



Bounded Performances: Cultural Tourism and Negotiated Authenticity in Northern Vietnam

Tran Quoc Viet

Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam

● <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7167-4511>

Bui Van Tuan

Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam

● <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1491-2566>

Le Thi Thu Huong

Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam

● <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5027-9900>

Abstract

In tropical postcolonial regions, tourism has reconfigured cultural life through selective visibility. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2024) in H'mong, Muong, and Kinh communities, this article examines how identity becomes choreographed for consumption yet remains bounded by community-set thresholds. Practices once sacred—bride-taking, stilt-house hospitality, Quan Họ singing, or Hầu Đồng trance—are transformed into choreographed visibility. Rather than cultural loss, such bounded performativization reflects a survival logic that preserves symbolic autonomy through partial exposure. Methodologically, the study integrates affective ethnography with media analysis to map how tropical materialities—humidity, light, and sound—mediate performance. Conceptually, it advances a framework that recasts performance as ethical endurance: identity lives on by learning how to be staged without surrender.

Keywords: cultural tourism, bounded performativity, negotiated authenticity, Northern Vietnam, tropical tourism, tourism ethnography

Introduction

In recent years, many localities in Northern Vietnam have witnessed a rise in tourism activities promoted as “authentic cultural experiences.” These include overnight stays in stilt houses, sharing *rượu cần* (fermented rice wine), weaving brocade, observing the H’mong bride-taking custom, attending Quan Họ singing festivals, and joining Hầu Đồng trance ceremonies staged under theatrical lighting—a transformation that reflects broader shifts in urban mediumship toward hybrid ritual–theatrical forms shaped by light and sound (Hüwelmeier, 2018; Stanley, 2023). Visitors may also walk around ancient villages such as Đường Lâm, where communal memory appears as a living museum. Practices once embedded in religious rhythms and daily life are now rearranged into staged displays with scripts, timetables, lighting, sound, and designated performers.

The concern today is less about the disappearance of tradition than about the conversion of identity into performance—a new mode of existence designed for tourist attention and commercial survival. Yet this transformation is neither purely imposed from outside nor a total loss of symbolic control. Rituals that move to the stage often arise through subtle negotiations among villagers, tour organizers, and shifting market expectations. Within such negotiated arrangements, identity is not erased but reconfigured—both as an adaptation to livelihood pressures and as a safeguard for sacred limits defined by the communities themselves.

The conversion of ritual into spectacle becomes most visible in tropical climates where material conditions—heat, light, and moisture—shape how performances are sensed and valued. These environmental textures affect not only aesthetics but also the ethical effort of keeping the sacred visible without depletion. In such contexts, authenticity takes an experiential rather than representational form, resonating with Wang’s (1999) existential understanding and Taylor’s (2001) reflections on sincerity as an ethical relation.

This situation is not particular to Vietnam. Throughout postcolonial Southeast Asia, cultural expression has become increasingly regulated by the logic of staging (Kapchan, 1996; Edensor, 2001). In Tana Toraja, Indonesia, funerals have turned into public spectacles (Adams, 2006); in Bali, temple festivals are rearranged into processions optimized for cameras and ritual tourism (Picard, 1990); and in Pa Vi, Meo Vac (Ha Giang, Vietnam), ethnic architecture and costume are reconstructed for experiential consumption (Vu, 2024). These examples raise enduring questions: when does a practice cross the line into scripted performance, and who retains the right to define authenticity when theatricalization becomes the condition of continuity?

Earlier studies tended to view theatricalization as a symptom of alienation (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). More recent research suggests that identity is not fixed but enacted through continuous negotiation between community agency and external gaze, between market demand and local strategy (Butler, 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Edensor, 2000). Such negotiations take place within what Shepherd (2002) describes as the commodified translation of culture, where meaning is rearticulated under global circulation. From this angle, theatricalization is less a sign of decline than a pragmatic restructuring of selfhood for endurance—a situated act through which communities co-author their own stage while preserving moral and aesthetic thresholds (Hsu & Nilep, 2015; de Bernardi, 2019).

This article approaches cultural tourism in Northern Vietnam through the notion of bounded performativization—selective staging in which some elements appear while others remain withheld. Building on Salazar's (2012) tourism imaginaries and Michaud and Turner's (2017) study of Sa Pa's state legibility, it reads performative visibility as both a strategy of endurance and a mode of governance, where appearance becomes entangled with policy, market, and affective infrastructure.

Moving past binary judgments that either celebrate community tourism as empowerment or condemn staging as cultural loss, this study asks why communities choose to perform, what they gain, and what they risk. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Sa Pa, Mai Châu, Đường Lâm, and Bắc Ninh, combined with theoretical insights on performativity, symbolic power, and postcolonial mediation (Bell, 1992; DeLanda, 2006; Hüwelmeier, 2018; Wang, 1999; Taylor, 2001). Through this, tourism emerges not as mere spectacle but as a co-created field of authenticity—an ongoing negotiation through which communities adapt, endure, and redefine the ethics of exposure.

Tourism in Northern Vietnam thus becomes a living laboratory for observing how communities calibrate what may appear and what must remain unseen. Rather than treating these performances as mere symptoms of commodification, this study approaches them as ethical negotiations enacted within the luminous pressure of postcolonial visibility. It asks how villagers, artisans, and spirit mediums decide the threshold of revelation—what can be shown to visitors and what must stay within ritual privacy; how moral and aesthetic boundaries, continually shaped by media, policy, and tropical materialities, are sustained amid touristic scripting; and how such bounded performativization discloses the modes of postcolonial survival and ethical endurance through which identity learns to be staged without surrender.

Literature Review

Since the 1970s, inquiries into cultural tourism have explored how authenticity is produced, mediated, and consumed. MacCannell (1973) traced the modern tourist's pursuit of "authentic" contact with the Other, arguing that such encounters are often carefully arranged simulations—effects of authenticity rather than its essence. Cohen (1988) complicated this view by introducing the idea of emergent authenticity, showing that reconstructed or commodified practices can still evoke genuine meaning for both hosts and visitors. Wang (1999) later relocated the question from the truth of objects to the truth of experience, identifying authenticity as something existential, grounded in embodied feeling.

Following this shift, scholars such as Taylor (2001) and Reisinger and Steiner (2006) treated sincerity as the moral core of authenticity, describing it as a negotiated relation rather than a metaphysical property. Through this lens, authenticity became a shared ethical process—an intersubjective field where meaning is co-created across asymmetrical positions of power.

In Southeast Asia, where ritual, livelihood, and spirituality are deeply entangled, the movement from staged to negotiated authenticity has been particularly evident. Hsu and Nilep (2015) showed that indigenous performers constantly adjust what may be revealed and what must remain concealed to protect sacred value. Their findings echo de Bernardi's (2019) analysis of authenticity as a transactional construct that connects state agendas, market flows, and community intentions. Shepherd (2002) likewise urged that commodification be read not as decline but as cultural translation—a pragmatic means through which meaning is sustained under the pressure of visibility.

Parallel cases from across the region affirm this adaptive logic. In Bali and China, ritual displays have served as sites of reinterpretation where cultural performance yields both identity and income (Picard, 1990; Oakes, 1993). Similar patterns in Thailand and East Africa reveal how heritage exhibitions mediate between nationalism, tourism, and global consumption (Peleggi, 1996; Bruner, 2001). Within such contexts, staging operates less as betrayal than as a form of conservation through adaptation: what is presented allows what must remain hidden to survive.

Extending this discussion, the vocabulary of performativity provides further precision for understanding how identity is enacted through repetition and embodiment. Butler (1990) framed performativity as the continual rearticulation of norms through action, while Kapchan (1996) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) emphasized how local actors mobilize performance to negotiate dignity, recognition, and endurance within uneven power relations.

Tourism research has drawn from these ideas to reveal reciprocal enactments between visitors and residents. Edensor (2000, 2001) described tourist settings as shared arenas of performance where roles are mutually adjusted, dissolving the divide between stage and audience. Salazar's (2012) notion of tourism imaginaries complements this view by showing how global representational systems determine what kinds of identity become visible or desirable.

The ethnography of Balinese temple festivals by Picard (1990) demonstrates that ritual performance always addresses multiple audiences—divine, local, and touristic—each engaging through different emotional registers. In these multi-layered scenes, spectacle and sincerity do not stand apart; they intertwine to sustain devotion, diplomacy, and livelihood alike. Edensor (2018) later observed that such encounters operate through more-than-visual channels where sound, movement, and atmosphere co-produce meaning, a point echoed by Agapito (2020), who links sensory design to the memorability of place. Taken together, these perspectives ground performativity theory in the Southeast Asian experience, where the politics of appearance—what may surface and what must stay withheld—constitutes a primary mode of postcolonial negotiation.

From these debates, attention has gradually turned toward the role of environment and matter in shaping heritage. Benitez and Lundberg (2022) proposed the concept of tropical materialities, calling for sensitivity to sensory and climatic agents—humidity, light, sound, and decay—that co-create heritage experience in the tropics. Their intervention expands performativity beyond words and symbols to include atmosphere and affect, portraying heritage as something felt, breathed, and weathered.

In postcolonial climates where built structures meet natural forces, heat and moisture influence both aesthetics and ethics. Dampness erodes architecture yet intensifies ritual sensuality; brightness heightens spectacle while blurring the sacred and the mundane. Studies by Kirillova et al. (2014) and Kirillova and Lehto (2015) reveal that aesthetic judgment in tourism depends on harmony, symbolism, and emotional distance—criteria that equally shape the evaluation of tropical rituals. Waitt and Duffy (2010) remind us that sound and listening are equally formative, linking sonic texture to affective belonging. These material atmospheres determine what can be performed, how long it endures, and how moral boundaries are sustained amid exposure.

In the highland zones of northern Vietnam, Michaud and Turner (2017) observed that state efforts to render local life legible intersect with both climate and tourism to decide what may appear in public view. Their analysis resonates with Winter's (2009) argument that Asian tourism theory increasingly decenters Western

paradigms, reframing performativity through regional histories of mediation. Through this convergence of politics, atmosphere, and embodiment, postcolonial heritage emerges as a climate-inflected choreography of endurance, where the meaning of preservation is continually rewritten in the tropics.

Drawing these threads together—from MacCannell's (1973) early critique of staged authenticity to Wang's (1999) existential turn, from Edensor's (2001) notion of performative reciprocity, to Benitez and Lundberg's (2022) attention to material climates—the study of cultural tourism has moved from external observation toward internal negotiation. Yet these frameworks rarely reveal how communities themselves determine the line between performance and concealment, or how they reconcile economic necessity with ritual ethics.

The present research engages this gap through the lens of four northern Vietnamese communities, where performative practice operates simultaneously as livelihood and moral labor. Within these tropical economies of heritage, authenticity is neither preserved intact nor entirely lost; it is remade continually within the humid air of endurance.

Theoretical Framework

At the conceptual core of this study lies the understanding that cultural identity is never a fixed essence but a condition continually fashioned within particular social settings. Drawing from poststructuralist perspectives, scholars have shown that identity does not endure like a relic; it is enacted, reshaped, and reinterpreted through uneven interactions among social actors, especially within the circuits of tourism. In such spaces, identity becomes a practice of continual negotiation—responsive to external demands yet anchored in an inner sense of symbolic sovereignty.

Performance, in this context, extends far beyond theatrical display. It operates as a strategic form of social action. Butler (1990) reminds us that identity is constituted through repetition, each iteration containing both compliance and departure. Within tourism, where ritual gestures, attire, and music are planned and timed, this logic exposes how "ethnicity" itself may be a crafted visibility—manufactured, yet through that very making, asserting local authorship over what is deemed authentic.

Kapchan (1996) broadens this notion by viewing performance as cultural transaction through which local actors restage and reinterpret tradition to address outsiders. These restagings, often labeled "inauthentic," in fact function as vital techniques of continuity when original ritual conditions have weakened. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) carry this reasoning further, describing ethnicity in late capitalism as both resource and labor: a commodified self that nonetheless wields political and affective

agency. In a similar vein, Shepherd (2002) suggests that commodification, understood as translation, can become a survival strategy rather than a symptom of decline.

Within such frames, authenticity no longer stands as a moral absolute but unfolds as a process of negotiated exposure. Hsu and Nilep (2015) observe that authenticity emerges through continuous interaction among artisans, tourists, and institutions, while de Bernardi (2019) adds that what appears as genuine often contains layers of calibration designed to protect ethical coherence. Wang's (1999) existential account and Taylor's (2001) reflections on sincerity extend this argument toward experience itself—the felt and ethical truth of performance rather than the factual truth of objects. In this light, bounded display operates as a moral choreography of revelation, through which communities determine how far appearance may proceed without trespassing inner thresholds of meaning.

Seen through DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory, identity can be understood as a nonlinear constellation linking humans, materials, and atmospheres. Meaning arises not from permanence but from shifting alignments of sound, light, gesture, and silence. This sensorial ontology parallels Benitez and Lundberg's (2022) tropical materialities and Michaud and Turner's (2017) study of Sa Pa as a site where visibility functions as governance. Within such assemblages, heritage performance is molded simultaneously by market and policy systems and by climatic agencies—humidity, brightness, and decay—that alter the moral and sensory dimensions of authenticity.

From these intertwined currents emerge three analytical orientations that guide the present study. The first, bounded display, concerns the deliberate balancing of revelation and restraint through which communities preserve both visibility and sanctity. The second, performativization, captures the iterative reshaping of identity in response to the dual forces of continuity and demand. The third, choreographed visibility, addresses the combined aesthetic, regulatory, and affective mechanisms that structure how culture appears in public view. Seen through this convergence, these approaches situate identity not as inheritance but as ongoing negotiation—a moral and sensorial assemblage sustained within the humid and asymmetrical conditions of the tropical postcolony.

Methodology

Anchored in the theoretical triad of bounded display, performativization, and choreographed visibility outlined above, this methodological design adopts a performative ethnography attentive to both human and environmental agencies. Fieldwork was conducted from June 2022 to March 2024 across four sites: Sa Pa

(Lào Cai), Mai Châu (Hòa Bình), Đường Lâm (Sơn Tây, Hà Nội), and Bắc Ninh. The location of these sites within northern Vietnam is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Map outlining location of the study area in Northern Vietnam



Map created by the author using QGIS (2024).

Figure 2. Map showing the four field sites: Sa Pa, Mai Châu, Đường Lâm, and Bắc Ninh



Map created by the author using QGIS (2024).

Fieldwork at each site relied on selective participant observation centered on culturally performative activities such as the H'mong "wife-taking" ritual, stilt-house homestays, Mother Goddess trance ceremonies, and Quan Hò singing. In total, thirty-four observation sessions were conducted and documented through fieldnotes and unobtrusive audiovisual recordings.

The analysis takes the packaged tour as its main empirical unit—a structured, market-driven form that compresses ritual and everyday practices into consumable experiences. Independent travelers were examined only for contrast, allowing the study to show how tourism infrastructures, rather than casual visitors, organize the scripting and repetition of performance.

To complement these observations, twenty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with twelve local residents engaged in performances, three artisans, four tour operators, and two cultural officers. Each interview was recorded, transcribed in full, and thematically coded. Emerging categories included motives for performing, perceptions of authenticity, internal tensions, and ritual transformation.

Alongside ethnographic data, twenty-eight promotional videos from social media, twelve tour brochures, and sixteen media articles were examined through discourse analysis to trace the aesthetic and symbolic framing of local communities. Certain forms of enactment—such as the simulated "wife-snatching" games—were absent from official materials but verified through testimonies and field observation.

Analytical coding followed a grounded–thematic procedure using NVivo 14. Interviews, observations, and media materials were cross-compared to detect convergences and contradictions among local, managerial, and tourist perspectives. This triangulation clarified the gap between self-perception and projected image, demonstrating how performance becomes a space of negotiation rather than mere repetition. Aggregated results and the interview protocol are detailed in Appendix A.

This multi-source design revealed subtle discrepancies between how communities understand themselves and how they are portrayed within the tourism economy. Instances of hesitation, silence, or refusal to perform were treated as meaningful gestures—forms of symbolic negotiation shaped by market pressure and postcolonial context. Such interpretation ensured theoretical reflexivity and cultural depth, preventing both descriptive flattening and reliance on outdated conceptual models.

All stages of data collection observed established ethical standards in the humanities and social sciences. Before each session or interview, participants received clear explanations of the project's aims and gave informed consent—written or verbal according to local custom. Personal information was anonymized throughout. For rituals regarded as sacred, the researcher adopted a non-intrusive stance, limiting engagement to observation and note-taking, and recorded only with explicit permission. The study respected silence as a legitimate cultural response and maintained continuous reflexivity, treating research as a dialogue grounded in accountability rather than an extractive process.

Findings and Analysis

The performatization of identity in Northern Vietnam's local communities does not unfold as a linear or homogeneous process. Rather, it emerges as a fragmented and entangled network of cultural practices, shaped by continuous negotiations across spatial, temporal, and symbolic dimensions. Practices such as the H'mong "wife-taking" ritual, Muong stilt-house stays, Quan Họ singing, and Mother Goddess trance ceremonies are not uniformly staged, but are reorganized according to each site's characteristics, the degree of community involvement, and the pressures exerted by media, state agencies, or the tourism market.

To illustrate this complexity, Table 1 presents a matrix synthesizing field data and emergent analytical themes from the four research sites. The matrix organizes types of data (interviews, observations) and correlates participants, cultural practices, and coding themes. It serves both as an analytical framework for the case studies and a reflection of the internal logic of identity performativization across different sites.

Table 1. Matrix of field data and analytical coding

Research Site	Type of Data	Quantity	Participants	Main Practices Observed/Analyzed	Emergent Thematic Codes	Tour Type
Sa Pa	Semi-structured interviews (SP01–SP06)	6	H'mong community members, local tour guides	Bride kidnapping, khen dancing, souvenir selling	Motivations for performance, negotiated authenticity, tourism dependency	Packaged & independent
	Field observation	9 sessions	Love market, Cát Cát tourist stage	Performed “bride kidnapping,” khen performance, touristic <i>staging</i>	Ritual transformation, performative constraints	
Mai Châu	Semi-structured interviews (MC01–MC05)	5	Homestay owners, múa Xòe dance artisans, village youth	Stilt-house sleeping, sạp and múa Xòe dances	Adaptive strategies, bodily adjustment, ritual limitation	Packaged
	Field observation	8 sessions	Campfire zones, touristic stilt houses	Package shows with dance, rượu cần drinking, singing contests	Loss of communal dimension, temporal <i>staging</i>	
Đường Lâm	Semi-structured interviews (DL01–DL06)	6	Heritage homeowners, resident villagers	Living in heritage-designated ancient houses	Functional loss, life-within-heritage, preservation–livelihood tensions	Independent
	Field observation	9 sessions	Tourist routes, photo-check-in zones	Spatial immobilization, external tour guide narratives	Spatial performativity, reduced agency in local adjustment	
Bắc Ninh	Semi-structured interviews (BN01–BN04)	4	Quan Họ singers, Hào Đờng performers	Staged Quan Họ and Hào Đờng rituals	Symbolic duality, loss of affective resonance, media negotiation	Packaged
	Field observation	8 sessions	Festivals, cultural stages, themed tours	Compressed rituals, scripted Hào Đờng, stage-led processions	Structured performance, time control, LED as ritual device	

Regarding the above field data and analytical themes from the four research sites. It should be noted that some media and promotional materials (e.g., online videos, brochures, news articles) were consulted during fieldwork to contextualize local aesthetic and symbolic environments. However, these sources were not directly analyzed in the article and are therefore not included in the reference list. A complete list is available upon request.

The themes are not randomly distributed but closely tied to the specificities of each site, type of cultural practice, and local social dynamics. One recurrent theme is the community's motivation for participating in performance. This serves as a critical entry point to understanding that the performativization of identity is not merely an externally imposed process, but the outcome of strategic negotiations—intended to sustain livelihoods while preserving fragments of symbolic identity. The following sections delve into this theme and unpack individual performances as concrete manifestations of identity being (and allowed to be) performed within community-determined limits. A thematic synthesis of adaptive strategies observed during fieldwork is provided in Appendix B (Table B1).

Why Local Communities “Accept to Perform”

From the field data and interviews, it becomes clear that the performativization of identity does not result solely from top-down direction within the tourism industry. Communities themselves often enter performance through a dilemma—caught between the necessity of earning a living and the wish to sustain cultural memory. Participation, in this sense, appears as a form of strategic adaptation rather than passive compliance with official agendas.

As Michaud and Turner (2017) note, Sa Pa has become a testing ground for state legibility. In this highland town, several H'mong residents who once practiced shifting cultivation or kept livestock now sell souvenirs or perform enactments such as “wife-taking,” khèn dancing, and leaf-whistle courtship. A 42-year-old woman (SP07, interview, 14 July 2023) explained: “Hand-weaving takes too long, and the fabric sells for less than machine-made imports from China. Western tourists like the wife-taking scene and like wearing H'mong clothes for photos. I know it's no longer sacred, not true to tradition, but if tourists pay, I'll do it for the money.” A young man (SP12, 25) added: “I stopped farming because it wasn't enough to live on. Working as a tour guide and performer is more fun—I can speak English and show our culture. But I have to follow the script given by the cultural officer—not everything can be said openly.”

In Mai Châu, community tourism revolves mainly around the Muong people, whose performances include Múa Xòe dancing, gong music, and stilt-house hospitality. A 38-year-old homestay host (MC04) remarked: “When guests arrive, I help with the

bonfire and join the bamboo pole dance. It's tiring, but it keeps them here—if we don't do it, they'll go elsewhere. I still wear the Muong dress and dance the old steps, just faster and simpler. There's change, but not a complete loss of tradition." Another participant, aged twenty-two (MC09), reflected: "Dancing now is a service job. But the Muong haven't abandoned our traditional dance—we just adjust it to what visitors expect." This adaptation aligns with Đặng and Nguyễn's (2022) discussion of the aestheticization of local culture in community tourism, where gestures of welcome are stylized into images for the market.

Such testimonies blur the distinction between voluntary and pressured participation. Many participants recognize the boundary between ritual and performance, yet regard the latter as a workable means of keeping culture alive during economic transition. In Đường Lâm, a 56-year-old heritage homeowner (DL03) observed: "Visitors love to see and photograph our old house, so we keep it as it is. But it's hard to cook with a wood stove, and the bathroom is broken. Living in a heritage village means we can't change anything—even if we want to."

Across these narratives, performativization emerges as a negotiation linking visibility, livelihood, and the slow erosion of autonomy over ritual, memory, and space. Some residents perform their culture deliberately to ensure its presence—transformed into a consumable form, yet still a living expression rather than a vanished trace.

Forms of Cultural Staging in Northern Vietnam

The "Wife-Kidnapping" Custom as Scripted Performance

In recent years, the H'mong bride-kidnapping custom has been widely circulated through social media and tourism marketing, particularly in advertisements for Sa Pa tours. Many experiential itineraries now feature visits to the love market and opportunities to observe bride-kidnapping scenes—some genuine, others arranged in advance through agreements between local H'mong households and tour organizers.

Several tour guides note that certain packages even script "bride-kidnapping games" in which a foreign tourist plays the groom and a H'mong girl is cast as the bride. These enactments, usually held in the yard of a homestay in villages such as Tả Van, last only a few minutes and include a brief script, filming, and souvenir photographs. Comparable transformations are documented by Trần (2021), who shows how experiential tourism in Sa Pa converts intimate H'mong customs into negotiated performances balancing livelihood needs and cultural restraint. Marketed as "authentic and unique highland experiences," such enactments turn both visitors and hosts into performers. Edensor (2000, 2001) describes tourism as precisely this

mutual choreography in which the tourist's gaze and local staging adjust rhythmically to each other's expectations.

Within H'mong cultural logic, however, bride-kidnapping remains a solemn transitional rite marking the beginning of marriage. It follows a strict code: the timing of the act, the period the woman stays in the groom's house, the ensuing negotiations, and—above all—the woman's right to consent or refuse. When this act is detached from its ritual sequence and compressed into a short spectacle for visitors, its meaning is profoundly altered.

Community reactions to these staged versions vary. Younger residents often take part for economic reasons, while elders maintain distance or avoid appearing at performance sites. The setting itself shifts from ritual ground to commodified space: from a communal ceremony lasting several days to a brief choreographed attraction; from an act embedded in kinship to a transaction designed for consumption. Such transformation does not erase the ritual but repurposes one symbolic fragment within a new context and for different ends, revealing how local traditions are reorganized under the intertwined pressures of the market and global curiosity.

Sleeping in Stilt Houses as Curated Ethnic Experience

In Bản Lác (Mai Châu), "sleeping in a traditional stilt house" has become a hallmark of Northwest tour programs. Yet most of the existing houses are either newly constructed or substantially refurbished, bearing little resemblance to the original Muong domestic architecture. They follow a standardized pattern: tiled ground floors used for dining and souvenir displays, upper levels divided into small guest rooms equipped with fans, electric lighting, glass windows, and private bathrooms.

The very idea of "sleeping in a stilt house" evokes a romantic image of mountain life—closeness to nature, the hum of insects at night, and a calm rural landscape. In practice, what dominates the soundscape is the amplified music of evening shows, with stage lights stretching late into the night. Activities such as sạp dancing, campfires, and communal drinking are precisely timed, directed by MCs, and organized as team games. Local residents mostly perform or serve; the rhythm and content of these events lie beyond their control. This patterned synchronization between host and guest reflects what Edensor (2001) describes as the co-choreography of tourist space.

Within these orchestrated evenings, tropical humidity, low light, and resonant sound act as material agents that shape both atmosphere and emotion. The dense air slows the rhythm and deepens tone, embodying what Benitez and Lundberg (2022) term "tropical materialities," where climate and ambience co-create the conditions of cultural visibility.

Instead of offering genuine cultural immersion, the stilt-house stay now provides a carefully arranged aesthetic—sanitized, picturesque, and readily shareable. The house no longer serves as the locus of kinship or ancestral memory; it becomes a stage set for a designed experience, where “tradition” functions as a visual motif and the life that once animated it retreats behind the partition.

Hầu Đồng and Quan Họ as Rituals Staged for Performance

Across cultural festivals in Bắc Ninh and Hà Nội, the practices of Hầu Đồng spirit mediumship and Quan Họ singing are gradually moving from sacred environments to staged venues. Certain Hầu Đồng ceremonies now appear as scheduled attractions within festivals or tour itineraries. These performances are condensed into one or two incarnations, each lasting five to seven minutes, enhanced by lighting design and sound engineering. LED panels, fog machines, and elaborate stage sets replicate the aesthetics of professional concerts, translating ritual sequence into theatrical form.

Within this mediated space, the LED screen functions less as mere illumination than as an active participant in the rite—a technological co-actor shaping rhythm, aura, and affective resonance. Through this interface of media and devotion, spiritual communication is reformatted into choreographed visibility, its transcendence reframed within programmable light.

A comparable transformation occurs in Quan Họ singing. Once sustained by village communities, the duets are now often rendered by trained performers in full traditional costume. Yet the stage mirrors television variety formats with prewritten scripts and digital backdrops. Many “Lien anh” and “Lien chi” are professional singers rather than locals from Quan Họ villages, taking on ethnic personae across cultural events. A lounge-style variation has also emerged, blending folk lyrics into improvisational rhythms reminiscent of Xẩm. In these curated contexts, the communal dialogue that once defined Quan Họ gives way to commodified entertainment detached from its village base.

This evolution introduces a layered form of detachment. On one level, traditional performances continue within heritage villages such as Viêm Xá; on another, they proliferate in institutional, touristic, and televised settings. The outcome is a bounded mode of performative identity—sustained through repetition and aesthetic control yet drained of the intimacy that once bound singers and listeners. What had been a living exchange of emotion and memory turns into a rehearsed sequence adapted to the tempo of media and market visibility.

Within such conditions, the boundary separating ritual and art performance becomes porous. Practitioners of *Hầu Đổng* or *Quan Họ* now operate within dual registers—as bearers of tradition and as performers before audiences. The shift lies not only in costume or setting but in temporal framing and intention: from the slow rhythm of communion to the punctual tempo of spectacle.

Post-Village Đường Lâm: Heritage as Curated Collective Memory

Đường Lâm stands as Vietnam's first officially designated ancient village. Yet the very process of heritagization has brought a kind of stillness, curbing its adaptive life. Brick-paved lanes, restored houses, standardized signposts, mapped walking routes, and check-in photo corners now give the settlement the air of an open-air museum. Within that curated landscape, residents struggle to adjust their homes, install modern utilities, or sustain evolving everyday rhythms.

A number of households take part in tourism, mainly by hosting guests, preparing meals, or selling souvenirs. Their participation, however, unfolds within predesigned formats. Guided tours are conducted by outside operators or follow fixed signage, and local forms of expression—storytelling, temple rituals, clan gatherings—surface only intermittently as ceremonial displays.

The village itself has not vanished; rather, it has been spatially immobilized as symbol. Conservation of form does not necessarily mean conservation of vitality. This imposed stillness erodes the self-regulating logic that once allowed the community to renew itself. What endures is less a living environment of shared memory than a curated tableau where visitors glimpse a stylized version of the past.

Placed within the broader reconfiguration of rural space in northern Vietnam, Đường Lâm exemplifies a wider movement of transformation. As summarized in Table 2, multiple sites across the region have entered “post-village” transitions—from inhabited settlements into heritage zones shaped by tourism, branding, markets, or urban expansion. Each reflects its own configuration of actors and tensions. Seen in this perspective, Đường Lâm is not an anomaly but a node within a continuing redefinition of rural space, function, and identity.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of “Post-Village” Transformations in Northern Vietnam

Village Name	Province/City	Heritage Feature	Restructuring Mode	Key Actors	Key Conflict
Đường Lâm	Hà Nội (Sơn Tây)	First nationally ranked ancient village	Heritage conservation, tourism, heritage governance	State, community	Resident resistance to construction bans, living heritage tensions
Bát Tràng	Hà Nội (Gia Lâm)	Ceramic craft village	Marketization of craft, tourist staging	Enterprises, district gov't	Loss of community ties, performative craftsmanship
Cự Đà	Hà Nội (Thanh Oai)	Ancient Northern-style village	Partial heritagization, creeping urbanization	Community, commune officials	Weak protection mechanisms, architectural erosion
Vạn Phúc	Hà Nội (Hà Đông)	Famous silk village	Tourism-oriented urban transformation	Urban authorities	Eroded craft identity, loss of production
Đông Ngạc	Hà Nội (Bắc Từ Liêm)	Scholar village, old houses	Gentrification, mixed urban-rural residency	Locals, real estate sector	Conflicts over land use and heritage rights
Mai Châu – Bản Lác	Hòa Bình	Mường ethnic village, community tourism	Performative ethnic staging	Tourism firms, community	Village as tourist zone, cultural fragmentation
Sa Pa – Cát Cát, Tả Van	Lào Cai	H'mong and Dao ethnic villages	Experiential tourism, staged customs	Enterprises, provincial gov't	Ritual commodification, loss of communal autonomy
Đào Xá	Vĩnh Phúc (Yên Lạc)	Traditional instrument-making village	Heritage turned museum-tour circuit	Community, state	Lost ritual functionality of craft
Phù Lãng	Bắc Ninh	Ceramic village, riverscape	Heritage-tourism interplay	Local households, gov't	Pollution, craft decline, unsustainable tourism
Thổ Hà	Bắc Giang	Rice paper village, old houses	Experiential tourism, performed domesticity	Locals, media	Blurred line between living and staging

This comparison reveals that post-village transitions vary in form, reflecting diverse heritage types, stakeholder influence, and degrees of community involvement. Yet a shared pattern emerges: trade-offs between preservation and development, identity and consumerism, lived practice and curated spectacle. Gains may include infrastructure, branding, and revenue; but losses—though hard to quantify—often lie in diminished community cohesion, fragmented lived spaces, and erosion of local agency over heritage futures.

Gains and Losses: The Interwoven Outcomes of Identity Performances

The performance of ethnic identity within Northern Vietnam's tourism landscape generates a matrix of outcomes in which benefit and loss rarely stand in opposition. They overlap, intertwine, and are constantly renegotiated within the same social fields.

Economically, tourism has enabled many communities to expand their income base, diversify livelihoods, and reinvest in shared infrastructure such as roads, lighting, telecommunications, and water systems. In Bản Lác village (Mai Châu), average household income rose markedly after the adoption of the homestay model. Yet this prosperity remains fragile—seasonal, dependent on fluctuating visitor flows, and tied to external markets. As one resident of Đường Lâm explained, “If there are no tourists during Tet, it's like the year is lost. If it rains and no one comes, there's nothing we can do” (DL06, interview 2023).

Material heritage has also benefited from tourism-led preservation. Traditional houses, temples, village wells, and stilt houses have been repaired and incorporated into tour circuits, maintaining part of the visual landscape. Yet many of these structures now function more as display pieces than as inhabited spaces. A village head in Sa Pa noted, “The stilt houses look better now than before, but no one sleeps there anymore. They're just for guests. We live in concrete houses now” (SP03, interview 2023).

In the sphere of intangible culture, practices such as Quan Họ singing, Múa Xòe dancing, Hầu Đồng spirit mediumship, and the H'mong “wife-pulling” ritual have been revived and circulated as cultural commodities. Their prominence in tourist programs has given them wide visibility and national recognition. Yet this visibility often entails shortened forms, reduced symbolic density, and a dilution of the sacred tone that once accompanied certain rituals. A Quan Họ singer in Bắc Ninh observed: “In the past, we sang to respond, to improvise, to connect emotionally. Now we sing to get on stage, hold a microphone, and entertain. It has become something else” (BN05, interview 2023).

On the symbolic level, being seen—through promotional videos, billboards, and online campaigns—creates a sense of pride and acknowledgment within broader cultural narratives. However, these representations are frequently shaped by external frameworks of market taste and cultural consumption rather than by the lived texture of local experience. When a H'mong village such as Lang Tam is branded a “culturally distinctive village,” the crucial question shifts from who designates such distinctiveness to how far this identity still arises from within the community itself, rather than being curated for alignment with outside expectations.

From these analyses, we systematize the entangled gains and losses in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Comparative Overview of Gains and Losses

Domain	Gains	Losses
Economy	Increased income, improved tourism infrastructure	Seasonal dependency, market-driven relationships
Tangible culture	Preservation and renovation of heritage sites	Loss of living functions, “museumification”
Intangible culture	Broader promotion and restaging of traditions	Loss of sacredness, framed by external market tastes
Community symbols	Visibility and representational inclusion	Externally shaped imagery, erosion of symbolic autonomy

This comparison suggests that the performatization of identity does not merely yield binary outcomes but opens grey zones of compromise, negotiation, and symbolic reconfiguration. Within these interstitial spaces, identity is no longer a preserved essence but a situated practice continually shaped through asymmetrical interactions among communities, markets, and governing institutions. Across sites, performances are co-produced by local residents, tour guides, and media operators, each scripting distinct layers of authenticity. The following section elaborates on the theoretical implications of this dynamic.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that identity performatization in Northern Vietnam’s tourism cannot be reduced to simple narratives of loss or alienation. Rather, it represents a conditional process of identity-making that unfolds amid tensions between visibility and autonomy, livelihood and memory. Following Shepherd (2002), commodification here operates less as moral decline than as a form of translation

under uneven globalization. The act of staging becomes a pragmatic language through which communities negotiate entry into transnational circuits. Identity does not vanish; it alters its mode of being—moving from living ritual to scheduled performance, from community idioms to market vocabularies, from sacred object to visual prop. These dynamics are evident across field sites in Sa Pa, Mai Châu, Đường Lâm, and Bắc Ninh, where participants voiced both necessity and ambivalence in adapting ritual for tourist attention.

Across the cases examined, a model of bounded performatization emerges in which identity is not erased but edited to fit within tourism's display structures. This adaptive endurance parallels Tsing's (2015) vision of survival in capitalist ruins—as a mode of partial exposure and collaborative regeneration. Performatization thus operates on three planes: spectacularized practices among the H'mong and Muong; curated collective memory in Đường Lâm; and artistic reformulations of ritual in Hầu Đổng and Quan Họ. Each plane reflects a distinct negotiation between market demand and heritage governance, reshaping what lived identity can mean in practice.

Grounded in field data from Northern Vietnam's tourism zones, the study advances bounded performatization as a conceptual contribution that moves beyond reductive binaries—especially those dividing “authentic” from “corrupted” identity. This framework views identity as a liminal process through which communities selectively reorganize cultural elements inside boundaries they themselves establish and continually adjust.

Rather than assuming total loss, bounded performatization foregrounds symbolic agency—the capacity for self-definition, selective revelation, and cultural defense under overlapping pressures of market, policy, and memory. Selectivity functions as the first threshold: communities choose what can circulate without harming collective remembrance or diluting the sacred. Hence the avoidance of Hầu Đổng rituals during Tháng Cô Hồn (the Ghost Month), or the refusal to let children perform Múa Xòe outside ritual settings—decisions that delineate zones of non-performance as protective boundaries against commodification.

From such selective gates flows a rhythm of constant adjustment. Performatization unfolds not as a single conversion but as an ongoing choreography of talk, compromise, and revision among artisans, residents, entrepreneurs, cultural officers, and tourists. Each negotiation, partial refusal, or micro-edit marks a small assertion of control—an attempt to balance symbolic integrity with material survival.

Running through these acts is a double consciousness of signification. The same form—a brocade skirt, a Quan Họ verse, a moment of trance—faces outward as

cultural representation and inward as a vessel of memory and faith. Once placed on stage, these forms circulate as art, yet retain emotional residues that resist full translation into spectacle. Viewed together, selectivity, negotiation, and duality illustrate how bounded performatization functions as a calibrated regime of visibility—one that allows display while safeguarding depth.

Table 4. Conceptual Structure of “Bounded Performatization of Identity”

Dimension	Content	Who sets the boundaries?	Conditions shaping the boundaries	Who monitors/maintains them?	Degree of fluctuation over time
Selectivity of performance	Not all identity elements are staged. Only those “performable” without disrupting community memory are included.	Artisans, elders, local communities	Cultural beliefs – Ritual limits – Perceptions of sacredness – Traditional pressures	Artisans – Village heads – Communities	High: adjustable depending on festivals or politics
Ongoing negotiation	Performances are not fixed but undergo repeated negotiation depending on tours, taste, policy, or performers.	Communities, artisans, cultural officers, businesses	Tour schedules – Performance contracts – Local regulations – Tour structures	Organizers, performers, cultural officials	Very high: fluctuates with seasons, trends, and media
Symbolic duality structure	Cultural symbols both represent the community externally and sustain internal sacred sentiment.	Local people, artists, communities	Promotion demands – Political pressures – Ritual enactments – National media	Performers, community, festival organizers	Moderate: may fade if dominated by performative pressure

The conceptual structure outlined above shows that bounded performatization takes shape within interlocking systems of market logic, policy regulation, and media aesthetics. These bounded displays exemplify what Waterton and Watson (2010) describe as the semiotics of heritage tourism—a layered economy of signs in which visual surface and moral substance coexist within the same aesthetic field. Instances

such as the scheduled “wife-catching” in Sa Pa, now integrated into Korean tour packages, or the Múa Xòe dance in Mai Châu, standardized to fixed slots by Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), illustrate how identity is reoriented by the temporal rhythms of postcolonial consumerism (Adams, 2006; Lê & Nicolaisen, 2022). The boundaries of performance, in these cases, are co-authored and managed through the combined agencies of cultural policy, commercial infrastructure, and media representation.

This reading extends beyond human-centered explanations by locating identity within multi-agent assemblages where people, materials, soundscapes, lighting, and climate collectively produce affective and behavioral experiences. As Benitez and Lundberg (2022) argue, tropical materialities—humidity, light, sound, and decay—function as atmospheric agents that choreograph authenticity itself. The damp air of the mountains, the dense acoustics of Múa Xòe nights, and the electric pulse of LED-lit Hầu Đồng stages reveal how tropical environments materialize the sensory politics of cultural identity.

Within such conditions, bounded displays serve as a subtle mode of defense—ethical and affective—through which communities retain the right to opacity amid the brightness of tourism. Visibility is not rejected but carefully tuned: deciding what can be shown, heard, or felt. This modulation works through calibration rather than confrontation, preserving dignity through restraint, delay, and selective revelation. It constitutes an ethics of guarded exposure in which opacity becomes a gesture of care toward the sacred.

Agency, too, has become dispersed. It no longer rests solely with prominent “cultural brokers” (Salazar, 2010) but circulates through a broader ecology of relations—among homestay hosts, tour coordinators, artisans, local officials, and even non-human actors such as fabrics, sound systems, and architectural settings that mediate affective encounters. Agency thus assumes an infrastructural form: distributed, connective, and adaptive, enabling coordination without central command.

Seen in this light, bounded performatization is not a metaphor but a living cultural infrastructure of soft defense—controlled yet responsive, opaque yet perceptible. It articulates an ethical response to the intrusive luminosity of global tourism by turning exposure into reflexive choreography. Through this delicate balance, the communities of Northern Vietnam sustain both livelihood and moral autonomy—remaining visible, yet never fully transparent, within the radiant circuits of the postcolonial tropics.

Conclusion

In postcolonial tropical contexts, the boundary between performance and cultural practice no longer holds firm. Ethnic rituals such as bride-kidnapping, Múa Xòe, and Hầu Đòng have been restructured to fit tour itineraries, yet this restructuring should not be read as mere loss. It represents an adaptive grammar of survival through which communities translate memory into marketable rhythm while retaining symbolic control. The concept of bounded performatization advanced here captures this dialectic between exposure and opacity, offering a lens through which identity can be seen as both displayed and defended.

The study's contribution lies in showing how performance itself becomes an ethical field: a space where aesthetic adjustment doubles as moral reasoning. By attending to tropical materialities—humidity, light, and sound—as co-agents in this process, the research reframes tourism not as the erosion of authenticity but as a climate-inflected ecology of negotiation. These bounded displays thus operate as a soft defense system, sustaining moral and affective equilibrium under the pressures of visibility.

Such insight extends beyond Vietnam, speaking to broader tropical or Global South contexts where heritage persists through calibrated performance rather than static preservation. What remains at stake is the tempo of endurance—the balance between being seen and remaining whole. Rather than lamenting authenticity's loss, this study echoes Wang's (1999) insight that authenticity is existentially relocated within the act of performance itself; and, following Taylor (2001), that sincerity lies not in origins but in the ethics of encounter—how communities and visitors cohabit the same stage of visibility. The question that follows is both empirical and philosophical: How can heritage continue to breathe when performance becomes its primary mode of existence?

References

- Adams, K. M. (2006). *Art as politics: Re-crafting identities, tourism, and power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Agapito, D. (2020). The senses in tourism design: A bibliometric review. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, 102934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102934>
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ritual-theory-ritual-practice-9780195076134>
- Benitez, C.J.R., & Lundberg, A. (2022). Tropical materialities: Feeling, matter, and the more-than-human in the tropics. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 21(2). <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3929>
- Bruner, E. M. (2001). The Maasai and the Lion King: Authenticity, nationalism, and globalization in African tourism. *American Ethnologist*, 28(4), 881–908. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2001.28.4.881>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), 371–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X)
- Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2012). Authentication: Hot and cool. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(3), 1295–1314. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.03.004>
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226114734.001.0001>
- de Bernardi, C. (2019). Authenticity as a compromise: A critical discourse analysis of Sámi tourism websites. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 14(3), 249–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2018.1527844>
- DeLanda, M. (2006). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity*. London: Continuum. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474216504>
- Đặng, T. L., & Nguyễn, Q. V. (2022). Thảm mỹ hóa văn hóa bản địa trong du lịch cộng đồng ở Mai Châu. *Vietnam Journal of Tourism and Culture Studies*, 12(1), 45–62.
- Edensor, T. (2000). Staging tourism: Tourists as performers. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(2), 322–344.
- Edensor, T. (2001). Performing tourism, staging tourism: (Re)producing tourist space and practice. *Tourist Studies*, 1(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100104>
- Edensor, T. (2018). The more-than-visual experiences of tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 20(5), 913–915. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2018.1477172>
- Hsu, P. H., & Nilep, C. (2015). Authenticity in indigenous tourism: The provider's perspective. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 8(2), 16–28. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.306091098075893>
- Hüwelmeier, G. (2018). Trance mediumship takes the stage: Reenactment and heritagization of the sacred in urban Hà Nội. *Asian Ethnology*, 77(1–2), 57–78. https://asianethnology.org/downloads/ae/pdf/AE77_1-2_04_Huwelmeier.pdf
- Kapchan, D. A. (1996). *Gender on the market: Moroccan women and the revoicing of tradition*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812200176>
- Kirillova, K., Fu, X., Lehto, X., & Cai, L. (2014). What makes a destination beautiful? Dimensions of tourist aesthetic judgment. *Tourism Management*, 42, 282–293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.12.006>
- Kirillova, K., & Lehto, X. (2015). Destination aesthetics and aesthetic distance in tourism experience. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 32(8), 1051–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2014.958608>

- Le, M., & Nicolaisen, F. S. (2022). Tensions in local-global production of tourist spaces in Vietnam: Heritage, global flows, and local identities. *ASIEN: The German Journal on Contemporary Asia*, 162/163, 34–57.
<https://doi.org/10.11588/asien.2022.162/163.27147>
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225585>
- Michaud, J., & Turner, S. (2017). Reaching new heights: State legibility in Sa Pa, a Vietnam hill station. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 66, 37–48.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2017.05.014>
- Oakes, T. (1993). The cultural space of a Chinese tourism village. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d110047>
- Peleggi, M. (1996). National heritage and global tourism in Thailand. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23(2), 432–448. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(95\)00071-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(95)00071-2)
- Picard, M. (1990). “Cultural tourism” in Bali: Cultural performances as tourist attraction. *Indonesia*, 49, 37–74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351053>
- Reisinger, Y., & Steiner, C. J. (2006). Reconceptualizing object authenticity. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(1), 65–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2005.04.003>
- Salazar, N. B. (2010). *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing imaginaries in tourism and beyond*. New York: Berghahn Books. <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/SalazarEnvisioning>
- Salazar, N. B. (2012). Tourism imaginaries: A conceptual approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 863–882. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.10.004>
- Shepherd, R. (2002). Commodification, culture and tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 2(2), 183–201.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/146879702761936653>
- Stanley, N. (2023). Mediumship, gender, and identity in urban Vietnam. In *Modernity and re-enchantment: Religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam* (pp. 145–168). Leiden: Brill.
<https://brill.com/downloadpdf/book/9789004293502/B9789004293502-s009.pdf>
- Taylor, J. P. (2001). Authenticity and sincerity in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28(1), 7–26. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(00\)00004-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(00)00004-9)
- Trần, H. T. M. (2021). Du lịch trải nghiệm và chuyển đổi văn hóa: Trường hợp người H'mong tại Sa Pa. *Journal of Vietnamese Ethnology*, 4(3), 23–40.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bcc>
- Vu, N.-H. (2024). The rise of ethnic tourism in Vietnam: Staged authenticity at Pa Vi Village. *Kenyon College Summer Science Scholars Program*.
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/summerscienceprogram/714/>
- Waitt, G., & Duffy, M. (2010). Listening and tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 457–477. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.017>
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)
- Waterton, E., & Watson, S. (2010). *The semiotics of heritage tourism*. Bristol: Channel View Publications. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845411404>
- Winter, T. (2009). Asian tourism and the retreat of Anglo-Western centrism in tourism theory. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 12(1), 21–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500802220695>

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide and Coding Summary

Purpose and Scope

Semi-structured interviews explored five thematic domains:

1. Motivation and agency (continuity, pride, duty).
2. Authenticity and transformation (criteria of “realness”).
3. Tourism mediation (ritual–market negotiation).
4. Internal conflicts (sacred vs. commercial tension).
5. Perception of heritage value (preservation priorities).

Interviews (40–70 minutes each) were recorded in Vietnamese, H’mong, and local dialects, transcribed and translated under verification by bilingual assistants. Thematic coding in NVivo 14 generated 118 nodes grouped into seven axial themes.

Table A1. Representative Codes and Excerpts

Major Theme	Analytical Focus	Example (translated)
Motivation for performing	Continuity, pride, duty	“We sing to keep our ancestors’ words alive.” (Quan họ singer, Bắc Ninh)
Authenticity and transformation	What counts as ‘real’	“If I use the old melody, it’s real—even if tourists don’t understand.” (H’mong performer, Sa Pa)
Tourism mediation	How packaging reshapes practice	“The agency wants bright costumes—so we buy synthetic ones.” (Artisan, Mai Châu)
Internal conflicts	Moral unease about performing for money	“Elders say it’s wrong to act the spirit for tourists.” (Medium, Hà Nội)
Climate and materiality	Sensory participation of humidity, light	“The drum slows down when the air is thick.” (Fieldnote, Mai Châu)

Archival note: anonymized transcripts and NVivo matrices stored under Record No. VN-PERF-2024-07 (restricted academic access).

Appendix B. Adaptations Observed in Safeguarding Performative Heritage

Table B1. Adaptive measures across ritual-tourism interfaces (field observation, interviews)

Adaptation Domain	Description	Driving Factors	Representative Case
Safeguarding knowledge	Hiding chant books and instruments; teaching in private	Fear of prohibition, risk of loss	Quan họ singers, Bắc Ninh
Restoration and re-creation	Recopying texts; crafting substitute instruments with similar sound	Material loss, need to revive practice	H’mong shamans, Sa Pa
Adjusting offerings	Using small black pigs or chickens instead of buffalo	Livestock decline, economic constraint	Bồ Y ritual, Lào Cai

Organizational flexibility	Shortened ceremony or change of venue	Weather, resource limitation	Mother Goddess trance, Hà Nội
Mediated staging	Rehearsed “four versions” and synchronized movements	Tourist expectation, filming rhythm	Homestay dance, Mai Châu

Note: These adaptive practices illustrate selective conservation: form changes, but cosmological logic and affective rhythm remain intact.

Acknowledgements

The authors are deeply grateful to the community members in Sa Pa, Mai Châu, Đường Lâm, and Bắc Ninh who generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections. Their trust and openness made this research possible. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive comments, which helped refine the clarity and scope of the article.

Tran Quoc Viet is a senior lecturer and researcher in folklore and cultural anthropology at Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam. His work focuses on ritual performance, intangible heritage, and ethnic minority cultures in Southeast Asia. He has conducted extensive fieldwork on indigenous festivals, spirit possession, and oral traditions in Northern Vietnam. Dr. Viet is particularly interested in the intersection between cultural transformation and tourism, with publications addressing performative identity, soft assimilation, and staged heritage practices.

Bui Van Tuan is a scholar in Cultural Studies and Vietnam Studies, formally trained at Vietnam National University, Hanoi. He currently serves as Vice Director of the Institute and Director of the Vietnam Studies Program at Hanoi Metropolitan University. His research centers on cultural identity, national narratives, and the politics of representation in postcolonial Vietnam. He has contributed to interdisciplinary studies on ethnic relations, heritage education, and regional cultural development. With a background in both education and cultural studies, Dr. Tuan brings a critical lens to contemporary processes of identity negotiation in Vietnamese society.

Le Thi Thu Huong is a senior lecturer and historian at Hanoi Metropolitan University. Her academic interests encompass Vietnamese history and culture from ancient to modern times, memory studies, and the historiography of colonial and postcolonial periods. She has published on the transformation of rural communities, state heritage policies, and the cultural legacy of war. Dr. Huong’s work often explores the intersection of official narratives and vernacular memory, especially in the context of cultural heritage and historical preservation.