

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Making of Rural Entrepreneurs in Commoditizing Farmers' Daily Life**

The interpretation of farmers' rationality presented farmers' roles as producers and entrepreneurs as their choice when entering tourism market. In agriculture, farmers were at different level of active actors in connecting the commodity market and outside consumer markets. Agritourism business presented farmers' roles as entrepreneurs in new space of supplement market. In this chapter, I will use the concept of rural entrepreneurship to analyze farmers' activities in agritourism in order to understand how they adjust their roles as entrepreneurs in the emergent space of tourism market and tourists market. This chapter examines rural space as a space of farmers' storytelling, which farmers commoditized in their daily life. I also analyze farmers' roles as entrepreneurs in the process of creating new knowledge to educate tourists and connecting relationships with outsiders.

#### **4.1 Commoditizing Farmers' Daily Life Through Agricultural Activities**

The commoditization of farmers' daily life through agricultural activities differs among communes of Mỹ Hòa Hưng, Vàm Nao and O Lam. Farmers' agricultural activities included available activities that they can utilized to produce tours. I will present how farmers engaged tourists in their activities with different levels of contact to agriculture from farmers' life, agricultural knowledge to their relationships in the space of local food consumption.

In Mỹ Hòa Hưng, homestay is the activity that tourists can engage directly or indirectly in farmers' life. Thus, farmers prepared their time to host tourists and organized

separately with their agricultural activities. Agritourism in An Giang is typically organized by the farmer, which is different from travel agencies. These agritourism activities are sometimes spontaneous according to tourists' demands. Additionally, farmers engaged in the project are active in decorating their houses, organizing their activities, and contacting travel companies to find their tourists. They proved their capabilities to actively connect tourism production and consumption due to direct contact and experiences with tourists. Farmers' houses in Mỹ Hòa Hưng engaged in agritourism project are more comfortable and richer in terms of infrastructure, especially toilets compared with other houses. Those houses are called “nhà 3 gian”, which have three rooms horizontally, characterizing the old styles. They also have yards and small gardens with several fruit trees, vegetables, and bonsai. Farmers learn how to decorate their houses, yards, and gardens in the training workshops to attract tourists for example growing some vegetables. Due to those favorable conditions and with the permission to welcome foreigners from the local government, Mỹ Hòa Hưng was chosen for homestay group. There are no agricultural activities despite the existence of gardens and rice fields. Mrs. Mai said that she and Mr. Ba Đính joined tourism (homestay) in 2003 before the project came in because Lu Hanh Company contacted and supported them to welcome tourists. She added that Mr. Tùng still kept the same activities when she participated in agritourism project (Interview Mr. Ba Đính 2015).



Figure 4.1 Photos of the two homestay houses of Mrs Mai and Mr. Ba Đính in Mỹ Hòa Hưng, taken in 2015

Homestay became an intimate space for farmers to organize their activities to accommodate tourists. These activities are not limited to individual family member's responsibility, family relationship, and culture. The tourists' satisfaction is the farmer's main concern when hosting. According to the tour companies, tourists come to enjoy local culture, sightseeing, visiting Ông Hồ Temple, Bác Tôn's house, incense village or fish farming village. After meeting Mr. Tùng in Long Xuyên City, I went to Mrs. Mai's house to stay a few days, which Mr. Tùng arranged. I met Mrs. Fifth (a Southern Vietnam custom that uses the birth order as part of the name) first when I entered the house. Then, Mrs. Mai greeted me in the guest room. She smiled at me and said loudly to her two daughters that I just came in such a way that I was a relative visiting their house. In a few seconds, I was just embarrassed by her friendly nature. I put my bag at a corner next to my bed. After I settled in, I went to greet the grandmother, an 83-year old woman, who was sitting in a hammock. Vietnamese culture calls upon guests to greet the oldest in the house first out of politeness and in order to show respect to the host. She asked me about my study and activities I planned to do in Mỹ Hòa Hưng. She also told me about her health and the time she had problems with her patella. Mrs. Mai let me do my things around the house and she kept doing her works.

Mr. Mai and her husband played managerial roles in their rice cultivation when they had the power to negotiate with traders due to the large amount of harvested rice. They invested in merit in hopes of pursuing a better life according to their religion of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. They also invested in their children's education in hopes that they would be able to transcend their farming background. They thought farming was a hard and unsecured job. Mrs. Mai's husband is Mr. Hòa. He cultivates about 1.5 ha of rice in Thoại Sơn. He had a lot of free time besides the 3-4 times he visits his rice fields to check for diseases, to spray for pesticides, and to harvest. He also hires laborers if needed. He spends all of his free time doing charity work, including collecting wood for coffins and distribution of rice to the poor. His family's religion is Hòa Hảo Buddhism with the philosophy that making merits could accumulate blessings for the next life. In this sense, they calculate everything they do in regards to future benefits and to avoid bad outcomes. That was the reason why he and Mrs. Mai discussed whether or not they should get the money from me because they thought if their children would study far

away from home like me, they would also need help from other people. If they helped me, their children would benefit in the future. The grandmother also kept reminding me that I should make merits for better life. Followers in Hòa Hảo usually are vegetarians. Only Mrs. Mai's 11-years-old daughter is not a vegetarian. They always pray before eating and in front of the altar twice a day, in the morning and in the evening.

Because of my age, I was considered the child of the family. Mrs. Mai and the others tried to engage me in many family activities, which made me feel included and welcomed. These interactions helped to facilitate cultural exchange and knowledge. Besides joining family activities, I still had my private time to do my work. Mrs. Mai is in charge of house chores, taking care of her two daughters, and managing the finances of the rice cultivation and family. After harvesting, there are many traders who come to collect. The family's income is able to cover the children's education and family spending of five members. I usually had opportunities to talk with her husband at lunch or dinnertime. He actively asked me about my studies in Thailand and compared the economic and social development of the two countries. He shook his head to show his disappointment in the Vietnamese economic model. I was surprised that he cared about such kind of issues, whether they had any impact on his rice cultivating. Mrs. Fifth was more quiet, but she was very helpful. She usually went around and looked at me as if to see what I was doing. The family regarded me as an honored daughter because I am studying Master Degree overseas. Mrs. Mai and grandmother usually mentioned me as a good example for their children. Mrs. Mai even forced her daughters to learn English from me, but they were so shy and uncomfortable around strangers.

Being a new member in the family, the neighbors inquired about me whenever I went out with them. The local people's conversations depicted the farmers' life working in agricultural or non-agricultural labor. In the morning, Mrs. Fifth took me to have breakfast at a nearby local vegetarian food shop. She usually says hello to her neighbors whenever they meet on the road. People smiled at her as well. I found out that the food shop was a place for people to gather in the morning to talk to each other. It was a place for them to converse about their jobs, agricultural practices, and personal problems. For example, Mrs. Fifth asked a woman if she finished cutting vegetable this morning, how

much for that and whether she could leave for Mrs. Fifth a small amount. Then, the woman answered and said that next time she would save for Mrs. Fifth as a present.

People in the village were well acquainted. Their daily conversations established mutual caring. The house architect facilitated these conversations and their interactions. Mrs. Mai sometimes asked me to go to the local market with her. Whenever I accompanied her, the vendors asked about me. She simply introduced me as her niece, younger sister, or distant relative. The reason why her answers were different was that there were many people asking about me. Sometimes, they asked if I were her daughter that they have ever met before. I realized that people here were very close with each other. Furthermore, the architecture here made it easy to socialize. Mrs. Mai's gate was usually open, so that her neighbors and acquaintances could walk in whenever they wanted. Every house has its own fence, but they allowed outsiders to look in and talk to each other. Behind her house, there is a small canal, where the family did their washing, cleaning and bathing. This is where Mrs. Mai converses with the other women in the neighborhood. Because the water rises up at the same time every day, they would meet at the same time. Mrs. Mai also could talk with some boat drivers when they passed by. It was interesting to see how common resources could facilitate social interaction through the open access of house design, which was different in cities.

Similarly, tourists also enjoyed meal times with family and engaged in family interactions. Mrs. Mai tried to engage me in their family conversations to make me feel like a family member. She said the tourists, "they did the same like you, eating and sightseeing. They also like to talk with us. They ask about the weather here. I usually asked my daughters to practice English with them, but they were so shy" (Field Research 2015). She usually forced her daughter to study from me and asked me to teach them English. I spent most of the time doing whatever I wanted. But, sometimes she asked me if I want to join her activities such as taking her younger daughter to school. Once, I was busy conducting my interviews and arrived home late in the evening at about 6pm. She waited for me to have dinner. I was surprised and appreciated her kindness. Still, I wondered that if it was a social norm or her rules for guests because in South Vietnam, it is generally impolite to let the guests have meal

alone. When we got closer, she shared with me a lot of information about her homestay business. She said that her teacher in the training workshop organized by the agritourism project asked her to create a Facebook page. The teacher was in Ho Chi Minh City so if Mrs. Mai had Facebook, it would be easier to introduce tourists to her. One of her acquaintances also asked her to do so. Therefore, Mrs. Mai asked me to help her create a Facebook account.

Though Mrs. Mai was concerned about tourists' demand, she wanted to keep her family values, which she did not want commercialized. After I created and uploaded some pictures of certain activities that tourists could partake in Mỹ Hòa Hưng and her house, she checked the information and revised it. She asked me to delete some pictures of family members like she and her daughters and grandmother. While I thought the pictures would make her homestay more personal, she felt differently. My description of her family activities in doing charitable work was also deleted, she explained "the guests can see it when they come, we don't have to public. It is not good." Her Facebook account was under her father-in-law's name because of his fame in contributing to the development of local community. Even though she wanted to have more tourists, she kept her family values in a traditional way that a tourist like me found it attracting and wanted to share those.

Farmers are the main decision-makers in managing homestays. They actively design activities and create agritourism value to accommodate with tourists, which is not limited to family value. Mr. Tùng is also a member in the homestay group. He shared with me that he educated his son to welcome French tourists in French because he assumed that they really liked children. His wife and the kitchen were his concerns in the interaction with tourists.

Mrs. Mai also expressed that she wanted to re-decorate her garden to grow bottle gourd. Meanwhile, Mr. Nguyễn also thought of how to utilize his large yard and create some attractions. He planned to build a fishpond for tourists. He told me that he used bamboos to make lanterns to decorate his yard, which he learned in the training

workshops. Similar to Mrs. Mai, Mr. Nguyễn also tried to promote his homestay. He said, “the strategy is that people usually lower prices to attract more tourists”.

Homestay is a form of household economy formed in cooperatives to share the mutual benefits. Tourists are distributed equally to the members. If a household cannot receive tourists, they will be kept for the next turn. Tourists also choose households to stay in due to their interests because each household will be a different experience. Farmers can also find their own tourists, but have to pay a tax from the cooperative. Therefore, they are motivated in self-managing and self-control to attract more tourists. I shall call this farmer household economy collectiveness. Collectiveness means that farmers gather into groups to reduce risks and promote themselves, but they work individually for their own interests rather than the groups’ benefits. For example, some farmers asked to join the tourist center just to stay away from local “continental pirates” (Interview Mr. Tùng 2015). Farmers’ calculations were formulated in the way that how collective participation contribute to their self-interests. Therefore, the management of collectives can both promote collective and individual participation through its regulations.

In conclusion, farmers in Mỹ Hòa Hưng will actively seek tourists when trying to expand their networking through their acquaintances and travel companies. Farmers decorate their houses and commoditize their intimate family space to accommodate tourists, which is not limited to physical and cultural value. Engaging tourists in activities of farmers’ family helped them understand family value, which farmers could create in their homestay program. The making of family value in homestay empowered farmers as entrepreneurs. Economic efficiency motivated them to find their tourists instead of waiting for Mr. Tùng’s effort. Farmers in Mỹ Hòa Hưng presented themselves as entrepreneurs in the way they actively connected themselves to tourism production and consumption. Agritourism proved their new capacity in working as entrepreneurs besides agricultural producers.

## 4.2 Educating Tourists with Agricultural Activities in the Field

In this section, I will present how the rural landscape and farmers' activities are commoditized on tours. The rural landscape presents an authentic depiction of life on the farm to tell farmers' stories. When tourists engage in these agricultural activities, they will get a sense of how farmers make a living. Farmers don't offer staged tourism products. Rather, they invite tourists as their guests. The tours included historical and environmental sightseeing to introduce tourists to farmers' environment and livelihoods. Tourists then make their choice to join in on some agricultural activities. The rural landscape is not so much about the environment, but rather it is a space to tell farmers' life stories and the agricultural products they produce. Tourists can engage with these stories as they interact with the farmers. It really depends on how much tourists are willing to participate in agritourism activities.

In my study, I interviewed a group of Australian students to identify which agricultural landscapes they would like to see the most. Most of them said that they preferred rice fields, gardens, and fishponds (Interview Australian students in 2015). Rural landscape is not well advertised on the tours because of its popularity in the Mekong Delta. The reason I highlight this feature is because this is where farmers can tell tourists about their life stories, livelihoods, and agricultural products. I also point out the available activities in the fields, which are commoditized in agritourism. My study focuses on farmers' understanding of tourist demand in agritourism in order to examine how farmers organize and manage activities in rural areas. This is different from the research of Gao et al. (2014) on agricultural landscape preferences. They found out that "respondents liked most of the landscape features commonly found in an agritourism farm, especially natural and cultural ones" and that "different segments have significantly different preferences for these landscape features" (Gao et al. 2014: 377).

Currently, the farmers' agritourism cooperative in An Giang has advertised eight tours, which highlight farmers activities rather than focusing on the landscape. They've included exploring mountains and rivers in An Giang, taking mud baths, hunting "cá bông lao" (a kind of catfish migrating in flooding seasons), floating on the river, visiting



Uncle Ton's house, sightseeing flooding seasons, enjoying Khmer festivals, and visiting Vàm Nao, Cấm Mountain, and Trà Sư Forest. The tours are designed for tourists to enjoy local food, rural landscapes, and agricultural activities in order to promote the environment, the culture, and the regional agricultural products. These activities were combined to prove that the agritourism cooperative provided tours that extended beyond just sightseeing. Instead of promoting rural landscapes, cultural villages, traditional crafts, religious places, and historic sites were included to add more value to the tours. This was the point Mr. Tùng made to distinguish his tours. The rural environment is the backbone of people's livelihoods and their culture.

Rural space included landscape, which produced farmers' livelihoods. Mỹ Hòa Hưng is located in a small island. I had to take a ferry to go to Mrs. Mai's house. One of the ferries connected to Long Xuyen market, where farmers and fishers take their products by boats to sell in the early morning. When the ferry ran across The Hậu River, I could see some households living in their stilts houses along the river. Some floating houses are near the land. I do not know why people live on those houses. Sometimes, they are raising fish in cages. But, it must be a village, not individual houses scattering along the river. There are some fishermen pulling fishing nets onto their small boating. If people want to go for entertainment or schooling, they have to take the ferry to Long Xuyên city, which takes about 45' for the longest time, and about 15' for the short time. Along the road to Mrs. Mai's house, there is a river floating through the commune at one side. Houses are on the other side. As I mentioned before, each house usually has a small garden with some fruit trees, bonsai, or vegetable. Some houses are built with cement and therefore sturdier. Others are small and have no gardens. Rice fields are gathered in large places separate to where the houses are. All activities start in the early morning. Some farmers wake up to cut their vegetables and sell in the local market. Some went to work as laborers. And some had small businesses selling clothes. Before going to work, they gathered to talk and have breakfast at local food shops or coffee shops. These were common places, where people could meet and say hello to each other. A new comer was easily recognized. People would trace his family to say that he was someone's son.



Figure 4.2 Vàm Nao Hamlet and Ô Lâm Commune

Tourists were engaged in farmers' landscape to learn about their hidden stories. Vàm Nao is also located in a small island. In order to reach Mr. Tám Hổ's house, he had to drive me by his small canoes or the big one for tourists. Usually, tourists were picked up at the main cement road. They were taken around before arriving to Mr. Tám Hổ's house. Farmers here cultivate subsidiary crops instead of rice. During the flooding season (July to September), farmers go fishing and picking *trapa bicornis* and common sesban. Tourists have to pass through some fields of okra and chili on a small land road before reaching the if there were a lot of water hyacinth that clogged the water way. During my field research, it rained during the week so it was very slippery and my shoes were heavy with mud. Mr. Tùng and Mrs. Hòa, the director of the tourist center, followed me when I was a tour guide for a group of 8 Australian students. They had to go along to assure the security of the foreigners. I could observe the activities around the river when the boat was sailing. There was a small byre with about 10 cows nearby. Houses around were just built like huts at corners of the crop fields. Some farmers were working on their fields.



Figure 4.3 Tours Advertised on the Website of  
The An Giang Agritourism Cooperative

Source: <http://homestayangiang.com/products-7155/tour-du-lich-moi/>

After observing activities in rural areas, I was interacted with Mr. Tám HỒ' family, who was a retired farmer and a fisherman, to understand their livelihoods. Tours were designed with differing levels of agricultural activities, from observation to engagement, depending on tourists' desires. I had the opportunity to go fishing with his family and I gain a better understand that fishermen were competitive to choose the water zone and fishing depending on how much water flows. Mr. Tám HỒ had two houses: one on land and one on the island. His son, Mr. Sơn, lived with his wife and daughter in the house on land because of his work. His wife stayed at home to do house chores and to take care of their child. I lived in that house to assure my security. If I lived with Mr. and Mrs. Tám HỒ on the island, without Mr. Tám HỒ's help, I could not easily move elsewhere. One morning, I woke up at about 5AM to go fishing with their family. Mrs. Ny, Mr. Son's wife refused to join because she didn't want to sell fish after that. I followed Mr. Son to the to the waiting point that Mr. Tám HỒ and his wife would pick up us. It was still dark in the early morning. I almost fell down on a slippery road covered by reeds. The weather was so nice. Mrs. Tám HỒ told me that I could not follow her to sell fish because it was hard, my feet would be tired soon. Mr. Đáng Anh,

and Mr. Đáng Em (two farmers in the agritourism project) also went fishing at the same time. They had their own fishing areas. When Mr. Tám HỔ chose an area, he stopped the engine and we were waited for a while. Soon, an ironing boat appeared. Mr. Son jumped into the river and stayed there like a spindle. Mr. Tám HỔ drove the boat to make a circle and returned to Mr. Son's place. He had to make it quick or the ironing boat would catch all the fish. Depending on the water, there were only anchovies, and a small amount of other small fishes like catfishes and snakefishes. There were some rules for local fishermen on the river, but I couldn't understand.

When I was companied with Mrs. Tám HỔ to sell anchovies, I knew more about stories of her acquaintances including her patrons and partners beyond the unstable life of a fisherman. Farming is unstable due to the unpredictable sell. If they luckily had a good harvest, they were soon worried about their product consumption. I went with them twice and we were able to get about 20 kilograms of anchovies each time. Mr. Tám HỔ said happily that it was lucky to go with me. But, it's still very unpredictable. There were only about two weeks per month. Sometimes, they couldn't catch anything. After that, I followed his wife to sell fish along the inland road nearby. We passed a large field of scallion, watermelon, sweet potato and so on before researching the inland. She carried the fish bin on her head. I really wanted to help, but it was impossible for me to carry 20 kilograms on my head. It was 11,9\$/kg of anchovy. People easily recognized her because of her clear and loud cry. Some of them asked about me, then she answered that I was her niece. She told me about some people that we met on the road. There were a lot of fish and we couldn't finish until we arrived at the local market. Mrs. Tám HỔ asked another seller to save for her small place. The price of anchovy was fixed since she was a fish seller. She said that if there were not many customers, we could lower the price to finish selling. At the end, she gave the leftover amount to her friend, another fish seller at the market. She said that "poor her, she was also hardworking". I wonder that why she was such kind of generous. It was probably because it was easy for them to catch the fish within 1 hour with that amount. She did not spend any costs except the labors of four people for 1 hour. At first, I was also happy to catch a lot of fish. Later on, I felt a little bit nervous if we could not sell all. Fishing can earn high income within little amount of time, but it is not stable.

The rural landscape tells the story of farmers exchanging products. We came back from selling fish after three hours. She bought some vegetables from a woman, her friend. Sometimes, when she could not finish, she gave to her friend to sell for her. If there was some amount left, it usually was used to feed the ducks. I thought it a pity to throw away the anchovies, especially at such a steep price. The ducks here were so lucky for its abundant resources. When we were on the way back to her house, we stopped at a group of four female farmers to ask for some water. They were seeding corn. Mrs. Tám HỔ sat and chatted with them for a while. They talked about other families' members' activities like news as they heard or saw and discussed about that. It seemed to me that those common work places were sharing places for farmers. They looked very happy.

Coffee shops were gathering places for sharing stories and cultural exchange if tourists wanted to engage with the local community. Mrs. Tám HỔ's house is like a small coffee shop. Neighboring farmers usually stopped to drink some coffee, take a rest, and then return to their work. Around his house was his neighbors' land, which cultivated water melon, okra, chili, sugar cane, and taro. Mr. Tám HỔ and his wife are normally at home but they enjoy visiting their neighbors to chat. The topics were usually local gossip or about their agricultural-related activities such as selling and buying, discussing prices and so on. At lunch, Mrs. Tám HỔ invited a 28 year-old farmer to have lunch with her. He was very closed to them and called Mrs. Tám HỔ "mother". While they are not actually related, this sign of affection demonstrated his respect for her and their closeness. Sometimes, he took a rest and sang karaoke with Mrs. Tám HỔ. Farmers around knew each other very well in the way that I presented due to the lack of borders and their daily interactions. At night, I returned to Mr. Tám HỔ's house. I took her granddaughter to have some drinks at Mr. Đăng Anh's wife's coffee shop. The road was quiet and quite dark. There were some noises from a few children passing. Mr. Sơn also joined us. They talked and discussed about the news or about someone from work. Sometimes, they discussed news about their mutual acquaintances.

Conclusively, I just proved that rural space presents an ideal place for storytelling. These social interactions and cultural exchanges can occur in common locations such as food shops and coffee shops. According to the farmers, tourists seek out these tours to

be close to nature because they are tired of living in cities. However, the core issue with agritourism in An Giang is that farmers are the tour guides, who tourists directly interact. This makes the concept of agritourism in An Giang perceived as “Du Lịch Nông Dân” - “Farmers’ Tourism”.

After presenting rural space as a space of telling farmers’ stories, I will present how farmers’ agricultural activities were produced in agritourism to educate tourists. Farmer’s agricultural activities can be seen mostly in Vàm Nao hamlet and Ô Lâm commune, where there are some agricultural activities organized for tourists. However, the activities are not organized in a way that travel companies try their best to accommodate tourists according to the tour prices. By analyzing farmers’ management and organization as well as the farmers’ interactions with tourists, I will show that agricultural activities were not staged. Mr. Tùng first designed the tours after researching tourists’ demand in workshops, seminars, fairs, and his network of business partners (Interview Mr. Tùng 2015). Later, he cooperated with farmers to organize and manage tourism activities when farmers themselves had direct contact with tourists. This is a gradual process for farmers as producers learning about tourists’ demand to define the integrated concept of agritourism from the tourists. Similarly, Arroyo et al. (2013) engaged three stakeholders’ perceptions in Missouri and North Carolina in the definition of agritourism.

Mr. Tùng usually worked with local farmers and consulted with them to design tours. In Ô Lâm, Mr. Tùng used to work with Mrs. Bali, The Leader of Farmer Union, to design activities, which tourists could participate in. One of the activities in Ô Lâm was “making Côm Đẹp” with local farmers. The ingredient included glutinous rice, which the farmers usually buy from surrounding communes. Mr. Tùng consulted Mrs. Bali on how to grow glutinous rice for tourists to consume. However, Mrs. Bali said glutinous rice was difficult to grow and needed time. Meanwhile, the amount of tourists was not high enough to compensate for glutinous rice growing. Therefore, local farmers could not grow glutinous rice, though it was the main ingredient to make Côm Đẹp, which played an important part in Khmer culture and agritourism activities. Another case was in Vàm Nao. Once I had an opportunity to observe and listen to Mr. Tùng’s discussion



with Mr. Tám HỔ on preparing activities for the upcoming tours at Mr. Tám HỔ's house. Firstly, Mr. Tùng asked Mr. Tám HỔ whether tourists could search for mussels, cut sugar canes, pick lotus, or dig sweet potatoes. At the same, Mr. Tám HỔ brought a disk of boiled taro as a snack during the discussion. He said this season yielded a lot of taro and all people had to do was pick them up from the ground. Mr. Tùng agreed and wanted this activity on the tour. But, Mr. Tám HỔ added that by the time the tourists came, he was afraid the taros would be too old to be delicious. Hence, they did not include taro picking on the tour.

Mr. Tùng played the role as travel agent to find tourists and to work with farmers to organize tours. Therefore, he needed to negotiate with local farmers about the suggested prices for agritourism services. One time, Mr. Tùng negotiated with Mr. Tám HỔ about prices of meals. Mr. Tám HỔ was not happy about the suggested \$2.50/person menu price from Mr. Tùng. He complained that it was hard to run around serving the tourists. In an attempt to convince Mr. Tám HỔ, Mr. Tùng argued that finding tourists was also not an easy task. Mr. Tùng had to negotiate the tour prices with tourists and farmers. If he had fixed the prices with tourists, he had to convince farmers to agree with the prices. Therefore, farmers were not satisfied with the low prices. Similarly, in the case of homestays in Mỹ Hòa Hưng, Mr. Tùng would ask the homestay group if one of the members were willing to host the tourists with agreed prices.

Farmers in Vàm Nao organized the agritourism activities and guided tourists. When I was a tour guide for the Australian students, Mr. Tùng, Mrs. Hòa and I greeted them in Long Xuyên City, where there are many hotels, accommodations, and shopping malls. This is also the place where Mr. Tùng usually has appointments with his partners and travel companies to build up his network in agritourism. Professor Hải from Cần Thơ University hosted the tourists. They went on a field study about agritourism in the Mekong Delta. We were headed to Mr. Tám HỔ's house in the island. It was raining heavily. Mr. Đáng Anh was waiting for us on his big canoes. Mrs. Tám HỔ had prepared all the food. The students had lunch with their professor at one table. Professor Hải and Mr. Tùng were at another table while I was moving around to see if the students needed help, Mr. Giang, Mr. Đáng Anh, Mr. Tám HỔ, and his wife were

serving food. Actually, similar to other tours, Mr. Tám HỒ and his wife went to the local market and prepared the food. If some ingredients were available in the field or from fishing, they did not need to buy it. Sometimes, their daughter-in-law or their sons would support them if there were too many tourists. Mr. Đăng Anh arranged and checked the boats because he could drive the boats. Mr. Giang was assigned to help around if needed.



Figure 4.4 Agritourism Activities in Vàm Nao Hamlet

The authenticity of farmers' identification made agritourism in An Giang unique. Farmers characterized tourists into two groups: guests and tourists. Guests are their acquaintances. This includes governmental officials, and Mr. Tùng's partners, acquaintances, or professors. For guests, the farmers should interact with them directly to show their respect and hospitality. Guests also help to expand farmers' network. For tourists, farmers are more careful to accommodate them. Farmers have to prepare these activities beforehand. They contacted their neighbors who were also farmers to inform them the tourists were coming. Their neighbors would take the opportunity to sell their on-site products. Mr. Tám HỒ and Mr. Tùng also planned for potential activities according to the weather.

Farmers guided tourists to the fields and showed them activities they could do. They introduced their practices as telling stories about their practices in the field and invite



tourists to join. When I guided the students through the watermelon field. This time, they could pick up themselves because it was easier to dig taro. Again, Mr. Tùng followed to invite them or recommend them the activities that they could do. He asked them to smash it by hand and eat immediately. It was manual labor as farmers usually did on their fields. We stayed there for a while. I also picked up one and played with them. Two of us carrying two watermelons and collide to break it. Then, we shared with each other. It was really fun. I used to be a tour guide before. But, I felt like that I was a servant for my tourists because they hired me to work for them. My feelings this time was different, I was playing with them and invite them to join in some activities with me. Mr. Giang, Mr. Đăng Anh, and Mr. Tùng looked eager to observe the students. Once I interviewed Mr. Giang, he said that “it was fun to serve tourists. They are happy, then I am happy” (Interview Mr. Giang 2015). It began to rain again. We soon back to the house.

Welcoming tourists was staged in the farmers’ way, which should be clean only, because the place continues farmer’s work later on. The infrastructure was kept in the same way as usual. Farmers were considering about tourists’ satisfaction of activities in which they want or do not want at the same time of making agritourism products. It was raining cats and dogs. The land road became slippery and dirty with some holes of water. Mr. Tám Hổ’s house was just bigger than a hut and not consolidated. It was open all the directions, the back of the house faced to a large field. I was there when the weather was very windy. It was a little bit scary. But, it was very comfortable to sit on the hammocks around the house in the yard when it was sunny. Mr. Đăng Anh and Mr. Giang burned firewood to bake the corns at the corner of the yard. I asked the students to help them when they were just talking together. I usually ask them to engage in our activities such as cleaning the tables. Sometimes, Mr. Tùng stopped me because he thought that they were not happy to do. But, they felt happy to help out after being served. There was a sugar cane field next to Mr. Tám Hổ’s house so Mr. Tùng asked them to cut the sugar canes. Three students followed Mr. Giang to cut some. Then, they were back to bake the corn and to enjoy watermelon and sugar cane by themselves. Mr. Tùng asked them to search the river mussels, but they did not like to do it.

Farmers' activities were organized spontaneously according to their observation of tourist demands. When it stopped raining, Mr. Tùng, Mr. Tám Hổ, and Mr. Đáng Anh took the students out on three small canoes. Mr. Tám Hổ began to spread the net to catch fish. He acted as he did every day. Unfortunately, there was no fish at all. They were driven around before coming back. Fishing is not originally Mr. Tám Hổ's livelihood. Once, I followed him to spread the net with his son. He was very quick to observe the water to see if there were some fish. Then, he called his son to help him. He left the drinking table at that time. Mr. Ho looked very enthusiastic and passionate when spreading the net while Mr. Tùng was greeting the guests. After taking a rest and enjoying the food for a while, I asked the students to drive the boats, which I just learnt two days ago. After putting on their life jackets, the four students followed me even though I admitted that I did not know how to drive very well. It was not on the schedule, but it came to mind when I observed the way farmers organized their activities. I had to ask Mr. Tùng and Mr. Tám Hổ' permission first before inviting them. I was eager to act as tour guide for the students. Mr. Tám Hổ took some notes of what the students collected in the fields to return to the landowners.

In conclusion, this is the way farmers organized and managed the activities. Compared to their farming income, agritourism did not prove to be more financially beneficial. Mr. Đáng Anh and Mr. Đáng Em were not satisfied. However, at the beginning, when they became members of the agritourism business, they were granted capital, training workshops, and opportunities to travel to other provinces. Compared to farmers in Mỹ Hòa Hưng, farmers in Vàm Nao were not actively connected to the tourism market. They would just wait for Mr. Tùng to bring the tourists even though they do participate in organizing agricultural activities.

Furthermore, I pointed out that how the farmer's authentic lifestyle played a role in the agricultural activities. Rural space was a space farmers to share their daily lives and practices with tourists. Additionally, rural landscape is a source of knowledge to educate tourists using agricultural practices. Farmers organized and managed tourism activities. The landscapes and activities were not different from their daily lives, but were made to accommodate tourists and assure their safety. Accordingly, rural space

became farmers' stage to perform their stories for tourists. By sharing their life stories and acting as tour guides, I found that farmers were empowered when they stepped into the educator roles. In a dignified manner, they demonstrated their ability to turn agricultural activities into new knowledge. Agricultural activities were not only hard work, but also required farmers to take an active role in making agritourism products.

In my study, agritourism in An Giang is perceived as "Farmers' Tourism" by utilizing the farmers' available activities. Farmers played the main roles to define authenticity and commoditize their probability. It means that farmers showed what they have and invited tourists to join them, which is different from "*pseudo-backstage*", "a frontstage that is presented as an 'actual' backstage" (Kirchengast 2013: 170). Kirchengast found that farmers in Bregenzerwald in Austria and Valdres in Norway played two roles of farmers and tourists host. The role of tourists host made them to think strategically of the physical surroundings and their performances in terms of political and cultural norms. This can help farmers to control tourists' interaction (Kirchengast 2013).

#### **4.3 Building Connectivity in Space of Local Food Consumption**

I just presented how agritourism was dig deeper to create more contact and experience in agriculture for tourists by showing farmers' stage and their performance in the field as a re-acting their activities. However, the ultimate products are food, which is embedded in agricultural production, environment, and farmers' activities. I am going to analyze the meanings beyond the food in terms of how farmers made their agricultural products more valuable and showed their relationships on drinking and eating tables to engage their guests or tourists in culinary. According to Mr. Tùng and farmers, local food is made from local ingredients and "must be eaten". The term, "must be eaten," is coined by the local community for certain foods that are unique to the region. Tourism allowed farmers to expand their networking. It was not limited to just tourists and travel companies. Through drinking and eating, farmers can interact socially, expand their networks, and build relationships with other farmers for future support. It was also a strategy to resolve conflicts in managing and organizing among farmers as a way of "brothers working together".

Farmers characterized their tourists as guests and visitors to have according hospitality. For guests or acquaintances, drinking and eating was a space to foster relationships. At the beginning, Mr. Tùng introduced me and Mr. Lộc to Mr. Tám Hổ. Mr. Lộc works in the immigration office on keeping tourists safe. This time he came to assess the tourism site's safety. Mr. Tùng used his credibility to introduce us as his acquaintances. Mr. Giang and Mr. Đáng Anh were drinking in the house. Later on, Mr. Tùng asked Mr. Tân, the chairman of farmer union in Tân Trung Commune to join us. Some ingredients were bought from the local market such as eels, bamboo shoots, and frogs. Fresh vegetables were picked from the field. Mr. Tám Hổ caught fresh fish from the river. They were immediately fried and eaten with fresh cucumbers and salad. These were popular meals in the South. Mr. Tám Hổ also brought a dish of boiled taro. He said that they were collected in the nearby field. When there was some rains, taro appeared in the mud. But, for few days later they could not be eaten because they became old.

The discourse on “brother and sister help” and storytelling was strategically employed to expand farmers' relationship on the space of drinking and eating. For a while, Mr. Lộc called his “brother”, who used to work with him before. Now, he is a communal police. He was busy, but tried to come for a while. The main purpose was to introduce Mr. Lộc to Mr. Tám Hổ. Whenever I entered into a commune, I had to inform the communal police my purpose of stay. But this was also an unofficial opportunity for me to tell him about my presence. During this time, we enjoyed eating and talking with each other. Mr. Tùng told Mr. Lộc about tourist activities and they also shared work stories. Then, we also discussed about the food to compare to other places. Mr. Tùng told us about the story rice wine, also known as “rượu đế”. He informed us that during the colonial era, the French prohibited the making of rice wine. But people tried to make it without their permission. In the South, rice wine was made up of glutinous rice and hidden in reedlike grasses, called “cỏ tranh” or “cỏ đế”. This is the reason why rice wine was called “rượu đế”.



Figure 4.5 Food in Vàm Nao Hamlet

These relationships were not limited to government officials, professionals, chefs or partners. Farmers often played the role of host and their hospitality depended on how the guests and tourists responded to them. Another time, Mr. Tùng introduced Mr. Ái to me. He was in charge of developing a tourism plan for the An Giang province. We met when he visited An Giang to assess the area for potential tourist sites. In the late afternoon, Mr. Tùng took him to Mr. Tám Hổ's house in the island Mrs. Tám Hổ prepared some food, which looked very fresh. Mr. Tám Hổ was tired and sick. He did not want to eat or drink alcohol. Therefore, he just tried to escape from the table. Mr. Tùng kept asking him to join as he was the host. Mr. Ái discussed with Mr. Tùng how to cook those kinds of ingredients to make the best tastes. Sometimes, they talked about regional dishes, discussing specialties such as braised fish and freshly fried fish. Mr. Tùng also shared with him stories about the tourism business. They enjoyed conversing and sharing a meal.

After a while, Mr. Ái put out some bottles of local wine, which were given to him by nuns when he visited a church. The wine was delicious and tasted light compared to rice wine because it contained scant amounts of alcohol. We took turns sampling the wine. That was the rule of the drinking table. Mr. Tám Hổ left us drinking and went to spread a net when he observed the water flow. I followed him. Mr. Tùng also invited Mr. Ái to catch mussels from the river. In another instance, Mr. Tùng invited his friends to Mr. Tám Hổ's house. One of them was a professional cook who taught farmers in training workshops. He brought a big fish for Mr. Đáng Anh and Mr. Giang to roast per his

instructions. He also asked me to add more fish sauce to make it more flavorful. He and the other guests looked very happy as they conversed with each other. They talked about the restaurant business as he is a restaurant owner. Mr. Tám Hổ kept praising his cooking abilities. Tourism opened a space for farmers to expand and reinforce their relationships with outsiders.



Figure 4.6 Eating and Drinking in Vàm Nao, taken in 2015

Local foods were promoted due to farmer's pride to introduce their products. As I mentioned earlier, I was a tour guide for a group of Australian students who took a trip through Vàm Nao, Châu Đốc, and Tràm Forest. They enjoyed agricultural activities in Vàm Nao, landscapes and some spiritual sites (including pagodas and temples) in Châu Đốc, bought silk in Chàm village, and appreciated the wildlife in Tràm forest. It was at lunchtime when they reached Mr. Tám Hổ's house. The food was already displayed on the table. While they sat at different tables, we were all served the same food. It included vegetable and crab hotpot, local vegetables, and dishes with fish and frog. The students did not look happy with the food, but some of them were eager to try new dishes. Mr. Tùng was eager to ask me to tell them where the ingredients came from. Before leaving, Mr. Tùng also took some mussels to eat in a restaurant in Châu Đốc. Again, they also had similar food in the restaurant, which emphasized local ingredients. I wondered whether Mr. Tùng could see that the Westerners were not happy with the food. After dinner, they asked me to take them to the local supermarket to buy some ice cream and snakes. Meanwhile, Mr. Tùng had another table eating with Professor Hai. They spent some time conversing about topics such as food, work, and relationships.



Eating and drinking was also used to solve farmers' conflicts in organizing and managing agritourism. The first case was about conflicts in organizing activities between Mr. Tùng and Mr. Tám Hổ. I had an opportunity to join in on Mr. Tám Hổ and Mr. Tùng's drinking. It was a few days before a group of tourists arrived. Mr. Tùng asked Mr. Tám Hổ what the potential activities for tourists to do were. Mr. Tám Hổ began with "in this season" and suggested some options. They began to discuss these options, voicing concerns about tourists' interests, security, crop seasons, personnel, cost, and management. If one option was chosen, Mr. Tám Hổ had to organize everything. For example, Mr. Tám Hổ had to buy a row of sugar canes for tourists to cut from the nearby field. But he had to think of the price and negotiate with the field owner according to Mr. Tùng's wishes. Mr. Tùng was considered Mr. Tám Hổ's consultant. If Mr. Tám Hổ had any problems with organizing activities, Mr. Tùng was supposed to be the authority. However, this hierarchical structure was difficult because farmers are really experts in their own fields. Mr. Tám Hổ refused to follow Mr. Tùng's guidance. Then, Mr. Tùng confirmed that "just follow me, I will responsible for this". Production cost is always included in farmers' calculation. After welcoming tourists, Mr. Tám Hổ would send Mr. Tùng the budget. All losses would be compensated for. Therefore, if Mr. Tùng assumes all responsibility, Mr. Tám Hổ would simply have to follow along. However, Mr. Tùng is younger than Mr. Tám Hổ, making it difficult to resume a position of authority. Mr. Tùng usually began by emphasizing their commitments to cooperate with each other. Their commitments were not shown in the agreements, but in their relationship as "brothers", which drew out their "right behaviors". "Right behaviors" include the consideration of other members' benefits and the commitment to cooperation.

The second case was about reminding members to participate in agritourism. One late afternoon, I was in Mr. Tám Hổ's house in the island drinking with Mr. Giang and Mr. Đáng Anh. Mr. Đáng Anh had stopped to talk with us. Mr. Tám Hổ invited him to drink some cups of rice wine. He seemed tired and unwilling but he could not say no due to Mr. Tám Hổ's and Mr. Giang's pleas. After talking for a while, Mr. Tám Hổ lowered his voice to ask Mr. Giang to listen to him. The problem was that Mr. Đáng Anh did not join the activities to welcome tourists and did not inform Mr. Tám Hổ that he would be

missing these activities. He said that if Mr. Đàng Anh was busy, he should tell him in advance because then Mr. Tám Hổ would organize it by himself. Mr. Đàng Anh just smiled and apologized to Mr. Tám Hổ because he had to work on his fields. In fact, Mr. Đàng Anh shared with me that the income from driving boats or serving was not higher compared to his agricultural activities. Mr. Tám Hổ also told me that he could recognize Mr. Đàng Anh' reluctance. Meanwhile, Mr. Tùng informed me that the income from agritourism could be higher than farmers' activities because they could earn the same amount within 3-4 hours instead of 8 hours.

In conclusion, space for local food consumption established a network of farmers and outsiders. Entrepreneurs were able to use this network to bring consumers into their homes, which helped to bypass the market. Tourists were no longer strangers, but business partners. According to farmers, there were two kinds of visitors – tourists and guests. Tourists are stranger. The farmers will introduce their food as a promotion of their local environment, where the freshest ingredients are available. Guests or acquaintances, were treated with more hospitality. However, in my study I did not find out how the concept of “local food” is socially articulated. Local food means that it was regionally popular, and the ingredients sourced from nearby from farmers' perspectives. It is different from the study of Sims (2013) about *Food, place and authenticity: local food and the sustainable tourism experience*. Sims (2013) pointed out the two contested concepts of local and authentic from perspectives of tourists, food producers, and café and restaurant owners. Thus, the findings shared some similarities in the meaning of food, which is related to “landscape, culture and heritage of their destination”, “people and places”, and “eating and drinking” (Sim 2013: 14) beyond the meaning of food.

Sims (2009) also did another study of *Putting place on the menu: The negotiation of locality in UK food tourism, from production to consumption*. She pointed out the negotiation between the three actors, including ‘producers’, ‘consumers’ and ‘suppliers’, of the concept of “local food” in the food chain. The actors are not separate in the food chain. Sometimes, they exchange their roles. Therefore, the term of “local food” is used in consideration of “producers” to accommodate consumers, which is similar to “the tradeoff between value and practicalities” (Sims 2019:9). Farmers in An



Giang try to prove their specialties, which are not easily found in other areas with the same tastes. However, they are concerned about tourists' satisfaction and will work to accommodate their demands. Agritourism engages farmers in food production and consumption and helps them promote their "local food", which entails "people and places". Furthermore, "drinking and eating" is not only a space of food consumption.

In my research, I've discovered that agritourism opens a space for farmers to expand their networks and add more value to their agricultural products. When farmers have opportunities to interact with tourists, they can build new relationships with them according to how they communicate in the drinking and eating tables. Mr. Tùng's relationship with his guests demonstrated very clearly the farmers' strategic communication. When people connect over food, it becomes easier to expand this connection further and build friendships. Moreover, drinking and eating was not only considered as tourism products, but also a space for farmers to strengthen their participation, to solve problems, and to organize as well as manage agritourism. These activities were presented as a space for them to build up "brotherhood" for tourists considered as guests, which is seen as a commitment among themselves. Similar to Acharya's study (2012), cultural tourism opened up a space for "redefining relationships" among the White Tai peasants to claim for their identity.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the process of commoditization of farmers' daily life to show how farmers engaged their daily activities, rural environment and livelihoods in agritourism to accommodate tourists. Farmers have their own motivations for participating in agritourism. In order to benefit, they have to cooperate with other actors, including other farmers engaged with agritourism, travel companies, marketing managers, and tourists. This process transformed their livelihoods and moved beyond farming, as they took on new roles as entrepreneurs. It demonstrated how they actively connected commodity markets to inside consumer market. As entrepreneurs, farmers had to prove their ability to interact with tourists, commoditize their stories, educate tourists with their knowledge, and build their network through the space of local food

consumption. Farmers in Mỹ Hòa Hưng presented themselves as entrepreneurs, who are working for their own business. Farmers in Ô Lâm and Vàm Nao are not active in searching their own tourists, but well-managed. Even though they looked at agritourism as an alternative income source, they presented themselves differently in how active they played their roles as entrepreneurs.

Agritourism in An Giang combines both cultural and agricultural activities to add more value to the tours. The activities invite tourists to embrace the rural environment through the farmer's perspective. The rural environment was the source of farmers' livelihoods and culture, which includes the protocol of interaction to transmit farmers' stories and support each other. Moreover, rural space was presented as farmers' stage, where tourists can watch what farmers do in their fields. Tourists can compare and examine tourism activities to other surrounding farmers' activities in the same rural environment. The analysis showed that farmers took on managerial roles in their agritourism businesses and as entrepreneurs, they produced knowledge of agricultural practices and built their network by bringing tourists home. By equalizing their roles and tourists, and educating tourists, farmers presented agricultural educators' dignity in rural areas. Lastly, the farmers' main concerns were economic efficiency and their dignity as agricultural educators. By partaking in agritourism, farmers are able to share their daily lives and present an authentic experience for tourists.

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