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LEGENDARY ANCESTORS, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

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LEGENDARY ANCESTORS, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM²

This paper analyses the connection between issues of national identity and the concept of the legendary ancestors (Progenitor Lạc Long Quân, Mother-Fairy Âu Cơ, and the Hùng Kings) in the process of children's socialization in contemporary Vietnam. Educational products for kids such as books, cartoons, games, school teaching materials and different kinds of extracurricular activities are considered in terms of promoting the 'Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy' idea which interprets the essence of national identity for the young Vietnamese. The political objectives of the process, its achievements and its possible threats are also highlighted.

JEL Classification: Z - Other special topics

Keywords: Vietnam, national identity, myths and legends, ancestors, children's socialization

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*“He who controls the past controls the future.
He who controls the present controls the past.”*

George Orwell, 1984

Introduction

The main concepts underlying Vietnamese national identity were formed and recorded in written sources by the middle of the 2nd millennium CE. These concepts primarily rely on myths and legends. According to the legendary tradition, the national lineage and bases of the ethnic Vietnamese culture originated four thousand years ago. It is asserted that they survived through a millennium of Chinese domination and remain mostly intact today. The core idea of the national identity is related to the legendary ancestors—The Dragon-King Progenitor (*Lạc Long Quân*), the Mother-Fairy (*Âu Cơ*), and the *Hùng* Kings.

Rapid westernization and deep social changes have made the issue of national identity extremely topical in Vietnam. The honouring of the legendary ancestors has therefore turned into a very important part of public life including children’s socialization. All kinds of educational work at schools and children’s extracurricular activities related to learning about the ancient past and the honouring of the legendary ancestors are carried out within the overall movement defined by a unifying slogan: ‘Towards the origins’ (*Hướng về cội nguồn*). The veneration of the legendary ancestors is not only regarded as a tribute to the glorious ancient past of the Vietnamese people that must be learnt by every citizen but also as an integral part of the traditional ancestor worship.

By analyzing intellectual products for kids such as books, cartoons, games, school teaching materials (from preschool level up to secondary school) and different forms of children’s extracurricular activities this paper examines the process of how the young Vietnamese are taught to honour their prehistoric progenitors and to be their worthy descendants. The political objectives that are concealed behind this process are also highlighted.

Theoretical Background

Broadly speaking, this paper concerns common cultural and political phenomena such as nations and nationalism. More precisely it seeks to reveal the connection between origin myths, the shaping of national identity and the system of children’s socialization as an instrument to maintain both of them.

The quest for origins and elements of “historical ethno-symbolism”, focusing on the historical and popular context of nations with the central role of myths, memories, symbols, and traditions [Smith, 1999: Preface] are very specific for young or postcolonial nation-states like

Vietnam. The boundary between history and mythology here is quite ambiguous and it is nearly impossible to delineate proper history from myths and folklore.

The issues of using myths, rituals and other elements of “invented traditions” in constructing a national identity and nation-state building in both modern and pre-modern Vietnam have been revealed in a number of recent works by Patricia Pelley [Pelley, 2002], Allison Truitt [Truitt, 2014] and Liam Kelly [Kelly, 2012].

The development of people’s identities, including their national one, is heavily influenced by the system of children’s socialization. According to Smith, “quests for identity require certain types of action and behavior—in education, recreation, worship, habits, politics and so on—which in turn heighten solidarity and exclusiveness” [Smith, 1999: 69]. Stanbridge shows that childhood is still underestimated in existing theories of nationalism while it is obvious that “as future citizens, children are reported to require care, protection, education, training, proper socialization, and so forth to ensure the nation survives and prospers” [Stanbridge, 2011: 40]. According to Stanbridge, in the Smith’s theory of nation, implicitly, children are considered to be recipients of the myths, memories and culture “that serve as foundations for adult nation builders” because “faulty socialization would presumably threaten the nation’s continuity” [ibid: 47].

Gellner says that the nationalists are not born but made and educated through the process of exo-socialization which means “the production and reproduction of men outside the local intimate unit” [Gellner, 2008: 37]. Within the age of nationalism, exo-socialization has become the norm and the “main clue to why state and culture must now be linked” [ibid.].

Specific ways of teaching the foundations of national culture and historical memory to the younger generations in modern nation-states have been studied in many scholarly fields such as history, sociology, psychology. Marc Ferro [Marc Ferro, 2003] demonstrates how national traditions, high politics and education are melting together to form a collective historical memory across different societies. With regard to the Vietnamese case, similar issues are discussed in Salomon and Vu [Salomon and Vu, 2007] who analyze history textbooks and popular culture in contemporary Vietnam and conclude that Vietnamese national identity for children is built on the myths and legends as well as on the history of battles against foreign invaders [Salomon and Vu, 2007: 359-60].

The main characters and their origin

All the revered characters — Dragon-King, Mother-Fairy, and the *Hùng* Kings — are found in the origin myth of the ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) people. The myth was first recorded in the 15th century in two works written in Chinese: ‘The wonderful tales of *Lĩnh Nam*’ (*Lĩnh Nam*

chích quái) and the historical chronicle ‘The Complete Annals of *Đại Việt*’ (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*). According to the myth, the Dragon and the Fairy gave birth to a sack of one hundred eggs. A hundred sons hatched from the eggs were divided between the parents who decided to live separately. Fifty sons followed Father-Dragon to live in the lowlands by the water and the other fifty followed Mother-Fairy to take up residence in the mountain areas. They all became ancestors of the Hundred Việt (*Yue*). The eldest (or most dominant) son became the Hùng king of Hồng Bàng dynasty and the ruler of the first Vietnamese kingdom called *Văn Lang*. The Hùng Kings and their descendants are considered to be the progenitors of the Vietnamese (*Kinh*) people.

This story should obviously be interpreted as a myth since it describes the emergence of the first kings and thereby of the whole nation from supernatural heroes in an unreal way. However, the genre definition of this story in Vietnam is rather confusing: it is usually viewed as a legend (*truyền thuyết*) or, rarely, as a story (*sự tích*). This problem will be examined in more detail in the chapter on secondary schools. Here I would only like to note that in order to avoid any confusion with the Vietnamese tradition I will refer to this myth as a story and to its characters as legendary even though they are in essence mythical.

Preschool and primary school

In modern Vietnam the immersion of young children into the national traditions associated with the ancient past starts at the very first levels of schooling. Children receive a basic understanding of the legendary origin of the Vietnamese nation in nursery schools, pre-schools and primary schools. The story of the marvelous appearance of the ancestors from a hundred eggs of Mother-Fairy and Father-Dragon and their subsequent division between the parents can be easily presented as a fairy tale. Thus, it is quite convenient for teachers to impart a basic knowledge of the beginning of the national history to 3-11 year old children and to form the idea of ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’ (*Con Rồng cháu Tiên*). This idea takes on the shape of a motto and children are made aware of it through various talks, games, different kinds of books, as well as through extracurricular activities such as visiting commemorative temples and monuments or participating in concerts and performances.

Concerts that kids diligently prepare together with teachers and then present to their parents give a great emotional charge for both performers and audience. ‘The Dance of Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’ (*Múa Con Rồng cháu Tiên*) is now a very popular item of traditional school concerts. The scene may also include some elements of fighting to reveal the heroic past of the Vietnamese nation and to make it attractive for boys. There is a special set of songs that are widely known and used to create musical background for such

scenes, examples include: ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’ (*Con Rồng cháu Tiên*, by Trương Quang Lục), ‘Âu Lạc Lullaby’ (*Lời Ru Âu Lạc*, by Nguyễn Minh Sơn), ‘Mother Âu Cơ’ (*Mẹ Âu Cơ*, by Đào Ngọc Dung), ‘Âu Lạc Legendary History’ (*Huyền Sử Âu Lạc*, by Mai Thu Sơn). All of them are about the meeting of the Fairy and the Dragon, about their children, about the sea and mountains, the glorious birth of the Vietnamese nation, its prosperity and victories. The main idea of all the songs and performances is to affirm that it is an honour to be children of the Dragon and the Fairy (i.e. to be Vietnamese) because they appeared in a very special, beautiful way, their race and their country are strong and invincible.

Outside school, children have a great deal of books, comics and cartoons promoting and interpreting various aspects of the ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’ concept. The popular cartoon serial ‘*Âu Cơ Lạc Long Quân*’, for example, begins with a picture of a boy lying on a couch and reading a book titled ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’³. The children’s birth is shown in the 5th series ‘Going up to the forest, going down to the sea’ (*Lên rừng xuống biển*). Here, as well as in other cartoons of ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’⁴, one can note two particular features of the modern interpretation of the story. Firstly, the children of the Dragon and the Fairy are considered to be the ancestors of all fifty four peoples now living in Vietnam; secondly, before separating the children Father-Dragon usually tells them the words that are not found in the sources: ‘Never forget each other and always come to each other's aid in times of danger’. These two points are typical of the modern interpretation of the story and are reflected in secondary school teaching methods.

Secondary school

The story about Dragon *Lạc Long Quân* and Fairy *Âu Cơ* is presented in the ‘Folk literature’ section of the Language and literature textbook for the 6th grade. It is consistently labeled a legend despite the fact that Father-Dragon is clearly identified as a spirit (*vị thần*). The reason for this most likely lies in the fact that the *Hùng* kings, his descendants, are considered real historical characters. Moreover, the kings’ name is used to indicate the whole historical period when ‘the legend’ about their ancestry was created – the *Hùng* Kings era. In a footnote one can read: ‘A legend is a kind of orally transmitted folk story telling about characters and events related to the ancient history. It usually includes fantastic elements. Vietnamese legends are closely connected with myths. Many of them, especially legends about the *Hùng* kings period, are myths that have been historicized’ [Ngữ văn lớp 6, 2011:7]. This explanation

³ Historical consultancy for this serial was provided by one of the most eminent contemporary Vietnamese historians, professor Phan Huy Lê.

⁴ This cartoon was made as a graduation project of students at Dong Nai College of decorative arts (Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Trang Trí Đồng Nai).

raises confusion. The authors of the textbook and the teachers who use it realize that the story of the Dragon and the Fairy is a myth. Yet, due to this myth being ‘historicized’ (which most likely refers to the fact that it was included into historical records and became part of national history), it should be considered as a legend which tells about historical events and characters.⁵ A vicious circle? A similar approach based on the paradox in interpreting the genre of the story and historicity of its main characters, primarily King *Hùng*, is specific of the whole sphere of social sciences in Vietnam.

Kelly has argued that the actual *Hùng* kings did not exist, that the Vietnamese origin myth was created by literate scholars only in the Middle Ages and that the whole story constitutes the so called ‘invented tradition’ as characterized by Hobsbaum. Over the centuries this tradition became second nature to the Vietnamese and in post-colonial Vietnam it was turned into an unquestionable truth [Kelly, 2012: 87-130]. For the past two decades the tradition associated with the *Hùng* kings and their supernatural progenitors has been widely used to form the basis for the national identity and to assess the core values of contemporary Vietnamese society. The role of the education system in this process cannot be overestimated.

In the textbook the origin story contains features derived from several stories of ‘*The wonderful tales of Lĩnh Nam*’. The narrative is based on the version retold by Nguyễn Đông Chi⁶, which allows the introduction of some ideological and didactic elements into the narrative.

Unlike in ‘*The wonderful tales of Lĩnh Nam*’, the Dragon’s deeds⁷ precede his meeting with the Fairy in the retelling, and in almost all Vietnamese children’s book and cartoons. The marvelous birth of the children and their supernatural qualities such as extraordinary beauty, clever mind and strong health are especially emphasized. Educative roles of Father-Dragon and Mother-Fairy are clearly defined and described in detail. Here one can also find the Dragon’s appeal to all the children to always remember each other and help each other in case of danger. The final part of the story explains the notion of ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’: ‘we, the Vietnamese people – the children and grandchildren of the *Hùng* kings – when we remember our origin we usually name ourselves as Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’ [Ngữ văn lớp 6, 2011: 7].

The last sentence ‘we, the Vietnamese people...’ (*người Việt Nam ta*) sounds vague: does it mean all the peoples now living in Vietnam or the ethnic Vietnamese only? This ambiguity is

⁵ Language and literature textbook for 10th grade students asserts that legends “tell about historical events and historical characters or are connected with history in some way through the folk perspective” while myths “tell of gods and deities who created the natural and cultural worlds, reflect the concepts of the ancient people about the universe and human life” [Ngữ văn lớp 10, 2012: 15].

⁶ Nguyễn Đông Chi is one of the well-known folklorists in post-colonial Vietnam (1915-1984).

⁷ By feats made by Dragon Lạc Long Quân we mean his fights and victories over the Fish essence, the nine-tailed Fox essence and the Tree essence (*Ngư tinh, Hồ tinh, and Mộc tinh*).

exploited by teachers, film makers and children books creators and many other interpreters of the concept who use it to reason the claim that a hundred sons born from the Dragon and the Fairy are the ancestors of not only the Hundred Việt (*Yue*) and the ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*), as the original sources state, but also of all fifty four peoples of Vietnam. Such an interpretation is obviously intended to impose the idea of unity and solidarity on the children. However, the task seems to involve certain difficulties: besides the ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) no other peoples in Vietnam link their origin with the Dragon and the Fairy.⁸ Thus, whether consciously or not, the proponents of the above interpretation confirm the suggestion made by Pelley: ‘...it is tempting to see Vietnam's increasing homogeneity as an expression of ethnic Vietnamese hegemony’ [Pelley, 2002: 111].

Didactic materials such as Teachers’ books⁹ or various on-line lectures have recommendations for teachers to explain to pupils the ‘noble and sacred origin of the Vietnamese community’ and to teach them to take pride in it and worthily continue the lineage of the Dragon and the Fairy. Children are also advised to be taught ‘to exalt common ancestry and to show solidarity with all people in the country’. Wherever the Vietnamese live – on the plains or in the uplands, in the mountain areas or on the sea shore, in Vietnam or abroad – they all share the same origin being children of mother Âu Cơ, and therefore they always have to love each other and strengthen solidarity among themselves [Thư viện bài giảng điện tử].

Sixth graders take a course in ancient history along with a parallel course in language and literature. Here the Dragon and the Fairy give way to the *Hùng* Kings who are viewed as actual kings [Lịch sử lớp 6, 2013]. Students can see two pictures on the textbook cover: one is an image of the Roman Coliseum and the other depicts the so called Mausoleum of the King *Hùng* the 6th. These two pictures printed side by side create an impression that the *Hùng* Kings were as real as the emperors of ancient Rome and that the Mausoleum of one of them is as ancient as the Coliseum. The Coliseum is mentioned on page 18 of the textbook among the most outstanding works of architecture remaining from the ancient times. Yet there is no indication of when the Mausoleum was built¹⁰ although its image is found again in Unit 12, which deals with the kingdom of *Văn Lang* [Lịch sử lớp 6, 2013: 18, 37].

The textbook offers two versions of the of the *Hùng* Kings. The first links them with the *Văn Lang* tribe, one of the *Lạc Việt* tribes occupying the territory along the Red River between present day Hanoi and the city of *Việt Trì*. ‘According to ancient records’, around the 7th century BCE one of the tribe’s leaders used his talent to convince all other tribes to unite into one state.

⁸ Even the Mường whose language and culture are very close to Vietnamese have traditionally considered a pair of birds as their mythical progenitors.

⁹ For example, Ngữ văn lớp 6. Tập 1. Sách giáo viên. 2011.

¹⁰ The Mausoleum was built in 1874 in the place where according to the legend king Hùng the 6th ‘had disappeared’.

He took the name of *Hùng* King and named his state *Văn Lang*. The second version is based on ‘other historical records’ (*các bộ sử khác*) and connects the origin with one of the children who followed their mother *Âu Cơ* to live in the highlands. [Lịch sử lớp 6, 2013: 36]

Further description of the kings' activities and their state reproduces information from the ‘old sources’ (understood to refer to ‘*The wonderful tales of Lĩnh Nam*’ and ‘*The Complete Annals of Đại Việt*’), quoting them without any references. Unit 12 ends with a ‘popular expression’ (*danh ngôn*) which is a quote from Hồ Chí Minh of 1954: ‘The Hùng kings founded our country; We all together must defend it’. The next unit describes the ‘material and spiritual life of the population of *Văn Lang*’ asserts that the unique features of the Vietnamese identity were formed in those distant times and ‘it played in favour of developing a strong sense of community’. [Lịch sử lớp 6, 2013:40] These ideas provide teachers with a lever to convert the students’ former self-identification motto into a more sophisticated one – ‘Children of the *Lạc*, Grandchildren of the *Hồng*’, where *Lạc* refers to the *Lạc Việt* people and *Hồng* to the *Hồng Bàng* dynasty (*Con Lạc Cháu Hồng*).

Children and the Hùng kings cult

In recent years, the cults of the Hùng Kings, Progenitor *Lạc Long Quân* and Mother *Âu Cơ* have gained significant strength in Vietnam. The numbers of visitors to their temples and participants of the temple festivals, with many children among them, are increasing all over the country. The *Hùng* Kings worship seems to be the core cult in this complex and deserves separate consideration here.

In the 20th century the cult of the *Hùng* Kings gradually transformed from a purely Confucian cult of ‘the rulers of past dynasties’ into an element of the widespread traditional ancestor worship. From the last decade of 20th century, the cult of the prehistoric kings enjoyed considerable support from the Vietnamese authorities. Thus, the *Hùng* Kings Commemoration Day celebrated on the 10th day of the third lunar month was included into the calendar as a red-letter day. Every year on this day the top leaders of the Vietnamese state take part in the lush rituals at the *Hùng* Kings memorial in the province of Phú Thọ, and since 2007 the Commemoration day of the ‘*Hùng* Kings ancestors’ (*Ngày Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương*) has been an official holiday. In December 2012, following Vietnam’s initiative, UNESCO included the rituals of *Hùng* Kings' worship in Phú Thọ province into the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. However this phenomenon is often described by the media in a common manner ‘the cult of the *Hùng* Kings has become the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’.

There is currently no information about the cult of the *Hùng* Kings in school books which causes concern among the cult proponents and supporters. In his *Report on the Scientific*

Inventory of the Worship of Hùng kings in Phú Thọ province Dr. Bùi Quang Thanh points out that ‘in practice, coordination between schools and the community in the preservation of cultural heritage in villages is weak. The relevant propaganda does not seem to be very effective. In the Year 6 Textbook on Linguistics and Culture, the section introducing legends and traditional festivals associated with the period of *Hùng* Kings and the nation’s origin is quite short’ [Bùi Quang Thanh, 2013]. However, recently published children's books have some information about the cult. For example, in the picture book ‘*The beginning of the country. Văn Lang and Âu Lạc*’ one can read: ‘Gratefully remembering the founders of the state, every year on the 10th day of the 3rd month (according to lunar calendar), the people of our country ‘move in procession at the temple *Hùng* festival’ and solemnly climb up to the ancestral temple on the top of the *Nghĩa Lĩnh* Mountain’ [Thuở đầu dựng nước: 16]. This final piece is followed by the lines of a traditional folk song (*ca dao*) ‘Wherever you go, remember about the anniversary of the ancestors on the 10th day of the 3rd month’ and Hồ Chí Minh’s statement about the *Hùng* kings and their achievements.

In addition to reading books and receiving information from teachers and the media, children willingly take part in the festivals and celebrations commemorating the *Hùng* Kings that are carried out all over the country, which is usually of great educational value.

‘One showing is worth a hundred sayings’

The visual representation of the legendary ancestors is a new rapidly evolving phenomenon in Vietnamese public life. Unlike before, pictures, monuments and all sorts of images of the *Hùng* Kings and the Dragon-Fairy can be seen everywhere these days. They appear in children's books or cartoons, in street decoration, in amusement and recreation parks, at beauty contests and fashion shows, in computer games, and so on. Their target audience clearly includes adults, however it is for a child that they are especially vivid and memorable.

The most significant decorative elements associated with the legendary ancestors are monumental sculpture and large scale constructions. Among such are the monument of *Lạc Long Quân*, Fairy *Âu Cơ* and their children in Nha Trang (Fig. 1), the new monument of *Lạc Long Quân* in the *Hùng* Kings memorial complex (Fig. 2) and the giant ceramic mosaic picture ‘The mountains and rivers holiday in the land of ancestors’ in Phú Thọ province, the ‘*Lạc Long Quân* zone’ in the *Suối Tiên* Amusement Park in Hochiminh City, sculptures of the 18 *Hùng* Kings in *Đông Xanh* park in Pleiku city (Gia Lai province, Fig. 3), *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ* monument in Prenn waterfall tourist area near Dalat and in the Dam Sen Park of Hochiminh City, and so on. The ancestors are portrayed resembling the images of ancient people on the *Đông Sơn* drums with their heads invariably decorated with feathers. These monuments and sculptures are

intended to inspire in the spectator the feeling of love and pride for the Vietnamese national traditions and glorious history.

Among other ways of representing the ancestors for Vietnamese children and young adults there can be mentioned digital games (for example, an on-line tactical game ‘The *Hùng Kings*’ era. Become a king step by step’) or fashion and beauty contests, where Vietnamese girls are advised to use the image of Mother-Fairy *Áu Cơ* to create a national style of beauty.

Conclusions

The tradition of myths and legends about the ancient past is widely used today in Vietnam to instill in children a sense of national identity. Legendary characters—Dragon-King, Mother-Fairy and the *Hùng Kings*—are considered the ancestors of the nation, the progenitors of all Vietnamese, and therefore honouring them agrees with the traditional ancestor cult. This approach provides a tool to reinforce national feelings and to emphasize the antiquity of the nation.

Vietnamese children are taught to remember their ‘beautiful and glorious origin’, to be proud of it and to ‘maintain solidarity’ among all the Vietnamese because they share the same ancestry. ‘The Vietnamese’ in this case includes both the ethnic Vietnamese and all the other peoples living in Vietnam because they all are now viewed as ‘Children of the Dragon, Grandchildren of the Fairy’. This is meant to strengthen the interethnic solidarity in the country but in fact it creates a threat of further ‘vietnamization’ of the ethnic minorities.

This socialization strategy appears successful: through honouring legendary ancestors the young Vietnamese build a shared cognitive and emotional connection to the legendary period of national history and, subsequently, a sense of national identity and intergroup solidarity. Yet problems remain: many Vietnamese children, and later adults, risk remaining immersed in the legendary world with little chance of escape to the reality, i.e. without being able to think critically about themselves and the world around them. As a result, this policy may have a negative effect on the promotion of knowledge and the progress of historical studies as well as social sciences and humanities in general.

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Figures:



Fig. 1. Monument of Father-Dragon Lạc Long Quân, Mother-Fairy Âu Cơ, and their children in Nha Trang, Vietnam



Fig. 2. Monument of Lạc Long Quân in the Hùng kings memorial complex



Fig. 3. Sculptures of the 18 Hùng kings in Đông Xanh park in Pleiku city

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