

Beautiful Customs, Worthy Traditions: Changing State Discourse on the Role of Vietnamese Culture

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“In the first [lunar] month we celebrate New Year, in the second we gamble, in the third we flock to the festivals.”¹ Before the revolution, annual festivals related to agrarian rites or the worship of meritorious ancestors as village guardian deities held a significant place in Vietnamese village culture. With the consolidation of Party state power after 1954, however, festivals eventually came to be condemned as superstitious and wasteful relics of the old feudal system, and were subsequently banned from the agenda of village ritual practice. In 1957, an editorial in the Party mouthpiece *Nhan Dan* declared: “Rural festivals originating from the era of feudalism in form and contents can but perpetuate depraved customs”.² More than 40 years later, at the beginning of my second stay in Hanoi in 1998, large hand-painted propaganda posters reminded citizens of their responsibility to preserve the national cultural heritage. State bookshops feature a colorful variety of publications concerned with ‘Vietnamese Traditional Culture’, in which village festivals figure prominently. How did this change in official discourse come about?

Party state discourse on culture has played an ever important role in the process of constructing the Vietnamese nationscape. This paper will focus on one specific aspect of this discourse; namely, the different arguments employed regarding Vietnamese village festival traditions from the 1950s to the late 1990s.³ In particular, it will seek to show how in the *doi moi* era, the social sciences have informed this discourse by treating festivals as a ‘communal culture activity’ (*sinh hoạt văn hóa cộng đồng*) which contributes to the construction of national identity. Though scholarly discourse as well as publications have always been guided and controlled by the guardi-

¹ Vietnamese proverb; see Toan Anh 1969: 6.

² Xa Luan: *Can sua chua ...*, *Nhan Dan* 21.4.1957: 1

³ For the period between 1954–1975, I only refer to the course of events in the Northern part of divided Vietnam. From 1975 onwards, I refer to Vietnam as a unified country under communist rule.

ans of Party ideology, I argue that over the years it has considerably and favorably influenced the political discourse concerning the role of cultural traditions in the process of modern development.

Culture as “Front”

At the beginning of the 20th century, Vietnamese traditional culture faced a number of serious trials. Despite their different ideological camps, intellectuals agreed with each other when it came to blaming certain aspects of traditional culture for being the cause of the country’s loss of independence, its economic backwardness, or its various so-called social evils.⁴ Yet patriotic fervor was also deeply concerned with the ‘Vietnameseness’ of people and nation. The 1943 ‘Theses on Vietnamese Culture’ (written by Truong Chinh, Secretary-General of the Communist Party from 1941–1956, and promulgated by the ICP) declared culture to be one of three fronts – alongside economic and political fronts – in the revolutionary struggle. The three principles *dan toc hoa*, *dai chung hoa* and *khoa hoc hoa* introduced in the Theses – translated by Ninh (1996: 57–64) as nationalization, popularization and scientism – constituted the guiding concepts for the project of building a ‘new culture’ and a ‘new life’. As a starting point for my argument, the principle of *dan toc hoa* deserves particular attention. As carefully observed and discussed by Ninh, the term has a much wider connotation than the concepts of nationhood and patriotism: “[*dan toc hoa*] demands an active return to what is uniquely Vietnamese” (1996: 57). This is exactly what the Party ideologue Truong Chinh refers to when he defines *dan toc hoa* as “the struggle against all enslaving and colonial influence, so that Vietnamese culture can progress towards independence” (1985: 359). Nonetheless, the manifest does not completely reject cultural traditions and foreign cultural influences:

Regarding traditional culture and foreign culture, we should refrain from harsh criticism, but we should not follow their examples blindly either. We should have a critical spirit, assimilate what is good in these cultures, and reject what is bad.⁵

This selective approach towards tradition is further elaborated in Truong Chinh’s 1948 essay on ‘Marxism and the Vietnamese Culture’. The under-

⁴ See for example Phan Ke Binh 1995 (first published 1915); also the literary endeavors of Ngo Tat To (republished in 1977).

⁵ Truong Chinh 1994: 126. The text from which I took this quotation appeared 1947 under the title *Khang Chien Nhat Dinh Thang Loi* (The resistance will win). The 1943 theses are repeated in the chapter *Khanh Chien ve Mat Van Hoa* (Cultural Resistance). See Truong Chinh 1975: 54–60; for the English translation *ibid.* 1994: 121–126.

standing of the new culture envisioned and promoted by the DRVN⁶ leadership was that it represented simply 'the best' of the national heritage. By advancing the 'fine Vietnamese traditions and customs' while excluding only their 'obsolete, corrupt and feudal characteristics', it was assumed that villages with 'pure and beautiful customs' (*phong thuan tuc my*) would emerge (Truong Chinh 1994: 250–51).

Certain components of life-cycle rituals and village festivals held in the communal house (*dinh*) figured prominently on the blacklist of cultural reform, and were discredited as a particularly fertile hotbed of depravity.⁷ From a Marxist point of view, festivals were condemned as superstitious misconceptions used by the former ruling class to consolidate their power and prestige.⁸ According to the historian Nguyen Hong Phong, the belief in village guardian deities (*than thanh hoang*) had initially grown out of the people's collective 'positive emotions' (*tinham cam*) and had in the past contributed to strengthening the communal spirit (*thinh than cong dong*). Phong elaborates further that many of the meritorious personalities who had once been worshipped as guardian deities for the benefits they had brought to the community – an obligation best expressed in the proverb "when you drink water, think of the source" (*uong nuoc nho nguon*) – had been replaced by corrupt mandarins and village notables during the feudal era. Likewise, the emergence of class society had turned many other positive traditions into 'depraved customs' (*hu tuc*). In particular, Phong refers to communal house rituals (*te le*; in the following referred to as *te*-rituals) as a means through which the former village élites had buttressed their power and prestige, and argues that they had nothing to offer in terms of beautiful traditions worthy of preservation.⁹

From the mid-1960s onwards, the 'ideological liberation' of the 'new person' was pushed ahead through the 'New Way of Life' campaign (*nep song moi*).¹⁰ Throughout the 1970s, little standardized booklets on the 'Conventions on the New Way of Life' (*quy uoc nep song moi*) were published by the central government as well as at province and district levels. While the instructions on the rational and economical organization of funerals, weddings and death anniversaries were very detailed, the conventions completely lack reference to village festivals. A few reports mention the efforts

⁶ Democratic Republic of Vietnam

⁷ Truong Chinh 1975: 197; for the English translation see *ibid.* 1994: 247.

⁸ Nguyen Hong Phong 1959: 158–160; see also Tuan Cau 1962.

⁹ Phong (1959: 177) refers to the *ky phuc*-ritual which was held twice a year (in spring and in autumn) in honor of the village guardian deity. For a discussion of pre-revolutionary communal house rituals, see Endres 2001: 72–77.

¹⁰ See Malarney 1993 and 1996.

of local cadre to remodel festivals in order to spur agricultural production.¹¹ *Te*-rituals, however, were clearly not part of the new festival agenda. When a local cadre proudly presented the case of a successful reinterpretation of a *te*-ritual in the Party Daily *Nhan Dan* (Doi song hang ngay; 12.1.1963), the Ministry of Culture reacted with strong disapproval and caused a heated argument about whether or not pedagogical measures should be designed as 'new wine in old bottles' (Chung quanh bai ...; 19.2.1963). Concerning the *te*-ritual, the answer was clearly negative.

Towards a reassessment of traditional culture

If we read government regulations as critical comments on reality, actual ritual practices at the beginning of the 1970s did not in the least correspond to the Party's vision of a secular cult geography. In a directive (*chi thi*) issued in 1971, the Ministry of Culture disapproves of the fact that people from all over the country flocked to major places of worship in order to attend religious and 'superstitious' ceremonies.¹² In order to prevent the occasional, spontaneous resurrection of village festivals in the first half of the 1970s from becoming a mass movement, the government issued a new resolution in 1975 maintaining that "festivals which for a long time had not been organized, are prohibited from being restored now" (Decree No. 56-CP dated 18.3.1975, in: *Nhung Van Ban* 1979: 16.) For the next 14 years, this was the last word on the resurgence of village festivals from the upper echelons of the state apparatus.

In the years that followed the end of the war, however, a gradual change of Party state attitude towards festival traditions can be observed. I argue that one of the starting points for this transformation was the emergence of a new scholarly discourse in the social sciences.

The new generation of Vietnamese anthropologists and historians unanimously treated village festivals as a 'collective cultural activity' (*sinh hoạt van hoa cong dong*) constituting an important national characteristic.¹³ Although the political situation creates an obligation to allude to the 'drugging' effect of religion, the ritual aspect of village festivals also experiences a careful reevaluation: religious rituals are not only portrayed as strengthening the village community spirit (*cong cam*), but also as teaching basic concepts and rules of morality (*dao duc*).¹⁴ But it was also felt that the revivification

¹¹ Tuan Cau 1959 and 1962, Van Trong 1960, Phan Lu 1965:25.

¹² See *Chi thi ve hoi he* ... 1971: 5-12.

¹³ See Le Thi Nham Thuyet 1976, 1978a, 1978b, Tran Quoc Vuong 1978, Le Minh Ngoc 1978.

¹⁴ Le Minh Ngoc 1978 and Le Thi Nham Thuyet 1976.

of ritual traditions should not be left unguided. Tran Quoc Vuong suggests directing the 'dialectic process of change' towards the worship of meritorious ancestors, for example a craft ancestor (*ong to nghe*). Such a 'collective death anniversary' (*dam gio tap the*) would meet the villagers' needs for 'communion' and encourage pride in their tradition. Interestingly enough, it was in Vuong's writing that I came across the expression *le hoi* for the first time. This compound word consisting of 'ritual' (*le*) and 'gathering' (*hoi*) would later come to replace the variety of terms used to designate festivals in the past such as *hoi he*, *hoi mua*, *hoi lang*, *dinh dam*. This invention of a new term comprising both the sacred and the profane aspect of festivals can be read as an affirmative statement on the reintegration of ritual elements into festival culture.¹⁵

At the beginning of the 1980s, a reinforced discussion on the cultural traditions of North Vietnamese villages also took place at the province level. In 1982, the Cultural Office of the province published a 700 pages strong anthology titled "Monograph of Ha Bac". Nearly half of the subject matter is concerned with cultural and social issues, a whole chapter is dedicated to village festivals (*hoi lang*).¹⁶ In his introduction the author eulogizes the rich festival tradition of the province as a decisive factor in forming the human soul (*tam hon*) and emotion (*tinh cam*) as well as developing national culture.

In their effort to restore their 'beautiful customs and traditions' (*thuan phong my tục*) the villagers not only found 'allies' in the field of the social sciences, but also within the state apparatus: after the end of the war, the Ministry of Culture gradually began to reinforce its policies of preserving historic sites. In 1984 the already long existing guidelines on cultural conservation finally received a higher legal status (*phap lenh*).¹⁷ From then on, provincial authorities were explicitly encouraged to apply for official recognition of all commemorative sites provided they could prove the art-historical value of the edifice, or the historic or cultural importance of the residing deity.¹⁸ From the rapidly growing number of official recognitions published in the Government Gazette (*Cong Bao*) from 1984 onwards, it

¹⁵ Cf. Nguyen Duy Hinh 1994. In the years 1986–88 the order of the two components *le* and *hoi* had obviously not yet been agreed upon. Le Hong Ly (1988:44) argues that rites (*le*) preceded other festival activities (*hoi*) and therefore opts for the order *le hoi*. For further discussions on festival terminology see Nguyen Dinh Buu (1993) and Nguyen Quang Le (1992b).

¹⁶ Tran Linh Quy 1982: 555–579.

¹⁷ See *Cong Bao* 1984 (08). The terminus *phap lenh* is used for decrees issued by the State Council until it was abolished in 1992 and the Standing Committee of the National Assembly took over its function.

¹⁸ Interview with the Head of the Historical Sites Section, Ministry of Culture, October 1996. Also see *Cong Bao* 1985 (24).

can be concluded that the Ministry of Culture must have been swamped with applications. Until 1996, altogether 1860 historic sights and places of worship monuments were officially recognized as historical and cultural sites (*di tích lịch sử / văn hóa*), 188 of which were located in the province of Ha Bac.¹⁹

In 1986, Ha Bac initiated a research project on traditional festivals within the province, the results of which were presented at a symposium held on 11 November of that year. The contributions (published two years later, see *Hoi Xu Bac* 1988) unanimously recognize village festivals as a basic spiritual and cultural need of the people, a powerful means for reinforcing the spirit of community, and an important characteristic of national identity. The term *le hoi* or *hoi le* for festivals is now generally applied. Some of the contributions are explicitly concerned with the role of rituals, though the authors still cover themselves against the possible accusation of ideological dissent by emphasizing conformity with Marxist-Leninist principles. Dang Nghiem Van for example acknowledges that even a socialist person enjoys the solemn moments of worship, but stresses the need to infuse festival traditions with socialist contents.²⁰ Le Hong Ly (1988) pleads for a reinforced scientific discussion about traditional festivals in order to preserve their sacred (*thiêng*) meaning, and hurries to add that 'in contrast to widespread views' this had nothing to do with superstition. Phan Khanh (1988) supports the view that ritual offerings and processions should be researched in detail, "to improve them gradually and adapt them to the new life and the social psyche [*tam ly xa hoi*]".

When the resolution No. 10 of April 1988 provided peasant households with a long term allocation of land usage rights, violent land disputes (*tranh chấp ranh tho*) broke out in a number of villages.²¹ Claims to land often involved places of worship that had been expropriated for secular purposes or whose property had been incorporated into the cooperatives. The director of Ha Bac Cultural Office mentions peasant movements to reclaim the former properties of village communal houses (*dinh*), commemorative temples and pagodas where new administrative buildings or schools had been established, for example, by "expelling pupils from their classrooms in order to set up statues for religious worship"²². However, the Cultural Office did not feel responsible for the settlement of such local disputes. Instead it saw its major tasks in the administration (*quan ly*) of historical sites as well as in regulating the 'chaotic' (*lom com*) revivification of village festivals which

¹⁹ See Bo Van Hoa 1996: 109f.

²⁰ Dang Nghiem Van 1988: 16.

²¹ See Kerkvliet 1995: 75–78.

²² See Nguyen Dinh Buu 1993: 24.

provincial authorities had been increasingly confronted with since beginning of the 1980s.

For lack of appropriate guidelines from the central administration, the Cultural Office of Ha Bac (as one example perhaps of several?) decided to assume responsibility and adapt to the circumstances without consent from 'above' by issuing its own directive on festival organization (Directive 05-CT/UB dated 29.4.1988; archival material obtained at the Museum of Bac Giang). While the directive maintains socialist pedagogical aims such as 'fueling the spirit of patriotism', 'promoting solidarity and mutual help', 'mobilizing the masses to emulate in production' and 'abolishing superstitious practices while respecting the freedom of religion', it introduces a striking innovation as it permits festivals "to be organized according to their historical and local features that define their form and contents". Concerning rituals (*le*), the directive asserts that these were to be performed solemnly, but were to be less time consuming than it had been common in pre-revolutionary times. On the other hand, all 'outdated customs' that did not aim at teaching tradition, morality (*dao duc*) and a sense of honor (*nhan cach*) ought to be eliminated. This restriction particularly refers to rites that required a lot of manpower and financial resources. It is noteworthy that it took the Ministry of Culture another one and a half years to issue a 'Decree on the Opening of Traditional Festivals' (*quy che mo hoi truyen thong*) which finally gave a green light to the restoration of village festivals.

Scholarly discourse on festival traditions

As shown above, scholarly discourse undoubtedly influenced official attitudes toward traditional culture and left an imprint on festival politics on the local level. Moreover, the social sciences and humanities contributed significantly to the re-assessment of folk traditions in state discourse. Besides anthropology, sociology and religious studies, Vietnamese folklore (*khoa hoc van hoa dan gian*) was particularly dedicated to research on festivals. From the middle of the 1980s onward, the magazine 'Folklore' regularly featured contributions on the origin, historic development and socio-cultural relevance of festivals.²³ In 1992 the Institute of Folklore released a whole anthology on the issue.²⁴ In the following years several vol-

²³ See e.g. Le Thi Nham Thuyet 1984, Tran Quoc Vuong 1986, Le Trung Vu 1986, Nguyen Xuan Kinh 1991, Nguyen Quang Le 1992a and 1992b, Dinh Gia Khanh 1985 and 1993 (reprinted in 1994), Chu Huy 1993.

²⁴ Le Trung Vu 1992. Although I was able to gather quite a number of articles and books on festivals, the body of literature addressing the latter is probably much larger. Le Van Ky

umes were published that contain brief descriptions of contents, agenda, and characteristics of numerous festivals.²⁵ More often than not, these collections give but very shallow descriptions of festival traditions that are most likely no longer practiced in present day Vietnam. However, the discourse that preceded this abundance of festival publications gives valuable insights into the concerns of the state regarding Vietnamese traditional culture. Let me therefore take a closer look at two conferences on traditional festivals held in 1993.

The first conference was organized by the Institute of Social Sciences (later renamed National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities) in March 1993 with the topic "Traditional Festivals in Modern Society"²⁶. International participants included researchers from Indonesia, Thailand, China, the Philippines, France, and the US. The contributions presented can be grouped into four categories: (1) papers presenting a general survey of traditional festivals or describing a particular festival, (2) papers which draw a comparison between festivals in Vietnam and in other Southeast Asian countries, (3) papers analyzing the relations between festivals and tourism, and (4) papers dealing with theoretical problems related to traditional festivals, especially those concerning their role in modern society. Of these four categories, the latter is the most revealing. In his closing report, Lu Huu Tang affirms that all attendants agreed that festivals held an important place in modern cultural life, "especially in the education of noble thoughts and feel-

(1997: 142–149) refers to earlier publications, for example a study by Thu Linh and Dang Van Lung entitled 'Traditional and Modern Festivals' (*Le hoi truyen thong va hien dai*) published in 1984, and Truong Thin had obviously published a volume on "Vietnamese Festivals" (*Hoi he Viet Nam*) in 1990.

²⁵ With over 400 entries, the 1993 "Dictionary of Vietnamese Festivals" (*Tu Dien Hoi Le Vietnam*) is the most extensive of the genre (Bui Thiet 1993). In 1995, Thach Phuong and Le Trung Vu published an anthology of over 60 traditional festivals that – like the above mentioned dictionary – also considers festivals of ethnic minorities. Some Cultural Offices introduce the festivals of their province, for example Ha Tay (Ho Si Vinh and Phung Vu 1995). An English publication titled "Traditional Festivals in Vietnam" came out in 1995 (Do Phuong Quynh 1995). The latest and largest collection of essays is a huge volume on the "Treasure of Traditional Vietnamese Festivals" (*Kho Tang Le Hoi Co Truyen Viet Nam*) published in 2000. In addition, the reevaluation of traditional culture produced numerous publications on ritual traditions, e.g. the "Dictionary of Traditional Vietnamese Culture" (*Tu Dien Van hoa Truyen thong Viet Nam*) edited by Huu Ngoc (1995) and the "Dictionary of Vietnamese Rites and Customs" (*Tu Dien Le Tuc Viet Nam*) by Bui Xuan My et al. (1996). Village guardian deities were catalogued in two volumes offering background information on over 300 *thanh hoang* (Pham Minh Thao et al., 1997). Furthermore, earlier works on village customs and traditions by well-known scholars such as Phan Ke Binh, Toan Anh and Nguyen Van Huyen, that had been banned or 'forgotten', were now reprinted.

²⁶ See Dinh Gia Khanh and Le Huu Tang (1994).

ings such as patriotism, communal spirit, aesthetic sense, as well as in the promotion of cultural and artistic activities"²⁷. But while most researchers stressed it was part of the natural process of cultural change to adopt "enriching" modern elements, some voices clearly rejected such a fusion of tradition and modernity.²⁸ Some contributions clearly underline the role of rituals: To Ngoc Thanh, for example, holds the view that rituals are the center point of festivals and the main reason why they enjoy such popularity.²⁹ On the contrary, Dang Nghiem Van predicts that the profane aspect of the festivals would sooner or later displace the sacred.³⁰ Like a chorus the authors repeat that the positive sides of the festivals needed to be enhanced, whereas the negative aspects must be eliminated.³¹ However, many questions are left unanswered: How does one distinguish between religion, folk belief, and superstition? Which basic elements are worth preserving and to which extend should they be preserved? Which elements should be eliminated, and should they be eliminated as a whole or only partly?³² Although these questions reflect a deep indecisiveness of how to deal with the practical aspects of the selective approach towards traditional culture, the authors at least agree that authoritarian measures such as prohibitions should be avoided by all means.³³

Three months after this symposium, in June 1993, the Ministry of Culture organized a conference in order to assess the implementation of the 1989 'Decree on the Opening of Traditional Festivals' during the past years.³⁴ In his summarizing report the Ministry of Culture's deputy head of the Department of Mass Culture, Truong Thin, openly acknowledged that the restoration of festivals had already been in full swing long before their official approval. He declares that during '30 years of war', state politics had not tolerated the organization of festivals in order "to concentrate all

²⁷ The only author who does not reduce the educational role of festivals to the teaching of patriotism and community spirit but looks instead at their importance in communicating Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian values, is Le Trung Vu (1994).

²⁸ See Dinh Gia Khanh (1993) and Le Huu Tang (1994).

²⁹ See To Ngoc Thanh (1994), Nguyen Duy Hinh (1994) and Ngo Duc Thinh (1994).

³⁰ See Dang Nghiem Van 1994.

³¹ In particular, see Dinh Gia Khanh 1994, Phan Huu Dat and Nguyen Van Toan 1994, Dang Nghiem Van 1994 and Ngo Duc Thinh 1994.

³² See Le Huu Tang 1994 in his closing summary.

³³ See Le Huu Tang 1994. Dinh Gia Khanh had already emphasized in 1985 that bans should be avoided.

³⁴ Although this decree seems to be a milestone in the politics of festivals, I was unable to access it.

human and productive forces at the front lines”³⁵. He claims that state authorities had actually not outlawed the resurrection of festivals after 1975, but that the lack of clear guidelines had caused uncertainty over how to handle their resurgence. Whereas some localities ‘broke the fence’ spontaneously and allowed festivals to be held again, those that maintained ‘the ban’ had to deal with so-called ‘sneaky’ (*chui*) festivals until the 1989 decree finally put an end to this muddled situation. Thin further notes that in conjunction with the recognition of historical sites, the restoration of festivals had made the people (sic!) aware of the need to respect, to preserve and to create traditional culture. According to Thin, the decree had successfully turned the spirit of grateful commemoration (*uong nuoc nho nguon*) into an agency of communicating traditional cultural knowledge and educating the masses in truth (*chan*), virtue (*thin*) and esthetics (*my*). This way, he concludes, festivals would strengthen the national culture and protect it against ‘destructive cultural forces from outside’. It is interesting how Party state discourse tends to present a slightly distorted picture as far as the ‘change of awareness’ is concerned. In fact, the restoration of festival traditions provides ample proof that the people were not just passive recipients of Party inspirations. Since the beginning of the reform policy, the concept of traditional culture has been continuously negotiated in a transformative dialogue between the grassroots’ concerns and Party-state ideology.³⁶

Though Vietnamese officials now hail the people as ‘masters’ (*chu nhan*) of their own cultural life³⁷, it is clear that the state also seeks to remain in control. One of the concerns discussed at the conference was the increasing commercialization of festivals, which the Ministry of Culture feared would push the aim of preserving traditional values into the background.³⁸ Furthermore, festivals are seen as fertile grounds for an intensification of superstitious practices as well as other persistent bad habits like gambling and drinking bouts.³⁹ After the long ban on festival activities had finally been

³⁵ See Truong Thin 1993: 10. Justifications concerning the vanishing of festivals vary. In an article in the Party mouthpiece *Nhan Dan* the fight against superstition is held responsible for “the restriction of festivals and the waning of the smoke of incense in the temples” (Trung Dong 1994).

³⁶ For a detailed account on what took place at the village level, see my Ph.D. dissertation (Endres 2000), for an English summary see Endres 2001.

³⁷ See Truong Thin 1993: 10.

³⁸ See Truong Thin 1993: 14. Several years later, the commercialization of festivals is still discussed, see e.g. the article “Dung thuong mai hoa...” in *Van Hoa* 8.2.1998 and Quy Hien 1998.

³⁹ Truong Thin 1993: 14. See also Trung Dong 1993, who calls for a restriction of the sacred aspect because he thinks that the rituals take too much time and show traces of superstition. The following year, Trung Dong (1994) notices that male villagers again

lifted, villagers were now confronted with the task of distinguishing between worthy and obsolete traditions and adjusting their festival traditions to the new life. According to official claims, the result did not always meet the hopes and expectations of the population. Many festivals had lost their 'spirit' and were reduced to a crowded bustle (*nguoì xem guoì*).⁴⁰ This is why the question of the *te*-ritual remained one of the crucial points of the discussions. Whereas in the 1980s, rituals had still been subject to careful rhetorical manoeuvring, a general consensus on the essential importance of traditional belief had now been achieved. The worship of deities (*tin nguong tho than*) is characterized as providing basic moral values and thus contributing to the stability of the social order.⁴¹ In this purely functional sense, *te*-rituals are now treated as an essential and indispensable element of festival culture.⁴² However, state discourse only recognizes deities that can be considered honorable even in a 'revolutionary' context. When old written sources about the well-known Lim temple in Ha Bac revealed that it had been dedicated to a Chinese conqueror, its recognition as historical site was seriously contested.⁴³

In the years that followed, the worship of village guardian deities became an important element in the reification of 'national cultural identity' (*ban sac van hoa dan toc*) through scholarly discourse. Dang Nghiem Van considers it an extension of the cult of the ancestors which he defines as the national religion of the Vietnamese. Cleansed of obsolete and superstitious concepts, its key function in past and present is to incite "a collective consciousness and a patriotism capable of sustaining the war for independence and assimilating foreign civilizations without losing their identity" (1996: 46). Likewise, Nguyen Duy Hinh (1996:41) affirms the cultural value of the guardian deity worship and concludes it should be advanced in order to build a rich and strong nation.

attached importance to the seating order in the *dinh* (*chieu tren, chieu duoi*), that patriarchy (*gia truong*) and the subordination of women (*trong nam kinh nu*) experienced a revival, and that lavish feasting (*xoi thit*) was again widespread. He therefore calls on local authorities and cultural cadre to apply strict measures in the administration of festivals.

⁴⁰ See Truong Thin 1993: 11, and Nguyen Dao Toan 1989: 4.

⁴¹ In particular, see Nguyen Minh San 1993: 36, also Truong Thin 1993: 15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, see also Le Hong Ly 1993.

⁴³ See Nguyen Dinh Buu 1993: 22.

Doi Moi and National Identity

In the course of *Doi Moi* (Renovation) the Party state clearly picks up the alleged goal of the Vietnamese 'cultural revolution' to preserve worthy traditions. Based on the novel perception that village festivals are a 'communal culture activity' (*sinh hoạt văn hóa cộng đồng*) that meets the spiritual and cultural needs of the Vietnamese people and promotes a sense of community, at the beginning of the 1990s traditional festival elements were again carefully scrutinized for their utilitarian potential in the project of building socialism. This time, however, the 'grassroots' had a crucial say in deciding which elements of culture to incorporate into the canon of *selective tradition*. The discourse on *te*-rituals is a good example for the transformative dialogue between traditional conceptions of moral community and Party-state ideology. If in the 1960s these had been characterized as superstitious rites which had helped the 'class of feudal lords' to maintain and strengthen their power, cultural cadres and social scientists now claim that ritual practices not only strengthen the village community, but also educate the masses about leading concepts and rules of morality. One of these leading concepts is particularly emphasized: the grateful commemoration of the ancestors' achievements, expressed in the proverb *uống nước nhớ nguồn* (when drinking water, remember the source). The new emphasis on the positive role of cultural traditions thus serves both the interests of the people and the state with somewhat different purposes. While villagers want to restore their festivals in order to commemorate their ancestors, heroes and guardian deities in a way they consider appropriate, the state incorporates symbols from society in order to maintain its legitimacy.⁴⁴

In July 1998, the fifth plenary session of the 8th Party Central Committee passed a resolution on 'building and advancing a progressive Vietnamese culture while preserving the national identity'.⁴⁵ This identity is defined in terms of an idealized 'nature' (*tin hĩa*) of the Vietnamese People that had purportedly crystallized in the long project of nation-building. The conception of Vietnam as a "family state"⁴⁶ assumes a shared set of 'basic values' common to all Vietnamese ethnic groups, such as glowing patriotism (*long yêu nước nồng nàn*), striving for national independence (*y chí tu cương dân tộc*), spirit of unity (*tin hĩa thân đoàn kết*), etc. These values are now propagated with the declared aim of protecting Vietnamese society against "hostile forces which violently fight against us at the ideological

⁴⁴ See Vasavakul 1995.

⁴⁵ See "Nghị Quyết Hội Nghi ..." in *Van Hoa*, 16.8.1998: 1-3; for an English summary see "Vietnamese Culture - Product of Aeons ..." in *Vietnam News* 16.8.1998, 1/8.

⁴⁶ See Pelley 1995: 233.

and cultural front to carry out the peaceful evolution"⁴⁷. Besides serious social concerns like drug abuse, crime and prostitution, the Party presumes that the enthusiasm for everything new and foreign would lead to an increasingly egoistic lifestyle and result in a disdain for national cultural values. A strong cultural identity is thus seen as protecting the nation's 'beautiful customs and worthy traditions' (*thuan phong my tục*) against the evil spirit of modernity. Not surprisingly, weddings, funerals and village festivals are once again described as a particularly fertile ground for sprouting old and new varieties of 'depraved customs' (*hu tục*).

Although the leitmotif is now 'National Cultural Identity', the resolution bears the deep imprint of Truong Chinh's principle *dan toc hao*. The return to "the own" in contrast to "the alien is emphasized again, whereby 'the own' again implies only 'the best' of the national culture. It is interesting that the present discourse likewise 're-invents' village traditions by idealizing community spirit and village democracy as the original basis of peasant society.⁴⁸ The opening to the market economy resulted in new, consumer-oriented patterns of behavior and a growing individualization of society associated with negative side-effects like a profit-oriented mentality, corruption and materialism.⁴⁹ In order to ward off these supposed threats to the social and moral order, the project of nation-building highlights those social and cultural values that are in accordance with socialist ideology. The cultural neotraditionalism can thus be read as the Party state's effort to rephrase its claim to exclusive leadership in the nation's cultural and social development.⁵⁰ As Woodside (1997:71) rightfully observes, the Vietnamese state is "[...] clearly not about to surrender to the erosion of market economics. Cultural neotraditionalism is part of the renegotiation of authoritarianism in a postcollectivist era, not its abandonment".

Conclusion

The Vietnamese Party state's effort to exclude or even deliberately eliminate cultural traditions that were not in accord with the ruling ideology from the canon of 'beautiful customs' has been challenged by different levels of society. During the heydays of the 'New Way of Life' (*nep song moi*) cam-

⁴⁷ "Nghị Quyết Hội Nghị ..." in *Van Hoa* 16.8.1998:2. In particular, religion is seen as an effective weapon in the 'peaceful evolution' (see e.g. Nguyen The Thang 1997).

⁴⁸ See Tuong Lai 1997, Kleinen 1999:21.

⁴⁹ See Cheng 1998; Vasavakul 1997:349; Dinh The Huynh 1994; Xa Luan: Xay dung doi song ..., *Nhan Dan* 26.2.1998.

⁵⁰ See Kleinen 1999:6.

paign, official discourse had branded traditional beliefs and ritual practices as either 'fraudulent', 'superstitious', or as time-consuming and costly obstacles in the production process. Yet when Vietnam was reunited in 1975, and even more feverishly after the introduction of the economic reforms known as *doi moi*, local communities embarked upon the task of renegotiating their ritual traditions. Their endeavors were strongly supported by an intensification of scholarly discourse within the social sciences that gradually rendered Party-state outlook on cultural traditions a more favorable. The recently passed Cultural Heritage Law (*luat di dan van hoa*) even proclaims 'beautiful customs' as intangible cultural value.⁵¹ The resurrection of Vietnamese festival traditions can thus be seen as the – however preliminary – result of a lengthy and complex interactive process that involves not only the various segments of village society including local cadre, but also scholars (both Vietnamese and international) and different levels of the state apparatus. Moreover, this process also creates space for local communities to negotiate new identities beyond the confines of official rhetoric that tends to reduce the role of culture to fostering a sense of a shared national identity.

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⁵¹ The law was passed by the National Assembly on June 29, 2001. See *Nhung Quy Dinh Phap Luat ...* 2002: 7–34.

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