

FORUM

THERE ARE TWO SOURCES OF THE LẠC LONG QUÂN – ÂU CƠ NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This article examines two parallel sources of legends concerning Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ: the official textual records such as Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái and Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, and the rich local folk traditions deeply rooted in specific geographical sites and folk beliefs in regions like Bắc Ninh, Phú Thọ, and Hà Nội. Focusing on the folk narratives, the article highlights the cultural symbolism of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ as representations of the agricultural community's worldview - expressing a longing for the harmony between Earth and Water, community solidarity, and awareness of ancestral roots. From this perspective, the article proposes a systematic collection and textualization of these folk sources as an essential part of Vietnam's cultural heritage that deserves preservation and promotion.

Keywords: Lạc Long Quân, Âu Cơ, narrative, origins of legends, folk literature

In fact, scholars of Vietnamese culture and folklore have long recognized the coexistence of two parallel narrative sources about Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ. One of these sources has been textualized, published relatively early, and is frequently cited in discussions about the early history of the Vietnamese people. In the 15th-century work Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái (Wondrous Tales of Lĩnh Nam, compiled in 1429)¹, there is a tale titled Hồng Bàng Thị Truyện ("The Tale of the Hồng Bàng Clan"), which for the first time records the origins and lineage of Kinh Dương Vương, Lạc Long Quân, and the ancestral kings of ancient Vietnam. The tale recounts that Emperor Đế Minh of the North, a third-generation descendant of the divine Thần Nông (Shennong), fathered two sons: Đế Nghi (the elder) and Lộc Tục (the younger). Đế Nghi succeeded his father as ruler of the North, while Lộc Tục became king of the South under the title Kinh Dương Vương. Kinh Dương Vương married a Dragon Princess and gave birth to Sùng Lãm, who succeeded him and became Lạc Long Quân. Born of dragon lineage, he inherited his mother's affinity for water. Âu Cơ, a fairy maiden and beloved daughter of Đế Lai (grandson of Đế Nghi), once followed her father on a journey to the South, where she unexpectedly met Lạc Long Quân. They married, and their extraordinary union of Dragon and Fairy produced a sac of eggs that hatched into one hundred children - regarded as the first ancestors of the Vietnamese people in the South. This marvelous tale from the Lĩnh Nam region was later considered a part of Vietnam's early legendary history and was included in the Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư (Complete Annals of Đại Việt), compiled and published by the Lê dynasty's imperial historians in 1697. This first narrative source functions almost like a mythological genealogy of the Vietnamese nation. The second narrative source, though not yet formally fixed or stabilized in written form,

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¹ According to legend, the work was originally composed by Trần Thế Pháp during the Trần dynasty. It was later edited, supplemented, and published by Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú during the Lê dynasty.

contains many vivid details that continue to live on in folk memory. These are closely associated with a rich array of relics, rituals, place names, and local beliefs - imbued with a distinctly rustic and vernacular character.

However, in order to honor the noble origins of the community and to express reverence toward the imperial heavenly court, Vietnam's feudal dynasties chose to adopt the first narrative source, incorporating it into official historical records as a form of "supplementary history" (also referred to as *dã sử* - unofficial or legendary history).

Nonetheless, by incorporating the tale into official historiography, the imperial court effectively acknowledged and revered those mythical ancestors, adopting them as a spiritual foundation and source of collective pride for the entire Vietnamese nation throughout its long history.

In this article, our focus is directed toward the second narrative source. This source encompasses a wealth of folk materials dispersed across numerous localities in Northern Vietnam - particularly in the provinces of Bắc Ninh, Phú Thọ, and Hà Nội - where many legends, temples, communal houses, pagodas, ancestral tombs, taboos, and regional festivals are closely linked to the story. However, this body of tradition has not yet been systematically compiled or formally documented in any comprehensive volume. While Vietnam's legendary history often begins with Kinh Dương Vương, this second narrative asserts that his ancestral homeland was the village of Á Lữ, in Đại Đồng commune, Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province. Today, a temple and tomb dedicated to him still stand there, and the annual Kinh Dương Vương Temple Festival is held from the 16th to the 18th day of the first lunar month to commemorate him.

Regarding the origins of this founding ancestor, the book *Historical Figures of Bắc Ninh* by Trần Quốc Thịnh² writes: "Kinh Dương Vương belonged to the Dâu tribe, residing on the southern bank of the Đuống River, in what is now Bắc Ninh. Both Kinh Dương Vương and Lạc Long Quân were born here." The alluvial plains along the Đuống River (also known as Thiên Đức River) were fertile and well-suited for early mulberry cultivation and silkworm farming. The river itself, with its wide and gentle flow - more tranquil than the Lô or Hồng Rivers - was ideal for fishing. According to legend, this was sacred land imbued with the energies of the Four Divine Creatures (*tứ linh*). It was said to contain 99 ponds and 99 hills, and only such auspicious land could give rise to the progenitor of the Vietnamese people. Kinh Dương Vương and the local inhabitants established settlements there, leading increasingly prosperous lives. He married the daughter of the Dragon King and gave birth to Lạc Long Quân at this very site. Upon his death, he was buried in Á Lữ. Lạc Long Quân succeeded his father, gradually expanding the territory and securing the vast riverine and coastal regions. Under his reign, the populace enjoyed peace and prosperity.

Âu Cơ was a young woman from a mountain hamlet, associated with the Lăng Xương Grotto. According to the *thần tích* (sacred legend) preserved at the Mother Âu Cơ Temple in Hiền Lương commune, Hạ Hòa district, Phú Thọ province, Âu Cơ was originally a girl from the Lăng Xương mountain region of Thanh Thủy district, Phú Thọ. One day, while digging the

² Trần Quốc Thịnh, *Historical Figures of Kinh Bắc*, Labor Publishing House, Hanoi, 2004, p. 252.

soil and sowing seeds along the riverbank, she encountered a large serpent that transformed into a man who introduced himself as Lạc Long Quân. The two found themselves deeply compatible and fell in love. Lạc Long Quân married Âu Cơ and brought her to live in the Hi Cương mountain region. The following year, Âu Cơ gave birth to a sac containing one hundred eggs. According to legend, the Hạ Temple on Mount Hi Cương (also known as Nghĩa Lĩnh Mountain or Hùng Mountain) is the very site where Âu Cơ gave birth to the sac, which later hatched into one hundred handsome, intelligent sons. These were the very first ancestors of the ancient Vietnamese people.

The two legends - one of northern imperial origin and the other of local folk origin - both recount the miraculous emergence and extraordinary union of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ. Among the people, the second version has been preserved in its own way. This includes the construction of Kinh Dương Vương's tomb in Á Lữ village, Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh, believed in legend to be his native homeland. Á Lữ lies on the bank of the Đuống River, which explains why Lạc Long Quân, skilled in swimming and diving, is seen as the king of the water realm. Âu Cơ, in contrast, is a mountain girl from Lăng Xương, Phú Thọ. She is adept at cultivating crops, gathering forest resources, and organizing the mountains for communal life.

Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ represent the two vital natural elements of southern agricultural life: Earth and Water. When these two elements clash - when water overpowers earth - it results in floods. When Earth turns against Water, drought and cracked soil follow. Only when Earth and Water are in harmony, nourishing one another, can fertile land thrive, crops flourish, and the people live in prosperity. The marriage between Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ reflects the deep-seated hope for this Earth - Water balance.

A harmonious union - husband and wife in accord - brings forth numerous children and bountiful harvests. Their divine marriage encompasses the ancient people's dreams for favorable weather and flourishing descendants. That is why Mother Âu Cơ, in a single birthing, bore one hundred children. At a time when the population was sparse, labor scarce, and human survival uncertain - when, as the saying goes, "out of ten births, seven die and three survive" - the ideal of giving birth to many, safely and successfully, was a profoundly humanistic dream. Compared to all other mothers of many children, Mother Âu Cơ's egg sac was the largest; she bore the most children. She is thus the embodiment of femininity and fertility, reflecting the deep desires of the ancient Vietnamese.

The number one hundred symbolizes completeness, perfection, fullness, and ideal abundance - a number found only in dreams and symbolic of dreamlike aspirations. It also carries the ancient wishes for "numerous offspring," for "high returns from little capital," and for a life that is whole, prosperous, and rich in romantic and fertility symbolism, central to the worldview of early Vietnamese agrarian communities.

The Tale of the Hồng Bàng Clan in Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái recounts that, after the birth of their children, Lạc Long Quân would often remain for long periods in the Water Kingdom. His wife and children, left behind on land, waited endlessly without seeing him return, and eventually cried out: "Father, where are you, leaving mother and us so lonely and sorrowful day and night?" Lạc Long Quân returned. Âu Cơ said: "I am a woman of the northern land. I lived with the king and bore him one hundred children. Now the king has abandoned me, and does

not help raise our children, leaving me a woman with no husband, and them with no father
- I can only lament our fate.”

Lạc Long Quân replied: “I am of dragon lineage, ruler of the aquatic realm. You are of fairy blood, dwelling on land. Though the yin and yang energies joined and gave us children, fire and water are naturally incompatible, our lineages differ, and it is difficult for us to remain together. Now we must part. I will take fifty of our children to live with me in the Water Palace, where they will govern various regions. The other fifty shall stay with you on land, and they too will rule over their respective territories. Whether ascending the mountains or descending to the sea, let us always inform each other in times of need - never forget our bond.”

The hundred children obeyed. Thereafter, they said their farewells and set off to become rulers over the mountains, plains, rivers, and seas.

Fifty with mother, fifty with father,

All shedding tears as they part,

Children from their father torn,

Wife and husband torn apart...³

The dream of harmony between land and water has been the eternal aspiration of the people. Yet Earth and Water are inherently prone to conflict - earth must contain water, and water tends to invade land. Thus, Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ could not remain in lasting unity. Legend tells that they divided their children: fifty followed their father to rule over the watery domains, while fifty went with their mother to roam and govern the mountainous regions. Mother Âu Cơ, along with her children and people, settled and built their lives.

Mother ascended to the land of Tản Viên,

Tending the nation's order, preserving its form.

Hills and mounds, she organized all,

Raising ramparts, dividing realms, shaping the land.⁴

After sending her children out across the land to work and govern various regions, Mother Âu Cơ appointed her eldest son as king to unite his siblings. He was called Hùng Vương, and the country was named Văn Lang.

Father Lạc Long, for his part, was a capable and resilient leader. Whenever the people - whether living on land or in the rivers and seas - faced hardship, they would call upon their father: “Come and save us!” He would return to battle forest demons (Mộc Tinh) in the mountains, sea monsters (Ngư Tinh) in the ocean, and swamp beasts (Hồ Tinh) in the lowlands. He swept away all malevolent forces, expanding the territory across forests, rivers, seas, and

³ Đặng Văn Lung, Nguyễn Thị Huệ, Trần Gia Linh, Luy Lâu Culture and King Kinh Dương, Writers' Association Publishing House, 1998, pp. 45–47.

⁴ Đặng Văn Lung, Nguyễn Thị Huệ, Trần Gia Linh, Luy Lâu Culture and King Kinh Dương, Writers' Association Publishing House, 1998, p.291

plains, enabling the people to live and thrive.

On one occasion, Lạc Long Quân fought a fierce battle with the Nine-Tailed Fox Demon (Cửu Vĩ Hồ Tinh), a monstrous fox that transformed into countless forms to resist him. The battle was so intense that the earth collapsed, forming a vast lake. The fox was slain and buried beneath it. That lake was named “Đầm Xác Cáo” (the Lake of the Fox’s Corpse), which later became known as Hồ Tây (West Lake) in today’s capital, Hà Nội.

Mother Âu Cơ brought rice seeds and taught her children how to cultivate them. In spring, she instructed people in plowing and harrowing the fields; in summer, she guided them in harvesting. The hillsides were soon filled with fields of sticky rice intermingled with sugarcane and mulberry. With each new crop introduced, the people became increasingly prosperous.

Upon discovering the beautiful land of Hiền Lương (Hạ Hòa district, Phú Thọ province), Mother Âu Cơ decided to settle there. She taught people how to cut down and build homes to shield themselves from the sun and rain, freeing them from a wandering, nomadic life. They cut the logs into sections, bored holes, and fitted them tightly to create frames. Bamboo slats were laid to form floors, and walls were constructed using wooden panels and layers of leaves, making the houses warm in winter and cool in summer.

However, the high and sloped terrain made it difficult to retain water after rains, resulting in crop failures - what was gained in one season might be lost the next. Seeing this, Mother Âu Cơ summoned the waters of Ghềnh Hạc to flow back toward the land and called upon the Chầm Lâm wind to blow in reverse, helping retain water for irrigation. Under her caring and nurturing hands, Vietnamese culture gradually took shape and revealed its identity.

The feats and knowledge - of domesticating wild rice into the staple crop, of mastering irrigation and flood control, of building stilt houses from wood and leaves to protect from the elements and wild beasts - were the cumulative achievements of countless generations of ancient Vietnamese. These accomplishments were symbolically attributed to Mother Âu Cơ, making her not only the mother and first woman of the Vietnamese people, but also a leader and emblem of the rich and profound Vietnamese civilization.

Fifty of the children followed Father Lạc Long to the watery realms, spreading out across regions to settle and make a living. However, some found the aquatic environment unsuitable, while others longed for their mother, and so they asked to return. Mother Âu Cơ welcomed them back and instructed King Hùng to divide the land among them for cultivation and livelihood.

Among these returning children was the deity Cao Sơn, who later became the guardian of the southern area of the Thăng Long Citadel. He had originally followed his father to the sea but, out of longing for his mother, chose to return to the mountains. Following Mother Âu Cơ’s guidance, Hùng Vương assigned him the highest land south of Mount Hi Cương to govern and cultivate. Cao Sơn settled there with the people, leading a life of peace and prosperity. Grateful villagers built a temple in his honor, where incense offerings continue year-round.

When King Lý Thái Tổ chose Đại La as the new capital, it is said that Cao Sơn helped him, ensuring the citadel’s smooth and unhindered construction. After completion, the first

emperor of the Lý dynasty, in gratitude, established a shrine on the original site in Kim Liên village, south of the city. Thus, the temple became known as Kim Liên Temple (or Kim Liên Communal House). Cao Sơn was revered as the village's founding ancestor and conferred the title Thăng Long Nam Trấn - the Southern Guardian Spirit of the Citadel, one of the "Four Protective Spirits of Thăng Long."

Similarly, Saint Tản Viên, the deity of Mount Ba Vì, is also believed to have been one of the hundred children. According to legend, he was the youngest son of Father Lạc and Mother Âu. Though he initially followed his father to the sea, his yearning for his mother led him back upriver to the mountains, where he was granted a vast midland region to govern. He chose the summit of Mount Ba Vì as his sacred seat of power. To this day, he is revered as one of the most sacred mountain deities, counted among the "Four Immortals"⁵ (Tứ Bất Tử) of Vietnamese folk religion.

The fertile alluvial lands along the riverbanks, enriched by sediment deposits, were ideal for agriculture. Mother Âu Cơ instructed the people to plant mulberry trees, raise silkworms, and weave fabric, which they used to make clothing for daily life. Men wore loincloths (khố) - simple garments suited for trekking through forests and wading through streams without hindrance. Women wore bodices (yếm) and wide skirts. When working in flooded rice fields, they would hike up their skirts according to the water's depth; when bathing in rivers, they would gather the skirts all the way up to their heads. This traditional dress became so distinctive that a Vietnamese folk riddle from long ago went: "The basket with holes at both ends - ours has it, theirs does not", a playful metaphor for the Vietnamese woman's skirt of ancient times. This garment, distinctly Vietnamese, was not borrowed from "Tàu" (China).

Wet rice cultivation in the southern regions requires one essential element above all: water. Knowing this, Mother Âu Cơ taught the people how to grow rice, constantly concerned about how her children could have enough water to sustain their livelihoods. In those days, the land of Phú Thọ was still wild and undeveloped. Mother Âu is said to have stretched her legs across both banks of the Sông Cái (Red River), bending its course forward, while gathering the mountains and stacking them behind her, flattening the land near Hạc Trì into a usable plain. The Sông Cái thus became gentler, transformed into an abundant and benevolent water source for her people. They drank river water, bathed in it, and dug canals to bring it to their rice fields and gardens. She then instructed the people to dig the Muội Pond and Móng Hội Pond to raise fish, breed turtles, and store water for irrigation. Today, these ponds - Muội and Móng Hội - in Hạ Hòa district of Phú Thọ remain scenic and serene, regarded as promising eco - tourism destinations. Notably, they are still home to giant soft-shell turtles weighing hundreds of kilograms, said to resemble the legendary turtle of Hồ Gươm (Sword Lake). These turtles occasionally surface, their heads as large as buckets. Locals believe they are descendants of the turtles first raised during the time when Mother Âu Cơ taught the people how to create ponds to preserve water - and that they have endured ever since.

Once rice was plentiful, people grew weary of eating plain cooked grains all the time. So Mother Âu Cơ taught them to transform rice into a variety of cakes and pastries. Harvested sticky rice was dried, winnowed, milled, and sifted into pristine white grains. These were then

⁵ The "Four Immortals" are the four most sacred and enduring deities in the Vietnamese pantheon: Tản Viên Sơn Thánh (Mountain God of Tản Viên), Phù Đổng Thiên Vương (Saint Gióng), Chử Đồng Tử, and Princess Liễu Hạnh.

pounded into fine flour and mixed with sugarcane syrup to make bánh dầy and bánh mật (traditional rice cakes). She also taught them to make other rice-based treats such as bánh nếp, bánh tẻ, bánh hời, and bánh rộm. Her descendants followed her example, creating those cakes and many others. Over time, this became a culinary tradition—using sticky rice, regular rice, and their flours to craft hundreds of types of cakes and vermicelli—delicacies unique to the wet rice civilization of the southern lands, rarely found elsewhere. Mother Âu Cơ came to be venerated as the Mother of Rice, the Goddess of Harvests, embodying the spirit of labor and livelihood among the ancient Vietnamese. To honor her, the villagers of Hiền Lương celebrate a grand festival every year on the 7th day of the first lunar month, believed to be the day she descended to earth. A highlight of the festival is the preparation of one hundred bánh dầy (sticky rice cakes), made in turn by the village's communal guilds. These one hundred cakes symbolize the offerings from her one hundred children to their Mother Âu Cơ, and also commemorate the cherished cake she once taught her people to make - now a beloved traditional delicacy of the region.

The vast and untamed land, the deep seas filled with treacherous currents and rapids, and the mysterious, wild forests - all of these spaces were inhabited by countless fearsome creatures: werewolves, tigers, leopards, venomous snakes, and all manner of aquatic beasts that threatened the peaceful existence of humankind. These terrifying monsters, with their supernatural powers, prevented the people from settling and earning a living. As there is a mother, so too must there

be a father: while the mother nurtures and teaches, the father protects and shields. Whenever the hundred children called out in need, Father Lạc Long Quân would return from the sea, wielding his magical powers to summon rain, winds, and thunder. He aided his people by vanquishing the Sea Monster (Ngư Tinh) in the ocean, the Swamp Beast (Hồ Tinh) in the lowlands, and the Forest Demon (Mộc Tinh) in the mountains. He taught the people how to tattoo their bodies to resemble sea creatures - so as to avoid being attacked by aquatic monsters during river and sea journeys. Father became a symbol of talent and the determination to conquer nature and establish the realm. He also came to embody courage and the earliest notions of territorial sovereignty and national defense.

When the land was finally cleansed of evil, Father Lạc Long returned to the open sea, while Mother Âu Cơ continued to live and labor with the people on the newly reclaimed land. There, they planted fragrant flowers and sweet fruits. Birds from all directions flocked to the region to chirp joyfully, deer and antelope pranced freely, and streams sang with laughter day and night. The people grew ever more attached to this “land of sticky rice and golden fields.” From that point on, the concept of homeland began to take root - initially as a sense of dwelling place, of motherland and fatherland - and gradually evolved into the more profound idea of territory and nationhood. At the same time, the idea of shared lineage began to emerge and flourish. We take pride in being the descendants of Father Lạc the Dragon and Mother Âu the Fairy. The Vietnamese always remind one another that we are “children of the Dragon, grandchildren of the Fairy” (con Rồng cháu Tiên), a proud expression of our noble origin, born from a sacred and singular womb. That sense of shared ancestry slowly grew into a spirit of national solidarity. From mountain to river to sea, all Vietnamese remember that we are children of the same parents - Father Dragon and Mother Fairy - and must never forget our sacred and noble roots.

Across the central plains of Vietnam—from rice fields to hills and mounds, from

riversides to ponds and lagoons - traces of Mother Âu and Father Lạc remain etched in the landscape. These sacred parents of the Lạc Việt people, who gave birth to and nurtured the race both literally and symbolically, left their marks everywhere. Here lie Gò Cam, Gò Thị, Gò Sung, Gò Sở⁶ - earthen mounds that Mother Âu Cơ and the villagers built to block floods and plant crops. There is Ghềnh Hạc, where she summoned water to flow for the people's use in farming. And here is Ao Châu, where she and her children deepened a valley to form a pond, carving ninety-nine channels to bring water into the fields. The alluvial plains along the Đà and Lô Rivers still bear the imprints of her hands, as she taught the people to plant mulberries for silkworms and to spin and weave fabric. She led her children upriver along the Thao River into the highlands. Upon reaching Hiền Lương (Hạ Hòa district, Phú Thọ), they stopped to rest. Seeing that the land was fertile and the scenery enchanting, she decided to remain there, teaching the people to use fire to clear forests and grow rice.

She led her children to the riverside to plant sugarcane and more mulberries. She also showed them how to pound glutinous rice into flour, knead it with sugarcane syrup, and steam it into bánh Uôi. She taught them to dig wells for water, press sugarcane for syrup, and make delicious cakes and treats.

Afterward, she left one child behind to govern the region and continued upstream with the others, expanding into new lands and founding villages. Mother Âu Cơ was not only the one who "bore the ancient Vietnamese children with pain and love," but also a heroic matriarch who initiated communal culture - a Founding Mother who gave birth to the Lạc Việt lineage and laid the foundation of Vietnamese cultural tradition from its very beginnings. Just as the figure of Father Lạc Long embodies the cultural contributions of the people in Vietnam's long history of nation-building, so too does Mother Âu Cơ. She represents the distilled creativity and wisdom of the entire community, the embodiment of ancestral achievement and the laboring spirit of the ancient Vietnamese people. She is the enduring and noble symbol of the land, the hills and plains, the ponds and mounds - of Vietnamese territory and custom. From the first Hùng King - eldest of the fifty children who followed Mother Âu Cơ into the mountains and was honored as the founding monarch of the Văn Lang state - the Hùng Kings ruled in succession through eighteen generations, spanning over 2,600 years. The nation's borders became increasingly stable, the land more prosperous, and the population more numerous and well-fed. It was during this time that Mother Âu created the hát xoan - a traditional spring chant - and taught young men and women to sing sweetly and dance gracefully, praying for thriving plants, bountiful harvests, and the well-being of the villagers. As the chant originated in spring and was performed during spring festivals, the villagers of Phú Thọ called it hát xoan (meaning "spring chant")⁷. Thus, Mother Âu not only created a material culture - meeting basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter - but also fostered and passed down a spiritual culture to satisfy the people's artistic and emotional needs.

Then, one day, after the people had completed their harvest, the joyous Lễ hội cơm mới (New Rice Festival) was held, featuring a ceremony to honor the Rice God, contests in cooking rice and eating sugarcane, and performances of hát xoan. On that day, Mother Âu Cơ and her

⁶ Names of small hills located in the Phú Thọ region.

⁷ Xoan singing from Phú Thọ has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

fairy maidens ascended to the heavens, leaving behind only a pale pink bodice hanging on a banyan tree in the middle of the village fields. The villagers believed this was a sacred trace she left behind and built a temple at that very spot to worship her. According to the sacred lore (thần tích) of Hiền Lương village, that day was the 25th of the last lunar month.

Clearly, compared to the northern-origin story of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ - already textualized and canonized - the indigenous folk tradition is richer, more deeply rooted, more widespread, and no less enchanting or poetic. It is high time that this folk narrative be collected, documented, and widely introduced to all descendants of the Vietnamese nation.
