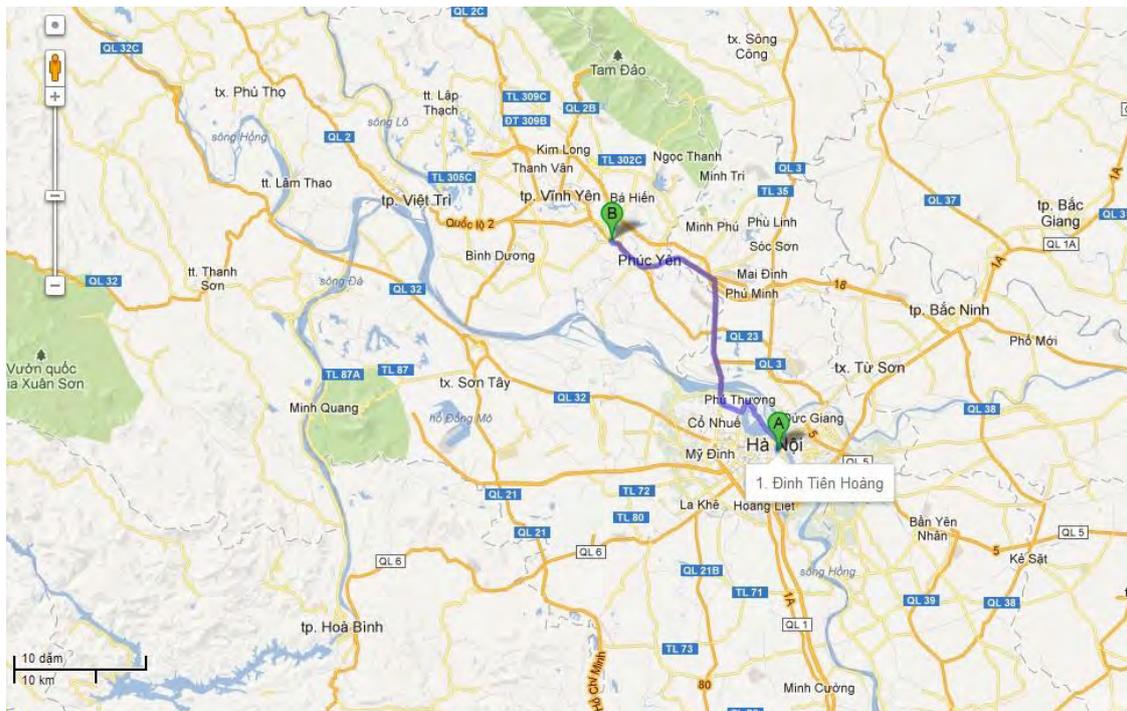


5. Tug-of-War Festival of Canh (Huong Canh) Village (Vinh Phuc Province)



Picture 2. Hanoi City (A) - Huong Canh town (B): 42.5km.

(1) Identification of the Element

Huong Canh is named for a town that includes Huong Canh, Ngoc Canh, Tien Canh and other hamlets. It is 45 km northwest of Hanoi.

Historically, tug-of-war was a popular game among many villages, such as Ngoai Trach, Quat Luu, Son Loi, and Thanh Lang, in the Binh Xuyen district, with the tug-of-war mostly taking place at the beginning of the lunar year. Today, only the town of Huong Canh keeps the tradition of the tug-of-war, but it is quite different to tug-of-war practices in other places in terms of format and meaning. In Huong Canh's tug-of-war, the ropes are made of thick rattan, which the players tug through an ironwood stake that marks the dividing line between the two teams. This stake makes the game here more dramatic, skilful, and longer lasting than the games in other places because both teams use that stake to re-gain their strength during the game. Players in Huong Canh tug-of-war game do not stand as most others do. Instead, they half-lay their backs and use their feet to

push against a shallow hole set aside for each player. This setup is also related to why this game lasts longer than others.

The Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival is usually held from 3 to 6 January according to the lunar calendar, and in some cases, it lasts until 9 January (during Tet celebration). It used to take place on the grassland in front of the current Huong Canh communal house. Now, the tug-of-war grounds are near the banks of the River Ca Lo. The grounds are 150 metres long and surrounded by a ditch (1.5 metres deep and 2.7 metres wide), which separates the playing grounds with the spectators' area.

(2) Characteristics of Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival

A. Tangible Aspects

The rope used in the Huong Canh tug-of-war is made of rattan and it is roughly forty-five metres long. Traditionally, the village sends some men to the northern mountain provinces, such as Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Yen Bai, or Ha Giang, to find for the perfect rattan. Recently, deforestation in many areas in Vietnam has made it more and more difficult to find good rattan quickly. For last several years, it has taken almost two weeks to find proper rattan. Rattan cord must be soaked in a pond for fifteen days and then taken out to dry for five to six days. This process makes the cord durable and firm.

The 2013 Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival was prepared at the end of 2012. Two men were sent to Lai Chau Province to look for good rattan. It took almost fifteen days to find two rattans; one was forty-five metres long, and the other about fifty metres long with a diameter of between three and four centimetres. It takes one year for a rattan to grow one metre. This means it took about fifty years for the rattan to grow. In 2013 festival, the organiser prepared two rattan ropes but used only one. The used one is still in good condition, so both will be used for the 2014 festival. Used rattan ropes from previous years are now kept in storage, and some are given to children so they can play their own tug-of-war game.

Other than the rattan materials, the tug-of-war stake is also an important element of the Huong Canh festival, and it makes the festival unique to other tug-of-war practices in Vietnam. The stake, which is made of ironwood, is 1.05 metres high with a diameter of 37 centimetres. It is fixed in the ground, marking the separation point of the two teams. On the stake, at the eighty-centimetre mark, there is a small hole, approximately four centimetres in diameter. Before the game begins, the rope is threaded through this hole, and the rope's central point will sit inside the stake. The referee paints two white marks on each side of the rope, one at the 18.5 centimetre mark and the other at the 1.5 metre mark. The latter is used as a reference point in deciding the winner and loser for each round.

In the past, the stake was made from longan trees, which is not as firm as ironwood, and it was 1.2 metres tall. However, this material and height made the rope more susceptible to breakage. Therefore, because of this and of rattan being so scarce, the festival organisers shortened the stake's official height to 1.05 metres, which reduces the risk of breakage and allows the rope to be reused in other years.

B. Intangible aspects

On the first day, 3 January in the lunar year, before the game starts, the players of each of the four teams gather in their Hậu Thổ (Deity of the Earth) shrine, bringing offerings such as pork, chicken, steamed spring rice, and fruit. They pray for victory and for protection. Later, in a colourful procession with many festival flags, all four teams go to the Huong Canh communal house to hold the main ritual. The ritual is performed by the senior villagers who are chosen to represent the whole village. These senior men pray to village tutelary deities and ask them to protect all the players and teams. After the senior men pray, each team prays for a successful festival and for the success of their team. The prayers are accompanied by drumbeats, which increasingly inspire all people involved.

C. Action

In the past, the Huong Canh tug-of-war was normally held from 3 to 6 January on the lunar calendar, and in some years it lasted even to 9 January without a final result. All participating teams used to tug on the rope until there was a clear winner. Now, the matches are limited to three twenty-minute rounds. This change was necessary to accommodate the young men who work in non-agricultural occupations outside their home village. Since they can only stay at their hometown during the Tet holiday, matches lasting days at a time are simply not feasible. For the last several years, the festival has been held from 3 to 5 January, during the Tet holiday.

According to senior villagers, since 1948, the Huong Canh tug-of-war was not held just once or twice due to local economic hardships. Other than those rare occasions, the festival has been kept alive as an indispensable cultural activity of local community.

In recent years, there have been four tug-of-war teams—Tien Huong, Huong Ngoc, Dong Nhat, and Lo Ngoi. The Huong Ngoc is made up of people from the eight residential sections that used to be a part of two old villages, Huong Canh and Ngoc Canh. For many years, the Huong Ngoc team has been the strongest. However, local stories tell us that Lo Ngoi were a very strong and skilful team many generations ago. In the past, Lo Ngoi was the name of a residential hamlet based on the banks of the River Canh. The people earned a living by making tiles and travelling on boats along the river to sell the tiles. Because of their hardwork, Lo Ngoi villagers were very healthy and had strong arms. And because they spent a lot of time on boats, they were accustomed to tugging ropes, so they had an advantage in tug-of-war competitions. These days, however, the Lo Ngoi team is made up of members from just two and a half residential sections while the Dong

Nhat team members come from four different sections, the Tien Huong team from four and a half, and the Huong Ngoc team, as mentioned, from eight. This means that the Lo Ngoi team does not have a large pool of strong young men to choose from. Furthermore, since boating isn't a major part of their livelihood now, they do not tug on ropes as much as in the past, so this advantage is no longer there.

According to the festival regulations, each team can have thirty-four members on the playing grounds: one captain, two vice-captains, one servicestaff, twenty-five main players, and five reserve players. An additional group of fifty substitute players stand outside the playing grounds on standby 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 must be at least 18 years old and have a healthy lifestyle with no alcohol or drug addictions.

When in a match, both teams have to be in a closely organised formation on opposite sides of the ironwood stake. The captain stands fifty centimetres away from the stake while one vice-captain is two metres away and the other vice-captain is close to the end of the rope. Among twenty-five main players, the four most important ones hold their positions close to the tug-of-war stake. These four people must be very strong, enduring, skilful, and ingenious to help secure a victory. The remaining twenty-one players are distributed in rows along the rope and taking hold. In the end, there are seventeen rows of two people each for the individual teams. The festival organisers dig a hollow oblique hole, 1.2 metres wide and 1.4 metres long, for players to step in to gain support and power. The rows are 1.5 metres apart from each other so that players can stretch their legs and lie down halfway on their backs when pulling the rope. Each team is allowed to have five reserve players while they are in a tug-of-war round.

Huong Canh tug-of-war has been organised according to regulations set up by Huong Canh People's Committee with advising by the festival organisers. Some of these regulations follow

General Regulations:

- In every tug-of-war competing round, each team has twenty-five players, five reserve players, one captain, two vice-captains, and one service staff. In total, each team has thirty-four participants while they are in the game.
- The festival referee team consists of one main referee and two assisting referees, who must be captain of the two other teams not competing. All orders, such as starting, pausing, or explaining, in the game are based upon these three umpires' decisions.

- While teams are competing, only five reserve players can be used to replace the main tugging players. Off-ground substitute players are not allowed to enter the playing ground when the game is taking place. Any violation will result in a twenty-point deduction to the team that commits the offence.
- After each tugging round, the two teams have to switch sides, but the rope must remain oriented with its roots to the east and its top is to the west.
- In the tugging rows, players are not allowed to fix the hole in which they are stepping. For any need regarding this issue, players should consult with the referee team.
- Only men are allowed to participate in the tug-of-war competition, but female staff members are allowed to support the team.
- All orders in a tug-of-war match must be made by the referee team. After checking and marking the rattan cord, the main referee will be the one who allows the match to begin.

Competing Methods, Classification, and Awards

- Two tug-of-war teams compete in three matches. Each match consists of three twenty-minute rounds with a fifteen-minute break between each round. Each team is given three points for winning a round. One point is given to both teams for participating in a round.
- In each round, the winner is the team that can pull in more than 1.5 metres of rope from the competing team. If neither team can accomplish this in the allotted time, then that round will be considered a draw.
- Points gained from the nine rounds in the three matches are tallied for each of the four tug-of-war teams. Depending on the results, the teams are ranked accordingly. The higher the result is, the higher prize each team can get. There are four types of awards: First Prize, Second Prize, Third Prize, and Fair-Play Prize.
- In the case of a draw, the winner will be determined based on the results of the match in which both teams competed. If that match was also a draw, the matter will be settled by a vote even.

In a tug-of-war match, tugging tactics are as important as the players' strength. The rattan rope needs to be held straight and tight under each player's armpit. In each row, the rope is held in this fashion by two players. The two players work together by setting their feet straight against the front of the hole, and then, half-lying their back, they pull

the rope towards their side. All actions need to be followed precisely and rhythmically according to signal from three team leaders/captains. If players miss or misunderstand their leaders' signals, the team's chance to win the game is very limited. Sometime, when both teams summon up all their strength to tug the rope, the friction from the back-and-forth motion starts to burn the rope.

The technical secrets in tug-of-war matches are based on the team leaders' signals. Each team has a different signalling system that is kept secret from competitors. Once the leaders move their flags or give some agreed-upon signals, all players are supposed to follow orders, such as holding, pulling, or tugging.

The 2013 Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival was organised as follows:

- **3 Lunar January** (12 February 2013): Opening Ceremony
 - 1st match: Huong Ngoc - Lo Ngoi (9 points - 0 points)
 - 2nd match: Tien Huong - Dong Nhat (3 points - 6 points)
- **4 Lunar January** (13 February 2013)
 - 1st match: Lo Ngoi - Dong Nhat (2 points - 3 points)
 - 2nd match: Huong Ngoc - Tien Huong (9 points - 0 points)
- **5 Lunar January** (14 February 2013)
 - 1st match: Huong Ngoc - Dong Nhat (3 points - 6 points)
 - 2nd match: Lo Ngoi - Tien Huong (0 points - 9 points)
- **Final result:**
 - Huong Ngoc team: 21 points, First Prize
 - Dong Nhat team: 17 points, Second Prize
 - Tien Huong team: 12 points, Third Prize
 - Lo Ngoi team: 2 points, Fair-Play Prize

An awardsceremony was held at the end of the final day among the great excitement of the four teams, organisers, and local people. In addition to the award granted by the festival organisers and a certificate of recognition, each team also received a large financial award from local people and businesses. As normal, when the festival finished, each team held a party to celebrate their success or effort and to discuss the matches improve their skills in future festivals. An important part of the 2013 festival is that two rattan ropes will be carefully stored for future uses.

D. Meaning and Values

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 six to seven generations. He used to play for Lo Ngoi team for many years, and now, his sons and grandsons are on this team. He insists that tug-of-war practice in Huong Canh was initially played only by young men living in Lo Ngoi hamlet (specialised in making tiles) and Lo Gang hamlet (specialised in making glazed terra-cotta jars). Later on, people from other hamlets and

villages that all geographically belonged to Canh village (current Huong Canh town) joined Lo Ngoi and Lo Gang hamlets to hold this festival. Canh village used to have eighteeng*giáp* (Vietnamese traditional residential quarters) divided into three teams of six*giáp* to compete with each other in its tug-of-war festival. While senior villagers are unable to provide an accurate date for its origins, they could confirm that the festival has taken place for many generations and that the festival was enthusiastically held between 1936 and 1942, before the First Indochina War in northern Vietnam, which prevented the festival from being held a few times.

Consulting with the local community, particularly with senior members of Huong Canh town, has brought different explanations for the festival's origins, yet all reflect strong faith and great pride of local people about their intangible cultural heritage.

One explanation⁴ suggests that the tug-of-war simulated the action of encircling and hunting animals as was practiced in the tenth century CE by General Do Canh Thac and two members of the Ngo royal family—Ngo Xuong Ngap and Ngo Xuong Van. These legendary figures are still being worshipped in today in three communal houses in Huong Canh town. Their technique for hunting included the use of many long rattan ropes to encircle the woods, which would prevent the animals from being able to flee the area. This mythical story was partly carved on some wooden parts of Huong Canh communal house: 'A chamois hit by an arrow was leg-tied, hanged, and carried by two men followed behind by a man on a horse's back, another man with a sword and a hunting dog'.

Another explanation asserts that this game depicts secret naval training on the River Ca Lo (currently a part of Binh Xuyen District, Vinh Phuc Province) during the Ngo dynasty to gain victory in the Bach Dang River Campaign against Han invaders in 938 CE. Naval soldiers would pull their boats with rattan ropes to surprise their enemies.

According to other village members, such as Mr Nguyen Chu Chau (Head of the Lo Ngoi residential area), Mr Nguyen Huu Dat, Mr Nguyen Huu Dac, and Mrs Tran Thi Vinh, Huong Canh used to use boats for catching fish and trading tiles and jars throughout the northern river system. They used rattan ropes to pull their boats to and from the rivers. This is the most probable origin of the tug-of-war practice in Huong Canh today.

Mr Tran Van Bach,⁵ a member of the Tien Huong team in the 2013 tug-of-war festival has a different idea about the origins. According to him, the tug-of-war game is closely related to the agricultural traditions of Canh villages, with symbolic meanings of praying for crops and prosperity or exorcising-related practices. In the past, Huong Canh also held many different traditional games, such as wrestling, stick-tugging, cock-fighting, and duck-catching, which are also all symbolically linked to agricultural communities in the

⁴ Interview, 28 February, Huong Canh town

⁵ Interview, 12 March 2013, Huong Canh town, Binh Xuyen district, Vinh Phuc province

north areas of Vietnam. However, of these games, only tug-of-war remains. While this explanation does not come with strong argument or good historical evidence, it seems to be the most rational explanation if we carefully consider to the role of tug-of-war in a traditionally agricultural community such as Huong Canh.

The Huong Canh tug-of-war has been preserved and practiced for many years and has become a cultural activity with great cultural and social values. The Lunar New Year holiday unites all the members of local communities, villages, and families. They move forward to a good new year with peace and prosperity. On these special days, essential cultural values of Vietnamese people are praised and heightened among all members of the community. Furthermore, tug-of-war festival held during this time reinforces community bonding and emphasises the significance of intangible cultural heritage to cultural and social life of local people. With those meanings, tug-of-war festival has been strongly and faithfully supported by everybody in Huong Canh town.

3) Safeguarding Measures

A. Bearers/Practitioners

Normally, a tug-of-war does not require too much skill or training, yet in Huong Canh, players' strength and skills are highly required. Additionally, the unity and full understanding among all team members are also essential.

Today, there are four teams in Huong Canh tug-of-war—Tien Huong, Huong Ngoc, Dong Nhat, and Lo Ngoi. Each team has approximately seventy members and three leaders (one captain and two vice-captains) and some assistants in charge of logistics and emergency aid. The captain and vice-captains must be experienced and enthusiastic, and most of all, they have to have strong leadership skills that can unify all members to create one strong team.

In 2013, captains for the four teams were as follows:

- Mr Nguyen Binh Nhat (51 years old, head of Lo Ngoi residential area): in charge from 2012 to present.
- Mr Duong Van Nguyen (58 years old, head of Dong Nhat residential area): in charge from 2006 to present
- Mr Le Dinh Binh (62 years old, head of No.2 residential area): in charge from approximately between 1995 and 1997 to present
- Mr Tran Viet Hung (55 years old, Director of Huong Ngoc Agriculture Co-operative): in charge from 2007 to present

Captains and vice-captains are able to understand the qualifications and characteristics of every member so that they can set up their teams in the most suitable and effective formation for each tug-of-war match. After each round or match, these leaders will quickly gather their team to discuss how to take advantage of their strength and overcome their weakness, to analyse their competing teams, or simply to encourage their people for better results in the next match.

Other than their main members, each team also receives great contributions from their assistants for logistics (uniforms, first-aid, and food and drinks), fundraising (donations from businesses and local people), and financial management. Most of all, the continuing support and cheers from everyone in Huong Canh are the very aspect that has kept this festival alive for so many years.

B. Safeguarding Activities

To have their traditional tug-of-war festival well preserved and practiced, local people and the government of Huong Canh have worked together for years. Considered one of the most important intangible cultural heritage elements as well as a cultural brand for local area, the Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival has received great support in terms of both finance and policy.

Each year, the Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival receives financial support from the local budget to buy two rattan cords, organise four teams, pay the organising members, and award the four tug-of-war teams.⁶ People serving on the festival organising board are mainly local authorities and heads of Huong Canh residential areas. They work as hard as they can with little payment because of their great love and pride in this cultural heritage.

In the past, the festival was held at a grassgrounds in front of the Huong Canh communal house. Sometimes, when spectators got extremely excited about the game, they crossed the line separating the players with audience. This would interfere with the match and occasionally cause chaos and conflict. In 2007, to prevent this situation, local authorities decided to build a small stadium for the tug-of-war festival. This oval stadium is in front of Huong Canh Town's People Committee office, next to Highway No.2. The main playing area is separated from the audience with an oval trench. This new stadium works effectively in restricting spectators' access to the main ground, and it keeps the game well organised.

Finding rattan is the most difficult part in organising the festival. This task has been undertaken by some members on the organising board. Traditionally, qualified rattan needs to be between forty-five and fifty metres long with a diameter between three and four centimetres. The price keeps getting higher and higher because of scarcity.

⁶ In 2013, it cost almost US\$2,200 to buy two rattan cords; US\$300 to organise four teams; US\$750 to award the teams. (Huong Canh Town's People Committee, 2013)

Therefore, as mentioned in previous parts of this report, the tug-of-war ironwood stake was shortened and competing times were limited to twenty-minute rounds. These measures reduce the risk of breakage and allow the rope to be reused in subsequent years. This saves a good deal of money.

Awarding prizes encourages young Huong Canh men to participate in the tug-of-war. The 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, awards were pink, yellow, or green silk. Today, awards for tug-of-war teams are prepared in cash, which is later used to buy gifts for every team member such as clothes, teaset, and thermoses. The gifts have little cash value but acknowledge everyone's effort on a team.

People in charge of organising and managing the annual tug-of-war festival are nominated by the chairman of Huong Canh Town's People Committee. They are mostly public administrator or local authorities who consider their contribution an expression of belonging and a commitment to their hometown.⁷ To carry out their tasks effectively, the festival organisers also need support from senior villagers who act as advisers or consultants thanks to their profound knowledge about the history of the festival. The 2013 Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival was run by a twenty-three member organising board, led by the following people.

- Mr Nguyen Duc Hoi, Vice Chairman of Huong Canh Town's People Committee: Head of Festival Organising Board
- Mr Tran Ngoc Yen, Culture and Society officer, Huong Canh Town's People Committee: Deputy Head of Festival Organising Board
- Mr Nguyen Hong Thinh, Vice Chairman of Huong Canh Town's People Committee: Deputy Head of Festival Organising Board

In charge of training, instructing, and leading players in each tug-of-war game are the captain and vice-captains. According to Mr Nguyen Duc Mau,⁸ adviser of the Lo Ngoi team, prior to the time limit change, most tug-of-war teams used to highly value tugging tactics and player's skill to maintain their strength during the very hard and long matches. At that time, experienced players and advisers played an important role because they gave the whole team skill training and tactic transmitting. These people used to use secret signals, such as moving flag, taking off their hat, or touching their hair, and special tactics to teach their team players. Today, even though everyone acknowledges the importance of these tactics and skills, due to time constraints most players on the four

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⁸ Interview, 13 February 2013, Huong Canh Town

teams do not have much time to practice before getting in a match. Physical strength now is highly prioritised over other aspects. However, team leaders still remain essential on each team. Strong leadership and team unity still define the game.

C. Safeguarding Efforts

As mentioned in the first part of this report, tug-of-war is not the only cultural activity that Huong Canh has preserved and practiced. Each year, Huong Canh hold several traditional fests, such as *đinh* festival (to commemorate and praise village tutelary deities) on 15 February on the lunar calendar. Traditionally, the tug-of-war festival has been held separately from the *đinh* festival. However, in 2012, the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vinh Phuc Province, within a framework of a provincial program for tourism development, proposed to merge these two traditional festival into one bigger cultural event to take place during the lunar February as a way of attracting more tourists to Huong Canh.

Basically, the new Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival would be held from 15 to 18 February on the lunar calendar. It was suggested to divide this festival into two main parts: liturgy (rituals such as sacrifices and processions) and rejoicing (traditional games and some folk art performances).

This proposal was presented in a wide and open consultancy with the local community, including local people and local authorities. However, while the result of this consultancy was positive, three of the nineteen residential areas in Huong Canh did not support this proposal. The main argument was that there would be a lack of players in February and that there was a risk of losing the intrinsic value of the traditional tug-of-war festival. For many years, the tug-of-war has not been considered a traditional game but rather a valuable cultural practice with a strong attachment to their agricultural belief.

Because of this disagreement, this proposal's feasibility was reconsidered. Though the proposal did not garner the needed support, the locals highly appreciated efforts of authorities in trying to explore tourism values from cultural heritages. For safeguarding efforts and activities that take into account local perspectives, such as this case involving the Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival, sustainable management and safeguarding of cultural heritage will be guaranteed.

D. Inventory

Until this research, the traditional tug-of-war practice in Vietnam in general, and the Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival in particular, has not been archived as an important intangible cultural heritage that needed to be studied, inventoried, or documented. Because of its common attachment with traditional festivals, the tug-of-war practice has

been mentioned in many documentaries or archives as part of those festivals but not as separated intangible cultural heritage as it deserves to be.

One may find some reference regarding to this special traditional cultural activity in some documentaries and reports stored in databank of the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies VICAS (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism).

Documentary: La Ha's Festival in Noong Lay, Thuan Chau District, Son La Province (2002)

Documentary: Gau Tao Festival of H'Mong people in Yen Bai Province (1999)

Long Tong Festival of Tay People in Binh Gia District, Lang Son Province. (1999)

E. References

One may refer to the following sources for further details about the Huong Canh Tug-of-War Festival:

Indigenous knowledge: Senior villagers such as Mr Nguyen Duc Mau (Lo Ngoi residential area), Mr Nguyen Kim Dap (Vice manager of the Huong Canh communal house), Mr Nguyen Chu Chau (Head of the Lo Ngoi residential area), Mr Duong Hung, Nguyen Hoan Ban, Duong Chau, Tran Ngoc Diep, Tran Dau, Nguyen Huu Dien, and others

Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies: Project "Huong Canh Traditional Tug-of-War Festival", national program "Collecting, Safeguarding and Promoting Intangible Cultural Values of Vietnam", 2013 (including raw visual data, reports, photos, and interview script)

Institute of Social Sciences Information: 1938 Statement of Mr Nguyen Huu (Chairman of the village council), Mr. Nguyen Khac Thuat (Village mayor), Mr. Tran Minh Chu (Village officer) submitted to central government. File No. TT-TS FQ4o18-XIII, 17; F2, number 12876) (mentioned tug-of-war as a traditional game practiced by Canh village to stimulate Ngo dynasty's navytraining on the River Ca Lo, which belonged to Canh Village, Huong Canh County, Binh Xuyen District).