

The Role of Interaction between Enterprises and Communities in Building the Cultural Environment of Tourist Destinations: A Co-Governance Approach

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ABSTRACT: Vietnamese tourism has grown rapidly, but this growth has also brought risks of heritage overcrowding, festival commodification, and the erosion of the authenticity of living cultural practices. This article analyzes the interactive role of enterprises and communities in building the cultural environment of destinations from the perspective that “people are the center” and that a “healthy cultural environment” is required. Based on policy–legal analysis and a literature review on responsible tourism, community-based tourism (CBT), authenticity–commodification, and overtourism governance, the article proposes a “destination cultural co-governance” framework consisting of four layers: values–norms, living cultural practices, space–infrastructure, and institutions–governance. The findings show that the community is the “immune system” of culture, while enterprises are the driving force of organization and innovation; however, without institutional design and fair benefit-sharing, conflict and commodification will intensify. The article suggests a governance toolkit based on consensual cultural boundaries, fair benefit-sharing mechanisms, codes of conduct, and carrying-capacity regulation in order to promote sustainable tourism development.

KEYWORDS: cultural environment; responsible tourism; community-based tourism; tourism enterprises; traditional festivals; co-governance; authenticity; commodification.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The development context of tourism and cultural pressures in Vietnam

Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Vietnamese tourism has made remarkable progress, becoming one of the key economic sectors and contributing significantly to national GDP while creating millions of direct and indirect jobs. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam consistently recorded double-digit growth in international arrivals, turning tourism into one of the sectors with major contributions to GDP and employment. In 2019, Vietnam welcomed more than 18 million international visitors and served over 85 million domestic trips, with total tourism revenue reaching approximately VND 755 trillion. Destinations such as Hoi An, Sa Pa, Ha Long, Hue, Da Lat, Phu Quoc, as well as pilgrimage centers like Huong Pagoda, Den Hung, and Yen Tu, have become major tourism brands with strong appeal not only regionally but also globally.

This growth has brought clear benefits in terms of employment, income, and the promotion of local and national image. At the same time, it has generated a cultural–social “dark side” that policymakers and scholars are increasingly concerned about. Pressure on heritage spaces and festivals is most visible during peak seasons: Huong Pagoda attracts millions of visitors each season, causing serious overcrowding, sanitation, and spatial order problems in a sacred setting; Hoi An Ancient Town receives millions of visitors annually while local residents are gradually displaced from the living space that constitutes the soul of the heritage site; Sa Pa has rapidly transformed from an ethnic minority community with distinctive culture into a noisy commercial tourist destination where culture is “performed” according to tour schedules.

These changes not only reduce the tourist experience in a narrow sense; more importantly, they can weaken the quality of community cultural life, disrupt intergenerational transmission, and trigger negative reactions from residents. What many scholars call “cultural drain” — when younger generations abandon traditional practices to join short-term tourism service chains — has been observed in many craft villages and ethnic minority communities. In major festival centers, sacred space is encroached upon by commercial activities, causing the original meaning of festivals to fade in community perceptions. Particularly worrying is the phenomenon in which rituals that are inherently communal and spiritually profound are cut, restructured, and turned into “shows” to fit tour duration and tourist expectations — a process that many scholars describe as “staged culture” in its most negative sense.

In addition, the rise of opportunistic businesses in heritage spaces — from disorderly street vending to illegal construction, from price gouging to noisy advertising — creates a chaotic commercial environment that distorts the cultural landscape. The uncivilized

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behavior of some tourists, combined with the livelihood pressures on local residents in a market economy, creates a downward spiral of norm deterioration that is not easily broken by administrative measures alone.

1.2. Policy framework and development orientation

In Vietnam's policy thinking, culture is identified both as a goal and a driving force of development; the focus of cultural development is the building of a healthy cultural environment; people are the subject and occupy the central position in the development strategy (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2021). Resolution 33-NQ/TW emphasizes the task of building a healthy cultural environment in each community and identifies "the people as the creative subject" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014). On the tourism axis, Resolution 08-NQ/TW calls for sustainable development linked to heritage conservation and promotion, while highlighting the role of enterprises and local communities as driving forces (Politburo, 2017). At the same time, the institutional framework for festival management, especially Directive 41-CT/TW and Decree 110/2018/ND-CP, emphasizes civilized conduct, order and safety, and warns against commodification (Party Central Secretariat, 2015; Government, 2018).

Vietnam's Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 sets the goal of sustainable tourism development on the basis of green growth and the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage values, while also emphasizing the role of communities and enterprises in the tourism ecosystem (Prime Minister, 2020). The Cultural Development Strategy to 2030 continues to affirm that building a healthy cultural environment is a central task, especially in the context of international integration and the market economy (Prime Minister, 2021). These orientations pose an urgent requirement: a destination governance model is needed in which enterprises and communities are not "on opposite sides" but become co-creators of a humane, healthy cultural environment.

1.3. Research problem and gap

Practical discussions often fall into two extremes. The first extreme treats tourism as a growth engine, prioritizing visitor numbers and revenue, and thereby easily tolerating overcrowding and commodification. This approach views culture as an "input material" for tourism products and measures success by arrivals, direct revenue, and indirect revenue. The consequence is constant pressure on heritage and community spaces, creating a cycle of exploitation, degradation, and superficial reinvestment that does not address the root causes of cultural decline.

The second extreme favors administrative tightening, emphasizing "prohibition" and "cracking down," but lacks mechanisms to create economic incentives and lacks the meaningful participation of communities and enterprises. This approach easily falls into a situation of "hot on top, cold below": strict regulations are issued, but implementation is weak due to insufficient monitoring resources, lack of stakeholder consensus, and the absence of livelihood alternatives for communities when business activities are restricted.

The gap lies in the lack of an integrated analytical framework that clarifies the causal relationships between cultural norms, living heritage practices, spatial organization, and institutional design; and also in the lack of a role-responsibility model among the State, enterprises, and communities to move from rhetoric to operation. Domestic studies on cultural tourism often focus on describing the current situation or proposing isolated solutions (promotion, training, infrastructure upgrades) rather than analyzing the mechanisms of power, benefit distribution, and cultural consensus among actors. Meanwhile, international research on destination governance has developed extensively but has not yet been sufficiently localized in the institutional and cultural context of Vietnam.

1.4. Research objectives and questions

This article aims to: (i) analyze the interactive role of enterprises and communities in building the cultural environment of destinations; (ii) propose a "destination cultural co-governance" framework as a basis for analysis and policy design; and (iii) discuss governance tools to balance economic benefits with the conservation and promotion of heritage.

The article answers two questions: (1) What roles do enterprises and communities play, and through what mechanisms do they interact to create a humane and healthy cultural environment? (2) What co-governance model is needed to reduce the risks of commodification, resident-tourist conflict, and authenticity loss?

1.5. Contribution

The article contributes at the conceptual and policy levels by proposing a four-layer cultural environment framework (values-norms; living cultural practices; space-infrastructure; institutions-governance) and a co-governance model as a "social compact" among the State, enterprises, and communities. It thereby offers operational suggestions: benefit-sharing, codes of conduct, monitoring of cultural impacts, and carrying-capacity governance. The novelty relative to existing studies is the integration of Vietnam's policy-value framework (people at the center, healthy cultural environment) with international theoretical mechanisms (SLO, shared value, CBT empowerment, carrying capacity) into a single model, thereby connecting macro-level orientation with micro-level operational design.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Responsible tourism and the logic of long-term value

Responsible tourism is seen as an approach that emphasizes the responsibility of stakeholders in maximizing local benefits and minimizing negative impacts. Unlike “sustainable tourism,” which tends to remain a macro goal and sometimes becomes an abstract slogan, responsible tourism emphasizes specific actions and responsibility that can be attributed to each actor: government, enterprises, communities, and tourists themselves. Goodwin (2016) emphasizes the “localization” of solutions: local problems require local solutions, with genuine participation from the groups concerned. The key point is that responsible tourism does not reject profit, but redefines profit in terms of long-term value linked to resource quality, destination reputation, and social acceptance. This long-term value logic is especially meaningful in cultural tourism, where the “resource” is the community’s living practices — something that cannot be recreated by financial investment alone. A festival that has been commodified can have its outward form restored with money, but once the community’s belief in its sacred meaning is broken, it is very difficult to restore. This poses a major challenge for enterprises: in the short term, maximum exploitation of culture may generate high profits; but in the long term, the depletion of cultural resources will erode the very basis of the destination’s attractiveness, leading to the collapse of the business model. Therefore, the responsibility of tourism enterprises is not only to “do no harm” but to move toward “co-creation” — participating in the protection and enrichment of the cultural capital on which their business depends.

Here, the concept of social licence to operate (SLO) helps explain in practical terms why enterprises need cultural responsibility. SLO was originally developed in the mining sector, but is increasingly applied in industries with large social–environmental impacts, including tourism. Dare et al. (2014) show that SLO is a “social licence” formed through trust, benefit fairness, and the legitimacy of decision-making processes. In tourism, SLO is eroded when communities feel that culture is being violated, benefits are leaking away, and living space is being overcrowded; conversely, SLO is strengthened when enterprises co-design with communities and distribute benefits transparently. SLO is particularly useful in analyzing situations where a legal permit has been granted but the community still objects — a phenomenon not uncommon in tourism development in Vietnam, typified by cable car projects, upscale resorts, or cultural festivals organized without adequate consultation with local communities.

It is important to emphasize that SLO is not a static state but an ongoing process that must be continuously nurtured. An enterprise once supported by the community can lose SLO if it changes its business model in an exploitative direction, fails to share benefits, or disrespects cultural boundaries. Conversely, a new enterprise can build SLO quickly through actions that demonstrate commitment to respecting culture and investing in the community. This mechanism creates a system of social control that complements legal control, and is especially effective in contexts where state inspection and monitoring capacity remains limited. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism of UN Tourism establishes normative principles regarding respect for host communities and heritage, and requires enterprises not to impose their socio-cultural models on local communities (UN Tourism, 1999). The United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/56/212 acknowledged and recommended that governments and tourism stakeholders consider incorporating the Code into national legislation and professional practice (United Nations, 2001). Although not legally binding, this code provides an international normative framework that allows national policies and corporate behavior to be assessed against a global standard of responsibility.

2.2. Community-based tourism and the problem of substantive empowerment

Community-based tourism (CBT) is often expected to increase livelihoods and empower communities. In theory, CBT promises a “bottom-up” development model in which communities not only provide services but also control decision-making and benefit distribution. However, international evidence shows that the gap between ideal and reality is substantial. The success of CBT depends on representative structures, organizational capacity, and the way benefits are shared.

Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014), in their study in Thailand, emphasize the role of local leadership, external support, and transparent benefit mechanisms; they also show that CBT can fail when community participation is merely formal or when benefits are “captured.” The study points out that even in “model” CBT projects, actual power often concentrates in a small group — those with networks, social capital, and language skills — while most residents only participate as simple labor providers. The factor of “luck” — such as the presence of a visionary leader or timely support from a non-governmental organization — also plays an important role, showing that CBT cannot be replicated mechanically and must be designed according to context.

In Vietnam, a case study of Hoi An emphasizes that community participation is linked to empowerment, but institutional barriers and benefit asymmetry remain, meaning that “participation” often stops at service provision and does not reach co-governance (Pham, 2021). Hoi An — one of Vietnam’s most successful heritage destinations — shows that even when authorities are conscious of conservation and CBT, the governance structure still tends to concentrate decisions at the level of government and large enterprises, while local residents of the ancient town are increasingly pushed to the margins by rising rents, overcrowding pressures, and changes in demographic composition. In addition, when culture becomes the “selling point” of the product, weaker groups may be marginalized in benefit distribution, increasing the risk of internal community conflict.

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An important lesson from the CBT literature is that “participation” does not necessarily mean “empowerment.” Arnstein (1969) distinguished a “ladder of participation” ranging from manipulation to citizen power; many CBT projects remain at the lower rungs — information and consultation — and do not move toward joint decision-making. In cultural tourism, this distinction is especially important: a community may be “consulted” about product design but still lack veto power when a festival is cut and rearranged, a sacred space is transformed, or an actual practitioner is replaced by a hired performer. At the highest rung of substantive empowerment, the community not only participates but also has the power to shape the agenda, reject initiatives that violate culture, and receive benefits commensurate with the sharing of its heritage.

International experience from successful CBT models in Costa Rica, Bhutan, and New Zealand (the Māori communities) indicates three core conditions: first, the community must own or control the cultural resources that form the basis of the tourism product; second, the community’s internal governance structure must be strong enough to prevent capture by a small group; third, there must be clear contracts on benefit distribution between the community and enterprises, with independent monitoring mechanisms. In Vietnam, the first condition is often eroded by the State’s management of relics and festivals, the second is weakened by community organizational structures that are not designed for tourism governance, and the third is hardly institutionalized at the operational level.

2.3. Authenticity–commodification and the right to define heritage

The authenticity–commodification debate is one of the oldest and most complex in cultural tourism research. MacCannell (1973) initially argued that tourists seek “authenticity” but often encounter only “staged authenticity” — a version that is produced for consumption. Cohen (1988) expanded this with the concept of “emergent authenticity,” according to which practices that were not originally “authentic” may gradually come to be recognized as authentic by both the community and tourists through a process of socialization.

Cole (2007), in “Beyond authenticity and commodification,” argued that commodification does not necessarily destroy culture; in some contexts, tourism can generate incentives for communities to take pride in their identity, revive traditions that had faded, and create new forms of cultural expression. The decisive factor, according to Cole, is the community’s right to define and control its heritage. When the community holds the right to decide how its culture is presented, it can adapt flexibly without losing its core meaning. Conversely, when the right to define is transferred to enterprises or the State without the community’s substantive consent, commodification easily becomes a form of cultural dispossession.

Research on the Cham community in Vietnam by Quang et al. (2022) provides a vivid illustration of the tension between preserving sacredness and the pressure to perform for tourism. The Cham people’s rituals have strict temporal, spatial, and personnel structures that reflect a profound belief system. When tourism intervenes — even with the good intention of promoting culture — the pressure to shorten time, expand visitor access, and make visible those parts of the ritual that are not meant for outsiders has generated internal community conflict. Elderly members, religious dignitaries, and people who hold ritual roles are often the most strongly opposed, while younger members, who need livelihoods, may lean toward compromise. This intergenerational conflict, if not governed, can lead to deeper community fracture than that caused by tourism itself.

UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasized the central role of communities in identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting heritage. Article 15 requires States Parties to endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups, and individuals who create, maintain, and transmit intangible cultural heritage in its management. This establishes an international legal standard that Vietnam, as a State Party, is obliged to implement in the management of festivals and intangible heritage related to tourism.

From a political economy perspective, commodification of heritage is not only a matter of “culture being violated” but also a matter of power and benefit distribution. When community culture becomes a “raw material” for tourism products while the community does not receive a fair share of the benefits, this inequity accumulates into dissatisfaction and social response — ranging from passive attitudes and non-cooperation to active protest. At the micro level, artisans, ritual specialists, and traditional craft practitioners — the true subjects of heritage — often receive the smallest share of tourism value, while tour operators, hotels, and booking platforms capture most of the value. This inequity is both an ethical problem and a sustainability problem: when there is no longer sufficient income to sustain cultural practice, heritage bearers will shift to other economic activities, leading to the disappearance of the very resource on which tourism depends.

2.4. Overtourism, social reactions, and carrying-capacity governance

Overtourism describes the exceeding of a destination’s capacity, resulting in the deterioration of tourist experience, the degradation of heritage resources, and social conflict between residents and tourists. This concept is not only about absolute tourist numbers; more importantly, it is about the spatial and temporal distribution of tourists, the quality of flow management, and the extent of benefit distribution among stakeholders. A destination may receive fewer tourists than another and still experience overtourism if

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all tourists concentrate in the same small area within the same short time frame — a typical situation in many festivals and heritage sites in Vietnam.

Milano (2017) analyzed “tourismphobia” — residents’ reaction to tourism — as a social consequence of a growth-oriented tourism model that lacks participation mechanisms and equitable redistribution of benefits. Studies in Barcelona, Venice, Dubrovnik, and Amsterdam show that when residents feel excluded from decisions about tourism development, disadvantaged in benefit distribution, and burdened by increasing inconveniences (rising rents, traffic congestion, noise pollution, loss of normal living space), they move from welcoming tourists to rejecting tourism. In Vietnam, although organized anti-tourism protests like those in Europe have not yet appeared, signs of latent tourismphobia are already evident in the form of indifference and lack of cooperation among residents in some overcrowded destinations, or in the gradual displacement of local residents from core tourism areas.

On the technical side, carrying-capacity research provides operational methods for regulating tourist flows. Jurado et al. (2012) propose a method for operational indicators and stress the need for measurement and monitoring tools rather than mere declarations of “sustainability.” Research at the Alhambra (Granada, Spain) — one of the world’s most heavily visited World Heritage sites — showed that timed ticketing, limiting the number of simultaneous visitors in each area, and designing controlled routes significantly improved the quality of the experience without reducing total revenue. The key lesson is that carrying-capacity governance does not mean refusing tourists, but rather redistributing tourist flows across space and time to optimize experiential value and reduce negative impacts.

However, carrying capacity is not only physical (people/m²) but also ecological (impact on the natural environment), psychological (the level of crowding that tourists and residents still find acceptable), and especially cultural–social (the community’s ability to absorb cultural impacts without losing identity). The last dimension is often overlooked in tourism governance analyses but is the most important one for cultural tourism: a festival may be able to physically accommodate thousands of tourists, yet still “break down” culturally if the number of visitors exceeds the threshold at which the community can preserve the sacred and communal meaning of the festival.

2.5. Summary of the gap and the article’s position

The literature review shows that four research strands — responsible tourism, CBT, authenticity/commodification, and overtourism/carrying capacity — have provided rich theoretical tools, but they are often applied separately. Responsible tourism research is strong on ethical principles but weak on operational mechanisms; CBT is strong on empowerment but weak on institutional conditions for scaling; authenticity/commodification offers deep cultural analysis but is less connected to practical governance; overtourism/carrying-capacity research provides technical tools but pays less attention to political and distributional power.

This article situates itself at the intersection of all four strands, proposing co-governance as an integrated mechanism that allows localities to: establish ethical responsibility norms; grant substantive empowerment to communities; protect the community’s right to define heritage; and operate data-based carrying-capacity tools. This integration has not been fully achieved in existing studies, especially in the institutional and cultural context of Vietnam.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

The article uses a qualitative method oriented toward conceptual–policy analysis. This method is suitable for the article’s purpose: not to measure a specific phenomenon quantitatively, but to synthesize, analyze, and integrate theoretical and policy streams to build a conceptual framework that can serve as an analytical and policy-design tool for cultural tourism destinations. This approach is similar to the “framework development” method widely used in governance and public policy research.

3.2. Sources and selection criteria

The sources consist of three main groups. The first group is Vietnamese policy and legal texts on culture, tourism, and festival management, including resolutions of the Central Committee, the Politburo, directives, decrees, and decisions of the Prime Minister. The second group is international and domestic scholarly literature, selected according to the following criteria: high influence in the field (highly cited and published in reputable journals), foundational theoretical importance (classical works such as MacCannell, Cohen, and Arnstein), and direct relevance to the Southeast Asian or Vietnamese context. The third group is normative documents from UNESCO and UN Tourism, which serve as global standards for evaluating and guiding national policy.

3.3. Analytical procedure

The article proceeds in three sequential steps. The first step is policy document analysis to extract two frameworks: the “value framework” (people-centered, healthy cultural environment, people as the creative subject) and the “operational framework” (enterprise–community roles; festival governance; tourism/cultural strategy). The second step is a literature review to identify corresponding theoretical mechanisms: responsibility and SLO; CBT empowerment; authenticity and the right to define;

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overcrowding and carrying-capacity tools. The third step is to integrate the two analytical sources to build the four-layer framework and co-governance model, and to derive governance-tool implications.

3.4. Methodological limitations

Because the article does not conduct field surveys or quantitative analysis, it does not claim causal relationships in the statistical sense. The proposed framework is model-based and needs to be tested through in-depth case studies in each locality using specific empirical methods. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged and also points to directions for future research.

4. RESULTS: THE DESTINATION CULTURAL CO-GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

4.1. Operational definition: “Destination cultural environment”

To build a governance model, it is first necessary to define clearly what is being governed. From Vietnamese policy orientations combined with the reviewed academic literature, the article proposes the following operational definition: the destination cultural environment is the totality of physical, institutional, and spiritual conditions that ensure the maintenance and healthy development of the community’s living cultural practices in a tourism context, including: (i) the system of values and behavioral norms that shape the quality of social interaction at the destination; (ii) living cultural practices — festivals, rituals, handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, performance arts — as heritage capital in practice rather than as display; (iii) spatial–infrastructure conditions that ensure civility, order, sanitation, and safety; and (iv) institutional design that ensures community participation, benefit-sharing, and impact monitoring.

This understanding has three important points. First, the “cultural environment” is not just physical space or heritage structures, but a cultural–social ecosystem including people and their relationships. Second, “healthy” does not mean static and unchanging, but rather capable of adaptation, self-repair, and development — similar to the concept of resilience in ecology. Third, a tourism destination is not only a place for tourists to visit; it is first and foremost a place where communities live. Therefore, the quality of the cultural environment must be measured by residents’ experiences and well-being, not only by tourist satisfaction.

4.2. The four-layer framework: causal mechanisms and intervention points

The four-layer framework is built according to causal and interactive logic: each layer is both a condition for the layer above it and a consequence of the layer below it, forming an interdependent system.

Layer 1 — Values and behavioral norms are the deepest foundation, determining the quality of social relations at the destination. This layer includes: the community’s cultural values (hospitality, attitudes toward outsiders, respect for sacred space); tourists’ behavioral norms (civilized tourism, respect for heritage); and enterprises’ business norms (honesty, fairness, no price gouging). When this layer is healthy, resident–tourist–enterprise interaction is voluntary, trusting, and beneficial for all parties. When this layer weakens — due to economic pressure, tourism fatigue, or lack of norm education — deviant behaviors such as overcharging, violating sacred space, littering, and offensive conduct increase, leading to a decline in social trust and tourist experience.

Intervention points at Layer 1 include: tourism civility education for tourists (before the trip and at the destination); training in business norms for enterprises; and, crucially, protecting community cultural values from erosion by commercial pressure. Resolution 33-NQ/TW on building a healthy cultural environment and Directive 41-CT/TW on civilized conduct in festivals provide the policy framework for such interventions (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014; Party Central Secretariat, 2015).

Layer 2 — Living cultural practices are the core asset of cultural tourism and simultaneously the most vulnerable object. This layer includes the full range of intangible heritage currently being practiced: traditional festivals with their ritual and belief systems; handicrafts with their distinctive techniques and aesthetics; folk performance arts; indigenous knowledge about agriculture, medicine, and nature; and traditional customs, ways of life, and cuisine. What makes this layer special is its “liveliness”: unlike tangible heritage, which can be conserved and restored, intangible heritage exists only through human practice and intergenerational transmission.

When tourism intervenes improperly in this layer, three common forms of damage can occur: (a) Staging — rituals are cut, simplified, and performed according to tour schedules, detached from their original meaning context; (b) Substituting the subject — real practitioners are replaced by hired performers who have no cultural connection to the content being performed; and (c) Erosion of transmission — young people lack motivation to learn traditional crafts because income from tourism services is easier to obtain and does not require years of training. When these three forms of damage occur together, the heritage loses its “liveliness” and becomes an empty shell.

Intervention at Layer 2 requires a two-pronged approach: protection (establishing boundaries for what cannot be commodified, supporting artisans, maintaining transmission mechanisms) and development (creating sustainable economic opportunities from living cultural practices without intermediaries reinterpreting culture). UNESCO (2003) and the operational guidelines of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention provide international standards for this kind of intervention.

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Layer 3 — Space and infrastructure are the material conditions of operation. This layer includes: organization of heritage and festival spaces (zoning, density control, visitor flow direction); service infrastructure (sanitation, order, safety, transportation); and material cultural institutions (sacred space, community space, residents' everyday living spaces). This layer interacts strongly with Layers 1 and 2: overcrowded space creates an unsafe environment, triggers deviant behaviors, and erodes the sacred experience of residents during festivals; poorly organized space creates conditions for uncontrolled commercial activities to invade the heritage area.

Governance of Layer 3 requires combining technical solutions (spatial design, ticketing systems, monitoring technologies) with management solutions (business regulation, route distribution, seasonal control). Experience from carrying-capacity research at the Alhambra (Jurado et al., 2012) shows that technical solutions are effective only when integrated into a comprehensive governance system with the commitment of all parties.

Layer 4 — Institutions and governance are the “control unit” that determines whether the three lower layers operate in a humane direction or slide toward commodification and decline. This layer includes: legal mechanisms (laws, decrees, regulations); participation and consensus mechanisms (decision-making processes with substantive community participation); benefit-distribution mechanisms (conservation funds, contracts with artisans, tourism taxes reinvested in the community); and monitoring and sanctions mechanisms (cultural impact reporting, inspection, penalties, and, equally important, rewards for enterprises with good practices). This is the layer where institutional design plays a decisive role: the same community and the same cultural resource can produce completely different tourism outcomes depending on the institutional design.

4.3. The role of the community: an in-depth analysis of the “cultural immune system” function

The image of the “immune system” is used to express a core mechanism: just as the biological immune system identifies and responds to harmful external agents without needing outside instruction, a cultural community has an internal capacity to identify interventions that threaten cultural integrity and to respond in order to protect itself. However, like the biological immune system, this function can be weakened (when the community is fragmented, disorganized, or bought off by short-term interests) or can become “autoimmune” in the wrong direction (when the community rejects even benign interventions because it has lost trust in all external actors).

More specifically, the community's “immune system” function manifests through five interaction mechanisms. The first mechanism is maintaining behavioral norms through informal social pressure. When a community member behaves deviantly (overcharging tourists, violating sacred space, cheating in business), the community itself — through public opinion, pressure from relatives, and the influence of community institutions such as associations, clans, and villages — can restrain the behavior more effectively than administrative supervision. However, this mechanism works only when the community is sufficiently cohesive and when shared norms still exist. Overtourism and rapid economic stratification can break community cohesion and cast doubt on common norms. The second mechanism is protecting the sacredness and meaning of cultural practices. The community is the only party that can distinguish between the “core” and the “shell” of heritage — what can be shared with outsiders and what must remain private to preserve sacred meaning. When enterprises or authorities propose to turn spiritual elements into tourism products, only the community — through religious dignitaries, elders, and internal consensus mechanisms — has sufficient cultural authority to judge whether the proposal is acceptable. This is why Cole (2007) emphasizes that the right to define heritage must belong to the host community, not to outside observers, no matter how well-intentioned they may be.

The third mechanism is maintaining intergenerational transmission. Living cultural practices exist only when there are teachers and learners. When the community is strong, elders have the motivation and capacity to pass on skills, knowledge, and values to the younger generation; the young have reasons to learn and continue. When tourism creates easy income opportunities from activities that do not require deep cultural skills (selling souvenirs, taking photos, rowing boats), transmission mechanisms are disrupted from within without any direct external intervention. Welfare policies for artisans, and the creation of time and space for transmission amid a busy tourism environment, are crucial policy interventions to preserve this mechanism.

The fourth mechanism is informal social monitoring. Resident communities at the destination can continuously observe what happens in their living space — an advantage that state agencies with limited resources cannot match. When there is a mechanism for feedback and connection with the formal management system, the community can become a “sensor network” that detects norm violations, localized overcrowding, and cultural intrusion early, helping authorities and enterprises adjust before problems escalate. The fifth mechanism is maintaining the authentic appeal of the destination. The fundamental paradox of cultural tourism is this: a destination attracts tourists because a community lives there with its own culture; but when too many tourists arrive, that community may be pushed out by rising prices, noise, and commodification; when the community leaves, authenticity disappears; and when authenticity disappears, the appeal to real tourists (those seeking authentic cultural experiences) also declines. The community's presence and well-being at the destination are therefore a fundamental condition for the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism.

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4.4. The role of enterprises: an in-depth analysis of driving force and risk

Tourism enterprises are “amplifying” actors: they amplify both the positive potential and the negative risks of any location. With financial resources, organizational capacity, distribution networks, and innovative ability, enterprises can transform a potential site into an actual attractive destination; but they can also turn a valuable destination into a “tourism bubble” — outwardly glamorous but culturally empty.

In terms of positive roles, enterprises contribute along four dimensions. The first is service professionalization: enterprises mobilize capital, technology, and personnel to raise service standards — from quality tour guides and professional cultural interpretation to modern booking, payment, and flow-management systems. When well designed, this professionalization both improves the tourist experience and reduces pressure on the community.

The second is innovation in responsible cultural products: enterprises can creatively think about how to bring local culture to the market in ways that are both attractive and respectful. The model of a “cultural immersion experience” — where tourists do not merely watch performances but participate in practices together with artisans — is one example of a product innovation that creates high-value experiences while directly generating income for artisans. This model is consistent with Porter and Kramer’s (2011) “creating shared value” framework: the enterprise creates economic value for itself while simultaneously generating social value for the community and artisan groups.

The third is guiding tourist behavior: tour operators have the ability to shape tourist behavior before and during the trip — through preparatory information, on-site guidance, and conscious experience design — in ways that government and local communities cannot match in effectiveness. Enterprises with a high level of social responsibility can integrate “cultural behavior guidance” as an essential part of the product rather than as a burden or cost.

The fourth is mobilizing resources for conservation: through conservation funds, earmarked tourism fees, patronage for artisans, and support for community training, enterprises can become a channel through which market-generated funds flow into cultural preservation — complementing state resources, which are often insufficient.

However, without institutional constraints, enterprises tend to move according to the logic of short-term profit maximization, leading to four major risks. The first risk is “packaging” and staging culture: turning a complex ritual into a 30-minute performance, stripping away context and meaning to fit the duration of a tour package. The second risk is restructuring festival space according to consumer logic: expanding commercial space, shrinking community space, and turning sacred space into a photo spot. The third risk is benefit leakage: profits from local cultural tourism accumulate mainly in large enterprises in urban centers, while the local community receives only a small share of its cultural contribution. The fourth risk is pushing residents out of living space: as land and service values rise due to tourism, original residents — especially the poor and the elderly — cannot compete economically and gradually move away, leaving behind a “cultural shell” without the community’s soul.

4.5. The co-governance model: structure, mechanisms, and operational tools

From the analysis of the roles of communities and enterprises, the article proposes a destination cultural co-governance model as a “social compact” structured among three main actors: the State (designing the rules of the game and ensuring enforcement), enterprises (operating services according to responsible norms), and communities (retaining decision-making power over the core and participating in monitoring). This compact operates through four groups of mechanisms.

First group: Cultural boundary consensus. This mechanism requires a structured community consultation process in which the community is enabled to discuss and decide: (a) which parts of heritage can be shared with tourists and in what form; (b) which parts need to be protected from outsider access or from commodification; and (c) the conditions and limits enterprises must observe when incorporating culture into tourism products. The outcomes of this process should be institutionalized as regulations with legal force, serving as a basis for licensing and monitoring. This mechanism can be implemented through a “community cultural preservation council” composed of diverse representatives: elders, religious dignitaries, artisans, youth representatives, and women’s representatives.

Second group: Fair benefit-sharing. This mechanism addresses distributional justice — the root cause of many cultural–tourism conflicts. Specific tools include: a cultural conservation fund financed by tourism revenue (for example, entrance fees to heritage sites, a percentage of tour revenue); transparent contracts between enterprises and artisans to ensure fair remuneration; local procurement preferences (food, crafts, services) in the tourism supply chain; and independent monitoring of benefit distribution with community participation.

Third group: Codes of conduct and impact monitoring. This mechanism operates in two directions: inward (regulating the behavior of enterprises, tour guides, and tourists in heritage spaces) and outward (assessing cultural impacts periodically through an agreed set of indicators). The code of conduct should be developed together with the community, not imposed from above, and updated regularly as conditions change. A cultural impact report — similar to environmental impact assessment reports for investment projects — should become mandatory for large-scale tourism projects or commercially organized festival programs.

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Fourth group: Data-based carrying-capacity governance. This mechanism applies technical tools to regulate tourist flows in space and time, based on scientifically determined capacity thresholds for each destination. The data system should track simultaneously: tourist density by hour and area; air quality, noise, and sanitation indicators; resident satisfaction levels (as an SLO indicator); and, importantly, indicators of the “health” of living cultural practices (number of active artisans, frequency of festivals held according to traditional procedures, and the level of youth participation in transmission).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Co-governance as the link between conservation and development: resolving the paradox

The analysis shows that the conservation–development paradox is not inevitable; it is the consequence of poor institutional design. When communities retain the right to define and share benefits fairly, they have an incentive to preserve culture because conservation is tied to their own economic interests. When enterprises possess SLO and a long-term value orientation, they have an interest in maintaining the authenticity of the destination because it is the basis of their competitive advantage. When the State designs the rules properly and ensures consistent enforcement, all parties operate within an incentive system oriented toward sustainable development.

This does not mean that conflict disappears entirely. There are always tensions that cannot be fully resolved: between tourists’ access and community privacy; between product innovation and authenticity preservation; between economic growth and carrying-capacity limits. Co-governance does not promise to eliminate all such contradictions, but provides a mechanism through which parties can negotiate, adjust, and find an acceptable balance — a balance that may change over time as conditions change.

5.2. Lessons from overtourism: procedural justice is a prerequisite

One of the most important messages from overtourism research is that residents’ negative reactions are not primarily due to the absolute number of tourists, but to the feeling of being excluded from decision-making and from the fair distribution of benefits. Milano (2017) documented the case of Barcelona, where residents protested tourism not because they did not want tourists, but because they felt they had no voice in how tourism was developed and who benefited from it. The implication for Vietnam is that a strategy to reduce tourism conflict cannot focus only on managing tourist behavior or upgrading infrastructure. The center of the strategy must be to ensure that communities have substantive voice in decisions about tourism development in their localities.

Procedural justice — a concept from legal and social theory — emphasizes that people accept unfavorable outcomes more readily when they feel the decision-making process is fair, transparent, and participatory. Conversely, even if the objective result is good, if the decision is top-down and lacks consultation, people will tend to resist. In cultural tourism, this means that even a “good” development project economically will face resistance if the community is not involved in planning and decision-making.

5.3. Authenticity in the digital world: new challenges for co-governance

One dimension that cannot be overlooked is the impact of digital platforms on authenticity and cultural governance at destinations. Social media and image-sharing platforms (Instagram, TikTok) have created a new communication mechanism in which images of destinations and local culture are created, distributed, and consumed at unprecedented speed. The “Instagram-worthy” effect — tourists’ tendency to seek places with striking images on social media — has created new pressures on destinations and cultural communities: they must be photogenic, ready for photography, and capable of delivering shareable “moments.”

This pressure can lead to two opposite outcomes. On the one hand, it can push communities to “perform” culture in increasingly detached ways, because authentic practice is often not photogenic by social media standards. On the other hand, it can also create media power for communities: an authentic story, told properly by the community itself, can spread widely and attract a type of tourist who is more conscious and willing to pay more for genuine experiences. The challenge of co-governance in the digital age is to integrate media governance and digital image governance as part of heritage protection strategy, rather than treating them as separate domains.

5.4. Institutional capacity as the decisive factor for feasibility

A major practical challenge is the institutional capacity of localities to operate a co-governance model. This model requires: technical capacity to design and operate carrying-capacity data systems; administrative capacity to manage consultation processes and benefit-sharing mechanisms; and political capacity to maintain long-term commitment despite changes in leadership. In many Vietnamese localities, all three types of capacity remain limited, raising the question of a capacity-building roadmap before the co-governance model can be implemented effectively.

Experience from CBT studies suggests that the whole model should not be attempted all at once. A more realistic approach is to identify the “weakest link” in the system — often community participation or benefit distribution — and concentrate resources on strengthening that link first. At the same time, investing in capacity-building for state managers, community leaders, and enterprises on the principles and tools of co-governance is a prerequisite.

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5.5. Implications for cultural industry policy

The strategy for developing Vietnam's cultural industries to 2030 encourages enterprises to innovate and commercialize cultural products (Prime Minister, 2016). This article's analysis shows that this can be fully reconciled with cultural preservation, but only if it is properly designed. Cultural industries in tourism should not be evaluated solely by revenue KPIs; they must also include KPIs for the cultural environment: resident satisfaction, the number of artisans with sustainable income from traditional cultural practices, the proportion of intangible heritage practiced according to traditional procedures, and the SLO index of enterprises in the locality. This dual evaluation system will create the right incentive framework and orient cultural innovation toward shared value rather than mere extraction.

6. Policy and Governance Implications

6.1. National level: an integrated legal and policy framework

At the national level, an integrated legal framework is needed to connect the Tourism Law, the Cultural Heritage Law, and festival-related regulations into a unified system for responsible cultural tourism governance. Currently, these three legal systems operate relatively independently, creating gaps in responsibility when problems arise at the boundaries between fields — notably in the organization of festivals combined with commercial tourism.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism should play the lead coordinating role in developing a “responsible cultural tourism” standard applicable to both tour operators, accommodation providers, and cultural event organizers. This standard should be developed through a multi-stakeholder consultation process, including representatives of heritage communities, artisans, enterprises, and researchers. Once issued, the standard should be integrated into the licensing system for tourism businesses and into the criteria for destination evaluation and classification.

6.2. Local level: destination cultural environment regulations

At the local level (province, district, commune), the operational tool should be a “destination cultural environment regulation” — a document that specifies, for each destination: the consensually defined cultural boundaries; codes of conduct for enterprises, guides, and tourists; carrying-capacity thresholds and adjustment mechanisms; benefit-sharing mechanisms; and procedures for monitoring and handling violations. This regulation is not an administrative document imposed from above, but the outcome of a multi-stakeholder consensus process, with legal force and periodic updates.

Regarding benefit-sharing, a feasible model is the establishment of a “destination cultural conservation fund” financed from multiple sources: a percentage of heritage entrance fees, voluntary contributions from enterprises, and local government budgets. The fund would be managed by a multi-stakeholder council with community representatives holding at least 40% of the seats, and would be used for: supporting artisans' incomes, organizing intergenerational transmission, preserving sacred spaces, and supporting households negatively affected by tourism overcrowding.

6.3. Enterprise level: from compliance to commitment

At the enterprise level, moving from “compliance with regulations” to “voluntary commitment” is a more sustainable direction. To encourage this shift, an appropriate incentive system is needed: giving priority in licensing and government promotion to enterprises with strong cultural commitments; building a credible market-recognized certification system for “responsible cultural tourism enterprises”; and creating space for enterprises to share good practices and build an industry culture oriented toward shared value creation.

In particular, tourism business associations (the Vietnam Tourism Association and local associations) have an important role in establishing and enforcing industry norms. A self-regulation model — in which the association develops a code of conduct, monitors members, and has a mechanism for expulsion in cases of serious violations — is an effective complement to state monitoring, especially when state supervisory resources are limited.

7. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This article has four main limitations that should be acknowledged transparently. First, because it uses documentary analysis and literature review, it does not conduct quantitative or in-depth qualitative field data, so it cannot empirically test the causal relationships proposed in the four-layer framework. Second, the international cases cited (Barcelona, Alhambra, Māori communities) are illustrative rather than fully comparative in the sense of systematic case-comparison research with consistent criteria. Third, the concepts of “cultural environment” and “co-governance” remain highly normative; to operate in practice, they require the development of specific measurement indicators and validated assessment methods. Fourth, the article focuses on enterprise–community relations within a destination-specific framework, while in reality there are many other important actors: real-estate investors in tourism (who are not always “tourism enterprises”), online booking and travel platforms, media, and social media influencers.

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8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should focus on verification and quantification.

First, in-depth case studies at specific destinations (for example Hoi An, Hue, Trang An, Sa Pa, or a major festival center), combining interviews with enterprises, artisans, and residents; analysis of governance documents; and observation of tourist behavior in sacred spaces.

Second, the development of a “destination cultural environment” index based on the four layers, including indicators of behavioral norms, indicators of the health of living cultural practices (transmission frequency, number of participating artisans, level of community consensus), indicators of spatial overcrowding by hour, and indicators of social acceptance (SLO).

Third, research on the impact mechanisms of digital platforms (OTAs, social media) on overcrowding and cultural commodification, thereby proposing co-governance tools suitable for the digital era.

9. CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism in Vietnam can only be sustainable when the destination cultural environment is constructed as a humane ecosystem in which people are at the center, the community is the subject of culture, and enterprises are the organizational and innovative driving force within ethical boundaries. This article proposes a “destination cultural co-governance” framework consisting of four layers to explain the mechanisms of cultural environment decline or strengthening. The analysis shows that the community plays the role of a “cultural immune system” by maintaining norms, sacredness, and authenticity; enterprises can be a positive driving force when they create shared value and maintain social licence, but can also become agents of commodification if institutional constraints are absent.

Therefore, the core direction is to shift from quantity-based growth to quality-based governance: consensual cultural boundaries, fair benefit-sharing, codes of conduct, and data-based tools to regulate overcrowding. This is how the requirement to build a healthy cultural environment and the principle that people are at the center in development can be realized (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014; Nguyen Phu Trong, 2021), while also aligning with the orientation toward sustainable tourism development linked to heritage conservation (Politburo, 2017).

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