



Traditional Tug-of-War Festival in Vietnam

Case of Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival

Presented by **Nguyen Kim Dung**
Chief, ICH Management Division,
Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Viet Nam

Reported by **Nguyen Thi Thu Ha**
Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies

1. Traditional Tug-of-War in Vietnam: An Introduction

Nowadays, tug-of-war has become a popular traditional game and loved by many communities in Vietnam. Both children and adults love playing this game since it requires not much particular skills or training and does not limit the number of participated players. Tug-of-war today is played in different cultural and social events, mostly in youth camps, students/pupils gatherings, and especially, in many traditional festivals and during Tet Lunar New Year celebration in Vietnam. Basically, in a traditional tug-of-war game, players are divided into two teams and stand oppositely along a string (normally a bamboo cord or a jute rope). A red piece of cloth marks the middle of the cord, which is positioned in parallel with a line drawn on the ground in order to separate two teams. After a signal (either a whistle or a hand signal) from the referee, players tug the cord as hard as possible to pull the red cloth towards their side. If this team lose their strength and the red cloth mark is pulled out of their side toward competitor's side, the other team will win the match. For every match, players of both teams always receive great cheer from surrounding spectators.

There are different variants of tug-of-war which are also named slightly different in Vietnamese such as *keo co* (tug-of-war with the cord is made of jute or other materials), *keo song* (tug-of-war with the cord is made of rattan), *day gay* (long stick pushing),... which have been all practiced differently in format and rules according to different characteristics of each communities, their belief, cultural values or events in which tug-of-war game is a part of. However, these tug-of-war variants of tug-of-war do share some following common aspects:

- Practice space: mostly in communities with long tradition with rice farming such as rural communities in the Southern part of Vietnam. Tug-of-war is widely practiced in different ethnic communities including Thai, Tay, Nung, Giay and especially Kinh people in provinces of Lao Cai, Bac Ninh, Ha Tay, Vinh Phuc, Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An,.... Tug-of-war which plays a role as a traditional game in traditional festivals is more popular in villages in the North area than is in the South of Vietnam. According to a survey conducted in 2004 by Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, there are 630 existing traditional festivals among which are 16 festivals having tug-of-war game included. In Ho Chi Minh City (2008 - 2010 statistics), there are 815 existing traditional festivals, yet only 6 have tug-of-war as their part of².
- Practice period: mostly in the return of a lunar year, at the start of a crop or after a harvest. Many of tug-of-war practices take place during a traditional spring festival marking for a good beginning of a new crop and a new lunar year.
- Meaning: When trying to get back to the tug-of-war's origin or its historical background and especially its close attachment with traditional festivals of many rural communities in Vietnam today, one will be interested in receiving different interpretation and explanation about the existence of this traditional collective cultural practice. As mentioned above, tug-of-war is presented in diversified format as well as in its socio-cultural function according to different communities who are practicing it; yet their similarity in practice space and period and long existence in farming communities in Vietnam show us a common profound meaning of traditional tug-of-war practices in Vietnam. Almost all of tug-of-war practices has strong attachment with rice-farming communities, playing an important role in their intangible cultural value system and reflecting those communities' perspective of the relationship between human and nature; their belief of that nature has strong power that can determine human's existence and in order to have mother nature's protection, human has to live in harmony with mother nature.

2. Case of Huong Canh Tug-of-war Festival (Binh Xuyen District, Vinh Phuc Province, Vietnam)

Huong Canh is a name of a hamlet which used to belong to Ke Canh village (Huong Canh, Ngoc Canh, Tien Canh hamlets), yet for many generations, Huong Canh had been used as a name of the whole commune. Today, Huong Canh is named for a town which included all those three old hamlets and some other hamlets around. Huong Canh town is 45 km away from Hanoi to the northwest direction.

² According to data of project documents of Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies

Historically, tug-of-war was a popular game played among many villages in Binh Xuyen district, mostly in the beginning of a lunar year, such as Ngoai Trach, Quat Luu, Son Loi, Thanh Lang,... Today, only Huong Canh town keeps practicing tug-of-war and turns it into a big festival. Huong Canh tug-of-war is quite different with tug-of-war in other places in terms of format and meaning. Commonly, a big rope is used in tug-of-war game, yet in Huong Canh's tug-of-war, the cord must be made of a long and big rattan. Moreover, in Huong Canh tug-of-war, players tug the rattan cord through a ironwood stake which marks for the separating line between two teams. It is this very stake that makes the game here more drastic, skillful and longer lasting than the game in other places because both teams are allowed to use that stake to gain back their strength during the game. Players in Huong Canh tug-of-war game do not stand to tug as usual but half-laying their back on the ground while having their feet push against a swallow-wide hole set aside for each player. This setup is also an element that makes the game stronger and last longer.

Traditionally, Huong Canh holds a number of different festivals in a year: Tug-of-war festival in lunar January, *đình* festival (to commemorate and praise village tutelary deities' merits) in 15th lunar February, *Thượng Điền* ritual (a sacrifice dedicated to the God of earth at the beginning of rice farm work) in lunar July, *Hạ Điền* ritual (a sacrifice dedicated to the God of earth after having the harvest) in lunar October. To Huong Canh's people, *Thượng Điền* and *Hạ Điền* are very important rituals, therefore they need to be hold with great respect and care. The village will offer raw pig meat to village deities and pray for good crops for the whole community. During these days, the village also hold some additional cultural activities such as rice cooking contest, fruit decorative displaying,....

Huong Canh Tug-of-war festival is usually hold from 3rd to 6th, in some cases, it lasts until 9th of lunar January (during Tet celebration). In the old days, teams kept tugging until they obviously either won or lost, yet currently, they have to play within three 20-minutes round for each match.

3. Historical background

According to Mr. Nguyen Duc Mau (74 years old, lives in Lo Ngoi hamlet, Huong Canh town), his family has participated this tug-of-war festival for 6 to 7 generations. He himself played for Lo Ngoi team for many years and now, his sons and grandsons also are playing for this team. He insists that tug-of-war practice in this Huong Canh town was initially played only by young men living in Lo Ngoi hamlet (specialized in making title) and Lo Gang hamlet (specialized in making glazed terra-cotta jars). Later on, people from other hamlets and villages which all geographically belonged to Canh village (current Huong Canh town) joined Lo Ngoi and Lo Gang hamlets to hold this festival for years until now. Canh village used to have 18 *giáp* (Vietnamese traditional residential quarters) divided into three teams of 6 *giáp* to compete with each other in its tug-of-war festival.

Senior village members are unable to define the accurate date in that the festival was first practiced, yet could affirm that the festival has taken place for many village generations. Shared memory among some senior members told that the festival was ebulliently hold during 1936 - 1942 before the French-colonialist resistance war broke out in the North of Vietnam that make the festival stopped for few years until 1950.

Consultancy with local community, particularly with senior members of Huong Canh town, in the origin and historical development of this tug-of-war festival brought us different explanations, yet all reflect strong faith and great pride of local people about their intangible cultural heritage.

The first explanation³ suggested that tug-of-war simulated the action of animal encircling and hunting practiced by two members of Ngo royal family (10th century AD), which are Ngo Xuong Ngap and Ngo Xuong Van, and General Do Canh Thac when they were in Dong Ho area (Huong Canh) for hunting. Today, these legendary figures have still been worshipped in three communal houses in Huong Canh town. Back to that time, Huong Canh people used many long and big rattan cords to encircle the woods and trapped animals for their hunting.

The second explanation asserted that this game is to depict secret naval trainings on Ca Lo river (currently belong to Binh Xuyen district, Vinh Phuc province) during the reign of Ngo Dynasty (10th century AD) in order to gain victory in Bach Dang River Campaign against Han invaders (in 938.AD). Naval soldiers used rattan cords while swimming to pull slightly their boats to surprise their enemies.

According to other village members, Huong Canh villagers used to use boats for title and jar trading and fish-catching from Ca Lo river to Hong river, then up to Tam Giang river and Da river,... Rattan cords were used to pull back and forth their boats on the rivers. This is probably the origin of tug-of-war practice in Huong Canh today.

Mr. Tran Van Bach⁴, a local as well as a player of Tien Huong team in 2013 tug-of-war festival had different idea about the origin of traditional tug-of-war practice. Tug-of-war game probably closely relates to long agricultural tradition of Canh villages, with symbolic meaning of praying for crops and prosperity or exorcising-related practice. In old days, other than tug-of-war, Huong Canh village also hold many different traditional games such as wrestling, stick-tugging, cock-fighting, duck-catching,... which were all symbolically linked to pure and traditional agricultural communities in the northern areas of Vietnam.

3. Huong Canh Tug-of-war Festival: Components and Practice

(1) Tangible aspects

Cord used in Huong Canh tug-of-war must be made of a big and long rattan with at least 45m in length. Traditionally, the village will send some of their men to some mountain

³ Interview, 28 February, Huong Canh town

⁴ Interview, 12 March 2013, Huong Canh town, Binh Xuyen district, Vinh Phuc province

province in the north of Vietnam such as Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Yen Bai, Ha Giang to find for the right and qualified rattan. Recently, because of the deforestation which has severely happened in many areas in Vietnam, it is getting more and more difficult to find a good rattan in a short time. For last several years, it took almost two weeks to find a qualified rattan because some ethnic men who were hired to do this job had to go further into a jungle to find good ones. In the past, when tug-of-war stake was still 1.2 in height, the rattan cord was so easily broken that the village have to prepare for some spare ones; yet now, because long and big rattan is scarce, the village decided to shorten the stake in order to maintain the cord's durability.

Rattan cord must be soaked under a pond for 15 days and then, lets it dry for 5 - 6 days before using it for tugging. This process will make the cord durable, tough and firm.

Other than the cord made of big rattan, tug-of-war stake is also an important element of Huong Canh festival and make the festival distinctive compared with other tug-of-war practices in Vietnam. The stake is made of ironwood, 1.05m in height and has 37cm diameter. It was fixed in the ground, marks the location that separate both competing teams. There is a small hole (approximately 4 cm of diameter) cut diametrically through the stake at the point of 80cm high from the ground. When the game begins, the cord will come cross this hole and its central point will sit right inside the stake. The referee will use white paint to mark the cord at its position of 18.5cm and 1.5m calculated from the central point of the cord. The 1.5m point will be used as a landmark to decide the winner and loser of the game in each round.

In the old days, the stake was made of *longan* tree, which was not as firm as the later one that made of ironwood. It was 1.20m before being shorten to 1.05m as today. In previous days, because of the old higher stake that made the game more skillful, tactical and drastic and the cord was easily broken or burnt. Today, because rattan is so scarce and extremely expensive that the festival organizers decided to shorten the stake to 1.05m in order to reduce the risk of the rattan cord being broken as well as to shorten the duration of the festival.

(2) Intangible aspects

In the first day of the festival (3th of Lunar January), before the game start, players of each team of Huong Canh tug-of-war competition gather together in their Hậu Thổ (Deity of the Earth) shrine and bring along offerings such as pork, chicken, steamed spring rice and fruit to pray for the victory and protection from their own deities.

After that, all four teams go together in a colorful procession with many festival flags to Huong Canh communal house, which is considered the main communal house of this town, to hold a main ritual for the festival. Some senior villagers who are chosen to be representative for the whole village will perform the ritual. These senior men will pray to village tutelary deities to report about the tug-of-war festival as well as ask for their protection for all players and teams.

After the praying of senior men, each team one after another pray for success of the festival in general and success of their team in particular. Continuing drumbeats increasingly inspired all people involved and urge for the start of the game.

(3) Practice

In the past, Huong Canh tug-of-war was normally hold from lunar January 3 - 6, in some years it lasted until 9 without a final result. All participated teams used to tug until they could define winners and losers, yet now they tug in three 20 minutes-length rounds in order to finish a match. For last several years, Huong Canh tug-of-war festival was often organized from Lunar January 3 - 5, during Tet celebration.

In recent years, there have been four participated tug-of-war teams, which are Tien Huong, Huong Ngoc, Dong Nhat and Lo Ngoi. According to the festival regulation, each team has 34 members when they get into the tugging ground: 01 captain, 02 vice-captains, 01 service-staff, 25 main players and 05 reserve players. There are also 50 substitute players waiting outside the ground to replace the main players when each tug-of-war round finished. Captain and vice-captains must be men with strong leadership and credibility so that they can lead the whole team in unity and understanding. Players participated in all team must be at least 18 years old and have healthy life with no alcohol and drug addiction.

When in a match, both teams have to be in closely organized formation. An ironwood stake was fixed into the middle of the ground to separately divide two team into two opposite and equal sides. Both team captains had to stand at 50cm away from the stake while one vice-captain is at position of 2m from it. The other vice-captain stays at the nearly end of the team. Among 25 main players, there are 4 important ones hold their positions close to the tug-of-war stake. These four people must be very strong, enduring, skillful and ingenious in order to protect their team against losing by pulling the cord down to the ground. The left (21 other players) are divided into ten rows of two and on row of one holding the end of the cord. In each row, festival organizers dig a hollow oblique hole with 1.2m in width and 1.4m in length for players to step on to gain their force. One row is 1.5m separated from the other so that players can stretch their legs and half-lie their backs down to pull the cord. Each team is allowed to have 5 reserve players while they are in a tug-of-war round.

Tug-of-war umpire team consists of three persons: the main one, sometime called by a folk name of "Mr. Level" or "Mr. Who Marks a Scale" and two assisting umpires which both are captains of the other two teams.

Huong Canh tug-of-war has been organized according to a regulation set out by Huong Canh People's Committee with the advising of festival organizers, mainly as following:

General Regulations

- In every tug-of-war competing round, each team has 25 players, 5 reserve players, one captain, two vice-captains and one staff. Totally, each team has 34 participants while they are in the game.
- Festival Umpire team consists of one main umpire, two assisting umpires who must be captain of two other team other than playing teams. All orders such as starting, pausing or explaining in the game will be upon these three umpires' decision.
- While teams are competing, only 5 reserve players can be used to replace the main tugging players. Off-ground substitute players will not be allowed to enter the ground when the game is taking place. All offence will be count for 20 points deducted to the team commits them.
- After each tugging-round, two teams have to switch their side yet remain the cord's direction in which its roots stands to the East while its top stands to the West.
- Players are not allowed to fix the hole in which they are stepping in the tugging rows. For any requirement regarding to this issue, players should consult with the umpire team.
- Only men are allowed to play tug-of-war competition. Female staff are allowed to support the whole team.
- All orders in a tug-of-war match must be made by the umpire team. After checking and marking the rattan cord, the main umpire will be the one allow the match begin.

Competing Methods and Awards

- Two tug-of-war teams compete in a match. Each match consists of three 20 minutes-rounds, a 15 minutes-break separates three competing rounds. Each team will be given 3 points if she wins a round. One point will be given to both team if they are even in a round.
- In each round, the winner will be defined if that team can pull in more than 1.5m length of the cord which belong to the competing team. If not, that round will be considered an even round.
- Points gained from nine rounds in three matches will be totaled to become the final result for each team (among four tug-of-war teams). Classification will be decided upon the final point each team gained, the higher the result is, the higher prize each team can get. There are four types of award: First Prize, Second Prize, Third Prize and Fair-Play Prize.
- In case of a drawing result, the winner will be defined according to the result of the match these both team competed. If that match is even, both team will be settled in a vote.

In tug-of-war game, tugging tactic is important as much as players' strength in defining the final result of a game. Additionally, the unity among all players and team leaders play an essential role. If players miss or misunderstand their leaders' signal, their chance to win the game is very limited. The rattan cord need to be tightly and straightly hold and run through inside each player's armpit. In each row, the cord will be hold tightly by two players, run through one's right armpit to the other's left armpit; two players join force by step straightly their feet against the front hole, then half-lying their back down to tug the cord toward their side. All actions need to be followed precisely and rhythmically according to signal from three team leaders/captains. Sometime, when both teams summon up all their strength to tug the cord at the same time, making the cord be moved back and forth continuously and get burnt with smoke.

Technical secrets in tug-of-war game are all in team leaders' signals. Each team has different secret signal system and will never be shared with other competitors. Once the leaders move their flag, or giving some agreed signals, all players are supposed to follow precisely to do the according actions, such as holding, pulling or tugging the cord.... An Awarding Ceremony was hold at the end of the final day of the tug-of-war festival (5th, Lunar January) among the great excitement of four teams, organizers and local people. In addition to a reward granted by Festival Organizers and a Certificate of Recognition, each team also received big financial supports from local people and businesses. Normally, when the festival finishes, each team will set a party to celebrate their success or effort and to learn from experience for better results in coming festivals. An important part of this festival, two rattan cords, will be carefully stored for next uses.

4. Safeguarding and Transmitting

(1) Bearers/Practitioners

Normally, tug-of-war game does not require too much skill or training, yet in Huong Canh tug-of-war game, players 'strength and skill are highly required. Additionally, the unity and full understanding among all team's members including leaders and players are also essential element to decide the final result for each team.

Captain and vice-captains must be experienced, enthusiastic and most of all, have strong leadership that can unify all members in one strong team. They are the ones that are able to understand qualification and characteristic of every single member so that they can set their team the most suitable and effective formation for each tug-of-war match. After each round or match, these leaders will quickly gather up their team to discuss about how to take advantage of their strength and overcome their weakness, to analyze their competing teams or simply to encourage their people for better results of next games.

Other than their main members, each team also receives great contribution of their assistants in logistic (uniform, first-aid, food and drinks,...), fund-raising (donations from businesses, local people) and financial management,... Most of all, the continuing

support and cheers from all people in Huong Canh town are the very aspect that has kept this festival alive for many years.

(2) Safeguarding activities

Each year, Huong Canh tug-of-war festival receives a financial support from local budget to buy two rattan cords, organizing four teams, payment for organizing members and award for four tug-of-war teams⁵. People who serve in the festival organizing board are mainly local authorities and heads of Huong Canh residential quarters. They work to support the festival as hard as they can with little payment thanks to their great love and pride of this cultural heritage.

In the past, the festival was held at a grass-ground in front of Huong Canh communal house. Sometime, when spectators got extremely excited about the game, they crossed the line separated players with audience to get into the main ground and interfere the match which sometime causes chaos and conflict. In order to prevent this action, in 2007, local authorities decided to build a new small stadium for tug-of-war festival. This oval stadium locates in front of Huong Canh Town's People Committee office, next to No.2 highway and is separated with the audience stand by an oval trench. This new stadium works effectively in restrict spectators getting into the main ground and keeps the game well organized.

Finding rattan cords seems to be the most difficult part in organizing this festival. This task has been taken care by some members in the festival organizing board. Traditionally, qualified cords need to be 45 - 50m in length with diameter of 3-4 cm. The price keeps getting higher and higher because of its scarcity. As mentioned in previous parts of this report, the tug-of-war ironwood stake used to be higher than now, which made the cords easily to be broken or burnt and could not last after one year. Therefore, after carefully considering festival financial constraint (for example, spending a big amount of budget to buy rattan cords), local authorities decided to shorten the stake and limited competing time in 20minutes rounds in order to reduce the risk of the cords being broken. Thanks to this change, some cords has been reused for more than one time which save local government some budget.

Prize awarding is one of effective activity to encourage young men in Huong Canh town to participate in tug-of-war festival. Tug-of-war is not merely a cultural practice but also a game where people involved always desire for victory and success. In the old days, Huong Canh villages were divided into 18 *giáp* (traditional residential quarter) that formed 3 tug-of-war teams. Awards were pink, yellow or green silk. Today, awards for tug-of-war teams are prepared in cash which later will be used to buy gifts for every team members such as clothes, tea-sets, thermos, vessels,... These gifts have little cash value but great acknowledgment made to everyone in a team.

⁵ In 2013, it cost almost 2,200 US\$ to buy two rattan cords; 300US\$ to organizing four teams; 750US\$ for awarding. (Huong Canh Town's People Committee, 2013)

5. Transformation

As mentioned in the first part of this report, tug-of-war is not the only cultural activities that Huong Canh town has been preserved and practiced. Each year, Huong Canh town hold several traditional fests such as *đình* festival (to commemorate and praise village tutelary deities' merits) in 15th lunar February, *Thượng Điền* ritual (a sacrifice dedicated to the God of earth at the beginning of rice farm work) in lunar July, *Hạ Điền* ritual (a sacrifice dedicated to the God of earth after having the harvest) in lunar October and tug-of-war festival in lunar January.

Traditionally, tug-of-war festival was been hold separately with *đình* festival in 15th lunar February. However, in 2012, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vinh Phuc province, within a framework of a provincial program of tourism development, proposed to merge these two traditional festival into one bigger cultural event in lunar February in order to attract more tourists come to Huong Canh town.

Basically, new Huong Canh tug-of-war festival would be hold in three days, from 15th to 18th of lunar February. It was suggested to divide this festival into two main parts: liturgy (rituals such as sacrifice, procession,...) and rejoicing (which including traditional games such as duck-catching, cock-fighting, rice-cooking competition, chess,... and some folk art performances,...).

This proposal was presented in a wide and open consultancy with local community including local people and local authorities. However, the result of this consultancy was positive. Three over nineteen residential quarters in Huong Canh town did not support this proposal with main argument made upon the lack of players in lunar February and the risk of losing the intrinsic value of traditional tug-of-war festival. For many years, tug-of-war practice has not considered as a traditional game but a valuable cultural practice with strong attach to their agricultural belief.

Because of this disagreement, this proposal was reconsidered in its feasibility. Though they did not support this proposal, local people were highly appreciated efforts of local authorities in trying to exploring tourism values from cultural heritages. For any safeguarding efforts and activities that take into account local perspectives such as this case of Huong Canh tug-of-war festival, the sustainable management and safeguarding of cultural heritages will be guaranteed.

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Links

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<http://www.phuquocexplorer.com/vietnamfestival.html>

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