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*Ekaterina O. Starikova*

# **SINITIC TRAITS IN VIET AND MUONG SONG LORE**

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*Ekaterina O. Starikova*<sup>1</sup>

## **SINITIC TRAITS IN VIET AND MUONG SONG LORE**

This article is devoted to the study of Viet and Muong song lore. The traditional view on folk songs of the Viets assumes autochthonous music and poetry as opposed to high Vietnamese Sinicized culture. In reality, high and popular culture in Vietnam were in a state of mutual influence, that's why we can suggest that there are Sinitic traits in folk poetry and music of Viets. It can be assumed that there are Sinitic traits even in Muong song lore, but in fact Muong song lore in Muong language is not Sinicized, though Muong folk music is Sinicized.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior lecturer at Department of Asian and African studies, National Research University 'Higher School of Economics', manager at Centre for Asian and African Studies, National Research University 'Higher School of Economics'. [estarikova@hse.ru](mailto:estarikova@hse.ru)

## ***Introduction***

The traditional view on folk songs of the Viets assumes autochthonous music and poetry as opposed to high Vietnamese Sinicized culture. In reality, high and popular culture in Vietnam were in a state of mutual influence, that's why we can suggest that there are Sinitic traits in folk poetry and music of Viets. Moreover, it can be suggested that Chinese influence touched not only the song lore of the Viets, but also that of the Muong. The Muong is one of the Vietnam minority groups, and Muong language is very closely related to the Vietnamese. According to Nguyễn Lương Bích, the Viet and the Muong form one ethnic group, and the Muong are the Viets living in highlands (Tạ Đức 2013). Keith W. Taylor argues that the use of the term Muong to designate an ethnic minority began in the early 20th century, as a product of French colonial knowledge, and the Muong are nowhere to be seen in Vietnamese historiographical archive from before the 20th century (Taylor 2001). John Phan in his article "Re-Imagining Annam" gives analysis of Sino-Viet-Muong linguistic contact and affirms that Proto-Viet-Muong language was Sinicized and then diversified into Vietnamese and number of Muong dialects (John Phan 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to study folk poetry of the Viets and the Muong and to find out if there are images and symbols of Chinese origin. The study of song lore in a comparative context will allow contributing to the research of the cultural divergence of the Viet and the Muong.

This study is based on records of Vietnamese and Muong folk songs made by the Vietnamese researchers. In case of song lore of the Viets the author used records of folk songs of genres *quan họ*, *hát ví*, *hát giặm*, *lý* and *ca dao*, made by Vũ Ngọc Phan, Trần Linh Quý, Hồng Thao, Ninh Viết Giao, Nguyễn Đông Chi, Nguyễn Chung Anh, Lư Nhất Vũ, Lê Giang, Lê Anh Trung and others. *Ca dao* is not a certain folk song genre, but the records of different folk songs, melodies of *ca dao* are often lost, so they are perceived as poems. In case of the song lore of the Muong the author used the bilingual work by Vietnamese researcher Bùi Thiện, who collected Muong folk songs and translated them into Vietnamese ("Dân ca Mường", Hà Nội 2003), and several works devoted to study of Muong song lore (that of Trần Hồng, Mai Thị Hồng Hải, Quách Giao).

### ***1. Sinitic traits in Viet song lore***

The interest in national song lore and sequent collecting of folk songs in Vietnam started quite late – on the cusp of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Nikulin 1977:220). Exactly at that time Vietnamese Confucians made the first records of Vietnamese folk songs, which they compared with *Yuefu* songs (樂府) and the Book of Songs (*Shijing*, 詩經). The idea of identifying of Vietnamese folk poetry with *Shijing* songs had an effect on even the contemporary Vietnamese

song lore studies tradition of applying to the Vietnamese folk songs such concepts as *fu* 賦 (Vietn. *phú*), *bi* 比 (Vietn. *tỉ*) and *xing* 興 (Vietn. *hứng*). These are the three most important expressive means that are used in the Book of Songs: *fu* is direct description of the person, event, interesting facts so that the listener could easily create in his mind an image; *bi* is comparison; *xing* is use in the song the image that does not have direct relation to the main subject of the song, in other words, an introduction (Vũ Ngọc Phan 1958:40). This tradition of looking at Vietnamese song lore through the prism of artistic means of *Shijing* seems not to be valid. Sometimes *Shijing* is also mentioned in works by Vietnamese researchers in the context of explaining of folk song meters origin. One of the characteristic features of the Vietnamese folk song meters *lục bát* and *song thất lục bát* is presence of so-called “inner rhyme” (Vietn. *vần lưng*). The inner rhyme connects the last syllable of one line with the syllable in the middle of another line. There is no inner rhyme in Chinese poetry, but Nguyễn Văn Hoàn argues that there are examples of rhyme of this kind in *Shijing* (Nguyễn Văn Hoàn 1974):

Chiêm bĩ Kỳ úc	瞻彼淇奥、
Lục trúc a a	綠竹猗猗、
Hữu phỉ quân tử	有匪君子、
Như thiết như tha	如切如磋、
Như trác như ma	如琢如磨

Look at those recesses in the banks of the Qi,  
 With their green bamboos, so dense together!  
 There is our elegant and accomplished prince, –  
 [Pure] as gold and as tin,  
 [Soft and rich] as a sceptre of jade !  
 (trans. by James Legge)

Nguyễn Văn Hoàn argues that “uc - truc” can be regarded as the case of inner rhyme, but in fact it is no more than coincidence, that exists only in Han-Viet transcription. In Modern Mandarin this syllables sound like “ào” and “zhú” respectively, so there is no rhyme, moreover, in 10th – 6th centuries B.C. when *Shijing* was created, the pronunciation of these syllables probably was somewhat different.

The traditional approach to study of Viet song lore assumes clear separation of elite and popular culture. According to this point of view, the Chinese influence touched only the elitist culture of the upper class. I argue that Vietnamese song lore is Sinicized, and there are images

and symbols of Chinese origin in Vietnamese folk songs and even quotations from Chinese classical books.

Contemporary Vietnamese people and Vietnamese folklorists generally do not mention these Sinitic traits. For example, the comprehension of this song is a problem for Vietnamese researchers:

<b>Cái cò mày mổ cái trai</b>	<b>Egret caught a pearl-oyster,</b>
<b>Cái trai quặp lại, lại nhai con cò</b>	<b>Pearl-oyster swung and snatched an egret.</b>
<b>Cái cò mày mổ cái tôm,</b>	<b>Egret caught a shrimp,</b>
<b>Cái tôm quặp lại, lại ôm cái cò</b>	<b>Shrimp swung and grabbed the egret.</b>

Researcher Nguyen Dang Chau believes this song symbolizes the internecine struggle of feudal clans, while Cao Dinh Huy believes that it reflects the idea of righteous vengeance of the oppressed people to the mighty of this world that are represented by an egret. However, folklorist Vu Ngoc Phan believes that an egret is always a symbol of the common man and this case is not an exception. According to Vu Ngoc Phan's submission, all members of the animal kingdom, mentioned in the song symbolize the members of the lower classes, that's why this song is about internal struggle between the peasants (Vũ Ngọc Phan 1958:125-6).

Actually, this song has a hidden quotation from the book "Strategies of the Warring States" (Chin. "Zhan guo ce" 戰國策), which refers to the bird to catch an oyster, which, in turn, pinched its beak. No one wanted to give in, expecting that the enemy will surrender first, as a result fishermen caught both of them.

The assertion that illiterate people created folk poetry, is only partly true, because among Vietnamese folk songs can be easily found songs that use word-play with the Chinese characters as a poetic device, it is furthermore reported that many educated people enjoyed participating in singing of folk call-and-response songs like *phường vãi* songs. Poet Nguyễn Du is believed to have often taken part in singing *phường vãi* songs; there was a special role for "erudite persons" – to prompt singers how to improvise, such a person was called *thầy gà*, where *thầy* means "teacher" and "*gà*" is to prompt (Ninh Viết Giao 2011:34).

For example, this song contains word-play of this kind:

Chờ chàng ngày một cho đến ngày mười  
Chữ rằng đán táo, thiếp ngồi trông luôn

I am waiting for you, my dear, from the first day of the lunar month and up to the tenth,  
The letter signify, that morning and the dawn will come, I am waiting.

The phrase “the first day” puns Chinese character “dawn” 旦, which consists of two radicals – “one” and “day”, and phrase “the tenth day” puns Chinese character “morning” 早, which consists of radicals “ten” and “day”. According to Ninh Viết Giao, a specialist in folklore, the Confucians participating in phường vải singing turned these call-and-response songs into intellectual competition, and alienated them from folk tradition (Ninh Viết Giao 2011:34).

Some of the folk songs that mention Shijing and other traits of high culture are composed by illiterate people:

**Đồn rằng chàng học Kinh Thi  
Cá nằm dưới cỏ, chữ chi rứa chàng.  
Anh đây chẳng học Kinh Thi,  
Cá nằm dưới cỏ, có khi cá tràu**

**They say that you read *Shijing*  
A fish under grass, what character is it?  
I have never read *Shijing*  
A fish under grass, sometimes it is a  
snakehead**

By “A fish under grass” is meant a character that consists of two radicals – “fish” 鱼 and “grass” 艹 subsequently. But in reply male singer says that fish under grass is snakehead, one of the species of fish that is holding strongly overgrown areas. As far as I know, this character does not exist in the system of Chinese characters, or in the Vietnamese Nôm writing system, i.e. this song was written by illiterate people.

In general, Vietnamese folk poetry is replete with metaphors of Chinese origin, but some of the Sinitic images were reinterpreted, and even if the song is still popular, the perception of the text is often far from the original meaning. For example, the popular image of Vietnamese folk poetry *trúc* and *mai*. *Trúc* is one of the bamboo species, while what is meant by the word “*mai*” is ambiguous. On the one hand, *mai* is a Vietnamese reading of the Chinese character *mei* 梅, plum. Plum and bamboo traditionally considered winter plants in Chinese culture, as bamboo stays green and plum blooms in cold months. Plum refers to *yin* and bamboo to *yang*. In Vietnam, the word “*mai*” is more commonly refers to *Ochna integerrima*, tree species that is used for decorations during Lunar New Year festivities in Vietnam, along with peach flowers. However, *mai* in the pair *trúc-mai* can be interpreted not only as *ochna*, but also as a bamboo species, so *trúc* and *mai* may be two different types of bamboo, one of which represents male, the other female. So Sinitic love poetry image “plum blossom and bamboo” was reinterpreted by the Viets, and is usually understood like “*ochna* blossom and bamboo” or “bamboo and bamboo”, although this metaphor still symbolizes loving couple.

**Đợi chờ trúc ở với mai**

**I'm waiting when *trúc* would be together with *mai***

**Đợi chờ anh ở với ai chưa chồng**

**I'm waiting when I would be together with girl that is  
not married**

Images based on the opposition of yin and yang are very common in Viet song lore. Apart from above mentioned *trúc* and *mai*, there are another pairs.

For example, moonlight and lamp. Moonlight is associated with *yin*, and lamp – with *yang*:

Bóng trăng em ngỡ bóng đèn

Bóng nước em ngỡ bóng thuyền anh xuôi

I confuse moonlight with the light of the lamp,

I confuse water reflections with the reflection of the boat you are floating

Such pairs as sun and moon, morning and evening star, light and shade, moonlight and lamp, dragon and cloud. Dragon and cloud (Vietn. *rồng* and *mây*) are also used as a metaphor of loving couple:

**Mấy khi rồng gặp mây đây**

**Sometimes the dragon meets here the cloud**

**Để rồng than thở với mây vài lời.**

**For dragon could complain to cloud**

**Nửa mai rồng ngược mây xuôi,**

**The next day, the dragon and the cloud will part,**

**Biết bao giờ lại nói lời rồng mây!**

**And who knows when they will meet next time**

Some Sinitic images are very perceptible, such as phoenix (Vietn. Phượng hoàng) pair of phoenixes (Viet Nam. Phượng loan), the poetic name of the moon – cinnamon (Vietn. *vàng quế*) and others. However, according to the researchers, conventional (i.e. non-Sinitic) motives, which a peasant can meet in everyday life, constitute the most of folk songs [Minh Hiệu 2000:79]. However, in fact even simple images of folk poetry are Sinicized. In general, folk songs of the Viets are significantly Sinicized, this applies to both poetry and music.

## **2. Sinitic traits in Muong song lore**

The Mường people live in Thanh Hóa, Hòa Bình and Phú Thọ provinces. Language of the Muong, who inhabit different provinces and communes, vary quite significantly. Degree of blurring of ethno-cultural characteristics is also different: for example, according to available statistics, in Ba Vì region (70 km from Hanoi center) only 57% of ethnic Muong can speak Muong language.

It is evident that Sinitic traits that are supposed to be found in Muong song lore, could get in it by two ways: as a result of interaction of Chinese and Viet-Muong cultures (earlier) and as a result of interaction of Sinicized Vietnamese and Muong culture (later).

Muong folk songs have much in common with Vietnamese. First, both in Vietnamese and in Muong song lore there are genres of call-and-response songs meaning songs in the form of an antiphonal song dialogue between female and male singers. The most famous Vietnamese genres of this kind are *hát quan họ*, *hát trống quân*, *hát giặm*, *hát ví*. Muong genres of this kind are *bộ mệnh*, *rằng thường* and *hát ví*. The structure of Muong and Viet call-and-response songs seems quite similar. For example, there commonly were three parts to *hát quan họ*: the mutual greeting of female and male singers, during which the receiving party should offer betel and areca nuts (symbol of the greeting and the beginning of conversation) to the guests, the main part (the performing of songs) and the farewell. Muong genre *Bộ mệnh xa lạ*, for example, is also divided into parts, that include these elements.

Some folk genres are common to the Viets and the Muong, for example, *sắc bùa*. This genre combines singing, music and dancing, traditionally *sắc bùa* is performed during the celebration of the Lunar New year (Tết Nguyên Đán). According to the researcher Trần Hồng, *sắc* is a Chinese morpheme *chi* (敕), which means "decree" and *bùa* - a Chinese morpheme *fu* (符) which has the meaning "charm, spell". Thus, *sắc bùa* can be interpreted as "spell with decree" ie inscriptions with auspicious meaning which are traditionally used as door and gate decoration during the New Year celebrations in Vietnam and China (Trần Hồng 2000: 17). Trần Hồng writes that the Muong living in province Hòa Bình call the same genre "*xéc bùa*", where the morpheme *xéc* means "to carry" and *bùa* – "gong" and the name of the genre can be translated as "carrying gongs", which is directly related to the fact that the main attribute of this genre are gongs (Trần Hồng 2000: 194). I assume that this difference in the interpretation of the name of genre in the Vietnamese and Muong version is connected with meaning shift based on phonetic similarity and subsequent reinterpretation; otherwise, there are doubts whether there are two different genres or only one. Such genres as *hát đúm* and *hát ví* are also common for the Viets and the Muong.

Muong song lore exists on two languages – the Mường and the Vietnamese, some songs are common for the Viets and the Muong. For example, during an expedition into region Ba Vì, one of Muong informants sang this song in Vietnamese:



Đôi ta như thể con tằm

Cùng ăn một lá, cùng nằm một nong

Our couple is like two silkworms

Eating together one leaf, lying together in the same basket

It is very popular among the Viets song, that is composed in Vietnamese *lục bát* folk song meter. The *lục bát* strophe consists of two lines, the first of six syllables and the second of eight (*lục* is the Sino-Vietnamese for six, and *bát* is eight). Sixth syllables of each line are connected by rhyme. *Lục bát* is the most popular Vietnamese folk song meter. Some of the Muong songs belonging to *hát đúm* and *hát ví* genres are also composed in *lục bát* and *lục bát biến thể* folk song meters, that's why some researchers assume that these genres are originally Vietnamese and then adopted by the Muong (Quách Giao 1965:27).

It is evident that in the case of folk songs in Vietnamese language common for the Viets and the Muong, everything that was written above in chapter about Sinitic traits in folk of the Viets is correct. But songs in the Mường language also exist and they distinguish by using another meters, another expressive means, another images and symbols. One of the most common means used in Viet song lore is syntactical parallelism. Many of *ca dao*, *quan họ*, *phường vãi* and other songs use parallel constructions, based on comparison or opposition of the objects. Muong songs in the Mường language are not so parallel.

Apparently, there are three layers in Muong song lore:

a) common with the Viets and existing in the same forms and using the same images and creative principles;

b) Muong song lore in the Vietnamese language (i.e. Viet-Muong song lore), that can be composed in Vietnamese *lục bát* meter, where principles of syntactical parallelism can be used as expressive mean;

c) Muong song lore in Muong language; this layer seems to be the oldest.

Let's examine Muong folk songs and find out whether there are images and symbols of Chinese origin.

Muong song lore reflects some realities that are borrowed from Chinese culture. It applies not only Buddhist realities, though temples and Buddha are frequently mentioned in Muong songs. Another Sinitic image frequently used in Muong poetry is dragon. Muong word indicating dragon is of Chinese origin (*rồồng*), moreover, Muong dragon is closely associated with water, and this points out the Chinese origin of this image.

Anh sang cầu ấy bị đổ	And when you went across the bridge, you fell down
Sang cầu ấy bị ngã	You fell down, when you went across the bridge
Ngã lộn xuống sông	And you fell down into the river
Con rồng bay qua bắt được	And a dragon flying by picked you up

Con rồng nghe mưa chạy vũng nước sâu

Dragon heard the rain and hastened to the area where water was deep.

Buddhist realities that we mentioned above, however, have other interpretation in Muong song lore, that differ from the Vietnamese Sinicized images and symbols.

Bụt mọc ở chợ hàng Rổ	Statue of Buddha near market Rổ,
Bụt mọc ở chợ hàng Rá	Statue of Buddha near market Rá,
Bụt mặc áo màu xanh áo lam có hoa đồng tiền	Buddha is wearing green and grey clothes, decorated with gerbera flowers

“Green and grey clothes, decorated with gerbera flowers” applied to Buddha does not correlate either with the iconography of Buddha or with Far East Sinicized poetical traditions. However, those metaphors and allegories of Chinese origin that are frequently used in Vietnamese poetry are not found in Muong songs.

Despite the fact that this study is mainly devoted to poetry, I would say a few words about music. The music of the Vietnamese folk songs, like poetry, is much Sinicized, the tuning and modal system of the Vietnamese music are the same that of the Chinese. An important component of both the Vietnamese and Chinese music is monody.

Muong folk songs also show the same intonation principles as the Vietnamese. There is an interesting situation: Muong folk poetry is to only a small extent Sinicized, while the music is much Sinicized. It is difficult to conclude whether the similarities between Viet and Muong music due to the fact that they have common origin, or due to the fact that at a later time Viets influenced Muong.

### **3. Conclusion**

The song lore of the Viet is strongly Sinicized, there are a lot of images and symbols of Chinese origin and even puns connected with Chinese characters, because popular culture of the Viet contacted with Sinicized elite culture.

Muong song lore exists in two languages: the Vietnamese and the Muong. Muong songs in the Vietnamese language are Sinicized, though songs in the Muong language are not Sinicized.

It can be assumed that the Vietnamese song lore was Sinicized after Viet and Muong divergence.

The music of Muong and Viet song lore is Sinicized. Sinitic influence on Muong music is probably connected with Viet-Muong contact, rather than direct Sinitic influence.

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### Ekaterina O. Starikova

Senior lecturer at Department of Asian and African studies, National Research University ‘Higher School of Economics’, manager at Centre for Asian and African Studies, National Research University ‘Higher School of Economics’. E-mail [estarikova@hse.ru](mailto:estarikova@hse.ru)

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