

Otherness and Diversity in Vietnamese Confucianism: The Formation of the Symbol of the Ancestral King Lạc Long Quân Based on the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp Complex

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Abstract

Quân sư phụ (君師父) is a concept of respectfulness derived from the Chinese Confucian concepts of *sān găng wǔ cháng* (三綱五常, the Three Principles and Five Constant Virtues) and *sān cóng sì dé* (三從四德, the Four Virtues Applied to the Three Male Figures) that is applied to Vietnamese Confucianism in regards to not only kings but also Chinese Emperors, as well as Chinese culture generally. In his famous literary work *Vàng lửa* (Golden Fire), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp revealed the Vietnamese attitude to Chinese civilization: “Our country could be characterized as *nhược tiểu* (弱小, small and weak). Vietnam was like a maiden forcibly deflowered by Chinese civilization. ‘She’ enjoyed it, but also came to hate it and feel disgraced by it” (Nguyễn 1988). This is a special sentiment or psychological complex of the Vietnamese in relation to Chinese civilization. The research findings are that the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex is the rationale behind which the symbol of the ancestral King Lạc Long Quân (貉龍君) was altered via Sino-Vietnamese motifs in order to develop Vietnamese Confucian thought.

Keywords: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex; Lạc Long Quân; Sino-Vietnamese motifs

Introduction

In the Chinese Confucian concepts of *sān gāng wǔ cháng* (三綱五常)¹ and *sān cóng sì dé* (三從四德)², the character *quân* —君 (in *Quân-sư-phụ*—君師父, meaning “King, Master, and Father”) ranks first, and this reflects the respect and admiration of Vietnamese Confucian scholars to not only the Kings of their own nation but also to the Chinese Emperors, as well as to Chinese culture. To the extent that, in his famous literary work *Vàng lửa* (Golden Fire), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp made a unique comment regarding this established way of thinking:

Our country could be characterized as *nhược tiểu* (弱小, small and weak). Vietnam was like a maiden forcibly deflowered by Chinese civilization. ‘She’ enjoyed it, but also came to hate it and feel disgraced by it. (Nguyễn 1988).

This is presumably a special kind of inferiority complex commonly observable among Vietnamese people towards the Han Chinese race and civilization, as noticed by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. It also demonstrates a distinct and diverse aspect of Vietnamese Confucianism. In this research, it will be referred to as the *Nguyễn Huy Thiệp Complex*, a pseudo psychoanalytical term with which the formation of the symbol of the ancestral King Lạc Long Quân (絡龍君) can be explored via Sino-Vietnamese motifs based on the characteristic Confucian ideological foundation of the Vietnamese people.

Chinese Confucian Civilization’s “Rape” of Vietnamese Culture according to Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Perspective

In the Viet people’s myth of *cha rồng-mẹ tiên* (dragon father and fairy mother), the couple, Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, work as a Sino-Vietnamese motif in which the father and husband Lạc Long Quân is the offspring of a Chinese family (神農, Shennong). However, it is this legendary couple’s “racial” conflict (technically the two are of different species but this is likely a metaphor for ethnicity) that motivates their separation or divorce. Each of them took half of their children and travelled their own path, which was consequently spoken of by some as “the first divorce in history.” In the view of symbolic studies, this marriage seems to be an inevitable fate that the Vietnamese culture would suffer at the hands of Han Chinese culture, but the divorce is a terrific creation by those who concocted this ‘love story.’ By doing so, they cleverly crossed off the role of the Chinese father (Lạc Long Quân) such that Hùng Kings (sons of Mother Âu Cơ) became the ancestors of the Vietnamese people, and these relational roles were meant to continue in perpetuity.

All along, only Hùng Kings have been recognized as the “Nation’s forefathers” of Vietnam, and this was confirmed by the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

through the inauguration of the festival for the *Ancestral Anniversary for Hùng Kings on the 10th day of the third lunar month*. Thus, the formation of the symbol of the ancestral King Lạc Long Quân that has endured for many centuries is actually a result of the formation of the forefathers of the Vietnamese people.³

Though the separation or divorce took place (in the myth), a number of Vietnamese people now still identify themselves as “the offspring of the Lạc and the Hồng” or “the descendants of the Dragon and the Fairy” (descendants of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ), implying that the Vietnamese people share the same origin or lineage of Lạc Hồng (in other words, their bloodline comes from Lạc Long Quân and the Hồng Bàng Clan). The above-mentioned phrases are always associated with the Vietnamese people’s pride in their own race. This is rooted in the history books that mention the Hồng Bàng family, such as *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư* (The Complete History of the Great Viet), *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (The Imperially-Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet), and *Việt Nam sử lược* (A Brief History of Vietnam). According to these works, Lạc Long Quân married Âu Cơ who gave birth to a sac of one hundred eggs which hatched into a hundred children and one of them, King Hùng became the Forefather of the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese people call themselves “the descendants of the Dragon and the Fairy,” and consider themselves the offspring of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ. They use the words “*đồng bào*” (同胞, compatriot) which holds the implication of “being born from the same sac.”

What exactly are *Lạc and Hồng or Dragon and Fairy*? Why do these appellations exist? Answering these questions will help people better understand the developmental stage of the cognition behind ethnic processing in Vietnam and further comprehend the ancestral symbols of the Vietnamese people. The internal contradictions of the Vietnamese people in finding their own ancestral symbols over the past centuries have been formed through three endogenous elements as follows: 1) the Vietnamese people’s need to find their own origin; 2) their psychological need to assert their own long-standing culture; and 3) the complexity of their ancestry (Dinh 2018a, 263).

These internal contradictions were woven into an analogy by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp when he created the image of a forcefully deflowered maiden as follows:

The most prominent feature of this country is its weakness. This country is like a virgin raped by Chinese civilization. She felt pleasure, but then humiliation and hatred... Nguyễn Du (a beloved national poet) is a child of that virgin girl, bearing blood full of legends about the man who raped his mother... Nguyễn Du’s mother (contemporary politics via analogy) conceals from her son her indignity, and she endures with great spirit and restraint... The Vietnamese community is an inferior one. How small it is in comparison to the Chinese civilization; a civilization whose greatness goes hand-in-hand with its vileness and ruthlessness. (Nguyễn 1988).

This excerpt shows how Nguyễn Huy Thiệp excellently used the method of analogy to describe the Vietnamese people's internal contradictions through Nguyễn Du's displeasure when the latter had to heavily rely on Chinese references when compiling his epic poem, *Truyện Kiều* (The Story of Kiều). The fate of Kiều and the poetical novel *Truyện Kiều* are similar to the destiny of the Vietnamese people when faced by the Chinese empire. This is an unacceptable feeling that was compulsorily accepted (by the contemporary administration at the time of Nguyen Du) despite the extremely strong oppression levied upon them by Chinese civilization as it manifested in Confucian thought. The outstanding conception of the Three Principles (King, Master, and Father) which was popular among Vietnamese Confucian scholars (like Nguyễn Du) was extended not only toward their Vietnamese kings but to Chinese emperors as well. This was the precondition for the 'birth' and development of a National Forefather such as Lạc Long Quân in medieval histories, a process in which authors of *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư* (The Complete History of the Great Viet) acted as the first contributors.

In psychoanalytic terms, structures in the unconscious that are antithetical to drives can be described as complexes. To borrow this term, the complex of the Vietnamese people consists of pride, complacency, low self-esteem, and inferiority. Through this complex, the formation of Lạc Long Quân (the signifier) can be studied as a typical symbol of Sino-Vietnamese motifs (the signified). Consequently, we can also recognize that Lạc Long Quân is a Confucian symbol (in the symbolic cluster of King, Master, and Father) rather than a genuine historical figure. This figure was produced by the thousand-year Confucian influence that is defined by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as "rape" perpetrated by the Chinese civilization. From a comparative point of view, we can see that the formation of the symbol Lạc Long Quân in *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư* is similar to the "birth" of Kiều in Nguyễn Du's work.

The Formation of the Symbol of Lạc Long Quân in National Histories and Legends

Relying on state historical records that survive into the present day, as Hậu Lê Dynasty (1442-1789), Vietnamese historians admitted or accepted some legends as part of history; however, they referred to these editions by different names such as *ngoại ký* (外記, supplemental chronicles) or *buến sử* (玄史, unofficial history). For example, in *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư*, *Ngoại ký—Book 1* it is written:

Lạc Long Quân, real name: Sùng Lãm, was the son of Kinh Dương Vương. He married Âu Cơ, daughter of Đế Lai, and she gave birth to one hundred sons (tradition has it that they gave birth to one hundred eggs) who became ancestors of Bách Việt. One day, he told Âu Cơ: 'I am a dragon while you are a fairy. Water and fire are opposites and can never match with one another.'

Thus, they bid each other farewell, deciding that 50 sons would follow their mother to the mountain, the remaining 50 children would accompany their father to the south (to the Southern Sea in some versions). The first son Hùng Vương succeeded to the throne [Lê Văn Hữu, Phan Phu Tiên, Ngô Sĩ Liên Ed. (1697, 1993, 3)].

It is possible to conclude that many historians during this period refrained from criticizing mythological elements when writing them into the historical records.

Unlike Ngô Sĩ Liên, under the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), King Tự Đức differentiated historical elements from mythological ones in a more specific and scientific way. Though still including the above ambiguous and contradictory details in *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*, King Tự Đức issued a royal edict (on the 12th day of the seventh lunar month of the ninth year of the reign of Tự Đức, or 12 August, 1856) in which he remarked:

The stories of Kinh Dương Vương and Lạc Long Quân written in old histories may be real or unreal. Even if real, it would be better to not discuss them. However, the old histories, one and all, were recorded in the main texts, and most of those notes are fabulous myths which are odd and unreasonable (*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (National Historical Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty 1998, 4).

In modern times, when mentioning the Hồng Bàng clan, Trần Trọng Kim wrote the following notes in detail in his book, *Việt Nam Sử lược* (A Brief History of Vietnam):

Hồng-Bàng Clan (2879–258 BC): Tradition has it that King Đế Minh, a third-generation grandchild of King Shennong, in his southward patrol to Ngũ Lĩnh Mountain (present-day Hunan Province), met a fairy and married her. They gave birth to a son named Lộc Tục. Later, Đế Minh passed the throne to his eldest son, Đế Nghi, who became the emperor of the north, and he appointed Lộc Tục to be the king of the south. Lộc Tục proclaimed himself Kinh Dương Vương and took the kingdom name Xích Quỷ. At that time, Xích Quỷ Kingdom's territories bordered Lake Động Đình (Hunan) in the north and Hồ Tôn Kingdom (Champa) in the south. Ba Shu (Sichuan) was to its west, and the Southern Sea was to its east. Kinh Dương Vương became the king of Xích Quỷ in around 2879 BC (?) and married Long Nữ, daughter of the King of Động Đình. They gave to birth to Sùng Lãm who succeeded his father. He called himself Lạc Long Quân. Lạc Long Quân married King Đế Lai's daughter, Âu Cơ, and gave birth to one hundred sons all at once. Lạc Long Quân told Âu Cơ: "I am a descendant of the Dragon King whereas

you are a fairy. Our ability to live together will not endure for long. Now you take 50 children to the mountains, and I will lead 50 others to the Southern Sea.” (Trần 2018, 77).

However, in this book, Trần Trọng Kim offered a remark: “The origin of this story is probably that, from Lạc Long Quân onwards, Xích Quỷ Kingdom was divided into different states, called Bách Việt (百越, Baiyue, the One Hundred Viet States). Therefore, the land of Hu-Guang (Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi Provinces) is still called Baiyue. This is an exaggeration based upon nothing” (Trần 2018, 78). This shows that those who “record history” scientifically should not automatically accept mythical elements but should raise questions whenever sufficient foundations to explain ambiguous contents are found lacking.

Through the examples above taken from key historical texts available in Vietnam, some comments can be made as follows. The “birth” of Lạc Long Quân, as noted in *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư*, *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*, and *Việt Nam Sử lược*, was copied from the same mythical motif available in the pre-existing work, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* (嶺南摭怪列傳, Selections of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam). It is noteworthy that *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* is a semi-fictional work (列傳, liệt truyện) rather than a book of history (史, sử) or the records of a historian (史記, sử ký). But when those myths were copied again and again in books of history by feudal-era historians in later periods, it set a precedent for an academic category error. That category error contributed to the historicalization of the legend Lạc Long Quân-Âu Cơ and transformed Lạc Long Quân from a legendary figure into a pseudo-historical one. This caused a number of Vietnamese people to believe in themselves as descendants of Lạc Long Quân; this idea still persists to the present day.

That category error, though discovered early on (as confirmed by King Tự Đức’s royal edict and by Trần Trọng Kim’s comment), has not been scientifically resolved, and this has left some historical doubts that persist to this day. That made a history-related issue—the nation’s origin—so unhistorical that King Tự Đức called it, and related content, “fabulous myths which are odd and unreasonable.” In light of this, what role should Lạc Long Quân play in order to become “reasonable”? Below, a review of this figure as a legendary motif through the non-historical perspective of symbolism will be utilised to produce multiple insights.

Lạc Long Quân and the Vietnam’s Legendary Founding: Symbolism and the Forefather

Research into the vague origins of figures such as Lạc Long Quân has been conventionally regarded by historians as being outside of their field. Instead, research into Lạc Long Quân and other such figures fits into the purview of mythology. *The*

Legend of Lạc Long Quân-Âu Cơ is a fascinating story about the dawn of the Vietnamese nation, and it includes a motif which is somewhat common in the cultures that have a great influence on Vietnamese culture, such as Indian culture, Chinese culture, and the culture of other neighboring ethnic groups. That motif is the legend of founding the country through an egg-sac (Đình Hồng Hải 2019: 5). From the motif of the egg-sac, much can be learned about the role of Lạc Long Quân in the legendary founding of Vietnam, and this also provides a chance to review the position of this myth in the history of the Vietnamese people. It is easy to recognize that the motif of egg-sac in country-founding legends is quite popular and has played a role in the development of various civilizations. But why is egg and egg-sac imagery selected as the prototype for the birth of country-founding legends? Based on the characteristics of mythology and maximizing the human imagination, it seems that the symbol of egg or egg-sac represents the zenith of imaginative thinking.

In the search for their own forefathers, medieval Confucian thinkers found the symbol of King Hùng appropriate for Vietnamese culture. However, a “fatherless” ancestral king would be difficult to accept in the broader context of Confucian values. Therefore, the application of the egg motif to the forefather’s birth may have been an inevitable step. And efforts to rationalize and validate this egg necessitated revealing the egg’s mother. Consequently, Âu Cơ’s entrance into the myth likewise became an inevitable result in the process of relaying a traditional creation with a beautiful symbol of the nation’s ancestor.⁴

It seems that Confucian intellectuals, especially historians, were not truly satisfied with the nation’s mother being “without husband,” and this required the further “creation” of a well-matched husband for Mother Âu Cơ (a suitable proverb in Vietnamese states: *Sinh con rồi mới sinh cha, sinh cháu giữ nhà rồi mới sinh ông*; meaning “One becomes a father only after a child is born, and a one becomes a grandfather only after a grandchild is born”). In the end, an “excellency” of the Chinese royal lineage was no doubt the ideal Confucian choice for the position of the nation’s forefather. Hence, the husband of the nation’s Mother, Âu Cơ, joined her in forming the symbolic pair, the Dragon father and Fairy mother. It is precisely at that point that all the complications began.

The nation’s Forefather, Lạc Long Quân, was named ‘Sùng Lãm,’ and naturally, he also needed a father.⁵ This ‘search’ revealed that his father led to the “birth” of Kinh Dương Vương or Lộc Tục. And Lộc Tục, in his turn, needed a father, and as a result, he was shown to be a third-generation grandchild of the Flame Emperor Shennong (China’s Yandi Shennong 炎帝神農), named ‘Đế Minh.’ Despite his vague origin, he was placed in the position of the father of Kinh Dương Vương in the legend. Up to that point, three kings can be noted (Kinh Dương Vương, Lạc Long Quân, Hùng Vương), and this draws comparison with Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors (三皇五帝) of China.

Thereby, the patriarchalization of Vietnamese ancestors can be observed, and it can further be analyzed as an attempt to Sinicize the origins of the “barbarian” Vietnamese people from the perspective of medieval Confucian intellectuals operating under the notion of “*vô tốn Trung Hoa*” (“non-inferiority to China”, see below). An inevitable consequence of this tradition-creating process is that the Vietnamese people’s ancestors “morphed” into the offspring of the Flame Emperor Shennong, who is considered by the Chinese to be their own forefather. But both the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor (黃帝, Huangdi) of China were “descendants” of Pangu, the god who emerged from an egg.⁶ Thus, though being interpreted in different myths, all the country-founding legends of both the Vietnamese and Chinese peoples eventually arrive upon the commonly held utmost limits of human imagination—the symbol of the egg.⁷

Therefore, to decode the legend of Lạc Long Quân, prejudice towards seeing him as a historical figure should be avoided. Instead, Lạc Long Quân should be viewed in his role as a symbol. To learn about this symbol, by the way of semiotics, it is necessary to “read the symbol.” Accordingly, Lạc Long Quân is a *signifier* of the “ancestor” in Vietnamese culture. This reflects the more complicated *signified* in Vietnamese culture in the past and at present. Among countless signified things through the symbol of Lạc Long Quân, a motif can be recognized which is used in numerous myths, legends, and tales. It combines Chinese elements and Vietnamese ones into a Sino-Vietnamese motif. This is the core factor that formed the symbol Lạc Long Quân—a character of Han origin (漢人) in the country-founding myth of the Vietnamese people.

Lạc Long Quân as a Sino-Vietnamese Motif

Generally speaking, the Sino-Vietnamese motif is a basic unit in the structure of numerous medieval myths in Vietnam. This motif combines indigenous cultural elements (folk) and Chinese cultural factors (royal) into a new cultural synthesis accepted by both common people and mandarins (high-ranking imperial officials from China or natively in Vietnam). With the ‘somewhat Vietnamese’ surname, *Lạc*, the patriarchal conception of the Han race and the Chinese royal criterion of *Long Quân* (a Dragon King) were combined such that Lạc Long Quân became a symbolic monarch of the Vietnamese people according to a decidedly Chinese vision.

Names with the Chinese character *quân* 君 (i.e., Lạc Long Quân) or *vương* 王 (ie. Hùng Vương) are clear evidence of the royalization, Sinicization, and symbolization of the Vietnamese nation’s forefather. This is most clearly reflected in the Three Kings (Hùng Vương, Lạc Long Quân, and Kinh Dương Vương). If the name Lạc Long Quân (貉龍君) is more thoroughly analyzed from a symbolic perspective, there is a realization that the word *Lạc* or the family name *Lạc*, via homophone, is a signifier for the Vietnamese or Lạc Việt (雜越 or 駱越; indicating tribal people which included but was

not limited to the proto-Vietnamese). *Long Quân* is a reference to the dragon king (龍王 Long Vương, 龍君 Long Quân). Being comprised of exclusively Chinese features, he was introduced into Vietnamese culture through the process of royalization or Sinicization into the symbol of the ancestral king of the Vietnamese:

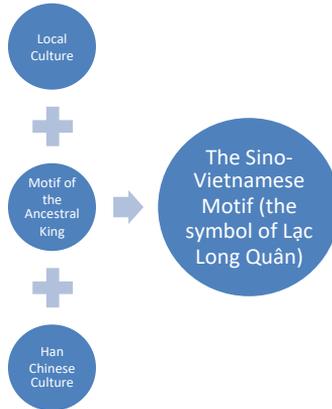


Table 1. The formation of the Sino-Vietnamese motif: Lạc Long Quân

It can be seen that the formation of the Sino-Vietnamese motif during the stage of building Vietnamese independence was a transition from the myths of world creation, such as *Truyện quả bầu* (The Story of the Gourd), *Đẻ đất đẻ nước* (The Birth of Earth and Water) and others, imbued with Southeast Asian indigenous features (Dinh 2018: 67–92), to country-founding myths. Why did the Vietnamese at that time tend to insert Chinese cultural elements into their country-founding myths? The answer may be that the model of the nation (or kingdom) used by the Vietnamese during the period of building feudal independence and autonomy was basically an imitation of China’s model. Therefore, an archetypal kingdom of the Chinese and a country-founding legend related to Chinese culture seemed to be the most suitable model according to the notion of “*vô tổn Trung Hoa*” which was already deeply rooted in the thinking of Vietnamese Confucian intellectuals, as discussed below.

Nowadays, it is crucial that newly-founded states gain official recognition from the international community and especially from the United Nations (for example, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste in 2002 or South Sudan in 2012), and they also need recognition from their neighbors. In the history of Vietnam, if vassalage was not mentioned, most of the independent and autonomous states established in Vietnam (with kings) should be recognized by neighboring kingdoms, including China. Is it true that the creation of a Sino-Vietnamese motif for ancestral kings aimed at gaining easy recognition from Chinese emperors? Certainly, the formation of the Sino-Vietnamese motif in Great Viet (Đại Việt) culture was not smooth because there always existed resistance (implicit or overt) against Han ethnic elements being included in

history books or in the culture of the Vietnamese. Take for example King Tự Đức's royal edict which was mentioned above. Those forms of resistance mirror the actions of the "virgin girl" described in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's analogy. However, it is through this mythological Sino-Vietnamese motif that "Mother Âu Cơ" had an opportunity to play her role as the Nation's Mother. Because of the "Han" origin (offspring of Shennong), Lạc Long Quân could not become the Vietnamese Nation's Forefather. Instead, only King Hung (Âu Cơ's son) could be seen as truly deserving of the position. This also explains why, during the feudal period, although the Vietnamese always adopted the Chinese patriarchal viewpoint as their "pillar" (via Confucian concepts such as the Three Principles and Five Constant Virtues and the Four Virtues Applied to the Three Male Figures) there were still indigenous elements that existed which were opposite to those Confucian views (such as *lệnh ông không bằng cồng bà*— "the wife's say is more decisive than the husband's", and *nhất vợ nhì trời*— "one's wife comes first, and Heaven second"). In the opposite direction, the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex has always arisen in the sentiments of Vietnamese people. Confucian influences are still rather strong in Vietnamese culture, and it is especially the case that the concept of "*vô tốn Trung Hoa*" still lingers, in part, because it formed the "Han Chinese ethnic" origin of Lạc Long Quân.

The Nguyễn Huy Thiệp Complex and the Han Ethnic (漢人) Origin of Lạc Long Quân

To study the "Han ethnic origin" of Lạc Long Quân, it is first essential to understand the Vietnamese Confucian concept of "*vô tốn Trung Hoa*." (無遜中華, non-inferiority to China) is "an ideological tendency" that arose under the Trần Dynasty and strongly developed during the Lê Dynasty. Its expectation was that efforts to convert the Vietnamese culture to the Chinese standards would be a positive direction. It was an ideological tendency held primarily by Confucian scholars (*Vn, Nbo gia*). The vast majority of Vietnamese Confucians, even great scholars like Phạm Sư Mạnh under the Trần Dynasty or Lê Quý Đôn under the Lê Dynasty, took the Chinese culture and civilization as the system of reference whenever pondering matters related to culture or ideology. This reflected the national inferiority complex and the attitude of *dân tộc* "*Nam nhân Bắc hướng*" (Southern people looking toward the North). Even Confucian patriots, when they wanted to prove that Vietnam was a "civilized" country, would make assertions such as "*Hồ Việt đồng phong các đệ huynh*" (Nguyễn Trung Ngạn, meaning "the Chinese and the Vietnamese are brothers sharing the same customs") or that Vietnamese civilization was "no different from China" ("*bất dị Trung Quốc*") or that it was "not inferior to China" ("*vô tốn Trung Quốc*") (Lê Quý Đôn). Even bolder thinkers such as Hồ Quý Ly, who dared to disparage many Confucians from Confucius to Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, and posited many unique perspectives on academics and culture, when responding to the Northerners about our nation's customs, stated:

‘Dục vấn An Nam sự
 An Nam phong tục thuần.
 Y quan Đường chế độ
 Lễ nhạc Hán quân thần.’

Meaning:

Do not ask about Viet Nam’s affairs (because)
 Viet Nam’s customs are extremely beautiful
 Clothes are similar to those of the Tang Dynasty
 Rites and music are the same to the Han era.

Having rites and music that were ‘the same as those from the Han era,’ and having ‘clothing similar to that of the Tang Dynasty’ was considered a criterion for Vietnam’s status as a civilized country (Trần Q. V. et al 2015, 478–479). In reality, the concept of “*vô tổn Trung Hoa*” did not only create the symbol Lạc Long Quân, but it also contributed to the formation of many other ancestral symbols of the Vietnamese. The comparison table below shows the correlation between ancestral symbols of China and Vietnam.

	Chinese	Vietnamese
Symbol of the origin	Pan Gu egg (盤古, Vn. Bàn Cổ)	Sac of one hundred eggs (trăm trứng)
Legend	Liu Yi zhuan (柳毅傳)	Legend of Lạc Long Quân - Âu Cơ
Ancestral origin (Vn. tổ tiên)	Fuxi (伏羲) - Shennong (神農, Vn. Thần Nông)	Viêm Đế - Thần Nông
Ancestral mother	Nu Wa (女媧)	Âu Cơ
Ancestral king	Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors (三皇五帝)	Three Kings: Kinh Dương Vương, Lạc Long Quân, Hùng Vương
Ancestral clan	Fuxi Clan (伏羲氏), Shennong Clan (神農氏), Nuwa Clan (女媧氏)	Hồng Bàng Clan
Forefather	Pan Gu (Vn. Bàn Cổ)	Thủy tổ [Ancestor](Nam bang thủy tổ)
Ancestral symbol (Vn. tổ tiên)	Dragon	Dragon and Fairy

Table 2. Comparison of ancestral symbols between the Chinese and the Vietnamese (Dinh 2018, 29)

This was a popular standard of Vietnamese Confucian intellectuals in feudal times who were likely unaware that their thinking was indicative of a latent national inferiority complex. In accordance with those standards though, Vietnamese Confucian intellectuals had to royalize many indigenous cultural elements (by Sinicizing Vietnamese culture) by eliminating folk village tutelary gods, compiling records and stories of deities, and by legitimizing or Sinicizing purely Vietnamese names into Sino- Vietnamese ones (for

example Kê Noi to Cổ Nhuế, T'Lèm and Chèm to Từ Liêm). This was especially necessary for legitimizing the nation's forefathers.

This was a necessary condition for the Nation's Forefather, Lạc Long Quân, "to be born;" however, the sufficient condition for him to become righteous in Vietnamese culture was that he must have an ancestral relationship with the Vietnamese people rather than demonstrate absolute adherence to China. And the Sino-Vietnamese motif became a "perfect couple" sufficient for both the satisfaction of mandarin classes and the recognition of the masses. The "Han ethnic" origin of the symbol of Lạc Long Quân came into existence out of this standard. It is easy to realize that, from the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex to the three endogenous elements of the Vietnamese, or the concept of "*vô tón Trung Hoa*" to the Han ethnic origin of Lạc Long Quân, it was all the process of the formation of the nation's forefather through writing a script and data also dependent on Chinese language and conventions.

From the perspective of symbolism, we can see that the birth and existence of Lạc Long Quân sprung from a legitimate aspiration of the Vietnamese; their desire for independence as a country ruled by a King (or the nation's forefather) such that they would not be inferior to China. By linking the word Lạc (the surname of Lạc Long Quân) with the word *Lạc* (in the name of Lạc Việt) and *Lạc bird* in many current publications, we can realize the significance of this sign (Lạc) as the Vietnamese element (or the indigenous element of the Vietnamese) within the signifier—the Nation's Forefather, Lạc Long Quân (Đinh 2018b, 710).

In general, country-founding myths that create rulers, ancestral kings, or national forefathers, are a phenomenon popular among many cultures throughout the world. Multitudenous examples exist such as King David of the Jews and the Flame Emperor and Yellow Emperor of the Chinese. However, in Vietnam, although the country-founding mythology was "completed" in the medieval period with various symbols like Hùng Vương or Lạc Long Quân, "the demand for tradition creation" has not decreased but has instead been further "perfected" in the twenty-first century.

A recent example can be observed in the construction of statues of the eighteen Hùng kings, which included plaques conveying their respective reigning titles, lifespans, and number of wives and children. These details were then recognized as 'records' in Vietnam in 2015 (T. B. Dũng 2015). Recently, some have "discovered" that the nineteenth Hùng king (Lê 2016) and the temple of Kinh Dương Vương (who is considered to have been the grandfather of Hùng Vương) were built at a cost of 500 billion Vietnamese dong; about \$20 million US dollars (Đoàn 2012). These cases clearly show the continuing demand for "tradition creation," which can also be shown by the construction of the temple to the Nation's Mother Âu Cơ which started on 18 September 2001.

Through the symbolic perspective, it is demonstrated that the Sino elements within

the symbol Lạc Long Quân were formed from the concept of “*vô tĩn Trung Hoa*” which represents a sort of reactivity rooted in the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex. As a country-founding myth, the symbol of Lạc Long Quân was royalized (or Sinicized) through a Sino-Vietnamese motif—the symbolic pair of a Dragon Father and Fairy Mother, or, if the analogy is removed, a Han-Chinese Father and a Vietnamese Mother. This is an inevitable consequence of an ethnocentric viewpoint (or the previously mentioned sentiment of Trần Quốc Vượng’s that Southern people should look towards the North) held by Confucian intellectuals. That was their impetus for creating the “half Chinese, half Vietnamese” forefather of the Vietnamese people. Considering China to be a de facto model of civilization and progress, they built up the symbol of an ancestral king (Lạc Long Quân) who had Han Chinese ethnic origins.

The above concept not only held influence throughout the feudal period but also continues to impact on a number of intellectuals in modern society who obsess over the supposed Han ethnic origin of the nation. That historical obsession has led some modern scholars, like Đào Duy Anh, to give controversial explanations about their nation’s ancestors by claiming that the origin of the Vietnamese was from China or that the totem of the Vietnamese was the Lạc bird which originated from China (Đào 2005: 53). Some scholars even provided definitive claims about “the Han ethnic origin” of the Vietnamese without feeling the slightest need to verify that claim (Đỗ Ngọc Bích 2010). This has kept the academic community in a state of perpetual debate for this past decade. It generally rings true that the Vietnamese people have been continually grateful to Chinese culture which has brought about many achievements of civilization for themselves and humankind, but they do not need to express this gratitude by unwillingly and non-scientifically accepting the Han people as their ancestors.

Conclusion

Thanks to modern methodologies and interpretive frameworks (such as Anthony Smith’s ethnosymbolism and Eric Hobsbawm’s invented tradition) as well as research methods in terms of regional studies, archaeology, and especially genetics, the hypothesis of the “Han origin” of the Vietnamese has been increasingly found to contain many inadequacies and irrationalities. However, from the symbolic perspective, the formation of the symbol Lạc Long Quân through the concept of “*vô tĩn Trung Hoa*” is completely reasonable because the Vietnamese people have continually operated under the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp complex. Through this study, it can be affirmed that the Forefather, Lạc Long Quân, a typical symbol in traditional Vietnamese culture, was formed from a Sino-Vietnamese motif. He cannot be seriously entertained as having been a historical figure. Better understanding of the complexity of Sino-Vietnamese cultural exchange can be found through reflections on the Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

complex. Understanding this characteristic not only yields better comprehension of the Vietnamese nation's history, but, more importantly, it aids in understanding that this complex has long existed in the Vietnamese national and ethnic sentiment, and is likewise present in a wide swath of traditional cultural elements of Vietnam. This complex not only existed in the past but still survives at present. This is proven by the enduring concepts of the Vietnamese as “offspring of the Lạc and the Hồng;” “offspring of the Dragon and the Fairy.”

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

- ¹ Three principles (the ruler guides his subjects, the father guides his son and the husband guides his wife) and five constant virtues (benevolence [仁], righteousness [義], propriety [禮], wisdom [智], and fidelity [信]).
- ² Confucian moral injunctions for women, namely: obey in turn three males: one's father, husband and son. Further, there are the four virtues of morality 德, physical charm 容, propriety in speech 言, and efficiency in needlework (功).
- ³ This formation is further boosted through the construction of the temple dedicated to the Nation's Mother Âu Cơ on 18 September 2001, on Ốc Sơn Peak within the complex of Hùng Kings' temples, Hy Cương Commune, Lâm Thao District, Phú Thọ Province.
- ⁴ If the country-founding myth of the Vietnamese stopped at the symbol Âu Cơ (or the Nation's Mother of the Vietnamese), perhaps the issue of the Nation's Forefather would not be so complicated that it leads to heated debates at present.
- ⁵ The Confucian concept of filial piety views not bearing a son as impious (不孝有三, 無後為大— As Mencius said, “Among three crimes of filial piety, the crime of not having a son is the worst.”).
- ⁶ According to Chinese mythology, the universe was a huge cosmic egg that coalesced for 8,000 years and then Pangu emerged from it.
- ⁷ From a biological point of view, humans are mammals with live-bearing viviparous reproduction (viviparity) rather than through egg-laying (oviparity). Thus, the above-mentioned myths of ancestral origin are not valid for historical or biological research, but are considered creations of literature and art.

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