

## HISTORY

### **LĨNH NAM CHÍCH QUÁI AND THE STUDY OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY IN THE NATION-BUILDING PERIOD**

Nguyễn Văn Kim<sup>a</sup>

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#### **Abstract**

The formative history of most nations worldwide is closely associated with myths and legends. In many cases, the founding figures are deities or supernatural forces. However, there are also instances in which the progenitors of a nation were historical human beings. As a multi-ethnic country with a rich cultural heritage, Vietnam is home to numerous myths and legends about its founding era. Reading the tales in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, such as “Lạc Long Quân - Âu Cơ”, “Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh”, “Chử Đồng Tử - Tiên Dung”, “Mai An Tiêm”, and others, one can discern cultural messages and “genetic codes” transmitted by earlier generations to their descendants. The study of these myths can provide increasingly profound and comprehensive insights into the mindset of ancient communities during the nation’s formative period; the role of the state and its rulers; social structures and relationships; matriarchal and patriarchal systems; modes of social division of labor; natural resources and the interrelation between sea and land. These cultural elements and messages are perceived, interpreted, and analyzed from multiple dimensions and approaches, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary.

**Keywords:** nation, living space, social division of labor, ancient culture, progenitor professions

#### **1. From myths and legends to the history of the nation-building period**

The formative history of most Asian nations, as well as of the wider world, is closely intertwined with myths and legends. In many cases, the progenitors are deities or supernatural forces. However, there are also founders of the “earth- and nation-creating” era who were ordinary human beings, intimately connected with everyday life. As one of the earliest established and developed countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese ethnic communities inhabiting a vast territorial expanse from North to South have preserved a rich cultural reservoir of distinctive

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<sup>a</sup> Professor, Ph.D., University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi  
Email: kimnguyenvanls@gmail.com

tangible and intangible heritage, including numerous myths and legends about the nation-building period.

In the cultural space of the North, myths and legends concerning the founding of the nation are recorded in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* [Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam – LNCQ] - such as “Lạc Long Quân - Âu Cơ”, “Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh”, “Chử Đồng Tử - Tiên Dung” and “Mai An Tiêm” (LNCQ, 2011, 2024; *Việt điện u linh* [Collection of Stories on Spirits of the Departed in the Viet Realm], 2012) - are exemplary narratives that embody many messages transmitted by past generations to their descendants. These reflect conceptions of the universe, of space and time, the origins of ethnic groups, as well as the emergence of ancient kingdoms. Over time, many of these myths and legends have remained alive in the consciousness of communities, serving as foundations and sources of motivation for national development.

From the late 1950s to the 1980s, Vietnamese scholars and international experts conducted numerous studies on the history of Vietnam during the nation-building era (Đào Duy Anh, 1956; Văn Tân, 1967; Trần Quốc Vượng - Hà Văn Tấn, 1960; Phạm Huy Thông & Nguyễn Duy Tỳ, 1974). A wide range of historical sources was explored and approached from multiple perspectives. Alongside written documents, many archaeological surveys and excavations were undertaken. With the aim of reconstructing an authentic picture of Vietnamese history and society in the formative period, specialists also examined various sources from social history, ethnology, anthropology, as well as literary-historical and linguistic works. A research mindset combining disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches was clearly manifested in these studies.

In *Việt sử lược* [The Abridged History of Viet - VSL], a work composed during the Trần dynasty, the author states that during the time of the Hùng Kings, Giao Chỉ had fifteen tribes: “Giao Chỉ, Việt Thường Thị, Vũ Ninh, Quận Ninh, Gia Ninh (Trần Quốc Vượng & Đinh Khắc Thuân, 2005, p.19; Văn Tân et al. 1973; Phạm Huy Thông, 1975), Ninh Hải, Lục Hải, Dương Tuyền, Tân Xương, Bình Văn, Văn Lang, Cửu Chân, Nhật Nam, Hoài Hoan, and Cửu Đức - all of which were military domains. During the reign of King Trang of the Zhou dynasty (696-682 BCE), a strange man appeared in Gia Ninh, who, by means of magic, subdued the tribes. He proclaimed himself Hùng King, established his capital at Văn Lang, and named the state Văn Lang (emphasis in the original). The customs were simple and honest, and governmental affairs were conducted through knot-tying. The throne was passed down through eighteen generations, all bearing the title Hùng King” (VSL, 2005, pp.17-18).

In *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [The Complete Annals of Dai Viet - ĐVSKTT], the official chronicle of the Lê dynasty, the *Ngoại kỷ* [Outer Records] recounts the figures of the Hồng Bàng clan: Kinh Dương Vương, Lạc Long Quân, and the Hùng Kings. According to the chronicle,

Sùng Lãm (son of Kinh Dương Vương) married Âu Cơ, the daughter of Đế Lai, and she bore a hundred eggs that hatched into a hundred children. These were the progenitors of the Bách Việt people. “One day, Lạc Long Quân said to Âu Cơ: ‘I am of the dragon lineage, you are of the fairy lineage; water and fire are different by nature, and it is difficult for us to live together.’ Thus they parted: fifty children followed their mother to the mountains, while fifty followed their father to the sea (the South Sea). The eldest son was enthroned as Hùng King, continuing the royal line” (ĐVSKTT 1993, p.132).

According to *ĐVSKTT*, the Hùng King ascended the throne, named the kingdom Văn Lang, and established the capital at Phong Châu. The kingdom’s eastern boundary reached the South Sea, the west extended to Ba Thục, the north to Lake Động Đình, and the south bordered Hồ Tôn, that is, Champa. Thus, according to *LNCQ*, the territory of Văn Lang under the Hùng Kings was vast, its borders adjoining many regions of neighboring polities. This land possessed diverse natural conditions and ecosystems, with five principal ecological zones: *mountains and forests, midlands, river deltas, coastal areas, and seas/oceans*.

However, according to modern scholarship, the territorial extent described in these legends does not correspond to the actual domain of the Văn Lang state under the Hùng Kings, but rather to a broader region inhabited by non-Han or non-Sinicized peoples south of the Yangtze River. Some ancient Chinese records referred to them as the Việt or Bách Việt peoples. Based on the fifteen tribal divisions of Văn Lang and, more importantly, on the historical transition from the Văn Lang state of the Hùng Kings to the Âu Lạc state under An Dương Vương, the territory of Văn Lang corresponds roughly to present-day northern and north-central Vietnam, together with part of southern Guangxi and Guangdong in China (Phan Huy Lê et al., 1993).

To govern the country - and doubtless also to manifest his authority-the Hùng King “used magic to subdue the tribes” and then proclaimed himself king. From that time onward, *secular power was intertwined with, and amplified by, the strength of kinship and bloodline relations as well as the supernatural forces of religion and magic*. In this sense, the formation of the Văn Lang state under the Hùng Kings bore significant similarities to the *Mandala* model in ancient Southeast Asia (Đỗ Trường Giang 2009, pp.59-67).

According to *ĐVSKTT*, the Hùng Kings divided the country into fifteen bộ (administrative divisions), whose names were recorded as: Giao Chỉ, Chu Diên, Vũ Ninh, Phúc Lộc, Việt Thường, Ninh Hải, Dương Tuyền, Lục Hải, Vũ Định, Hoài Hoan, Cửu Chân, Bình Văn, Tân Hưng, and Cửu Đức. These were sacred territories under the management and influence of the Hùng Kings, while the Văn Lang division was the location of the royal capital. Thus, both *VSL* and *ĐVSKTT* consistently noted the number of divisions under the Hùng Kings as fifteen, though

the names differ between the two sources. It is possible that the Lê dynasty historians either recognized changes in the names of certain divisions or reflected alterations in their administrative boundaries.

With his authority, at the “central” level, the king established two offices: civil and military. Civil officials were called Lạc Hầu, and military officials were called Lạc Tướng. The king’s sons were titled Quan Lang, and his daughters were called My Nương. Officials overseeing local affairs were called Bồ Chính, with hereditary succession referred to as Phụ Đạo. *LNCQ* records explicitly: “In the land of Phong Châu, brothers and clans submitted to one another. The younger brothers were appointed as civil and military officials, called ‘Lạc Hầu’ and ‘Lạc Tướng’; the king’s sons were called ‘Quan Lang,’ and his daughters ‘My Nương’; officials of state were titled ‘Bồ Vương Quan’; servants were called ‘Trâu Tỳ’; attendants were called ‘Tinh Tướng’; deities were called ‘Khối’; hereditary succession from mother to child was called ‘Đạo’; and successive kings all bore the title Hùng King without alteration” (*LNCQ*, 2024, pp.385-387). According to Ngô Sĩ Liên and the Lê dynasty historians, during the time of the Hùng Kings, the country was divided into fifteen bộ, which may have functioned as subordinate domains, serving as protective frontiers (*kimi*) for the central authority, with the royal kingdom located at Gia Ninh. Each division had chiefs and deputies. The king appointed his sons according to rank to administer the country. Thus, *kinship and bloodline relations were evidently established as the principal axis shaping and governing the political life of the Văn Lang state at that time.*

## **2. The sea-continent relationship and habitable spaces**

In previous research, the ethnic formation process has often been interpreted along two trajectories: the flow of rivers from the Northwest to the Southeast, or the successive waves of Vietnamese migration from the North to the South. In other words, the ancient peoples - the bearers of Neolithic cultures such as Hòa Bình-Bắc Sơn, and early Metal Age cultures such as Phùng Nguyên - Đồng Đậu - Gò Mun, particularly the Đông Sơn inhabitants - moved from the mountainous and midland regions down to the East and Southeast to exploit resources and build social and cultural life in the river deltas and coastal areas.

Examining the legend of Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh alongside the cultural history of the Northeastern coast, Hà Hữu Nga and Nguyễn Văn Hào argued: “In Vietnamese consciousness, the myth of the battle between Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh seems to carry traces of large-scale migrations from the coastal regions to the midland zones of Vĩnh Phúc - Phú Thọ - Sơn Tây. These moves were aimed at securing opportunities to cultivate the fertile lands situated at the intersections of ancient communication routes: from the Central region outward, from the

Northwest and Việt Bắc downward, and from the Northeast inward. This location was precisely the confluence of the Hồng, Đà, and Lô rivers. The contest between Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh was a race against time and culture to win the princess's hand. The clash between the two figures symbolized the encounter and harmonization of Mountain and Sea cultural elements, ultimately giving rise to a unified ancient Vietnamese civilization. In historical terms, this was a step forward" (Hà Hữu Nga & Nguyễn Văn Hào, 2002, pp.236-237).

The diffusion and exchange between the Hòa Bình - Bắc Sơn cultural tradition and maritime cultures such as Soi Nhụ, Cái Bèo, Hạ Long, and, further afield, Đa Bút and Quỳnh Văn - when compared with the founding legends recorded in *LNCQ* - provide an *alternative perspective* on the formation of the nation. From the very beginning, alongside mountains, forests, and river deltas, the sea constituted a vital environment of existence, a habitable space, and a principal gateway of economic and cultural exchange for Vietnamese ethnic communities. Across the primary spatial domains - the continent (mountains, forests, and deltas) and the littoral (rivers and seas) - communities of inhabitants collectively built the nation and defined the essence and identity of the national culture.

From their origins, territorial and maritime spaces have consistently retained diverse natural features and environments characteristic of the tropical *general ecosystem*. This ecosystem displays three salient traits: (1) *a high index of species diversity*, (2) *rapid regenerative capacity*, and (3) *a typically low population size per species*. These three defining features, or natural indicators, embody genetic codes that are trans-temporal, trans-cultural, and inter-ethnic. They offer insights into the early or late emergence and distinctive characteristics of cultures; the developmental trajectories of economic centers; the major challenges (wars, famines, epidemics, etc.) faced by humankind; and the structural traits and developmental models of many Southeast Asian and Eastern nations. These may be contrasted with models shaped by *specialized ecosystems* in temperate regions such as Northeast Asia, Europe, and North America,...

On the spaces where the ancient Viet peoples once lived, there existed both the deep strata of continental culture and that of rivers and seas. The organic, mutually reinforcing relationship between *Sea* and *Continent* (land), between *Earth* and *Water*, between *Yin* and *Yang*, had already been established early on and left a profound imprint on the consciousness of resident communities (Nguyễn Khắc Sửu, 2009, p.271). The *Sea* and the *Continent* constituted survival spaces for two worlds, two halves of a whole that complemented and reinforced each other. Among these two constituent elements, the continental (land-based) factor consistently played a

crucial role, for the cultural vitality of a people generally concentrated and crystallized there. It was also the locus of population clusters, economic activities, and social organization.

However, an examination of myths and legends in *LNCQ* also reveals that the continent has always been the dominant space for the formation of political institutions and states, from early polities to powerful kingdoms and empires. In collective perception, the land was always the site where political systems were established, where policies were formulated and implemented, and where social activities were organized. Populations, social resources (labor, taxation, military service), and even cultural creativity largely converged there. In *LNCQ*, myths such as those of Lạc Long Quân - Âu Cơ, Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh, Chử Đồng Tử - Tiên Dung, and Mai An Tiêm all demonstrate the close interrelation between the two worlds and the pivotal role of the continent in shaping the cultural history of the nation. The histories of many nations that arose on maritime and insular territories also follow this universal pattern (Alfred Thayer Mahan, 2012; Robert D. Kaplan, 2017; James G. Stavridis, 2022; Tadao Umesao, 2007).

The study of certain legends, such as Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh, consistently reveals the enduring interplay and balance of forces: *Yin* and *Yang*, *Mountain* and *Water*. The contest for marriage between two figures - both talented deities - has often been interpreted as symbolic of traditions of opening new economic spaces, competing for land and resources, and constructing irrigation systems. This legend also preserves memories of great population movements prompted by historical processes of marine transgressions and regressions in the history of the Vietnamese and of Southeast Asia (Hà Hữu Nga - Nguyễn Văn Hào, 2002, pp.236-237). The American scholar K.W. Taylor once remarked: "Mount Tản Viên, where Sơn Tinh dwells, carries a symbolic value akin to that of sacred Mount Olympus." The rivalry between the *God of Water* and the *God of the Mountain* "has been interpreted in various ways - as a metaphor for the rainy season, the monsoon, sudden surges of seawater, or even invasions from across the sea" (Keith Weller Taylor, 2020, p.25).

Over the course of millennia, it can also be observed that whenever the *God of Water* receded, he left behind for the inhabitants a stretch of fertile alluvial plains in the deltas, ensuring the abundance of many agricultural seasons. More than that, the phenomenon of rising waters not only helped forge the resilience and adaptive capacity of local communities in relation to their living environment, but also became a factor that fostered communal solidarity while providing the vital resources for ethnic groups whose livelihoods depended on water and who had traditions of wet-rice cultivation. From the very beginning, the Vietnamese both feared water (when it rose excessively: "*first water, then fire*") and sought it (through rain-invoking rituals), longing for its return at the onset of the agricultural season or during prolonged droughts. In

other words, water has been an integral component of cultural tradition, deeply engraved in modes of thought (flexible and dynamic), in the struggle to *build* and *defend the nation*, and within the mythological world of the Lạc Việt. These myths and legends “all reflect a system of duality and complementarity, existing within a larger mythological-social totality that is simultaneously bifurcated and unified” (Trần Quốc Vượng, 1996, p.28).

From myths of the sea to the substratum of maritime culture, from the tradition of marine exploitation to an orientation toward the sea; from the capacities and strength of naval forces, the heroic victories of naval battles (Phan Huy Lê et al., 2004; Nguyễn Việt et al., 1983), to the potential for maritime trade—all of these reveal that the Vietnamese people adapted early to aquatic environments and engaged deeply with the sea. Ancient communities possessed early on a rich system of thought and knowledge concerning water and the sea. The Vietnamese also demonstrated early capabilities in conquering and mastering rivers and the ocean (Trần Quốc Vượng, 1988; Lê Xuân Diễm et al., 1995). Within this cultural trajectory, the national vision has consistently extended toward the sea, toward oceanic spaces. Yet this historical journey has also consistently found firm foundations in the land, the deltas, and the mountains. Rivers, trade routes, and cultural exchanges along riverbanks and maritime spaces interconnected cultural zones, elevated them, and contributed to shaping the identity, distinctiveness, and values of these cultural spaces.

### 3. Division of social labor, functions, and responsibilities

The legend of Lạc Long Quân, King of the Lạc realm (*Nước - Water*), who united with Âu Cơ (*Mountain*), tells of their giving birth to one hundred children and then dividing them - half following their *Mother* to the *Mountains* (the terrestrial realm), half following their *Father* to the *Sea* (the aquatic realm). In the cosmogonic thought of primordial times, this was not an absolute separation between *Mountain* and *Sea*, between *Yin and Yang*, but rather a mode of “division for the sake of union.” Although there was a (temporary, relative) separation, the two progenitors nevertheless made a covenant: “when ascending to the land or descending to the water, they would visit one another” (Vũ Quỳnh, 1993, p.47). The significance of this spirit of commitment lay precisely in compensating for deficiencies (and also differences) in natural resources, economic potential, and cultural capital. This harmony also served to fulfill human aspirations for affection, for the union of *Yin* and *Yang* - an essence of *Nature* itself and a fundamental yearning of *humankind* (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2022, p.34).

According to the myth, once their children had matured, the Sea God Lạc Long Quân led fifty of them back to the sea. Mother Âu Cơ remained on land, raising her children and simultaneously “assigning” them to govern various regions. The fifty who followed their Father

to the sea became known as Thủy Tinh. Those who stayed with their Mother on land (mountains) were transformed into Sơn Thần, deities who governed the uplands, midlands, and deltas. All were said to “bring glory to the lords, guarding both mountain and sea, regarded as subordinate deities” (Phả họ Hồng Bàng, n.d., pp. 4-9). Mythic accounts state that at that time, in the southern realm of Giao Nam, “the land was still wild, plants grew everywhere, people were intermingled, dwelling in groups, building shelters from clay or erecting rudimentary palaces. The King arranged everything, teaching the people how to cook rice, build houses, make clothing from tree bark, and sleep on mats of dried grass or lotus leaves. Men and women were free to choose partners, each following personal inclination; all clans lived joyfully, following the King’s guidance” (Vũ Quỳnh, 1993, pp.42-43).

What is particularly striking is that the world of Lạc Long Quân - the Father (Male - *Yin*)- was associated with the Sea (Water - *Yang*). Conversely, Mother Âu Cơ (Female - *Yang*) presided over and governed the vast expanse of the terrestrial realm (*Yin* - Land). Could it be that, even at that early stage, the consciousness of the ancient Vietnamese already manifested a complex, integrative way of thinking about the coexistence of multiple elements within a single living entity? This synthesis operated according to principles later conceptualized as the Law of Âm - Dương Harmony. Such a mode of thought appeared early in the cultural consciousness of the peoples of the South, of the Âu Việt and Lạc Việt (the founders of the Văn Lang and Âu Lạc states). This cultural mentality has remained a continuous source, vividly expressed in numerous customs, forms of cultural cognition, in the motifs and decorative patterns on bronze drums and vessels, as well as in many tangible and intangible cultural heritages of the nation.

Not only did he possess the power to conquer and master the open seas, dwelling in the Water Palace, but whenever the “multitude of the people” was in need, Lạc Long Quân was always ready to return to the land to rescue his descendants and subjects. *The Sea Deity thus continued to embody a profound sense of responsibility toward generations of descendants who carried within them the cultural genetic code and the bloodline of the Sea* (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2022, p.36).

Several scholars have suggested that by the time of the Đông Sơn culture, when the Văn Lang state was established, the patriarchal system had already emerged. However, it seems that the matrilineal system still exerted significant influence in society. From this perspective, the division of one hundred children between Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ can be interpreted as a reflection of the existence of a bilateral family model. The scholar K.W. Taylor likewise noted: “Dividing the children was a custom of bilateral families, in which inheritance rights could be granted through both paternal and maternal lines” (Keith Weller Taylor, 2020, p.36), meaning



that both sons and daughters could inherit. Similarly, the Korean scholar Yu Insun has observed that in antiquity, “a newly married couple did not necessarily have to live together, and the mother often bore primary responsibility for child-rearing” (Yu Insun, 2011, pp.26, 29).

According to legend, Lạc Long Quân once protected his offspring/people from disturbances by northern invaders, and resisted incursions from Hồ Tinh (identified with Hồ Tôn - Champa) in the South. In this context, the role of the father/master, and of the patriarchal system, was emphasized. The father/master became the locus of the people’s hopes and trust, as well as the head of the polity. The responsibilities of rulers toward their subjects were clearly articulated. Along with this, notions of caring for the livelihood of the people, ensuring their peace and survival, may have originated as early as the era of the Hùng Kings in the founding of the nation.

In his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) conducted a profound study of three major divisions of social labor in human history. The first: animal husbandry separating from agriculture; the second: handicraft industry separating from agrarian economy; and the third: trade becoming an independent branch of the economy (Friedrich Engels, 1983, pp.242-259). This represented the universal model of the division of social labor, which unfolded over time. Each division of social labor was the result of economic and social transformations and necessarily led to the emergence of one or more new economic sectors, new social strata, and new structures and relations within society.

In fact, in the history of Vietnam as well as in that of many Asian countries, alongside these major divisions of labor, there also existed other “phenomena” of social division of labor, including: (1) *division of labor by age*; (2) *division of labor by gender*; (3) *division of labor by caste/class*; (4) *division of labor by skill, knowledge, and educational level*; and (5) *division of labor by region*,...

What is certain is that, with only simple tools and weapons, by means of their hands and minds, and with a strong will and daring spirit to reach out and exploit new, vast living spaces, Vietnamese national history witnessed the emergence of its very first major social division of labor: *the Division of Labor by Territory*. This division did not appear to evolve along the universal model of separating *agriculture* from *animal husbandry* and then *agriculture* from *handicrafts* and *commerce*. Rather, it unfolded in a distinct, characteristically Vietnamese - Southeast Asian manner. Shaped by the very environment in which communities resided - under the influence of the *general tropical ecosystem* - the point of departure for this division lay in the establishment of spaces for exploitation, survival, and development. Such differentiation was

carried out between *Sea* and *Continent*, between *Land* and *Water* - constituent parts of a national whole (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2022, p.34).

Thus, although myths and legends are always “trans-temporal” and often involve phenomena of “*anachronism*” (Trần Quốc Vượng, 1998, p.75; Trần Quốc Vượng, 2000, pp.263-269), thereby rendering history into the realm of the Marvelous, they nevertheless contain underlying foundations of authenticity. Viewed from the perspective of culture and spirituality, the myths and legends of the founding era reflect an early intellectual grasp of the living environment, of existential spaces, and of the coexistence of entities within a shared world. At the same time, they also embody the ancient people’s wisdom regarding the process of *social division of labor by territory* (existential space) and even by ethnic origins.

#### 4. Ethnic origins and the creative agents of culture

According to *LNCQ*, after Earth and Water came into being, the children carrying the blood of Lạc Hồng reached maturity. Unable to continue living far from the marine environment, Lạc Long Quân (the *Dragon*) led fifty of his children back to the sea - to the realm of *Water*. Possessing supernatural powers, he could walk (and live) underwater just as he did on land. As a manifestation of a *human deity*, Lạc Long Quân’s magical abilities reflect the lingering image of an *amphibious way of life* - highly characteristic in the evolutionary history of humankind. Notably, his descendant, King An Dương Vương, also possessed extraordinary powers in dealing with the regional political environment, the populace, and the sea. Along with the divine Crossbow bestowed by the sacred Kim Quy (Golden Tortoise), the ruler of Cổ Loa citadel also owned a rhinoceros horn - another sacred object - seven *tắc* long, which allowed him to part the waters and enter the Thủy cung (Water Palace)<sup>2</sup>. This rhinoceros horn, a treasured gift of the *mountains* and *forests*, held miraculous power. As both sacred object and divine medicine, it was transformed into the image of a boat. This boat could not only *sail upon the sea* but also *travel beneath* it - penetrating the Thủy cung and entering the world of aquatic beings.

From the founding era, the Biển Đông (EastVietnam Sea), part of which was known as Giao Chỉ dương or Giao Châu Sea, quickly became a significant cultural and economic center. Thanks to its geographic advantages and abundant natural resources, ancient populations settled and established communities there at an early time. Research shows that before the Qin Dynasty expanded southward, the regions south of the sông Yangtze River were inhabited by the Bách Việt peoples. Among them were the Vu Việt in present-day Zhejiang, the Mân Việt in Fujian, the

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<sup>2</sup> According to the tale of An Dương Vương and the Divine Golden Turtle (Thần Kim Quy) in *Tân đính Lĩnh Nam chính quái* [The Newly Revised Collection of Strange Tales of Lĩnh Nam], when pursued by Triệu Đà, “the Thục king held the seven-span rhinoceros horn and, following the Golden Turtle, parted the waters and entered the Water Palace” (ibid., p.131).

Điền Việt in Yunnan, a group of Nam Việt in Guangdong, and the Lạc Việt and Tây Âu further south. During their historical development, the Bách Việt, including the Lạc Việt, cultivated a profound consciousness of their origins and living spaces, creating many unique cultural legacies (Trình Năng Chung, 2014, p.202).

Archaeological, anthropological, historical, and linguistic evidence confirms that the communities during the era of the Hùng Vương - the ancient Vietnamese - *were multi-ethnic*. Both *Mongoloid* (yellow-skinned) and *Australo-Negroid* (dark-skinned) groups coexisted; over time, the Mongoloid element developed and became dominant. This was a process of hybridization trending toward “yellowization,” producing the ancient Vietnamese of the Đông Sơn period - predominantly of the Southern Mongoloid subtype (Nguyễn Đình Khoa, Nguyễn Lân Cường, 1971).

From centuries before the Common Era, the creators of Đông Sơn culture and the Văn Lang state had already established and maintained extensive relations with cultural spheres in East Asia (particularly the southern Trường Giang cultural belt) and Southeast Asia. During that same period, communities such as Lâm Ấp - Champa in Central Vietnam, as well as societies in Island Southeast Asia and even South Asia, maintained economic, cultural, and technological exchanges with the ancient Vietnamese peoples. Such inter- and trans-regional interactions inevitably led to ethnic and cultural intermingling. Consequently, in many social spaces, there was an early coexistence of indigenous Vietnamese, Austronesian, and Malay-Polynesian populations. It is also worth noting that, historically, many coastal regions of Vietnam were once inhabited by Dân Nhân (such as Bồ Lô and Pù Lao). They were the masters of the so-called “Mường Nước,” leading lives deeply tied to the sea and rivers. The Dân Nhân and Bồ Lô regarded the sea and water as their home and were highly skilled in fishing, aquaculture, and maritime trade and exchange. Thus, the cultural landscape of the Vietnamese people early on embraced a wide array of diverse elements and layers. Not only were they children of the mountains and forests, but many ancient Vietnamese peoples also carried the blood of the sea within them (Hà Văn Tấn, 1999; Phan Huy Lê, 1997). The image of the “hundred eggs” and “hundred children” not only evokes deep reflections on the remote origins of humanity but also symbolizes the diversity of the general/pluralistic ecosystem - of which humans have always been both a product and a member. Within that ecosystem lie the values of wholeness, creativity, and fertility - the life-giving power of the primordial ancestors and of all subsequent generations (Ủy ban nhân dân huyện Hạ Hòa, 2020, p.58).

Every year, on the seventh day of the first lunar month (the Day of the Descent of the Immortal), the people of Hiền Lương commune (Hạ Hòa, Phú Thọ) hold the Festival at the

Temple of Mother Âu Cơ. The community continues to maintain the custom of preparing exactly one hundred bánh mật (fragrant, pure honey cakes) as offerings to the Ancestral Mother. Legend has it that it was the Ancestral Mother herself who taught the villagers of Hiền Lương how to make these cakes. The one hundred cakes symbolize the completeness and reverence of the one hundred children offering their tribute to the Ancestral Mother. Along with the one hundred honey cakes, the villagers also prepare one hundred portions of chè kho (sweet mung bean pudding), one hundred bánh ít (sticky rice dumplings), together with fruits, lamps, incense, betel nuts, and rice wine as offerings. These are also scientific indicators of the very early presence in national history of the symbiosis, shared destiny, and *co-existence* of many sibling ethnic groups, all believed to have been born of the *Ancestral Mother* and all deeply conscious of their common origin.

The idea of regions and living spaces (fifteen bộ), associated with the opening of land, rivers, and seas; with the exploitation of natural resources; with concepts of living environments, central regions and “peripheries”; and with the lineage of Lạc - Hồng, was formed from that time. The Mother of Nature, who was also the Birth Mother of beings, clearly manifested both her noble (divine) qualities and her wisdom in selecting and training “leadership capacity” (focused on the eldest/first-born son) to become the chief/king and the head of the polity. Perhaps, in that era, upon the foundation of a matrilineal system, there also appeared a transition toward a patrilineal order. According to historian Trần Quốc Vượng, the title “Hùng King” was in fact the embodiment of the *Pò Khun* in the ancient Tày-Thái language. The ruler of the Sukhothai kingdom also called himself *Pò Khun*. In Phù Nam, the king of a small principality was called *Ku-rung*. All of these terms carry the same meaning: “The Chief of all Chiefs” (Trần Quốc Vượng, 1996, p.6; Trần Trí Dõi, 2023, pp.263-282).

## 5. The role of ancestral masters and economic activities

According to *LNCQ*, during the reign of the second Hùng King, in the Eastern Sea there lived a “fish-serpent demon, its body longer than fifty trượng, with many legs like a centipede...” This creature could devour humans alive and swallow entire boats! Undoubtedly, it must have dwelled in the vast and deep seas. The harassment of Ngư Tinh prompted Lạc Long Quân to seek another route for merchants to pass through. Understanding the suffering of both seafarers and traders in the Water Palace, Lạc Long Quân fashioned a great boat, ordered Thủy Dã Thoa to calm the seabed and prevent waves from rising, and then rowed the vessel forward. *When Ngư Tinh attempted to swallow the boat, Lạc Long Quân hurled into its mouth a block of red-hot iron blazing with fiery sparks, thereby exterminating the aquatic demon* (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.391).

Thus, *the supernatural power of Lạc Long Quân, combined with the strength of weaponry and the advances of the Iron Age, created a comprehensive force that triumphed over sea monsters* (or perhaps pirates?). Regarding the metallurgical skills of the Đông Sơn people, Prof. Hà Văn Tấn once remarked: “The Đông Sơn people were *masters of metallurgical techniques*... One may say that bronze casting reached its zenith. Their foundries, methods of mold-making, materials, and fuels remain questions of astonishment for us today. The alloying of bronze with other metals and semi-metals demonstrates their firm grasp of the chemical properties of each substance: ductile alloys, easy to cast, filling intricate patterns for artistic works (drums, jars, bells, vessels...); sharp alloys for weapons (spears, arrowheads, daggers...). The Đông Sơn people skillfully created twelve different alloys to produce functional objects, and they also cast pure red bronze. Compared with other contemporary Southeast Asian peoples, the Đông Sơn possessed superior metallurgical knowledge; their products (drums, jars, bells, axes...) spread across mainland and insular Southeast Asia.” (Hà Văn Tấn, 1994, p.356).

The Sea God thus used his wisdom and power to safeguard the peace of the ocean, the activities of merchant fleets, and the livelihood of fishing communities dependent upon the sea, venturing offshore and into deep waters. In this sense, *Lạc Long Quân was indeed the first Sea Deity in the consciousness of the ancient Việt people*. Not only did he aid the people in eliminating sea bandits and human marauders, but Lạc Long Quân also “taught the people how to cultivate rice, weave clothing, and thereby introduced for the first time the hierarchical order of ruler and subject, as well as the ethical relations of father and child, husband and wife, in accordance with proper norms” (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.381). As Yamamoto Tatsuro observed: “Lạc Long Quân was depicted as a figure endowed with supernatural powers, not only performing miraculous deeds but also being the first to teach the people to plant rice, raise silkworms, and observe the fundamental principles of social relations between rulers and the ruled, filial piety between fathers and children, and conjugal duties between husband and wife. Moreover, legend relates that from this time, the Việt people first came to know the concepts of ‘Father’ and ‘Chief’.” (Yamamoto Tatsuro, 1970, p.82). All these elements collectively shaped the sacred essence of Thủy Tổ (the Ancestral Forebears), the primal figures who *established the nation, its communities, and the early Việt civilization*.

Âu Cơ (Fairy) and Lạc Long Quân (Dragon) were not only the Progenitors but also the Founding Ancestors of crafts, transmitting to their descendants the earliest and most fundamental occupations. According to *LNCQ*: “At the dawn of the nation, when food and utensils were insufficient, the people had to use tree bark to make clothing, weave bamboo for mats; use mộc ô to brew liquor, use flour from *arenga pinnata* (quang lang) and *diospyros vaccinioides* Lindl (tung lư) to cook rice; use wild animals and fish for making fish sauce; ginger roots for salt; clear

fields and uplands to obtain much sticky rice, which was then steamed in bamboo tubes. They cut down mountain trees to build houses to avoid being harmed by tigers and wolves. They trimmed their hair short to facilitate going into the forest. When giving birth, they laid banana leaves for the infant to rest upon. When someone died, they pounded the mortar as a signal so that neighbors, hearing it, could come to help.” (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, pp.387-388). These Founders not only taught the people: agricultural cultivation; house construction (as dwellings); silkworm rearing and weaving; salt production-but also imparted ways of living, interacting with the natural world, and practicing many essential, fundamental crafts.

According to legend, the land pioneered by Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ was a region rich in resources. On this southern expanse, the scenery was ever beautiful and bathed in sunlight. There existed many “wondrous flowers and strange grasses, rare animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, tortoises, as well as gold, silver, precious gems, cinnamon, aloeswood, eucalyptus, frankincense, etc. - marvels of the South” (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.382). The myths further recount: “When men and women took each other in marriage, first they used a packet of salt as the rite, afterwards slaughtered buffaloes and goats to seal their union. Glutinous rice was used as the nuptial meal, and only after eating together did they consummate the marriage. At that time, betel and areca had not yet appeared. The hundred sons were the very progenitors of the Bách Việt people.” (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.388). This divine figure was able to safeguard merchants as well as maritime exploitation and trade. Later, the descendants of Lạc Long Quân - namely, the Hùng kings - not only transmitted to fishermen the knowledge of seafaring but also instructed them in the practice of tattooing with indigo ink to ward off Giao Long when venturing out to sea. Seeing the tattooed figures, Giao Long mistook them for aquatic beings and dared not attack. Not only coastal dwellers, but even those in mountainous regions engaged in fishing often suffered from the Giao Long. It is said that the Hùng kings taught them: “Use ink to tattoo images of sea creatures and monsters across the body; when the *thuồng luồng* see this, they will not bite; thus the people rejoiced. The tattooing custom of the Bách Việt truly began from then.” (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.387). Many customs from that age retain transhistorical value and continue to live within the people.

According to myth, the mountain god Sơn Tinh also comprehended profoundly the powers of nature, and it was this Lord of Tản Viên mountain who domesticated rare animals such as the nine-tusked elephant, the nine-spurred cock, and the nine-mane horse, to present as tribute to the Hùng king. Similarly, Thủy Tinh commanded the maritime world. The god of the ocean also possessed rich knowledge of the power of water, of tidal systems, and the characteristics of aquatic species. Within this complex of culture and national ethos, processes of social development and stratification unfolded. The legend of Chử Đồng Tử (commoner, associated

with *Water*) and Tiên Dung (princess, nobility, associated with *High Mountain*) also bequeathed to later generations profound messages concerning the diverse currents of economy and Vietnamese cultural traditions.

Inheriting the benevolence of Mother Âu Cơ and Father King Lạc Long, who had taught the people the craft of trade - both domestic and foreign, that is, “external economy.” Mythic tradition records: from the establishment of marketplaces and river trade (internal circulation), a successful merchant couple - possessing an inherent commercial aptitude - gathered capital and, following the advice of foreign traders, resolved to venture onto the high seas, engaging in long-distance maritime commerce. They sailed southward and undoubtedly came into contact with Indian and Champa civilizations. Similarly, the legend of Mai An Tiêm also bears strong outward-looking, international traits, reflecting distinctive anthropological and psychological dispositions. Exiled to a distant island, Mai An Tiêm and his wife were favored by the Divine Bird (symbol of the *Sun*, of *Yang*, of *Heavenly Mandate*), which bestowed upon them watermelons (Tây qua)<sup>3</sup>. This rare and wondrous produce from the maritime economic sphere not only saved the couple, whose resilience and determination were remarkable, but also became the source of their wealth. More importantly, such extraordinary produce reconnected the couple with the mainland, the political system, and the life of the royal court. These narratives conclude with auspicious endings imbued with Buddhist spirit.

Certainly, along with seafood (fish, shrimp, etc.), among the rich bounty of the sea was also salt. From the very beginning, *salt has always been a precious resource, indispensable to social life*. For centuries afterward, salt remained rare and valuable, especially for communities far from the sea or high in the mountains. The custom of using salt in betrothal rites represents a sea-oriented belief, a gesture of gratitude toward the *God of Sea* in Vietnamese tradition. Salt is the very fragrance of the sea, crystallized upon the earth (along the coasts), symbolizing benevolence, humanity, and the profound bonds of human affection. Salt is also a distinctive product of tropical salt-making communities (Southeast Asia), exceedingly rare and necessary for upland populations or temperate countries unable to boil or sun-dry salt. It should also be noted that, besides salt, many of the resources known to the people in the founding era originated from the sea.

Situated at the intersection of *geo-economic* regions and at the boundary between tropical and temperate ecosystems, Vietnam “became the meeting place of many plant flows-from South

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<sup>3</sup> Watermelon, called Baticha in Arabic and Pastèque in French, certainly originates from West Asia. The story of the “bird flying and dropping seeds” evokes reflections on the imagery of sails on seafaring vessels, which once played a vital role in connecting the Vietnamese communities with the bearers of Southeast Asian and West Asian economies and cultures from the early centuries of the Common Era.

China, from India, from Malaysia and Indonesia. This factor contributed to increasing the diversity of our country's biological world" (Phan Huy Lê, 1988, p.493). This explains why, from ancient times, dynasties of the North paid close attention to southern resources and implemented numerous measures to exploit and appropriate such abundant wealth<sup>4</sup> (Lý Tế Xuyên, 2012, p.125; Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2014, pp.32-44).

These economic, cultural, and ethnic intertwinings must indeed mark the imprints of "exogenous" cultural and civilizational elements arriving from India, West Asia, or Cham and Austronesian cultures. These cultural currents quickly penetrated, merged, and soon became integral components of Vietnamese culture. All four myths feature *Couples* (Male - Female, Yin - Yang) and *Other figures* (influential agents creating conflicts and resolutions within the mythic narrative). Each of these myths also contains a *major relational* theme in the cultural genesis of Vietnam: *the interaction between Land and Sea*. Many of these figures, upon completing their "historical missions" - such as Mother Âu Cơ, the couple Chử Đồng Tử - Tiên Dung (and even Saint Gióng) - serenely departed to Heaven (the celestial realm), to the world of Immortals (Daoist cosmology).

## 6. Remarks and conclusion

Myths and legends are an integral component of cultural tradition, deeply tied to national beliefs and collective consciousness. "Within the corpus of Vietnamese myths and legends, female deities are often associated with the creation of cosmic being, such as the Sun Goddess, the Moon Goddess, Lady Nữ Oa together with Lord Tứ Tượng who propped up stones, patched the sky, heaped mountains, and carved rivers... Even the symbols of homeland and nation are bound to the Mothers (Mẫu): Mother Âu Cơ of the Lạc Việt, Mother of the land Pô Inur Nugar of the Chăm. The Mothers generated cultural values: Mother of Rice, Mother of Sugarcane, Mother of Fire; the Mothers as progenitors of crafts: weaving, sericulture, salt-making, carpentry, cake-making, performing arts, and so forth" (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2004, p.24). And, as observed: "The Ancestral Land, with its shrines and mausoleums of the Hùng kings on the slope of Mount Nghĩa, bears the same significance. The Immortal Mother Âu and Dragon Father Lạc are the mythic ancestral couple of the Vietnamese people. Yet the union of the Âu Việt of hill-valley regions and the Lạc Việt of riverine, mountainous, and maritime spaces into Âu Lạc was historical reality" (Trần Quốc Vượng, 1996, p.14).

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<sup>4</sup> During the period of Northern Domination, whenever Sĩ Nhiếp "sent envoys to the Wu kingdom, he would present aromatic spices and fine textiles, numbering in the thousands, as well as pearls, tortoiseshell, crystal, feathers, elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, exotic flowers and plants, bananas, coconuts, and longans. Not a year passed without envoys being sent to Wu. On one occasion, he even offered several hundred horses as tribute."



Although imbued with mystical hues, myths and legends also contain historical cores and authentic values. Studying historical legends-while integrating and comparing them with archaeological data, historical-cultural relics, and documentary sources - allows a deeper understanding of the consciousness, as well as the social and cultural characteristics, of Vietnam during its founding era. From a multidimensional and comparative perspective, one may discern the diversity and multi-linear flows of Vietnamese history and culture; the openness of interrelations; and the horizontally and vertically linked, multi-layered value chains of many co-existing ethnic groups inhabiting a shared socio-cultural space. Such enduring cultural encounters and interactions forged the character and resilience of the nation. Across millennia, the Vietnamese in the South not only successfully organized wars of resistance to safeguard national independence but also continually enriched their store of knowledge and cultural values in the building and development of the country. Importantly, the Hùng kings were the first rulers to establish the early states of Văn Lang and Âu Lạc (Phạm Huy Thông, 1975, pp.63-72, 76).

Within this historical-cultural landscape, in the resounding echoes of the bronze drum, in every rhythmic pounding of rice pestles, in each shuttle of the loom; in every ancient life-cycle ritual, every folk song, and every lullaby of the Mother - there lies the affirmation of the southern lineage of an ethnic community abundant in resources and cultural reserves. Alongside this, the early development of a vast cultural space and *the emergence of the states of Văn Lang and Âu Lạc,... held special significance in forming fundamental notions of origin, awareness of sovereignty, and the distinctive cultural identity and independent living space of the Vietnamese* (Nguyễn Văn Kim 2021, 38). This explains why, despite the severe challenges of history, national spirit and cultural identity endured, a spirit that flared forth in the tenth century and in centuries thereafter (\*).

(\*) **Note:** This article has been revised and supplemented following participation in the International Workshop: “*Lĩnh Nam chí quái: A Multidimensional Perspective*”, held on December 08, 2024, at Thang Long University.

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