

HOANG PHUONG MAI*

**THE TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL OF THO HA ANCIENT VILLAGE:
CULTURAL VALUES AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES¹**

***Abstract:** The article positions cultural values as the central analytical axis for reconstructing the traditional festival of the ancient village of Tho Ha across key dimensions: the value of preserving cultural space and collective memory, the value of indigenous belief practices, and the value of folk artistic expressions. Accordingly, the festival is interpreted as a “living heritage”, reflecting the adaptive capacity and flexible resilience of community culture within contemporary society. In the context of rapid socio-economic transformation and administrative boundary changes, the Tho Ha festival is facing multiple challenges: the erosion of sacredness and distortions in ritual practice; the commercialization and spatial transformation of the festival environment; pressures related to the environment, infrastructure, and public order; gaps within the management mechanism; and the potential loss of cultural identity. Responding to these practical demands, the article proposes several solutions aimed at safeguarding and promoting the festival’s values, ensuring harmony between tradition and modernity, and contributing to the preservation of the cultural identity of Tho Ha village in particular and the wider cultural landscape of the Kinh Bac region in general.*

***Keywords:** Traditional festival, Tho Ha village, cultural value, contemporary context.*

Date of submission: 28/9/2025; date of receipt of peer reviewer comments: 10/11/2025; date of approval for publication: 19/11/2025.

* Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Email: maihp.vass@gmail.com.

¹ The article is the result of the 2025 Institutional-level Science and Technology Project titled: “Traditional Festival in Tho Ha Ancient Village, Van Ha Commune, Viet Yen Town, Bac Giang Province”, chaired by Dr. Hoang Phuong Mai, Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies.

Introduction

Traditional festivals have long been recognized as integral components of Vietnamese cultural identity, reflecting not only the richness of spiritual life but also preserving distinctive historical, artistic, customary, and ritual values. Throughout history, numerous festivals, both major and minor, have been formed and distributed across the country, closely associated with rural communities, craft villages, ancient towns, and cultural-religious centers. Despite the pressures of globalization and industrialization, festivals continue to demonstrate remarkable vitality, attracting large numbers of local residents and visitors from afar.

In alignment with the flow of national cultural heritage, the traditional festival of Tho Ha ancient village stands as a representative case of safeguarding and revitalizing cultural values in the contemporary context. Tho Ha, historically known as a renowned ceramic craft village in the midland region of Northern Vietnam, later became famous for producing rice paper wrappers, grilled rice paper, and rice noodles. In addition to its tangible heritage (see Hoang Phuong Mai, 2024: 55), Tho Ha preserves a rich repository of intangible cultural heritage, with its annual village festival serving as a prominent testimony to this legacy. Held annually from the 20th to the 22nd of the first lunar month, with the 21st being the main festival day (the deification anniversary of the village tutelary deity), the festival includes ritual processions, worship rites dedicated to the village deity and the craft ancestor, alongside various cultural performances such as festival drumming, Quan ho (*quan họ*) folk singing on the Cau River, classical Tuong opera (*tuồng*), *sinh tiền* ritual dance, and traditional folk games (To tom card game, cockfighting, wrestling, Chinese chess, etc.). Thanks to its enduring vitality and strong communal significance, the Tho Ha Festival was inscribed as a “National Intangible Cultural Heritage” by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Decision No. 5079/QĐ-BVHTTDL dated 27 December 2012).

The festival unfolds within the spatial setting of the ancient village situated along the Cau River, encompassed by a complex of nationally recognized heritage monuments such as the communal house (*đình*), the Confucian shrine (*từ chi*), and Doan Minh Pagoda. These are complemented by the antique village landscape including the traditional village gate, river wharf, old houses, and walls constructed from fired ceramic shards which collectively evoke the architectural ambience of premodern Vietnamese rural settlements. At the center of the festival is the cult of Taishang Laojun (Laozi), the preeminent figure of Chinese Daoism, who is venerated by Tho Ha villagers as their *Thành hoàng* (village tutelary deity). According to Sino-

Vietnamese archival materials preserved at Tho Ha Communal House, the image of Laozi refining the elixir and tending the eight-trigram kiln resonates strongly with the imagery of ceramic artisans firing clay in traditional kilns. In many craft villages, cosmological concerns involving fire, earth, water, and geomancy are deeply sacred, making the syncretism between an exogenous Daoist deity and indigenous craft-based worldviews a unique characteristic of the local belief structure. The choice of this deity reflects the broad worldview of a community historically engaged in extensive interregional trade networks. They required a guardian possessing universalized authority capable of offering protection for both production and commerce. In addition, the communal house of Tho Ha also enshrines Dao Tri Tien, the legendary craft ancestor of ceramic making, whose merit is honored through procession and worship rituals during the festival. The Tho Ha Festival thereby constitutes an “open cultural space,” where belief systems, craft traditions, and communal memory intersect. This space not only preserves the cultural essence of the ancient village but also mirrors the social standing and adaptive agency of Tho Ha residents within the broader socio-economic and cultural networks of the former kinh Bac region.

Over several decades, traditional festivals have attracted substantial attention from scholars in the social sciences. Foundational studies have examined their origins, ritual structures, and especially their cultural values. Dinh Gia Khanh (1989), in a seminal work on Vietnamese folklore, asserted that festivals represent “high points” in communal cultural life, where distinctive ritual forms and folk performances converge. The imagery of festivals reveals communal aspirations toward auspiciousness and collective well-being. Nguyen Chi Ben (2013: 13), approaching festivals from a theoretical perspective by analyzing their structure, constituent elements, and inter-elemental relationships, argued that “Vietnamese culture is not discontinuous from its traditional cultural stream; rather, it continually incorporates elements of traditional culture, particularly festivals.”

Within the domain of craft villages, several studies highlight the link between the cultural functions of festivals and traditional village economies: the rise of market-oriented production does not equate to the abandonment of traditional values and norms. Ritual frameworks embedded within festivals serve as cultural templates guiding communal cultural activities. Maintaining social cohesion through ritual practices is vital for the development of craft villages, where production and business are strongly community-based (Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh 2006). The resurgence of ritual practices and festivals since the 1990s – when numerous architectural

monuments such as communal houses and pagodas were restored – coincides with improved economic conditions in many craft villages (Ta Long et al. 2007: 209). For the particular case of Tho Ha, Hoang Phuong Mai (2024), through an analysis of the village's cultural characteristics, has demonstrated the interrelationship between tangible heritage (architecture, communal institutions, craft heritage) and intangible heritage (festivals, beliefs, customs). She argues that the festival embodies culturally distilled values accumulated over generations, including lifestyle patterns, craft traditions, belief systems, and folk arts, all of which influence the ethos, sentiments, and identity of the community-ultimately shaping the distinctive cultural profile of Tho Ha in contrast to neighboring communities.

The study of the Tho Ha traditional festival is thus not only crucial for identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also illuminates contemporary sociolect-cultural challenges. In particular, since July 1st, 2025, pursuant to Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 of the National Assembly on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units, Tho Ha formerly part of Van Ha Commune, Viet Yen Town, Bac Giang Province – has been incorporated into Van Ha Ward, Bac Ninh Province. As the “cradle” of Kinh Bac culture with a dense concentration of traditional festivals, this administrative transformation promises expanded opportunities for Tho Ha to connect more deeply with the cultural landscape of Northern Vietnam. However, it simultaneously introduces new challenges related to heritage management, preservation, and festival development. Issues such as updated heritage regulations, changes in toponyms, shifts in administrative authority between the former Bac Giang and the new Bac Ninh jurisdictions, along with ongoing trends of commercialization and tourism expansion, call for urgent scholarly attention and practical solutions.

Employing ethnographic methods combined with interdisciplinary approaches drawn from cultural studies and sociology, we conducted participant observation at several iterations of the Tho Ha Festival in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Interviews were carried out with Tho Ha residents of diverse ages, genders, and occupations, as well as with visitors attending the festival, ensuring a wide and balanced range of empirical data. This study also draws upon prior scholarship on traditional festivals, Kinh Bac cultural heritage, and Tho Ha craft village, alongside state policy documents on the safeguarding and promotion of cultural heritage values. Based on these sources, the research aims to identify and analyze the most salient value of the Tho Ha Festival – its cultural value – as an element that continues to exist, evolve, and adapt within contemporary society, especially amidst administrative reorganization following the

merger of Bac Ninh and Bac Giang provinces. This is a transformative period marked by economic, cultural, and social changes, necessitating holistic strategies for preserving and sustainably developing the festival in alignment with local and national cultural–social orientations.

1. Cultural Values of the Tho Ha Festival

Several scholars argue that festivals embody three fundamental categories of value: cultural, social, and economic (Dinh Gia Khanh 1989; Ngo Duc Thinh 1993). Within the scope of this study, the author focuses primarily on the cultural dimension, employing a cultural-analytical lens as the interpretive framework to elucidate the constitutive elements of the festival. First, the Tho Ha Festival is essentially a synthesis of cultural space and communal memory, reenacting legends associated with the worshipped figures and expressing aspirations for a prosperous and harmonious society. Second, the festival affirms spiritual values, belief systems, communal norms, and social relations, functioning as mechanisms for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge to succeeding generations. Third, the festival embodies the aesthetic and creative capacities of local people through its rich repertoire of folk arts. Positioning cultural value as the analytical core thus allows for both a deeper understanding of the traditional essence of the Tho Ha Festival and the formulation of policies aimed at sustainable preservation and development that harmonize tradition and modernity.

1.1. The Value of Preserving Cultural Space and Communal Memory

In preparation for the festival, Tho Ha villagers spend several months adorning sacred spaces, arranging ritual paraphernalia and offerings, and organizing folk games. Human resources are allocated into various groups and committees, each assigned systematically and trained with meticulous care. During this period, the village is permeated with an atmosphere that is both solemn and expectant – anticipating a key communal event. This distribution of tasks reenacts the organizational model of the traditional Vietnamese village, a form of “soft institution” where each individual has a role and responsibility. Such organization fosters social cohesion through voluntarism and shared belief rather than administrative mandates. Consequently, the festival reinforces community socialization and effectively preserves traditional cultural spaces and collective memory.

The ritual procedures of the Tho Ha Festival follow a sequential structure: the *cáo yết* ritual (performed on the 19th day of the first lunar month to petition the deities

for permission to open the festival), during which incense is kept burning continuously on the altar; on the 20th occurs the *tỉnh sinh* ritual (offering an animal such as a chicken or pig) and the *moc duc* ritual (ritual bathing of statues or spirit tablets). On the 21st – the main festival day – the most striking component is the grand procession. Leading the procession are groups bearing the national flag, festival flags, drums and gongs, followed by dragon and lion dancers; ceremonial musicians; performers of *sinh tiền* dance and silk-ribbon dance; then child attendants (*Tiên đồng, Ngọc nữ*) and the three deities of Blessing – Prosperity – Longevity (*Phúc, Lộc, Thọ*). Next comes the incense palanquin, the *bát bửu* sacred insignia, and an impressive troop formation symbolizing ancient martial spirit. At the heart of the procession is the main palanquin carrying the Deity (Taishang Laojun), followed by the palanquin of the Lady Deity, the craft ancestor's palanquin, and the male and female ritual officiants, all dressed in traditional attire. Behind them march Buddhist devotees from the pagoda and the group carrying ritual offerings. Two offerings are particularly distinctive: the palanquin of the sacrificial ox and the palanquin featuring the “flying phoenix.”

The sacrificial ox-roasted to a deep golden hue-is positioned in a kneeling posture on a large elaborately decorated palanquin, carried by eighteen young men, symbolizing the village's prosperity and reverence for the deity. The “flying phoenix,” crafted from a large rooster with wings outstretched and legs extended backward as if in flight, is placed atop a tray of white sticky rice, symbolizing the village's aspirations for enduring prosperity. These rituals, along with the procession groups, construct a sacred dramaturgy that transports participants into an imagined ancient society, fostering a profound sense of connection with ancestors and deities.

Upon the return of the palanquins to the communal house, the worship rituals commence. The system of rites includes the *textual* components (invocation, liturgical texts, petitions), musical components (ritual music, drums, *sinh tiền* dance, gongs), and ritual offerings. The officiating system comprising the chief officiant (*chủ tế*), vice officiants, temple guardians (*ông từ*), representatives of village lineages, donor families, and the broader community – collectively conducts the ceremony. The most distinctive component is the ox-offering ritual. The ox, carried ceremonially into the communal house, is placed centrally before the incense table. Before the offering, the chief officiant and village elders perform purification rites, prayers, and proclamations explaining the meaning of the “ox sacrifice for military reward” (*tế bò khao quân*), symbolizing martial strength and the communal memory of defense. The earlier procession of “troops” is metaphorically reenacted, recalling the village's mytho-

historical narratives of settlement and protection. After the formal ceremony, the “military reward” continues through the communal sharing of the ox meat among the village’s age associations (*giáp*), representing communal redistribution and the egalitarian sharing of blessings characteristic of Vietnamese folk culture.

A representative of the 2025 Festival Organizing Committee remarked: “*Our Tho Ha Festival offers richness and uniqueness in every ritual. Sacredness and the traces of antiquity reside in every character and custom. Some details are recorded in archival documents stored at the communal house; others are transmitted orally, often imbued with mystery and metaphor, sometimes unverifiable – fragments of collective memory passed down through generations. Our ancestors’ aspiration was for abundance and sufficiency; regardless of hardship, they were always optimistic. All these ideals are expressed in this festival*” (Nguyen D. Th., male, 61, Tho Ha village, interviewed in February 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, Pierre Nora (1984) argues that *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) are tied to the social groups that create and maintain them, while communal spaces crystallize memory into symbols and rituals within specific settings. In Tho Ha, the festival space functions as a locus where the collective memory of the craft village is reenacted through both tangible elements (communal house, pagoda, village gate, river wharf, palanquins, offerings) and intangible elements (rituals, music, beliefs, collective emotions). This interweaving creates a “framework of collective memory”, enabling residents to recognize their origins, ancestors, craft traditions, and cultural identity. This is evident in the fact that villagers – whether ceramic artisans, rice-paper makers, respected elders, small traders, or migrant laborers – return for the festival. Their participation in preparations, rituals, processions, and festive activities reflects not only reverence but also social solidarity. Such shared participation exemplifies *communitas*, cohesion, and belief: during the festival, individuals symbolically return to their roots and collectively extend the living thread of memory into the fut–re.

1.2. Religious and Belief Values

Festivals in general and Vietnamese folk festivals in particular are deeply imbued with spiritual and religious significance. Truong Thin (1993: 208) asserts that attending a festival is an expression of reverence and engagement with the sacred values of the homeland and nation. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian cultural theorist, posited that “festivals (of all forms) are primordial expressions of human culture. Their origins cannot be fully explained by practical needs, labor objectives, or periodic rest;

festivals embody profound worldviews and human ideals. They derive not merely from labor or material means but from existential ideals, spiritual aspirations, and philosophical conceptions of life” (cited in Nguyen Quang Le 2011). At the Tho Ha Festival, the fluid syncretism between folk beliefs, Confucianism (ritual etiquette, ceremonial dress, liturgical texts), Buddhism (chanting, processions to the pagoda), and Daoism (Laozi as tutelary deity) reflects the “Three Teachings sharing one origin” which produces a multilayered belief system in local spiritual life.

The ritual architecture comprising the communal house, pagoda and Confucian shrine not only serves as the setting for festival rituals but also functions as the structural core of cultural – religious life. Tho Ha communal house, constructed between 1685 and 1692, enshrines Taishang Laojun as the tutelary deity and Dao Tri Tien as the craft ancestor. From the communal house, all major rites are performed, illustrating the intimate relationship between belief systems and the village’s socio-organizational structure. Adjacent to the communal house is Doan Minh Pagoda (dedicated to Buddhist worship), the Temple of the Mother Goddess (a place for offerings, healing rituals, and popular belief practices), and the Confucian shrine, dedicated to Confucius and seventy-two scholars from the village who passed imperial examinations. Collectively, these sites form a “sacred circuit”. Thus, in the Tho Ha Festival, religious spaces both sacralize spiritual values and operate as cultural institutions that allow the community to express, preserve, and recreate belief systems across generations. While belief is embedded within the broader category of culture, it occupies a core sacred position; culture, in turn, provides the expressive medium through which belief is enacted. This synthesis sustains the enduring vitality of the Tho Ha Festival in contemporary society.

During the festival days, nearly every household prepares ancestral offerings; family members return home even from distant places. Villagers believe that this is a sacred moment of the year when the tutelary deity, craft ancestor, and familial ancestors all return to witness and bless the community. This practice is not only a customary tradition but also an expression of spiritual connection and reverence. Hence, even those working far from home strive to return for the festival, seeking both communal joy and spiritual renewal. Ancestral altars are adorned with fruit trays, flowers, and offerings akin to preparations for the Lunar New Year. A local resident explained: *“For us, the festival is even more important than Tet. It is not only for enjoyment but also a sacred occasion when the entire village turns toward its roots. In the atmosphere of incense smoke and drumbeats, we feel more deeply the connection*

between everyday life and the sacred” (Le Huu Th., male, 48, Tho Ha Water Station, interviewed in February 2025). Thus, the Tho Ha Festival is not merely a commemoration of deities and craft ancestors but also a moment for reinforcing the spiritual bonds within families and lineages. Offering incense, preparing ritual food, and maintaining ancestral etiquette function as forms of “communication” with the spiritual world – a space where ancestors are believed to watch over and protect their descendants.

1.3. The Value of Folk Art

The festive component of the Tho Ha Festival reflects the dynamic interplay between folk practices and traditional performing arts. Alongside familiar popular performances and games such as festival drumming, *sinh tiền* dance, *Tổ tôm* card game, cockfighting, and wrestling, the most salient artistic expressions are *Quan ho* folk singing and *Tuong* classical opera. *Quan ho*, recognized by UNESCO as an element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, transcends its identity as antiphonal folk singing when situated within the festival’s ritual environment. Tho Ha maintains longstanding cultural ties with traditional *Quan ho* villages such as Viem Xa (Diem Village), Hoai Thuong, and Lim. These connections foster a highly refined and distinctive form of *Quan ho* within the festival.

For three consecutive days, male and female singers don traditional attire silk tunics, turbans, and flat palm hats and perform antiphonal exchanges at the communal house courtyard, on boats along the Cau River, or within the precincts of Doan Minh Pagoda. The boat-based *Quan ho* performance is particularly significant not merely as an artistic display but as a liminal ritual of communion between humans, nature, and the sacred. This contributes to social cohesion and reinforces the festival’s role as an expanded cultural space for *Quan ho*.

Alongside *Quan ho*, *Tuong* classical opera constitutes another vital expression of living folk culture. Unlike many localities that rely on professional troupes, the *Tuong* performances in Tho Ha are enacted by villagers themselves. Historically, this practice has been maintained through local *Tuong* guilds (*phường Tuồng*), where artisans across generations train regularly. Tho Ha is home to *Tuong* artisans recognized by the State with the honorary title “Excellent artisan”, underscoring the artistic value and cultural contribution of the community.

Preparing for festival performances requires months of rehearsal mastering vocal techniques, stylized speech (*nói lối*), gestures, and especially traditional martial

choreography, which constitutes a defining expressive language of *Tuong*. According to Duong Nguyet Van and Giap Thi Ha (2023), Tho Ha's *Tuong* repertoire predominantly consists of courtly plays extolling loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, and moral virtue, reflecting long-standing ethical norms in traditional Vietnamese society. The performing style of Tho Ha *Tuong* is deeply embedded in folk aesthetics: singing, movement, costume, and performance space are closely integrated with local belief practices and everyday social life.

The Tho Ha Festival thus functions as a communal cultural institution where art, belief, and society interact, ensuring that folk performance traditions remain embedded within their living context. In an era of globalization, when many traditional values face erosion, the continued practice of folk arts such as *Quan ho* and *Tuong* at the Tho Ha Festival carries exceptional significance. The festival operates not merely as a "living museum" of heritage but as a dynamic space for cultural reproduction and transformation. These activities create promising avenues for sustainable cultural tourism, where heritage is authentically practiced and driven by the local community itself thereby enhancing Tho Ha's cultural distinctiveness and competitiveness within the broader spectrum of Northern Delta festivals.

2. Cultural Adaptation of the Tho Ha Festival in the Contemporary Context

The Tho Ha Festival represents a form of "living cultural heritage", in which the community simultaneously reenacts its historical memory and affirms its collective identity through ritual practices and folk arts. Since the launch of the *Đổi Mới* (Economic Renovation) in 1986, rural Vietnam has undergone profound transformations, not only in terms of material living standards but also in the revitalization of domestic and communal ritual practices. However, as noted by Ta Long et al. (2007: 195-196), pre-1945 ritual forms have not simply been restored; rather, they have been selectively reinvented and reconfigured. In this broader context, although the pottery craft the historical foundation of Tho Ha's economic and cultural identity has largely declined, the community continues to preserve essential ritual elements of the festival, including the sacred legends, procession rites, sacrificial ceremonies, and the network of sacred spaces such as the communal temple, Doan Minh Pagoda, Confucian shrine and local shrine as well as the community's collective memory. Upon this cultural foundation, new components have been thoughtfully incorporated: cultural performances, sports competitions, exhibitions of contemporary village products, and community-based tourism promotion. Such dynamism illustrates a mode of "heritage preservation through adaptation," in which the Tho Ha villagers

act as central agents both custodians of tradition and negotiators of change. The integration of new elements into the festival is driven by community initiative and consensus, demonstrating an internal capacity for recalibration essential to maintaining heritage continuity.

The festival's organization also highlights the community's agency through a highly socialized financing model. Funding comes primarily from local households and Tho Ha natives living elsewhere, while local authorities mainly support administrative supervision and permits. This "State-People co-management" model reflects the increasing salience of cultural self-governance. Nevertheless, coordination between stakeholders is sometimes inconsistent or insufficiently professional, leading to challenges in managing commercial activities, maintaining sacred space, and ensuring environmental sanitation. These issues reveal the need to strengthen community-based cultural governance.

From a cultural-economic perspective, the festival is increasingly intertwined with market mechanisms. Historically, pottery products displayed during the festival were both commodities and symbols of artisan lineage prestige. Today, as pottery production fades, villagers leverage the architectural charm of the ancient village to promote other local specialties-such as rice paper rolls, baked rice crackers, sweet soup, and traditional confectionery. Small household stalls contribute simultaneously to preserving culinary heritage and increasing income. According to the Van Ha Commune People's Committee Report (2025), visitor numbers have increased significantly: approximately 12.000 visitors in 2023; 8.000 visitors in 2024 despite the absence of formal processions; and over 15.000 visitors during the 2025 festival. This "ancient-village tourism integrated with traditional festivals" model demonstrates its effectiveness, enhancing both heritage safeguarding and socio-economic development.

The Tho Ha Festival thus functions as a unique cultural tourism product, where visitors experience material heritage, intangible cultural expressions, and community life within an ancient village landscape. The festival's cultural value also lies in community branding: strengthening the village's reputation, generating positive media effects, and cultivating local pride. Notably, Bac Giang Provincial Radio and Television collaborated with Vietnam Television to produce documentaries and features such as *S Viet Nam – Treasures of Tho Ha Village*, *Ethnic Colours: Tho Ha Village*, and *Check-in Vietnam: The Ancient Village of Tho Ha*, all of which have amplified the visibility of local heritage. These media initiatives illustrate the

community's proactive and flexible strategies in safeguarding and promoting traditional festival values amid contemporary transformations.

3. Emerging Challenges in Safeguarding and Promoting the Cultural Values of the Tho Ha Festival

Based on fieldwork and prior studies, Le Hong Ly et al. (2014: 25-26) argue that ritual practices and folk performances in traditional festivals are continually transmitted across generations, wherein obsolete components are eliminated while new, socially relevant elements are assimilated. This perspective supports the selective-preservation approach commonly advocated in heritage management. However, a critical issue arises when cultural officials-not the community itself-determine which traditional elements are "valuable" and which are "outdated," sometimes disregarding local perceptions.

In Tho Ha, under rapid modernization, internal tensions have intensified, particularly between preservation and development, between the sacred and the secular, between cultural values and commercialization, and between collective memory and contemporary tastes. These tensions manifest through shifts in ritual practices, spatial organization, and participant behavior. The following issues are particularly urgent:

First, the erosion of sacredness and the distortion of ritual practices within the festival space. In recent years, visitor numbers have exceeded the village's capacity, resulting in overcrowding along narrow lanes, waste accumulation, loud noise, and heavy joss-paper smoke in the communal house and pagoda areas. The sacred landscape-historically a locus of communication between humans and the divine-has increasingly been secularized as some visitors attend merely to take photos, seek entertainment, or engage in superficial acts of fortune-seeking. While similar problems occur in many Vietnamese festivals, the spatial constraints of Tho Ha's riverside ancient village intensify these pressures.

Moreover, several inappropriate forms of spiritual practice have emerged, including fortune-telling services, commercialized votive offerings, and even spontaneous spirit-mediumship (*lên đồng*) rituals performed at the local Mother Goddess shrine-despite the fact that the village's deity is *not* associated with the Vietnamese Mother Goddess Worship tradition but refers instead to the biological mother of the village's tutelary deity. These practices were strictly prohibited by the 2025 Festival Management Board because they deviated from the core heritage values

of the festival. If not properly regulated, such hybridized and profit-driven forms of spirituality risk distorting the sacred structure and undermining the authenticity of the Tho Ha Festival.

Second, the risk of commercialization and distortion of the festival's cultural space. Commercial activities in recent festivals have expanded beyond traditional craft and food stalls. Local products—once central markers of village identity—are increasingly overshadowed by low-quality mass-produced goods and children's toys imported from China, many of which imitate violent weapons (plastic guns, swords, spears). Disturbingly, these stalls appear not only at village gates but even within the sacred courtyards of the communal house and pagoda. In addition, gambling-like games of chance have proliferated, degrading the dignity of the festival. Culinary commercialization also presents problems: traditional dishes are increasingly displaced by fast food such as ice cream, milk tea, sausages, or grilled skewers—favored by younger visitors but incongruent with local identity. Weak supervision allows these trends to reshape the festival into an eclectic, less culturally meaningful event.

Third, environmental, infrastructural, and community-safety pressures have intensified. During festival days, traffic congestion frequently occurs along the dike road, village gates, and Nguyet Duc ferry. Waste—including plastics, disposable containers, joss-paper remnants, incense ash, and wastewater—pollutes heritage spaces and the Cau River. Insufficient parking, sanitation facilities, waste-collection systems, and crowd-control measures pose risks of accidents and undermine the dignity of a festival recognized as National Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Fourth, gaps in governance and intersectoral coordination have emerged as systemic problems. The committee responsible for festival rites works alongside local authorities, but the absence of a unified governance framework for commerce, tourism, environmental protection, and ritual management has led to fragmented oversight. As commercial actors, media organizations, and informal groups become increasingly involved, the festival now operates within a multi-layered network that lacks effective coordination. Without a clear legal framework and professional management, the festival's cultural authenticity and visitor experience may degrade.

Fifth, threats to authenticity and the erosion of ritual integrity have become increasingly evident. The pressure to “perform” for tourists and media outlets has encouraged the simplification, rearrangement, or even omission of sacred rites. In 2025, for instance, the traditional post-sacrifice thanksgiving rite (*lễ tạ*) which customarily follows the ox-sacrifice ceremony was postponed and ultimately canceled

because organizers prioritized welcoming delegations and accommodating media schedules. As villagers gradually internalize these new festival rhythms, many now participate only in the procession and the ox-sacrifice ritual before returning home for family gatherings, inadvertently contributing to the disruption of ritual continuity. Such modifications raise a critical anthropological question: when tourist experience and media visibility take precedence over religious practice, can the festival still retain its sacred character? This phenomenon reflects broader cultural transformations in market-oriented Vietnam, where the symbolic and sacred dimensions of ritual life are increasingly overshadowed by performative demands and commercial imperatives.

Sixth, administrative restructuring following the provincial merger has generated new forms of uncertainty. Under the National Assembly's 2025 Resolution on administrative reorganization, Tho Ha was reassigned from Bac Giang Province to Bac Ninh Province. This realignment has far-reaching implications for heritage governance, including the transfer of administrative authority, the updating of heritage dossiers, the revision of conservation plans, and the reallocation of cultural budgets. While Tho Ha had previously occupied a central position in Bac Giang's cultural-tourism strategy, its relocation to Bac Ninh one of Vietnam's most heritage-dense provinces, home to major sites and festivals such as the Lim Festival, Den Do Temple, Dau Pagoda, Phat Tich Pagoda, and Ba Chua Kho Temple renders the village vulnerable to being overshadowed. As provincial resources are increasingly concentrated on high-priority regional projects, institutional attention and financial support for Tho Ha may become comparatively limited. These emerging challenges highlight the necessity of strengthening community agency and participatory governance to ensure that the Tho Ha Festival retains its distinct cultural identity within the broader and highly competitive Kinh Bac cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The traditional Tho Ha Festival represents a vibrant crystallization of the Vietnamese village cultural landscape, where religious belief, folk performing arts, and collective memory converge into a coherent cultural whole. For centuries, the festival has not only served as an occasion to honor the village's tutelary deity but has also functioned as a mechanism for preserving identity and reinforcing social cohesion, reflecting the enduring vitality of local heritage amid the historical vicissitudes of the nation. In today's context of rapid socio-economic transformation and administrative restructuring, Tho Ha faces both new opportunities for expanding

its heritage connectivity and significant challenges, including commercialization, ritual attrition, distortion of sacred space, and insufficient oversight in festival organization.

To safeguard and meaningfully enhance the cultural values of the Tho Ha Festival, a set of sustainable and integrated measures is essential. (1) Restoring cultural norms and the sacred spatial order including reinforcing ritual solemnity, ceremonial discipline, and the preservation of traditional rites, while transmitting folk knowledge to younger generations is vital for maintaining the “collective memory” that forms the core of local identity. (2) Commercial activities must be regulated to prevent excessive commodification, ensuring that trade, publicity, and tourism development remain properly planned, with transparent benefit-sharing among community members, businesses, and local authorities. Economic activity should become a resource for sustaining heritage, not a force that distorts cultural values. (3) Digitalization and the creation of a comprehensive heritage database should be prioritized, accompanied by training programs for young practitioners and the formation of successor networks of artisans and ritual specialists. These initiatives are central to safeguarding and disseminating the cultural values of Tho Ha in the era of digital transformation. (4) Strengthening governance mechanisms and regional linkages is crucial, positioning the Tho Ha Festival not merely as a heritage asset of a single locality but as a key node within the broader Kinh Bac cultural landscape. Such an approach would enable the festival to contribute more effectively to regional cultural connectivity and expand the visibility of Tho Ha’s heritage beyond administrative boundaries.

In practice, without coordinated interventions involving multiple stakeholders local communities, policymakers, cultural managers, and researchers traditional festivals are at risk of falling into commercialization, disorder, environmental degradation, and cultural decline. Thus, the organization and governance of the Tho Ha Festival today should not be viewed solely as an issue of religious belief or cultural custom but as a broader challenge of local cultural governance in an era of transition toward a tourism and service-based economy. Achieving a balanced relationship between preservation and development, between sacred values and economic imperatives, and between tradition and modernity will serve as a key indicator of the festival’s “cultural adaptive capacity” a new form of value that the Tho Ha Festival must affirm within the ongoing currents of integration and change./.

References

1. Nguyen Chi Ben (2013), *Traditional Vietnamese Festivals: Structure and Components* (Lễ hội cổ truyền của người Việt, cấu trúc và thành tố), Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
2. Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh (2006), “Transformations in Ritual Life in the La Phu Craft Village, Hoai Duc, Ha Tay” (Những biến đổi trong đời sống lễ nghi ở làng nghề La Phù, Hoài Đức, Hà Tây), *Anthropology Review*, No. 4: 15-24.
3. Nguyen Quang Le (2011), *Việt Identifying Cultural Identity Through Vietnamese Traditional Festivals* (Nhận diện bản sắc văn hóa qua lễ hội truyền thống người), Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
4. Ta Long. (Ed.), Tran Thị Hong Yen, Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh (2007), *The Development of the La Phu Craft Village* (Sự phát triển của làng nghề La Phù), Hanoi : Social Sciences Publishing House.
5. Le Hong Ly et al (2014), “Safeguarding and Promoting Cultural Heritage in the Process of Modernization...” (Bảo tồn và phát huy di sản văn hóa trong quá trình hiện đại hóa...), *Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Vietnamese Society*, In: *Di sản văn hóa trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại*, Hanoi: Tri Thức Publishing House.
6. Dinh Gia Khanh (1989), *Exploring Vietnamese Folk Culture (Trên đường tìm hiểu văn hóa dân gian)*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
7. Hoang Phuong Mai (2024), “Cultural Values and Emerging Issues in the Ancient Village of Tho Ha” (Văn hóa làng cổ Thổ Hà: Những giá trị và vấn đề đặt ra), *Anthropology Review*, No. 6: 54-66.
8. Nora, Pierre (1984), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Paris : Gallimard. English edition: *Realms of Memory*, edited by Laurence D. Kritzman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York & Chichester: Columbia University Press.
9. People’s Committee of Vân Hà Commune (2025), *Quarter I 2025 Socio-Economic Development Report*, No. 108/BC-UBND, dated 21 April 2025.
10. Truong Thin (1993), *Festivals and Tourism in Vietnam* (Lễ hội và du lịch ở Việt Nam), In Dinh Gia Khanh & Le Huu Tang (eds.): *Traditional Festivals in*

Contemporary Social Life (Lễ hội truyền thống trong đời sống xã hội hiện đại), Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.

11. Ngo Duc Thinh. Ed (1993), *Regional Cultures and the Cultural Zoning of Vietnam* (Văn hoá vùng và phân vùng văn hoá Việt Nam), Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.

12. Duong Nguyet Van & Giap Thi Ha (2023), “Characteristics of Tho Ha Classical Opera” (Diện mạo nghệ thuật tuồng Thổ Hà (Bắc Giang)), *Journal of Arts and Culture*, No. 2: 77-80.

Tóm tắt**LỄ HỘI TRUYỀN THỐNG LÀNG CỔ THỔ HÀ: GIÁ TRỊ VĂN HÓA VÀ NHỮNG VẤN ĐỀ ĐẶT RA TRONG BỐI CẢNH ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI****Hoàng Phương Mai***Viện Dân tộc học và Tôn giáo học**Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam*

Tóm tắt: Bài viết đặt giá trị văn hóa làm trục phân tích để tái hiện lễ hội truyền thống làng cổ Thổ Hà trên các phương diện: giá trị bảo tồn không gian văn hóa và ký ức cộng đồng, giá trị tín ngưỡng và giá trị nghệ thuật dân gian. Qua đó, lễ hội được xem như một “di sản sống”, phản ánh khả năng thích ứng linh hoạt của văn hóa cộng đồng trong xã hội đương đại. Trước bối cảnh chuyển đổi mạnh mẽ về kinh tế - xã hội và thay đổi địa giới hành chính, lễ hội Thổ Hà đang đứng trước nhiều thách thức: sự suy giảm tính thiêng và biến dạng trong thực hành tín ngưỡng; thương mại hóa và biến đổi không gian lễ hội; áp lực về môi trường, hạ tầng và an ninh trật tự; khoảng trống trong cơ chế quản lý và nguy cơ mai một bản sắc. Từ yêu cầu thực tiễn đó, bài viết đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm bảo tồn và phát huy giá trị lễ hội, đảm bảo sự hài hòa giữa truyền thống và hiện đại, góp phần gìn giữ bản sắc văn hóa của làng Thổ Hà nói riêng và không gian văn hóa Kinh Bắc nói chung.

Từ khóa: Lễ hội truyền thống, làng Thổ Hà, giá trị văn hóa, bối cảnh đương đại.