

# A Number of Trends in Folk Festival Celebration Today

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**Abstract:** Traditional customs and festivals have emerged to be a crucial part in Vietnam's modern life recently. The author investigates the trends of folk festivals from the perspectives of cultural studies, namely the strong restoration to promote them for tourism development, their secularisation, as well as the promotion of international exchange in the festivals, and their governmentalisation/officialisation. Diversity and complexity are increasing amidst activities of religious beliefs and folk festivals in the contemporary society. The clear identification of the issues is essential to creating a scientific basis for debates, opinions and policies of a more relevant nature.

**Keywords:** Folk festival, trend, restoration, secularisation, governmentalisation/officialisation.

## 1. Introduction

Perhaps never before in Vietnam have festivals been mushrooming as they are now and the term “*lễ hội*” (festival) mentioned so much in the mass media, studies, workshops, roundtables and among the people. That fact depicts a multi-colour picture of festivals in the contemporary Vietnamese society. Like many other cultural phenomena, folk festivals have undergone numerous ups and downs along with the country's history. Some were once fading away, altered, modified in forms and contents, and others even discontinued. Yet the past two decades have witnessed such an effervescent return of many folk festivals that, when speaking about Vietnam's contemporary cultural life, one cannot miss them.

“*Lễ hội dân gian*” (Folk festival) is a term denoting festivals held by the masses, the most popular of which are village festivals held by villagers to satisfy the need for their own observations of cultural traditions, religious beliefs and rituals. Folk festivals are therefore also known as village festivals and can be referred to as traditional festivals, even though in terms of connotations these concepts are not completely the same.

A folk festival can be defined as a popular cultural product of a certain community (a village or a group of villages) which worships a particular god. At a certain time of the year, in a specific location, people conduct protocols such as offerings, rituals, processions, followed by entertaining and

feasting activities of the community, which aim at community consolidation, stress relief, fortifying faith and strength of every member. In the photos of Vietnamese culture in general and of the village culture in particular taken from the past to the present, folk festivals are always a highlighted part, with a unique colour spectrum representing vividly and diversely the cultural quintessence of different communities.

Characteristics such as the amplexity, diversity, having various cultural colours layering on one another, the many systems of symbols, the harmony, the convergence of sacredness and art, the protocol included, and values like community cohesion, heading towards one's origins, balancing the spiritual life, creativity and enjoyment of culture, aesthetics, conservation and promotion of the national identity ... have been taking folk festivals to a "moment of strength", as Prof. Dinh Gia Khanh put it, in the community life. [8]

Varying from region to region, ethnic group to ethnic group, but from a panoramic view, folk festivals in today's society are taking place in some outstanding trends. In this paper, the author discusses the trends.

## **2. Trend of strong restoration of folk festivals**

Along with the vicissitudes of history and the social contexts, folk festivals were once quietening down or at least was no longer enlivening as they had been. That was the period of relentless wars, and, after the peace was restored, the country underwent a subsidy period with war aftermaths.

Festivals were then still held in villages, but given financially scanty conditions, many relics and a major part of the space once reserved for festivals were no longer maintained, or they were instead used for other purposes. There were even wrong views on folk festivals. All of the circumstances led to festivals held in a simple manner with a moderate extent, and many were even discontinued. Then, in the 1980s, spurred by the atmosphere of *đổi mới* (renovation) in the country, folk festivals were gradually restored and then "boomed" vigorously. The beliefs and festivals were closely linked with local people's daily life and were held in a widespread manner across the country, which attracted the participation of numerous people from all walks of life.

Looking at the number of festivals, we can feel how folk festivals have been strongly restored across the country. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2008, of 7,965 festivals held nationwide, 7,039 were folk ones. [3] Researchers and the media used many terms to refer to this effervescent period of folk festivals: "restoration", "renaissance", "an energetic return", "a boom" ..., to name a few.

We are also witnessing a fact that villages everywhere rediscover their traditional cultural assets to find elements relating to festivals in order to restore the festivals and showcase their communities' own cultural traits and cachets. In localities where festivals have never been discontinued or fallen into oblivion, people go on with efforts for the restoration, and in places where the festivals have become something of the past, the locals try to

rediscover them from the ancient documents and memories of the elderly, and even include their own invented or copied elements into the festivals.

The strong restoration of festivals at the moment is also reflected in a fact that they are now held in a progressively larger scale and attract not only people living in the festival hosting localities but also those from many other places. Few festivals are confined to the hosting village only - many are held in large scales such as at the inter-village, regional and national levels, e.g. Hung King Temple festival, Giong Temple festival, Giay Temple festival, Do Temple festival, Lim festival... Village and regional festivals are now held in larger scales than before, with expenses keeping increasing to meet the higher and higher demands of the people for the spiritual cultural activities. For example, over the past few years, Do temple (Dinh Bang village, Tu Son town, Bac Ninh province) has spent more than VND 1 billion on a festival, with the festive processions attracting up to 8,000 participants each; [14] In the 2008 Hoa Lu ancient capital festival, the building of the "Hoa Lu Gate" of the festival location alone cost VND 150 million [18]... The number of visitors is also a key indicator showing the excitement of today's festivals. The newspaper article titled "The Entire Country in an Eager Bustle with Spring Festivals" [19] reports that the number of pilgrims to Yen Tu (Quang Ninh province) in the 2009 festive season posted a record of over 10,000 (from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> of the first month of the lunar year), the number of pilgrims to Huong (Perfume, or Aroma) Pagoda (suburban Hanoi) on the festival opening day (the 6<sup>th</sup> of the first lunar month

of 2010) was around 6,000, and the Vieng market day (Nam Dinh province) on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the first lunar month of 2010 saw 90,000 visitors. Another example is that during just 10 days, the Hung Kings' Temple festival received approximately 3 million people...

### **3. Trend of utilisation of folk festivals for tourism development**

That is the case of festivals held over the past more than ten years, based on the concept and format of folk festivals but conveying new messages and implying new purposes of the contemporary life. The trend is typified by the cultural and tourism festivals held across the country, but mainly in high density urban areas with a view to promoting tourism and attracting tourists. During such festivals, religious and spiritual elements and distinctive cultural activities of the community that inherently belong to folk festivals are maximally demonstrated for the purpose of promoting the image and introducing the cultural characteristics of the region.

Not much different from the folk festivals in general, cultural and tourism festivals have been booming over the past decade, with all provinces and cities opting for their own typical festivals, for their distinctive cultural characteristics and those of beliefs, in order to combine those with tourism activities to form cultural tourism festivals as new festivals. They include the Hue Festival, Tay Son - Binh Dinh Festival, Da Nang fireworks festival, Da Lat flower festival, Ha Long tourism festival, Thu Bon River legend festival, Red River Delta cultural and tourism festival, which are

successful examples of the trend in which new festivals are formed based on folk ones linked with tourism promotion. The organisation of such new festivals has successfully built up the brands for festival-linked tourism cities, such as Viet Tri as the City of Festival of Heading towards One's Source, Hue as the Festival City (or the City of Festivals), Vung Tau as the City of Kites (named after the kite flying contest in the city)...

#### **4. Trend towards promoting international exchange in folk festivals**

Over the past decade, along with the expansion of international exchanges in various fields, folk festivals have also been increasingly integrated in depth and in width into the world. Given the fact that 3.2 million Vietnamese people now live abroad, we can say that Vietnam's festivals have become rather popular to foreigners, especially in countries with large Vietnamese communities such as the United States, France, Germany, Russia... Overseas Vietnamese have really rich spiritual lives, imbued with the Vietnamese identity which is closely linked to the spiritual life in Vietnam. Many pagodas and temples, as well as *điện thờ* (shrines, at private homes)... have been built amongst the Vietnamese community abroad with the active support in terms of architecture, sculpture, worshipping objects... from Vietnam. After the religious works are inaugurated, they are directly and frequently connected with religious activities in the country. Religious activities of overseas Vietnamese also have linkages

maintained with those in the country, demonstrated with, for example, the pilgrimages by many overseas Vietnamese groups returning to Vietnam to attend the death anniversary of Hung Kings, Yen Tu festival, Huong pagoda festival and various religious activities and those of beliefs, such as "borrowing from the *Bà chúa kho* (Treasury Queen, or the Lady [in charge] of [the] Treasury)" at Ba Chua Kho temple (Bac Ninh province) or the groups of mediums of the *lên đồng* (going into trance, or mediumship, or spirit possession) from California (the US) visiting the province for a shrine opening ceremony...[5]

Implementing the Vietnamese State's general policy of promoting cultural diplomacy and cross-border tourism development, cultural exchange via festivals is fostered, with various festivities held abroad, including the Vietnamese Cultural Days in Russia, the Netherlands, Japan, Cambodia, the Vietnam Day in Spain... in 2008; the Vietnam Week in Russia, the United Kingdom, Laos, South Africa, Venezuela, Brazil, Malaysia, the Vietnam Sea Tourism Festival in Paris... in 2009; the Vietnam Cultural Week in Germany and Belgium, and the 3-day Vietnam Tourism Festival in France... in 2010; the Vietnam Cultural Week in Italy in 2015; and the Vietnam Cultural Weeks in Argentina and China in 2016... In the cultural activities, festivals were the major form of demonstration, with numerous cultural traits of folk festivals on show such as processions, games and incense offering ceremonies...

In addition to the promotion and introduction of Vietnam's festivities abroad, folk festivals held in the country also attract broad participation of foreign art

troupes, researchers and visitors. Thanks to such activities, step by step, Vietnam's folk festivals have been more and more widely known. Meanwhile, a number of foreign festivals have been introduced into the country and become increasingly familiar with the Vietnamese people, such as Valentine's Day, Christmas, or Halloween... Through activities of international exchange, Vietnamese folk festivals have gradually integrated in depth and in width with activities of beliefs and festivals in the region and the world.

### 5. Trend towards secularisation

The past recent years witnessed the flourishing of folk festivals in all places, from village festivals to regional and national festivals, from folk beliefs of worshipping sacred stones and trees practiced at small temples or by tree stumps... to beliefs practiced in well-established worshipping facilities such as *đình* (communal houses), temples, and shrines.... No festival is considered more important than others, as believed by people. Each has its own place in people's spiritual lives, and are developed without excluding, competing or conflicting one another. They together create the various colours of today's folk festivals.

The trend towards *thế tục hóa* (secularisation) of folk festivals has become more and more visible in both the conception of festivals and the way they are practiced. The rituals are understood and practiced by people in coherence with the practical demands in their life. Many people go to festivals not to pray to the worshipped

god or without knowing which god(s) is/are being worshipped there. They just attend the festivals and immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the spiritual activities and space, believing that is already sufficient. That is not to mention those who attend festivals not for worshipping purposes but merely for leisure and use the festival as a meeting and gathering place..., or many others who attend festivals with the purpose of worshipping but have no understanding of the procedures of rituals and offerings... They just do whatever they consider reasonable. Their offerings can be anything, ranging from food to things to use or even things for making-up... Using cash as the offering has become more and more popular. Many people pray to gods for whatever they feel necessary for their lives. They do not pay much attention to what kind of prayers they should make, and at which parts of the shrine/temple/pagoda, where the statue of the god appropriate to the prayer is situated, they should stand to make the prayers. Instead, they just pray for whatever they need. We joined some persons from Hanoi to visit Ba Chua Kho Temple (Bac Ninh province) and heard them asking *the Lady Treasurer* for many things, not just "borrowing money" from her to do business or "asking for redundant pieces from her fortunes" as in the tradition. They prayed for that they would not be sued by the neighbours for a balcony of their newly built house that encroached the shared lane of the two families, that they would not be bothered by construction inspectors, that their husbands would break up with their office paramours, that their daughters who were studying abroad could get married to good foreign husbands, that

the poultry they bred would not be infected with plagues... Such practices have been accepted in the belief in the prevailing trend in which gods, Buddha and the *Mẫu* (mother goddesses of *đạo Mẫu* – a traditional purely Vietnamese religion) are drawn closer to the mundane life to support their very mundane demands.

## 6. Trend towards governmentalisation/officialisation

It can be seen that festivals are now clearly trending towards *Nhà nước hóa* (“governmentalisation”, or “officialisation”, becoming something of the State: *Nhà nước* = State), even from the way they are named. New activities, festivals, tourism fairs, large gatherings, anniversaries... are all called “*lễ hội*” (festivals). Hence, there is no clear distinction between folk festivals and new ones that are organised following one another in fashion, aimed at tourism promotion and sale of goods as in trade fairs... Many researchers believe that it is the new festivals, which are held too much in a wasteful manner, that have exerted negative impacts on folk festivals. In addition, quite a few folk festivals have followed the trend towards officialisation and gradually lost their intrinsic traditional values. For example, the overuse of pre-written scenarios/scripts, the competitive race for fame, the excessive intervention of the local authorities and the orientations and instructions guiding the festivals towards propaganda purposes... have caused the folk colours in numerous festivals to fade and lessened the local people’s initiative in their role as the festival’s main owner.

The governmentalisation of festivals is also reflected in the hierarchy of festival organisation. The trend is the most visible after the State recognised and upgraded 15 festivals to national ones. The Department of Grassroots Culture, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, says: “The country has a total of 1,417 relics where Hung Kings and personages related to *Hùng Vương* (Hung Kings) era are worshipped. The Ministry has also promulgated a guideline for the procedures and protocols of commemorating the Hung Kings. Hung King’s death anniversaries are to be organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in the years the numbers of which end with the digit “0” (for example, 2000, 2010, 2020 – *editor’s note*), and by the People’s Committee of Phu Tho province in other years”. [20] National festivals are often held with the participation and close instructions of State leaders with respect to the organisation, the lists of guests of honour and activities therein.

Attaching the activities of folk festivals to major anniversaries and key cultural and political events is also a form of festival governmentalisation. For example, festivals held in the years 2009 and 2010, especially those in Hanoi, were all aligned with the grand celebration of the 1000<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Thang Long – Hanoi. The opening or closing speeches in the festivals often included political messages aimed at educating, disseminating or merely delivering to the people the information deemed as important and necessary by the authorities. Previously, talking about folk festivals was to talk about village festivals. The villages’ folk beliefs largely depended on the people’s choice. There was intervention by

the State, but it was often pretty minor. At present, the State's role in religious and festive activities is quite bold. Given the situation, the trend of governmentalisation of folk festivals has become very obvious.

### **7. Trend toward paying special attention to restoration, embellishment and newly building of relics to serve folk festivals**

Perhaps never before have the restoration, embellishment and newly construction of relics been carried out in such large numbers and with huge investments as those of today. "I have been attached to the relic here my whole life. However, we have never had this much money for renovation, which explains its beauty", said a member of the Relic Management Board in Dinh Bang ward, Tu Son town, Bac Ninh province (data collected from personal interviews in March 2008). The restoration, embellishment and new construction, on the one hand, reflects a vigorous revival of beliefs and festivals. On the other hand, they also demonstrate the process of *xã hội hóa* (mobilisation of social, i.e. non-State, resources, often linguistically wrongly translated as "socialisation") of these activities and an increasingly stronger attention from both the State and the people to the activities nowadays.

At present, the restoration, embellishment and new construction of relics have become regular and continuous activities in places from communal houses, temples, pagodas and shrines... in the distant countryside to relics in urban areas. Many relics have been restored and embellished across the country over the past decade: In 2005 alone, in

Hanoi, 117 relics were restored and embellished with the total cost of VND 80.476 billion (the *Nhan Dan* newspaper, issue No. 1843, dated 22 January 2006), while in Hue, 60 relics in the ancient capital complex were preserved and restored with the total fund of VND 99,196 billion (according to the *Ha Noi moi* newspaper dated 10 March 2003). And, in Hai Duong province, the temple dedicated to the 9<sup>th</sup>-century ruler Khuc Thua Du was embellished with a budget of over VND 18 billion (the *Van hoa Chu nhat* newspaper, issue No. 1129, 9-12 September 2005, p.3). In 2007, the restoration and embellishment of the Thuy Phieu communal house, which is dedicated to the worshipping of the Tan Vien mountain god in Ha Tay province (now part of Hanoi), was commenced with a total budget of nearly VND 7 billion (the *Phu nu Viet Nam* newspaper, issue No. 145, dated 3 December 2007). In 2015, Thua Thien - Hue province carried out an extensive restoration of relics with a budget of VND 150 billion in 22 royal tombs (data from the Hue Relic Conservation Centre)...

Apart from the special attention paid to the restoration and embellishment of relics, many religious establishments were newly built with funds either from the State or the private sector. For example: the Lac Long Quan Temple within the Hung Kings' Temple complex, Phu Tho province, was newly constructed from 2006-2008; the newly built Con Dao Temple in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province - in late 2008; Bai Dinh pagoda in Ninh Binh province - from 2003-2010; Linh Ung pagoda in Da Nang city - from 2004-2010; Ba Vang pagoda in Quang Ninh province - from 2011-2014...

Vietnamese people nowadays have multiple options in practicing their festive

culture. They can attend festivals in community religious establishments or worship at private shrines. They can go to festivals held in the countryside or those right in urban areas. Thus, folk festivals are now more closely connected to the people's daily lives.

### 8. Diversity and complexity in folk festivities

In view of many aspects, such as state management, social stability, changes in the practice of rituals and the conservation of traditional cultural values..., a number of diverse and complicated issues have arisen during the past two decades of extensive development of folk festivals. Even debates on phenomena of beliefs in folk festivals from various perspectives and approaches have also added more complexity to the many forums on research and management of these festivals.

Over the past years, we have witnessed the rapid and vigorous emergence of old folk festivals and the appearance of new ones. It is the vibrant diversity in forms and levels of such festivals that has created the complexities for the society. Firstly, the inclusion of elements of folk festivals into new ones is mostly done in an awkward, patched-up and hasty manner. At the same time, new elements appear in folk festivals in an unreasonable way. The new festivals try to exploit the folk elements as much as they can. Nevertheless, on many occasions, the way they are staged (Vietnamese: “*sân khấu hóa*” - “dramatised”, in the meaning of “theatricalisation”, as if being performed in a stage – *editor’s note*) has gone astray

from the folk traditions, which makes it hard for people to accept. Organisers of new festivals always attempt to make use of the traditional cultural elements and raise them to the level of “records”, such as the largest pair of “*bánh chưng*” and “*bánh dày*” (square and round traditional glutinous rice cakes) weighing nearly 4 tonnes (in the 2007 Death Anniversary of Hung Kings), the folk-music orchestra with the highest number of musicians and the largest pot to cook “*phở*” (Vietnamese rice noodle) (the 2009 Nha Trang sea festival), the longest ceramic dragon and the longest “*áo dài*” (Vietnamese traditional outfit) (the 2010 Thang Long festival of craft villages and streets), the largest set of bronze drums to accompany the grand chorus to celebrate the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thang Long – Hanoi, also in 2010), the highest number of people singing love duets of “*quan họ*” together (the 2012 Lim festival in Bac Ninh province)... Some unfortunate incidents happened during such activities, such as a gigantic “*bánh chưng*” getting stale and a “*bánh dày*” found made of incorrect ingredients... In addition, new but inappropriate elements were incorporated into the folk festivals. For example, the festival of Lanh Giang Temple (Ha Nam province) was “renovated” by using contemporary art, namely the video art, performance art and music, in the saint offering rituals. In many festivals, various modifications are made to the practice of traditional processions, such as costumes used for rituals carelessly prepared, the saint’s palanquin put on a car, musical and dance troupes invited to perform shows, that do not go with the atmosphere of the festivals...

Festivals have been organised everywhere, leading to strong competition among different localities, especially since the State stipulated on the hierarchy of festivals. Localities compete for an upgrade in the hope that their festivals can be on par with or at a higher level than the others'. Some even want to apply for an upgrade so that more funds would be granted and hence the larger and more beautiful festivals would be held. The rivalry, which causes wastefulness and undermines the unity of the community, is posing a risk that the festivals shall be, rather than being of substantive significance, tilted towards formalism with the showing-off of the rich and no longer representing the festivities of the public.

The larger the festivals are held, the more adverse impacts they create on the environment. Waste is an issue that causes frustration in most festivals. It has seriously threatened the landscape and environment and contaminated the places of spiritual significance. Dozens of thousands of visitors attend the Huong pagoda festival and dump hundreds of tonnes of trash each day into the environment, even the poetic Yen stream. Similar things happen to the Yen Tu festival or the Lim festival with garbage being thrown everywhere. By the end of a festival day, the whole Lim hill becomes filled with trash in a full range of colours. In addition, the lack of fresh water and clean toilets for visitors and their poor awareness of hygiene are also exacerbating the environmental pollution in festival sites.

Traffic jams during festival days has become a frequent occurrence, especially at large festivals and those held in urban areas. For example, in the North, the *khai ấn*

(seal-opening) ceremony at the Tran Temple in Nam Dinh province causes traffic congestion every year on a section of some kilometres of the road leading to the temple. Similar situations happen at the Ba Chua Kho festival, Giong festival and Giay Temple festival. Festivals organised right inside a city, such as Hanoi's Hai Ba Trung Temple festival and Tay Ho Temple festival, make the traffic conditions even more complicated.

Services that "come along with" the festivals always contain complicated issues to be managed, e.g. an overload of services, visitors being overcharged due to the crowdedness of the festivals, sellers and providers of services trying to seize the clients from one another in an unfair manner, intermediaries vying in introducing services to win the customers, services being predominant over festival activities, and inappropriately priced foods, drinks, services and fees..., which all happen on a regular basis at the festivals. Arrays of shops with an overwhelming display of goods and busy dining activities right within the premises of the relics and the areas where the festivals are held have become a common sight. Advertisements, displays and sale of goods are in many cases more salient than the main festival activities. Gambling in various forms appear more and more at festivals. Entrance tickets and service fees collected too much and too often in one festival have taken away the beauty of the festivals and decreased the visitors' enjoyment.

Furthermore, the busy scenes at festivals have lately been accompanied by a host of other issues such as food safety, the appearances of beggars, burglars and pick-

pocketers, fortune-tellers and sellers of horoscope and fortune-telling books, which all undermines the values of traditional festivals.

Another issue that stirs up controversies and conflicts is the perfunctory restoration of relics without proper research and consultation, which induces a loss of inherent values of the space of spiritual significance. For example, in the Hue ancient capital relic complex, many new paintings, sculptural works and walls were unskillfully made. As a result, the embellishment somehow devalued the royal relics. In many other relics, new statues were painted flashily, with wooden pillars replaced by those made of concrete, and ancient carvings imbued with the colour of time replaced with brand new ones... The press has reported on the phenomenon many times, for example: "Dai communal house was acknowledged as a national relic thanks to several works of carving from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, after the acknowledgement, some people felt there was a need for renovation to make the place look more decent. They then had the works of carving burnt, saying they looked too old (i.e. obsolete – *editor's note*). The case of Lo Hanh communal house that dates back in 1576, the second oldest communal house in our country, is another sad story repeated. After being recognised as a relic, the elders in the village were determined to renovate it into a larger, more decent and beautiful place by replacing plates of "*chạm khắc*", "*chạm thủng*" and "*chạm lõng*" (different types of carving) done in the Mac dynasty with new nice-looking wooden plaques. Those soulful pieces of wood were burnt away for cooking..." (*Dai Doan Ket* newspaper, issue No. 63, dated 8 August 2003). Despite the

complaints and warnings from the media, the issue remains a common occurrence in many sites of relics under restoration. More recently, the public became extremely frustrated with the restoration when the Rong temple was completely demolished to build a new one in Dinh Bang ward, Tu Son town, Bac Ninh province and the restoration of Xuan Tao communal house (Tu Liem district, Ha Noi) where the original architecture was modified...

The complexity of today's folk festivals is also reflected in the challenge to clearly distinguish between beliefs and superstitions, which leads to rigid management measures over spiritual activities. Debates arise around the phenomena of "*lên đồng*" (mediumship, or going into trance), "*gọi hồn*" (summoning the spirit), "*xóc thẻ*" (shaking a box of cards to select one and get to know about one's future written therein), "*đốt vàng mã*" (burning joss, or spirit, money for the dead)... Are these activities superstitious? Should they be allowed to take place publicly? Should buffalo sacrifice festivals be continued? How can one manage home shrines? All these issues have added more complexity to today's folk festivals. The society is developing and expanding towards diversity. So is the development of festivals, resulting in the inevitable rise of their complexity. How to deal with the complexity and overcome its problems is a long story, which managers, researchers and also the people need to get a thorough understanding of before arriving at conclusions and actions, abstained from being hasty and imposing.

9. In the context of today's new trends of folk festivals as mentioned above, perhaps

even the concept of “*lễ hội dân gian*” (folk festival) itself needs to be reviewed. The folk festival is considered a product of the people (the term is in many cases used synonymously with “*lễ hội làng*” (village festival) and “*lễ hội truyền thống*”, “*lễ hội cổ truyền*” (traditional festival)) in distinction with new festivals, such as tourism festivals, or those imported from abroad. Nevertheless, in the quite complicated picture of today’s festivals, with the arrival of new festivals in various forms, the term “*lễ hội dân gian*” (folk festival) sometimes becomes difficult to understand when it is placed next to other terms referring to different types of festivals. The confusion and complexity with respect to the term are not only seen in newspapers, the media or the works of researchers, but also in legal documents. Researcher Nguyen Chi Ben pointed out that the 2001 and 2009 versions of the Law on Cultural Heritage, and Decree No. 98/2010/ND-CP dated 21 September 2010 have the “*lễ hội truyền thống*” (traditional festivals) as their subject, whereas, for Decree No. 22/2005/ND-CP dated 1 March 2005 providing guidance on the implementation of some articles of the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions, the subject is “*lễ hội tín ngưỡng*” (festivals of [religious] beliefs). In Decree No. 103/2009/ND-CP dated 6 November 2009 promulgating the Regulation on Cultural Activities and Public Cultural Services and Business, the subject is the “*lễ hội dân gian*” (folk festival) in distinction with three other types of festival, namely the revolutionary and historical festivals, the cultural, sports and tourism festivals, and festivals held in Vietnam with foreign

origins. So, even in the legal documents, the terms are not used consistently and a fairly overlapping classification has made the folk festival a vaguer concept with questions such as: Are “*lễ hội tín ngưỡng*” (festivals of [religious] beliefs) “*lễ hội dân gian*” (folk festival)? Is there any folk festival that is not based on beliefs? Is it possible to clearly differentiate folk festivals with other historical and cultural festivals? If the folk festival is understood as a cultural product of a community (of one or more villages) and held by villagers for the purposes of their daily life and meet their cultural and religious demands, then, can the various festivals that previously belong to the villages and are now "nationalised" and "officialised" with the whole festival’s organising procedures specified in scenarios arranged by the State, still be considered folk festivals? Accordingly, a concept, which is thought to be completely clearly understood, has, in today's context, become more complex and polysemous.

## 10. Conclusion

There may be many other trends, in addition to what has been analysed earlier in this paper. We have just touched upon a number of basic trends to assert that today’s folk festivals are very different from those in the past as known by us. The process of changes in folk festivals from the past to the present has raised various issues, including how to apprehend the concept of the “*lễ hội dân gian*” (folk festival) itself. Another issue is the attitudes and behaviours of the authorities and mass organisations towards

the activities of [religious] beliefs and community activities in folk festivals that are getting increasingly more complicated. Faced with the situation, sometimes and in some places, they become critical or prohibitive, but, at other times and in other places, the authorities and organisations perform lax management or shy away from the problems. These phenomena have caused sizable impacts on folk festivals in particular and the culture in general. Differences in the understanding and awareness of folk festivals among different groups in the society have led to different practices. The different viewpoints have also brought conflicts to and exert impacts, to a certain degree, on the social stability. The overuse and misuse of festivals here and there to seek illicit gains or create political influences... have made folk festivals increasingly more complex. It can be said that the activities of [religious] beliefs and folk festivals in the contemporary society are full of volatilities with increasing diversity and complexity. The clear identification of the issues is essential to creating a scientific basis for debates, opinions and policies of a more relevant nature.

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