Ms. Tan Thi Shu – Panelist

Ms. Tan Thi Shu is a 32-year-old ethnic H’mong who has been able to turn her dream of helping her people into reality. She founded and is now Director of the Sapa O’Chau Travel Social Enterprise, the first tourist company run by H’mong ethnic minority people in Lao Chai commune under the community tourism model, with a top priority of creating jobs and learning opportunities for local children.

Ms. Shu was a simple village girl who lived with her parents in the mountains. Her family depended on the rice terraced fields for subsistence. Her parents could not afford to send her to school, and she dropped out at 3rd grade. Shu followed her mother to sell handicrafts to tourists on the streets. She seized the opportunity to learn English from tourists. At night, she would make use of internet cafés to study more English. As Shu learnt sufficient English, she began to work as a trekking guide. At 19, she became a single mother. That did not stop her from building the first ethnic minority-owned homestay in her village for her widowed cousin in 2009.

Sapa O’Chau was established in 2007, with O’Chau in the H’mong language meaning “thank you.” She developed the concept of Sapa O’Chau with four Australian friends, and then grew it into the only not-for-profit tour operator in Sapa. After covering costs, all the tourist income goes to support the community. Tours are the main income, not donations. In 2010, Shu started the Sapa O’Chau cooperative. This is the first boarding facility where youths could board and study at the only government high school located in
town. Youths also learned English from international volunteers and got their tour guide licences after a course with an NGO. Three years later, Shu established Sapa O'Chau Travel, the first ethnic minority-owned tour operator with international tour operator licence. Lonely Planet featured it.

In 2016, Ms. Shu landed on the cover of Forbes Vietnam “under 30” list. The same year, she helped Sapa O'Chau obtain international accreditation from World Responsible Tourism Awards 2016 (Silver) and World Tourism for Tomorrow Awards 2016 (Finalist). This year, Sapa O'Chau Travel Social Enterprise is formally renamed to reflect its new social enterprise status.

Ms. Shu was one of the model citizens commended by the Central Government. Sapa O'Chau won the Blue Swallow award given by Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It is a finalist for World Responsible Tourism - SDG8 and 12, awaiting final results.

Today, Sapa O'Chau has evolved from a charity tourism business into a business that trades beverages and brocade in the popular hill town of Sapa in northern Lao Cai province in Vietnam. The company is made up of four inter-connected parts: boarding facilities to help students who would otherwise not be able to complete their education due to financial or geographical limitations, a café, a H'mong handicraft store, and tours.