



Community Cohesion and Transformation of Cultural Value Systems in Urbanizing Vietnamese Society

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 31 December 2025	Urbanization in Vietnam has brought about profound transformations in social structure, reshaping patterns of community cohesion and traditional cultural value systems. Research indicates that community relationships based on kinship and locality have gradually weakened, while functional and network-based forms of social bonding have increasingly expanded. At the same time, cultural values are shifting toward greater emphasis on individual agency and adaptive capacity, without completely erasing communal values, which continue to be reactivated in specific social contexts. These transformations highlight the need to renew approaches to cultural governance and urban development in Vietnam.
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INTRODUCTION

In the process of modern development, urbanization has become one of the key driving forces profoundly transforming social structure and cultural life in Vietnam. Beyond changes in residential space, livelihoods, and lifestyles, urbanization directly affects forms of community cohesion and cultural value systems that were formed and sustained within traditional society. Many studies argue that urbanization is a structurally embedded social process in which population mobility, spatial differentiation, and the reorganization of economic life fundamentally reshape the social foundations of community relations (Giddens, 1990; Wirth, 1938).

In traditional Vietnamese society, community cohesion was primarily built upon kinship, locality, and culturally embedded moral norms characterized by strong communal orientation, manifested through village institutions, extended family relations, and shared rituals. These mechanisms not only ensured social order but also maintained cultural stability and community identity over long periods of time (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, 2003). However, rapid urbanization coupled with the expansion of the market economy has gradually weakened these traditional mechanisms of cohesion. Social relationships have increasingly become selective and functional, relying more on economic interests, occupational roles, and open social networks rather than being bound by kinship ties or residential locality (Bùi Minh Đạo, 2010).

Transformations in forms of community cohesion have been accompanied by significant shifts in cultural value systems. Collective values such as mutual assistance, sharing, and communal responsibility—once central in traditional society—have gradually given way to values emphasizing individual autonomy, economic efficiency, and adaptive capacity within the market environment. Nevertheless, this process does not result in the complete erosion of traditional values. Numerous studies indicate that under conditions of urbanization, communal values are restructured and operate in more flexible ways, often being reactivated in specific social contexts such as festivals, life-cycle rituals, or periods of social crisis (Berry, 1997; Lê Minh Chiến, 2016).

From the perspectives of sociology and cultural studies, the relationship between community cohesion and the transformation of cultural value systems should be understood as a dynamic process in which forms of social bonding are continuously negotiated and reshaped under new socio-economic conditions. This perspective is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where rapid urbanization remains closely intertwined with enduring elements of traditional culture. Examining this relationship not only contributes to identifying contemporary social transformations but also provides an important scientific basis for cultural and social policymaking, aimed at achieving sustainable urban development while maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity.

2. FINDINGS

Based on the collected and analyzed data, the following findings reflect the salient transformations in community cohesion and cultural value systems in Vietnam in the context of urbanization.

Urbanization and the Transformation of Forms of Community Cohesion

The research findings indicate that urbanization in Vietnam has brought about profound changes in both the forms and the degree of community cohesion. In traditional society, community cohesion was primarily built upon kinship ties, locality, and relatively stable socio-cultural institutions such as villages, lineages, and communal rituals. In the context of urbanization, however, these foundations have gradually weakened. The expansion of urban space, rural–urban migration, and the emergence of new residential areas have reshaped settlement patterns, thereby directly affecting social relationships that once sustained strong community bonds.

Survey data and analytical results show that in urban and peri-urban areas, residents tend to have diverse backgrounds, unstable lengths of residence, and lower levels of direct social interaction compared to traditional communities. Community ties based on kinship and locality have gradually given way to more functional forms of social linkage, formed through occupations, economic interests, administrative relations, or open social networks. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Wirth (1938) and Giddens (1990), who suggest that urbanization increases the impersonal nature of social relations while undermining traditional forms of social cohesion.

An important factor identified is the decline in the frequency of direct social interaction among community members. In

newly developed urban areas, the absence of stable communal spaces such as communal houses, cultural centers, or shared public courtyards has significantly reduced opportunities for regular face-to-face interaction among residents. Instead, social interactions have increasingly shifted toward functional spaces or online environments, thereby altering the very nature of social bonding. These results suggest that the weakening of community cohesion in an urbanizing society is not only a consequence of changing values but is also closely linked to spatial structures and residential conditions (Putnam, 2000).

The Shift from “Hard” Cohesion to “Soft” Cohesion

One important finding of the study is the shift from a model of “hard” community cohesion to a model of “soft” cohesion in Vietnam’s urbanizing society. “Hard” cohesion—characteristic of traditional society—is based on residential stability, long-term relationships, and cultural norms that exert strong binding force on individual behavior. By contrast, “soft” cohesion is more flexible, formed on the basis of individual choice, shared interests, and specific social situations.

The analysis indicates that in the context of urbanization, community relationships do not disappear entirely but are restructured in a networked manner. New forms of social bonding tend to emerge around occupational groups, hometown associations, interest-based clubs, or voluntary community activities. Although these forms involve a lower level of obligation than traditional communities, they demonstrate a high degree of adaptability to urban living conditions and the rhythms of modern life.

Table 1. Comparison of Community Cohesion Characteristics in Traditional Society and Urbanized Society in Vietnam

Criteria	Traditional Society	Urbanized Society
Basis of cohesion	Kinship, locality	Functional ties, networks
Residential stability	High	Low – flexible
Degree of obligation	Strong	Moderate – weak
Shared communal spaces	Clearly defined, stable	Lacking or fragmented
Form of cohesion	“Hard” cohesion	“Soft” cohesion

Source: Compiled and analyzed by the author.

Table 1 illustrates fundamental changes in the mechanisms through which community cohesion operates under the impact of urbanization. Although the degree of obligation has decreased, new forms of cohesion enable more flexible individual participation, aligning with increased social mobility and diversified lifestyles in contemporary urban contexts.

Transformation of Cultural Value Systems under the Impact of Urbanization

Alongside changes in forms of community cohesion, cultural value systems in Vietnamese society are undergoing profound transformations under the combined influence of

urbanization and the market economy. The research findings indicate that traditional values such as mutual assistance, sharing, communal responsibility, and village-based attachment—which once played a central role in rural society—are gradually declining in their influence on everyday life. In their place, values emphasizing individual autonomy, economic efficiency, competitiveness, and adaptive capacity to market conditions are becoming increasingly prominent, particularly in urban and peri-urban spaces. Individuals are no longer primarily defined through community relationships but are increasingly perceived as independent actors with the ability to choose, adjust, and shape their own life trajectories.

However, the collected data suggest that this shift in value systems does not follow a linear replacement pattern in which traditional values are completely eliminated. In practice, many communal values continue to exist and exert influence, albeit in more flexible and contextualized forms. Values such as mutual support and sharing are no longer practiced as constant obligations but are selectively activated in specific social situations, including festivals, life-cycle rituals, weddings and funerals, or periods of risk and crisis. This indicates that communal values are shifting from a state of “constant visibility” to one of being “latent and situationally activated.”

From a cultural studies perspective, communal values in an urbanizing society can be understood as a form of latent cultural and social capital that communities continue to maintain as a reserve resource to ensure social security and stability in times of uncertainty. This mode of operation reflects a process of value system restructuring, in which traditional norms are adjusted in terms of scope, intensity, and mechanisms of practice to align with new spatial arrangements, rhythms of life, and social relations. This interpretation is consistent with Berry’s (1997) view that cultural change is not merely a process of loss, but one of adaptation and reorganization of values in response to a changing social environment.

Thus, urbanization in Vietnam does not lead to a crisis or disintegration of cultural value systems; rather, it promotes a transition from a collective, stable, and highly binding value system toward a more flexible one that combines individual orientation with contextually activated communal elements. This interweaving constitutes a defining feature of Vietnam’s contemporary socio-cultural life under urbanization and simultaneously poses new challenges for cultural research and governance.

Differences among Social Groups in Levels of Community Cohesion

The research findings show that transformations in community cohesion in the context of urbanization in Vietnam do not occur uniformly across social groups, but rather display clear stratification closely linked to demographic characteristics, social position, and especially residential stability. Among these factors, length of residence and the accumulation of shared community memory emerge as decisive elements in maintaining or weakening social ties. Long-term residents and older people tend to maintain higher levels of community cohesion than other groups. Prolonged residence in the same locality enables these groups to build durable social networks, including kinship ties, neighborhood relations, religious affiliations, and shared cultural practices. Such networks generate a stable system of social norms and strengthen a sense of community belonging. In particular, older people play an important role as “carriers of collective memory,” actively participating in the maintenance and transmission of cultural values and social norms, thereby enhancing community cohesion even as residential spaces and social structures undergo change.

By contrast, younger residents, migrants, and mobile workers tend to exhibit lower levels of community cohesion. Temporary residential arrangements, the fast pace of urban life, and livelihood pressures lead these groups to prioritize functional social relationships linked to work and immediate economic interests. Limited residential stability and reduced participation in communal activities constrain the accumulation of sustainable social capital, resulting in looser community ties.

Table 2. Levels of Community Cohesion by Social Group

Social group	Residential and social characteristics	Level of community cohesion
Long-term residents	Stable residence, long-term attachment to locality	High
Older people	Custodians of community memory; active in rituals and communal activities	High
Young residents	Flexible residence; prioritize livelihoods and education	Medium
Migrants	Temporary residence; limited attachment to locality	Low
Mobile workers	Frequent mobility; functional social relationships	Low

Source: Analysis of the author’s research data.

Table 2 indicates a gradual decline in community cohesion from groups with high residential stability to those characterized by high social mobility. This pattern reflects a shift in the logic of social bonding from a model based on “long-term co-residence” to one grounded in “temporary co-participation” within flexible social networks. Such stratification demonstrates that community cohesion in an

urbanizing society is no longer a uniform condition, but rather situational and strongly dependent on the social context of each group.

These findings suggest that policies aimed at strengthening social cohesion in the context of urbanization should adopt a differentiated, group-based approach, paying close attention to residential characteristics, needs, and capacities for

community participation across social groups. Creating flexible communal spaces suited to urban lifestyles, while leveraging the role of stable residents and older people as “agents of cohesion,” represents an important direction for maintaining and enhancing community cohesion in Vietnam’s urbanizing society today.

Reactivating Communal Values in Specific Social Contexts

One notable finding of the study is that although traditional communal values tend to decline in the everyday life of an urbanizing society, they are not completely eliminated. Instead, they continue to exist in a latent form and are reactivated in specific social contexts. Field data and case analyses show that during festivals, life-cycle rituals (such as weddings and funerals), or when communities face risks and crises such as natural disasters or epidemics practices of mutual assistance, sharing, and communal responsibility tend to increase markedly.

In these contexts, individuals including those who rarely participate in community activities in daily life often actively return to traditional or semi-traditional social networks to seek material and emotional support. The rise in social interaction, voluntary contributions, and collective coordination during such periods demonstrates that communal values continue to function as an important social resource, enhancing communities’ capacity to cope with uncertainty and mitigate risks. This suggests that communal values no longer operate as permanently active norms but have shifted toward a situational activation mechanism.

The findings also indicate that the reactivation of communal values is often associated with the involvement of socially respected actors, such as older people, resident group leaders, or individuals who serve as connectors within the community. These actors play an intermediary role in mobilizing participation, temporarily re-establishing social ties, and coordinating mutual-support activities. The presence of such “activating agents” highlights the significance of social capital and collective memory in sustaining social cohesion, even when traditional community structures have been fragmented by urbanization.

Overall, these findings suggest that in Vietnam’s urbanizing society, community cohesion and cultural value systems operate in a flexible mode, combining decline in everyday contexts with reinforcement in specific social situations. This reinforces the view that cultural change should not be understood merely as a process of loss, but rather as one of restructuring, in which communal values are adjusted in scope, intensity, and modes of practice to align with new social conditions. This empirical evidence provides an important foundation for further analysis of the theoretical implications and policy relevance of transformations in community cohesion in the subsequent discussion section.

3. DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that transformations in community cohesion and cultural value systems in Vietnam’s urbanizing society should not be understood simply as processes of decline or disintegration of traditional communal life. On the contrary, these changes reflect an adaptive socio-cultural restructuring in which forms of social bonding and cultural values are adjusted to accommodate new spatial conditions, livelihoods, and rhythms of life. This perspective is consistent with contemporary theories that conceptualize cultural change as a non-linear process combining decline, continuity, and regeneration (Barth, 1969; Berry, 1997).

First, the shift from “hard” community cohesion to “soft” cohesion demonstrates a fundamental change in the logic of social bonding. In traditional society, community cohesion was grounded in residential stability, long-term relationships, and highly binding normative systems. In the context of urbanization, however, where residential patterns become fragmented and social mobility increases, these forms of cohesion no longer play a dominant role. Instead, network-based, functional, and situational social ties have emerged as the principal modes of cohesion. This observation aligns with the arguments of Wirth (1938) and Giddens (1990) regarding the characteristics of urban society, in which social relations become looser yet more flexible and diverse.

Second, shifts in cultural value systems from a predominantly collective orientation toward a hybrid combination of individual and communal orientations should be understood dialectically in relation to changes in social structure. Values emphasizing individual autonomy, efficiency, and adaptability are not merely outcomes of the market economy, but also cultural responses to the uncertainties of urban life. However, the continued reactivation of communal values in specific social contexts indicates that these values have not been replaced; rather, they persist as a form of reserve social resource. This reinforces the view that cultural value systems in urbanizing societies are hybrid systems that integrate traditional and modern elements, rather than representing a clear-cut transition from the “old” to the “new.”

Third, pronounced differences in levels of community cohesion across social groups highlight the stratified nature of social bonding under conditions of urbanization. The higher levels of cohesion observed among long-term residents and older people reflect the importance of collective memory and accumulated social capital over time. Conversely, lower levels of cohesion among migrants and mobile workers should not be interpreted as a form of “cultural deficit,” but rather as a consequence of temporary residential arrangements and livelihood conditions. This finding is consistent with Putnam’s (2000) analysis of social capital differentiation in modern societies and suggests that community cohesion should be approached as a context-dependent and group-specific phenomenon.

From the perspective of cultural governance and social development, these findings call for adjustments in policy

approaches toward greater flexibility and differentiation. Rather than attempting to restore traditional community models in a transformed context, greater emphasis should be placed on creating appropriate social conditions and cultural spaces that enable new forms of cohesion to emerge and function effectively. Developing flexible communal spaces, strengthening the connective role of socially respected actors, and encouraging voluntary participation among mobile population groups are important directions for enhancing community cohesion in an urbanizing society.

More broadly, the findings and analysis demonstrate that urbanization in Vietnam is not merely a process of economic and spatial transformation, but also a profound restructuring of socio-cultural life. Accurately identifying the nature of changes in community cohesion and cultural value systems will make a significant contribution to the development of sustainable urban models, in which economic growth is harmonized with social cohesion and cultural development.

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