

## TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TAY AND NUNG TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS IN THE FAR NORTH REGION (VIET BAC)\*

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The traditional festivals of the Tay and the Nung peoples have much in common with the festivals of other peoples in Vietnam. The similarities are found in the festival purposes, the rituals, the timing and the festival spaces. These elements *are critical to the creation of community power, and feelings of co-existence and sympathy* (Ngo Duc Think, 2001, p. 7). The reason for these similarities is that those traditional festivals stem from wet-rice cultivation. Like other cultural and spiritual events, however, festivals of a people are usually directly influenced by historical, social, economic and geographical settings. Therefore, the festivals of the Tay and the Nung peoples, apart from sharing festival traits common to all of Vietnam, also have their own typical cultural features.

### 1. Categorization of the Tay and Nung Festivals

Based on ethnological field data and publications, the festivals of the Tay and the Nung people can be classified into four types:

- Agricultural festivals, such as the *Long tong festival*, the *Nang Hai* or *Nang Trang festival*, *prayers for good crops*, *prayers for rain*, and *worshipping of the forest*. Religious festivals, such as festivals held in the *communal house* and the *Buddhist temple*.

- Love song festivals involving *Sli* and *Luon singing*.

- Martial arts festivals, such as the “*hoi tranh dau phao*” (*the Fire-cracker seizing festival*).

These festivals are generally held in the spring and autumn, during the crop time and what is considered the cosmic times for festivals. A festival usually lasts three to four days. Some festivals are carried out on a regional scale, such as the *Long tong* festival, and the *Nang Hai* festival.

#### 1.1. Agricultural Festivals

Agricultural festivals of the Tay and the Nung people vary from one region to another in terms of date and organization.

*Long tong* in the Tay and the Nung language means *going to the rice paddy*. To mark the beginning of a new crop, the annual *Long tong* festival is usually held on a spring day and is celebrated by a few hamlets or even an entire region, attracting tens of thousands of visitors. These festivals are often arranged to be held in succession, so that people from one village can visit the festivals of other villages.

The festival has two components: the ritual procedures and the festival activities. It varies from place to place whether the festival organizer is a *Thai dinh* (communal house keeper) or the Agriculture God priest.

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It is conventional for families to offer feasts in the early morning of the festival opening day. These feasts are held before an altar decorated with a bamboo pole that is covered in red paper, either in front of the temple or in a dry paddy. Before the ritual, a procession will invite the Divas, the Agriculture God, and the Village Spiritual Protector from the communal house to attend the ritual ceremony in the paddy. The ritual leader, *Thai dinh*, wearing the ceremonial dress, respectfully conducts a ceremonial prayer to the Agriculture God for a good crop. After that are the festival activities, including traditional games such as lion dances, tug-of-war, wrestling, and *con* (a small colourful stripped ball) throwing and catching.

Contrary to the *Long tong* festival, which is held during the day atop a high mountain, in a rice paddy or in the temple foreground, the *Nang Hai* festival is often held on a moonlit evening in bad crop years due to natural disasters such as drought, flooding, and pests. The festival is offered during the first lunar month of the year, and sometimes last from mid-January to mid-March of the lunar year. The purpose of the festival is to pray to Mother Moon (as opposed to the Agriculture God) for good crops and peace for the villagers during the coming year.

A popular belief of the Tay and the Nung people is that the moon is home to Mother Moon and her twelve fairy daughters who take care of the world's crops. The *Nang Hai* festival includes rituals, songs and parties to invite Mother Moon and her daughters to visit the world to receive

symbolic offerings of good harvests and grains before going back to the moon. In exchange, Mother Moon will sympathize with people's wishes. It is conventional for a kind lady from a happy family in the village, who can sing many folk songs, to be chosen for the role of Mother Moon. Ten young, beautiful, virtuous girls will play her fairy daughters. Mother Moon will train them in traditional *luon hai*, moon gliding melodies, which will be sung on the festival evening. A pavilion will be set up in a large rice paddy or in front of the temple, and inside the pavilion will be decorative *khao quang* and *bjoc-lom* flowers. Above the alter is a large piece of red or black cloth with a drawn and embroidered yellow or white crescent in the centre. On each side of the pavilion is a row of tables for placing feasts and offerings that the families bring. This is the folk stage on which the villagers meet Mother Moon.

The festival performances as well as the festival content all resemble agricultural activities. The festival is run by a prestigious *then* lady who, in ceremonial red dress, will hold a ceremony on stage inviting Mother Moon to come down and be incarnated into the actress' body.

The main part of the festival evening is the singing-in-parts between Mother Moon and the villagers, expressing their wishes of peace and prosperity for everyone.

The festival ends up with Mother Moon scattering handfuls of white parched rice, symbolizing the seeds she has left for the villagers, while making spells to wish them all the best. People compete for

picking up these “*heaven seeds*” for good luck (Tran Quoc Vuong et al., 1976).

The rain-prayer festival, held from late March to early April of the lunar year, is similar to the *Long tong* festival. The festival takes place by the riverside, with such games as boat rowing, boat rowing competitions, and swimming, with the purpose of praying for rain, good crops, more livestock and a wealthy and happy life.

The annual festival for worshipping the forest is held in a forbidden forest at the village entrance from late January to early February of the lunar year. It lasts for two to three days, and is attended by only males. During this time all production activities are brought to a halt. On the first festival day, people hold a ceremony of thanks-giving and prayer to the divine Earth Genie. The arbiter, with all of the male villagers sitting behind him, is a prestigious old man who is a master of the ceremonial prayers. He will pronounce the name of every villager and report to the Earth Genie on deaths, births, marriages, immigrants, emigrants, the status of the village livestock, and the cultivating land of the village, so that the God is well informed and can care for and protect the villagers. After the ritual, the participants sit at the ceremonial place to discuss some common issues of the village.

It is a rule that families from other villages and regional inhabitants from different ethnic communities are also allowed to participate in that festival, provided they follow the village regulations, such as not letting their livestock and poultry harm other people’s crops and not cutting

down trees in the forest. The later days of the festival are for games and tournaments among the villagers or between villages.

### ***1.2. Temple and Pagoda Festivals***

Due to the influence of Viet (Kinh) culture, some Buddhist temples are also present in the Tay and the Nung communities. In addition, there are various temples and shrines dedicated to national heroes and heroines, such as Tran Hung Dao, Hai Ba Trung, and Dinh Tien Hoang, as well as temples dedicated to various mountain and water gods. Visitors offer burn incense during those festivals, praying to the gods for protection and care of their families, good health, and prosperity in the New Year.

### ***1.3. Fire-cracker Seizing Festival***

Featuring a martial arts spirit, and appreciation of good health, this festival is held in Cao Bang and Lang Son provinces, with the game of seizing the firecracker in hopes of blessing.

The festival has two main parts: the rituals dedicated to Heaven and Earth conducted at the Happiness Altar, and the festive activities including many joyful games such as lion dances, setting off fire-crackers, and martial arts performances. The most important performance is the fire-cracker seizing. A head-shaped circle covered in red stripes is placed on the fuse of another big fire-cracker, set atop a fire-cracker tree that is made up of many surrounding fire-cracker chains. When all the fire-crackers are set off, the circle is projected high into the air. The surrounding young people compete to seizing the circle, and the one who catches the circle

and bows before the Happiness Altar three times first will be recognized as the winner (Nguyen Thi Yen, 1998, p. 3).

#### ***1.4. Sli and Luon Singing Festivals***

*Sli* and *Luon* are two forms of love duets, sung between Tay and Nung young men and women, and are usually held on market days in the spring. On those days, the young men and women often wear their best indigo-dyed dresses to the festival. Young men of one village often sing *Sli* and *Luon* with girls of another village, singing with great passion, and sometimes even lasting through the night. The audience is equally as passionate when listening to their heartfelt exchanges. The songs refresh memories for the elderly and enable a sense of repartee with the young people in love. During market days, young Tay and Nung people gather for singing, first making acquaintance with one another and second promising to meet again on the next market day. After many times singing together, they may fall in love and get married.

*Sli* and *Luon* have healthy elegant, melodic verses and lyrics that depict honest feelings, praise the native country and village, and honour innovative and hardworking labourers. They also honour love, desire for happiness and optimism.

## **2. Typical Features of the Tay and Nung Festivals**

### ***2.1. Expression of Ancient Beliefs through Ritual Forms and Festive Games***

The belief that every thing has its own soul is not only found among the Mon-Khmer, the Tang-Mien, the Hmong-

Yao, and the Viet-Muong people, but also can be seen quite clearly during the Tay and Nung festivals.

Agricultural festivals of the Tay and Nung share the concept that rice and buffalos have their own souls just like human beings. It is believed that ceremonies to worship the souls of these things must be conducted to have good crops and healthy buffalos and cows. If ceremonies are not conducted, there will be bad crops and life difficulties. The people argue that tired buffalo souls go away after seasonal hardships; a soul-returning ceremony is used after the end of the season to take the souls back into the buffalos so that they can work well in the next crop season. Ceremonies worshipping the souls of the rice and buffalos are part of the *Long tong* festival, apart from the general rituals. During such ceremonies, the Tay and Nung peoples often read spells about soul worshipping, soul training, and soul reunification, and then spells to welcome male and female buffaloes and buffalo calves (Le Trung Vu, 2001).

The celebration inviting the soul of *Nang Hai* to the world is a symbol of shamanism – a popular belief among people in primitive societies (Nguyen Thi Yen, 1998, p. 7).

“*Con*” *throwing and catching* is a fundamental game during the *Long tong* festival. A bamboo pole called a *phong con*, which is 15 to 20 meters long, is erected on the play ground in preparation for the game. On the top is a circle covered with red and yellow paper. The Chinese character representing *Sun* is written on the red side

and the character for *Moon* on the yellow side, representing the *yin* and the *yang*. The *phong con* bamboo pole is erected on the east - west axis representing both the agriculture belief in sunshine demand and the belief of *yoni - linga*, because the paper-covered circle represents virginity. The game also employs cloth balls stuffed with rice and decorated with cloth strips of various colors. It was the convention that every household made two balls, first to offer to the Agriculture God and then to use in the game. Men and women stand on either side of the *phong con* bamboo pole to throw and catch the balls. The person who breaks the centre of the circle with the ball is the winner of the game, and will receive a lot of luck during the coming year. The belief that breaking the central point of the circle means good crops also makes the villagers feel safe. The game will be replayed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of lunar January to alleviate fear of bad crops. As a rule, the winning ball will be worshipped at the village communal house. The ball can be slit to divide the rice among the people, in the belief that the rice is the seeds granted by the Agriculture God.

Tug of war is a game played between villages or hamlets, with each village team standing on one side in the eastern, the western, the southern and the northern directions. The game begins with two parties: the east and the west, implying *yin* and *yang* (the east is the sun and the west is the moon). The first three rounds are perfunctory, as the eastern party will surely win. It is believed that the victory of the eastern party represents that of the sun, and a good crop.

The lion dance is a popular game of the Tay and Nung peoples in northern Vietnam, with the number of lions ranging from one to tens from one place to another. This game is related to the belief of praying for rain to spread in Van Lang (Lang Son province). It is said that once upon the time, it did not rain for twelve straight years. When all of the animals and plants were dying from the devastating drought, a leopard and a monkey set off to find water to save every being. They kept traveling until they saw the mouth of a river full of water. The monkey and the leopard happily drank water from the river. At sunrise the next day, they saw a herd of strange, big, beautiful animals, with big jaws, coming from the sea. After recognizing that the animals were lions, they invited them to their home. The lions danced as a hello to all of the animals upon their arrival. All of the thirsty animals danced after them cheerfully into the forest. It rained heavily afterwards and soon refreshed the life in that region.

From that spring on, the leopard kept organizing lion dance days to pray for rain. After leopards became human beings, they still remembered the convention, and thus held lion dance festivals every spring to pray for rain. Nowadays, a village will invite a lion dance team from another village if they do not have one, and the “lions” process from the riverside waterholes, as the legend depicted.

In some places in Lang Son and Tuyen Quang provinces, there is a marriage game celebrating farming through the story of a fairy who married a farmer rather than someone doing another jobs (Co-authors,

1992). During the *Long tong* festivals in Ha Giang, Cao Bang and Tuyen Quang provinces, the festival host scatters seeds and speaks the names of the plain and sticky rice seeds, beans and maize seeds. After speaking the names of the seeds, they throw out a handful of coins for the people. It is believed that whatever kinds of seeds the people pick up will grow well during the year, and the more seeds they can pick up, the luckier.

The Tay festival of going to the paddies celebrated by people living by the side of the Red River and the Chay River featured the game of fencing and shielding in which people use swords to stab shields with their bodies pressing forward. Is it an image of sexual intercourse?

## **2.2. Polytheism and Mother Religious Practices**

All festivals of the Tay and Nung begin with the ceremony of asking permission before the deities who control the locality, such as the Earth Genie, the Water God, the Rain God, the Stone God, the Mountain God, and the Village Spiritual Protector. Those divinities are believed to be the embodiment supernatural power that directly influences agricultural production and people's health. In a primitive farming society, when natural phenomena were unexplainable, the Gods became the peoples' absolute belief.

Ritual ceremonies for the Gods during those festivals have many common procedures, including incense burning, introductions, offerings, horse feeding, and departing. For example, the *Long tong*

festival and the *Nang Hai* festival have the following things in common:

- They are held in a high, clean paddy where a priest performs incantations to locate the four main directions and to expel evil spirits. Villagers prepare offerings, including boiled pig's head or chicken, sticky rice and rice wine. The ceremony arbiter is a prestigious village leader, who takes care of the village communal house, or an experienced shaman.

- The ceremony begins with informing the gods, and asking for their permission to organize the village festival by choosing one side of a coin. At the same time, the villagers express thanks to the gods for providing good crops.

During the *Nang Hai* festival, after informing the gods, the people conduct a series of rituals praying for good crops and happiness. The festival also shows evidence of sun worship through its ceremony of inviting *Nang Hai* from the heavenly village down to the world to bring good crops and happiness to the villagers. In some places, the festival is accompanied by singing and dancing which describe the journey of a group of people to the heavenly village to offer flowers and ask Mothers Moon for seeds, breeding animals, and protection against pests.

Apart from holding a thanksgiving ceremony to the Earth Genie, Nung villagers also make offerings to the Forest Genie during forest worshipping festivals with a pig, a cock and a bottle of wine. The sorcerer has to conduct three speeches: inviting the Forest Genie to the festival,

asking him for help, and offering him the pig and the cock. The forest worship stems from the belief that people's existence is due to the favorable conditions offered by the natural setting. It is also believed that heaven and earth, mountains and forests all have their forefathers who protect the natural world for its continued development. Therefore, in addition to worshipping to the forefathers during the traditional New Year days as a symbol of thanks giving, the people worship and pray to the Forest Genie for his protection of their livestock and poultry development, as well as for good crops.

It is obvious that polytheism harkens back to the worshipping of the protective gods of the farming commune in the period of social transformation from the primitive age to the age of class society.

Mother worship originated from the tradition of reproductive mother appreciation. The goddess of reproduction is called *Me Bjooc* (Mother Flower) in the Tay and Nung language. It is believed by the Tay and Nung peoples that the heavenly Mother Flower is everyone's real mother while their worldly mother gives birth to them by order of the Mother Flower. People worship the Mother Flower in connection with women's childbearing period. The farming highlights women's roles by attributing the reproductive role to Mother Flower to form Mother Moon. The *Nang Hai* festival, featuring the worship of Mother Moon, is related to the method of mother worship mentioned above. The role of Mother Moon varies depending on the festival's specific form and content. She is

*put luong* (big Buddha), the mother who governs the Moon, or the person who takes care of all aspects of human life. In other contexts she can be Mother Flower, and many other mothers such as Mother Lan Ba, Mother Khac Co, Mother Bich Van, and Mother Ma Mi, which are altogether called *me Nang Hai* (Mother Moon Lady). Each of these mothers governs one aspect of agricultural production in the heavenly village and the moon village respectively. The ritual of offering flowers during this festival symbolizes the bringing of flowers to the heavenly village for Mother Flower, which is also seen in Luon Coi (Nguyen Thi Yen, 1998, p. 8). Some villages worship to Village Spiritual Protectors.

### 2.3. Reflection of Adopted Religions

Buddhism, one of the most popular religions of the Viet people, has had certain influence on the Tay and Nung, specifically with regard to their system of temples. The temple festivals are simply an offering of incense to Buddha. Some temples built by the Tay and Nung people, like those built by the Viet people, show evidence of polytheism in their arrangement and decoration. The Tien Temple in the Dai Tuong Grotto, Mai Pha commune, Chi Lang district (Lang Son province) has the Three Refuges placed in the centre, which is dedicated to the Great Buddha. The right hand room is dedicated to Saint Tran (Tran Hung Dao) in the higher position and Pham Cong (Pham Ngu Lao) in the lower position. By the main door are altars to the Holy Mother Buddha. The room to the left is dedicated to the souls of the Buddha who have passed away. The temple has eight main ceremonies, which are on the same dates as those held in the plains.

The Mau Son Temple, commonly called Trung Thien, in Tu Doan commune, Loc Binh district is dedicated to both the Heavens and the Buddhas. It is situated at the foot of the Mau Son Mountain (the Mother Mountain) whose two peaks are considered to be symbols of *yin* and *yang*. The temple festival is held every 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> lunar January, and includes many joyful games, including a weather forecast. Therefore, we can see that the festival is a mix between Buddhism and the agricultural belief of worshipping Heaven and Earth, *yin* and *yang*. In addition, the Tay people also build their village communal houses, which are mainly used to hold ceremonies to the Agriculture God, during the January *Long tong* festival. However, communal houses are built quite thoroughly, with the layout similar to that in the lowlands. The communal house festival is organized during the fourth month of the lunar year, with activities similar to those in the midlands. People sing both Vietnamese and Tay language songs, with rituals and parties in their communal houses.

#### ***2.4. Democracy and Equality in the Tai and Nung Festivals***

A distinguishing feature of the Tay and Nung festivals is their democracy and equality. Everybody enjoys the festival atmosphere no matter who they are: the poor, the rich, the lavish, and the humble. Visitors can participate in games, singing performances, and tournaments. Having parties at the communal house is also evidence of equality, as the people gather according to their age and gender, regardless

of status or titles. People also discuss community conventions during some festivals, such as the forest prayer festival of the Nung people, to which all participants feel free to contribute.

### **3. Some Comments**

- Based on size, the traditional festivals of the Tay and Nung peoples can be divided into two categories: village festival and inter-village festival. The village festivals, such as the forest prayer festival, the Buddhist temple festivals, the communal house festivals, and the martial art festivals, are common. The inter-village or regional festivals are exemplified by the *Long tong* festival, the *Mother Moon* festival, and the *Sli* singing festivals.

- These festivals are a form of religious activity that is deeply ingrained in the farming community. This can be seen through *yoni* and *linga* worship, rain prayers, sun worship, and expressions of returning to the original community.

- The festivals are held mainly in the spring while the number of festivals held in the autumn is few. Therefore, we know that the crops influence the organization of festivals. This timing can also explain the ceremonies held during the festivals to pray for good crops and for successful farming of mainly the spring crops, as well as the autumn crops.

- The festivals of the Tay and Nung are influenced by Viet culture. This can be seen through a series of Buddhist temples across the northern Vietnam Region from Lang Son, Cao Bang, to Tuyen Quang.

- Nowadays, many values derived from the traditional festivals of the Tay and Nung peoples remain important to the demands of a modern people and a modern society. It is a pity that a number of these festivals have not been held for a long time, and have potentially been lost forever. Therefore, the recent revitalization of the traditional festivals of the Tay and Nung peoples not only satisfies the people's spiritual demands, but also contributes to the construction and development of a progressive and multifaceted Vietnamese culture.



The Hmong ethnic group in the Northern mountainous areas of Vietnam.

Photo: Thanh Nguyen

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