



## TIEN GIANG TRADITIONAL MARKETS NEED CHANGING TO SURVIVE AND DEVELOP IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

The traditional market of our country in general and of Tien Giang in particular is not only a place to provide food, nutrients, household items, and daily production materials for residents, but also a space for cultural communication of the residential community. In the new trend, although many modern business forms such as supermarkets, convenience stores and commercial centers have blossomed, the traditional market is still considered the most popular form of commerce. However, for the traditional market to exist to meet the requirements of civilized trade, management agencies, small traders and consumers must join hands to solve it.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional markets are an important part of our country's commercial system. Traditional markets play the role of a bridge between producers and consumers, ensuring smooth circulation of goods, serving people's daily lives as well as generating budget revenue. At the same time, traditional markets are a prism that reflects all aspects of the material and spiritual life of residents in a certain region or area (Le Thi Mai 2006, 8). Not only having economic significance, traditional markets also reflect the cultural exchange and acculturation of the people in each locality.

Traditional markets in Tien Giang were born and developed for more than 300 years. Traditional markets have promoted the role of serving people's daily lives, goods circulation needs and promoting local commercial development. Traditional markets connect production and consumption in order to solve the output for

producers, ensure the continuous reproduction process, and improve production efficiency (Vo Van Son 2018, 175). In addition, traditional markets in Tien Giang are not only a place to exchange goods, playing a great role in material life, but also a place of convergence, crystallization, exchange and cultural spread between regions.

However, as social life develops, people's increasing needs, along with the strong development of modern commercial types (supermarkets, convenience stores, commercial centers and e-commerce) have caused the market share of Tien Giang traditional market has shrunk under competitive pressure. In addition to the positive aspects, the network of traditional markets in the area has also brought many shortcomings in terms of food and traffic safety, fire prevention, fighting safety and business culture. Therefore, it is necessary to have

appropriate solutions to preserve and promote the values of traditional markets.

## 2. RESEARCH CONTENT

### 2.1. Research methods and research data

#### 2.1.1. Research methods:

- Method of analyzing and synthesizing data: On the basis of documents collected from State Management Agencies (Tien Giang Department of Industry and Trade, Department of Economy - Infrastructure, Management Board of markets) and research works (books, newspapers, magazines, yearbooks, projects on issues related to Tien Giang traditional market), the author conducts analysis, evaluation, synthesis in order to exploit information and data in secondary form. The author conducts the research in the following steps: Identifying the necessary information for the topic; Locating the site and source of document storage; Collecting, evaluating and processing documents.

- Ethnographic field method: With a research topic on a specific geographical area, the use of field method plays an important role. This method supplements the official documents, helps the research become more specific, objective and offers more accurate assessments in the research. To collect data from the field method, the author conducts the following stages: Identifying the problem to be observed; Selecting location and time of observation; Preparing notebooks and technical equipment; Recording diary and taking pictures; Analyzing data.

- Method of sociological investigation: The author builds survey tables of subjects such as scientists, market managers, small traders, consumers and tourists at 10 typical markets in Tien Giang province from 2015 to 2023 on the actual status of activities and movement trends

of markets in Tien Giang, in order to have quantitative documents and evidence for qualitative comments and assessments. On the basis of the survey tables prepared, surveys are conducted; data are synthesized and analyzed to draw objective as well as honest judgments and assessments about the research problem.

#### 2.1.2. Research data:

In the process of implementing the topic, the author uses legal documents of State Management Agencies on Markets. Specifically, the author exploits the schemes, plans, decisions and circulars of the Ministry of Industry and Trade on market management of Vietnam in general and Tien Giang in particular. Besides, the author also collects data from Tien Giang Statistical Department, Tien Giang Department of Records and Archives, Tien Giang Department of Industry and Trade, etc. These useful documents have helped the author to analyze actual status of activities and cultural values of Tien Giang markets in the scope of space and time determined by the topic.

In order to supplement the material to implement the topic, the author also conducts fieldwork, field investigation in Tien Giang's typical markets, especially interviewing many small traders, consumers, floating market traders, market managers, tourists, etc. who participate in buying, selling and exchanging goods at Cai Be floating market (Cai Be district), Cai Lay market (Cai Lay town), Cho Gao market (Cho Gao district), Go Cong market (Go Cong town), My Tho market (My Tho city). During the implementation of this survey, the author contacts the Management Board of the participating markets. On the basis of reference to previous works and field documents related to the research object and space, the author has approached and applied selectively in the research.

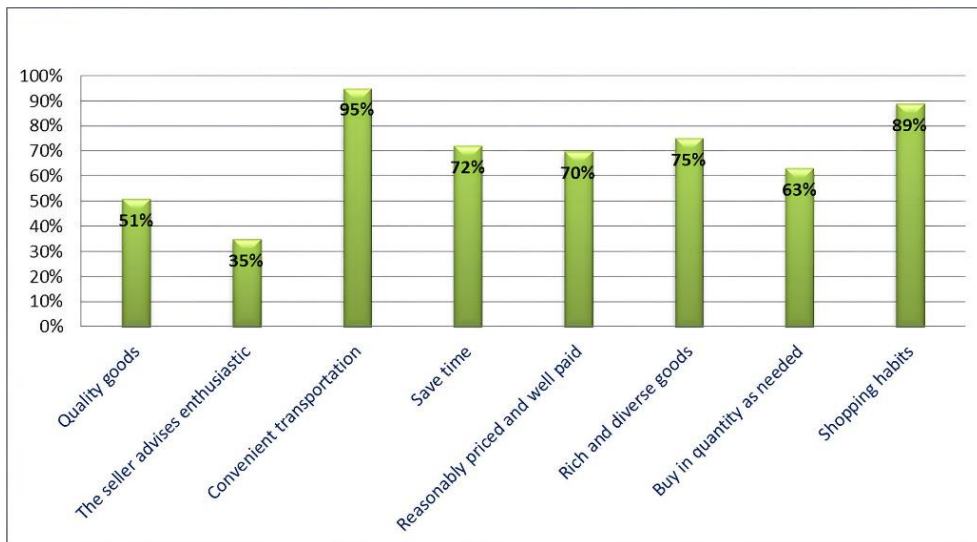
**2.2. Current status of traditional market network in Tien Giang province**

The market network in Tien Giang province in recent years has continuously developed in both quantity and quality to meet the buying and selling needs of the people. Many markets have been invested in new construction, fully upgraded and put into stable operation. Most of the newly built markets are invested in places with favorable conditions for commercial infrastructure, many concentrated industrial zones and clusters. According to statistics of the Department of Industry and Trade, the province currently has 177 markets, including: 5 grade I markets, 21 grade II markets, 151 grade III markets (Department of Industry and Trade of Tien Giang Province 2023). Every year, the management, exploitation and business activities of the market in the province have basically stabilized.

The system of traditional markets has actively promoted production, developed services, circulated goods, and served the lives of people in the area. According to data from the Department of Industry and Trade, currently, on average, each commune, ward and township in

the area has 16.1 markets; each ward/commune has 1.08 markets; on average, each market serves 9,244 people; in which there are 25 markets in urban areas (accounting for 14.1%) and 152 markets in rural areas (accounting for 85.9%). In general, the distribution of the market network in communes, wards and townships is quite even. Currently, there are still some communes, wards and towns in the province that do not have markets.

The main business lines at the traditional market are mainly fresh food, groceries, dried, semi-processed agricultural and smallholder products accounting for more than 80% of the total number of business households. In which, fresh food products have the largest number of business households, accounting for 46.3%, goods of small production households account for 14.7%, apparel products are 8.5% and groceries are 7.5%. Items such as jewelry, agricultural tools and materials as well as electronics account for less than 1%. The structure of business households is not fixed and synchronized in each district and town, but there are certain differences between industries.



**Figure 1: Reasons why consumers choose traditional markets for shopping**

In addition to the various developments of supermarkets, commercial centers, convenience stores, electronic markets, etc., the traditional market system in the province has a very important role in the economic and social life of the province. The development of traditional markets promotes the development of agricultural production, industry, commerce and services, gradually changing the face of the

countryside, actively contributing to the implementation of the “People's Communities” campaign. Vietnam gives priority to Vietnamese goods while markets bring Vietnamese goods to the countryside and traditional markets serve the daily needs of the people (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep 1998, 175).



**Figure 2: Cho Gao market is located in today's Cho Gao district**

Today's consumers are not only looking towards price and product quality, but also distribution channels. Through the survey, up to 51% of small traders in traditional markets believe that customers shop at the market because the quality of goods is guaranteed to meet their needs (see Figure 1). The majority of customers choose to shop at the market because it is convenient for travel, the purchase and sale takes place quickly without taking much time to pay, the price at the market is more reasonable than other shopping destinations and the buyers also have the right to

make a bargain. In addition, they choose the market because of their shopping habits, the goods in the market are quite rich and diverse.

However, along with the advantages, the survey by the provincial authorities shows that, in some traditional markets, business activities still face certain difficulties and limitations, such as: investment work; market relocation; market management transformation model; environmental sanitation; the conversion of functions of some inefficient markets; the limited handling of temporary and spontaneous markets;

the undrastic building of commercial civilization; inappropriate local initiative in calling for socialization of investment in market construction and management model transformation.

According to Ms. Phan Thi Thuy, Head of Trade Management Unit of Tien Giang Department of Industry and Trade, the number of business households in some traditional markets is already overloaded compared to the size of the market; most of the business premises are arranged in a small area, which has not yet met the needs of business households; the infrastructure system and ancillary works are lacking and asynchronous; traffic, electricity, water supply, drainage, lighting and sanitation works are patchy and damaged; parking spaces are very limited... so it is necessary to invest in expanding, upgrading infrastructure and reorganizing the order of traditional market business in a civilized and modern direction (Phan Thi Thuy 2023).

Especially now, the traditional market is being threatened by the emergence of a series of modern retail brands in the country and abroad such as Lotte Mart, Co.op Mart, Big C, VinMart... with a system of stores. Conveniently, mini supermarkets have crept into residential areas in cities, towns and in rural areas of the province. In some supermarkets and shops, many products are cheaper than in traditional markets because they are imported directly from the manufacturer, without intermediaries, which reduces costs. The opening time of supermarkets and shopping centers is flexible, all day, not hourly, according to sessions like traditional markets. Furthermore, customers can buy most of the essential goods for consumption at one location instead of moving to many markets and stores to buy different types of goods, which are also factors that people choose this form of shopping.



**Figure 3: Buying and selling lemons and peppers at Go Cong market today**

According to Ms. Phan Thi Thuy, Head of Trade Management Unit of Tien Giang Department of Industry and Trade, in fact, when social life

develops, the purchase and sale of goods are becoming more and more exciting with sale channels, modern goods from commercial

centers, supermarkets, convenience stores..., as well as many convenient forms and services on the internet, from online shopping, livestream, e-commerce platform to social networks like Facebook or Zalo ... This is also one of the reasons why the traditional markets in Tien Giang have fallen into a state of sluggishness, dullness, and absence of customers. Many small traders are really forced to leave the market because they cannot earn enough money to cover their expenses (Phan Thi Thuy 2023).

Ms. Nguyen Hue Hao (ward 1, My Tho city) says that in addition to shopping channels at supermarkets and convenience stores, she often chooses to buy goods through online networks and by phones. The advantage of buying products this way compared to the market is that it saves time, the goods are delivered quickly, the price is also cheaper. She does not buy goods at the market because there are still some cases such as the seller demands a price that is too high compared to the actual value of the product, creating a sense of apprehension for customers who are afraid of unfairly buying items. Sellers are also not active in using tactics to attract customers such as promotions, gift-giving, door-to-door delivery, sales styles as well as unprofessional service attitudes (Nguyen Hue Hao 2023).

Information from Go Cong Market Management Board (Go Cong town) shows that purchasing power at the market is decreasing. The number of visitors to Go Cong market is only 40-50% compared to 5 years ago. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Ngoc My (born 1955), a small trader of cloth stalls at Go Cong market (Go Cong town) says that for 20 years of trading, the market has never been as empty as it is now. "In the old days, there were markets where 2-3 sales assistants still could not stop their hands. Now, there are meals offering all day or counters for 2-3 days without customers. Other stores are in a similar situation. Even items that are

the market's dominant, such as fresh food, are in a state of moderate trade. The market is now, no longer the scene of "hundreds of sellers, ten thousand buyers" as before (Nguyen Thi Ngoc My 2023).

Although the Tien Giang Industry and Trade has also had many solutions as well as developed a scheme to re-plan traditional markets to convert functions and upgrade infrastructure to better meet the needs of civilized consumers, the implementation process has generated many shortcomings. The planning is not close to reality, making the "wearing new clothes" for traditional markets in the style of "Truong Ba's soul, butcher's skin". In fact, over the years, there are many markets that are planned to become commercial centers that have not yet operated effectively.

Typically, My Tho market (My Tho city) was once expected to be the largest commercial center in Tien Giang, creating a new look for the traditional markets in the area when it was upgraded to a modern and spacious two-storey market. However, after being upgraded, for nearly 13 years, but only about two thirds of business households entering the market, the remnant was left vacant, causing loss of revenue and waste. Due to the absence of customers, many stall owners in this market house had to close their stalls. In many cases, they had to "leave the market", then found places around to sell their goods spontaneously.

Many small traders operating at My Tho market also shared that the purchasing power of many items such as agricultural products and food was influenced by the development of new and modern retail channels. Ms. Nguyen Thi Lan (born 1965), selling groceries in My Tho market said that in the past, trading activities at My Tho market were always busy and bustling, people went to the market a lot. But now customers buy less, the front stalls can still survive, but the back stalls like hers lack

customers all day, sometimes sell a few sporadic things... The small traders also hope the authorities have paid much more attention to labour forces in the market. If everything keeps going like this, the small traders will have to stop selling (Nguyen Thi Lan 2023).

Ph.D Pham Van On (Faculty of Economics and Law, Tien Giang University) says that there are many reasons why traditional markets are increasingly deserted, including the lack of customers, fierce competition by many modern and diversified business types. With the current

trend, modern goods distribution channels are developing strongly, causing traditional markets' dominance lost. Along with that, in the face of worries about food safety and hygiene, consumers now have many choices and tendencies to shop at supermarkets, commercial centers, and convenience stores because those selling sites have airy, cool and clean space. Goods are diversified, abundant with clear, publicly listed price and origin (Pham Van On 2023).



**Figure 4: Cai Be floating market in Cai Be district, Tien Giang province**

### **2.3. Tien Giang traditional markets need changing to integrate**

For a long time, traditional markets in Vietnam in general and Tien Giang in particular have been considered a popular and important form of commerce in the supply and consumption of goods for people (Vo Van Son 2020, 112-113). Currently, with the rapid development of modern retail channels such as supermarkets, commercial centers, convenience stores, etc., competitive pressure has increased on traditional markets. In order to develop traditional markets in parallel with other types of trade, the

authorities of Tien Giang should implement the following solutions:

*First*, reviewing and supplementing the planning of the traditional market network in Tien Giang province by 2030 to be consistent with the socio-economic development, urban and agricultural construction planning; adjust 'the land-use plan' to ensure the land fund for market development; carry out the investment as well as attracting investment to build the market with appropriate plans.

*Second*, priority should be given to promote the transformation of market management models in

Tien Giang province with socialization process. For the degraded traditional markets, the industry also coordinates with localities to have a plan to gradually upgrade and renovate them to meet the trading and shopping needs of small traders, people as well as tourists.

*Third*, it is necessary to link the selling sites in the traditional markets of Tien Giang province with OCOP products, typical products of local strengths, and require prices listed at stalls in the market and goods sold at the right prices. At the same time, the authorities should promote inspection, control, traceability of goods, food hygiene and safety, environmental sanitation, security and order at the market; as well as strictly handle any violations.

*Fourth*, training and retraining courses should be regularly held for market managers (including: Management Board, Market Management Team, Management Board of Market Business Cooperative, Market Management Enterprise). Diversified forms of those courses are expected to suit the actual situations and conditions of the locality. At the same time, the government should ensure safety against fire and explosion as well as replicate the model of “market to ensure food safety and hygiene”.

*Fifth*, small traders should be propagandized and mobilized to innovate thinking and business methods; build customer trust by selling products with clear origin, right listed price, beautiful and convenient goods; better meeting the needs and buying habits of customers. At the same time, business in the form of direct selling at stalls and online sales should be actively applied with transfer payments and scanning QR codes.

*Sixth*, in the era of integration, business culture is a decisive factor for the success of enterprises. Traditional markets need drastic reforms in business culture to build a civilized and polite business culture to meet the consumers’ increasing demands.

*Seventh*, small traders need to actively participate in training courses to improve their legal knowledge, encourage the development of business potential, and enhance their ability to apply new technologies and techniques. At the same time, small traders should also improve service quality, build civilized and polite business culture, meet the consumer needs as well as improve the operational efficiency of traditional markets in the new situation.

*Eighth*, along with the trend of developing digital technology, small traders in traditional markets tend to switch from traditional to online business. Therefore, bringing Tien Giang traditional market online is a model that needs to be implemented, helping small traders approach consumers closer in the current digital age.

*Ninth*, it is necessary to pay attention to digital transformation through non-cash payment and traceability of goods. When customers scan the stamp code, all information about the product, the name of the store owner, and the address are clearly shown. Through this application, the sellers have to increase their responsibility to improve the goods quality, ensure the right prices, preserve their brand and reputation in the business process. Customers who know the origin of the product will have more confidence and comfort when shopping.

Ph.D Nguyen Phuc Nghiep (Head of the Department of Administration - Party History, Propaganda Department of Tien Giang Provincial Party Committee) shares that in the world, many countries have been very successful in “shaping” traditional markets to fulfill their needs, responding to social development. For example, in Korea, traditional markets are strongly developed not only in real life, but also on the screen through famous movies. The image of neatly planned, clean and beautiful markets with a lot of attractive products, traditional shops mixed with modern ones, and convenient

accompanying services has attracted people and tourists as they come to visit and shop, such as: Dongdaemun, Namdaemun, Gwangjang, Tongin, Sinpo... In fact, Tien Giang traditional markets can be completely changed to survive and develop strongly with investment in infrastructure and meaningful vision from long-term strategy to attract people, especially the market share of tourists to visit, shop or eat... Especially, Tien Giang attracts more than one million tourists every year. This is an advantage, great potential “key” to open the opportunity to change and promote the unique cultural features of Tien Giang traditional markets in the integration trend (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, 2023).

Mr. Dang Van Tuan (Deputy Director of Tien Giang Department of Industry and Trade) says: “In the development trend of modernization, the establishment of convenient markets, supermarkets and trade centers seems to be fading away images of traditional markets. However, in reality, traditional markets always have a certain position in life, expanding the distribution network of goods, promoting the development of manufacturing industries, creating jobs as well as preserving local cultural identity. The strength of the traditional markets that cannot be lost is that the consumption habits of most people, especially in rural areas, are still inclined to shop at traditional market channels partly because of habits. On the other hand, traditional markets are still better than convenience stores in the word “love” as people can bargain, feel convenient when buying and selling goods. Therefore, we need to preserve this culture and combine modern elements to match the development of the times. To survive, Tien Giang traditional market needs a more comprehensive transformation to improve competitiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to have the cooperation of authorities at all levels and efforts to change business thinking from

small traders themselves to create new vitality for the traditional market” (Dang Van Tuan, 2023).

### 3. CONCLUSION

In short, Tien Giang traditional market still bears its own cultural imprint, playing an important role in the socio-economic development of the residential community. However, due to its long-standing formation, the network of traditional markets in Tien Giang still has some limitations such as increasingly degraded infrastructure, food insecurity, weak environmental sanitation, etc. To meet the consumption needs of the people, Tien Giang traditional market needs to be renewed in terms of space, environment and business methods. In particular, the authorities need to have specific preferential policies to attract investors to build, renovate and develop traditional markets in both civilized and modern ways; meet people's shopping habits; at the same time drastically eliminate flea and temporary markets.

Meanwhile, Tien Giang Industry and Trade needs to identify digital transformation as the “key” to solve “bottlenecks”, opening up a new, comprehensive and sustainable development space, contributing to economic recovery and development. Therefore, it is necessary to recommend small traders to promote the application of 4.0 technology applications in trading to help Tien Giang traditional market become more and more modern and civilized. At the same time, this is also a way for the digital transformation to deeply develop people's lives.

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