



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preserving the Values of the Traditional Houses of the Chaozhou People in Vinh Chau Town – Soc Trang Province

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ABSTRACT

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Ancient Chinese houses in southern Vietnam have attracted the attention of both domestic and international researchers. Notably, reviews highlighted the groundwork for understanding the residential culture of the Chinese people in the region and greatly enriched the knowledge of this topic. However, there was a gap regarding the multi-dimensional evaluation of these ancient houses in the context of sustainable development and preservation. This article aims to address this gap by employing qualitative data analysis methods. The research utilizes in-depth interviews conducted between April 9th and 12th, 2022, with heritage owners, local government officials, cultural managers, and residents surrounding the heritage site. The interviews focused on the management, preservation, and utilization of the cultural heritage values embodied by the ancient Chaozhou houses in Vinh Chau town, Soc Trang province, Vietnam. Through this research, the article seeks to provide a multi-dimensional assessment of the potential and benefits associated with these ancient houses. Additionally, it aims to propose directions for preserving and promoting the cultural heritage value of Chaozhou houses within the framework of community-based tourism development

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INTRODUCTION

The residence is one of the elements of material culture (food, clothing, accommodation, and transportation), resident culture is the result of the arrangement of human living space, created by humans in the process of labor and production, in the interaction with the natural environment and the social environment. The Chaozhou people are an important cultural subject with many specific cultural values and have many interactions with the Vietnamese and Khmer in the process of production. Most of the previous research works only studied behavioral culture, cuisine, or religious – beliefs with little mention of the resident culture of the Chaozhou people. The article introduces the remaining ancient houses of the Chaozhou people, the arrangement of living space, and the process of interacting with the natural and social environment of the Chaozhou people in Vĩnh Châu – Sóc Trăng.

According to the Geography of Sóc Trăng province “Chinese flows from Southern China migrated to the South in general, to the Mekong Delta and the western part of the Hậu River in particular around the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century and lasted until 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was established”. (Provincial Party Committee – People’s Committee of Sóc Trăng Province, 2012: 304)

The term “the Hoa or the Hoa people (Người Hoa)” refers to a group of people from China who have migrated to Vietnam to live and settle down together with the Vietnamese for a long time. Depending on historical periods, contact circumstances, or causes of migration, each Chinese group/community

claimed their name in a different way. The term “*Hoa people (Người Hoa)*” was born and has developed ever since.

The Hoa who settled and lived in the South were identified around the 17th century after a group of Chinese came to ask Lord Nguyen for them to settle and reclaim wasteland. In their home country, Ming policies¹ did not please the people and the movement against Ming rule led to the mass departure of officials and people loyal to the feudal system Qing (seen through the “Oppose-Qing and restore-Ming” (反清復明) movement)

The Teochew people or Tieu people is a group of people currently living mainly in the Southern provinces of Vietnam. They originated from Chaozhou (潮州 pronounced Cháozhōu, or Teochew), China, making up most of the Chinese people coming to Vietnam such as Cantonese, Fujian, Ha, Hainan, etc. Although the term “*the Hoa*” refers to the common Chinese when they come to Vietnam, each Chinese group has a different material and spiritual culture.

Vinh Chau is a coastal town of Soc Trang province, the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups living together in Vinh Chau have created diversity in ethnic culture. However, there is still exchange and acculturation in the culture here. Vinh Chau is the place where many Chaozhou people live, especially in Vinh Phuoc, Lac Hoa, and Vinh Hai commune. This is where many associations and community faith establishments are located, and where Chaozhou people live in both urban and rural areas.

Chaozhou culture in Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng is strongly expressed through material culture and spiritual culture (relics and festivals, and customs). Material culture is the totality of material values created by humans in the historical process to satisfy the needs of human material and spiritual life. With that meaning, the content of material culture mainly refers to objects such as cuisine, costumes, houses, production tools mean of transportation, weapons, and folk musical instruments, etc. and ancient houses of the Chinese in the field of culture reside in material culture.

The traditional house is the house left by the ancestors, which is “a suitable cultural environment to preserve the nation’s fine customs and traditions and especially the family’s morality” (Phan Thuận An, 2006: 22)

This research aims to synthesize and evaluate multi-dimensional opinions from local authorities and people in preserving the cultural values of hundreds of years of residents living in the land. This is a meaningful job that not only preserves but also promotes the value of cultural heritage for the next generation.

The study raises 2 research questions which are: 1/ Is the government concerned with preserving and keeping these ancient houses intact? And 2/ How interested are the people in the State policy on cultural preservation and maintaining?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Chinese in Vietnam live mainly in the areas of the Mekong Delta provinces and the Southeast provinces such as Đồng Nai, Hồ Chí Minh City, Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, Cần Thơ, etc. The Chaozhou people (Người Triều Châu, 潮州人) are mainly concentrated in Sóc Trăng. Vĩnh Châu town, Sóc Trăng province is the place that is considered to still retain the bold Chinese identity of Chaozhou.

¹ In 1368, the peasant uprising led by Chu Nguyên Chương overthrew the rule of the Yuan dynasty (元朝) in Trung Nguyên, establishing a completely new unified dynasty after Yuan politics had become obsolete. That was the Ming Dynasty (明朝).

Research on the traditional housing of the Chaozhou people is still an issue that has not received much attention from researchers. Because in the process of researching, we only saw studies in general about the Chinese people, the house of the Chinese, but the Chaozhou people and Vĩnh Châu places have never been studied. Currently, there are several research papers as follows:

Documents related to housing and residence culture: Phan Thị Yến Tuyết with *Housing, Clothing, Food of Ethnic Groups in the Mekong Delta* (Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, 1993). *Identifying house architecture in the tradition of creating urban identity in the Mekong Delta* by Ngô Doãn Đức (Ngô Doãn Đức, 2016), or *Cultural and traditional architecture of houses in the Southwest region* by Võ Thị Lệ Thi (Võ Thị Lệ Thi, 2016), *Geography, climate, customs and traditional houses* of Trần Yên Nguyên (Trần Yên Nguyên, 2007), *Traditional house* of Phan Thuận An (Phan Thuận An, 2006)

Contemporaneous with the resident culture, the topic is inclined to study architectural culture, “*Oriental Architectural Culture*” is an introduction to the architecture of major Eastern cultures such as India, China, Southeast Asia, the direction of preserving the traditional architecture of Eastern in the current period (Nguyễn Văn Định, Đặng Thái Hoàng, 2012). Documentary *Vietnamese Architecture through the Dynasties* by Nguyen Dinh Toan provides useful information about Vietnam’s ancient architecture, often associated with the culture of taking advantage of or responding to the natural environment. The remaining works are often from the 17th century, with their own creativity and the exchange in architectural cultures of other countries, creating the architectural identity of Vietnamese dynasties (Nguyễn Đình Toàn, 2018).

Documents relating the Chinese in general and the Chaozhou people in particular: Chau Thi Hai with “*The Nguyen Dynasty with Chinese community group in Vietnam in the 19th Century*” in the journal *Historical Research*, No.4 (Châu Thị Hải, 1994). Châu Thị Hải also has “*The Chinese in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: Yesterday’s image and today’s position*” (Châu Thị Hải, 2006); *The Chinese in Vietnam* of Nghị Đoàn (Nghị Đoàn, 1999). Phan An with *Chinese in Southern of Vietnam* (Phan An, 2005); *The Chinese in Vietnam* by Nguyen Văn Huy (Nguyễn Văn Huy, 1993). This collection of research article and research topics on the Chinese people in general that the author has participated in Vietnam.

Documents related to the study area: For documents on Vĩnh Châu and Sóc Trăng, *Sóc Trăng Geography* is an elaborate document in both content and scale of Provincial Party Committee – Sóc Trăng Provincial People’s Committee (Tỉnh ủy – UBND tỉnh Sóc Trăng, 2012). The *Monograph on Sóc Trăng province* completed by Indochina Research Association, part of the note in the project *Geography: Nature, Economy, and History of Cochinchina*, advocated by Indochina Research Association carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The work is published in small volumes. Sóc Trăng province is recorded as Shock Trang province (volume XI) and printed in 1904 (translated by Nguyễn Nghị – Nguyễn Thanh Long Indochina Research Association, 1904) (Hội Nghiên cứu Đông Dương Nguyễn Nghị - Nguyễn Thanh Long dịch, 1904).

An old story in Sóc Trăng by Vương Hồng Sển: The content of the posthumous book talks about the place where he buried vegetables and cut his navel, where Mr. Vương’s grandparents and parents lived there for 3 generations. The posthumous book introduces the origin of Sóc Trăng province, the history of formation and development from the Mien period, the development of Sóc Trăng and Hậu Giang, and then the rule of the government in the recent period. How did the French rule period affect the people living in the provincial capital Sóc Trăng (Vương Hồng Sển, 2020).

It can be said that the current advantage of studying the topic is a huge source of materials including many research outcomes on the Chinese in the South, studies on ancient houses and architecture through which we can also refer to and define their new research direction to avoid duplication.

In general, the documents of domestic scholars about the Chinese in general hardly mention the culture of a group of Chaozhou Chinese in the overall Chinese community in Vietnam. The Chinese

with material culture and spiritual culture do not mention the Chaozhou Chinese at all, with separate material and spiritual cultural activities. The documents specifically talk about the ancient architectural culture of the Hoa in Vĩnh Châu area.

To do this topic, we made an approach from a post-structuralist perspective on the influence of state policies on the conservation and promotion of the value of cultural heritage. Along with that, the theory of cultural mixture is also a basic for us to work out this topic. The exchange of the communities when the Chinese came and co-located with the indigenous Khmer, and the Vietnamese are also the communities that came before or with the Chinese.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was employed to reach the research objectives. We conducted 02 in-depth interviews with 5 people who have been managing and taking care of the ancient house of the Lai family (Lai Van Tia), the couple of Uncle Lam Soan (the ancient house of the Lam family – Mr. Ca San's ancient house). The local manager Ms. Pham Thi Huong – head of the cultural department of Vĩnh Châu town, and some longtime neighbors living around the heritage site are closely associated with the two cultural heritages mentioned above. All interviews and talks were recorded and sent back to the interviewee to check the information before transition of data analysis process. The location of this study cover of two houses located at: Hamlet 6, Ward 1 and House 60, Hamlet Cà Xăng, Ward 2, Vĩnh Châu; and the time implemented from April 2022 to May 2022.

Besides, we also implemented of regularly observing and participating in the daily life of local people to evaluate the culture of residence, as well as concern of their adaptation to the natural and social environment through how they live. Create and arrange the living space in the ancient house, the difficulties that they get when the ancient house the comfort is not like that of modern house today.

FINDINGS

The current state of ancient Chinese houses in Sóc Trăng

Currently, in Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng, there are only two ancient houses of the Chinese with architectural, historical, artistic, and cultural values that are still used. In the past, there were many houses, but the old houses were destroyed and dismantled over time. The two ancient houses that we mentioned are degraded houses that need to be preserved for future generations. The local government is interested; however, people are still wondering whether the benefits of the government's participation in the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage value left by their ancestors are not obvious. Because people's awareness is still limited, the government's way of doing things is still rigid, leading to the old houses not being cared for and repaired, leading to the phenomenon of heritage loss. Currently, the period of industrialization and modernization of housing architecture has passed a new phase – the stage of rural urbanization. The change in housing structure has not created the cultural characteristics of the current residents. The results of this study hope that the authorities and cultural managers, together with the owners of the heritage, will receive suggestions to help the ancient Chinese house be preserved and preserved for the next generation.

The ancestral house of the Lai family

Located in Hamlet 6, Ward 1, Vĩnh Châu Town, the house faces north. According to the records of the family, the ancestors of Lai family from Guangdong – China came to Vietnam, choosing the land of Vĩnh Châu to work with other ethnic groups to reclaim the land. The house has 5 room structures built with brick walls, wooden columns, and wooden table doors, decorated with paintings, Chinese characters are painted directly on the wooden panels. The floor of the house is tiled with Chinese

bricks and covered with yin yang tiles, typical of traditional Chinese architecture. The house was built since 1925 and was restored and repainted by descendants in 2014.

The ancestral house is beautifully decorated with the Chinese characters “Lai Hòa Lợi” placed in the middle. The two sides decorate sentences with good content, teach their children and grandchildren to live in harmony with the word “Hòa” (和 meaning concord) as precious, do-good deeds, and to learn Confucianism as a household routine. The windows also hang couplets praising the natural beauty, classics in Chinese culture: Pine trees, bamboo trees and then paintings of birds such as peacocks, pheasants, cranes, lovebirds, parrots, chickens, ducks, and animals are very lively. Especially, there is a picture depicting the descendants of the Lai family doing salt work, growing purple onions, growing radishes, growing rice, raising seafood products, growing longan, etc.

The image of children sitting at the same table to talk about family business shows the solidarity of the members. Inside the building, in the middle is worshiped Quan Vũ (關羽, pinyin guān yǔ), or Quan Công (關公, pinyin guān gōng, or Guan Gong); there is also the word Thần (神, pinyin shén, meaning “a god/ a deity”) written in the middle. On both sides of the main altar are 2 altars worshipping ancestors having the word Tổ (祖, pinyin zǔ, meaning “ancestors”) in the middle. Right at the centre of the worshipping room is hung a horizontal lacquered board engraved with the Chinese characters “天南呈瑞 or Thiên Nam Trình Thụy”, meaning “The Southern Heaven Presents the Good”. According to the concept of “*Guan Gong represents the wish for peace and morality, for the family to be peaceful and healthy, and at the same time reminds children and grandchildren of the way of being human, being filial to grandparents and parents, and helpful to people in need.*” (Nguyễn Văn Diệu, 2000).

The tall pillars are made from chariot wood, making the house taller and resistant to the hot weather of Vĩnh Châu. A special feature in the architecture is that the rafter columns are linked together by wooden tenons without the use of screws or glue. Around hanging pictures of family members, especially the image of Mrs. Co (Great-Grandmother) – the wife of the first homeowner. Along with that, photos of children and grandchildren are also displayed, showing the solidarity of a large family living in the new land. The ancestral house of the Lai family reminds the descendants of their ancestors. The house was donated by the descendants of the family, painted, and repaired in 2014 to preserve and keeping to this day.

According to the concept of wishing for abundance and goodness, the great-grandmother always wanted her children to live under one roof, therefore, it cannot be sold or transferred. After 7 generations living in the house, the descendants have always kept the house. Descendants are proud of the priceless gift the family has left behind, educating the family's traditions for their descendants.

Mr. Cả Sạn's house – the ancient house of the Lâm family (Lý Hòa Nguyên)

Initially, the house was called the Lý family, but later changed to Lâm family (which is the family name of Mr. Cả Sạn's son-in-law, because Mr. Cả Sạn has only one girl). The house was built in 1918. The most rectangular wooden house has 3 compartments, roofed with beautiful lapis lazuli blue tiles. The outside is reinforced with large iron bars, the inside is built of chariot wood. Materials are all bought from Cambodia, workers who did the assembling work were from China. The house is tiled with Chinese tiles. At the centre of the house, there is a horizontal lacquered board engraved with the Chinese characters. On both sides, there are altars with the word Tổ (祖 meaning “ancestors”) in the middle of each. Around are hung pictures of family members, with photos of Mr. Ca San. Unlike the ancestral house of the Lai family, the house of Mr. Ca San is not preserved as in the past. The house was almost in serious disrepair. The roof is leaking; the wood is damaged. Precious artifacts and antiques on display in the house are almost gone over time. According to the 5th generation grandson of Mr. Cả Sạn, although the family was among the wealthiest in the old Vĩnh Châu region, Cả Sạn's descendants are not united, making it difficult to visit and learn about the house.

Overall assessment

There are no longer many traditional houses of the Chinese in this land; instead, modern houses and tube houses are mushrooming due to increasingly expensive land. The period of industrialization and modernization of housing architecture has passed a new phase – the stage of rural urbanization. The change of economic and cultural life leads to the consequence that the model of ancient houses is no longer suitable, for the protection is difficult due to familial and community factors.

Through the survey, and the stories told, the direct descriptions, we come up with these research outcomes as follows: Currently, these two ancient houses are the only remaining of the Chinese in the town. Vĩnh Châu commune has historical, architectural, aesthetic, and cultural values. In the past, there were many such old houses, but over time, people couldn't keep them plus the harsh weather led to the houses being damaged, degraded and destroyed.

Multi-dimensional assessment of the company that preserves and promotes the value of ancient Chinese heritage in Sóc Trăng

For homeowners who use and manage the heritage: Homeowners are facing economic difficulties to be able to repair and preserve, if the same old materials will be not suitable. Those who have the intention of preserving and preserving do not have economic conditions, and the age is getting older. If there is no unity and solidarity with the people because the ancient house does not have as many utilities as the modern house, the descendants also lack the attention to preserve. In the case of ancient house of the Ly family, the family members were not united, so most of the assets inside (movable property) were taken away, sold, or destroyed. People are not interested in having their house become a monument or a work recognized by the state, because they think that many administrative procedures must be carried out when their private house is exploited for the purpose, cultural and tourism development. Every time, they repair or need to do something affecting their house, they will encounter many difficulties and interference. *"People have come down a few times, given some papers to do renovations but I don't agree, because now I agree to do it, tomorrow I will lose my house like a game, I have to ask their permission to do anything, it's very troublesome"* (Lâm Soan – the owner of the ancient house with the Lâm family).

For heritage managers and local authorities: Many times, the authorities have visited the area visiting and mobilizing people to know the state policies on preserving and promoting the values of the heritage. However, people are not interested in the government in creating a relic profile of seriously degraded ancient works and promoting the value of these heritage.

"...the cultural management agency of government has not really cared about this issue, when the people and owners are not interested, we do not campaign to preserve and promote the ancient house for other purposes, especially tourism. In the coming time, we will suggest consulting with the leadership to help preserve these houses better, because it is not only the historical evidence of a family but also the historical evidence of the land" (Ms. Phạm Thị Hương)

The Law on Cultural Heritage stipulates that: Relic embellishment is an activity aimed at enhancing the ability to use, exploit and promote the value of a monument, but without affecting the original elements constituting the monument and natural landscape and environment – ecology of the monument. Urgent repair of a monument is an act of temporary support, reinforcement, or minor repair to promptly prevent a monument from collapsing or destroying.

For those who live around the site: People are very interested and proud of these works because it proves that a part of people's lives is attached to the land. Where tourists come to visit film crews as well as researchers come here to learn and visit. The life of the people in the area is more developed. They want the government to pay more attention and develop more facilities so the

people living near or in the heritage area can benefit. *“In my opinion, it is advisable to preserve and promote this type of ancient house architectural culture; First, to preserve the traditions of our nation; and second, to make my spiritual asset to remember my roots when I am away from home.”* (Kim Sal – resident living near the heritage site)

The results of this study show that the number of interviewees mentioned the difficulties in preserving and preserving the ancient house in the area.

Difficulties in heritage preservation: Lack of money, unwillingness, lack of interest, lack of consensus on how to resolve conflicts of interest, making people see the positive side of State policies when the ancient houses are recognized as cultural heritage. As Mr. Lâm Soan – the owner of the house one said: “Never mind, in the city, people come down to ask for work, but it is very difficult, give all kinds of documents but I do not know what documents, when sing them to give them money for repairs. After that, sometimes I lose my house, or my family wants to do something, I just have to ask permission to do it, so it’s very troublesome, so when I have money, I will fix it well and then keep it for the future generations (Lâm Soan – The old owner of the Lam family). It is this thinking and the persuasion of cultural officials who have not done it right, leading to misunderstanding of the people – the owner of the heritage.”

Currently, the State has promulgated the Law on Cultural Heritage since 2001 and through the amendments and supplements the Law on Cultural Heritage has been completed. From the owner of the estate to the government and the people, everyone has the responsibility to protect, preserve and preserve the legacy left by their ancestors. At this time, the heritage is not only a family’s heritage, but also a precious asset every citizen must preserve.

DISCUSSION

As for the issue of ancient houses, from the perspective of cultural house, we are looking forward to the support of the State, especially in terms of techniques for repairing and preserving ancient houses so that people can feel secure. Now that the law on cultural heritage of Vietnamese state has been implemented, the government needs to take action to help people preserve and preserve the heritage of their ancestors for hundreds of years.

Although when asked, homeowners often say that they don’t want the government to interfere in family affairs, because every time the house is damaged or repaired, it takes a lot of time and effort to get permission. During the interview, we found that people are not interested in and aware of the state’s policies on the conservation of cultural heritage, the government is not really interested in the culture and cultural heritage of the community. Even the Vietnamese and the Chinese have not yet created a common voice on many issues in this locality.

Vietnam has enacted a law on cultural heritage since 2001, demonstrating the state’s interest in preserving and promoting heritage values in the face of the risk of heritage disappearance. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization also issued the Convention on the Protection of the World’s Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972. Countries have *“recognized that cultural and natural heritage is increasingly at risk of being destroyed not only by traditional causes of degradation, but also by the evolution of traditional cause by further damaging or destructive phenomena.”* (Công Ước về Việc Bảo vệ Di Sản Văn Hóa và Thiên Nhiên Của Thế Giới, n.d.)

Every country has China Town areas all over the world. The name “China Town” appeared in America in the mid-19 century to refer to a neighborhood with a large population of overseas Chinese residents. China Town is present all over the world, including in East America, Australia, and Europe. “China Town” in other countries is often invested, preserved, and promoted by the state and non-governmental organization in tourism development and other activities. However, in Vĩnh Châu,

there are not many houses of Chinese and other ethnic groups, so these ancient houses need to pay more the value of these heritages.

These studies are very important for government leaders, cultural managers and for the people themselves – the owners of the cultural heritages that we have just introduced need to care about the legacies of the people legacy left by ancestors.

Organizations and individuals that directly manage cultural heritage have the right and obligation to *“Protect and preserve cultural heritage, take measures to prevent and promptly stop acts of infringing upon cultural heritage...”* (Article 16, Chapter 3, Law of Cultural Heritage 2009). (Quốc hội nước CHXHCN Việt Nam, 2009). This is consistent with the policies of the Vietnam Communist Party and the State on conservation and promotion of cultural heritage value of the Vietnamese ethnic community.

If the locality can do the restoration of ancient Chinese houses in the locality, it will not only enrich the local tourism products, but also help other job develop. For example, connecting attraction in the area: Thiên Hậu Temple, Tomb of Lê Văn Duyệt (Lăng Ông), Bà Temple, Temple of Earth Gods, Ancient house of Lai family, Lâm family and enjoy The Hoa's specialties such as Ông Yến noodles, Vĩnh Châu market will certainly help people here increase their income from community tourism development. Tourist accommodation will develop, food and traffic will develop accordingly. The image of Vĩnh Châu and the Chinese culture of Chaozhou will be promoted, helping Sóc Trăng to have a new community tourism destination to be exploited.

CONCLUSION

The Hoa have brought with them their cultural values of their home country. When they came to Vietnam, they created unique values in terms of material culture (food, accommodation, clothing) and spiritual culture (customs, festivals, folk arts...). At the same time, the culture of residence and architectural art of the Hoa show the adaptation to the natural environment and the social environment in Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng.

The research outcomes show that the architectural culture of the Hoa's ancient houses in Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng is unique. It shows the level of human construction hundreds of years ago. These ancient houses clearly show the cultural and material life of the residents here; concepts in how and with which materials to build and decorate the houses; and the wealthiness of the owner of the house.

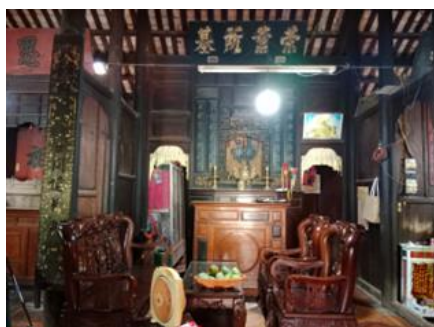
In preserving and promoting the values of current ancient houses in Vĩnh Châu, the local government and the residents have not yet reached a consensus on the way of management and have not found a common voice. Therefore, these ancient houses are still being degraded or on the edge of being destroyed over time and by people.

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Photos



In the middle of Lam family – Photo taken by Vu Nhat Tan - 10/4/2022



In the middle of Lai family – Photo taken by Vu Nhat Tan - 10/4/2022



In the front of Lai family – Photo taken by Vu Nhat Tan - 10/4/2022



Interview host of Lam family – Photo taken by Vu Nhat Tan - 10/4/2022