

# Renovation or Maintaining: Conflicts and Negotiations in Festival in a Village in Northern Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses upon gender relations in a particular village in Northern Vietnam, based on analysing a performance activity that is part of the village pagoda festival. In the context of *đổi mới* (the period of renovation), wealth capacity is lauded and the village women, who are excellent businesspeople, have increasingly gained respect within the community. This has been an instrumental factor facilitating a completely new activity for the women in one of the village festivals. Their achievements demonstrate their creativity and entrepreneurship, and their contribution to the village's renovation-oriented identity economically and in other spheres. The conflicts and negotiations, however, show the complexity of the gender relations in their village. While socio-cultural developments have provided women with more opportunities, challenges remain resulting from lingering prejudices that are thought to have been completely wiped out.

**Keywords:** Festival, conflict, negotiation.

**Subject classification:** Cultural studies

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the gender conflicts and negotiations demonstrated through festival activities in an ancient village in a Hanoi suburb.

One would agree that gender and sex are two different concepts<sup>2</sup>; gender issues always relate to differences in positions and power. Gender matters exist in daily life and festivals provide an arena to showcase

these issues. As gender is definitely dominated by socio-cultural factors, gender issues evident in festivals are, in essence, the very social matters facing the village at present. Based on the link between gender issues and cultural practice apparent in the village pagoda festival, the authors would like to clarify this gender identity and illustrate how the village identity has been created in the context of commercialisation. In addition, the authors would like to prove that the

socio-cultural characteristics of the location on which the research is based have promoted gender equality for women, but there are still challenges that are not easy to overcome.

## 2. Village and the pagoda festival

Nanh (known as Ninh Hiep Village nowadays) is located in Gia Lam District, Hanoi City, close to the border with Bac Ninh Province. In the past, it got the Sino-Vietnamese name of Phu Ninh (or Ninh Trang, for a period). In the bibliographies available at present, Phu Ninh was first mentioned in the “Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden” (*Thiền uyển tập anh*), a Buddhist biographical work on the schools of the Zen and famous monks in Vietnam, which dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Phu Ninh was located in the area of Dong Ngan District, Tu Son Prefecture. While Tu Son Prefecture was referred to as the “land of literature” according to the book of “Bac Ninh Geography”<sup>3</sup>, Dong Ngan District was considered “the land of highest knowledge”. Today, traces of a past Confucian culture are still evident in daily village life.

Nanh became a multi-craft village very early. Thus, almost all various activities done by people in ancient Kinh Bac (previous name for a region in the north of Vietnam which now includes Bac Giang and Bac Ninh provinces) can be found in the village. Main activities done by the village people were agriculture, handicrafts, and trade. In particular, the area became famous for its herbal medicinal products and, later on, leather goods. At the same

time, the Nanh inhabitants were traditionally experienced in trading, not to say famous for their commercial activities. The “Bac Ninh Geography” book also referenced the local characteristics of Dong Ngan District remarking that there were “many tradespeople in the village”. Commercial activity was, however, considered the job of women, hence this is why the local women have always retained this particular status in the village (Le Manh Nam, 2005, pp.64-72).

Blessed with an advantageous strategic business location, the old market of Nanh Village, called Nanh market, dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It soon became a well-known busy centre for the exchange of goods in the area, especially in the trade of textiles and medicinal plants. In addition, Nanh people went to trade in Thang Long Citadel and travelled to other northern provinces in order to expand their networks. In conclusion, Nanh is seen by Luong Van Hy and Unger (1998) as an example of a specialised Vietnamese traditional craft and trading village, where tradition was considered one of the factors that have the fundamental implications for the degree of a village’s market orientation (Luong, V. H. and Unger, J., 1998, pp.61-93).

In the past, the people of Nanh carried out a wide variety of economic activities. However, trading stagnated severely during the centrally planned economy period, although some spaces were open due to the ineffectiveness of the mechanism for the “informal sector” (Guha-Khasnobis, B. et al., 2006). Following *đổi mới*, and especially the opening of the Vietnam-China border in the late 1980s (Beresford et al., 2001), trading was restored, becoming a driving

force in the economic growth of the village in general and the households in particular. Nanh is evidence to support Pettus' opinion (2003) that Vietnam's economic liberalisation resulted in an unprecedented increase in the number of small-scale trade activities carried out by women, similar to the situation in post-socialist Eastern European countries<sup>4</sup>. Nanh was one of the leading locations in Northern Vietnam, and possibly the whole of the country, in terms of economic development resulting from *đổi mới*. In particular, women played a pivotal role in this rapid development, holding the entire household economic power in the community.

Regarding cultural aspects, Nanh is going through many transformations, similar to the general changes taking place in today's rural areas in Vietnam (Luong Hong Quang et al., 2000, pp.15-23, 55-61). On the one hand, Nanh people have developed traditional and cultural practices at an unprecedented rate, but on the other hand, they continue to be influenced by industrial-urban cultural trends.

First of all, it is necessary to mention the high preservation of values of the village's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This is shown by the improvements made to historical sites and the active revival in traditional cultural and non-material activities (such as festivals, rites, religious practices, and daily folk performances). In addition, the community has adopted urban lifestyles. With the improvement in living standards, it is now a common trend for houses to be built following modern architectural designs and equipped with the latest household facilities/appliances; people enjoy high-quality forms of entertainment,

participate in high-cost sporting activities, raise expensive animals as pets, and ornamental plants, holiday in high-end resorts, and hold family feasts at luxurious restaurants, and so on. It is not unusual for them to tour Asian countries (such as Singapore, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, China, and Malaysia) as well as travel around Europe and the United States of America. In the Nanh area large-scale ecological parks, spread over many hectares, have been built and equipped with a number of services to meet the local cultural and non-material demand, including the holding of performances by famous singers, dancers, and comedians of Northern Vietnam. Such changes in the sphere of cultural activities follow the general trend in all suburban villages (Ngo Van Gia et al., 2007; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2003, pp.15-20; Le Du Phong et al., 2002), but in Nanh they have been taking place at a much greater extent.

Located in the north of Vietnam, which is considered "the kingdom of festivals" (Tran Dinh Luyen, 2005, p.28), Nanh Village holds a well-known festival called the Phap Van Pagoda festival, also called the Nanh or Ca Pagoda festival. Phap Van Pagoda is more popularly known as Nanh Pagoda (henceforth referred to as Nanh Pagoda in this paper). It is one of the biggest pagodas in Vietnam for worshipping four Dharmas (natural phenomena worshipped by the ancient Vietnamese people: Dharmas of the clouds, rain, thunder, and lightning). The pagoda's annual festival is held on the fourth to the sixth days of the second lunar month; characteristics of this event closely relate to the theme of this paper.

Nanh Pagoda festival used to be called the Dai (lit. Big/Great/Major) festival. Before the 1945 August Revolution, it was regarded as a festival of not only the village, but also the whole canton, attended by the governor of the zone which incorporated some provinces as well as the canton itself. It was held in the Nanh Pagoda yard, considered a sacred site where the *thạch sàng*, i.e. “the stone bed” is located. Legend has it that it was where Kalacarya, an Indian Priest (*Già La Đồ Lê* or *Khâu Già La*) made a stopover during his missionary journey. In addition to large-scale worshipping rituals, many performances were held as part of the festival to attract visitors. The most interesting was the “lifting the *phan* tree” (*nâng cây phan*), which was linked to agricultural worship. 60 bamboo trees were bundled together and tied with eight bands made of bamboo bark belts and a red flag was attached to the top of the bundle. Young men, standing inside a circle formed by 36 young girls representing female military leaders, tried to lift the bundle with sticks. This activity is no longer performed at the festival. Instead, the symbolism of female military leaders has been replaced by the processional ritual from the communal house and shrines to the Nanh Pagoda, while the image of the young men lifting the bundle with sticks is represented by a martial arts display by village elders.

After the August Revolution, due to influential opinions that societies are all developed in the manner of evolution - from lower to higher levels, such festivals were discouraged as they were considered to be superstitious and costly. As a result,

many completely disappeared or their activities were scaled back. The Nanh Pagoda festival was no exception. However, during *đổi mới*, owing to the changes in the Party’s and the Government’s viewpoint on cultural issues, the festival was restored in all its glory. Some of Nanh’s prominent and elderly villagers were invited to recreate the festival, incorporating its fundamental original elements whilst also adapting it to make it relevant for the modern day. A retired senior police lieutenant-colonel in Hamlet 2 was appointed the person in charge of the arrangements. The festival outline was presented in an official document that was reviewed and approved by the relevant authorities.

More than 30 years have passed since that first proposal was made to resurrect the festival. Over the years, significant changes have since been made to the Nanh Pagoda festival and local villagers have contributed billions of VND towards the event’s annual budget. The organising board uses the money to fund cultural and sporting activities for the people.

Traditional music bands which take part include: the *chèo* band of the Army’s General Department of Logistics (*chèo* is a form of traditional musical theatre, popular in northern Vietnam); the national troupe of *cải lương* (a form of folk opera from southern Vietnam); and the Bac Ninh *quan họ* troupe (a genre of folk music originating in Bac Ninh Province). Modern music bands also feature. In addition, many traditional sports are included, such as: wrestling, shuttlecock kicking, and Chinese chess. Modern arts and sports are represented by teams such as the national

Circus Troupe, and volleyball clubs which participate in national championships - the Vietnam Joint Stock Commercial Bank for Industry and Trade, the Army's Signal and Telecommunications Command, Air Defence Command, and Sport Club.

Until quite recently, the most outstanding feature of the Nanh Pagoda festival has in fact been the Le Ngoc Han thurification ritual performed by the middle aged and older village women. However, their performance revealed some present-day social problems in the village community.

### *2.1. Performance of the village women in the thurification troupe named Le Ngoc Han*

The troupe, which performs the thurification rite, was established by the older women nearly two decades ago. Their organisation used to be called the Nanh Elders' Club. However, once the Le Ngoc Han Temple opened in 2010, the members based themselves at the temple and hence renamed their troupe to the 18<sup>th</sup> century princess-turned-queen, whose mother came from the village. Remarkably, many of the members had been "outstanding" tradeswomen in Nanh during *đổi mới*. In other words, they are the very people who created today's wealthy image of the commune. It stands to reason that the villagers often refer to the troupe members as "seasoned wealthy women". In the past, they had a very strong determined business mindset and nowadays, they proactively strengthen the troupe's presence.

Their repertoire, in addition to the main spiritual performance of the thurification rite, includes: a theatrical performance of *hầu*

*đồng* (going into trance/spirit possession), song and dance performances, martial arts display, etc. They make equal efforts, including financial ones, in all activities, not just the main activity. Shortly after the troupe was formed local governments (at the district and the city levels) started inviting the women to perform at important public holiday events and big festivals all over the country. A particularly notable performance took place at the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Thang Long - Hanoi, in the square named after King Ly Thai To, in front of the monarch's statue.

It was in 2013 when the troupe first asked the Nanh local government and the abbot of Nanh Pagoda if they could perform at the festival. As to why the troupe members decided to put forward such a proposal at that specific time, their leader explained that all the members felt it was the most appropriate time to suggest the idea. *Firstly*, the troupe was well-known and recognised in the society. *Secondly*, the Nanh Pagoda festival had changed significantly over time, becoming more open to the inclusion of new ideas; thus, it was an opportunity to showcase the troupe's creativity. After their proposal was approved, the members drew up a programme and a theatrical scenario, which they rehearsed thoroughly. The acts included "*hầu đồng* dance", "fan dance", "martial arts dance with sticks", "flag dance", "couple's dance", and "group dance". Of these, the most noteworthy were the (modern-style) dances. The troupe had specific reasons for performing their acts. The "*hầu đồng* ceremony" is a regular ritual performed at the Mother Goddess

sanctuary located at the back of the Nanh Pagoda every first and fifteenth days of the lunar calendar. The “fan dance”, “martial arts dance with sticks”, and “flag dance” related to the *phan* tree bundle-lifting ritual (previously mentioned in this paper) in the original pagoda festival in times past. Meanwhile, the [modern-style] dance of couples and groups are forms of modern entertainment highly regarded in today’s society. At the same time, it was felt these performances would make the festival more attractive. The troupe first performed in the pagoda yard on the evening of 17 March 2013 (i.e. the sixth day of the second lunar month). Advanced publicity sparked the villagers’ curiosity and many were eager to watch the performance. It attracted a large audience who were surprised and excited about the festival programme. For the subsequent some years, people eagerly continued to watch these festival performances. Herein, the authors would like to discuss further about why the troupe participated in the Nanh Pagoda festival by performing these entertainment acts rather than the thurification procession/ritual, which had previously been the main activity. In reply to this question, the troupe members explained that the procession was not allowed to take place inside the pagoda, since the official rite (the rite with six votive articles offered for worship) was conducted by the monks from the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. During the festival, however, the troupe carried out the thurification rite in other places, such as Trung (lit. Middle/Central) Shrine, which is another place of worship in Nanh Village.

To conclude therefore, the performance of the Le Ngoc Han troupe took place at the pagoda festival for over half a decade, bringing the feel good factor to many local people. However, in 2019 their performance was removed from the festival activities at the pagoda. Nowadays, the women perform at the village stadium, where the pure “festival” (*hội* - lit. merrymaking) activities are held on the occasion of the village festival.

## 2.2. Gender conflict

As soon as the troupe’s performance was first included in the pagoda festival programme in 2013, a conflict arose. According to the village male elders, including some members of the Ritual Organising Board, the women’s performance incorporated some activities deemed inappropriate for the festival. They were labelled as being “deviated from traditions/mixed with exotic elements” and “upsetting”; and therefore would “destroy the festival” and also “ruin the cultural tradition of the village”. One man complained to the authors: “It cannot be so! It is the pagoda yard, but not the yard of those women’s houses!” What they were being criticised for was their dance performances. The reason for the criticism was the discourse on the tradition of cultural essentialism where individuals are categorised, for example into groups, leading to commonly held beliefs, generalisations and stereotyping.

When it came to the dance performance, many local people, especially young women, considered dancing to be an officially acceptable and healthy artistic activity that brought an interesting, unique, and modern element to the festival. One of

the troupe members complained: “Those who sang in *quan họ* tunes are ridiculous. Why don’t people condemn them? They performed both *quan họ* songs and songs of melancholy by the pond, where water puppetry shows are often held, in front of the pagoda. They come here from other places just to earn money. They can do whatever they want while we, the village people, are scrutinised for giving a performance for the local people”. One villager who supported the performance, said briefly: “Dance is a civilised and respectful activity that has already been accepted by the entire society”. In addition, many people were of the opinion that the village had always been the vanguard of progress both in the past and present day. Thus, it was completely reasonable to make changes to the pagoda festival. Some people affirmed: “Especially, our village women are inherently famous for their proactivity and openness!”

The reaction of the village men led to difficulties in retaining the troupe’s performance.

Initially, the men asked the women to alter their performance, to make it “appropriate to the pagoda”. Specifically, they asked the troupe members to wear modest costumes to ensure their bodies were fully covered, and not to perform the couple’s dance. They explained: “This is the pagoda yard, so it is not possible for them [the women] to wear what they want for the performance; and there shall not be anything related to the “male-female relationship””. Later on, they asked the women to cut down the length of each act. A member of the Ritual Organising Board explained to the authors: “They have to

give a shorter performance. It is impossible for it to last the whole evening.” In fact, those who opposed the performance wanted to impose even more restrictions, but they were not able to completely remove it from the festival programme since many locals held it in high regard.

Furthermore, the women encountered other obstacles due to behind the scenes manipulation by those who opposed them. When the members first wanted to learn how to dance, they asked Mr Ton, a villager who worked as a dance teacher in cultural centres in Hanoi, to give them dance lessons. He was also a member of the Ritual Organising Board of Nanh Pagoda. Seeing the situation, he decided to stop teaching the women. As a result, they had to hire a teacher from downtown Hanoi. When talking to the authors Mr Ton explained why he stopped giving the dance lessons. He was, unfortunately, the subject of a rumour going round that he took advantage of the dance lessons to touch the women’s bodies. This rumour was being spread particularly by some elderly men who were opposed to the dance performance taking place in the pagoda yard. Mr Ton conceded: “It is sometimes easy but sometimes difficult to do things in our village. Regarding the dance lessons, it was better to hire an outsider so as to avoid bad rumours.” In addition to Mr Ton’s experience, a story about Mrs Can is also popular in the village. Mrs Can was a comparatively wealthy woman with an outgoing personality. Although she had bad health and was often sick, she was a very enthusiastic and outstanding member of the women’s troupe. Her performances were

often selected to be the main ones in their shows. Recognising her talent, she liked to perform the *hầu đồng* dance. In 2013, the audience showered her with praise when she performed “A Cloth-Selling Girl” (*Cô Đói bán vải*). She was even more successful in classical dance. Also in 2013, she and her male dance partner, a fellow villager, were cast as the lead couple in the dance performance. In order to achieve the success they did, they had been trained for a long time in many prestigious dance clubs. Their performance was as brilliant as those performed by the famous city dancers, who were also invited to take part in the festival. This was one of the reasons for the high praise lavished on them. However, after the festival, Mrs Can’s husband and children asked her not to perform any more. At first, she refused but then her husband fell sick, or at least professed to be ill. Many times he told her that he could no longer carry on living if she did not give up her part in the performance. Eventually, she made concessions; however, it was later discovered that the male members of the village cycling club had incited her husband to get him to stop her performing the dance. He had secretly been to see the performance when he made his decision.

Meanwhile, troubles befell not only those who directly gave the dance lessons (Mr Ton) and those who personally took part in the performances (Mrs Can), but the troupe’s leader was also affected.

The woman in charge was very efficient at directing all activities ever since day one. The whole time, however, her husband never agreed with her involvement as the troupe was constantly

bringing in new performance ideas, and he could not stand the changes these older women were making. It is, therefore, not surprising that her husband was one of the men who strongly opposed the dance performance in the pagoda yard during the festival. However, having a strong personality, she was determined not to give up. As a result, she and her husband almost separated, yet she continued designing lively performances. By the time this paper was written, the relationship between her and her husband had not improved.

Directly related to the above-mentioned conflicts is the position of gender roles in the context of this village that has developed into a trade village thanks to outstanding strength of the women.

As previously mentioned, the village has traditionally been famous for its trading activities. This practice has been retained and developed further once its agricultural production completely stopped (from the early 2000s farmland was used for other purposes). In addition to the cessation of agricultural production, many other traditional crafts were replaced by trading activities. Owing to the resourcefulness and wisdom of the local women, as well as the long-standing trading tradition, the village has become one of the areas with the most outstanding economic development in the country. In the past, Nanh women were famous for their commerce, but they have become even more renowned for their present day economic achievements. Due to their gains, the position of women in Nanh is far different compared to that of females in other areas. And, in actual fact it is the men who are now facing challenges. With



the local women becoming extremely powerful in trade, the men are increasingly becoming dependent on their wives. They have to face the dichotomy that wives, as the breadwinners, earn the money to cover all the family expenses, while the husbands take care of the housework and children. This has put a strain on family life. Many of the local men revealed that although the husbands take charge of looking after family-related and household matters, in reality, it is in fact their wives who make the final decisions on important issues. One man said: "On the whole, that is the matter of money. Wives earn money and manage the budget... when we want to do something, we cannot do it if our wives tell us that there is no money, or there is, but not enough to spend on the matters." Similarly, the influence fathers have on their children has drastically reduced. Another man revealed: "Children are now very practical. Whenever they need something, they just ask their mother for money. Thus, they are more obedient to their mother." To avoid feeling dependent on their wives, some men tried to get jobs outside the village, no matter what the jobs were. However, due to the particularity of their wives' work, they eventually had to give up their jobs so they could take care of the children and the home.

One of the areas, however, where men have been able to affirm their position and balance out the gender relationship, relates to rituals. In daily life, all activities involving family rites and ceremonies are managed by men. In regard to lineage activities, men will discuss and take decisions. Similarly, in the past, the pagoda

festival was managed by men; in general, women did not play any significant role in the proceedings. Thus, the recent and increasing participation of women in the festival has become a problem for men. In the context, in which women are the breadwinners, men have become known more for their role in the ritual activities. Thus, they find it difficult accepting the women's encroachment on their domain.

As women earn money, they exert significant power over village activities compared with other local areas. Owing to this power they can carry out whatever activities they like, despite the men's objections. The participation of women in the festival activities, however, meets with the men's resistance in the context of restructuring the local Confucian cultural model. The restructuring shows that when women age and retire from their business activities they end up returning to the role of housewife.

Before the August Revolution in 1945, deeply held Confucian viewpoints in Vietnam greatly impacted on women. At that time, they had to comply with the moral principles of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues". Due to the influence of Marxist feminism (which, to a certain extent, was attached to the political viewpoint), after the August Revolution, women have been held in high regards, but also encountered more pressure. A typical motto for women during this period was "being good at both social and family affairs". In the *đổi mới* period, gender equality was seen as one of Vietnam's significant achievements. However, returning to the issue of Confucian viewpoints, gender

inequality maintains its silent presence in family life. As Nanh has become a community centred totally on trade, women now play an increasing role due to their influence in business. At the same time, they have to satisfy the criteria imposed on them in the village, which include being able both to do business and take care of their husbands and children.

Being the breadwinner and looking after the family mean that women have to return to the world of housework as soon as they give up their business activities (they have to completely stop when they are considered old), despite the fact their business work has given them benefits and a comfortable existence.

In regard to the biological aspect, as a generalisation and stereotypically, old age is often associated with an inevitable decline in physical strength, intellectual capacity/brainpower, state of mind, and so on. Physically, the elderly are considered to be frail. In terms of brainpower, a commonly-held belief is that they have memory loss and poor thinking ability. When it comes to state of mind, their personality is said to deteriorate, although personality is viewed as something enduring (Neugarten, B. L., 1977). Despite these above-mentioned inevitable states of decline, what makes 'old age' is determined differently by each society. With regard to older people who work, society still has preconceptions which stem from the commonly-held view that elderly people physically and mentally decline and/or they no longer want to continue working. This is, however, an overly generalisation; while it is true for some, it does not apply to everyone.

It is not surprising that the same prejudices that surround old age and the elderly who work remain alive in Nanh. Like people in many other village communities, those over 50 years of age are considered old, even if they are still very healthy. Getting married at an early age means they became grandparents in their late 40s/early 50s. Those who have turned 49 years old, heading into middle age, are classed as being of early old age. Thus, many people are considered old even though they are still intrinsically young, i.e. in terms of health status, physical appearance, state of mind, and so on. For women, it is considered inappropriate for them to continue with business activities once they "become old".

According to the opinions of local people in Nanh, the elderly are considered to be neither healthy nor clear-headed. At the same time, they are too cautious and consequently focus excessively on security. Such traits are not suitable in the business world. On the other hand, the villagers also think the elderly are no longer blessed with good fortune, and that any success and prosperity they would continue to gain are [infringements from] those of their children. Another point of view held by the villagers is that if a person still carries out business activities when old, their children will be seen as irresponsible for 'letting' the parents carry on working [whereas they should rest], or the individual themselves will be considered greedy. In conclusion, for the above reasons, it is unavoidable that, despite good physical and mental health, women in the village have to resume taking care of the home and the family so that their children can concentrate entirely on business.

At an age considered to be old, all the village women share the same feeling that they have become 'superfluous and redundant' and since they are no longer considered suitable for the business world, their relevant experience is not seen as valuable. Children refuse to follow their parents' business experience as they assume that "the present business is completely different from the past one". According to some studies, this trend is also quite common in many other local areas. Vu Hoa Thach wrote in his research: "... at present, children rarely ask their elderly parents for advice or the best solution to the issues they encounter in life" (Vu Hoa Thach, 1992, p.49).

As a matter of course, almost all members of the thurification troupe gave up their business activities at the age of 50, although they were definitely not old, physically or mentally. While many of them said that it was somewhat fairly reasonable for them to stop their business work at that time, but it was not quite what they expected. One member revealed: "We find it impossible to stay at home all the time when we are still so fit and healthy". Realising that they were still more than capable of doing business, some of them carried on to a certain extent into early old age. Then, they took more part in social activities as a way to relieve pent-up feelings. Therefore, looking at the performance of the Le Ngoc Han thurification troupe from this standpoint, the authors suggest it shows the women's aspirations, closely related to the discourse on gender issues and old age, as well as their practical status in the village. Yet, it is not easy to make their dreams come true,

due to the opposition they face when entering "the world of men".

Obviously, the women's dance performance as part of the traditional festival displayed their wish to confront the Confucian model with the participation of women at an age considered old. However, they encountered strong opposition from men, who felt the women were trespassing on their turf (bearing in mind the context where men stay at home to take care of housework, while women go out to work). This resulted in the gender conflicts illustrated in the aforementioned situations involving the Le Ngoc Han thurification troupe's performance in the festival.

### *2.3. Negotiations and gender-related limitations*

After the first dance performance, the troupe members faced long-lasting pressure from the opposition and therefore had to be flexible in their ideas in how to continue the dancing performance in the pagoda festival.

Hence, immediately after 2013, the couple's dance was replaced by a same-sex couple's dance, in which one of the two women dressed as the man. Consequently, the dance performance was able to remain part of the festival. In terms of costume, they retained their colourful and beautiful dresses but had to cover their legs with knee-length leggings (although the dresses were certainly not short).

They continued their dance performances whenever the festival took place, while disagreements between them and the men in opposition still smouldered.

Then, in 2019, the troupe leader made the unexpected decision to move their

performance from the pagoda yard to the Nanh stadium. At the same time, a major change was made to the format of the performance. Instead of the couple's dance the members just performed the group dance in which they stood in a line, moving in unison to the music.

The change in location is said by the authors to be unexpected because it was not due to an unavoidable issue or a force majeure situation, but rather it was based on presumptions held by the different parties involved including the troupe members and their opponents.

In reality, the women could have continued dancing in the pagoda yard if they had wanted to. However, the troupe leader took this decision as she planned to pursue a long-term renovation-oriented development of their activities. She explained: "To do this, it is necessary to get wide support from local people. I think it will be disadvantageous if we encounter opposition all the time, but no one can criticise us if we give the performance at the stadium. Those who like our performance will come to the stadium to watch it. Moreover, there will be new audiences." In brief, she thought the troupe would encounter difficulties in other activities if they continued performing in the pagoda yard, plus there could be a negative impact on their reputation. In fact, her decision could lead to new opportunities. After being persuaded at several meetings, all the members immediately supported their leader's decision. Together with moving the performance site, she also asked the local authorities to allocate a room for them in the newly-built sports complex (in

the past they had previously based themselves in part of Le Ngoc Han Temple).

"It is so good now", the troupe leader explained. She believes the troupe has better conditions due to a number of factors, including the following: in addition to the room officially allocated to the troupe, the local government promised to provide stage props for their performance; it seems promising that the performance will continue for a long time; and the members are united after initial disagreements, etc. In fact, their first performance at the stadium during the festival in 2019 was strongly advocated by local people, with both material and non-material support. The money donated for the performance amounted to VND 50 million. All the members felt happy with their performance. When the authors interviewed one member who had at first not agreed with moving the performance site to the stadium, she admitted that the decision turned out to be "not too bad". At first she thought "no one would come to watch the performance" because there were just young people playing combat sports at the stadium. However, surprisingly, many villagers came to cheer on the troupe. The encouragement really excited her. Yet, she still felt regret as she considered the pagoda yard the centre of the festival where all visitors came, while maybe not all of them would go to the stadium. She concluded that it was a good temporary move, but she hoped for an opportunity to perform at the pagoda again. In conclusion, the decision for the thurification troupe to perform at the stadium during the festival was seen as an "amicable" solution by all the parties,

although there were different levels of satisfaction. Men supposed “it was appropriate”, while women felt pleased since it “still attracted an audience from the village”. At the same time, the local authorities “sighed with relief” as the conflict between the two parties had been dealt with. The year 2019 can be seen as a landmark period asserting the long-term reasonableness of this activity of the women amidst the community’s festival activities. Although the village socio-cultural context, in which women are respected, enables women to give a performance seen by men to be out of the framework of the festival, the adjustments that had been made afterwards to the performance show the limitations of the women’s rights in the local community. As described above, the constraints are more or less related to the government’s stance on the cultural practice in festivals, something which can be interpreted in different ways depending on the circumstance. The authors found that in this locality the situation partly matches the assessment made by Atkinson and Errington in their research on gender relations in Southeast Asia (1990), which supposes that subtle differences in power and positions between men and women still remain, although gender equality can be easily seen (Atkinson, J. M. and Errington, S., 1990).

### 3. Conclusion

Through this paper, the authors have aimed to highlight some aspects of gender relations by analysing one particular performance of

one of the festivals in an ancient Vietnamese village. In the context of *đổi mới*, wealth capacity is praised and more respect has been shown to the women of Nanh. It has been a key factor facilitating their participation in the pagoda festival, which was a new project for them. What they have achieved partly demonstrates the identity of these active, creative, and enterprising women and as well as contributing to the village’s renovation-oriented identity, in economic and other spheres. The conflicts and negotiations, however, show the complexity of gender relations in the village. Although women have more opportunities due to socio-cultural changes, challenges due to past stereotypes still remain in the vicinity. In other words, it is an example which demonstrates that “the masculine” is still valued higher than “the feminine” in the area, where past stereotypes seem to have been wiped out completely (Dyt, K., 2006). This is always a noticeable obstacle facing these self-assertive village women. As a result, they are now walking a fine line between their own aspirations and meeting the social expectations in the somewhat male environment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was published in Vietnamese in *Nghiên cứu Văn hóa*, số 3, 2020, then developed into this English version. Translator: Nguyen Tuan Sinh. Language editor: Stella Ciorra. The paper is a part of the ministerial-level project “Festivals in Ninh Hiep, Gia Lam District, Hanoi: Invention of Tradition in the Modern Context” chaired by PhD Nguyen Giao.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper “sex” is referred to by its biological definition, while “gender” is defined as a social construct.

<sup>3</sup> The same information is also provided in Section: Geography in “*Categorised Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties*” (*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*) by Phan Huy Chu (Phan Huy Chu, 2007, p.118).

<sup>4</sup> In Vietnam, like many other areas, small-scale trade activities are usually associated with women, as this activity is considered appropriate to women’s visual thinking abilities (Leshkowich, A. M., 2011, pp.277-290). In reality, “the relatively thriving small trade activities in pre-1954 Northern Vietnam were in the hands of women” (Bui Quang Dung, 2009, p.86).

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