



BRIEFINGS HANOI

Vietnamese Wrestling

Gus Roe comes in full contact with an ancient martial art



One day a long time ago, a flash flood ravaged the commune of Liem Tuc. One of the villagers, Doan, ran to give aid to people in the affected areas. But when he arrived at the scene of the flooding, he found a glowing sword resting on a red cloth. He accepted this sacred gift and tied the sword around his waist with the cloth.

Some time later Doan was called upon to defend the country. He became a fierce, near-invincible warrior, famed for his sword and grappling skills. Eventually he was killed in battle. On hearing the news, his wife, Bui, died of grief.

So struck were the people of Liem Tuc by the death of the couple, that they began to venerate them, and worship their memory. Over time Doan and Bui were given the titles Thanh Ong and Tien Ba — god and goddess. To pay homage, every year the villagers of Lieu Doi in Liem Tuc hold a traditional wrestling festival.

I'm a martial artist and a documentarian based

in Hanoi. Last year when I was offered the chance to go the *dau vat* festival during Tet, I couldn't refuse. I spent some time the month before researching the village and connecting with the locals. A pro-fighter, Linh, and his friend, Thuy, agreed to give me some training. When I arrived on the day of the festival, I had no idea what to expect. This is the diary of my experience.

5am

A nearly 1,000-person-strong parade leads from the ancient *soi vat* wrestling arena to Doan's shrine outside the village. The village elders perform rituals, burn incense and deliver gifts requesting luck for the coming year. The offerings are 'accepted' by the ancestors and the parade pours back into the village square.

7am

The fighters divide into four groups and take position around a worn canvas tarpaulin on

a bed of straw. The festival begins with one of the oldest villagers reenacting the legend of Doan.

9am

Time to fight. The first few bouts are symbolic, known as *trai rot*. The local sons born on the previous year's most auspicious dates must wrestle. As they're less than one year old, their fathers or grandfathers tag in for them.

10.30am

Two old guys take to the canvas and start to fight. I ask Thuy their age and my jaw hits the floor: one is 84, the other is 87. As we watch Thuy tells me about how dangerous the festival used to be, and points out the scarred faces and torn ears of some of the elder competitors. These are some serious fighters.

11am

My turn. I nervously get to my feet and take to the canvas, but it's over quickly. My



competitor shoots down and takes me off balance. I topple over and nothing's hurt except for my pride. The next fights go a little better. With my weight advantage I manage to throw my opponents, remaining in the running — barely.

Day 2

7am

My first fight of the day, and I'm paired with the most heavy-set guy in the district. We grapple and both hit the floor, his feet are in the air moments before mine. I win on a technicality.

Next I face Linh, and I'm dreading it. This fight's much longer, I get in a few good grabs before Linh darts down and gets hold of my leg, slamming me down onto my back and neck. Officially I'm out of the running.

11am

There is a traditional display fight between Linh and another pro, Truong. This bout has no time limit. Six minutes of full contact, adrenaline-fuelled wrestling and their exhaustion is clear. This is my personal highlight of the event — seeing this art used just like in real combat all those years before.

Day 3

8am

My mentor Linh is named *giai coc*, champion. Just when I think it's all over, an elder leans over and tells me: "Now we have the *giai coc* fights — these are the important ones!"


Linh sits in the centre of the ring wearing Doan's red scarf. Any competitor can walk in and challenge him. Five fighters take the opportunity, but Linh takes them out one by one. Finally, he's declared the grand champion. The crowd cheer and the village is honoured.

Linh is presented with Doan's red cloth and ceremonial sword.

11am

The elders invite us to join them, and we sit on a straw mat in front of the shrine drinking tea. As we chat they explain why it's so important to keep *dau vat* alive. It's one of the very few truly indigenous Vietnamese martial arts.

2pm

We're back on the road to Hanoi, bruised, aching, but amazed. It's hard to believe that this world is so close to the capital. Now I can start training for next time. 



A Quick Guide to Dau Vat

Dau Vat or traditional Vietnamese wrestling festivals are held on the fifth day of Tet in Lieu Doi Village, Liem Tuc, Ha Nam province, just south of Hanoi. The festival is a tribute to the God of martial arts, Thanh Ong.

The rules of the festival are as follows:
— Each fighter has a minimum of six contests

— To stay in the competition they must win 50 percent of their matches
— The first person to be taken down on their back or thrown loses
— Prizes are small, but people fight for honour