
MA CHAU SILK-WEAVING VILLAGE (DUY XUYEN, QUANG NAM): HISTORY, LIVELIHOOD TRANSFORMATION, AND PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE “GREEN” ERA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the five-century history of Ma Chau silk-weaving village in Duy Xuyen, Quang Nam, Vietnam, tracing its trajectory from formation, prosperity, and decline to recent revival. The study analyzes the silk value chain—including sericulture, weaving, dyeing, and finishing—while emphasizing the participation of households and local enterprises. It also highlights innovations in eco-friendly practices such as natural dyeing and the integration of silk production with cultural-heritage tourism in Hoi An and My Son. Drawing upon secondary sources (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006; Nguyen, 2010; Quang Nam People’s Committee, 2001; Tran, 2022), the study identifies: (i) Ma Chau’s origins in the 15th–16th centuries, with products once presented to the imperial court; (ii) the decline caused by war, urbanization, and competition from industrial textiles in the late 20th century; (iii) opportunities for revival driven by the global “green fashion” trend and local craft-village revitalization programs; and (iv) the need for sustainable strategies combining preservation with innovation. Policy recommendations are structured along three pillars: natural dyeing technology and OCOP programs, public–private heritage clusters with demonstration workshops, and digitalized geographical branding.

Keywords: Ma Chau; sericulture; silk weaving; natural dyeing; craft villages; heritage tourism; Quang Nam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ma Chau silk-weaving village is located in Nam Phuoc town, Duy Xuyen district, Quang Nam province, about 15 km from Hoi An Ancient Town and 20 km from My Son Sanctuary. It is one of the oldest silk-weaving villages in Central Vietnam, with origins dating back to the 15th–16th centuries, closely tied to the trading axis along the Thu Bon River connecting Hoi An and My Son (Nguyen, 2010). For centuries, Ma Chau silk products gained prominence in Quang Nam and were included in the tribute system to the royal court (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006).

After 1975, and particularly since the 1990s, the village faced profound challenges due to the legacies of war, rapid urbanization, and the influx of low-cost industrial textiles. Nevertheless, dedicated artisans and households who continued the tradition helped to preserve the craft (Tran, 2022). In recent years, the narrative of “reviving Ma Chau silk” has become one of the key priorities in Quang Nam province’s strategy for craft-village development, cultural tourism, and the creative economy (Quang Nam People’s Committee, 2001).

Research questions posed in this study include:

What are the historical characteristics of the formation and development of Ma Chau silk-weaving village?

What is the current status of the silk value chain?

How can Ma Chau be preserved and developed sustainably in the context of globalization and the “green” transition?

Contribution: This paper synthesizes and analyzes historical records, journalistic sources, and policy-related documents concerning Ma Chau. It identifies the challenges and opportunities emerging from the global trend of sustainable fashion, the expansion of experiential tourism, and the implementation of the OCOP (One Commune One Product) program (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020). It further proposes policy recommendations and sustainable development models for Ma Chau that could serve as replicable lessons for other Vietnamese craft villages.

Methodology: The research employs multiple methods:

Secondary document analysis: synthesizing information from government portals, tourism reports, and scholarly publications.

Historical method: reconstructing the trajectory of formation, prosperity, decline, and revival of Ma Chau silk-weaving.

Policy analysis: assessing provincial support measures and national programs on OCOP and craft-village tourism.

Comparative method: contrasting Ma Chau with other Vietnamese silk villages (Van Phuc in Hanoi, Nha Xa in Ha Nam, and Tan Chau in An Giang) to extract transferable lessons.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CRAFT VILLAGES

2.1. Concept of Craft Villages

The concept of a “craft village” is specific to the Vietnamese context, yet there is no unified set of criteria to define it nationally. According to Associate Professor Vu Trong Khai, “*the term craft village is a conventional designation, encompassing very different forms—from a weaving village with international market stature such as Van Phuc in Ha Dong, to Trang Bang rice-paper village in Tay Ninh, or incense-stick production in Binh Chanh on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City*” (Vu, 2004). This observation underscores the diversity and fluidity inherent in the term.

2.2. Classification of Craft Villages

Classifying craft villages is useful for understanding their origins, formation, and pathways for preserving cultural values. They can be divided into several groups: Traditional craft villages, with long-standing histories and continuity across generations; Newly established craft villages, often arising from recent market opportunities; Villages with uncertain traditional status; Villages of varying scale, from household-based production to larger, semi-industrial forms (Nguyen, 2010).

By sectoral activity, craft villages may be grouped into: Handicraft villages (weaving, pottery, fine arts, etc.); Industrial-mechanical villages (metalworking, gold and silver processing, steel recycling); Construction-oriented villages; Service-oriented craft villages (Tran, 2022).

Specialization offers another criterion: Villages producing a single type of product; Villages producing multiple types of traditional goods; Villages combining traditional production with

newer activities such as services and construction (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020).

Finally, classification by environmental impact is increasingly significant in the contemporary sustainability discourse: Non-polluting craft villages; Villages with low, moderate, or high levels of environmental risk (Pham, 2019).

2.3. Core Characteristics of Vietnamese Craft Villages

Vietnamese craft villages combine the features of traditional rural communities with traits specific to artisanal production. They simultaneously reflect both rural conservatism and proto-industrial dynamism, with five notable characteristics:

Artistic uniqueness and uneven quality. Products often exhibit high aesthetic value and carry the imprint of both the village and individual artisans, enabling differentiation across regions (Nguyen, 2010).

Limited consumer markets. Most products serve local and regional needs, with relatively few villages able to expand into international markets (Tran, 2022).

Manual, labor-intensive production. Technologies remain limited, relying on household-level expertise and “secret know-how.” Mechanization has increased but productivity remains low compared with industrial standards (Pham, 2019).

Traditional management systems. Production is small-scale, family-based, and often conservative, with little distinction between production and commerce. Organization relies heavily on intergenerational transmission of experience (Vu, 2005).

The central role of artisans. Master craftsmen accumulate techniques and knowledge through decades of practice. They are respected figures who play crucial roles in sustaining village identity, with training largely transmitted via apprenticeships and familial mentoring (Nguyen, 2010).

3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MA CHAU SILK-WEAVING VILLAGE

Origins and Formation (15th–16th centuries)

According to local legends and historical records, Ma Chau village emerged in the 15th–16th centuries when settlers along the Thu Bon River (now Nam Phuoc town, Duy Xuyen district) began cultivating mulberry, raising silkworms, and weaving cloth. Its geographic position on the trade axis linking Hoi An and My Son enabled early market integration, supplying both local and regional demand and facilitating exports through Hoi An port (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006).

The craft was based on traditional wooden looms with basic techniques: reeling silk, spinning threads, weaving raw fabric, and dyeing with natural colors from leaves, roots, and bark. Initial products served household and ritual needs, later expanding to broader markets. During this period, Ma Chau silk was esteemed enough to be included in the imperial tribute system under the Nguyen lords (Pham, 2019).

Flourishing in the 17th–19th centuries

From the 17th century, under the rule of Lord Nguyen Hoang and subsequent Nguyen lords, Quang Nam became an economic hub in the South. Sericulture and silk weaving in Ma Chau flourished, with products comparable to those of Van Phuc in the North. Many families became hereditary weaving households, specializing in distinct stages of production: raising silkworms, reeling silk, weaving, or dyeing (Nguyen, 2010).

In the *Phu bien tap luc*, Le Quy Don noted that Quang Nam contributed a significant share of

silk to the imperial tax and tribute system, underscoring its centrality to the regional economy (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006). Oral traditions also preserve the story of Lady Doan Ngoc Phi (“Ba Chua Tam Tang”), who married Nguyen Phuc Lan and encouraged local mulberry cultivation and silk weaving, elevating Duy Xuyen into a center of high-quality silk production (Tran, 2022).

Ma Chau silk was exported widely via Hoi An port to Japan (through the “red-seal ships” to Nagasaki), to China, and to Southeast Asia. It was also a prestigious product within domestic markets, used as dowries in marriage and as markers of social status (Pham, 2019).

Transformation under French Colonialism (late 19th–early 20th centuries)

With French colonial expansion, cotton weaving was introduced alongside silk. French iron looms and local innovations, such as the wooden loom improvements by Vo Dan of Thi Lai village, increased productivity and diversified products. By the 1930s, semi-mechanized looms enhanced output and quality, creating both opportunities and challenges for artisans (Nguyen, 2010).

However, the penetration of Western industrial textiles eroded domestic markets. From the early 20th century, traditional handwoven silk began to decline, squeezed between imported fabrics and cheaper synthetic materials.

Decline during Wars and Post-1975 Challenges

After 1945, continuous wars devastated sericulture and weaving in Ma Chau. Many households abandoned the craft for farming or other livelihoods. The 1980s–1990s brought further decline with the influx of industrial textiles and imported fabrics. Reports note that thousands of looms once active in Ma Chau fell silent; only elderly artisans continued weaving on a small scale to preserve tradition (Tran, 2022).

During this period, silk production became fragmented: mulberry cultivation and silkworm raising sharply declined, forcing dependence on external raw silk (e.g., Lam Dong or imports from China). Local weaving persisted but lacked the scale to compete, resulting in low incomes and diminishing transmission of skills to younger generations (Quang Nam People’s Committee, 2001).

Revival Efforts since the 2000s

Beginning in the early 2000s, Quang Nam authorities-initiated programs to restore traditional crafts in connection with tourism. Decision No. 37/2001/QĐ-UBND provided incentives for craft village development, including infrastructure support (roads, electricity) and detailed planning for Ma Chau (Quang Nam People’s Committee, 2001). By 2003, Ma Chau was officially recognized as a traditional craft village and awarded the title “Hero of the Renovation Period” for its contributions to rural development (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020).

In the 2010s, revival efforts included experimentation with natural dyeing, diversification into souvenirs and fashion items, and integration with tourism circuits linking Hoi An and My Son. Artisans and younger entrepreneurs began to adopt e-commerce platforms for small-scale exports, while provincial cultural festivals and OCOP programs promoted Ma Chau as part of the “green silk” movement (Tran, 2022).

Current Situation and Prospects (2020s)

Today, Ma Chau silk production remains modest but carries renewed cultural and economic

significance. Over 200 households are still engaged in sericulture, weaving, or dyeing, with companies like Ma Chau Silk Ltd. experimenting with organic dyes from plants such as indigo, areca nut, and turmeric. Tourism linkages—such as experiential weaving tours—are emerging as key revenue streams (Nguyen, 2010; Tran, 2022).

However, challenges persist: shortages of young artisans, dependence on imported raw silk, weak branding compared to Van Phuc or Tan Chau, and limited capacity for standardized international exports (Pham, 2019). Nevertheless, the global demand for sustainable textiles and eco-fashion presents significant opportunities. If effectively linked with heritage tourism and green branding, Ma Chau could reposition itself as a model of sustainable craft-village revitalization.

4. VALUE CHAIN OF MA CHAU SILK

4.1. Raw Materials: Mulberry Cultivation and Sericulture

The foundation of Ma Chau silk production lies in mulberry cultivation and silkworm rearing. Historically, the fertile alluvial soils along the Thu Bon River enabled extensive mulberry fields, which supported thousands of weaving households (Nguyen, 2010). Farmers grew mulberry varieties adapted to Central Vietnam's climate, providing high-quality leaves for silkworms.

However, since the late 20th century, mulberry farming has drastically declined due to land conversion for housing and other crops. Many households now rely on raw silk imported from Lam Dong province or China, leading to supply-chain vulnerability (Tran, 2022). Revitalization programs emphasize the need to re-establish mulberry fields as part of a closed-loop “green silk” model (Quang Nam People's Committee, 2001).

4.2. Weaving Techniques and Household Production

Weaving remains the core of Ma Chau's identity. Traditionally, households used wooden looms to weave satin, brocade, and plain silk. Each family often specialized in a particular weaving style or stage of production. Skilled weavers could produce fabric of remarkable fineness, once compared with Van Phuc silk (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006).

The introduction of semi-mechanized looms in the 20th century increased productivity but reduced artisanal distinctiveness. Today, many households balance between maintaining traditional techniques and adopting mechanized looms for higher-volume production. Women continue to dominate weaving labor, while men are more involved in loom construction, marketing, or dyeing processes (Pham, 2019).

4.3. Dyeing: From Chemical to Natural Colors

Historically, Ma Chau used natural dyes derived from plants such as indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*), turmeric, and areca nut husks. These colors carried symbolic meanings in local culture: indigo for dignity, yellow for prosperity, and red for celebration (Nguyen, 2010).

During the 20th century, chemical dyes largely replaced natural ones due to lower cost and convenience. However, these dyes raised environmental concerns and reduced product uniqueness. Since the 2010s, artisans have reintroduced natural dyeing in response to global eco-fashion trends. Companies such as Ma Chau Silk Ltd. promote “green silk” products using plant-based dyes and biodegradable packaging (Tran, 2022).

4.4. Finished Products and Diversification

In earlier centuries, Ma Chau's products focused on cloth for garments, royal costumes, and ritual textiles. Today, diversification includes scarves, áo dài fabric, handbags, home décor, and souvenirs for tourists. This shift aligns with Quang Nam's OCOP (One Commune One Product) program, which encourages innovative product lines and value addition (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020).

Tourism has become a significant driver of product diversification. Experiential workshops allow visitors to try weaving or dyeing, creating additional income streams and enhancing cultural branding (Tran, 2022).

4.5. Markets, Branding, and Distribution

Historically, Ma Chau silk reached Japan, China, and Southeast Asia via Hoi An port (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006). In the modern period, local and domestic markets dominate. Competition from Van Phuc (Hanoi) and Tan Chau (An Giang) remains strong due to their established brands.

E-commerce has recently emerged as a new distribution channel, with small-scale exports to Europe and North America. Yet, brand recognition is still weak, and traceability standards (ISO, organic certification) remain underdeveloped (Pham, 2019). Experts argue that a geographical indication (GI) label for "Ma Chau Silk" could strengthen competitiveness in both domestic and international markets (Tran, 2022).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Socio-Economic Impacts

The revival of Ma Chau silk-weaving has generated important socio-economic benefits for local households. According to the Quang Nam People's Committee (2001), craft-village restoration contributes to rural employment creation, reduces underemployment, and provides supplementary income beyond agriculture. For households with weaving expertise, silk production remains a crucial livelihood strategy, particularly for women and older generations who may lack alternative employment opportunities.

Nonetheless, incomes remain modest compared with industrial jobs. Studies reveal that average monthly income from silk weaving in Ma Chau is significantly lower than that from service or construction work (Nguyen, 2010). Thus, while weaving provides a safety net and cultural identity, it cannot yet guarantee economic prosperity unless integrated with value-added sectors such as tourism and heritage branding.

5.2. Livelihood Transformation

Ma Chau illustrates the transformation of rural livelihoods under market pressures and globalization. Many households have shifted from full-time weaving to part-time weaving combined with farming, wage labor, or tourism-related services. This hybridization of livelihoods reflects both resilience and vulnerability: resilience in diversifying income streams, but vulnerability in the declining number of full-time artisans (Tran, 2022).

The OCOP program has created opportunities for households to innovate with new product lines—such as naturally dyed scarves or eco-friendly fashion items—thus connecting local livelihoods to global sustainable consumption trends (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020).

5.3. Gender Dimensions of Labor

Gender roles remain a defining feature of Ma Chau silk-weaving. Traditionally, weaving has been “women’s work,” while men were more engaged in tasks such as loom construction, marketing, or dyeing. This gendered division persists, with women accounting for the majority of weavers (Pham, 2019).

While weaving allows women to contribute income and maintain household stability, it often remains undervalued compared to male-dominated sectors. Younger women increasingly seek alternative employment in urban centers or industrial zones, contributing to the labor shortage in traditional weaving (Nguyen, 2010). Sustainable revival therefore requires not only economic incentives but also gender-sensitive policies that empower women artisans as cultural entrepreneurs.

5.4. Environmental Implications

Environmental concerns represent a double-edged issue. On one hand, the revival of natural dyeing has reduced the ecological footprint of silk production and aligned Ma Chau with the global “green fashion” movement. Natural dyeing processes use biodegradable inputs and support biodiversity through mulberry cultivation (Tran, 2022).

On the other hand, chemical dyeing continues to be practiced due to cost advantages, generating wastewater pollution and affecting local health conditions (Pham, 2019). Waste management remains weak, with few households equipped with treatment systems. This environmental dimension underscores the necessity of policy intervention and technological upgrading to ensure the sustainability of the entire value chain.

5.5. Cultural and Heritage Values

Beyond economics, silk weaving embodies cultural heritage and collective memory. Ma Chau’s history connects local identity with broader narratives of Quang Nam’s role in regional trade and cultural exchange (Le Quy Don, 1776/2006). Revitalizing the village thus contributes not only to rural incomes but also to intangible heritage preservation recognized by both local communities and international tourists.

6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**6.1. Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of Ma Chau silk-weaving village demonstrates the dynamic interplay between tradition, economy, and cultural identity. From its emergence in the 15th–16th centuries and flourishing during the Nguyen lords’ period, to decline under colonialism and postwar industrialization, Ma Chau embodies both resilience and vulnerability. In the 21st century, global trends toward sustainability and eco-fashion, coupled with Vietnam’s OCOP program and Quang Nam’s heritage-tourism development, create new opportunities for revival (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020; Tran, 2022).

Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain: shortages of young artisans, dependence on imported raw silk, weak brand recognition, limited access to international markets, and unresolved environmental risks from chemical dyeing (Pham, 2019). The future of Ma Chau depends on whether local stakeholders—artisans, households, enterprises, and policymakers—can balance preservation with innovation, ensuring both cultural continuity and economic viability.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

1. Restoring the raw-material base and promoting natural dyeing technologies: Reviving mulberry cultivation and silkworm raising is critical for reducing dependence on imported raw silk. This should be integrated with the expansion of natural dyeing practices, drawing upon indigenous knowledge and aligning with international sustainability standards (Nguyen, 2010). Local universities and research centers could support technological upgrades in eco-friendly dyeing and waste treatment (Pham, 2019).

2. Strengthening product innovation and OCOP linkages: Ma Chau should diversify product lines (scarves, fashion textiles, home décor, tourism souvenirs) while embedding them in OCOP branding programs. Innovation must balance aesthetic value, cultural authenticity, and modern consumer demands. Certification systems (organic, fair trade) could enhance competitiveness in global niche markets (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020).

3. Building public–private heritage clusters with experiential tourism: Policy should foster partnerships between artisans, local enterprises, and tourism operators. Demonstration workshops where tourists experience weaving and dyeing could create new revenue streams and enhance cultural branding. Integration with Hoi An–My Son tourism circuits would increase visibility and attract both domestic and international visitors (Tran, 2022).

4. Digital transformation and geographical branding: Developing a digital presence through e-commerce, virtual exhibitions, and storytelling platforms is essential for reaching global consumers. At the same time, pursuing a geographical indication (GI) for “Ma Chau Silk” would protect intellectual property and strengthen brand recognition in domestic and international markets (Quang Nam People’s Committee, 2001).

5. Gender-sensitive and youth-oriented policies: Revival strategies must address generational and gender challenges. Empowering women artisans as cultural entrepreneurs and encouraging youth participation through vocational training, financial support, and creative start-ups will ensure continuity and innovation (Nguyen, 2010; Tran, 2022).

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