

Le Hoang Kiet, Le Thi Thanh Tam, Tran Xuan Hiep

The Evolution and Impact of Popular Culture in Contemporary Vietnam

Abstract. Popular culture is a dynamic expression of collective identity in modern society, reflecting the interplay between tradition and modern influences. This research analyzes the development of popular culture in Vietnam within the context of globalization, digital transformation, and socioeconomic development. Through systematic analysis of cultural industries and international integration processes, the study shows how popular culture has shifted from a peripheral position to become a central driving force in national development, especially after the *Doi Moi* reforms in 1986. Results indicate that Vietnam's cultural policies need to balance preserving authenticity while adopting positive international influences, contributing to understanding cultural evolution in transitional economies.

Keywords: Vietnam, popular culture, cultural industry, international integration, cultural identity.

Authors: Le Hoang Kiet, Ph.D. Student (International Relations), VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. ORCID: 0009-0002-9968-1952. E-mail: kietlh.tg@yersin.edu.vn

Le Thi Thanh Tam, Ph.D. Student (International Relations), Dong A University, Da-nang, Vietnam. ORCID: 0009-0008-3581-2363. E-mail: tamltt@donga.edu.vn

Tran Xuan Hiep, Assoc. Prof. (Political Studies), The University of Da Nang, University of Science and Education, Vietnam. ORCID: 0000-0002-5236-993X.

E-mail: txhiep@ued.udn.vn

For citation: Le Hoang Kiet, Le Thi Thanh Tam, Tran Xuan Hiep (2025). The Evolution and Impact of Popular Culture in Contemporary Vietnam. *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 9 (2): 129—140.

Ле Хоанг Кьет, Ле Тху Тхань Там, Чан Суан Хуен

Эволюция и влияние популярной культуры в современном Вьетнаме

Аннотация. Популярная культура является выражением коллективной идентичности в современном обществе, отражая взаимодействие между традицией и современными влияниями. Данное исследование анализирует развитие популярной культуры во Вьетнаме в контексте глобализации, цифровой трансформации и социально-экономических процессов. Опираясь на анализ культурных индустрий и международной интеграции, исследование показывает, как популярная культура после реформ «Дой Мой» в 1986 г. перешла от периферийного положения к положению одной из центральных движущих сил национального развития. Авторы приходят к выводу, что политика Вьетнама в области культуры должна способствовать поддержанию баланса между сохранением аутентичности и принятием позитивных международных влияний, в чём заключается сущность культурной эволюции в переходных экономиках.

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, популярная культура, культурная индустрия, международная интеграция, культурная идентичность.

Авторы: Ле Хоанг Кьет, аспирант, Университет общественных и гуманитарных наук, Ханойский государственный университет. ORCID: 0009-0002-9968-1952. E-mail: kietlh.tg@yersin.edu.vn

Ле Тхи Тхань Там, аспирантка, Университет Донг А, Дананг, Вьетнам. ORCID: 0009-0008-3581-2363. E-mail: tamltt@donga.edu.vn

Чан Суан Хиеп, к. полит. н., доцент, Университет науки и образования, Данангский университет, Вьетнам. ORCID: 0000-0002-5236-993X. E-mail: txhiep@ued.udn.vn

Для цитирования: Ле Хоанг Кьет, Ле Тхи Тхань Там, Чан Суан Хиеп. Эволюция и влияние популярной культуры в современном Вьетнаме // Вьетнамские исследования. 2025. Т. 9. № 2. С. 129—140.

Introduction

Culture is fundamental to national existence and sustainable development, representing distinctive identity characteristics and societal direction [Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017]. President Ho Chi Minh introduced “culture guiding the nation” at the 1946 National Cultural Conference, defining culture as humanity’s creations for survival and life purpose: “language, writing, morality, law, science, religion, literature, art, tools for daily activities regarding clothing, food, shelter, and methods of use” [Hồ Chí Minh 2011: 458]. This broad cultural definition, combined with General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trọng’s [2021] emphasis that “With culture, a nation can exist” at the 2021 National Cultural Conference, affirms culture’s fundamental value in national development. In the 21st century, deepening international integration creates new cultural development challenges through diverse stratification and socialization processes. In the digital era’s mass media explosion, popular culture expands its influence and becomes more socially comprehensive. This research therefore applies document analysis with logical-historical approaches to explore popular culture’s importance and manifestation in Vietnamese society while proposing positive development orientations for Vietnamese popular culture.

The concepts of “culture” and “popular culture”:

The flow shaping human identity

Culture is a complex social phenomenon that extends far beyond a simple collection of material and spiritual values. Through millennia of civilization development, culture has become the core foundation that shapes, expresses, and connects social communities. According to Ho Chi Minh’s perspective, culture is defined as “the synthesis of all ways of living and their expressions that humans have created to adapt to the needs of life and survival demands” [Hồ Chí Minh 2011: 458]. President Ho Chi Minh emphasized culture’s significance: “Culture is the spiritual foundation of society, both a goal and an endogenous strength, an important driving force for national development” [Nguyễn Phú Trọng 2021]. UNESCO [2009] defines culture as “the

living totality of activities and creations in the past and present”, forming the system of values, traditions, and distinctive identity of each nation. Culture encompasses diverse creative expressions from language and art to sports and lifestyle, reflecting the unique characteristics of each ethnic community.

In contemporary society, popular culture plays a crucial role in shaping social characteristics and development orientation. The term “Pop Culture” is understood as “everything revolving around life and representing the public in a culture, typically behavior, attitudes, social interactions...” [Lersch 2023]. British media scholar Stone provides dual definitions: “popular culture is folk culture, something that arises from the people rather than being imposed on them: popular culture is authentic (created by the people) as opposed to commercial culture (imposed on them by commercial businesses)” and “popular culture consists of commercial items produced for mass consumption by indiscriminating consumers” [Crossman 2024]. In Vietnam, Pham Thu Trang [2022] expands this concept as “a collection of habits, beliefs, goals accepted by society and prevalent in a specific period”. Myeong-eon [2020] emphasizes that “popular culture is formed through two concepts: culture and the masses”, representing a type of culture that is easily accessible, popular, and spreads through mass media.

In general, popular culture is universal and appears as a historical inevitability, igniting the flame of democracy and freedom in creation and entertainment enjoyment. Popular culture serves as a key element shaping the thinking and lifestyle of most modern society, while creating a foundation for breakthrough development in many important areas of human life.

Characterizing the multidimensional nature of popular culture

Many scholars consider America to be the homeland of popular culture. After hundreds of years of development, popular culture in America has become an effective tool in spreading American soft power [Đặng Thị Tuyết 2017]. Therefore, popular culture is not simply a universal cultural layer but also a multidimensional space that reflects and shapes contemporary society. From a Western sociological perspective, Wand and Hoyer [2024] suggests that “Popular culture focuses on cultural systems and products shared and understood by most of society; it refers to widely popular cultural elements, often conveyed through local language”. This view emphasizes the universality and permeability of popular culture in all aspects of daily life — from art, fashion, media, and sports to thinking and social behavior. In Vietnam, Dang Thi Tuyet [2022] identifies popular culture as “an inevitable product of history to meet the needs of a developing society,” not only creating changes in the lifestyle and thinking of most people but also creating cultural spaces and forums for them.

Additionally, Dang Thi Tuyet argues that the essence of popular culture is expressed in “modernity, associated with the consumption of information and cultural products by the general public. Young people and the poor are the largest customers of popular culture” [Ibid]. Therefore, its products such as books, newspapers, films, music works, fashion, etc., which are diverse, rich, and easily accessible, play an important role in disseminating scientific and technical knowledge, raising public awareness, and

satisfying the entertainment needs of the general public. On the other hand, Myeong-eon [2020] provides a deeper analysis by pointing out that popular culture “exists in our daily lives through contact with popular culture in the most routine activities such as walking on the street or eating” and each cultural transformation creates cultural shocks — positive or negative — that society must adapt to. Pham Thu Trang [2022] clarifies the social aspect of popular culture by identifying it as including “a collection of habits, beliefs, and goals accepted by society and prevalent at a certain time.” In this sense, popular culture not only reflects society but also becomes a source of inspiration and direction for individual behavior and decisions. Bui Viet Thang [2023] adds the historical development aspect by emphasizing the inevitability of popular culture as a regulatory law in the cultural market, influenced by and simultaneously impacting the development of media technology, urbanization, market economy, and cultural industry in the context of globalization.

In the context of increasingly deep digitalization and globalization, popular culture has transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries to become a bridge for global cultural exchange [Lersch 2023]. This phenomenon is evidenced by the strong spread of contemporary music, film, and art trends from various cultures, creating a network of cultural exchange unprecedented in human history. At the same time, the development of social media and online platforms has democratized the process of creating and receiving culture, allowing individuals not only to be passive consumers but also to become active creators contributing to the flow of popular culture [Wand, Hoyer 2024]. This has fundamentally transformed the relationship between cultural creation and consumption, generating newer, more diverse, and more complex forms of popular culture in the 21st century. From the above analyses, four core characteristics of popular culture can be synthesized:

(i) Popular culture is an inevitable product of the historical-social development process, reflecting and meeting the needs of modern society. It not only expresses social diversity and cohesion but also shapes the thinking environment and interaction of the vast majority of people [Tạ Thị Lan Khanh 2019].

(ii) Popular culture is both a reflection of society and a source of inspiration and direction for individual behavior [Tu Thi Loan 2022]. It includes a system of habits, beliefs, and goals recognized and popular at a specific historical time, creating multidimensional spiritual interaction between individuals and communities [Myeong-eon 2020].

(iii) Popular culture plays an important role in promoting consumption needs and shaping social aesthetic trends, requiring the leadership of intellectuals and strategic vision [Crossman 2024]. The distinction between popular culture and elite culture becomes a fundamental element in understanding cultural diversity and the importance of preserving and developing both forms [Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017].

(iv) Popular culture is an indispensable component in reflecting social development and is deeply influenced by media, technology, and the urbanization process [Woo 2005]. Its development is based on cultural market laws and has the potential for global impact, affirming its important role in the process of international integration and promoting cross-border cultural exchange [Tu Thi Loan 2022].

In general, popular culture is a complex social phenomenon that both reflects and shapes contemporary society, formed from the historical development process and meeting the spiritual needs of the vast majority of people. The core characteristics of popular culture include historical-social inevitability, the ability to reflect and guide individual behavior, the role of promoting social aesthetics, and close interaction with media technology in the era of globalization. These characteristics help popular culture become a bridge for cultural exchange, transcending language and geographical boundaries, while creating a democratized creative space for all individuals. In the context of modern digitalization, the transformation of popular culture necessitates strategic vision and the leading role of intellectuals to preserve and develop national cultural identity while absorbing and integrating with global cultural flows.

The evolving role of popular culture in Vietnam's development trajectory

Vietnam is a resilient country with a strong foundation of patriotic national culture which, with support from international friends (especially the Soviet Union), achieved victory over American and French colonial imperialism in the 21st century. In 1986, Vietnam underwent a comprehensive policy transformation through international integration, transforming from a poor, backward country with a modest economy of only about 13 billion USD in 1986 to reach a scale of 476.3 billion USD in 2024, ranking 4th in Southeast Asia and 33rd in the world, with an expected growth rate of 6.5–7 %/year [Le Hoang Kiet et al. 2025]. This economic transformation with international integration policies has created the foundation for cultural development and transformation in Vietnamese society, where popular culture plays an increasingly important role in national development and integration into the globalization process.

Entering the 21st century, popular culture in Vietnam has promoted the development of diverse cultural forms, reflecting the country's increasing prosperity and social vitality. The institutional context of Vietnamese popular culture manifests diverse organizational mechanisms that facilitate the production and dissemination of cultural content. Professional institutions, including the Vietnam National Opera and Ballet Theatre, Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory of Music, and major film studios such as Vietnam Feature Film Studio and August Cinema, have systematically integrated contemporary global influences while maintaining cultural authenticity. Creative guilds, particularly the Vietnam Writers' Association and Vietnam Musicians' Association, actively promote intercultural dialogue through international festivals and collaborative projects. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has implemented strategic initiatives encompassing the "Cultural Development Strategy to 2030", allocating substantial resources toward digital content creation and cultural entrepreneurship. Contemporary manifestations are evident in Vietnam's thriving entertainment ecosystem: reality television programs such as "The Voice of Vietnam" and "Vietnam Idol", the emergence of V-pop artists including Sơn Tùng M-TP and Vinh Khuất,... and the proliferation of domestic cinematic works that achieve both commercial success and international recognition. These developments have profoundly transformed Vietnam's social dynamics, particularly among urban youth, fostering cultural confidence, diversifying career aspirations within creative industries, and consolidating national

identity through globally resonant modern cultural expressions while preserving indigenous values.

Individuals and businesses now have more opportunities to create and experience cultural products with significant depth. Entertainment has become an important driver of socio-economic development, meeting the diverse needs of the community through expanded forms including cinema, music, museums, libraries, theaters, amusement parks, and sporting events. The intensity of the business environment and labor market has increased the entertainment needs of Vietnamese people to maintain a balance between work and life. International integration has facilitated the introduction and dissemination of various cultural forms from around the world, enriching Vietnam's cultural landscape and creating a vibrant environment attractive to both domestic residents and international tourists [Tu Thi Loan 2022]. Additionally, popular culture in Vietnam serves as an effective medium for cultural socialization processes, contributing to the deep penetration of culture into social life [Đặng Thị Tuyết 2022]. This is the path toward democratization, popularization, and dissemination of cultural values. The socialization process has encouraged more people, especially the middle and upper classes, to participate in culture, increase spending on culture, and organize cultural activities independently. Popular culture facilitates domestic and international cultural exchange, allowing culture to permeate social life and develop widely. This exchange process has helped Vietnamese people gain more objective views on various cultural issues. Popular culture participates in “Cultus Animi” (nurturing the soul) — educating and nurturing the human spirit while promoting dynamic development along with social transformations.

A distinctive feature of popular culture is its commercial nature, clearly demonstrating the penetration of commodity-money relations into cultural life. The development of popular culture illustrates the connection between culture, industry, and commerce. Commerce and industry are two factors that strengthen the relationship between culture and economy, where the development of contemporary popular culture depends on cultural industries and markets [Ibid]. Vietnam's economic development since the reform period has provided an important impetus for the development of popular culture, while deep international integration has promoted cultural exchange between different civilizations. This has stimulated the development of Vietnam's cultural industry, establishing major popular culture centers in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The development of culture in the market economy lies in its economic nature, allowing culture to determine its own destiny without external “sponsors” [Tu Thi Loan 2022]. The complex relationship between economy and culture is both the driving force and the goal of the cultural industry. Additionally, Vietnam's popular culture plays an important role in international relations by promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation, influencing how nations perceive each other, especially in “closing history, looking to the future” in relations with the United States and China.

Western popular culture, especially American entertainment, has greatly influenced the culture of urban Vietnamese youth. Hollywood films, Western music genres (from rock to hip-hop), and American television shows have influenced Vietnam's entertainment industry [Lê Thị Anh 2013]. This influence is evident in the approach to content production, storytelling techniques, and aesthetic presentations adopted by

Vietnamese creators. Western fast-food chains such as McDonald's, KFC, and Starbucks have become cultural symbols beyond the scope of ordinary dining establishments, representing modernization and globalization. They serve as social spaces where young Vietnamese gather, study, and socialize. Western fashion brands and trends such as Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, Dior, Prada, Louis Vuitton, etc., quickly spread through social media platforms, influencing Vietnamese consumer preferences and the local fashion industry. However, this influence has raised concerns about preserving cultural identity, with critics arguing that excessive consumption of Western culture could erode Vietnam's traditional values and affect domestic production and consumption [Ibid]. The Vietnamese government has implemented policies aimed at balancing international cultural integration with preserving national cultural identity and protecting the development of the domestic market [Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017].

Perhaps the most profound foreign cultural influence on contemporary Vietnam comes from South Korea. Korean television dramas, K-pop music, Korean cosmetics, fashion, cuisine, and language have deeply impacted the culture of Vietnamese youth since the early 2000s [Woo 2005]. The "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu" has changed entertainment preferences, beauty standards, and consumer behavior across Vietnam. K-pop idol groups like BTS, BLACKPINK, and EXO have large followings in Vietnam, inspiring local music production styles. Korean dramas consistently attract significant viewership on Vietnamese television platforms, influencing the aesthetics and narrative structures of domestic television production. Korean fashion trends and beauty standards have transformed Vietnam's cosmetics market and physical appearance ideals, especially among young people. This profound cultural impact extends to tourism patterns, with Vietnam becoming an important source of tourists to South Korea. The number of Vietnamese tourists traveling to South Korea in 2024 increased by nearly 20 % compared to 2023, reaching over 499,000 visitors as of December 22, 2024 [Hải Nam 2024], driven by desires to experience locations featured in favorite television dramas or attend K-pop concerts. Learning Korean is becoming popular among Vietnamese youth, due to entertainment needs and potential career opportunities related to Korean businesses in Vietnam.

Additionally, Japanese cultural products also hold an important position in Vietnam, especially through anime, manga, games, cuisine, and aesthetics. Anime and manga have created a large fan base, influencing Vietnam's animation and comics industry [Công Tâm 2024]. Japanese cuisine has become widely popular with sushi, ramen, and matcha becoming trendy food choices in major urban centers like Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Da Nang, Can Tho, etc. Japanese aesthetic concepts such as "minimalism" have influenced Vietnamese interior design, architecture, and product design. Japanese business organization principles and management philosophy have impacted Vietnamese corporate culture. Events and conferences on Japanese popular culture regularly attract thousands of Vietnamese attendees, demonstrating the enduring appeal of Japan's cultural exports [Ibid.].

In particular, Russian cultural influence is a unique case stemming from the historical Vietnam-Soviet relationship. Although influence declined after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Russian literature, educational methods, and artistic traditions maintain a significant presence among Vietnamese intellectuals born before

1991. Classical Russian literature still occupies a prominent position in Vietnam's educational curriculum, with authors such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov continuing to influence the development of Vietnamese literature. A large number of Vietnamese educated in Russia or the former Soviet Union have facilitated ongoing cultural exchange [Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism Portal 2021]. Contemporary Russian cinema occasionally has special screenings in Vietnamese cities, maintaining cultural connections established during the Soviet era. Russian classical music, ballet, and visual arts continue to influence Vietnamese artistic organizations, especially those established with Soviet support.

In general, popular culture plays diverse roles in contemporary Vietnam, promoting economic development, facilitating international integration, preserving cultural identity, and strengthening social cohesion. Foreign cultural influences from Western countries, South Korea, Japan, and Russia have significantly shaped Vietnamese popular culture, creating a dynamic synthesis between global trends and local traditions. As Vietnam continues its development journey, popular culture will continue to play an important role in defining national identity while promoting international exchange. Balancing global integration with cultural preservation is an ongoing challenge and opportunity for Vietnam's cultural policy. The future trajectory of Vietnamese popular culture is likely to see increasing hybridization, where international influences are absorbed and transformed through the lens of indigenous culture, potentially establishing Vietnam as an important cultural producer on the regional and global stage.

Cultural development in contemporary Vietnam: strategic directions and approaches

Culture has always played an important role in Vietnamese society [Nguyễn Phú Trọng 2021]. Building an advanced Vietnamese culture with strong national identity remains a focus in the Party's guidelines and the Vietnamese State's policies [Nguyễn Thanh Hải 2022]. The 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam emphasized: "Developing comprehensive human resources, building an advanced Vietnamese culture rich in national identity so that culture truly becomes an endogenous strength, a driving force for development and protection of the Fatherland" [Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 116]. Therefore, to transform culture into a true endogenous strength, a driving force for Vietnam's development and to achieve the goal of "preserving and promoting cultural values and the strength of Vietnamese people in the cause of building and protecting the Fatherland, international integration" [Ibid.: 202] in the coming time, the following solutions should be considered:

First, strengthen the leadership of the Party and State management in popular culture.

Vietnam must effectively implement the resolution of the 5th Central Conference of the 8th tenure "On building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture with strong national identity"; Resolution of the 9th Central Conference of the 11th tenure "On building and developing Vietnamese culture and people to meet the requirements of sustainable national development", the 12th Congress Documents on "building and

developing culture and people”; and the 13th Congress Documents on “the Party’s views on building and promoting cultural values and the strength of Vietnamese people”. This includes developing guideline documents for cultural work in general and popular culture in particular to keep pace with development and provide clear direction [Nguyễn Thanh Hải 2022]. The importance of popular culture in nation-building requires raising awareness within the Party itself. Local Party committees must promptly lead the development and maximize the potential of popular culture in their localities. The Party’s leadership role in arts and culture must be maintained, regularly evaluated and assessed to develop appropriate policies based on practical experience. The effectiveness of state management of popular culture must be enhanced, especially considering the strong impact of the market economy, globalization, and the fourth industrial revolution [Đặng Thị Minh Nguyệt 2022]. Policymakers need to understand more deeply the impact of popular culture throughout society. The legal framework and specific mechanisms for popular culture development should follow an international approach while ensuring compatibility with Vietnamese cultural values. Strategic development plans for popular culture should be established at both national and local levels, balancing regional characteristics with national development priorities. The relationship between economics and popular culture requires careful adjustment and monitoring. The cultural administrative workforce needs to continue developing through better access to international perspectives, along with specific policies and modern training programs. Investment in popular culture should be increased, with priority focus and emphasis on preserving traditional cultural values. Preferential financial mechanisms should support the development of popular culture, especially in emerging fields and areas with regional or ethnic advantages. Effective state inspection and management must be maintained, with the Vietnam Fatherland Front and socio-political organizations playing an important role in social monitoring, particularly emphasizing people’s participation in managing popular culture [Tạ Thị Lan Khanh 2019].

Second, build a popular culture industry appropriate to national potential.

Raising awareness about the position and role of popular culture in today’s era is necessary, alongside encouraging investment in popular culture development. The State must improve the investment environment, enhance administrative culture, and promote competition to support the development of popular culture in Vietnam [Nguyễn Phú Trọng 2021]. Scientific and technological achievements should be leveraged to create quality products and promote popular culture services. Innovation in cultural industries and technology transfer in production, services, and business need to be accelerated. International integration must be strengthened to bring Vietnamese popular culture to the world stage, with programs and plans to promote popular culture products and brands internationally, stimulating the development of popular culture industries and popular culture economy [Nguyễn Thanh Hải 2022]. The potential of regions and localities should be considered when developing popular culture. Vietnam should continue to learn from countries that have successfully built popular culture industries, such as South Korea, where each product represents a specific strategy targeting audience demographics in different countries, allowing Korean brands to penetrate countries with long-standing cultural traditions like Vietnam, China, and Japan.

Conclusion

Despite its relatively brief historical trajectory of approximately two centuries, popular culture has established itself as an indispensable component of contemporary society. In Vietnam specifically, popular culture has secured a position of remarkable significance within the social fabric. The multidimensional impacts of popular culture permeate virtually all aspects of Vietnamese social life with considerable frequency and magnitude, fundamentally reshaping individual behaviors, social interactions, and national identity formation processes. The development of popular culture in Vietnam represents a complex interplay between global cultural flows and local traditions, where international influences—particularly from Western nations, South Korea, Japan, and Russia—have been synthesized through the prism of Vietnam’s rich cultural heritage. This cultural hybridization process has created unique expressions that reflect both Vietnam’s historical resilience and its contemporary aspirations in the international arena. The remarkable economic transformation of Vietnam since the *Doi Moi* reforms of 1986 has provided the socioeconomic foundation for this cultural evolution, establishing the necessary infrastructure and market conditions for popular culture to flourish.

In general, to effectively develop popular culture in Vietnam moving forward, it is imperative to implement comprehensive and coherent strategies, with particular emphasis on macro-level policy interventions. These interventions must balance the preservation of Vietnam’s cultural identity with openness to beneficial international cultural exchanges, while strengthening both state management and market mechanisms in the cultural sector. The implementation of strategic solutions grounded in the Party’s cultural development guidelines — particularly building “an advanced Vietnamese culture with strong national identity” — will be crucial for transforming culture into a genuine endogenous strength and driving force for national development.

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Дата поступления статьи: 15.11.2024

Дата поступления в переработанном виде: 06.03.2025

Принята к печати: 12.06.2025

Received: November 15, 2024

Received in revised form: March 3, 2025

Accepted: June 12, 2025