

THE THO HA COMMUNAL HOUSE: FROM A TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTION TO A CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL SPACE

Hoang Phuong Mai*

Abstract: *Drawing on a cultural anthropological approach and qualitative research methods, this article examines the functional transformation of the Tho Ha communal house from a traditional village governance institution into a contemporary community-based cultural space. The case of Tho Ha illustrates a common reality in rural Vietnam today: traditional institutions have not disappeared, but have continuously adjusted their roles in response to changes in social organization, livelihoods, and local administrative governance. In this process, the communal house has gradually shifted from its former political-administrative functions toward cultural and symbolic roles, becoming a multifunctional space where the community sustains local identity while negotiating new demands related to heritage management, conservation, and development under contemporary conditions.*

Keywords: *Tho Ha communal house; traditional institution; functional transformation; contemporary cultural space*

Tóm tắt: *Bằng cách tiếp cận nhân học văn hóa và phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính, bài viết phân tích quá trình chuyển dịch vai trò của đình làng Thổ Hà từ thiết chế quản trị truyền thống sang không gian văn hóa cộng đồng trong xã hội đương đại. Trường hợp đình làng Thổ Hà cho thấy thực tế phổ biến ở nông thôn Việt Nam hiện nay: các thiết chế truyền thống không mất đi mà đang điều chỉnh chức năng để thích ứng với những thay đổi về tổ chức xã hội, sinh kế và quản lý hành chính. Trong tiến trình đó, đình làng trở thành không gian văn hóa đa chức năng, nơi cộng đồng vừa duy trì bản sắc địa phương, vừa dung hòa với các yêu cầu quản lý, bảo tồn và phát triển trong điều kiện mới.*

Từ khóa: *Đình làng Thổ Hà, thiết chế truyền thống, chuyển đổi chức năng, không gian văn hóa đương đại*

Date of submission: 8/4/2026; date of submission of comments: 19/4/2026; date of approval for publication: 12/5/2026.

* Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Email: mailhp.vass@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

The communal house (*đình làng*) is a distinctive cultural institution of traditional Vietnamese villages, occupying a central position in both the social organizational structure and the spiritual life of rural communities. Historically, the communal house was not only a site for worshipping the village tutelary deity (*Thành hoàng*), but also a key venue where important collective affairs were conducted, including village meetings, deliberations on public matters, the establishment of customary regulations, dispute settlement, and the performance of communal rituals. Through these functions, the communal house served simultaneously as a sacred center, a symbol of village autonomy, and a repository of historical memory and local cultural norms.

In the context of profound transformations in Vietnamese society particularly processes of urbanization, shifts in economic structure, and the restructuring of rural administrative governance the role of communal houses has undergone significant change. Nevertheless, the decline of their traditional governance functions does not imply their disappearance. In practice, communal houses continue to exist as cultural centers where ritual practices are maintained, festivals are organized, and forms of community cohesion are reproduced. This continuity indicates that the communal house is experiencing a functional shift: from a traditional institution closely associated with village governance toward a contemporary community-based cultural space.

Such a transformation can be examined through the concept of “institution.” Institutions are commonly understood as relatively stable social structures, comprising systems of rules, norms, and practices that shape and regulate the behavior of community members (Durkheim, 1982). From the perspective of functionalist anthropology, Bronisław Malinowski argues that cultural institutions emerge to meet specific social needs; therefore, when social conditions change, institutions may adjust their modes of operation in order to persist and continue fulfilling their roles (Malinowski, 1944). From this standpoint, the communal house should not be approached merely as an architectural monument or a religious site, but rather as a composite socio-cultural institution sustained through the community practices performed within it. As rural social structures evolve, the communal house may reconfigure its functions, shifting its emphasis from governance toward cultural, memorial, and symbolic roles within the community.

Many scholars argue that Vietnamese communal houses became clearly established in the 15th century under the Early Lê dynasty, were further consolidated in the 16th century, and reached their fullest development in the 17th century (Trần Lâm Biền, 2017, p. 27). In terms of belief systems, the communal house has been viewed as the product of multiple layers of cultural integration, including the worship of natural spirits, ancestor worship, fertility cults, and the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, resulting in a flexible yet enduring symbolic structure (Nguyễn Văn Cường, 2006, p. 58). From the sociology of village society, Nguyen Van Huyen’s classic study demonstrates that ritual

activities conducted at communal houses concentrate the collective social capacities of the village community, creating an enduring organizational framework that extends beyond the scope of an ordinary religious institution (Nguyễn Văn Huyền, 1944). Meanwhile, studies on Vietnamese village social structure emphasize the relationship between the construction of communal houses, economic contributions, and social status, thereby highlighting the connection between symbolic power and collective memory (Bùi Xuân Đỉnh, 2021, p. 613). Overall, research on communal houses has gradually shifted from descriptive accounts of history and architecture toward analyses of institutions and social roles. However, most existing works remain general in scope, focusing on regional patterns or monument typologies, while in-depth case studies that examine how communal houses operate and transform under contemporary conditions remain relatively limited.

Regarding Tho Ha, existing studies have largely concentrated on the history of the craft village, its festivals, and broader heritage values. The work edited by Trương Minh Hằng (2012) provides an important documentary foundation on the history and cultural structure of Tho Ha pottery village. Publications by the Bac Giang Provincial Museum (2018) and Nguyễn Thị Minh Bắc (2002) describe the system of tangible and intangible heritage in the ancient village, in which the communal house mainly appears as the setting for festivals and folk performances. More recently, Hoàng Phương Mai (2024) has expanded the anthropological approach to the cultural values of Tho Ha ancient village; however, the communal house is still primarily treated as a space for cultural practice rather than as a central analytical object. This review reveals a notable academic gap: the Tho Ha communal house has not yet been systematically studied as a cultural institution that actively operates and continuously reshapes its meanings in community life, particularly in the context of urbanization, heritage tourism development, and ongoing changes in local administrative boundaries.

Against this research gap, the present article selects the Tho Ha communal house as a representative case in order to analyze the transformation of its role from a traditional village institution to a contemporary community cultural space. The study aims to clarify how a traditional cultural institution is reproduced and adapted amid current social changes. Employing a cultural anthropological approach and an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates anthropology, cultural studies, and history, the article examines the communal house not simply as an architectural monument or a religious site, but as a socio-cultural institution that remains active and is continuously reconstituted in community life.

Fieldwork was conducted in Tho Ha in 2024, 2025, and early 2026, focusing on participant observation of rituals, festivals, and communal activities held at the communal house, while also documenting everyday village life in order to understand the communal house as a “living cultural space.” In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with various groups, including elderly villagers, local cultural officials, members of festival organizing committees, artisans, and local residents, to access community memories,

experiences, and interpretations regarding the contemporary role of the communal house. Alongside field data, the study analyzes documentary sources such as steles, Sino-Nom texts, heritage dossiers, and previous scholarly works, enabling a comparative understanding of the communal house's traditional functions and its shifting roles in contemporary village life.

2. Findings and Discussion

2.1. An Overview of the Tho Ha Communal House

In the history of Vietnamese architecture and culture, the term communal house appeared as early as around the 2nd - 3rd centuries; however, it was initially used to refer to various types of architectural structures. According to Trần Lâm Biền (2017), the earliest form of a “dinh” could be a “dinh tram” (wayside rest station), built in the middle of fields or along roads to provide shelter from sun and rain for farmers and travelers. Another form was the dinh quan (official guesthouse), usually located near the imperial capital and serving as a resting place for provincial envoys before entering the royal court. It was not until around the 16th - 17th centuries, when the traditional village structure in the Northern Vietnam became increasingly consolidated, that the communal house emerged as a distinct architectural form closely associated with communal life and gradually became the central venue for village activities.

The Tho Ha communal house is located in Tho Ha village, Van Ha Ward, Bac Ninh Province¹. It is one of the most representative ancient communal houses in the Kinh Bac cultural region, situated on the bank of the Cau River. In front of the monument are the village market and the Tho Ha river wharf-historically an important node in local river-based trade networks. The communal house is part of an integrated heritage complex arranged according to the traditional spatial principle of “front for the tutelary deity, rear for the Buddha”, consisting of the communal house, the Confucian shrine (*Từ chi*), and Doan Minh Pagoda². According to the stele inscription *Thuy tao dinh mieu bi* dated to the 13th year of the Chinh Hoa reign (1692), the Tho Ha communal house was initiated in 1685 and largely completed in 1692. Over the course of its history, the monument underwent major repairs and expansions in 1714, 1789, and 1807. Notably, in the 6th year of the Gia Long reign (1807), the complex was extended with the construction of the Front Ritual Hall (*Tiền tế*) and two auxiliary buildings, Left Wing (*Tả vu*)

¹ Since the Lê period, Tho Ha belonged to Tien Lat subdistrict (*tổng*), Yen Viet district (renamed Viet Yen in 1820), Bac Ha prefecture (*phủ*), within Kinh Bac administrative region (*trấn*). In 1831, Emperor Minh Mang's administrative reforms abolished the tran system and established provinces; accordingly, Kinh Bac tran was reorganized as Bac Ninh Province. In 1895, Bac Ninh Province was divided into Bac Ninh and Bac Giang provinces, and Viet Yen district was placed under Bac Giang. After the August Revolution in 1945, the tong administrative unit was abolished, and Tho Ha became a village under Van Ha commune, together with Nguyet Duc and Yen Vien villages. Following several administrative reorganizations, by 2023, although Viet Yen district was upgraded to a township-level administrative unit, Tho Ha remained under Van Ha commune. From 1 July 2025, under the National Assembly's resolution on provincial administrative reorganization, Bac Giang and Bac Ninh were merged into the newly established Bac Ninh Province, and Van Ha commune was upgraded to Van Ha ward.

² Doan Minh Pagoda was designated a National Architectural and Artistic Monument under Decision No. 226/QĐ-BVH dated 5 February 1994; the Tho Ha Confucian Shrine (*tu chi*) was recognized as a National Monument under Decision No. 295/VH-QĐ dated 12 February 1994.

and Right Wing(*Hữu vu*). During 1977 - 1979, the State funded the elevation of the Main Worship Hall (tòa Bái đường) by 1.8 meters in order to prevent flooding. In 1988, local residents contributed both funds and labor to restore the Front Ritual Hall and further raise the courtyard level. In 2006, with financial support from the Kingdom of Belgium, the communal house was restored on the basis of scholarly documentation preserved by French researchers at the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). Despite multiple phases of restoration, the communal house has largely retained the distinctive architectural and artistic features characteristic of seventeenth-century communal houses in the northern Vietnamese plains.

Architecturally, the Tho Ha communal house follows a shaped layout (工- shaped plan), comprising the Great Hall (*Đại đình*), the Rear Sanctuary (*Hậu cung*), the Front Ritual Hall and the surrounding Left Wing and Right Wing enclosing the communal courtyard. Its massive ironwood structural frame, sweeping curved rooflines covered with traditional *mui hai* tiles, together with elaborate wood and ceramic carvings, reflects the high level of vernacular craftsmanship associated with the Lê - Mạc period. The communal house still preserves numerous valuable artefacts, including a ritual throne, eight-bearer ceremonial palanquins (*kiệu bát cống*), lacquered horizontal panels, parallel couplets, and a system of stone steles dating from the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties. Owing to its outstanding historical and artistic significance, the Tho Ha communal house was designated as a National Relic in 1964 (Decision No. 29/VH-QĐ dated 13 January 1964). In particular, the richly carved ornamental altar canopy (*cửa võng*) in the Rear Sanctuary was recognized as a National Treasure under Decision No. 2283/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister on 31 December 2020.

The communal house space is closely intertwined with the socio-cultural structure of Tho Ha village, which was early renowned as a major center of handicraft production and riverine commerce along the Cau River in the Kinh Bac region. Due to limited agricultural land and its distinctive geography surrounded by the river on three sides local residents historically developed pottery production and waterway trading as their primary livelihood strategies. In this context, institutions such as the communal house, pagoda, Confucian shrine, and the village market together formed an interconnected network of communal spaces closely linked to the village's economic and cultural life. Therefore, the Tho Ha communal house should not be viewed merely as an architectural monument, but rather as a focal point of community life, reflecting its organizing and regulating functions within the traditional craft-village structure.

2.2. The Traditional Governance Institution of the Tho Ha Communal House

The emergence and development of the communal house in the Northern Vietnam was closely tied to the consolidation of the centralized feudal state from the fifteenth century onward. During the Early Lê period, state policies hastened the decline of the fief estates (*thái ấp*) and manorial landholdings (*điền trang*) characteristic of the Lý - Trần era, creating the conditions for a more stable restructuring of rural villages. In this historical context, the

communal house became a distinctive architectural form and institutional structure: it simultaneously embodied the symbolic presence of the imperial court at the grassroots level while adapting to the village's internal mechanisms of self-governance.

The Tho Ha communal house, constructed in the late seventeenth century (1685 - 1692), is a representative product of the period when communal houses expanded rapidly and their functions became increasingly standardized. The communal house space with roof-top dragon motifs, the ornamental altar canopy, and elaborate carved panels not only demonstrates sophisticated vernacular artistry but also reflects the hierarchical order of feudal power inscribed into architectural form. In this sense, the communal house may be understood as a “miniature court,” where the political order of the monarch and mandarins was translated into the social order of the village through symbolic representation.

Within the traditional village structure of the Red River Delta, the communal house was not merely a religious center but also a locus of authority where community governance was organized and enacted, thus foregrounding its political character. The Tho Ha communal house clearly exemplifies this “dual institution”: it served both as a sacred site for the worship of the village tutelary deity and as the village's administrative and social center. Notably, governance functions were not separated from religious life; rather, they were legitimized through the sacredness of the communal house itself. This sacralization endowed communal decisions, village customary regulations, and social rules with a binding force that exceeded mere consensus. The communal house thus operated as an intermediary institution linking the authority of the feudal state with the village's autonomy. Power was exercised not only through administrative mechanisms but also through symbols, rituals, and cultural order. The Tho Ha communal house, therefore, should not be seen simply as a piece of architecture, but as an “institutionalized space” where power relations and social hierarchy were repeatedly affirmed and sustained.

The mechanism of imperial ordination granted to the village tutelary deity represents a particularly clear form of legitimation by the feudal state. This practice was not merely religious in nature but functioned as a means through which the state asserted spiritual and juridical authority over local communities. According to Han-Nom sources and local narratives in Tho Ha, after assisting King An Duong Vuong in defeating malevolent forces during the construction of the Co Loa Citadel, Taishang Laojun was bestowed the title of Supreme Deity (*Thượng đẳng thần*), and villagers were permitted to establish a communal house for his worship (Bac Giang Provincial Museum, 2018). Through the official recognition of this protective deity, the feudal state effectively inscribed its political presence into the villagers' spiritual world. Conversely, the Tho Ha community relied on the authority of the royal ordination to strengthen the legitimacy of their village tutelary deity cult and of the communal house as an institution. This demonstrates that the Tho Ha communal house was not merely a religious site but also a point of convergence between sacred and secular power, between village autonomy and the central state's governance.

In traditional society, Tho Ha's self-governing mechanisms were organized around residential lanes and hamlets, each with relatively stable territorial boundaries, village gates, guard posts, and designated watchmen. As a riverside craft village, Tho Ha's pottery products, once fired, were often stacked along narrow alleys and pathways before being transported to the river wharf for shipment by merchants via waterways. This economic practice increased the need for security and internal order. The lane-based residential structure, combined with a system of surveillance and guarding, facilitated the formation of a tightly regulated communal order in which the communal house served as the key coordinating center.

The administrative apparatus of Tho Ha village followed the common organizational model of northern Vietnamese villages. It was headed by a council of notables (*Hội đồng kỳ mục*). Notably, although these village-level positions were formally subject to supervision by the feudal state, in practice they were often nominated or endorsed by local residents, reflecting a degree of village autonomy within the traditional governance system. Within this structure, the Tho Ha communal house served as the principal venue where the council of notables carried out major governance activities, including allocating taxes and corvée labor, recruiting soldiers, enforcing communal regulations, managing communal land, administering village funds, deliberating the repair and maintenance of communal institutions such as the communal house, pagoda, and village school, organizing ritual calendars and communal festivals, and implementing welfare projects. The communal house, therefore, was not merely a meeting place but functioned as the administrative and social center of the community.

A particularly prominent manifestation of its governance role was the communal house's function in promulgating, maintaining, and enforcing village regulations. The communal house served as the institutional center where customary village regulations were maintained and legitimized, covering behavioral norms, land governance, village conventions, ritual codes, social ranking, and punitive measures against those who disrupted communal order. In Tho Ha, surviving village convention texts and ancient steles offer material testimony to this system of traditional self-governance. The political institution embodied in the communal house was grounded not only in the authority of village elders and local officials but also in sacred legitimation. Village regulations were not merely communal legal norms; they were embedded in religious belief, since they were articulated and enforced within a sacred space dedicated to the village tutelary deity, where divine witness was believed to be present. This intertwining of secular authority and sacred power constituted the strength of customary village order. From an anthropological perspective, the Tho Ha communal house can be understood as a traditional governance institution structured through three interwoven pillars: (1) the village governing apparatus, including the council of notables and local functionaries; (2) the normative system, comprising customary regulations, written village conventions, and contractual agreements; and (3) sacral legitimacy, expressed through the tutelary deity cult and ritual practice. Together,

these elements formed a “soft” yet effective governance mechanism typical of Vietnamese village society under the premodern monarchical order.

2.3. The Decline of Traditional Governance and the Changing Role of the Communal House

From the second half of the 20th century onward, profound transformations in Vietnam’s rural political and social system led to the gradual decline of the communal house’s traditional governance functions. In August 1945, the communal house became a symbolic site where the collapse of the local feudal apparatus and its collaborators was witnessed, alongside the establishment of a new people’s democratic government. The Revolution also abolished many rigid customary practices of the old village order, such as prohibitions against women entering the communal house; ritual procedures associated with the communal house were drastically reduced, and in some localities were even completely discontinued. Accordingly, traditional self-governing institutions and regulatory mechanisms grounded in village customary law no longer occupied the central position they once held. Accordingly, the administrative, political, and judicial functions that had once been closely associated with the communal house were transferred to the contemporary local state apparatus, fundamentally reshaping the position of the communal house within the organizational structure of rural society.

During the First Indochina War against the French (1946 - 1954), many large communal houses in northern Vietnam were demolished under the scorched-earth resistance policy or were shelled and burned by French troops. Nevertheless, a considerable number of communal houses were still protected and maintained by villagers despite the severe hardships of wartime (Bùi Xuân Đỉnh, 2021). The Tho Ha communal house was among the few monuments that were fortunate enough to be preserved in relatively intact condition thanks to local efforts. Between 1946 and 1954, the Tho Ha communal house was repurposed to support the resistance, serving as a venue for clandestine meetings, information exchange, revolutionary propaganda, and the organization of local armed forces. Several valuable objects kept in the communal house—such as the bronze bell, wooden planks, and other materials—were also requisitioned for weapon-making or used as supplies for wartime needs. This illustrates that the communal house was not merely a cultural symbol, but also formed an important part of the local logistical infrastructure during the war. As one elderly villager recalled with emotion: *“During the resistance, the people of Tho Ha took the communal house bell and melted it down to make weapons. It was an extremely difficult decision, yet it stands as evidence of the solidarity and sacrifice of Tho Ha villagers a lesson in patriotism and attachment to the homeland that later generations must always remember”* (Personal interview with Le Van Th., male, 82 years old, Tho Ha village, February 2026). This act not only reflects the transformation of the communal house’s role, but also highlights the significance of traditional cultural institutions in serving broader national goals.

During the collectivization period (1955 - 1986), the Tho Ha communal house was commonly used as a venue for cooperative meetings, the dissemination of collective agricultural production policies, and the distribution of output. During the anti-American war, it also served as a storage site for state grain reserves, military uniforms, and supplies. Since the *Đổi mới* reforms of 1986, the communal house has gradually resumed its role as a venue for traditional cultural activities, including festivals and ritual worship. It has also continued to host certain public affairs, such as meetings to plan infrastructure projects, irrigation maintenance, road and bridge repairs, welfare construction, or receptions for important visitors and working delegations.

2.4. The Tho Ha Communal House in Contemporary Community Cultural Space

From the second half of the twentieth century onward, as modern administrative structures gradually replaced the traditional mechanisms of village self-governance, the governance functions of the communal house increasingly contracted. In this context, the Tho Ha communal house shifted its institutional center of gravity, becoming primarily a space for cultural and religious practice as well as community life in modern society. This transformation highlights the communal house's flexibility: its capacity to adapt, maintain its presence, and continuously reproduce social meaning under different historical conditions.

- Sacred Space and the Repositioning of Religious Functions at the Tho Ha Communal House

In traditional society, the Tho Ha communal house operated as a multifunctional institution serving both as the site of worship for the village tutelary deity and as the venue where communal administrative affairs were managed. Today, however, the spiritual dimension has become the most prominent axis of its operation, enabling the communal house to retain its central position in the everyday life of Tho Ha villagers.

The most significant focal point of the sacred space within the Tho Ha communal house is the worship of Taishang Laojun (Laozi), the village tutelary deity who embodies the community's history, collective memory, and identity. This reflects a long-term process of cultural synthesis between Daoism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs within the cultural world of a craft village. The image of Taishang Laojun refining elixirs and overseeing the Eight-Trigram Furnace resonates closely with the craft of firing pottery and stoneware an occupation that has long been central to the livelihood of local residents. The deity narrative surrounding the tutelary god may thus be understood as a form of "symbolic legitimation," through which a Daoist figure of Chinese origin is incorporated into the village's sacred order and collective memory. This process reveals how Tho Ha villagers interpret history and define their identity in relation to their occupation and living environment (Trần Lâm Biên, 2017, p. 11).

Alongside the worship of the village tutelary deity, the Tho Ha communal house also venerates Dao Tri Tien, the pottery trade ancestor (*Tổ nghề*). The placement of the trade

ancestor's spirit tablet within the communal house and the fact that many lineages also establish separate altars in their ancestral halls demonstrates that the communal house is not only a shared religious center but also a focal point of occupational belief. Here, the trade ancestor becomes a symbolic embodiment of labor ethics, prosperity, and the historical legitimacy of the craft village.

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the worship of both the tutelary deity and the trade ancestor illustrates a distinctive mechanism of Vietnamese folk religion: the community's capacity to select, reinterpret, and create sacred figures in accordance with its own needs of expression. In contemporary life, the sacred centrality of the Tho Ha communal house continues to be sustained through regular practices such as incense offerings on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month; rituals for peace and blessings; and, most importantly, the annual village festival held from the 20th to the 22nd day of the First Lunar Month, featuring solemn rites and ceremonial processions.

The communal house thus remains a space where villagers of all ages participate in collective activities. Not only during festivals but also in everyday life, residents continue to visit the communal house to offer incense when major family events occur or when misfortune arises such as illness, childbirth, or rites of aging believing that the tutelary deity and the trade ancestor will provide protection. The steady continuation of these practices ensures that the communal house is not merely a monument, but rather a "living sacred space" that is constantly reproduced by the community.

In short, although the communal house no longer serves as a political center of governance in the way it once did, its spiritual and symbolic functions have become the primary foundation enabling the Tho Ha communal house to persist as a cultural center of the community. Through the worship of the tutelary deity and the trade ancestor, as well as through the regular performance of ritual practices, the communal house nurtures a strong sense of belonging a space where individuals recognize themselves as part of a community and connect to the historical continuity of the craft village transmitted across generations. This is a crucial mechanism through which the Tho Ha communal house continues to sustain vitality as a cultural institution in contemporary life.

- The Community Cohesion Function of the Tho Ha Communal House

Unlike the pagoda space, which is strongly shaped by Buddhist sacredness and doctrinal discipline, the Tho Ha communal house has become a venue for a wide range of community activities, including deliberations over communal matters, receiving visitors, organizing cultural performances, mobilizing contributions for welfare projects, and resolving issues requiring collective consensus. This public character enables the communal house to operate as an open social center, where the community continues to manage part of village life through shared participation. Within this mechanism, authority does not derive primarily from

administrative command, but rather from communal prestige and the capacity to build consensus. In this sense, the Tho Ha communal house functions as an intermediary social institution situated between the state and the community, between formal regulations and informal conventions, and between everyday life and ritual life.

A notable social mechanism in Tho Ha is the continued presence of the age associations (*giáp*) as a traditional unit of co-residence and cooperation. In the village structure of the Red River Delta, the age associations often served as an intermediary organization between individual households and the village as a whole, formed on the basis of settlement patterns in hamlets and lanes, as well as shared responsibilities in labor and ritual. Although the age associations does not fully coincide with lineage organization, it plays an important role in mobilizing labor, coordinating contributions, and allocating communal obligations. In Tho Ha, traces of the age associations structure remain visible, reflecting the self-governing mechanisms of a riverside craft village.

During the communal house festival, each age associations is assigned specific responsibilities such as carrying palanquins, performing ritual music, organizing logistics, decorating the worship space, cleaning, and participating in ritual teams. This division of labor is not merely technical; it reflects relationships of co-residence and collective responsibility. Members of each age associations contribute labor and resources together and share accountability for maintaining the solemnity of ritual practice, with the communal house serving as the central site where all age associations units converge to carry out communal duties.

Beyond its role in regulating communal order, the communal house also serves as a space of social cohesion across generations. During rituals and festivals, participation follows a structured pattern: elders transmit and supervise ritual procedures; middle-aged villagers manage organizational affairs; youth participate in processions and security teams; women prepare offerings and provide logistical support; and children observe and gradually internalize specific ritual roles. The communal house therefore becomes a setting where norms of hierarchy, social etiquette, communal spirit, and a sense of responsibility toward the homeland are transmitted in a natural yet enduring manner.

In the context of modernization where nuclear families, labor migration, and formal education increasingly shape everyday life the Tho Ha communal house remains one of the few spaces through which the community can reproduce cultural continuity through collective experience. On a broader level, it also sustains the social networks of those who work and live away from the village. This is not only a matter of religious sentiment but also a social mechanism for reconnecting kinship ties, friendships, and the original community. The sound of the communal drum, the palanquin procession, and the crowded courtyard become powerful symbols of return, drawing migrants back to their native village and helping maintain enduring social ties even as residential space becomes fragmented.

In a context where traditional pottery production has been transformed into rice-paper making and diversified small-scale trading, and where out-migration has become increasingly common, the communal house remains one of the few spaces capable of gathering the community and sustaining a shared sense of belonging to the village in modern society.

- The Tho Ha Communal House as an Institution for Cultural Preservation and Cultural Reproduction

From a cultural perspective, the Tho Ha communal house is not merely an architectural monument but an active cultural structure through which the community both preserves and further disseminates local identity in contemporary life. The system of royal ordinations, steles, horizontal lacquered boards, parallel couplets, Han-Nom texts, and ritual protocols preserved within the communal house still carry significance beyond their documentary value. They serve as key cultural anchors through which Tho Ha villagers affirm the continuity of their cultural heritage.

However, preservation in this context does not mean passive storage. The Tho Ha communal house remains a space of cultural reproduction, where traditional values are “brought into life” through practice. The organization of rituals, preparation of the worship space, training of ritual teams and procession groups, and the composition of ritual texts are mechanisms through which culture becomes embodied as communal skill and lived experience. As a result, younger generations do not learn tradition primarily through written texts, but through observation, training, and participation in disciplined ritual actions.

As the Tho Ha communal house has increasingly been recognized as a heritage site of national significance particularly after the ornamental altar canopy was designated a National Treasure the communal house has become both a source of pride for the local community and a site of growing pressure to conduct rituals in a more solemn and “worthy” manner. This heritage recognition process has not only strengthened preservation awareness but has also directly shaped how rituals are organized and presented. The Tho Ha case illustrates this shift clearly. In the past, the village ritual calendar consisted of two relatively independent festival cycles: the commemoration of the craft ancestor in autumn and the procession festival honoring the tutelary deity in spring. Today, however, these have largely been consolidated into a single spring festival, with more direct coordination by local authorities in order to ensure orderliness, safety, and greater capacity for public presentation.

The year 2026 provides a particularly illustrative example. Although local custom dictates that the tutelary deity procession is held once every two years (with a procession already held in 2025), the community still organized the procession as part of the traditional festival. This was closely tied to the ceremonial event celebrating the designation of the Tho Ha communal complex including the communal house, pagoda, and Confucian shrine as a Special National Monument under Decision No. 266/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister on 11 February 2026.

Notably, during this festival, the organizing body was no longer solely the community operating through traditional self-governance, but rather the newly restructured Van Ha commune-level authority, acting under the guidance of relevant departments and agencies of Bac Ninh Province. This event demonstrates that village customary regulations has not been erased, yet it can be flexibly adjusted when significant symbolic milestones emerge for the locality. In this context, ritual practice no longer functions solely as an internal religious activity of the community, but increasingly becomes a form of heritage performance shaped by state management mechanisms and by the need to assert local cultural standing within a broader socio-cultural space.

2.5. Mechanisms Sustaining the Communal House in the Contemporary Context and Emerging Issues

- Key Mechanisms Sustaining the Tho Ha Communal House

The Tho Ha communal house is not only a religious center but also a vivid emblem of the village's pottery economy and riverside trade. As a craft village that emerged early and flourished through commercial exchange along the Cau River, Tho Ha has long maintained a livelihood structure in which production, circulation, and communal institutions were closely intertwined. In this setting, the communal house transcended its role as a ritual site and became a symbolic focal point of subsistence, collective identity, and commercial memory. Such vitality is not spontaneous; rather, it is sustained through specific socio-cultural mechanisms that allow the communal house to remain a central institution in contemporary village life. These mechanisms may be summarized as follows.

First, the communal house is sustained through periodic ritual cycles and the village festival. Although the communal house no longer retains its former administrative and governance functions, the Tho Ha communal house continues to thrive through the regular performance of rituals dedicated to the village tutelary deity, the trade ancestor, and other ceremonial observances based on the lunar calendar. Practices such as sacrificial rites, deity processions, and incense offerings on new-moon and full-moon days not only carry religious meaning but also establish a stable cultural rhythm through which the community repeatedly "reaffirms" its social bonds. The festival, therefore, is not merely a seasonal cultural event, but a mechanism of community reproduction, where collective memory and craft-village identity are re-enacted through embodied practice. It is precisely the cyclical repetition of ritual that prevents the communal house from becoming a static monument, allowing it instead to function as a living communal center in constant motion.

Second, the communal house is sustained through the roles of village elders, age associations, and major lineages. In Tho Ha, the communal house can only remain a living institution through the active involvement of village elders those who possess knowledge of customary regulations, Han-Nom documents, and ritual procedures. They function not only as

“guardians of memory” but also as key agents responsible for transmitting ritual knowledge, instructing ritual and procession teams, and ensuring the perceived legitimacy and correctness of ceremonial practice. Major lineages and age associations groups also contribute to sustaining the communal house through organizational participation, labor and financial contributions, and the maintenance of collective responsibility. In this way, the communal house operates as an institution of cultural transmission, where cultural knowledge is reproduced through embodied learning acquired by participation, observation, and collective practice. This mechanism is crucial in preventing cultural discontinuity under conditions of modernization.

Third, the communal house is sustained through the coordinating role of local authorities in heritage management and community activities. Today, the Tho Ha communal house is no longer governed solely by internal village conventions, but has become increasingly embedded within state regulatory frameworks. Local authorities participate in organizing festivals, managing the monument, coordinating public order and security, mobilizing resources for restoration, and ensuring procedural order in ritual activities. This indicates that the communal house has shifted from an institution of village autonomy toward a community cultural institution characterized by cooperation between the state and local residents. Nevertheless, such administrative involvement does not necessarily imply the erasure of village customary regulations. Rather, it reflects a capacity for flexible adjustment: the community continues to preserve the ritual core, while the authorities provide administrative coordination in response to the expanded scale of festivals, tourism development, and major public events.

Fourth, the communal house is sustained through communal economic resources, particularly merit-making donations and socialized contributions. The continued existence and contemporary vitality of the Tho Ha communal house is also supported by its capacity to mobilize economic resources from the community, especially through merit-making funds and contributions from lineages, local households, and Tho Ha migrants working elsewhere. Such resources not only finance architectural maintenance and restoration, but also sustain ritual objects, ceremonial costumes, and the material conditions necessary for organizing long-term communal activities. The merit-making fund, therefore, should not be understood merely as a form of religious donation, but as a mechanism through which villagers transform communal responsibility into concrete action. Through this socially mobilized financial structure, the communal house maintains cultural continuity and continues to occupy a central position in contemporary community life.

- Emerging Issues in the Conservation and Development of the Communal House as an Institutional Heritage Today

The functional transformation of the Tho Ha communal house from a traditional center of village governance to a multi-purpose cultural heritage space reflects profound changes in Vietnamese society under urbanization and broader processes of integration. The Tho Ha case

therefore highlights several key challenges that must be addressed in order to ensure that the communal house is properly conserved while remaining a living cultural space.

It is necessary to move beyond an approach that treats the communal house merely as an “architectural monument”. Its value lies not only in age, scale, or carving techniques, but also in the continuing social life enacted through rituals, festivals, collective memory, and community relations. If conservation focuses mainly on tangible elements while neglecting social functions, the communal house may become “museumified” a static structure detached from residents’ cultural life thus weakening the very basis of its vitality as heritage.

A major challenge concerns balancing monument conservation with tourism development and the continuity of ritual life. Official recognition, restoration investment, and tourism promotion have enhanced Tho Ha’s public profile and created opportunities for cultural-economic development. Yet conservation linked to development may alter the familiar rhythm of ritual and festival life, as communal practices must adapt to performance demands, media representation, and administrative management. This raises a sensitive issue: determining the “ritual legitimacy” of practices what counts as traditional, who has authority to validate it, and how far modifications remain acceptable. This reflects the “politics of heritage,” since tradition no longer operates solely through internal customary routines but is shaped by conservation criteria, heritage regulations, and public presentation. As a result, negotiations often emerge: whether to preserve older ritual procedures or adjust them to contemporary conditions; whether to prioritize sacred solemnity or enhance performative appeal; and whether festivals should mainly serve villagers or expand for visitors. The Tho Ha case suggests that this is not necessarily an absolute contradiction, but an ongoing process of negotiation between the local community and state heritage governance, through which tradition is continually redefined and sustained.

Sustaining communal cohesion has become increasingly difficult under conditions of population dispersal and livelihood transformation. In Tho Ha, social bonds such as age associations, lineages, hometown networks, and voluntary contributions still help mobilize resources and maintain a sense of belonging. However, these bonds are becoming less cohesive than in the closed structure of the traditional village. Limited land and population growth have pushed many households to relocate outside the village, while labour migration especially among younger generations weakens neighbourhood-based ties. Meanwhile, traditional craft livelihoods have lost economic centrality, giving way to petty trade, services, and other non-agricultural work. When traditional livelihoods no longer provide a shared foundation, values tied to the village’s craft identity risk fading. If later generations rarely participate in communal house activities, it may gradually become a symbolic monument rather than a vibrant social institution. Thus, communal cohesion has not disappeared, but is being restructured under new conditions, creating long-term challenges for sustaining the communal house as a living institution.

Cultural agency and heritage governance have become more complex amid administrative restructuring. Traditionally, the communal house belonged to the village

community both materially and symbolically: it was built and maintained by villagers and operated according to customary village regulations. Today, it is increasingly shaped by local authorities in conservation, festival organization, public security, and tourism planning. This indicates a shift from closed communal self-governance to shared governance between the community and the state. The community remains the cultural agent through ritual practice and memory, while authorities provide legal protection and administrative coordination. Since 1 July 2025, Van Ha commune has been reorganized into Van Ha ward, and Bac Giang has been merged with Bac Ninh into the new Bac Ninh province. As a result, Tho Ha has shifted from a rural governance framework into an urban administrative structure. Previously a cultural highlight in Bac Giang's tourism strategy, Tho Ha now faces the risk of reduced visibility within Bac Ninh, a province with exceptionally dense heritage resources. This requires flexible governance mechanisms to ensure the communal house continues to function as the community's cultural center within the new administrative landscape.

Overall, the Tho Ha communal house illustrates a broader trend in contemporary Vietnam: traditional institutions have not disappeared but are being redefined under new social conditions. The communal house is no longer solely a center of authority in the traditional village polity; it has become a multi-functional cultural space where heritage and development intersect, where community practices interact with state governance, and where historical memory meets present-day needs. Research and heritage management today therefore require an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes not only architectural values but also the ongoing social life enacted within heritage spaces, so that communal houses may continue to exist as living cultural institutions in contemporary society.

3. Conclusion

Historically, the Tho Ha communal house has embodied the defining features of a traditional governance institution. It both represented the authority of the imperial state through the system of royal conferment and the ritual order, and reflected the community's relative autonomy through its internal mechanisms of self-governance. It was precisely this capacity to mediate between state power and local authority that ensured the communal house's durability as a central institution of village society. Notably, sacredness here was not merely a matter of religious belief; it also legitimized collective decisions, reinforcing communal governance not only through customary rules or coercive mechanisms, but through shared faith and symbolic authority. This helps explain why, despite wars, social reforms, and profound institutional transformations throughout the twentieth century, the Tho Ha communal house did not disappear but continued to endure, while adapting its functions to new historical circumstances.

Accordingly, the transformation of the Tho Ha communal house from a "traditional governance institution" into a "community cultural institution" should not be interpreted simply as a decline in significance, but rather as a functional restructuring shaped by social change. The communal house has remained a focal point of village life, yet its operational

center has shifted from administrative authority to symbolic authority, and from governance through command to social regulation through ritual practice, collective memory, and local identity. The case of the Tho Ha communal house therefore provides concrete evidence that traditional institutions in contemporary rural Vietnam do not survive merely as remnants of the past, but retain the capacity to adapt and to continue playing an important role in sustaining the cultural and social structure of local communities./.

References

1. Bảo tàng tỉnh Bắc Giang [Bac Giang Provincial Museum]. (2018). *Kỷ yếu Hội thảo khoa học: Bảo tồn và phát huy giá trị văn hóa làng cổ Thổ Hà gắn với phát triển du lịch* [Proceedings of the Scientific Conference: Conserving and Promoting the Cultural Values of Tho Ha Ancient Village Associated with Tourism Development]. Hanoi Publishing House.
2. Bùi Xuân Đính. (2021). *Bách khoa thư làng Việt cổ truyền* [Encyclopedia of the Traditional Vietnamese Village]. National Political Publishing House.
3. Durkheim, É. (1982). *The rules of sociological method*. Free Press. (Original work published 1895).
4. Hoàng Phương Mai. (2024). Văn hóa làng cổ Thổ Hà: Những giá trị và vấn đề đặt ra [Tho Ha ancient village culture: Values and contemporary issues]. *Journal of Anthropology*, (6), 54-66.
5. Malinowski, B. (1944). *A scientific theory of culture and other essays*. University of North Carolina Press.
6. Nguyễn Thị Minh Bắc. (2002). *Lễ hội làng Thổ Hà* [The village festival of Tho Ha]. Writers' Association Publishing House.
7. houses in the Red River Delta]. Culture and Information Publishing House.
8. Nguyễn Văn Huyền. (1944). *Văn Minh Việt Nam* [La civilisation annamite/ Annamese civilizatio] (Do Trong Quang trans). Writers' Association Publishing House (Reprinted 2023).
9. Trần Lâm Biền. (2017). *Đình Làng Việt Châu Thổ Bắc Bộ* [Vietnamese village communal houses in the Northern Delta]. Hong Duc Publishing House.
10. Trương Minh Hằng (Ed.). (2012). *Tổng tập nghề và làng nghề truyền thống Việt Nam* (Vol. 4) [Collected works on traditional crafts and craft villages in Vietnam]. Social Sciences Publishing House.