



Traditional Tug-of-War in Vietnam

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the tug-of-war is a popular traditional game loved by many communities in Vietnam. Both children and adults love playing this game since it does not require any particular skills or training and there is no limit to the number of participants. The tug-of-war today is played during different cultural and social events, mostly in youth camps and student gatherings. But it is especially popular during traditional festivals as well as the Tet Lunar New Year celebration. In a traditional tug-of-war, players are divided into two teams and stand opposite to each other along a rope (normally a bamboo cord or a jute rope). A red piece of cloth marks the middle of the rope and is parallel to the line drawn on the ground that separates the two teams. After a signal (either a whistle or a hand signal) from the referee, players start pulling the rope, trying to get the red cloth towards their side. The team that successfully pulls the red cloth to its side are the victors. For every match, both teams always receive great cheers from spectators.

There are variant forms of tug-of-war. They have different names, such as *keo co* (tug-of-war with the rope made of jute or other materials), *keo song* (tug-of-war with the rope made of rattan), and *day gay* (long stick pushing). These differ not just in name and materials but also in practice, with formats and rules established to reflect the characteristics, beliefs, and values of each community. However, in spite of these variations, these different tug-of-war forms do share some commonalities.

- **Practice space:** Tug-of-war events mostly take place in communities with a long tradition of rice farming. The tug-of-war is widely practiced in different ethnic

communities, including Thai, Tay, Nung, Giay, and Kinh people in provinces of Lao Cai, Bac Ninh, Ha Tay, Vinh Phuc, Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An. The tug-of-war, as a traditional game in traditional festivals, is more popular in villages in the north than in the south. According to a survey conducted in 2004 by the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, there are 630 traditional festivals in Hanoi, among which 16 include a tug-of-war game. Ho Chi Minh City, according to statistics collected between 2008 and 2010, stands in contrast to this, where only 6 of the 815 traditional festivals include a tug-of-war.¹

- **Practice period:** Many of tug-of-war practices take place during traditional spring festivals to mark the beginning of a new crop-planting season and to celebrate a new lunar year.
- **Meaning:** The historical background of the tug-of-war and its close attachment with traditional festivals is complex and uncertain. There are different interpretations and explanations about the tug-of-war as a collective cultural practice. The reason for these discrepancies comes from the tradition being presented in diverse forms and serving different socio-cultural functions based on the varied communities who are practicing it. However, because of the similarities in practice space and practice periods as well as the tug-of-war's long existence in farming communities, one can find a common and profound meaning in traditional tug-of-war practices in Vietnam. Most tug-of-war practices have a strong attachment to rice-farming communities, play an important role in these communities' intangible cultural value systems, and reflect these communities' perspectives regarding the relationship between humans and nature. This overarching belief is that nature's power can determine the fate of humans. Therefore, to be in good terms with Mother Nature and to have her protection, humans must try to live harmoniously with nature.

Many Vietnamese ethnologists and folklorists have long affirmed that tug-of-war practices in Vietnam derived from a primitive ritual of rice farmers. In many villages, especially in the northern provinces, the tug-of-war is thought to reflect traditional Vietnamese agricultural beliefs and to have been practiced as a way of wishing for a good harvest, weather, and health for local communities. Some representative examples of existing tug-of-war practices in Vietnam presented below would partly prove above argument of tug-of-war's rice-farming origin and meaning (which is all about agriculture, crops and weather).

¹ According to data of project documents of Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies