

## ORGANIZING CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM DURING THE WAR: THE CASE OF VINH LINH (1954–1975)

### ORGANIZAÇÃO DA VIDA CULTURAL E ESPIRITUAL NA REPÚBLICA DEMOCRÁTICA DO VIETNÃ DURANTE A GUERRA: O CASO DE VINH LINH (1954–1975)

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Nguyen Chi Hieu\*

\*University of Education, Hue University (HUEdu), Hue, Vietnam

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7630-0965>

[hieukhqs@gmail.com](mailto:hieukhqs@gmail.com)

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#### Abstract

This study investigates the organization of cultural and spiritual life in Vinh Linh Special Zone, a frontline territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1954 to 1975. Positioned adjacent to the 17th parallel, Vinh Linh endured severe wartime devastation while simultaneously serving as a strategic stronghold in the struggle for national liberation. Drawing upon archival sources, policy documents, and historical accounts, the research highlights how culture was mobilized as both a spiritual resource and a “soft weapon” to sustain resilience, foster patriotism, and reinforce collective identity. The findings demonstrate that cultural activities, ranging from education, literature, and arts to community rituals, were systematically organized to strengthen morale, unify the population, and support the broader mission of liberating the South and reunifying the nation. The case of Vinh Linh illustrates the enduring role of culture as a decisive factor in wartime society, reflecting the broader Vietnamese revolutionary perspective that culture constitutes one of the three essential fronts alongside politics and economics. This article contributes to the understanding of wartime cultural policy and underscores the significance of cultural resilience in contexts of prolonged armed conflict.

**Keywords:** Vinh Linh. Wartime Culture. Spiritual Resilience. Vietnam. National Identity.

#### Resumo

*Este estudo investiga a organização da vida cultural e espiritual na Zona Especial de Vinh Linh, um território de linha de frente da República Democrática do Vietnã entre 1954 e 1975. Localizada próxima ao paralelo 17, Vinh Linh sofreu intensa devastação durante a guerra, ao mesmo tempo em que atuava como bastião estratégico na luta pela libertação nacional. Com base em fontes arquivísticas, documentos de políticas e relatos históricos, a pesquisa evidencia como a cultura foi mobilizada tanto como recurso espiritual quanto como “arma suave” para sustentar a resiliência, fomentar o patriotismo e reforçar a identidade coletiva. Os resultados demonstram que as atividades culturais, abrangendo educação, literatura, artes e rituais comunitários, foram sistematicamente organizadas para fortalecer o moral, unificar a população e apoiar a missão mais ampla de libertar o Sul e reunificar a nação. O caso de Vinh Linh ilustra o papel duradouro da cultura como fator decisivo em uma sociedade em guerra, refletindo a perspectiva revolucionária vietnamita de que a cultura constitui uma das três frentes essenciais, ao lado da política e da economia. Este artigo contribui para a compreensão da política cultural em tempos de guerra e ressalta a importância da resiliência cultural em contextos de conflitos armados prolongados.*

**Palavras-chave:** Vinh Linh. Cultura em Tempos de Guerra. Resiliência Espiritual. Vietnã. Identidade Nacional.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

From the earliest stages of Vietnam's struggle for national liberation against French colonial rule, culture was recognized not merely as an auxiliary element but as a fundamental source of strength for the people. This perspective was formally articulated in the *Vietnamese Cultural Outline* of 1943, the first foundational document that laid the groundwork for revolutionary cultural policy. The Outline clearly emphasized that “culture is one of the three fronts, along with politics and economics, serving the goals of resistance and nation-building.” This principle established culture as both a strategic resource and a spiritual weapon, shaping the ideological foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam throughout decades of war.

During the prolonged conflict, cultural policy was continuously refined and implemented through major directives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Culture was not only understood as a means of artistic expression but also as a decisive force in nurturing the spirit, will, ethics, and revolutionary ideals of the nation. President Ho Chi Minh repeatedly underscored this role, affirming that “culture must light the way for the people to follow” and that “to save the country and liberate the nation, there is no other way but the path of culture.” These statements highlight the centrality of culture in mobilizing collective consciousness, strengthening national unity, and sustaining morale in the face of adversity.

For Vinh Linh, the significance of culture was even more pronounced. Following the Geneva Agreement of 1954, Vinh Linh became a fierce battleground between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam. Positioned at the frontline near the 17th parallel, the region directly confronted the full-scale war waged by the United States. In this context, the people of Vinh Linh relied not only on military strength but also on the spiritual resources embedded in their cultural life. Community rituals, educational activities, literature, and artistic expressions all contributed to a collective resilience that fortified the population against relentless bombardments and hardships.

## **2 THE CULTURE OF VINH LINH IS CHARACTERIZED BY MODERN VIETNAMESE CULTURE**

To lay the groundwork for a new cultural foundation capable of nurturing and elevating the spiritual life of its people, the administration of the Vinh Linh Special Zone placed strong emphasis on cultivating cultural forms that were deeply rooted in everyday community life. Rather than remaining abstract or distant, these initiatives were designed to resonate with the rhythms of daily labor, family gatherings, and collective activities, ensuring that culture became a living force within society.

Between 1955 and 1964, a period when destructive warfare had not yet reached the North, local authorities seized the opportunity offered by relative peace to expand cultural programs with remarkable intensity. This was a crucial moment, allowing the government to enrich the spiritual life of the population through diverse and practical measures. Mass art troupes were established and promoted, bringing music, theater, and dance to villages and towns, while exhibitions showcased achievements in production and social progress. Cultural clubs provided spaces for dialogue, creativity, and solidarity, becoming hubs where people could share experiences and strengthen community bonds.

Professional film teams were also organized, traveling to remote rural areas to screen films for audiences who had little access to such resources. These screenings were not only a source of entertainment but also a powerful medium of education and propaganda, reinforcing revolutionary ideals and encouraging the population to remain steadfast in their determination to fight for national unity. Through these efforts, culture was woven into the fabric of daily life, serving simultaneously as a source of joy, a tool of enlightenment, and a means of political mobilization.

Thanks to the core support of professional and semi-professional cultural units, the movement of culture, arts, and sports were developed vibrantly and uniformly. Some communes established amateur art teams to serve the people during holidays and festivals, such as the art teams in the communes of Vinh Giang, Vinh Thuy, Vinh Son, Vinh Kim, etc. Many communes had football and volleyball teams for both men and women competing in various places in the region. The Department of Culture organized the establishment of Vinh Linh Cultural Propaganda Team and Tri Thien Folk Singing Team, while central art troupes and General Department of Politics continuously took turns

serving the border area. Alongside various cultural activities, the Special Zone government intensified its press and propaganda activities.

The area established two types of press: a printed newspaper called "Thong Nhat" and a newsletter named "Ben Hai". Both of which were printed and distributed by Thong Nhat Printing Enterprise (Vinh Linh). Alongside the printed format, the radio system through the network of Vinh Linh Radio Station disseminated news to various segments of the population. Ho Xa town, regarded as the economic and political center of the area, features a public loudspeaker system from Vinh Linh Radio Station, and the streets were equipped with reading groups that share news, promote good deeds, criticize and remind people of undesirable actions and phenomena.

The welcome gates, information boards, and clusters of panels sprung up everywhere, creating a neat appearance for the town and serving as a place to disseminate the policies and socio-economic tasks set forth by the government at all levels (Ho Xa Town Party Committee Executive Board, p.38). Combined with the efforts of cultural agencies and grassroots communities, they played an important role in promoting cultural and artistic movements among the people. Many sectors and communes developed grassroots cultural and artistic movements. Cultural and artistic activities have vividly reflected the spirit of production, labor, and the construction of a new society.

Along with promoting the grassroots cultural movement was the development of the local cultural network, which included a system of cultural houses, museums, libraries, information stations, broadcasting stations, and clubs. The training of cultural staff had been given significant attention. From 1961 to 1964, Vinh Linh had dozens of football teams, volleyball teams, shooting teams, and swimming teams that achieved high results in regional and northern competitions. The movement for building a beautiful Ho Xa town and attractive streets was increasingly effective, with a growing number of tiled houses, enhancing the town's appearance continuously.

Political education created a peaceful environment for life, which was essential for the work of security and defense. Social organizations in the district, from children, teenagers, and youth to women's associations and cooperatives, effectively managed and educated their members, resulting in a truly healthy cultural and social environment in Vinh Linh. Streets, village roads, and alleys were always kept clean. Everyone was concerned about maintaining environmental hygiene. People lived and worked according to the constitution and the law.

The period from 1954 to 1964 left a profound mark on the history of revolutionary culture in Vietnam during the early stages of the resistance against the Americans, with Vinh Linh serving as a typical example. The cultural values nurtured during this period not only contributed to enhancing the spiritual life, but also provided a tremendous source of motivation for the people of Vinh Linh to overcome hardships and protect their homeland throughout the subsequent resistance against the Americans.

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### **3 DEVELOPING A STRONG GRASSROOTS CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN DESTRUCTIVE WARFARE**

During the years of war, Vinh Linh was not only the front line in military terms but also the front line in culture, a place where the resilience of the people was expressed not only through weapons but also through the preservation of spiritual life. Amidst the fierce bombings that shook villages and towns, this land steadfastly maintained the spiritual life, ethics, and character of the Vietnamese people, becoming a true "cultural fortress" amidst the fiery front lines. The phrase "cultural fortress" was not simply a poetic tribute but rather an accurate reflection of the essence of life here, where culture itself became a shield and a source of strength for the community.

As the war intensified, the Vinh Linh Party Committee made a decisive shift, transforming all cultural and informational activities from peacetime into wartime modes of operation. This adaptation was not passive but proactive, ensuring that culture remained a weapon of encouragement and unity. The action slogans at this time carried profound meaning: "The song drowns out the sound of bombs, the loudspeakers blend with the sound of gunfire", "All for the beloved South", and others. These slogans were not mere words but guiding principles, embodying the goals and core spiritual values of Vietnamese culture that had been inherited and promoted in the fire line of Vinh Linh.

They symbolized the determination to let art, music, and collective spirit rise above destruction, turning cultural expression into a form of resistance.

The cultural, educational, and healthcare sectors during the years of fighting against destructive warfare became truly hot battlefields in their own right. From 1965 onward, the grassroots cultural movement in Vinh Linh did not diminish but continued to develop with remarkable vitality. At the commune and cooperative levels, amateur art groups were formed whose activities were carefully adapted to wartime conditions. These groups provided timely encouragement for both production and combat tasks, ensuring that morale remained high even in the most difficult circumstances.

The film industry also made significant contributions. In 1966, despite constant bombardments, current affairs and feature films were shown to the public, with 386 screenings attracting 77,532 viewers, achieving 69.8% of the plan. These screenings were more than entertainment; they were powerful tools of education, propaganda, and collective solidarity, reminding audiences of the broader struggle and reinforcing their determination to persevere.

In the context of severe bombardment by American planes, the local government sought innovative ways to sustain intellectual and cultural life. One of the notable efforts was the distribution of library book publishing agencies to communes, cooperatives, agencies, and schools, ensuring that reading and access to knowledge did not cease even under fire (Vinh Linh Regional Department of Culture and Information). Books and printed materials became sources of inspiration, helping people maintain a sense of normalcy and intellectual engagement amidst chaos.

Thus, during the war years, Vinh Linh demonstrated that culture was not a luxury but a necessity, a force that sustained the community's spirit and identity. The intertwining of cultural resilience with military resistance created a unique model of survival and struggle, showing that even in the harshest conditions, the Vietnamese people could transform culture into a fortress of unity, strength, and hope.

The types of books and newspapers effectively served political study sessions and high school students, achieving 87.6% of the plan. The broadcasting activities were strengthened and developed, with 90% of cooperatives in the delta having a loudspeaker system, averaging 0.4 households per loudspeaker. Physical education and sports work was maintained and developed, with the promotion of a combination of four sports: running, swimming, shooting, and traditional martial arts, especially among youth, self-

defense forces, and students. Morning exercise was maintained, contributing to increased health for combat and production.

Along with the political service mission, the cultural and information work encouraged a joyful, optimistic revolutionary spirit among the people. During holidays and the Lunar New Year, most communes had cultural performances organized by local art teams and cooperatives. Additionally, there were two professional art troupes from Central Government and a cultural troupe from Department of Culture that perform for the communes. Film teams were also actively engaged, with 474 films screenings held in 1967 for various communes and units, attracting 45.410 viewers.

Despite living in the harsh conditions of war, Party Committee of Vinh Linh Area always prioritized the spiritual life of the military and the people. Activities related to information, culture, and arts had always been emphasized. The publi also actively participated in the cultural movement. The songs were not only resonate during leisure and meetings, but also during battles, production, and amidst hardships, difficulties, and sacrifices. The movement "The Song Overpowers the Bombs" truly brought a life with full of optimism and confidence to the military and people of Vinh Linh.

With the human resources from the grassroots cultural movement and the training support from Military Command of 4<sup>th</sup> Military Region, the art teams continuously expanded in scale, enhanced their musical instruments, and become "Shock Art Teams" on all fronts. The team consists of amateur actors and singers who were youth, officials, teachers, and soldiers selected from various communes, agencies, and units in Vinh Linh. Although the team members were not formally trained, they had a passion for the arts, performance abilities, and especially a spirit of enthusiasm, courage, and readiness to face danger to serve the people.

Overcoming countless difficulties and shortages, the actors and artists passionately performed on artillery platforms, trenches, storage yards, and in bunkers, driven not only by their passion but also by love and the belief in victory. In every locality they visited, the members of the "Cultural Performance Team" actively engaged in understanding the local situation and incorporated local examples into their works, which were greatly loved and appreciated by the people. The performance program usually includes: solo singing, group singing, skits, short plays, revolutionary poetry, adapted folk songs, and short dramas... with content that encourages the spirit of resistance, praises the homeland, and

reflects life in the tunnels. They perform without a stage, without lights, but are affectionately referred to by the people as "the artists of the people's hearts"

In the midst of the smoke and fire of battle, the songs of the cultural performance team serve as a morale booster, uplifting the fighting spirit, igniting love for the homeland and hatred for the enemy, contributing to transforming suffering into action, and helping the people and soldiers maintain the spirit of "every citizen is a soldier" and "every village is a fortress." The team utilized various folk melodies from Binh - Tri - Thien, adapting them into revolutionary songs to resonate more deeply with the people. In addition, there are folk performances that were satirical, critical of the enemy, and promote production and solidarity. The artistic team was also an extension of the propaganda work, conveying the policies and guidelines of the government to the public in a lively and easily accessible manner. Many performances are built around key themes: "Three Ready", "Steady Hands on the Plow, Steady Hands on the Gun" or "Fight and Win", etc.

A notable example in the movement was Vinh Giang Cultural Performance Team. The songs, skits, folk tunes, and poems of the team truly became an essential source of spiritual nourishment for the forces stationed in the area. As one of the few grassroots cultural teams classified as strong by Vinh Linh Department of Culture, it was invited multiple times to perform at the district level for leaders of various levels, neighboring provinces, and international guests visiting and working with Vinh Linh, all of whom praised this performances enthusiastically. The team also developed several exchange performance programs with neighboring communes and with the local community displaced in Tan Ky (Nghe An), leaving a lasting impression on the audience.

In particular, in 1970, Ms. Nguyen Thi Thu Ngoan was appointed to represent the team in the artistic delegation of the fire line in 4<sup>th</sup> Region, representing the movement "The Voice Overcomes the Bombs" in the North to visit and perform in China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, contributing to strengthening international solidarity and friendship. Nguyen Thi Thu Ngoan had the honor of meeting Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, Chairman of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Il-sung, and the Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army of China, who presented her with a rifle. At the same time, artist Tran Duyen, a musician skilled in many traditional instruments, performed several folk songs from Binh Tri Thien, which received high praise from Chairman Kim Il-sung (Vinh Giang Commune Executive Board, p.105).

Vinh Linh artistic team was a unique and representative symbol of revolutionary culture during wartime. In the harsh conditions of war, they transformed their singing into a weapon, bringing art to deep bunkers, trenches, and battlefields, etc. Their songs were expressions of faith, courage, and love for the homeland. This was an indispensable part of the cultural and historical picture of the "Vinh Linh fire line" and forever symbolized the spirit of "fighting with all heart and song" of the Vietnamese people.

#### **4 FORMING THE UNIQUE CULTURAL SPACE OF THE "TUNNEL VILLAGE"**

From July 1966 to October 1968, the U.S. used all kinds of modern weapons such as tunnel bombs, penetrating bombs, cluster munitions, and chemical agents to launch devastating attacks on Vinh Linh. The entire Vinh Linh region had to endure simultaneous bombardments from various types of munitions delivered by U.S. modern equipment, including strategic and tactical aircraft, as well as artillery of different calibers firing from the sea and from the southern bank of the Ben Hai river, continuously dropping thousands of tons of steel onto the densely populated areas of Vinh Linh day and night (Commission for Investigation of War Crimes of the US Imperialists in Vietnam).

At this moment, in response to the question of "To exist or not to exist" the issue of organizing "prevention" was a decisive matter, primarily to protect the lives of the people while ensuring the successful execution of all tasks to defeat the American military adventures. Therefore, Vinh Linh Regional Government concentrated all its efforts on organizing prevention, viewing this as a major political campaign, crucial for fulfilling the political mission assigned by higher authorities. Vinh Linh Administrative Committee launched the movement of "Militarizing the entire population" and "Fortifying the entire area" with the slogan "Shelters from sun and rain, bunkers to protect bones and flesh".

From there, the villages on the land of Vinh Linh were organized in a way that gradually "dived deep" into the ground, creating an underground living network right beneath the fiery soil, which was the tunnel system. The tunnel was the largest passage and also served as the village routes, with each small branch being a minor tunnel, which leads to the village routes, and each nook represents a household. The main tunnel was designed with a hall for activities, meetings, and cultural performances, as well as a

maternity house, a surgical station, a water well, a bathing area, a storage room, and guard posts at the entrances and exits.

All daily activities and the steadfast struggle of officials, party members, soldiers, and the people took place underground. The system of 70 tunnels was distributed across 15 communes and towns in Vinh Linh. Besides their primary function of protection, the tunnels vary in purpose depending on the characteristics of each region and commune; they could be a complete village or merely a temporary shelter during bombings, a workplace, a storage area, a transit point for goods, or a resting place for troops. In the tunnel and underground village system, there were a total of 114 different tunnels, particularly notable for their large scale and length. The most typical and representative tunnel in this system is the Vinh Moc tunnel. However, life underground, no matter how well the tunnel system was constructed, inevitably leads to confinement, lack of light, and declining health. Therefore, it was essential to organize the cultural and spiritual life of the people effectively.

Vinh Linh's government launched a movement and encouraged the underground villages, households, and tunnels to decorate their living spaces with appropriate cultural forms and promptly recognized the beautiful and bright underground homes where people lived together warmly and loved each other like family. Books, newspapers, and pictures from the Regional Cultural Department have been delivered to the people regularly and comprehensively by cultural shock forces, overcoming bombs and bullets.

The songs and voices of the youth and militia rose day and night from the bunkers to the frontline positions, providing strength to the people on the fire line. Amidst the carpet bombing of B-52s and the sounds of gunfire and explosions, the content of the programs from the Voice of Vietnam and the regional broadcasting stations continued to convey the familiar and beloved voice of the Fatherland and the people of the entire nation, bringing a strong belief in ultimate victory to the officials, soldiers, and people of Vinh Linh. "Thong Nhat" newspaper, the official publication of the Vinh Linh region, was also delivered to every officer, soldier, and citizen. The communes established reading groups and artistic creation teams. Books and newspapers were used for activities in the bunkers. Dozens of wall newspapers, bulletins, slogans, pictures, and posters were displayed and decorated right under the communication trenches. Almost every bunker has a prominent place reserved for hanging a portrait of President Ho Chi Minh (Standing

Committee of the Party Committee of the Military Command of Quang Tri Province, p. 34).

Vinh Linh tunnel system was not only a military marvel during the war, but also was a unique cultural phenomenon, exemplifying the will, determination, and creative spirit of Vietnamese culture in wartime. These values served as a lesson in the resilience and inner strength of the nation in the face of all challenges. During the years of war, despite living in extremely difficult, dangerous, and harsh conditions, the people of Vinh Linh still maintained traditional values and family ethics. Many local folk songs were adapted to serve propaganda purposes, vividly reflecting the continuity and innovation of national culture.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Nowadays, in modern society, as individual values are increasingly emphasized, the lessons drawn from the collective cultural life of Vinh Linh during wartime remain a precious heritage, transmitted across generations. Vinh Linh stands as a vivid testament to how culture can flourish even under the harshest conditions; the greater the adversity, the more creative and resilient cultural expressions became. This historical experience continues to inspire contemporary creativity in education, communication, and artistic practices, ensuring that cultural development remains closely aligned with both traditional cultural spaces and modern trends of globalization and innovation.

From 1954 to 1975, Vinh Linh was not only a symbol of heroic struggle but also a living embodiment of resistance culture and creative culture. The cultural achievements forged in the midst of bombardments and hardships are now being inherited, revitalized, and expanded as part of Vietnam's broader strategy to build an advanced, modern culture that retains its profound national identity and humane values. These achievements highlight the enduring role of culture as a foundation for unity, a source of moral strength, and a driver of social progress.

Promoting the cultural values of Vinh Linh today affirms that culture is more than “soft power”; it is a reservoir of national resilience, a guiding light for sustainable development, and a vital force in shaping the future of the nation. By integrating these wartime lessons into modern cultural policy and practice, Vietnam demonstrates that

culture is not only a reflection of identity but also a dynamic resource for innovation, solidarity, and long-term prosperity.

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### Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

**Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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