

Social Capital and Traditional Festival Heritage Governance in Vietnam: Toward Sustainable Community-Based Cultural Management

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ABSTRACT

The study is situated in the context of the exceptionally rich practice and restoration of traditional festivals, with an estimated nearly 9,000 festivals currently held annually in Vietnam. Today, festivals are no longer merely religious customs; rather, they have become a dynamic form of living heritage that contributes to preserving collective memory, strengthening cultural identity, and generating significant economic, political, educational, and cultural-diplomatic benefits. In this context, the objective of studying festival heritage through the lens of social capital theory is to help identify and promote the “core elements” of each festival, transform them into developmental advantages, and ensure sustainability in heritage governance. To achieve this objective, the article adopts an interdisciplinary approach within cultural studies, combined with methods such as secondary data collection and analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The research findings show that approaching social capital as a mode of preserving traditional festivals can help local heritage managers propose solutions for safeguarding and promoting culture that are both consistent with community conventions and consensus and effective in cultural preservation, while also delivering benefits across multiple dimensions.

Keywords: traditional festivals, social capital, heritage governance.

1. Introduction

Vietnam currently possesses an exceptionally rich landscape of traditional festivals, with an estimated nearly 9,000 festivals held annually across the country. Many of these festivals have existed and developed for hundreds of years, while others have only been revived since the 1990s under policies aimed at restoring and promoting national cultural identity. Today, festivals are no longer merely religious customs but have become a dynamic form of living heritage, contributing to the preservation of collective memory, the consolidation of cultural identity, and generating significant economic, political, educational, and cultural diplomatic benefits. However, this vibrancy also raises numerous challenges: the trend toward commercialization, the replication of

“festival formulas” among localities, the risk of identity erosion, and particularly the often-tense relationship between the State’s managerial role and the agency of local communities. In this context, a central question arises: how can the “core elements” of each festival be identified and promoted as developmental advantages while ensuring sustainability in heritage governance? To address this question, an analytical framework is needed that goes beyond cultural-historical perspectives and is capable of explaining how communities mobilize resources, establish trust, maintain cooperation, and manage conflicts in the process of organizing festivals. Social capital provides such a framework.

Since the 1990s, the concept of social capital has attracted considerable attention from international

scholars and has been applied in fields such as community development, social governance, and public policy. However, in cultural heritage studies in general, and traditional festival research in particular, the social capital approach remains underexplored, especially in non-Western contexts such as Vietnam. Domestically, the number of studies directly addressing social capital in festival governance is still very limited. This gap provides the basis for demonstrating that research on the role of social capital in festival heritage governance is both necessary and novel. Accordingly, the first research question is formulated as follows: *From an academic perspective, how does social capital influence the governance of traditional festivals in Vietnam?* Analyzing traditional festivals through the lens of social capital helps clarify the social dynamics underlying their operation: how trust, norms, and social networks shape cooperation between the State and communities; how different social groups negotiate power and interests; and how cultural identity is preserved in the context of globalization and intensified commercialization. At the same time, this study contributes the Vietnamese case to international discussions on the governance of intangible cultural heritage, enabling comparisons with other countries facing similar dilemmas between identity preservation and economic-tourism development.

In addition to the academic dimension, from a practical perspective, the article also poses a second research question: What governance mechanisms emerge through the interaction between state social institutions and local communities? Adopting a social capital approach offers important policy implications: avoiding the mechanical transfer of festival models from one locality to another; encouraging meaningful community participation; establishing clear mechanisms of division of responsibilities and coordination among the State, enterprises, and communities in festival governance; and recognizing social capital as a resource for strengthening trust, enhancing social cohesion, and laying the foundation for sustainable development. These analyses are valuable not only for Vietnam but also for developing countries where festivals simultaneously serve as cultural heritage and significant socio-economic resources.

In sum, this research is grounded in three main rationales: (1) the current state of festival governance in Vietnam reveals multiple challenges; (2) there is a research gap in applying social capital theory to festival heritage studies; and (3) there is a need to provide both theoretical foundations and practical solutions for sustainable governance. By examining social capital as both a method and a resource, this study aspires to contribute academically and practically to

the preservation and promotion of festival heritage in Vietnam, while also enriching international discussions on heritage governance in the context of globalization.

2. Methodology

From a methodological perspective, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach within cultural studies, combining sociological and anthropological perspectives. From a sociological standpoint, the author views religious practice and the organization of traditional festivals as a synthesis of social relations and social interests. This includes relations within the community, relations between the State and the community, and relations among different levels of government in the formation and maintenance of social capital; it also considers the respective interests of the State and the community in and through festival organization, and discusses comparative issues in heritage governance in Vietnam in relation to other countries. In addition, the anthropological approach enables the article to engage more deeply with the “insider’s perspective”, namely the viewpoints of members of the state management apparatus and of the community in the context of festivals, thereby gaining a more profound understanding of their sentiments, beliefs, mutual support, and the conflicts that arise among participants in festival life.

At the level of specific research procedures, the article employs two main sets of methods. First, it collects and reviews secondary materials, including documents, books, newspapers, journals, and published research works that are currently archived in libraries. These materials provide the author with an overarching view of traditional festivals and of social capital across multiple dimensions; on that basis, the author conducts fieldwork, develops an interview question system, and selects interviewees. It can be said that this body of secondary materials plays an equally important role, enabling the study to inherit and apply findings from previous generations of scholarship, thereby identifying new arguments, new approaches, and further developing them within the author’s research. Second, the study uses participant observation and in-depth interviews, which are key methods in ethnology and anthropology. Employing these methods allows the author to enter deeply into the festival setting and into the relationships among its participants, and to better understand its underlying nature.

Regarding participant observation, the author has accumulated nine years of experience observing festivals across all three regions of Vietnam: the North, the Central region, and the South. The criteria for selecting festivals include: (1) scale, namely national-level, regional-level, and village-level festivals; (2) type of belief, including

nature-deity worship, human-deity worship, ancestor worship, and village tutelary deity worship; and (3) the status of the principal deity, such as the Four Immortals. In conducting participant observation, the author attended and observed a number of ritual and religious activities within traditional festivals (The festival period, including the opening ceremony, the main festival, and the closing thanksgiving rites, usually lasts from two to five days); observed interactions between state actors and community members during festival organization (usually taking place from the opening ceremony to the main festival day); participated and observed as a community member in processions, communal feasts, and preparatory work for festivals within households of community members; and observed how they cleaned up and brought the festival to a close (usually taking place from the main festival day to the closing thanksgiving rites). The festivals that were repeatedly and intensively observed over multiple years include the Vả Temple Festival, the Gióng Festival in Hanoi, the Phủ Dầy Festival in Nam Định, the Bà Chúa Kho Festival in Bắc Ninh, and the Bà Chúa Xứ Festival in An Giang.

In conducting in-depth interviews, it is generally evident that traditional festivals involve the participation of both the State and the community. The criteria for selecting interview participants were based on the festival organization task-assignment table provided by the locality and on the characteristics of the belief system associated with each specific festival. All interview participants met the criterion of being “insiders,” meaning that they were native residents of the locality that owns and maintains the festival. The author contacted and interviewed members of the Festival Organizing Committee, including local authorities and community representatives; members of the ceremonial committee responsible for the festival and other ritual occasions held at the heritage site throughout the year; as well as temple custodians and chief ritual officiants of the festivals. Since the composition of community members participating in festival organization differs from one festival to another, the number of interviewees was not fixed by individual respondent but was instead determined by group. For example, group interviews were conducted with palanquin procession teams, usually consisting of 5 to 10 members who had participated for many years, and with ritual performance teams, usually consisting of 10 to 20 elderly members, depending on village customs. All interviews were conducted in accordance with proper research procedures: interviewees gave their consent for the disclosure of information obtained during the interviews, while the researcher committed to protecting the confidentiality of the interviewees’ personal information. For this reason, the article conducts in-depth

interviews with both groups in order to understand social relations, how such relations are established, and the benefits that each party obtains. This is an effective method for generating multi-dimensional information while also allowing the verification of certain information provided earlier or later. It should also be noted that, for a topic that is strongly concerned with the attitudes, feelings, thoughts, and notions of cultural subjects regarding their social relations and social capital, this article places greater emphasis on qualitative research methods. Accordingly, in-depth interviewing is regarded as the most important method.

3. Results

3.1 Theoretical foundations of social capital in the governance of traditional festivals

A review of the concept of social capital shows that it has attracted considerable scholarly attention and has been approached from different perspectives.

a. Theory of social capital

Emphasizing social capital as an individual asset, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, P, 1986). He also conceptualizes social capital as “the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, P, 1986). His important contribution lies in viewing social capital as both attached to and produced through the construction and possession of institutionalized social networks formed through groups and social organizations, thereby enabling members to benefit from group-based relationships. According to Bourdieu, social capital constitutes a social network through which members may directly access economic resources and increase cultural capital through contact with experts, cultivated individuals, or powerful persons and organizations. The author of this article draws on Bourdieu’s perspective on the relationship between social capital and economic resources to analyze the current state of festival-season tourism and to propose models of festival heritage governance linked to economic effectiveness.

Understanding social capital as a collective asset of a community or society, in 1990 the American sociologist James Coleman defined social capital as encompassing “features of social life-such as social networks, norms, and social trust-that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Coleman, J. S, 1988). Expanding beyond Bourdieu’s focus on social

networks to include the dimension of shared benefits, in 1995 the political scientist Robert Putnam reiterated Coleman's idea and defined social capital as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, R. D, 2000). The World Bank's contemporary understanding of social capital is largely similar to that of Coleman and Putnam, viewing it as a concept related to social norms and networks that enable collective action. In 2000, the Japanese-American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued that "social capital is an informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals. The norms that constitute social capital can range from a norm of reciprocity between two friends to highly complex and elaborately articulated doctrines such as Christianity or Confucianism" (Fukuyama, F, 2001). Based on Putnam's studies and a series of international conferences, in 2001 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proposed a definition of social capital largely consistent with Putnam, Coleman, and Fukuyama: "Social capital refers to networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Le, M. T, 2014a,b). These approaches highlight important elements such as norms, trust, and social division of responsibilities-core values and key mechanisms in heritage governance.

From the perspective of workplace culture, Rezky Pakendek, Dina Ramba, and Adriana Madya Marampa, in their study entitled "The Effect of Servant Leadership, Organizational Culture and Social Capital on Employee Performance at the Social Services Office of North Toraja Regency," emphasized the conceptual foundations proposed by Putnam, Nashar, Replita, and colleagues. According to Putnam, as cited in Nashar et al. (2023), social capital consists of "social networks, the resulting reciprocity, and the values necessary to achieve common goals." (Ahn, Y.-J., Kang, E. M., Kiatkawsin, K., & Zielinski, S. (2023). Emphasizing the role of social capital in human resource governance and the development of a learning culture, Sumi Lee and Seung-hyun Han cited the view of Srirama et al that "parameters of social capital, such as shared vision and narratives in the cognitive dimension, trust and identification in the relational dimension, and mutual confiding in the structural dimension, are positively influenced by a strong learning organization culture. Additionally, recent findings indicate that fostering a robust learning culture is key to strengthening employee relationships and, consequently, developing social capital" (Lee, S., & Han, S.-H, 2024).

In 2026, Paola Bordandini, in the article "Social Capital and Civic Culture in Italy," argued that over the years, research has shown that social capital is a foundation for

social integration, political stability, effective institutions, and a robust democracy (e.g., Almagisti, 2025; Cartocci, 2000, 2007; Fukuyama, 1996; La Porta et al., 1999; Norris, 1999; Putnam et al., 1993; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 1999). In many comparative studies, economists and sociologists have demonstrated that trust and other dimensions of social capital are essential to economic growth (Algan & Cahuc, 2010; Guiso et al., 2006; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Tabellini, 2010; Whiteley, 2000), health (Kawachi et al., 2008), and even happiness (Bartolini & Sarracino, 2014; Helliwell & Putnam, 1995; Helliwell & Wang, 2011). In particular, the author highly appreciates the studies of Marco Almagisti, a scholar specializing in historical political science, democratic quality, political culture, social capital, the Italian political system, and political parties. His works pay particular attention to the relationship between social capital, civic culture, and the quality of democratic functioning in Italy. Building on the achievements of previous scholars and drawing upon the Italian context, Bordandini argues that "social capital is regarded as a lens through which to identify value orientations, social relations, and contextual factors that have profound implications for social sustainability and cohesion within democratic life" (Bordandini, P, 2025).

b. The theory of social capital in the governance of traditional festivals

In research on social capital in the governance of festival heritage, the 2021 study by Terese Fiedler and Mark Wickham is also noteworthy. Their article adopts Claridge's (2018) three-dimensional social capital framework to analyze how social capital is formed in the context of festivals deeply embedded in local communities. The case study is the Cygnet Folk Festival, a regional festival in Tasmania, Australia. The study combines a quantitative survey with semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with multiple stakeholder groups. The findings show that community-embedded festivals are capable of generating a distinctive form of social capital by making use of local infrastructure and expanding volunteer opportunities for residents. All three dimensions of social capital are identified, including the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions. However, this type of festival appears to be particularly effective in generating social capital in the structural and cognitive dimensions. This suggests that festivals are not merely cultural events, but also social spaces that connect people, strengthen community networks, and foster a sense of belonging to place. The study also emphasizes that community-embedded festivals differ from other types of festivals in the ways they generate social capital. Accordingly, the article offers both theoretical and practical implications for the more effective management

and development of social capital in festival settings (Fiedler, T., & Wickham, M, 2021).

Approaching traditional festivals through the theory of social capital, and based on the view that “traditional festivals are a particularly important cultural practice in the communal life of the Vietnamese people from the past to the present, preserved and promoted as a custom,” Nguyễn Thùy Linh defines social capital as follows: “Social capital consists of social relations, value norms, trust, and the benefits that the State and the community obtain or expect to obtain through the establishment and use of the values of religious practice and festival organization” (Nguyen, T. L. 2022).

In 2023, Ahn, Y.-J., Kang, E. M., Kiatkawsin, K., and Zielinski, S. emphasized the analysis of the relationship among social capital, participation in community festivals, and residents’ subjective well-being. The data were drawn from the Social Well-being Survey in Asia conducted in the Philippines and Thailand in 2016, with more than 2,000 respondents. The findings indicate that social capital is significantly associated with levels of happiness and overall life satisfaction. In particular, social capital linked to family and relatives plays an especially important role. The study also shows that participation in community festivals serves as a mediating factor between social capital and subjective well-being. In other words, family, kinship, and community relationships can encourage people to participate more actively in festivals, thereby enhancing their sense of happiness and life satisfaction. The structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital within kinship groups both contribute to promoting festival participation. The study also compares similarities and differences between the Philippines and Thailand in the relationships among social capital, festivals, and subjective well-being. The findings suggest that festivals are not only community cultural activities, but also spaces that help strengthen social capital and improve people’s spiritual and emotional well-being (Ahn, Y.-J., Kang, E. M., Kiatkawsin, K., & Zielinski, S, 2023).

In 2025, Sang Hyuck Cha and Shin Kyum Kang focused on analyzing the relationship among social capital, residents’ participation in festivals, and place attachment. Their case study is the Yeonggwang Barley Festival in South Korea, a festival characterized by the active participation of local residents. The findings show that social capital has a certain influence on place attachment, particularly through two factors: trust and social networks. Among these, social networks play the most important role in encouraging residents to participate in the festival. By contrast, social norms do not demonstrate a significant effect on festival participation or place attachment. The study also indicates that residents’ participation in the organization and operation of the festival contributes

to strengthening community cohesion. When residents participate in a substantive manner, they tend to develop a stronger sense of pride, belonging, and attachment to the place where they live. Therefore, promoting social capital, particularly networks of connection among residents, is important for enhancing the effectiveness of community festivals. The study highlights that festivals are not only cultural activities, but also instruments for strengthening social relations and local identity (Cha, S. H., & Kang, S. K, 2025)).

Thus, scholars generally agree on several key points:

- (1) The foundation of social capital lies in social norms and community trust.
- (2) The manifestation of social capital is reflected in relationships and the division of responsibilities among relevant stakeholders (government and community).
- (3) The benefits generated by social capital include economic, political, cultural, and social values.

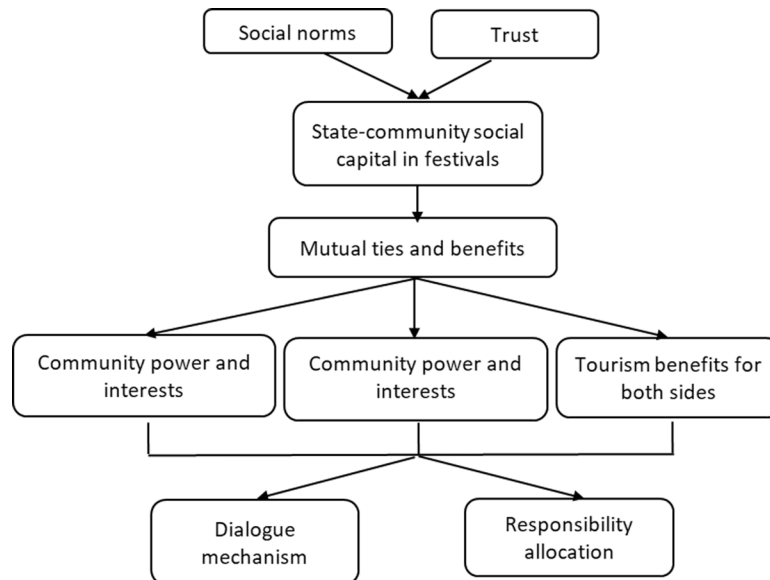
From the perspective of benefits, effective utilization of social capital can generate substantial political, economic, and cultural value for the locality that possesses festival heritage. Although local authorities hold legal status to govern heritage, in practice the formation, operation, and mobilization of social capital for multiple benefits involve both government and community actors. In some cases, the voice of the community may even be more influential than that of the authorities.

Based on the theoretical discussions presented above, this article develops a theoretical framework on “**Social capital in the governance of festival heritage**” as a foundation for implementing the subsequent research contents. This theoretical framework focuses on clarifying the relationship between the constituent elements of social capital, including trust, social networks, and social norms, and the process of governing, preserving, and promoting the value of festival heritage within the community. Accordingly, the article examines the role of social capital as an intangible resource capable of fostering coordination among the State, the community, and relevant stakeholders in the practice of festival heritage governance.

3.2 The role of social capital in the governance of traditional festivals in Vietnam

3.2.1 Trust, norms, and social networks shaping cooperation between the state and the community in festivals

Trust constitutes a distinctive spiritual dimension embedded within the system of beliefs and festivals of



the community as a key element. The term “faith” in Vietnamese (tín ngưỡng) implies absolute belief and reverence. Unlike interpersonal trust, religious faith belongs to the realm of the absolute-of idealized beauty in form, spirit, character, and communal identity directed toward the deities worshipped. Saints and deities are perceived as perfect and ideal figures who embody communal aspirations and perform virtuous deeds for society. The community believes in their spiritual power and protective role over daily life and production activities. When any local resident at the Đền Và Festival or the Gióng Festival (Hanoi) is asked, the answer is always unanimous: “The Saint is extremely sacred,” “Everyone believes in the Saint,” or “After the rain falls upon the temple gate, the Saint will return to attend the festival.”¹ The presence of deities functions as a form of inviolable soft power that guides behavior, lifestyles, and moral norms within society. Because of belief, individuals strive toward goodness. Because of belief, they fear wrongdoing. Because of belief, they endeavor to cultivate themselves as exemplary members of the community. Because of belief, the community must remain united and transmit this faith across generations so that traditional values endure. Psychological states such as reverence, moral striving, self-discipline, solidarity, and the intergenerational transmission of belief become shared social norms among communities united by the same faith. Thus, trust becomes the driving force for establishing elevated social norms across the community. Although administrative village structures have changed over time, communal values of faith and moral norms

associated with deities continue to be preserved as collective memory, as local educational tradition, and as contemporary cultural practice. In a study on the role of social capital in festivals, Sang Hyuck Cha and Shin Kyum Kang did not place strong emphasis on the role of social norms. However, the present study takes a different position and argues that norms constitute a key factor in the governance of cultural heritage. This is because trust and social norms not only connect the State and the community, but also give rise to a distinctive form of social network: a faith-based community. This type of community differs from other forms because it is grounded simultaneously in shared belief, social norms, and relational networks formed through festival organization. Its cohesion is shaped by shared locality, spiritual consciousness, common ritual responsibility, and collective participation in festival activities.

Another manifestation of trust, norms, and social networks strengthening State-community cooperation can be observed in the process of festival restoration and organization. In changing political, economic, and social contexts-along with evolving State policies regarding traditional belief practices-communities have worked alongside the State to revive festivals. This revival has revitalized traditional culture, reinforced communal solidarity and faith, and reminded younger generations of ancestral origins.

Such processes have also fostered a positive perception of the State, demonstrating respect for community autonomy and recognition of local ownership and inheritance rights over heritage. As Trần Thị Thủy notes, an invention considered a tradition cannot be separated from questions of identity, belief, rights, and ownership. This was also acknowledged by the local

¹ Source: Author’s group interview with the elders of the Festival Ritual Committee of Đền Và and Đền Gióng in the 1st and 4th lunar months of 2025.

authorities of Cổ Mễ Village: “The Bà Chúa Kho Festival here is entirely organized by the people; we only provide support when the residents need it.”² A newly constructed tradition must strengthen identity, reinforce belief, and affirm communal rights and ownership, while maintaining symbolic or meaningful connections to the community’s historical past (Trần, T. T, 2017). Every festival, ritual, or cultural event is constructed from elements of the past—customs, memory, textual sources—combined with contemporary political contexts and implicit messages about the future. While the past is associated with communal identity and ownership of belief and festival practices, the present and future dimensions often reflect a stronger imprint of governmental authority. Nguyễn Thùy Linh emphasizes that the invention of tradition serves as both an unconscious and conscious tool of the State to consolidate its legitimacy, particularly amid political challenges, while communities similarly use it to reinforce their own survival and development. Traditions may be constructed in official or unofficial forms, the former often political and the latter social in character (Nguyễn Thùy Linh, 2022). Due to historical and political transformations, some traditions may be entirely new, while others are reconstructed from longstanding practices deeply embedded in communal consciousness. The successful restoration of a festival reflects internal negotiation among community members and between the community and the State. Communities have demonstrated flexibility in reviving self-governance traditions, adapting to market mechanisms, and adjusting to new State management models so that traditional culture remains visible and practiced in new forms. This explains the shared enthusiasm of authorities and residents in festival organization and the emergence of a new cultural governance model that has yielded both cultural and economic benefits.

3.2.2 Social groups and state institutions negotiating power and interests in festival heritage governance

The organization and governance of festival heritage cannot be reduced to a uniform formula applicable nationwide. Each festival represents a dynamic cultural practice rooted in regional and local identity. Consequently, social groups differ in cultural expression, power allocation in festival organization, and the articulation of group interests. In some traditional festivals, negotiation between the State and the community reaches a maximum level when organizational authority is entrusted to a specific lineage. Members of that lineage

assume responsibilities ranging from ritual performance and communication to guest reception and logistical coordination. In such cases, the State plays a relatively symbolic role, issuing general guidelines and participating as an honored guest. The recognition of lineage authority is understood as a “sacred benefit” inherited from ancestors who contributed to the preservation of the site and festival through periods of war and political upheaval. Here, power is intertwined with benefit, and the State respects historically established community authority.

In other restored festivals, the community initially manages organization independently—from mobilizing participants and preparing ritual offerings to developing detailed scripts. As organization becomes more professionalized, State involvement increases, resulting in shared coordination. Coercive State control risks organizational failure and serious religious conflict. Therefore, gradual power-sharing and co-organization between community and State have become practical governance lessons.

In 2025, Vietnam reached a significant milestone in heritage governance with administrative territorial mergers. This raised questions among heritage managers and practitioners: How will the State manage heritage? Will community roles change? How will negotiation and cooperation unfold? Preliminary field observations suggest that dual-level authorities continue to guide policy and support logistics while community actors retain primary authority over festival organization and key decisions. The chief temple custodian of Phủ Dầy Văn Cát also affirmed: “Although the administrative merger has taken place, the authority to organize the festival and manage the relic site has been maintained as in the past.”³

3.2.3 Economic development and sustainable tourism through festivals

Traditional festivals are not isolated cultural practices but embody a synthesis of economic, political, social, and educational values. In the contemporary tourism economy, festivals provide localities with opportunities to both preserve cultural identity and generate revenue. From an economic origin perspective, many festivals historically reflected the community’s primary economic structure. Even amid historical upheaval, assimilation, and cultural exchange, festival life continues to mirror fundamental economic patterns.

In terms of economic development through festivals, the expansion of religious freedom and market openness has broadened the scale and influence of festivals. During the early Đổi mới period, communities played a central

² Source: Author’s interview with a cultural officer of Cổ Mễ Village, Bắc Ninh, in February 2025.

³ Source: Author’s interview with the chief temple custodian of Phủ Dầy Văn Cát in December 2025.

role in reviving ritual practices aligned with spiritual needs. Over time, however, market dynamics entered sacred spaces. Heritage sites increasingly function as economic instruments, and festivals sometimes resemble revenue-generating enterprises. Pilgrims become customers, and commercial services-ritual assistance, hospitality, transportation-expand accordingly. Historically, festivals honored ancestors who contributed to cultural formation and national development. Today, while these commemorative functions remain, festivals are also expected to generate economic value. Cultural tourism services associated with festivals can be understood as a spiritually infused form of patriotism shaped by the socioeconomic transformations of the *Đổi mới* era. Changes in rural policy, recognition of household economic units, and the revival of village culture have contributed to the resurgence of traditional festivals as tourism assets. Many localities aspire to become “festival cities” to attract visitors and stimulate economic growth. Even small village-scale festivals increasingly incorporate such economic considerations.

3.3 Solutions for festival governance from a social capital perspective in the contemporary context

The current context has brought about improved living standards, enabling people to participate more easily in and actively support festivals both materially and spiritually. Yet this same context is marked by uncertainties, risks, and rapid changes that lead many individuals to turn to belief and ritual as forms of spiritual refuge, seeking renewed faith and hope. Although social capital was formed in the past, its role and influence have never ceased, because social capital is inherently regenerative: it generates benefits, these benefits multiply and develop into new forms of social capital, which in turn re-enter the sphere of religious practice and festival organization. Thus, effective festival heritage governance through the mobilization of social capital is an objective and inevitable trend, since heritage itself is a manifestation of social capital in action. To enhance governance from this perspective, the article proposes several key solutions.

3.4 First, establishing mechanisms of dialogue grounded in trust and social norms

In any festival, the local community serves simultaneously as the subject that maintains, expresses, and recreates spiritual values and as the beneficiary that experiences those values. Festivals are tied to the belief that the revered deity embodies the most noble virtues of the community and its tradition. Myths and royal decrees associated with deities often recount extraordinary,

benevolent acts, linking them to national protection and communal prosperity. Villagers tend to internalize these narratives as part of their own history. Economically, festivals provide income for various interest groups, particularly traders operating around temples and shrines. The vendors around *Đền Và* are always busy during the festival season because, as they explained, “We try to earn additional income during the festival days, because on ordinary days our work is only enough to make ends meet⁴.”⁴ Spiritually, festivals generate profound pride and collective honor. Even amid administrative restructuring, urbanization, and modernization, Vietnamese culture retains strong agrarian and village-based characteristics. Each village maintains distinctive beliefs, customs, and cultural practices that constitute enduring systems of trust and social norms. Building dialogue mechanisms upon these shared values can prevent unilateral decision-making and promote democratic, equitable governance oriented toward sustainable development. Authorities may intervene in administrative aspects, but in core ritual elements the community should retain decisive authority. Harmonious negotiation between authorities and residents forms the foundation for effectively mobilizing social capital in the preservation and promotion of festivals, including within the contemporary trend of commercialization.

3.5 Second, enhancing effective social division of responsibilities between the State and the community

In the era of globalization, festivals are important tools through which states strengthen social cohesion, consolidate political legitimacy, and affirm national identity. Each community participates in festivals differently, reflecting complex cultural and power relations between State and society. The State should focus on promotion, symbolic representation, and regulatory oversight, using festivals to reinforce political legitimacy. Communities, meanwhile, should emphasize preservation, creativity, and local interests that may differ from State objectives. Participation in festivals allows individuals to affirm their roles within the community and express collective identity. Festivals thus function as forums enabling multiple stakeholders to engage for diverse purposes.

The influence and prestige of a festival reinforce communal pride and attract increased State attention, leading to investment in restoration and heritage development. Community participation has shaped a multidimensional process of heritagization in Vietnam.

⁴ Source: Author’s interview with a group of vendors at *Đền Và* during the *Đả Ngư* Festival on the 15th day of the 9th lunar month of 2025.

Despite deeper State intervention in cultural domains, communities remain active agents who adapt and negotiate rather than passive recipients. Their rights are legitimized, while the State, if excessively intrusive, risks over-nationalizing heritage. Balanced division of responsibilities ensures that authorities support rather than replace community agency.

4. Conclusion

Mobilizing social capital in local festival heritage governance: a promising direction for contemporary cultural preservation and promotion

Across nations and regions, culture remains an invaluable communal asset. Over time, communities construct distinctive cultural identities, and heritage becomes a key through which researchers and managers engage deeply with cultural worlds and develop effective preservation strategies. As an essential cultural component, festivals are not static relics of the past but dynamic processes of cultural creation shaped by diverse social actors. Their ongoing transformations reflect both the dynamic nature of heritage and shifts in economic, political, and social environments that affect social capital. Through formal and informal power relations, festivals continuously evolve. The crucial task for both State and community is to adapt to these transformations and effectively mobilize social capital in preserving heritage values while generating benefits for all stakeholders. Converting social capital into a method of preservation enables heritage managers to design solutions aligned with community norms and consensus, ensuring successful governance and sustainable local cultural development.

This study raises a number of issues that warrant further discussion, both from an academic perspective and in terms of practical application at the local level. For example, within the interrelationship among the value systems of trust, social norms, and social networks, do the State and the community prioritize any particular element, or are these elements treated with equal weight? Are there any contradictions or conflicts in terms of the norms or beliefs held by the State and the community regarding the actual practices of festivals currently taking place? This may be regarded as a critical issue for localities in the present context of administrative boundary mergers and the restructuring of cultural management personnel. A second issue that the author considers necessary to include in discussions on social capital concerns the competition for interests in festival organization, as well as disputes over titles such as “main palace” or “main temple” in many localities, including Nam Định, Bắc Ninh, and Hà Nội. Instead of promoting

and enhancing the value of social capital, it is the very “insiders” who are, in some cases, diminishing the value of the capital that generations of their ancestors had painstakingly built. Therefore, the above study, together with subsequent research directions, seeks to contribute an additional academic voice while also providing sustainable support for localities in governing heritage in a manner that remains faithful to the “soul and cultural essence of the nation.”

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies solely for editorial purposes, including language refinement, grammar correction, stylistic improvement, and the enhancement of clarity and coherence. These tools were not used to generate the research ideas, theoretical framework, analysis, interpretation, arguments, or conclusions presented in the manuscript. All intellectual content, conceptual development, methodological decisions, and scholarly interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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