finance, and community play a key role in village tourism (Thong, 2021). Additionally, Thanh (2020) indicates that there is a strong connection between the protection of cultural heritage and economic growth in some handicraft villages. As a result, there is an urgent need for the authorities to manage cultural values in Vietnamese craft villages to ensure a balance between traditional values and contemporary production and life (Dang, 2012; Bui, 2008). Finally, fewer studies have paid attention to the situation and conservation of handicraft villages. A cultural researcher Loi reveals that the management of the environment in the craft villages of the Ca Lo River has not been given attention, and pollution has been a major issue for the locals (2012). Therefore, there are some suggestions to manage and conserve craft villages seen from other Asian countries (Thi, 2023), several measures to protect intangible cultural heritage in the context of industrialisation and urbanisation (Le, 2003; Duong, 2001); some strategies to revitalise and promote Thua Thien Hue craft villages (2012), as well as proving on-site training for students through education programmes (Tinh, 2020).

Through the existing literature, it suggests that different aspects of Vietnamese craft villages have been studied. However, the challenges and barriers facing handicraft villages have

been overlooked over the years. This article aims to shed light on the obstacles of the Van Phuc silk villages and then propose some measures for the conservation and development of the village.

## **Research Methods**

A primarily qualitative approach was used in conducting this study, with Van Phuc village in Ha Dong district selected as the case study. Numerous field trips to the village site and its surrounding areas from late 2017, and mostly in 2018 - 2021. The observation of the participants helped me observe the changes and challenges facing the village. Also, I had some conversations with local people, officials, and local researchers. Empirical data were collected through in-depth interviews. My initial observation and conversations with the locals helped to understand the village and shape some interview questions. The interviews took place between September and December 2021.

Sixteen interviews with various stakeholders were conducted to obtain their opinions on the management and challenges of the Van Phuc silk village. Specific identifiers of the researchers were removed to secure their anonymity. A careful selection of interviewees was made that could represent their own experiences with Van Phuc management and challenges. The first ten interviews were conducted with residents of Lai Xa village's residents (Local 1 to Local 10) who have been producing silk for a long time. Their thoughts and sharing are supported by some heritage researchers and local officials. Four interviews were conducted with four local officials (Local Official 1 to Local Official 4) who directly manage the management of the Van Phuc silk village. Finally, two interviews with heritage researchers (Heritage Expert 1 and Heritage Expert 2) were conducted. These people are believed to have expertise in heritage management and conservation in Vietnam. All interviews and discussions were recorded and noted for analysis. Open-ended questions were used to obtain information from the different participants in the interviews (Yin, 2018). These in-person interviews were complemented by books and other materials released by the media.

Thematic analysis is used since it is a foundational method for identifying, examining, and reporting themes within the data, thus possibly providing a rich and detailed amount of information. This method also provides a flexible approach and research tool for researchers to generate new insights and concepts derived from the interview results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this article, the entire data were manually coded and analysed since the number of interviewees is a manageable size. Analysing systematically the whole of data set brings full attention to each data item. Specifically, I started coding the data by writing notes directly on the texts gathered by utilising coloured pens to indicate possible patterns throughout the entire data. Various themes emerging from this stage are analysed and presented logically in the research findings.

## **Findings and Discussion**

By decoding the interviews conducted with various stakeholders, there are some primary challenges facing Van Phuc artisans, including the lack of basic infrastructure, less competitive and conventional style products, and the worry about future inheritance.

# Lack of basic infrastructure

One primary challenge facing Van Phuc silk village is the lack of input materials. This point is strongly supported by different local villagers who have been making silk in the village. Accordingly, Local 1, a male, who is the Chairman of the Van Phuc Silk Village Association, shared "Most of the silk production for the village is taken from Lam Dong province, the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The price of raw silk varies from time to time; therefore, it can create profound impacts on the price of handicrafts." This idea is further explained by the male Local 2, who is over 50 years old:

"Approximately 5 years ago, the price of raw silk was 1,100,000 VND (\$US 50) per kilo, it has so far reached roughly 1,600,000 VND (\$US70) per kilo. To make a set of silk clothes, it normally uses around 2,3 - 2,5 metres of silk. It means that the price of silk products is much more expensive than it used to be."

Although the Van Phuc people are willing to pay more to buy raw silk, they have not secured a reliable supply of silk for their production. This problem is revealed by a male Local Official 1, who is 55 years old, claiming:

"Many Van Phuc households used to plant mulberry trees along the *Hong* (Red) River, the *Tich* River and the *Day* River; they could also raise silkworms in their family. As a result, the Van Phuc people had a reliable source of materials for silk making. Unfortunately, those areas for mulberry cultivation are replaced by residential areas and infrastructure. Locals do not have land to plant mulberries."

As an urban village, Van Phuc has been profoundly affected by industrialisation in recent years. The locals have not planted mulberry on their farms since their farms have been given to high-rise buildings and residential areas. This problem reflects a common problem seen not only in Van Phuc, but also in many other traditional villages in Vietnam (Huy Anh, 2013). More farms in Vietnam have been converted into residential areas to meet the demand of people; therefore, farmland has been shrunk substantially in Vietnam (Konstadakopulos, 2008). Furthermore, it is notable to acknowledge that a long chain of shops and businesses has been erected along the main road of the village, thus reducing the silk production space within the village. What local Van Phuc artisans have been encountering is consistent with the study undertaken by Hassan et al. (2016), who claimed that it is vital to have quality raw materials to make high-quality handicrafts. However, it has been more and more difficult for Van Phuc people to have access to high-quality raw materials for the purpose of silk making.

## Less competitive products

The price of making silk products in Van Phuc village has been more expensive in recent years, therefore different kinds of products have been less competitive to Chinese counterparts. This issue is explained by a male Local 5 who has been making silk products for around 13 years.

"Since the price of raw silk becomes more and more expensive, Van Phuc silk products gradually lose competitive advantage in comparison with Chinese silk products."

The idea of the Local 5 is favoured by the Local Official 4 who has been overseeing silk production in the village for 3 years. He assumes that "Chinese silk products are diverse with reasonable price, thus attracting more consumers, particularly young Vietnamese." As a matter of fact, Barber (2006) suggests that China is one of a primary competitor regarding production and export of handicrafts in the world. The Global Market Assessment Report of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) states that "China can produce anything, better than anyone else and at a better price." The Chinese handicraft industry has achieved an advanced level of competitiveness with respect to price, quality, and production capacity. In addition, buyers who import directly from China to domestic markets might earn a good profit margin that hardly very few importers of other countries can compete with. By virtue of industrialisation, many products have been commoditised; therefore, traditional handicrafts normally give way to mass-produced stuff. The growing competition at the global level between handicrafts and substitute products has been much stronger (Barber, 2006). Local 3 also states that there is greater competition in the market, saying that "Many local households have given up their traditional handicrafts. They turn their working space into apartments to sublet or do other types of business." In comparison, this is in line with a study conducted by Sachan et al. (2013) that indicates that the price of raw materials may grow day by day, thus tremendously growing the production cost of production.

Since Chinese handicraft products have a more affordable price, some Van Phuc households have sold those products for the sake of profit. This issue may have negative impacts on the management of Van Phuc silk production, since Chinese products are not as good as Van Phuc ones. Heritage expert 2 as the Chairman of Vietnamese Traditional Village Association contends:

"Some Van Phuc households have sold Chinese silk products in the village. This is troubling because it could have some negative impacts on Van Phuc's image and value as a traditional silk village."

In addition to the opinion of Heritage Expert 2, Local Official 3 highlights that "selling Chinese silk products in Van Phuc is a breach of local rule." Consequently, the Van Phuc village regulation indicates that local silk products are only allowed to trade within the village 'all shops and businesses in Van Phuc village must sell local products to protect, maintain, and promote the local brand.' They also need to introduce the origin and quality of Van Phuc silk products to visitors.

#### **Conventional Craft**

In terms of production technology, some Van Phuc households are still taking advantage of old-fashioned machines, thus having a quite love productivity. This point is confirmed through an interview with a female Local 6:

"There are six silk machines in my family, but they look old and do not work well. My family inherited those machines from my father and my uncle in 1975. However, they have not been ungraded those machines so far. Therefore, we only produce a small number of silk products. When there are many orders from customers, we cannot handle them."

Handicraft is normally considered a low technology field that involves traditional methods of design and production (Senko, 2003). Besides, customers have desires for new products and designs, artisans need to come up with more modern technologies to meet the demand of customers. However, reality indicates that the lack of innovation and technologies artisans do not serve the demand of customers (Yang et al., 2018; Ploydee, 1997; Pinaisup & Kumpun, 2006).

#### Generational inheritance

The inheritance of silk has been problematic in Van Phuc village for decades due to the impacts of urbanisation and industrialisation in Vietnam. This issue is clearly presented by an eighty-year-old Local 8 who has been making silk for a few decades:

"At the heyday, there were more than 1000 silk making machines in the Van Phuc village. During at day and the night, people hear machines working loudly. However, the number of silk machines has plummeted to only 250 machines with approximately 400 households."

A large proportion of locals, especially young people, share that they are not as interested in making silk. Instead, they opt for new jobs that are easy to earn a lot of money and less stressed, the local 9 (28 years) male postulates: "Since Industry Revolution 4.0 is no longer uncommon, there are different jobs that I can do in various fields, such as Information Technology (IT), Marketing, Accounting or Finance. So traditional handicraft is no longer attractive to me." He also explains the reason for his choice: "When I was a kid, my parents had to work hard to raise me and my brother with silk machines. It took a lot of sweat and effort from both my parents, since making silk is a kind of painstaking process."

Another local woman, 20 years old, who is studying for a bachelor's degree at the National Economic University (Hanoi), defends her own choice of not working as a silk maker, although it has been a family tradition: "While my parents make silk for a living, I will not continue with this kind of job. Silk making requires a lot of time and great effort, but income is not adequate at all." This is in line with research findings carried out by Yang et al. (2018) contending that many young people find it challenging to maintain the handicraft making process. Therefore, they are not as keen to continue their family job and would like to work in the office with a higher income. There is also the possibility of losing silk-making techniques in the Van Phuc village. Indeed, many skilful artisans passed away; the remaining artisans are not strong enough physically and mentally to train young people about traditional silk making techniques. This is an alarming situation that occurs in the village that is stated by Local 10 (56

years old): "A renowned artisan Trieu Van Mao who can produce *Van* silk just passed away. I am wondering whether I can maintain my tradition of being bestowed by my great grandparents."

Another point worth discussing is that according to the village custom, the silk making technique is not given to outsiders, but to family members. This is considered a great challenge for local artisans to conserve and pass on the traditional technique to future generations. Local 8 shares: "There are five members of my family. But I and my wife can make silk, our kids are doing their own work. There is no child in my family who wants to learn silk making techniques and skills. I am afraid that silk will leave the village one day." This problem is correct with the study conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that says that it is difficult to find a good master willing to teach traditional crafts that have 'trade secrets' and that various artisans are not ready to pass such secrets on to outsiders and strangers (2022). This can be further explained by Heritage Expert 1, who is a member of the National Council of Cultural Heritage, saying that: "The majority of young people in Vietnam would love to pursue their higher education at top universities. If they cannot go into university, they would do vocational training focusing on Information Technology (IT), finance, or accounting. A small number of them might follow their family career in handicraft making." In fact, this is consistent with a study by Nguyen (2019) asserting that many young people are keen to pursue higher education at some universities and seek a job instead of following the careers of their parents or grandparents.

#### Conclusion

The cultural heritage represented in crafts is a precious cultural asset for any country, as it unveils the culture, tradition, and identity of a specific region (Yang, 2018). Strikingly, in many developing countries, the craft making has been an integral part of the national economies (Fatt & Bakansing, 2014). This study found that there are some primary challenges facing the Van Phuc silk village, such as lack of basic infrastructure, low-competitive products, conventional crafts, and the worry of future inheritance. When comparing Van Phuc village with other cases, these barriers are so common and prevalent, thus deteriorating the significance of the craft heritage in the long run. By examining all difficulties, my analysis states that this kind of heritage is losing its value and its existence, so it is critical to pay more attention to protect and preserve it.

Consequently, several immediate and viable implications can be derived. The input materials for silk making need to be secure and stable, so craftsmen and craftswomen can focus on producing different products (Huy Anh, 2013). New crafts and technologies need to be applied to the production process, so new products can be made at a more reasonable price, thus meeting the demand of different groups of consumers. In fact, several issues related to handicraft marketing and networking could be handled using modern technology to promote the marketing and distribution process, thus generating higher income, and reducing cost for producers (Wondirad et al., 2021). Additionally, the modern design of silk products should be considered (Thuy Linh, 2015). New programmes need to be in place to encourage and incentivise young people to learn and maintain traditional craft; this is a problem not only in Van Phuc village but also in many Vietnamese handicraft villages. Therefore, the Vietnamese government must play an important role in designing proper handicraft development and

management policies that incentivise local producers, create a market for their product and link them with the tourism sector (Wondirad et al., 2021). Another study by Grobar (2019) also emphasises the critical role the government plays in stimulating, conserving, and promoting the handicraft sector and its inputs. Once young people see the importance and can live on craft, they will stick to it and conserve it over the years (Hoang Lan, 2020). From a practical perspective, the research findings of this study could be of interest to relevant stakeholders in the handicraft and tourism sectors in building sustainable tourism destinations related to handicraft products. Finally, the relationship between handicrafts, tourism, and mechanisms to produce, market, and distribute handicrafts is strongly advised (Wondirad, 2021).

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