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1. Introduction

Today’s urban ward of Ngọc Hà comprises a cluster of ancient villages that together constituted the so-called thập tam trại “13 farms”. Nowadays the former farms of Ngọc Hà, Hữu Tiếp and Đại Yên are located within the administrative boundaries of the ward.

The urban ward of Ngọc Hà has a long history. During the Trần Dynasty, the city, then called Trung Kinh, consisted of 64 quarters. Under the rule of the Lê kings, the area was renamed phủ Phụng Thiên and comprised 2 districts with 36 quarters. During the Nguyễn Dynasty’s administration, phủ Phụng Thiên incorporated the two districts of Vĩnh Xương and Quảng Đức. Later, phủ Phụng Thiên was renamed thành phủ Hoài Đức, while Vĩnh Xương District was called Thọ Xương and Quảng Đức District became Vĩnh Thuận. The land registers of Vĩnh Thuận District stipulate that in the time between
1810-1813, 1837 and 1866 Ngọc Hà was designated a farm (trải). In the land register of 1886-1888 it was formally listed as a village (thôn) (Papin 1997: 50). In 1831, the Province of Hà Nội was founded. The four farms of Ngọc Hà, Đại Yên, Vinh Phúc, and Hữu Tiếp continued to belong to Vĩnh Thuận District. Only Xuân Biểu became a part of Yến Thành. After 1889 a great amount of the latter’s land was taken by the French colonial administration to construct the Botanical Garden. It was only in 1889 that the French government took land from the districts of Thọ Xương and Vĩnh Thuận to found the city of Hà Nội (thành phố). Until 1899, a Zône suburbaine autour de ville Hà Nội (khu ngoại thành Hà Nội) existed, comprising land from the districts of Vĩnh Thuận and Từ Liêm. In 1915, this outer area changed its name to Hoàn Long District forming a part of Hà Đông Province. In 1942, Hoàn Long District was officially ascribed to the central administration of Hà Nội City, with the new name “Délegation spéciale de Hà Nội” (Đại Lý đặc biệt Hà Nội). Residents referred to it as Đại Lý Hoàn Long. During the resistance against the French and the August Revolution, the farms and villages of Ngọc Hà ward changed their names several times. At the end of 1945 the area was called Đại La, in May 1948 it was renamed Trần Tây District. In November 1954, it received the name Ward 6 (Quận 6), and in 1961 it was made Ba Đình Quarter (khu phố Ba Đình). Finally, in 1979, the site received its current name Ba Đình District (Anon. 1996: 7 ff.).

In the following, the focus of research is on the three neighbouring villages of Ngọc Hà, Hữu Tiếp and Đại Yên. Forming a part of the agricultural section of the capital known as “13 farms”, the villages used to play an integral role for the urban economy of the pre-colonial state. In the villages of Ngọc Hà and Hữu Tiếp flowers and vegetables were grown, while Đại Yên village was well-known for the production of traditional Vietnamese herbs (thuốc Nam) (Anon. 1996: 27). The three villages are bound together through a common founding legend. Annually, celebrations are held in honour of the villages’ founder.

2. The founding legend of the 13 farms

According to the legend, the daughter of a Lý king went on a boat trip on the Thiên Đức River, nowadays the Dương River. Suddenly, a monster arose from the water ramming the boat causing it to capsize and the princess fell into the water. The villagers went to the banks looking for her, but no
one was able to find her. The king, desperate about the loss of his daughter, promised a reward to anyone who could find the princess. Finally, a young man from Lê Mạt village\(^1\) was able to retrieve her corpse from the water. The Lý King wanted to reward the young man graciously with gold, silver, and money, but the young man from Lê Mạt village refused these gifts. All he requested was a plot of land situated in the west of the royal city of Thăng Long. The king accepted his wish and assigned the western land to him. Thereafter the young man named Hoàng Phúc Trung, invited his fellow villagers from Lê Mạt to follow him and settle down in this new area. From then on the land was called “13 farms” (thập tam trái); the name is Sino-Vietnamese, thập meaning ten, and tam signifying three. The 13 villages comprise Ngọc Hà, Hưu Tiếp, Đại Viện, Xuân Biểu, Công Yến, Văn Phong, Vĩnh Phúc, Liêu Giai, Công Vị, Thủ Lệ, Ngọc Khánh, Kim Mả, Giảng Vô, all part of today’s Ba Đình District (HNM 26.04.05).\(^2\)

Although the 13 farms share a common founding legend, a clear functional division existed between the three villages studied from their early beginnings onward. The villagers of Ngọc Hà and Hưu Tiếp mainly engaged in the cultivation of flowers and vegetables. A few villagers also worked as bricklayers or petty traders, and as civil servants or industrial workers. The women of the two villages carried the flowers in baskets on their backs to the royal citadel selling them to the capital’s residents, who always bought flowers on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month to pray and worship. This represented the earliest form of street trade in Hà Nội. In Đại Viện, medicinal herbs like lemon grass, peppermint, etc., were cultivated (Kurfürst 2012: 128). Before 1945, residents of Ngọc Hà and Đại Viện also bred milk cows. In 1970, during the war against the United States, the vegetable cooperative of Ngọc Hà was founded. Its task was to produce vegetables for the state, especially simple vegetables such as water spinach (rau muống). In response to the high demand for vegetables, flower plantations were replaced with vegetable beds (Anon. 1996: 27, 68 f.).

\(^1\) Lê Mạt is a village located across the Red River in today’s Gia Lâm District. It is famous for its restaurants specialising in snake dishes.

\(^2\) This recollection of the founding legend is based on two sources. The main source is a narrative interview conducted with a member of the organisation committee of the Ngọc Hà Communal House that took place in January 2008. The information gathered in the interview was amended by a second source, a book on the history and tradition of Ngọc Hà published by the urban ward of Ngọc Hà (Anon. 1996).
In 1980, the village was transformed from a rural administrative entity (làng xã) into an urban ward (thành phố) of Hà Nội. This also favoured the area’s transition from an agricultural production site into a residential area.¹ In 1994, the urban ward of Ngọc Hà comprised 9 residential units and 63 resident groups with 14,000 residents (Anon. 1996: 10). According to statistical data from 2005, the ward comprises 80.1 ha of land and 16,774 registered residents. The housing area is attractive for residents, for both Hanoians who are looking for a dwelling close to their place of work and for newcomers to the city, because of its close proximity to the city centre (4 kilometres). Naturally, the high demand for living space fosters the conversion of agricultural lots into land for building, as revenue from rent and sales are much more lucrative than from agricultural production. This in turn affects the residents’ source of income. In Ngọc Hà, the occupation has shifted from the agricultural to the state sector. One respondent implies that currently many residents of the former village of Ngọc Hà are employed in civil service, for example in the Office of the Government which is situated nearby, or in the Police Department (Kurfürst 2012: 128).

3. Places of communication and interaction

In general, open spaces for social interaction among the residents of Ngọc Hà ward are rather rare in the area. In particular, through the constant enlargement of houses and the expansion of living space onto fallow, public spaces in the form of streets, sidewalks, places and urban green hardly do exist. The ward’s streets are very narrow. The main alley is about 4-5 metres wide, only permitting motorbikes and bicycles to pass. A pavement for pedestrians is non-existent. The path system from village times appears to have been retained as a main alley leads into the villages, which then branches out into several smaller lanes (Kurfürst 2012: 129).

The place, which - at least in Western cities used to be the main point of assembly - the market is existent in all three villages under research, yet displaying quite different features. First, the biggest market, “Ngọc Hà market”, is not situated within the administrative boundaries of Ngọc Hà ward, but rather within Đội Cấn ward. It is located next to the junction of

¹ The Constitution of 1980 introduced the ward system. Before this the local administration constituted a two-level system (city, district). With the administrative entity of the ward, a third level was established within urban areas (Koh 2006: 53).
Lê Trong Phong and Ngọc Hà Streets. The market in the immediate centre of Ngọc Hà ward is called Hữu Tiếp market. The market used to consist of wooden market stalls erected in a demarcated area, but today only few of the stalls are still in use. Instead, most of the economic activity has shifted to the main alley leading to the market. Thus, the market is occupied by mobile vendors, coming from outside the village. Additionally, the owners of houses that face the market lane have transformed their ground floor into small shops. The major customers in the ward are women; they buy fresh vegetables, fruit, meat and flowers for the day. Due to the narrowness of the market, there are limited opportunities for rest or social interaction like chatting. Many women stay at the stall where they purchase their food, talking with the owner (Kurfürst 2012: 129).

In Đài Yến, economic activities are concentrated around the ancient village gate. There is a combination of fixed shops and mobile vendors, comparable to conditions in the Hữu Tiếp market. The area is located right at the junction between the two main alleys connecting the village with the surrounding main roads. Therefore, more room is provided for social interaction than is available in Hữu Tiếp market.

At least in Hữu Tiếp, some additional recreational space is provided by two lakes, B52 and Dài Phương Lake. The former is named after the wreck of a US-B52 bomber lying in the middle of the lake. On the shores of the lake, the primary school, communal house of Hữu Tiếp and Cát Triệu Temple are located. Accordingly, the banks of the lake constitute the symbolic centre of the former village (Kurfürst 2012: 129 f.).

In particular, in the late afternoon hours the banks of the B52 Lake are a popular gathering place for parents and their children, whom they collect from school. Around the lake, two mobile drinking stalls offer refreshments and a place to sit down and chat. They are mainly visited by parents who watch their children play. In the morning and afternoon two different food stalls take turns occupying one specific spot opposite the school. In the morning sticky rice (xôi) is sold and in the afternoon noodles with snails (bún ốc) is available. Food stalls are for the most part frequented by pupils and their parents before or after school. Besides, not many neighbours use the space for recreation or social interaction. This is especially interesting

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1 In 1972, during the Vietnamese offensive the US bomber was shot down by Vietnamese forces. The lake has turned into a famous sightseeing site for tourists.
given the little public space in the area. As soon as it gets dark, the banks are emptied and neighbours retreat to their houses (Kurfürst 2012: 130).

Besides these profane spaces, many sacred spaces, such as the communal house, Taoist temple, and Buddhist pagoda, can also be found in the area. This system of sacred spaces dates back to village times. Most of the edifices are well-preserved. This may be a result of the ideological shift that took place in 1986; since then urban wards are in charge of the preservation of historical monuments, worship houses and Buddhist and Taoist temples in the locality (Koh 2006: 66).

In the villages of Ngọc Hà, Đại Yên and Hữu Tiếp, the main holy sites are the following:

1. Ngọc Hà Communal House (đình) belongs to the administration of the residential unit No. 2. The communal house was built under the Lý Dynasty in honour of the village deity Huyễn Thiên Hác Đế. According to legend, an eight year old boy fell from a tree and died and after his death he became a deity. When the Lý king had to fight the Nam Chinh Army he had a dream that the deity would come to assist him and he was finally successful in the campaign. He was able to make the enemy’s ship sink. He was aware that Huyễn Thiên Hác Đế had helped him to achieve his victory because the colour of the water had turned black like the skin of the deity (Anon. 1996: 11 f.).

2. Hữu Tiếp Communal House belongs to the residential unit No. 3. During the French occupation it was completely destroyed but was rebuilt thereafter. Nowadays, Ngọc Hà’s primary school occupies the main part of the former communal house’s courtyard. Like the communal house of Ngọc Hà, it is dedicated to Huyễn Thiên Hác Đế. Every year on the saint’s birthday (19.01.) and the day of his death (21.11.) the residents of Xuân Biểu, Ngọc Hà and Hữu Tiếp organise a feast in his honour.¹ On his birthday the three villages bring the palankeen and the ancestral tablet of the deity to the hosting communal house. There the saint is worshipped for three days (Anon. 1996: 12).

3. Cát Triệu Temple is located next to the communal house of Hữu Tiếp. It is dedicated to Hoàng Thị Đức, Huyễn Thiên Hác Đế’s mother. Her worshipping name is Mẫu Cát Triệu. The statuettes of the three mothers, Bà Mẫu, are located in the temple and each wears a different coloured robe.

¹ These dates follow the lunar calendar and therefore vary each year.
The first mother wears a red robe symbolising life, while the second wears green representing the forest, and the third wears white, signifying water.

4. Bát Mậu Pagoda belongs to residential unit No. 3. During French occupation, the site of the Buddhist pagoda used to be a place for the French army to practice. In the realm of land reform in 1954, the land was transferred to peasants in order to plant flowers and vegetables. A further land plot behind the pagoda was assigned to the police to construct housing and working units for their employees. In recent years, parcels given to peasants have been transformed into construction land. The book about the history of Ngọc Hà highlights the pagoda’s function as a place for the elderly to take a rest and for the young to play (Anon. 1996: 15 f.). However, as data from participant observation illustrate only few laymen actually spend their time there; even on the evening of the 1st and 15th of the lunar month it is usually not that crowded.

5. Đại Yên Communal House belongs to residential unit No. 7. It was built during the reign of the Lý Dynasty. Unlike the other communal houses in the urban ward, it is not dedicated to Huyền Thiên Hắc Đế, but rather Princess Ngọc Hoa. She is the female saint of the village. Each year on the 13/14th of the third lunar month the residents of Đại Yên village celebrate a feast in her memory (Anon. 1996: 23). According to the legend about Ngọc Hoa, she decided to help her father, a general under the Lý Dynasty, combating the enemy by disguising herself as a sales woman and therefore spying on the enemy’s troops. With the information gathered, her father’s troops were able to win the war. She died at the age of nine in her mother’s hometown, Đại Yên village.

6. Đồng Nước Temple belongs to residential unit No. 5. The temple is also referred to as Tam Phủ Thánh Mẫu. Its construction dates back to Trần times. It is dedicated to the female Saint Ngọc Nương. Each year on the 17th of the 8th lunar month the people of Đồng Nước village celebrate her day of death with a festival (Anon. 1996: 19).

Among the holy sites presented above the communal house of Ngọc Hà sticks out. First of all, it is the largest architectural construction in the area. Second, it is also a communal place within the urban ward, where most social activities take place. Of course most of the activities conducted in the building or the courtyard are related to religious practices. Nonetheless,
also a variety of other social activities are carried out here. For example, a Chinese class is regularly held in one of the rooms. In the early morning, mothers take their toddlers for a walk, and neighbours exercise in the courtyard. Third, it is a sacred space, where urban dwellers go to to pray for good luck and honour the village deity. The village saint of Ngọc Hà is Huyễn Thiên Hắc Đế. According to the legend the communal house of Ngọc Hà was founded during the Lý Dynasty (11th-13th century), when the locale was called Phú Phượng Thiên. At that time, an old couple living in the area desperately longed for a child and one day the husband and wife went to the One Pillar Pagoda to pray to the gods for a child. After they had finished their prayer and returned home from the temple, the woman had a dream about a rich old man with grey hair giving her a child. He said that it was the child of the King of Heaven (Ngọc Hoàng). The child was sent to earth as a penalty because it had broken a cup in heaven. Soon after this dream, the woman became pregnant with a male. The baby had black skin and therefore received the name Hắc Công, Hắc meaning black. When Hắc Công grew up his only interest was in martial arts and he often went to the forest in today’s Botanical Garden (Bách Thảo) to practice. In the year he turned eight, he died there and legend has it that someone from heaven had descended to earth to take him back (Kurfürst 2012: 69 f.).

Some years later, the country was shattered by a war. The troops of the Lý King had to defend the country against foreign invaders. In order to receive heavenly support, the Lý King organised a spiritual festival. In the night after the celebrations he dreamt of a small saint advancing towards him from the north, and thus promising him victory. Suddenly, during a battle between the Lý King’s army and the enemy troops on the river, a black cloud arose. The enemies were not able to see anything, and therefore the Lý King’s troops were able to defeat them. In order to express his gratitude to the saint, the King commanded the thirteen farms located west of the royal citadel to honour the saint. The king gave the saint the name Huyễn Thiên Hắc Đế. Huyễn and Hắc meaning “black”, and Thiên translating into “heaven”. Subsequently, the three villages Ngọc Hà, Hữu Tiếp and Xuân Biểu, all parts of the thirteen farms, built communal houses and temples dedicated to Huyễn Thiên Hắc Đế. The people of Hữu Tiếp specifically honour the saint’s mother, Hòang Thị Đức, because they believe that she was born there and therefore, next to the communal house of Hữu
Tiếp, the temple, Cát Triệu, was erected. In tribute to the saint’s mother it is also referred to as Mau Cát Triệu. On the saint’s birthday, the 19th of the first lunar month, villagers visit the communal house of Hữu Tiếp. His day of death, the 21st of the eleventh lunar month, is celebrated in Xuân Biểu Temple located in the Botanical Garden nearby. On both occasions, festivals (lễ hội) are held in the communal houses and all villagers are invited, a tradition that continues today. On this occasion the residents of Ngọc Hà and Hữu Tiếp meet in the communal house to celebrate. The celebrations include numerous games and social activities such as singing folk songs, or performing modern Vietnamese folk opera, cái lường (Kurfürst 2012: 70).

The architecture of the communal house follows a strict geomantic outline and the different spatial compartments are linked to specific functions. Many of the functions, particularly those related to sacred activities, have prevailed over time, whereas others have been altered and adapted to villagers’ everyday life. The greatest change has been in the accessibility of certain parts of the holy site to the public (Kurfürst 2012: 70).

The brick wall surrounding the communal house clearly marks its outstanding position in the village structure. The main gate, the so-called Cổng Tam Quan, constitutes the threshold mediating between the profane and sacred world. It leads into the courtyard. This gate is always opened on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month and on festival days. On other days it might be closed without further notice, making it difficult for residents to visit the communal house on working days. The members of the management board are in charge of opening the đình to the public (Kurfürst 2012: 70).

In general, communal houses in Vietnam have three common features: a courtyard (sân), a well or pond (giếng) and a banyan tree (cây đa). The obligatory pond of gold fish and the banyan tree are located within the courtyard. The gold fish denote wealth and prosperity, while the tree is a symbol of longevity. In front of the pool at đình Ngọc Hà, two stone elephants facing each other are to protect the communal house (Kurfürst 2012: 70).

The main edifice of the đình is separated from the courtyard by a wall. The entrance to the communal house is marked by three gates. The main gate in the middle is framed by two pillars. On top of each pillar, dragons face the four cardinal points. The pillars’ adornments depict the everyday activities of the village (sinh hoạt làng). While the main gate is only open on festival days, the two smaller gates on the left (cổng tà) and right (cổng hữu)
are also open on usual days. Behind the two gates two smaller buildings are located, phong tả (left room) and phong hữu (right room). The two rooms function as a resting place for visitors to the đinh. It is here, where visitors to the communal house are offered a cup of tea (Kurfürst 2012: 71).

Entering the main structure of the communal hall, the first room is the Tiền Tế, with Tiền referring to the location of the room that is the “front”. Tế designates the activity that takes place within this space, “worshipping”. The space of the Tiền Tế consists of five courts (sân). Wooden pillars demarcate the different courts and one court reaches from one column to the next. At the altar of the Tiền Tế, visitors to the communal house inform the spirit about the purpose of their visit, an inaugural act that every visitor needs to conduct before entering the other parts of the đinh. It is certainly the most profane space within the communal hall. During pre-colonial times this was the site, where villagers’ taxes were collected. Nowadays, it is where community meetings take place (Kurfürst 2012: 71).

Behind the Tiền Tế lies the Phương Đình, the chamber where the saint’s palankeen (long đinh) is kept. On festival days, the saint’s statue is carried around in this palankeen to the Botanical Garden. The ceiling of the Phương Đình is adorned with paintings of the heraldic tiger. The next room behind the Phương Đình is called Đại Bài. The sacredness of the Đại Bài and the chamber behind it called Hậu Cung is emphasised by its height above the other halls. A step and a wooden gate separate this part from the front. Thus, to enter the Đại Bài another threshold needs to be passed. Traditionally, all wooden houses used to have such a step at the entrance door. The threshold warrants that people slow down before stepping in and thereby ensures the worshippers’ consideration. The deity’s war tools (trắc ky) are kept in the Đại Bài (Kurfürst 2012: 71 f.). Behind this area, the saint’s altar is situated and always used to be accessible to all members of the community to pray. The holiest part of the communal hall is situated in the last room, the Hậu Cung (Endres 2000: 46). It is the location of the statue of Huyền Thiên Hắc Đế. In the past, this space used to be separated from the other chambers by a wooden gate and was only accessible to the temple guardian (thu tự). Nowadays, it is open to the public.

The spatial configuration of the đinh is closely related to a system of in- and exclusion. Within the đinh exclusive spaces existed which were not accessible to all members of the community alike. The degree of exclusiveness
of a space communicates its degree of sacrality; the more sacred, the more enclosed. Moreover, the communal house’s function as a village assembly hall and thus its connotation of officialdom created supplementary barriers (Kurfürst 2012: 72). This system of inclusion and exclusion was based on gender and class. For example, under the Nguyen Dynasty’s rule the village administration constituted the council of notables. These notables were chosen from registered male villagers according to specific criteria including age, mandarinate degree, competence in administrative matters, prestige, and property. The head of the council of notables was appointed on the basis of age and education and enjoyed prestige in the village. Within the council two groups of notables were distinguished; the main group of notables, kỳ mục, and the small notables referred to as dịch mục (Großheim 2004: 57). In addition, Nguyễn Quang Ngọc (2009: 123) reports that in Yên Sở village of former Hòai Đức District the people, who had a rank in the communal house, could be divided into 11 classes (11 tích). In some villages selling and buying of ranks also became a popular means to augment the village budget. This represented how village social stratification was outlined in terms of access to spaces of power as well as money.

Nowadays the holy sites of the urban ward, particularly the communal houses ought to be open to all residents of the ward as well as to strangers. Nonetheless, a form of restricted accessibility remains as most edifices are only opened to the public on the first and 15th of the lunar month, during New Year (Tết) or during festivals dedicated to the village deity. For example, the communal house of Ngọc Hà used to be watched by a guardian, but after his death no successor among the younger generation could be found. Thus, the communal house’s organisation committee took over the role of opening the hall to worshippers. Members of the board take turns watching the communal house. If residents wish to pray on a usual day, they will need to register with the committee in advance. Members of the committee report that most people would come to the sacred space on their way to work, or to pray before they start building a new house, or also prior to a joyful event. On common days of worship, such as the 1st and 15th of the lunar month, only a few youth appear to visit the communal house. Mostly, elderly women and also females between the ages of 30 and 50 go there to pray (Kurfürst 2012: 132). After making offerings some worshippers stay in the hall for a cup of tea and chat with each other. However, as most
of them come to worship on an individual basis, occasions for interaction appear to be rather rare.

In general, there appears to be an occupation of the communal house by the elderly residents of the area. Both social activities organised in the communal house of Ngọc Hà, and cultural and religious festivities are for the most part frequented by elderly residents. Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien (2009: 178) depict a similar account when stating that more research needs to be done in order to determine “to what extent non-congregational religious life (i.e., that based on individual worship) offers associational life opportunities for any but the retired and elderly (mainly women) …”.

The domination of the elderly is also represented in the configuration of the organisation committee of đình Ngọc Hà. The committee consists entirely of older people, for the most part women. These women not only organise the festivities on the village saint’s birth and death day, but they also represent Ngọc Hà village in the annual procession of the 13 farms to Lệ Mật village. Additionally, the group goes on pilgrimages (di lễ) together. Overall, social cohesion among the organisation committee and further affiliates, who regularly join religious celebrations, appears to be exceptionally high (Kurfürst 2012: 132).

4. Locality and Social cohesion

A locality consists of loosely structured relations of mutual assistance between people living in a spatially demarcated area (Korff 1991: 14). Thus, a locality is formed through people’s social creativity. “Social creativity is the ability to create new patterns of social relations and organisations” (Korff, Rothfuß 2009: 363), and therefore, the will to improve one’s living conditions. In their study about social ties in slums in Bangkok and Manila Berner and Korff (1995: 214 ff.) determine that physical proximity and time are determinants of the development of solidarity, mutual trust and the feeling of a “we”.

In the study area, the various communal houses actually bear the potential to serve as basis of such a locality. Throughout Vietnamese history the relevance of the communal house for the collective was constantly stressed. The reference to a common history and founding legend resulted

1 One reason for this is certainly the principle of seniority.
in an identification with a specific community. In particular, nowadays within an estranged urban environment, this feeling of a “we” could be produced through social and cultural activities organised in the communal house. A member of the communal house committee in Ngọc Hà asserts that the residents of the 13 villages maintain close relationships with each other (Kurfürst 2012: 132). Especially, the celebrations in honour of the village Saint in the communal house could provide a platform for communication and exchange between long time residents and the newly moved ones.

On the 21st of the eleventh lunar month the village of Ngọc Hà celebrates the death of its Saint Huyễn Thiện Hắc Đế. On that day the people of the village (làng) come to the đình to make oblations to the deity in order to pray for their families. Oblations are made in the form of cooked rice served with chicken, fruits, flowers and incense sticks. Afterwards, every villager visiting the communal house registers with the organisation committee to make a donation. With the money collected the renovation of the đình ought to be financed. A high contribution to the communal house increases social reputation because it is honoured with the inscription of the family’s name onto a marble table at the entrance towards the dãI bai. After having donated the villagers are invited to have lunch together. The hall, where lunch is served is situated right around the corner in the culture house Nhà Văn Hóa of Ngọc Hà. All visitors are served with giò (sausage), nộm (salad), xôi (sticky rice) and liquor. The last one’s to have lunch are the members of the committee. The festival ends with a cultural program.

Some months later on the 14th of the third lunar month the 913th birthday of the village deity Princess Ngọc Hoa (1095-2008) is celebrated in the đình of DãI Yến. The communal house of DãI Yến is surrounded by a high rectangular stone wall and only accessible at one side. Most of the time, on usual working days, it is closed. In contrast to the communal house of Ngọc Hà it only opens on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month and on the occasions of festivals or Tết. The morning before the big celebration the courtyard of the đình is already decorated with the festival flag. In front of the phòng hửu a counter collecting the villagers’ contributions is set up. Every visitor who makes a contribution receives a little plastic bag comprising oan (sticky rice wrapped in a leave for worshipping) and a banana. In front of the first altar in the tiên tế a group of elderly women (70-80 years) sits and prays. They all wear brown coloured robes and brown/red pearl necklaces like Buddhist
nuns. On the altar sticky rice is offered to the princess. In front of the altar only elderly women sit. Younger people stay in the back of the hall in order to leave the space in front to the older people. After they have finished their prayer they all go to the hâu cung to present their gifts to the deity. When the women go home they take the sticky rice with them to feed the children. The rice is considered a present of the princess to the villagers. The small plastic bag comprising the sticky rice and banana is a symbol of participating in the community. In the area of Đại Yên neighbours will immediately recognise who returns home from the communal house.

In the morning of the next day at 8.30 am the actual celebrations begin. The organisation committee set up a complete festival programme consisting of coq fights, traditional dances etc. The courtyard of the dinh is much more crowded than the day before. Children play around the pond. Next to the site, where the registration desk for contribution is situated, an altar comprising a photo of the princess is situated. In front of the phòng tà old men sit and have tea together, while the elderly women go together to the altar to bring offerings to the princess. On the right hand side the small phòng hưu is dominantly occupied by women. Behind it in a small court close to the tiền té women wash and cut flowers. In the Đại bai the altar is decorated with flowers, offerings and money. Since the village is part of the 13 farms not only the inhabitants of Đại Yên participate in the festival, but what is more all other 12 communities sent delegations to the dinh.

At 11.30 am the first part of the celebration ends. A lot of people go home to have lunch and to rest. For the afternoon programme some residents return dressed differently. The reason for this is that the diverse parts of the festival programme go hand in hand with a particular dress code. For example, in the morning Mai Anh, who is a resident of Đại Yên wears an áo dài with flower print. She explains that this is the dress in which to serve the guests and delegations coming to the communal house. Around 3 pm she has to return to the communal house dressed in a so-called áo tế consisting of white trousers and a yellow top. Around her head she wears the khăn, a yellow coloured hairband decorated with silver and turquoise stones. The áo tế is worn, when to worship the princess. At 5 pm the closing ceremony of the festival is held.

About one week later on the 23rd of the third lunar month the traditional festival named Lễ hội Lễ Mật takes place in the village of the
same name in Hà Nội’s Gia Lâm District. That day each of the 13 villages (thập tam trại) sends a delegation of 13 representatives to the communal house of Lê Mạt in order to pay tribute to the founder Hoàng Phúc Trung. In Ngọc Hà village the organisation committee of the dinh is in charge of organising the trip across the Red River. Through information boards and posters residents are invited to register in advance for the trip. Every passenger has to pay 70,000 VND for the ride. At 6 am that morning a van leaves from dinh Ngọc Hà to Lê Mạt village. Only elderly people, for the most part women from 60 till 80 years old, join the delegation. Five men, who will leave the festival earlier, accompany the women because they are in charge of carrying the flag. In addition to that two younger women escort the delegation, taking care of the organisation. The delegation of Ngọc Hà is the first delegation of 13 to arrive in the courtyard of the people’s committee and council of Lê Mạt. In the court male representatives of Lê Mạt wearing the traditional áo dài welcome the delegations with 13 wooden boards displaying the names of the 13 farms. For the procession to the communal house each group needs to line up behind its board. But before, the women of Ngọc Hà change their clothes. They dress in black silk trousers combined with a white blouse above which a brown áo dài is tied in front. Around their head they wear a hair band made from black velvet. This is the traditional uniform that the women of Ngọc Hà used to wear when they went to the royal citadel to sell flowers. All representatives receive a sticker which identifies them as members of the Lê Mạt, festival. Meanwhile the two younger women prepare the tray with the offerings for the Saint, the founder of the 13 farms. The offerings comprise a flower bouquet made of lillies and roses as well as small money bills. Then, the procession starts. Through a loudspeaker the different delegations are asked to start their procession. The first person of the delegation of Ngọc Hà to start is a man carrying the village’s sign. Behind him an elderly woman carries the tray with offerings on her head. In order to facilitate carrying the heavy plate, she wears a black headscarf. Behind her the four men of Ngọc Hà follow with the traditional festival flags. The men wear áo dài consisting of white silk trousers and black tops as well as a black hairband. In the back the female representatives line up in lines of four. The delegations of the other villages all engage in the procession. Most delegations wear colourful costumes; yellow, rose or pink áo dài, while men are dressed in royal blue áo
dài, wearing colourful shoes. A few delegations even are accompanied by a little orchestra, mainly consisting of men playing traditional instruments. In other delegations women dance. Through the common clothing, dance and music a collective identity is created. Furthermore, the 13 delegations present different offerings to the deity (Kurfürst 2012: 133).

The head of the communal house’s organisation committee of Ngọc Hà walks next to the group supervising and giving instructions. Along the village’s main street people stand and watch the march. Among them are mainly women and children as well as elderly people. One reason for this might well be that it is a working day and those watching the parade are residents that do not go to work. As the parade advances the communal house of Lê Mạt, the groups are advised to slow down. The delegation turns into lines of two. Stepping through the main gate on the right and left hand side old women in áo dài welcome the delegations by speaking prayers. In the courtyard a lot of young women and a few men sit with their children and watch the procession. Before entering the hall the women have to take off their conical hats. A man announces the delegation of „làng Ngọc Hà, làng Trọng hoa“. Then, the group is allowed to place its offerings on the altar. Each village designates one person in charge of making the offerings. Afterwards the whole group moves counterclockwise to the other altars of the communal house, stopping in front of each of them and praying. At last the group goes to the pagoda neighbouring the đình. There a cup of tea is served to the visitors. Meanwhile in the court a coq fight is taking place with men only watching the fight. Thereafter the women of Ngọc Hà go together to a big hall for lunch. Every group is seated at a table, where raw tofu, sticky rice, pork and sausages are served. Before leaving all guests receive a small plastic bag again comprising oan and a banana. At the exit, a registration desk for contribution is set up, but none of the representatives of Ngọc Hà makes a donation. This is quite interesting as usually donating is regarded to enhance social reputation. However, because the women are not villagers of Lê Mạt noone would come to appreciate their contribution.

After the parade has ended the courtyard of the communal house is transformed into a stage where traditional songs are performed. Outside the wall of the đình mobile traders advertise worship accessories to the visitors. They even sell the traditional áo dài of the Ngọc Hà women. At 10 the whole official procedure of the Lê Mạt Festival ends.
The three annual festivals presented above actually provide continuity in an ever changing urban environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that mostly elderly residents of Ngọc Hà ward, especially women, engage in the celebrations. By contrast, younger dwellers as well as migrants who only recently moved to the area, often are not aware of the festivals or do not participate in them.

Against this background, it is remarkable that today many Hanoians, also newcomers to the city, still refer to Ngọc Hà as the “flower growing village” (làng trồng hoa). Many residents, even young people, from the urban ward are at least aware of the area’s flower cultivating past. However, when it comes to specific knowledge, such as the founding legend or the date of the village saint’s birthday, only few residents, mainly older villagers, are cognisant of it (Kurfürst 2012: 133).

Cultural and religious activities in the communal house seemingly fail to attract other residents of the area, in particular the younger generations, except for those who have already been living in the ward for quite some time, and are actively engaged in the community. Consequently, as the findings from Manila and Bangkok indicate, time appears to be a critical factor in the constitution of social ties in Ngọc Hà ward.

Through the immigration of new residents, social ties among neighbours appear to dissolve and it takes time to build up new relationships. People who recently moved to Hà Nội, have social relationships outside their neighbourhood, as they maintain ties to relatives and friends in their hometown or build relationships with their colleagues at work, rather than becoming involved in their new neighbourhood.

In conclusion, the communal house occupies an ambivalent role within the locality. On one hand, it constitutes a local public space bearing the potential for the development of the feeling of a ‘we’ and thus a collective identity, while on the other it remains an exclusive space failing to integrate the diverse social strata of the neighbourhood regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, etc. Additionally, local public spaces such as alleys and markets appear to be transitional spaces that only serve short-time interactions. In contrast, permanent relations seem to be established in the private space of the home, for example through an invitation for tea. Finally, spatial practices of local public space within the urban ward seem to argue for a privatisation of society (Kurfürst 2012: 136).
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