

A mythographical journey to modernity: The textual and symbolic transformations of the Hùng Kings founding myths

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This paper analyses the textual-mythographical transformation of Viet origin myths from their transcription in the distant past through their exploitation for political purposes in the 1950s by scholarly elites. It attempts to demonstrate that, as early as the fifteenth century, stories about the Hùng Kings were deliberately collected and codified by members of the Việt elite, who sought to exploit their potential as catalysts of identify-formation and unification under the leadership of the imperial state. However, as a result of the confluence of two currents, that of the monarchical state's mythographical construction and that of popular, village-based, animistic worship, the Hùng Kings came to be venerated as ancestral founders of the Việt quốc in temples throughout the Red River Delta and beyond. During the French colonial and early national periods, the codified myths were the object of severe criticism and strident defence by both French and Viet scholars.

The Vietnamese or rather the *Kinh* (ethnic Việt) have a founding myth, the 'Story of the Dragon Lord and Lady Âu Cơ' (*Truyện Lạc Long Quân và Bà Âu Cơ*) also known as the 'Story of the one hundred eggs' (*Truyện Một Trăm Trứng*). Linked to that founding myth is a cycle of stories relating the deeds of their direct descendants, the eighteen Hùng Kings, considered as 'civilising heroes' as they settled the Southern land, battled invaders, and taught their people customs.¹ In this article, I refer to this body of myths as the 'Hùng Kings Epic', the earliest *textual* appearances of which can be found in the 1329 collection, *Việt điện u linh tập* (Collected stories of the potent spirits of the Việt realm), and in the fourteenth–fifteenth century *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (*LNCQ*; Wonders gathered from Linh Nam).² These two collections represent

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1 'Southern' was often used by pre-modern Việt authors to refer to their land in contrast to that of their 'Northern' neighbour, China.

2 This paper uses translations in *quốc ngữ* of works that were composed in Sino-Vietnamese or *Nôm* and translated by contemporary scholars of Vietnam.

the first extant attempt of a Việt euhemeristic process. A second stage would occur in the late fifteenth century with its official integration into Đại Việt historiography, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (TT; The complete historical records of the Great Viet), commissioned under the Later Lê dynasty. Thence, their textual appearances became more pronounced as the ‘ornithomorphous hierogamy’ mythologem seeped into Việt culture, and the Hùng Kings were deified and worshipped in hundreds of temples throughout the Red River Delta.³

Nowadays the Hùng Kings Epic motif, festivals, and temples have become an intrinsic part of Việt culture. The tales of the Dragon Lord, the Immortal Lady, and the Hùng Kings have turned into mythologems inseparable from the birth-of-the-Việt-nation historical narrative. Every year, a national ritual takes place at Tết, the Lunar New Year, and more importantly, at the *Giỗ Tổ* (Founder’s Anniversary) on the Tenth of the Third Lunar Month. Leading government figures make obligatory pilgrimages to the Hùng Kings temple in Phú Thọ province to honour the *Quốc Tổ* (National Founder). Whence did it all begin?⁴

This study retraces the mythographical journey through time of the Hùng Kings Epic, and its progressive euhemeristic textual transformation and integration into the national discourse from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, on the eve of the First Indochina War (1946–54). It will show how, through pre-modern and modern times, mythology and historiography have contributed to an evolving elaboration of the Việt identity as conceived by its literati elite, but also in response to the deep spiritual needs of a people conditioned by animistic traditions. It will demonstrate how *mythical* ideas had a life-force of their own — regardless of historical exactitude — by retracing the roots of the phenomenon centuries earlier and positing it within the framework of scholarly formulations of a pre-modern nationalistic sentiment. It will equally uncover the scholarly contestation undergirding this ancient historiographic reflection that attempted to elaborate a more ‘Confucian-orthodox’, de-mythified nationalistic narrative. France’s twentieth-century cultural and political intervention in Việt Nam would exacerbate this debate by questioning the historicity of a Việt national past through a Cartesian demonstration of their colonised subjects’ lack of antiquity. With independence and reunification, this mythographical and textual journey would solidify and be intrinsically woven into Việt Nam’s national fabric.

3 Anne Birrell, *Chinese mythology: An introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 113. The expression ‘ornithomorphous hierogamy’ has been applied by Birrell to refer to the ‘sacred marriage’ between divine, mythical bird-origin/shaped ‘founders of the Shang and Ch’in people’ that may or may not result in a sacred egg from which emerged the ancestors of the Chinese.

4 Recently, the Hùng Kings Epic inspired a parallel project by Liam Kelley, who views this phenomenon from the perspective of Chinese sources. Tạ Chí Đại Trùng and Keith Taylor contribute to the debate. Liam C. Kelley, ‘The biography of the Hồng Bàng clan as a medieval Vietnamese invented tradition’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 7, 2 (2012): 87–130. See also Eric Henry, ‘Chinese and indigenous influences in Vietnamese verse romances of the 19th Century’, *Crossroads*, 15, 2 (2001): 1–40. Henry analyses the Hùng Kings Epic from a literary and gender angle, noting that even though ‘some tales have at least a functional resemblance to tales of Chinese culture heroes . . . or of the supernatural . . . yet the Vietnamese tales also show striking and consistent differences’. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Euhemerisation and semantics

Euhemerism is a Hellenistically-influenced approach inspired by and derived from the work of the fourth century BCE Greek scholar Euhemerus of Messene who rationalised the question of religious worship, myth, and history. The surviving fragments of his work *Sacred scripture* explains that Greek gods such as Zeus or Uranus had been actual kings, heroes who, because of their beneficial rule, were worshipped after death by their grateful subjects.⁵ One may derive from this approach the conclusion that myth is based in history and that mythical phenomena were actual historical events. In the following centuries, euhemerism served different purposes, depending on whether its users were Christian apologists deriding paganism or modern anthropologists researching religion. Euhemerism seems to be a logical analytical framework for examining mythographical questions, but one has to ask, especially in light of Việt mythography's Sinitic connotations, which euhemerism — that of Greek origin, or that which is linked to Vietnam's pre-modern inspiration, the Chinese model?

In 1924, Sinologist Henri Maspéro was among others who criticised ancient Chinese scholars for using euhemerism as their sole method of interpreting myths, melting them into 'a colorless residue, in which gods and heroes are transformed into wise emperors and sage ministers, and monsters into rebellious princes'.⁶ In 1918 Maspéro had published his study on the kingdom of Văn Lang, which was to serve as a catalyst for modern debates regarding Việt Nam's founding myths. Following in his path, sinologist Derk Bodde in his 1961 'Myths of ancient China', commented that in Chinese mythology, euhemerisation was 'a problem' because it was 'the opposite process: the transformation of what were once myths and gods into seemingly authentic history and human beings'.⁷ He blamed the Confucianists who, being historically minded, conserved but also edited ancient texts to fit their own framework and thus removed supernatural matters or explained them in 'purely rationalistic terms'.⁸ Later generations of sinologists reached the same conclusions, although William Boltz in his discussion of the mythical hero Kung Kung uses the term 'reverse euhemerisation' to refer to the process of transforming myths into history.⁹

What then of the Vietnamese Hùng Kings Epic? Which euhemerisation process did Viet scholars adopt, and for what purposes?

The mythopoeic premises

Within the framework of this particular mythography, I follow Bodde's definition of 'founding myth' as a story or stories that relate the deeds of 'the culture hero who

5 See Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and fabula: Myths and legends in historical thought from antiquity to the modern age* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Truesdell S. Brown, 'Euhemerus and the historians', *Harvard Theological Review*, 39, 4 (1946): 259–74; Franco De Angelis and Benjamin Garstad, 'Euhemerus in context', *Classical Antiquity*, 25, 2 (2006): 211–42.

6 Henri Maspéro, 'Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou King*', *Journal Asiatique*, 204 (1924): 1–2.

7 Derk Bodde, 'Myths of ancient China', in *Mythologies of the ancient world*, ed. Samuel Noah Kramer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 372.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 375.

9 William G. Boltz, 'Kung Kung and the flood: Reverse euhemerism in the "Yao tien"', *T'oung Pao*, 67, 5 (1981): 141, 152.

enjoys supernatural birth, is sometimes aided by protective animals, becomes a sage ruler or otherwise performs great deeds for mankind, and so on', as it seems to fit the Việt case.¹⁰ The origin or founding myth of Vietnam is 'Truyện Hồng Bàng' (The tale of Hong Bang), which appeared in *LNCQ*.¹¹ According to the tale, King Kinh Dương, who belonged to the bloodline of the Northern Thần Nông (in Chinese Shen Nung, or the Divine Farmer) on his paternal side, and to the Immortals on his maternal side, ruled over the Southern realm named *Xích Quỷ Quốc* (The Red-haired Devils' Realm).¹² During a journey to the Water Realm, Kinh Dương married a Dragon Spirit, who gave birth to one son, Sùng Lãm, also known as Lạc Long Quân (Dragon Lord of the Lạc).¹³ The Dragon Lord devised rules of behaviour among his subjects, and whenever they needed him, they called on their *Bố* (father). The Dragon Lord met Âu Cơ, an Immortal from the Mountainous Realm, and was smitten by her beauty.¹⁴ Their union produced a pouch of one hundred eggs whence one hundred sons emerged. Not needing any sustenance, they grew to manhood, born leaders shining with intelligence and bravery. Nevertheless, the union was not to last, and after one year, they parted, the father taking fifty sons to the Southern Sea and the mother fifty to the land at Phong Châu in the Red River Delta.¹⁵ Of the fifty who followed their mother, the eldest and bravest took the title of Hùng Vương (King Hùng or Valorous King),¹⁶ founder of the Hồng Bàng dynasty. The eighteen ensuing kings

10 Bodde, 'Myths of ancient China', p. 370.

11 There are between nine to eleven *truyền bản* (transmitted versions) of *LNCQ*, each including at least twenty-two stories compiled over centuries by a number of authors. The *LNCQ* was translated by both Hanoi and Saigon scholars separately, in multiple annotated versions, differing from each other in the version used, its interpretation, and translated terms. I refer to both the 1961 and the 2011 versions. Trần Thế Pháp, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, ed. and trans. Lê Hữu Mục (henceforth *LNCQ 1961*) (Portland, Or.: Trăm Việt, 1982); Trần Thế Pháp et al., *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (henceforth *LNCQ 2011*) (Hanoi: Hồng Bàng, 2011) See also Keith W. Taylor, *The birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 349–59.

12 In Chinese mythology, Shen Nung was one of the three major legendary heroes, a god of farming and medicine, the inventor of the plow and agriculture. By linking the Việt Hồng Bàng line with that of the Chinese Shen Nung, the Việt myth and its hero, Lạc Long Quân, acquired a genealogy as ancient as, if not older than, that of its Chinese counterpart. M. Kaltenmark, 'Mythical rulers in China', in *Asian mythologies*, compiled by Yves Bonnefoy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 244–6.

13 *LNCQ 1961*, p. 43.

14 Lady Âu Cơ is an Immortal, that is, a fairy. Fairies symbolise a bird goddess common to South and Southeast Asian mythologies. In this tale, the mother of the Việt is believed to be a bird goddess, a motif omnipresent in Việt culture. Phan Đăng Nhật, 'Chứng tích văn hóa dân gian về cội nguồn dân tộc: Những yếu tố trùng hợp giữa sử Thi-Mo và sách *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*' [Folk cultural remnants and the question of national origins: Similarities between Mo epic and the *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* [Historical Studies], 3 (1981): 43.

15 In the village of Hỷ Cường, Phong Châu district, Phú Thọ province, there is an ancient Hùng Kings temple complex on Nghĩa Lĩnh Mountain (a.k.a. Hùng Mountain), which includes a Lower Temple dedicated to the worship of Lady Âu Cơ and the Hùng Kings' daughters; a Middle Temple to that of the Hùng Kings-related figures and Lạc nobility; and an Upper Temple to that of the Hùng Kings and their struggle against invaders (*Truyện Đổng Thiên Vương*). Lê Trung Vũ et al., *Lễ hội Việt Nam* [Vietnamese Festivals] (Hanoi: Văn Hóa và Thông Tin, 2005), pp. 328–9; Đỗ Trọng Huề, 'Đi Tìm Dấu Vết Hùng Vương' [In search of Hùng Kings' traces], Phủ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ Việt Nam Cộng Hòa [Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam], File 29277, dated 18/04/1964, VTX 4788: 14. Vietnam National Archives II, Ho Chi Minh City.

16 *Hùng* is a word common to Southeast Asian ethnic groups and indicates a leader, a chief, or clan head noted for bravery. Phan, 'Chứng tích văn hóa', p. 44; Vietnamese historians theorise that '*Hùng*

bore the same reign title; the *quốc hiệu* (realm's name) was Văn Lang,¹⁷ with its capital at Phong Châu. The *quốc dân* (realm's people) over which they ruled were known as the *Bách Việt* (One hundred Việt), noted for their custom of tattooing as taught by their Dragon Lord-Father to ward off crocodiles and other aquatic creatures. The ensuing tales retrace the evolution of the kingdom of Văn Lang as it defended itself against invasions.

The struggle pitting the Hùng kings against their attackers — the shift between what Việt historiography considered as 'inherently Việt' and what is 'exogenous' to it — is embodied in *Truyện Kim Qui* (Tale of the Golden Tortoise), also from the *LNCQ*. This is a fundamental tale, closely tied to events pertaining to the founding of what was believed to be a Việt state, as recorded in Chinese and Việt historiographies. This is a contested narrative which has undermined the very nature and claim of Việt historical identity because of the origins of its two main figures, King An Dương, and Triệu Đà (known in Chinese as Zhao Tuo, 203–137 BCE), and the ethno-national identification of the political entities that they supposedly created. In a single narrative, the story recounts the rise and fall of three polities assumed by most Việt scholars as *Việt* precursor states, constituted before the advent of Han domination in 111 BCE. They were Văn Lang, Âu Lạc, and Nam Việt, founded respectively by the Hùng kings, King An Dương, and Triệu Đà. Việt official historiographies such as the *TT* traditionally ascribed the following dates for their emergence and downfall: 2878–256 BCE, 257–208 BCE, and 207–111 BCE, respectively.¹⁸ Historiographically, Nam Việt was considered as the last independent *Việt* state before it succumbed to the Han armies in 111 BCE under general Lu Bode.¹⁹

It is said that Thục Phán, also known as King An Dương, spurned by the Hùng King's daughter, Mỵ Nương, destroyed the kingdom of Văn Lang founded by the Hùng Kings. He incorporated it into his own kingdom, Âu Lạc. King An Dương then constructed and defended the citadel of Cổ Loa or Loa Thành (Snail Citadel), helped by Thần Kim Qui or the Golden Tortoise Spirit, who gave the king a magical claw. When used as a trigger to the crossbow, it allowed the king to defend Cổ Loa against invaders led by the Han Chinese general, Triệu Đà, by unleashing tens of

Vương was a title given to the tribal leader of the Văn Lang tribe, one of the most powerful tribes in the Red River Delta. Phan Huy Lê et al., ed., *Lịch Sử Việt Nam: Thời Kỳ Nguyên Thủy Đến Thế Kỷ X* [History of Vietnam: From prehistory to 10th c.] (Hanoi: Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, 1985), vol. I, pp. 104–5. Tạ Chí Đại Trường hypothesised that *Hùng* was the name given to the ruler of the native population in the colony of Giao Châu, whereas 'Lạc' referred to an ethnic group. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người và đất Việt* [Spirits, humans, and Viet land] (Kệ Sách eBook Publishing Center: Smashwords ed., 2011), p. 72. Others argue that 'Lạc' connotes a bird similar to a crane or goose, a motif found on the Đông Sơn bronze drums and pediform axes. Đào Duy Anh, *Cổ sử Việt Nam* [Vietnamese ancient history] (Hanoi: Tập San Đại Học Sư Phạm, 1956), p. 53.

¹⁷ *Văn Lang* appears to be the transliteration via Chinese characters of an ancient Austro-asiatic word, *Vlang* or *Blang*, which designates a large wading bird, possibly a totemic animal worshipped by the Hùng kings. The name of *Hồng* in *Hồng Bàng* also refers to a wading bird. Nguyễn Phúc Long, *Les nouvelles recherches archéologiques au Vietnam* (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1975), pp. 17–18.

¹⁸ Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete historical records of Great Viet], ed. and trans. Viện Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam (henceforth Ngô and Viện, *TT*) (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1998), vol. I, p. 107.

¹⁹ Sima Qian and Burton Watson, *Records of the grand historian: Han dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), vol. II, pp. 215, 222–3.

thousands of arrows. The general, although heading a large army, was repeatedly repulsed. An Dương's daughter, My Châu, married to Trọng Thủy, Triệu Đà's son, unwittingly contributed to An Dương's defeat when she revealed the secret of the citadel's impregnability. Trọng Thủy stole the magical claw, replacing it with an ordinary one. Tragic events ensued: the citadel's downfall and the king's headlong escape to the sea from which he was saved by the Golden Tortoise, but only after having slain his daughter when informed of her betrayal; and Trọng Thủy's suicide by jumping into the well upon learning of his wife's fate.²⁰

Triệu Đà seized Âu Lạc kingdom, founding in its stead the kingdom of Nam Việt in 207 BCE, an event recorded in Han Chinese texts such as the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records) by Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE): 'By the time the Qin dynasty fell, Zhao Tuo had attacked and brought under his command the provinces of Guilin and Xiang as well and had set himself up as King Wu of Southern Yue.'²¹ Việt historiographies such as the 1377 *Đại Việt Sử Lược* (Great Việt Historical Annals; anonymous), often referred to as *Việt Sử Lược*, and the *TT* mention it briefly.²² Yet this tale narrates an essential historical episode pertaining to the founding of the precursors of a constituted Việt state; as such, it poses perplexing questions, one of which concerns the nature of the Việt *Quốc* — was it a kingdom, realm, polity, or nation?

The Việt euhemeristic transformation

Unlike the diverse creation mythologies of their highland counterparts such as the Muong, Jarai, etc., there is no true cosmogony in Việt mythology. Lê Oc Mach argued that

The accounts [were] written mainly in Chinese by Việt scholars . . . [who,] imbued with Confucian biases, exercised great selectivity. . . . Uninterested in creationist theories, they avoided the question of the origins of mankind as a species They pay particular attention to extraordinary men who were deified at the time of their deaths because of their deeds. They do, however, include the miraculous birth of the Việt people, descended from a sovereign couple of mythical origins, and they thus euhemerise mythic themes.²³

This apparent disinterest in creation myths was also reflected amongst the populace, explained partly by relentless invasions, which 'led at least to the partial destruction of the Việt cults and the substitution of Chinese deities'.²⁴ Lacking a primordial cosmogonic tradition, Việt mythology nevertheless abounds in euhemerised tales. Those of the Dragon-Hùng King and Golden Tortoise have survived in transcribed Việt versions in the 1329 *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*'s collection of legends and biographies of heroes and founding spirits compiled by Lý Tế Xuyên, but which includes only one

20 LNCQ 1961, pp. 70–74. See Philippe Papin, *Histoire de Hanoi* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), pp. 19–25. Papin provides an anthropological layer to the Hùng Kings Epic, tying together natural elements and belief systems.

21 Sima and Watson, *Records of the grand historian*, vol. II, p. 208.

22 *Việt Sử lược*, trans. and ed. Trần Quốc Vượng (Hanoi: Thuận Hóa, 2005), p. 20; Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 141.

23 Lê Oc Mach, 'Vietnamese mythology', in *Asian mythologies*, comp. by Bonnefoy, p. 221.

24 *Ibid.*

related to *Hùng Vương*, the ‘Tale of the Mountain Spirit and Water Spirit’. Tạ Chí Đại Trường observed that in this earliest Việt reference, the Hùng king was a mere ruler not even endorsed by the Trần when they first began spirit promulgation in 1285. Thus, ‘until the end of the thirteenth century, the legend of *Hùng Vương* had not blossomed or at least, had not developed yet in Đại Việt.’²⁵ He notes, however, that before the 1407 Ming occupation, there was a deeply-rooted local practice of the worship of Lạc kings that would evolve into the Hùng Kings’ mythic tradition. It stands to reason that Confucian scholars seeking to add an origin-founder component to their monarchical-construction ideology euhemerised the Hùng Kings tradition.

The *LNCQ* was compiled by Trần Thế Pháp²⁶ under the late-fourteenth-century Trần dynasty, and amended in the fifteenth century under the Lê dynasty by Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, other scholars continued to add stories to the collection. Ethnologist Đinh Gia Khánh considers the *LNCQ* a collection of myths and legends compiled by successive authors.²⁷ The compilers relied on the works of their predecessors who, throughout the Lý, Trần, and Lê dynasties, had gathered tales that had circulated in the population for centuries, but whose names they no longer knew or had forgotten. Vũ Quỳnh wrote, ‘these were stories that had not been inscribed in stone or incised into wooden blocks,’ but ‘transmitted orally from one generation to another.’²⁸ The compiler-editors did not hesitate to compare the *LNCQ* to the best of contemporaneous Northern works, noting that the Southern land ‘had magnificent mountains and rivers, magical lands, heroic people, and marvelous legends.’²⁹ The introductions, reflected through the prism of Confucianism, with Buddhist and Daoist influences in the background, manifest pride in the Southern land and its peoples.³⁰ Kiều Phú, the other contemporary editor, considered the ‘One hundred eggs giving birth to one hundred boys’ story the equal of the Northern myth of the black bird sent by Heaven to give birth to the Shang dynasty.³¹

Some of these tales show external influences, especially borrowings from Chinese literature. For instance, in *Kiến văn tiểu lục* (A small record of things seen and heard),

25 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, p. 72. Emphasis in the original.

26 Although Trần Thế Pháp’s authorship has been questioned, he is mentioned in pre-modern texts such as Lê Quý Đôn’s *Kiến văn tiểu lục* [A small record of things seen and heard], which described him as a scholar of the late fourteenth century c. Trần dynasty and a native of Hà Tây province. Emile Gaspardone, ‘Légendes, confucéisme, bouddhisme, traités divers’, *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)*, IV (1934): 128–9; http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/befeo_0336-1519_1934_num_34_1_4964 (last accessed 15 Feb. 2013); Đinh Gia Khánh and Nguyễn Ngọc San, ‘Lời Giới Thiệu’, in *LNCQ 2011*, pp. 9–10. However, his name was not mentioned in the prefaces written by *LNCQ*’s 1492–93 editor-contributors, Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú.

27 *LNCQ 2011*, pp. 9–10. The translation from Sino-Vietnamese into *quốc ngữ* used here is derived from the version (A33) dated 1695, comprising twenty-two tales compiled and edited in chronological order by Trần Thế Pháp, Vũ Quỳnh, and Kiều Phú.

28 Vũ Quỳnh, ‘Tựa Liệt Truyện Linh Nam Chích Quái’ [Title of the Compendium of wondrous tales gathered from Linh Nam], in *LNCQ 1961*, p. 38.

29 *Ibid.*, 37.

30 Đinh Gia Khánh, Chu Xuân Diên, and Võ Quang Nhơn, *Văn học dân gian Việt Nam* [Viet folk literature] (Hanoi: Giáo Dục, 2001), p. 53.

31 Kiều Phú, ‘Hậu Tự,’ in *Tác phẩm được tặng giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh: Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm* [Works awarded the Ho Chi Minh Prize: Understanding the treasury of Han-Nom works] (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2003), p. 1113.

Lê Quý Đôn (1726–84) observed that the LNCQ adapted stories from the Song-era *Tài Quý Ký* by Trương Quân Phong and from the Yuan-era *Nam Hải Cổ Tích Ký* by Ngô Lai.³² The 1329 *Việt Điện u linh tập* used Chinese sources such as the *Giao Châu Ký* by Triệu Công, the ninth-century Tang dynasty governor of Annam. Among the oldest surviving texts, these two collections of stories have spawned innumerable versions that appeared in Việt imperial annals, historiographies, temple steles, and in folktales. In the ensuing centuries, more Confucian-infused scholars, such as the sixteenth-century Nguyễn Dữ — author of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (Scattered annotations of marvellous stories) — integrated mythography as an inseparable part of their heritage, using myths and folktales to reflect on the society of their time.³³

A textual euhemeristic journey from myth to historiography

With the advent of Việt historiography called *chính sử* (official history) in the thirteenth century (under the Trần dynasty, if not earlier), mythological figures and events related to the Hùng Kings Epic began to emerge in texts at the end of the fourteenth century before becoming fully integrated in the fifteenth century into the official historiography. Their historiographical emergence and integration coincided with cataclysmic events, notably three devastating invasions: by the Mongols in the thirteenth century (Trần dynasty), the Cham in the fourteenth century, and the Ming in the fifteenth century (Later Lê).

John K. Whitmore explains that by the 1330s, Emperor Trần Minh Tông, ‘turning away from Thien Buddhism’, invited Confucian scholars, including the great educator, Chu Văn An, to the capital.³⁴ Chu Văn An’s teaching ‘seems to have . . . emphasised the classical belief of China, its antiquity’, and by his students’ (Lê Quát and Phạm Sư Mạnh) generation, ‘there was also the change from Chinese antiquity to the formulation of one in Dai Viet, called Van-lang’.³⁵ Citing Wolters, Whitmore affirmed that it was these scholars who contributed to the mythic creation of a ‘Vietnamese Antiquity’ and of ‘Văn Lang’ within this chaotic historical phase of ‘constant invasions by Champa’ of the end of the fourteenth century and a dynastic change with the rise of Lê/Hồ Quý Ly.³⁶

32 Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, ed. and trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm and Viện Sử Học (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2007), pp. 196–7; Emile Gaspardone, *Bibliographie annamite* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extreme-Orient, 1935), p. 129.

33 Nguyễn Từ Chi, *Góp phần nghiên cứu văn hóa và tộc người* [Contribution to the study of culture and ethnic groups] (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Dân Tộc: Tạp Chí Văn Hóa Nghệ Thuật, 2003), p. 217.

34 John K. Whitmore, ‘Religion and ritual in the royal courts of Dai Viet’, Working Paper 128, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2009, pp. 10–11. Chu Văn An (1292–1370), a native of Sơn Nam, was famous for his rectitude and incorruptibility and for having taught thousands of students, many of whom became great scholars, among them Phạm Sư Mạnh. John K. Whitmore, ‘Chu Văn An and the rise of “antiquity” in fourteenth century Dai Viet’, *Vietnam Review*, 1 (1996): 56–7.

35 Whitmore, ‘Religion and ritual’, p. 10.

36 Based on a poem by Phạm Sư Mạnh, Wolters speculates that ‘Van-lang, originally an obscure toponym in two early Chinese records about northwestern Vietnam, is seized on as a nostalgic metaphor for what was assumed to be a traditionally disciplined Vietnamese society.’ O.W. Wolters, ‘On telling a story of Vietnam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (1995): 70–71.

Later, under Ming occupation, because of Emperor Yongle's instructions that, 'all written and printed materials within An-nan are to be burnt . . . [including] anything that promotes Vietnamese rites and customs', cultural memories and artefacts became scarcer.³⁷ Each wave of destruction stimulated a stronger affirmation of Việt identity through the imperial promulgation of Supernatural Beings (*thần*), their mythical feats and millennial semi-divine lineage, and in the validation of their existence through a transformative euhemeristic process. Responding to invasions, the Việt voice became stronger and clearer in its choice of founding myths. Tạ Chí Đại Trường noted that during the Lý–Trần period, due to a surge in popular beliefs, 'kings pay heed to spirits that are worshipped in the country, and Confucian scholars gather phantasmagorical stories into books'.³⁸ Southern/Việt historiography drew its inspiration from a number of (no longer extant) Việt historical works such as the *Việt Chi* (Việt notes) by Trần Phủ under Emperor Trần Thái Tông (1225–58).³⁹ Việt historical records until then did not mention the Dragon Lord and Immortal, the eighteen Hùng Kings, King An Dương, or the kingdoms of Văn Lang and Âu Lạc. The Lý and Trần are not known to have practised the worship of these mythical kings, only of such figures as the Mountain Spirit. The oldest historiography, the *Đại Việt sử ký* (Annals of Dai Viet, which is no longer extant but mentioned in later texts) compiled in 1272 by Lê Văn Hưu, court historian of Emperor Trần Thánh Tông, did not allude to the myth of the Dragon Lord and Lady Âu Cơ of the Immortals, or the eighteen Hùng Kings, but rather began with Triệu Đà in 207 BCE.⁴⁰

Two Việt sources appeared in the fourteenth century: (*Đại*) *Việt sử lược* (anonymous) compiled in 1377, and *Việt Nam thế chí* (*Annals of Viet Nam*) by Hồ Tông Thốc. Although it summarised in great part the thirteenth century–*Đại Việt sử ký* by Lê Văn Hưu, for the first time, *Đại Việt sử lược* (*Đại Việt historical annals*) (also known as *Việt sử lược* or *VSL*), featured a starkly different introduction. *VSL* stated that in the seventh century BCE, in Gia-ninh district, 'there was a strange person who used magic to gain the tribes' submission, calling himself Hùng Vương, with his capital at Văn Lang, in the kingdom named Văn Lang'.⁴¹ *VSL* also mentioned the eighteen Hùng Kings, situating the beginning of a Việt state in the seventh century BCE. Thus, according to the *VSL*, before the seventh century BCE, there were only scattered tribes who began to coalesce under a state headed by the Hùng Kings. Its eighteen kings ruled over 434 years until 258 BCE. According to Trần Quốc Vượng, this historiographic text was compiled at the end of the Trần dynasty, when Buddhist and Taoist influences remained strong, and Confucianism, although ascendant, had not yet exerted censorship on the essence of written texts. Thus,

37 Alexander Ong Eng Ann, 'Contextualising the book-burning episode during the Ming invasion and occupation of Vietnam', in *Southeast Asia in the fifteenth century: The China factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), pp. 157–8. See also Paul Pelliot and Leopold Cadiere, 'Première étude sur les sources annamites de l'histoire d'Annam', *BEFEO*, IV (1904): 619. The authors mentioned that Emperor Yongle as he issued the confiscation order in 1418–19 also decreed that Confucian and Buddhist texts be widely disseminated in Annam.

38 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, p. 16.

39 Phan Huy Lê, 'Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư: Tác giả, văn bản, tác phẩm' [The Complete historical records of Great Viet: authorships, documents, and works], in *TT*, ed. Ngô and Viện, vol. I, p. 19.

40 Gaspardone, *Bibliographie annamite*, p. 49.

41 *Việt sử lược*, p. 18.

VSL recorded numerous myths, legends, phantasmagorical stories, including those concerning ‘dragon appearances and white elephants’.⁴² However, it made no mention of the Tale of the Dragon Lord and the Immortal, the One Hundred Eggs, and other related stories; nor did it recount the Tale of the Golden Tortoise, although it briefly referred to King An Dương.

Contemporary to VSL were Hồ Tông Thốc’s works (*Việt Nam thế chí* and *Việt sử cương mục*). Gaspardone noted that, of these two, which were among the works requisitioned to China in 1418–19, the *Việt Nam thế chí* (henceforth TC) described in detail for the first time each of the Eighteen — a figure not mentioned in the LNCQ — Hồng Bàng kings.⁴³ Hồ Tông Thốc, a scholar of the late fourteenth century, during the Trần dynasty, wrote numerous works, most of which no longer exist. His TC, which recorded the history of ancient Việt rulers, survived only in the form of a ‘Preface’, and as mentioned in dynastic literature.⁴⁴ To answer his own hypothetical question as to why he did not observe the Confucian rule of expunging all extraordinary phenomena in TC, leaving only ‘normal’ ones, he replied that even in China, many phantasmatic tales had been recorded regardless of their accuracy. ‘In our Việt land . . . from the Hồng Bàng period onward, newly settled, lacking in learning and rites, if we consider the stories factual, then how do we confirm this? If we consider them fictional, then on what do we base this?’⁴⁵

Hồ Tông Thốc also emphasised the necessity, ‘when interrogating the past, of listening to tales told by elderly people’, and of utilising records found in shrines and temples. He was among the first to have made the connection between popular culture and ancient history and to exploit folktales and popular legends, integrating them into the historiographic mainstream.⁴⁶ Given his methodology, he may have been the first Việt mythographer!

Việt historiographic texts such as VSL began the official dynastic history of the Việt with Triệu Đà, de facto acknowledging a Qin general as the founder of the Việt *quốc*. This would later give rise to uneasiness amongst some intellectuals regarding the ‘Việt-ness’, independence, and uniqueness of a *quốc* founded by a Northern invader.

In the fifteenth century, after two decades of Ming occupation, Việt scholars initiated the task of reconstructing the national past based on salvaged texts and imperially ordered transcription of existing folk tales. Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), the scholar-statesman who had aided Lê Lợi (1385–1433) to defeat the Ming in 1428 and to found the Later Lê dynasty (1428–1788), integrated folk sayings — using

42 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

43 Gaspardone, *Bibliographie annamite*, p. 50.

44 Esta S. Ungar, ‘From myth to history: Imagined polities in fourteenth-century Vietnam’, in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and Anthony Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p. 181; Trần Thị Băng Thanh, ‘Hồ Tông Thốc’, in *Từ điển văn học* [Dictionary of Literature] (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2003), pp. 643–4.

45 ‘*Việt Nam thế chí*’ in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* [The classified repertory of regulations through successive dynasties], Phan Huy Chú, ed. and Viện Sử Học (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản khoa học xã hội, 2005), vol. II, pp. 506–7.

46 Trần Quốc Vương, ‘The legend of Ông Dóng from the text to the field’, in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 28; Đặng Đức Thi, *Lịch sử sử học Việt Nam: từ thế kỷ XI đến giữa thế kỷ XIX* [Historiography of Viet Nam: from the eleventh to the mid- nineteenth century] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà xuất bản trẻ, 2000), pp. 158–64.

Nôm rather than *Hán* — into his writing (e.g., *Quốc âm thi tập* or Collected poems in the national language) to reflect popular perspectives.⁴⁷ He also initiated the integration of mythological dimensions into historiography. By order of Lê Thái Tông in 1435, Nguyễn Trãi compiled *Dư địa chí* (Treatise on Geography) a geography that retraced the land's evolution, traditions, and customs. Noticeably, he began the history of 'Việt Nam' with the rule of King Kinh Dương, descendant of the Dragon race and the 'Divine Farmer', writing, 'Hùng Vương kings succeeded each other and founded a realm called Văn Lang, with its capital at Phong Châu.'⁴⁸ The Hùng Kings were thus given precise antecedents with links to ancient mythological divine roots by a prominent Confucian. The *Hùng Vương* founding myth must have been not only familiar but also integral to the intellectual consciousness of the fourteenth–fifteenth century for a scholar of Nguyễn Trãi's stature to begin Việt Nam's history with the Hùng Kings' predecessors. Tạ Chí Đại Trường attributed this to Nguyễn Trãi's belief that the Hùng Kings mythologem should become an indispensable part of the Later Lê's monarchical nation-reconstruction process in the post-Ming occupation period.⁴⁹ Cao Huy Đình notes that scholars of that era paid particular attention to popular legends in writing ancient *national* history.⁵⁰

The Việt euhemeristic transformation of an ancient myth of unclear origins into a historicised tale about the founding of the Việt realm had now been officially sanctioned by the court. A further, definite stage occurred almost half a century later, which was to alter dramatically the way Việt history was conceived and written and thus how Việt peoples viewed themselves. Emperor Lê Thánh Tông (1460–97) entrusted court historiographer Ngô Sĩ Liên with the task of compiling a historiography of the realm, and despite Confucian-inspired misgivings, instructed him to include popular sources.⁵¹ Thus was born the 1479 *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, which retraces Việt history from its origins to the fifteenth century, and through successive compilations by later historians, to the end of the seventeenth century.⁵² It is one of the oldest and most important extant historiographic works, based as it was on numerous Việt historiographies, Northern sources, and a number of orally transmitted tales that had been transcribed. Previously, Emperor Lê Thánh Tông had ordered all *dã sử* texts, ancient legends, and tales to be collected, recorded, and archived.⁵³ Tạ Chí Đại Trường argues that this compilation provided the emperor

47 Nguyễn Trãi wrote numerous fables based on Việt folklore, using popular sayings and themes, a fact that makes him one of the earliest if not the first socially inspired writers of Đại Việt. Cao Huy Đình, Từ Thị Cung, and Ngô Văn Doanh, *Cao Huy Đình, Tuyển tập tác phẩm* [Selected works of Cao Huy Đình] (Hanoi: Lao Động, 2004), pp. 666–71; N.I. Nikulin, *Lịch sử văn học Việt Nam* [Literary history of Viet Nam] (Hanoi: Văn học, 2007), pp. 131–8. See also Nguyễn Trãi, Do Nguyen, and Paul Hoover, *Beyond the court gate: Selected poems of Nguyen Trai* (Denver: Counterpath Press, 2010).

48 Nguyễn Trãi, *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập: Úc Trai thi tập* [Complete works of Nguyen Trai: Poetry of Uc Trai], ed. and trans. Hoàng Khôi (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2001), p. 742.

49 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, p. 76.

50 Cao, Từ, and Ngô, *Cao Huy Đình*, p. 673.

51 Đình, Chu, and Võ, *Văn học dân gian*, p. 54.

52 See Phan Đại Doãn et al., *Ngô Sĩ Liên và Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Ngo Si Lien and The Complete historical records of Great Viet) (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản chính trị quốc gia, 1998).

53 Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 103; Yu Insun, 'Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên: A comparison of their perception of Vietnamese history', in *Việt Nam: Borderless histories*, ed. Anthony Reid and Nhung Tuyet Tran (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 46.

with a genealogy superseding mere clan-based boundaries, making it possible for him to officiate in the 1473's *lễ Tế Giao* (Offering to Heaven Ritual), a Northern-influenced ceremony that only the emperor, Son of Heaven, could conduct as true ruler and protector of the realm.⁵⁴ Other historians remarked that the emperor was in actuality inspired by Confucianism, which he had helped transform into the state ideology.⁵⁵ He used it as a tool to promote Việt 'national feeling', understanding that historiography was a sine qua non of *quốc*-building. Thus, Ngô Sĩ Liên's mission was to promote Đại Việt's supernatural and millennial ancestry.⁵⁶ Historian Nguyễn Phương observed that Ngô Sĩ Liên went further than Lê Văn Hưu did in ascribing a more ambitious territorial domain to Đại Việt due to his euhemerising (*lich sử hóa*) the myths in *LNCQ*. For the former, 'the phantasmagorical world is the real world, and stories about spirits are also historical stories'.⁵⁷

Ngô Sĩ Liên became the first court historian to break with tradition by contributing a *Ngoại Ký* (External Chapter) that opened the founding period in the history of Đại Việt *not* with Triệu Đà but with King Kinh Dương, the Dragon Lord, the eighteen Hùng Kings, and ended with the rule of King An Dương. The materials used by the court historian for this chapter came mostly from *dã sử* (chronicles) and in particular, from *LNCQ*.⁵⁸ Ngô Sĩ Liên was the first court historian to exploit myths, popular legends, and tales recorded in temple stelae, systemising them as sources for *Ngoại Ký*.⁵⁹ He combined them with Việt and Chinese official documents to write about the first realm of Văn Lang of the Hùng Kings.⁶⁰ By now, the phantasmagorical dimension of the Hùng Kings Epic had been Confucianised and euhemerised.⁶¹

Ngô Sĩ Liên also had the distinction of being the first historian who calculated that, from King Kinh Dương, the progenitor of the Dragon Lord, to the end of King An Dương's reign, there were 2,622 years. The founding year of the Hồng Bàng dynasty was now equivalent to 2879 BCE, and 258 BCE marked the end of Việt autonomy with An Dương's defeat by Triệu Đà.⁶² Ngô Sĩ Liên's euhemeristic action integrated an era formerly shrouded in mythological mist into official history, giving it historicity and materiality. Such historicity would be rarely challenged in the ensuing centuries, as numerous court historians commissioned to compile national

54 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, p. 76. See also David Cannadine and Simon Price, *Rituals of royalty: Power and ceremonial in traditional societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 181–236; Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Những đại lễ và vũ khúc của vua chúa Việt Nam* [Great royal ceremonies and dances of Viet Nam] (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1992), pp. 13–86.

55 Yu, 'Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên', pp. 57–8.

56 Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 'Khuyh hướng trở về với cội nguồn dân tộc thời kỳ văn minh Đại Việt và sự ra đời của *Đại Việt Sử Ký Ngoại Ký Toàn Thư* (Quyển I)' [The movement to return-to-our-people's origins during the period of Dai Viet civilization and the birth of *The Complete historical records, External Chapter*], in *Ngô Sĩ Liên và Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, pp. 137–8.

57 Nguyễn Phương, 'Phương Pháp Sử của Lê-văn-Hưu và Ngô-sĩ-Liên' [The historical methodology of Le van Huu and Ngo si Lien], *Đại Học*, 12 (1962): 893–5.

58 Phan Huy Lê, 'Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư', in *TT*, vol. I, p. 23; Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 103.

59 Đinh, Chu, and Võ, *Văn học dân gian*, p. 54.

60 Nevertheless, Ngô Sĩ Liên adopted a patrilineal interpretation more suitable to Confucian mores. The fifty sons, who, in *LNCQ*, followed their mother to Phong Châu, now followed their father to the Southern Sea to become the founders of the Hồng Bàng dynasty. Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 132.

61 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, p. 76.

62 Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 135.

historiographies would follow Ngô Sĩ Liên's example by integrating the Hồng Bàng dynasty into Việt official historiography. Dynasty after dynasty, from the fifteenth-century Lê to the nineteenth-century Nguyễn, confirmed the Hùng Kings Epic as intrinsic to the *quốc's* cultural fabric. For instance, the *Đại Việt thông giám thông khảo* (Complete study of the history of Đại Việt) compiled by Vũ Quỳnh (one of the compilers of *Việt điện u linh* and *LNCQ*), who presented his work to Emperor Lê Tương Dục in 1511, opened with the Hồng Bàng dynasty.⁶³ Another officially commissioned historiographic text, *Đại Việt sử ký bản kỷ thực lục* (The veritable basic historical records of Đại Việt), compiled in 1665 by Phạm Công Trứ, likewise integrated the Hồng Bàng dynasty.⁶⁴ For historian Esta Ungar, there was visibly 'a dynasticisation of origin myths traced back to remotest antiquity', and thus, 'the images of political authority that filtered with increasing clarity into compilations of folk tales and official histories illustrate the growing perception of the ancient past in terms of dynastic authority'.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, dynastic construction without popular acquiescence cannot endure. Outside of the court-commissioned historiography accessible only to the scholar-gentry class, there were parallel traditions that contributed to a wider popular transmission of the Hùng Kings Epic within the world of village worship.

Popular dissemination

Before the advent of transcription and integration of myths into literature, there was likely a long oral tradition in the Red River Delta of re-enactment of these tales at the level of the village. Each village held yearly festivities at the communal temple with public recitations and re-enactments (*diễn xướng*) during which villagers recreated a specific myth, historical event, or character.⁶⁶ Some villages focused on the popular mythical character of Tản Viên, the Mountain Spirit; others re-enacted the heroic sacrifices of female warriors who accompanied the Trưng Queens in their struggle against the Chinese general Mã Viện, etc. Yet, each re-enactment carries with it the particular characteristics of the region and specific history of the village in which it takes place. Folklorist Nguyễn Khắc Xương observes: 'Myths and legends are a form of popular oral transmission that has been preserved from one area to another' which, upon arrival in a specific region, are embellished with new features without losing their central themes.⁶⁷ Thus, the Hùng Kings worship may have existed locally before the fifteenth century, but under the *Lạc* name; its Mountain Spirit, its Phù Đổng Celestial King, etc., which originally were worshipped to the capital's north were gradually integrated into its pantheon. Local spirits had their counterparts in

63 Gaspardone, *Bibliographie annamite*, pp. 76–7; Phạm Thế Ngũ, *Việt Nam văn học sử giản ước tân biên: Tập I, văn học truyền khẩu-văn học lịch triều: Hán văn* [New concise literary history: vol. I, Oral and dynastic literature in Han (Đồng Tháp: Đồng Tháp, 1996), p. 279.

64 John K. Whitmore, 'Vietnamese historical sources: For the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (1460–1497)', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 29, 2 (1970): 373–94.

65 Ungar, 'From myth to history', pp. 181, 184.

66 Nguyễn Khắc Xương, 'Tìm hiểu quan hệ giữa thần thoại, truyền thuyết và diễn xướng tín ngưỡng phong tục' [Understanding the connections between myths, legends, and re-enactments], in *Văn học Việt nam, văn học dân gian: những công trình nghiên cứu* [Literature of Viet Nam, folk literature: related research], ed. Bùi Mạnh Nhị et al. (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1999), pp. 153–61.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

the capital 'as un-obliterated remnants of a distant territory' even though its former occupants had been defeated.⁶⁸ The Hùng Kings Epic with its mythologems of struggles against invaders, against nature, of enduring love, loyalty, bravery, etc., satisfied deep spiritual and emotional needs among the people, manifested in the construction of temples and shrines, and in oral propagation of multiple variations on the Epic. In 1285, the Trần dynasty began to promulgate the widespread village practice of *thần* worship by issuing decrees confirming the spirits' ranks and titles, and by the recording of *thần tích*, *thần sắc*, *thần phả*, and *ngọc phả*.⁶⁹ This mythographic dissemination was driven in part by the court, which systemised and ordered this mythical profusion in part 'to standardise older traditions so as to reduce subversive potentials', but was also sustained by deep popular mystical needs.⁷⁰ *Thần* were classified according to whether they were nature spirits (*nhiên thần*), celestial spirits (*thiên thần*), or Supernatural Beings (*nhân thần*).⁷¹ Lê Thánh Tông, who had commissioned Ngô Sĩ Liên's *TT*, also established in 1470 the *Hùng Vương ngọc phả thập bát thế truyền* (Precious genealogy of the eighteen reigns of the Hùng Kings).⁷² Court archivists throughout successive dynasties — Lê, Trịnh, Tây Sơn, Nguyễn — reproduced this text, and court-issued copies were worshipped in village temples. Spirit promulgation by imperial decrees became a sanctioned practice, amplified with each passing dynasty. In the sixteenth century, academician-cum-mythologist Nguyễn Bính, who worked for the Ministry of Rites under Lê Anh Tông (1557–73), compiled from 1572 to 1577 *Ngọc phả thần tích*, a collection of hundreds of myths and genealogies about Supernatural Beings and national heroes, including that of the Hùng Kings which he had gathered from the Red River Delta.⁷³ More than a century-and-a-half later, in 1741, under Lê Ý Tông (1735–40), another academician, Nguyễn Hiền, began recopying these sources, an effort that continued until Khải Định's reign (1885–1925). Thus, numerous versions 'embroidered' earlier versions, recreating

68 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, pp. 56–7.

69 *Thần tích* refers to the biographical records of spirits worshipped in the village, documents which the court copied but 'corrected', preserving the originals at the Ministry of Rites; *thần sắc* are imperial decrees consecrating the *thần*'s deeds, ranks, and names, and conferred on villages for officially sanctioned worship; *ngọc phả* and *thần phả* designate respectively records about the Hùng Kings and about Supernatural Beings. Lê Quang Chấn, 'Một số tư liệu về Hưng Yên lưu trữ tại Viện Hán Nôm' [A number of documents about Hung Yen province archived at the Han-Nom Institute], (TBHNNH2009), <http://www.hannom.org.vn> (last accessed 15 Feb. 2013); Nguyễn Khắc Xương, 'Thư tịch ngọc phả, thần tích và vấn đề lịch sử thời Hùng Vương', [Bibliography of spirit records and the question of the history of the Hung Kings period] (TBHNNH1995), <http://www.hannom.org.vn>; Trần Thị Thu Hương, 'Mấy nét về mảng sách thần tích Hà Nội lưu trữ tại Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm', [A few aspects related to the collection of Ha Noi spirit records archived at the Han-Nom Institute] <http://www.hannom.org.vn>.

70 John K. Whitmore, 'Literati culture and integration in Dai Viet, c.1430–c.1840', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997): 673.

71 Lê Quang Chấn, 'Một số tư liệu'.

72 Nguyễn Khắc Xương cites three main *Hùng Vương Ngọc Phả* genealogies: the oldest one (under Emperor Lê Đại Hành was dated to 986, although the date seems inaccurate), reproduced in 1919 under Khải Định; the 1470 version, reproduced in 1619; and the 1572 version by Nguyễn Bính. Nguyễn Khắc Xương, 'Thư tịch ngọc phả'.

73 Nguyễn Thị Lâm, 'Sự tích khắc trên đá ở đình Ngọc Tào' [Spirit records inscribed on stone at the Ngọc Tao temple] (TBHNNH1998) <http://www.hannom.org.vn>; Bùi Duy Tân mentions that Nguyễn Bính worked on the myths while in Thanh Hóa, where the Lê-Trịnh court was based during its struggle against the Mạc. Bùi Duy Tân, 'Nguyễn Bính', in *Từ điển văn học*, pp. 1109–10.

myths and inventing traditions that were then accepted by the villages — which had *originated* them — reinforcing and perpetuating the [Hung Kings'] spirits' materiality and potency through village worship. These mythical characters had been transformed into *thành hoàng* (tutelary spirits) consecrated by imperial orders and by popular fervour stemming from long traditions of ancestor worship.⁷⁴ Thus, the Hùng Kings acquired sons-in-laws who became Mountain Spirits, and when migrating south with the territorial expansion, transformed themselves into Whale Spirits when near the sea, and mythical female characters such as Princess My Nương merged with the local pantheon to morph into female Supernatural Beings!⁷⁵ As part of this process, the court also provided land to temples in Phú Thọ province — site of the main Hùng temple — to meet the expenses of Hùng Kings worship. As late as 1945, the Nguyễn court continued to delegate officials to oversee rituals in the temples of Phú Thọ, the Hùng Kings' heartland. Thus, as the result of the confluence of two currents, that of the monarchical state's mythographical construction and that of popular, village-based, animistic worship, the Hùng Kings came to be venerated as ancestral founders of the Việt *quốc* in temples throughout the Red River Delta and beyond.

Mythographical dissemination was further facilitated by the use of the freer *lục bát* (six-eight) verse form, which Eric Henry defines as a 'deeply traditional and popular mode of expression (which) establishes an immediate link between even the most sinified of narratives and the vast world of *ca dao*, or Vietnamese rural folk poetry'.⁷⁶ This is especially true when it was used in the historical epic to recount the national past as illustrated by the end of the seventeenth century, anonymous *Thiên nam ngữ lục* (Annals of the Heavenly South, henceforth *TNNL*).⁷⁷ This text became intrinsic to the popular memory, which has retained familiar stories of beloved national heroes like the Dragon Lord or the Trưng Queens. The tales are easily memorised and transmitted, thanks to the use of *Quốc Âm* (national language) instead of *Hán* linguistic expression, and to an abundance of ancient popular sayings. *TNNL*, the first versified historical work of epic proportions, recounts the history of the Southern Land from the Hồng Bàng until the end of the Trần dynasty. Although relying on Ngô Sĩ Liên's *TT* for historical development and still influenced by Confucianism, the anonymous author, unfettered in form and use of sources, integrated a larger volume of myths, folktales, legends, and *ca dao* that mirrored the common folk's understanding of historical events.⁷⁸ It relates in lyrical style historical events and depicts historical figures such as the Trưng Sisters in martial, heroic terms ('although of the weaker sex, they descended from the Dragon Lord').⁷⁹

74 See Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* [An outline of Vietnamese culture] (Hanoi: Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000); Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam phong tục* [Customs of Viet Nam] (Hanoi: Văn hoá-thông tin, 2003).

75 Tạ, *Thần, người, và đất Việt*, pp. 82–3.

76 Eric Henry, 'Chinese and indigenous influences', p. 3.

77 Bùi Duy Tân, 'Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục', in *Từ điển văn học*, pp. 1671–72; Lê Văn Siêu and Nguyễn Duy Nương, *Văn học sử Việt Nam* [The literary history of Viet Nam] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn học, 2006), pp. 956–8.

78 Nikulin, *Lịch sử văn học Việt Nam*, pp. 250–51.

79 *Thiên nam ngữ lục: thơ Nôm* [Annals of the Heavenly South: Nom poetry], ed. and trans. Nguyễn Thị Lâm et al. (Hanoi: Văn Học, 2001), pp. 89–93.

More importantly, it uses colourful verses close to the vernacular, to everyday life, to recount the tale of the Dragon Lord and the ensuing historical process of building a state with its capital at Phong Châu.⁸⁰ The founding myth of the Dragon Lord and the Immortal, deeply euhemerised, had now become a popular epic, easy to memorise and recite.

TNNL reflects a national character close to popular beliefs.⁸¹ It sets the literary example of a work that ‘summarises the millennial history of the country, and presents its national heroic tradition according to popular conception’.⁸² According to Cao Huy Đình, the ‘orally transmitted’ historical epic ‘was transformed into a “historiography” in a six-eight verse format and transcribed using the Nôm script’.⁸³ Nôm literature, the authors of which were closer to the common folk who memorised and circulated mythical stories through different forms (*vè, ca dao*), stressed the mythical aspect, as it escaped the constraints of the formal literature. Whitmore also notes that six-eight *nôm* verse ‘allowed oral presentations to those who could not read. Recitations of this sort, popular versions of elite texts . . . served . . . to deepen the association between Vietnamese ethnicity and Neo-Confucianism’.⁸⁴ Unsettled conditions from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth century saw an explosion of Nôm literature, facilitated by the development of woodblock printing which allowed for their circulation, first within the capital and later throughout the Việt-speaking lands.⁸⁵ As many scholars in the *Đàng Ngoài* (Outer Region) and *Đàng Trong* (Inner Region) grew disenchanted with the ruling class, they turned to popular Nôm literature, further contributing to the transcribing of oral literature and the transmission of a *nationalistic* mythology.⁸⁶ Consequently, *TNNL* played a pivotal role in reinforcing and diffusing into popular perception a *memory* of historical developments in which the Hùng Kings Epic had become inseparable from a Việt national ethos.

Confucian hermeneutic contestation

By the eighteenth century, when Đại Việt was nearing the end of centuries of turmoil, this popular mythographical construction was contested by Confucianised Việt intellectuals, who condemned the myths as ‘implausible stories’ (*truyện hoang đường*). Even Ngô Sĩ Liên, the first historiographer to insert mythological dimensions into official historiography, admitted that some stories, e.g., the Mountain–Water Spirit tale, were too strange to believe.⁸⁷ Lê Quý Đôn, while accepting the Hùng Kings period, paradoxically did not trust the documents related to it. In his *Vân đài loại*

80 Ibid., pp. 27–9.

81 Bùi Duy Tân, ‘Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục’, pp. 1672–3.

82 Cao, Tử, and Ngô, *Cao Huy Đình*, p. 678.

83 Ibid.

84 Whitmore, ‘Literati culture and integration in Dai Viet, c.1430–c.1840’: 673.

85 Cao, Tử, and Ngô, *Cao Huy Đình*, pp. 888–9. See also, Phạm Thế Ngũ, *Việt Nam văn học sử giản ước tân biên: Tập II, văn học lịch triều: Việt văn* [New concise literary history: vol. II, dynastic literature: Viet literature] (Đông Tháp: Đông Tháp, 1997), pp. 32–46.

86 Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài indicate two regions into which Đại Việt was divided from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century; each was ruled by a *Chúa* (lord) who claimed to support the Lê dynasty.

87 Ngô and Viện, *TT*, vol. I, p. 135.

ngữ (Classified topics from the Yun) he expressed doubt about Ngô Sĩ Liên's *Hùng Vương* story, blaming Confucian scholars who had carelessly borrowed from Northern texts.⁸⁸ As he noted in *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, since even Northern writers make copying errors, 'Southern oral transmission errors are to be expected'.⁸⁹ Similar misgivings emerged in two nineteenth-century historiographies, *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* (Annotations on the History of Đại Việt; henceforth *TB*) compiled by Ngô Thì Sĩ⁹⁰ under the Tây Sơn and published in 1800, and *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (Text and commentary as a complete mirror of Vietnamese history as ordered by the emperor; 1856–84; henceforth *CM*).

Ngô Thì Sĩ, while perpetuating a historiographic tradition initiated by Ngô Sĩ Liên, suffused his text with critical commentaries of his own as well as of those of other historians. For the first time in Việt historiography, a scholar imbued with Confucianism dared to contest the mythical aspects of the foundational period.⁹¹ He particularly questioned the story of the union of the Dragon Lord and the Immortal, dismissing it as an 'unfounded interpretation' (*thuyết vớ vẩn*) inspired by *LNCQ* and *Việt điện u linh*.⁹² One should not risk transforming 'a credible national history into a collection of phantasmatic stories'.⁹³ Significantly, Ngô Thì Sĩ contested the pre-Chinese era's chronological scope, as it would mean that each of the eighteen Hùng kings would have lived more than 130 years!⁹⁴

Ngô Thì Sĩ also questioned Triệu Đà's integration into Việt historical discourse. In *Việt sử tiêu án* (Ambiguities in Việt History), a critical commentary, Ngô Thì Sĩ rejected in a strongly worded statement the hagiographic construction of Triệu Đà as a benefactor of the Việt *quốc* by past scholars and court historians:

Triệu Đà has no merit when it comes to our country. On the contrary, he was the first to bring ruin to it. . . . Our country was colonised by China from the Han to the Tang, all because of Triệu Đà. He divided our country into commanderies and districts . . . collected taxes, and supplied jade to the Han How can one say that he has merit?⁹⁵

Challenging Triệu Đà as a Việt founding national hero and questioning the length of Hồng Bàng's reign formed a historiographic counter-discourse that was to emerge in

88 Lê Quý Đôn, *Văn đài loại ngữ*, ed. and trans. Trần Văn Giáp et al. (Hanoi: Văn hóa thông tin, 2006), pp. 168–9.

89 Lê and Viện, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, 526–7.

90 Ngô Thì Sĩ (Ngô Thời Sĩ, 1726–80) was an official of the Later Lê dynasty (under *Chúa Trịnh Sâm*), a gifted scholar who composed hundreds of poems and treatises, and father of Ngô Thì Nhậm, minister to Tây Sơn Emperor Quang Trung. See Trần Lê Văn, *Một số tác giả và tác phẩm trong Ngô gia văn phái* [A number of authors and works in the Collected Literary Works of the Ngo clan] (Hà Sơn Bình: Ty Văn hóa và Thông tin Hà Sơn Bình, 1980), pp. 71–121; Alexander Woodside, 'Classical primordialism and the historical agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism', in *Rethinking Confucianism*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002), pp. 116–43.

91 Ngô Thì Sĩ, *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, [Preliminary history of Dai Viet] ed. and trans. Lê Văn Bày and Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1997), vol. I, p. 23.

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–41.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

95 Ngô Thời Sĩ, *Việt sử tiêu án: từ Hồng Bàng đến ngoại thuộc nhà Minh* [Ambiguities in Việt History: From Hong Bang to the Minh domination] (Saigon: Văn hóa Á Châu, 1960), pp. 34–5.

the following centuries, when the Hùng Kings Epic would become the lightning rod of ensuing debates.

After centuries of wars, in the nineteenth century *Đại Nam* was consolidated from north to south by Nguyễn Ánh (Emperor Gia Long, r.1802–20) — but not for long, as France would begin its conquest in the 1850s. The last independent historiography was the *CM*, commissioned by Emperor Tự Đức in 1856 and intended as a national history combining existing official historiographies and private histories. Phan Thanh Giản and Phan Đình Phùng led the team of historians who took up the task between 1856 and 1884.⁹⁶ In presenting their findings to Tự Đức (1847–83), the scholars contested the pertinence of some historical figures considered as integral to Việt history: ‘In what ways was Kinh Dương, located in the Qin kingdom . . . related to our history? . . . On what do we base the claim that these were our country’s founding kings, who created a sovereign system?’⁹⁷

The historiographers thus rejected opening the foundational chapter of Việt history with the Dragon Lord and King Kinh Dương, affirming that beginning it with the Hùng Kings was more ‘orthodox’. As to King An Dương, the court historians observed that he was a ‘foreigner’, an opportunist who seized the country but in turn lost his kingdom. However, Đặng Quốc Lang, one of their collaborators, defended Ngô Sĩ Liên’s action in beginning Việt history with the Hồng Bàng dynasty, arguing that, ‘In those days, although Confucian court scholars were influential and numerous, there was not one who challenged the rationality of his (Sĩ Liên) action.’⁹⁸ He asserted that all the historiographies that succeeded Ngô Sĩ Liên’s fifteenth century *TT* did not question Hồng Bàng’s beginning, proving that ‘Sĩ Liên’s historiography was not totally unfounded’.⁹⁹ In his decree approving the composition of the History Committee in 1856, Tự Đức considered the existence of King Kinh Dương and of the Dragon Lord as belonging to neither truth nor untruth, but rather to a third category, the ‘unverifiable’.¹⁰⁰ In his view, such tales should continue to be conveyed.

Also resulting directly from Tự Đức’s programme of collecting, compiling, and writing national historiographies, the historical epic *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca* (The national history of Đại Nam in verse; henceforth *DNQS*), in Hán-Nôm script, was born. Lê Ngô Cát (b. 1827) edited in 1858 a *Nôm* work by a scholar from Bắc Ninh. Another mandarin, Phạm Đình Toái, reworked it, titled it *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca*, and had it printed in 1870. It was soon translated into *Quốc Ngữ* by the southern savant, Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837–98), and published in Saigon in 1875. Multiple versions were widely disseminated by the twentieth century. Numerous passages were popularised, especially verses on the *Trưng Vương* (Trưng Queens); in

96 Trương Bửu Lâm, ‘Lời Giới Thiệu’ [Introduction], in *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* [Mirror of Viet history], ed. Bửu Cầm (Saigon: Bộ Quốc Gia Giáo Dục, 1960), vol. I, pp. i–xviii; Philippe Langlet, *La tradition vietnamienne: un état national au sein de la civilisation chinoise d’après la traduction des 33 et 34 chapitres du Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (Saigon: Société des Études Indochinoises, 1970), p. 5.

97 *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục: Tiền biên: Quyển nhất*, ed. and trans. Trương Bửu Lâm (Saigon: Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo Dục, 1965), vol. I, pp. 13–16.

98 *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 27, 29, T.N. 7a–b.

99 *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 27, 29, T.N. 7b.

100 Trương Bửu Lâm, ‘Lời Giới Thiệu’, in *CM*, vol. I, p. xiii.

recent years, the fact that some of them have been used as part of the literature syllabus in secondary education ‘shows the extent to which this historical epic is propagated’.¹⁰¹

Historically, *ĐNQS* spans the period of Hồng Bàng to the rise of the Tây Sơn and the fall of the last Lê emperor, Lê Chiêu Thống (1787–88). Thematically, although not alluding to the egg-pouch, it retained the theme of the Dragon Lord-Immortal Lady and their one hundred male progeny. The betrayal theme as illustrated by the story of the Golden Tortoise is reprised in the *ĐNQS*: ‘The magical crossbow gone, his fate (An Dương) fallen/Hurriedly had come the moment of escape/But not without his daughter behind him/ . . . / (The king) thus understood that the enemy was next to him/ . . . / Bonds broken, to the precious sword he put his daughter.’¹⁰² *ĐNQS*, born as France began its conquest of Đại Nam, infused Việt history with a *nationalistic spirit* as evoked in the heroic actions of the miraculous boy-saviour Phù Đổng (‘With a golden sword and an iron horse, he led the troops’), of the Trưng Queens (‘Lady Trưng was from Châu Phong/Neither her fury at the oppressor nor her will to avenge her husband forgotten’), or of Trần Hưng Đạo (‘Bạch Đằng a wide field of battle/The ground white with piled bones/The river red with spilt blood’).¹⁰³

Through a colonial lens

While France conquered Vietnam in the nineteenth century, its scholars avidly explored the history and culture of their dominions, their curiosity piqued by the Annamites’ apparent phantasmatic imagination. They collected legends and published them in collections such as Antony Landes’ *Contes et légendes annamites* (1886), Abel des Michels’ *Contes plaisants annamites* (1888), or Gustave Dumoutier’s *Les Chants et les traditions populaires des Annamites* (1890).¹⁰⁴ Although these French-rendered stories mixed historical events and figures with local customs and legends about supernatural beings, magical births and animals, etc., there was no trace of the Hùng Kings Epic.¹⁰⁵ The mythographical, historiographical, and national dimensions of the Hùng Kings myths appeared to have evaporated from the Annamites’ memory. What remained were ‘droll’, ‘cynical’ stories that illustrated — from the colonisers’ viewpoint — their subjects’ duplicity, untrustworthiness, and superstitious nature.

101 Lã Minh Hằng, ‘Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca: Văn bản và tác giả’ [The national history of Đại Nam in verse: text and author], in *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca: Lịch sử Việt Nam*, Lê Ngô Cát, ed. and trans. Phạm Đình Toái, Lã Minh Hằng and Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm (henceforth Lê Ngô Cát et al.) (Hanoi: Văn Học, 2008), p. 10.

102 Lê Ngô Cát et al., *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca*, pp. 46–7.

103 Ibid., p. 9.

104 Abel des Michels translated these tales from Trương Vĩnh Ký’s 1882 Nôm collection of *Chuyện khôi hài*, whereas G. Dumoutier gathered his stories from 1886 to 1889 while doing fieldwork in Tonkin.

105 However, Maspéro in the course of his 1918 study on the kingdom of Văn Lang, remarked that a number of the Hùng Kings’ myths had been published in a small anonymous pamphlet, written in Vietnamese and entitled *History of the eighteen rules of the Hùng Kings*, which was distributed at the yearly anniversary celebrated at the Hùng temple. Maspéro opined that these were ‘paraphrased from the local myths, which might have dated back to the end of the fifteenth century c.’ Henri Maspéro, ‘Etudes d’Histoire d’Annam: IV. Le Royaume de Van Lang’, *BEFEO*, 18, 3 (1918): 1, fn 2.

Maspéro's challenge

Among the French scholars who distinguished themselves by their erudition was Henri Maspéro, whose contributions have left an indelible mark on Việt (and Chinese) studies. One work, in particular, *Le Royaume du Văn Lang*, 1918, profoundly shaped the Hùng Kings' debate and all that had to do with Việt founding myths, national identity, and historical roots. Maspéro contested the territorial extent and even the existence of the name of Hùng, of a kingdom named Văn Lang, attributing it 'to confusion between the names of Wen-lang (Văn-lang) and Ye-lang (Da-lang)'.¹⁰⁶ Somehow, everything was an error, a recording mistake reproduced unknowingly by generations of Chinese and 'Annamite' copiers for centuries! From those errors resulted misperceptions leading to a *Hùng Vương* temple, that although already in existence around the fifteenth century 'could not be very ancient', as Maspéro conceded that at the most it dated back to the Trần dynasty (1226–1400). Such a cult, he reasoned, could not have survived in a 'savage country' over centuries during Chinese colonisation. Maspéro concluded: 'In sum, the extent and even the name of the kingdom of Wen-lang (Văn-lang) appeared to me to be caused by a series of confusions for which Annamite historians are not responsible, but which went back to the Chinese writers of the sixth and seventh century.'¹⁰⁷ Concerning the *Hùng Vương* name, Maspéro, citing ancient Chinese texts, categorically stated, 'the traditional Annamite name is mistaken and must be discarded: there were never any Hùng kings but only Lạc kings. In this case again, the error went beyond the oldest Annamite authors, going back to Chinese writers. Furthermore, Annamite historians detected the error but did not dare to correct it.'¹⁰⁸ His summary left no doubt:

The name of Văn-lang that Tonkin might have had originally, the extents attributed to it, and the title of the kings that ruled it as given by Annamite historians, are so many errors and confusions. Additionally, we notice that all these errors are imputable to Chinese writers, and had already appeared during the Tang, and that the Annamites only reproduced when copying their sources.¹⁰⁹

In barely ten pages, Maspéro's study, by challenging the accuracy of the name of 'Văn Lang', its territorial extensiveness, and the name of 'Hùng' kings, by implication, equally contested that there was ever such an ancient realm and such traditionally named 'Annamite' kings, questioning the whole Hùng Kings Epic. The entire Việt mythological construction and identification that had been coalescing over centuries was thus shattered. His statement did not provoke any immediate traceable reactions, confined as it was to the spheres of official French- and Vietnamese-language scholarship, and given the restraints of colonial censorship.

It was only in the 1930s that Maspéro's statement was to ignite a rancorous, wide-ranging debate among Việt scholars. The decade of the 1930s, under the Front Populaire, presented opportunities for Việt nationalists of all political trends, as it liberated them from prisons, lifted censorship on newspapers, and allowed greater

106 Ibid., p. 2.

107 Ibid., p. 4.

108 Ibid., p. 7.

109 Ibid., p. 8.

freedom of movement throughout Indochina. One must thus view the Hùng Vương/Lạc Vương debate within this context, reflective of the wider search for national identity. Contributing to such effervescence, *chữ quốc ngữ* (national script) was in its second decade of print dissemination through the blossoming of newspapers and magazines, spearheaded by intellectuals such as Trường Vĩnh Ký and Phạm Quỳnh. The question of national origin(s) generated a fierce pro- and anti-Maspéro thesis debate. Those opting for Lạc Vương as the correct name of the first kings professed their confidence in (Western) *scientific* accuracy and reliability. Their opponents, who proclaimed that only Hùng Vương was correct, based their argument on the conviction that indigenous sources and traditions are by definition authentic, whereas Chinese and French texts were unreliable.

Leading the group supporting the correctness of the Lạc Vương's name was Nguyễn Văn Tô (1889–1947), a Sinologist-cum-Francophile scholar, regular French-language contributor to the *BEFEO*, and a member of Hồ Chí Minh's provisional government of 1945. Appearing in 1932 in the review *Đông Thanh*, his article, 'Hùng Vương or Lạc Vương?' addressed Maspéro's contentions, examining ancient Chinese texts, and finally agreeing with him that the name Hùng Vương had arisen from replication errors.¹¹⁰ He supported Maspéro in putting the onus on Chinese copiers: 'That mistake was not due to our historians but mainly to historians of China.'¹¹¹ In an ensuing article in 1941, Nguyễn Văn Tô reiterated his pro-Maspéro arguments in favour of the Lạc Vương interpretation, 'This time we are more categorical in affirming that *Hùng* was a replication error, and *Lạc* was the correct (term).'112 He revisited the question in 1943, explicitly rejecting the arguments advanced by Lê Dư representing the *Hùng Vương* interpretation, criticising him for being 'nationalistic', biased, and lacking a scientific, historiographic methodology. He deemed *LNCQ* to be 'a collection of *hoang đường* (implausible) and bizarre stories that could not be trusted to be factual.'¹¹³ He explained that the Hùng Kings mythology sprung from the rich imaginations of scholars who had invented names and stories of these Hùng figures, pressed as they were by the Lê court that obligated villagers to petition it for approval and recognition of tutelary spirit(s)!

Joining the ranks of the pro-Maspéro school was Đào Duy Anh (1904–88), who published in 1938 *Vietnam văn hóa sử cương* (An outline of Vietnamese culture), a work influenced by the French historian, Felix Sartiaux, who wrote on Hellenistic civilisations and Kantian philosophy. Đào Duy Anh wrote, 'According to tradition, the Vietnamese belong to the race of Immortal and Dragon (*nòi giống Tiên Rồng*),' asserting that the first-born of the fifty sons, 'became the ancestor of the Vietnamese race'. Đào Duy Anh viewed this as *truyền thuyết*, that is, a legend, but deemed it meaningful.¹¹⁴ He stated, 'The king of the Văn Lang realm was titled *Lạc Vương*. Văn Lang was

110 The text was quoted by Phạm Hoàn Mĩ in a 1959 series of articles published in *Bách Khoa* [(a Saigon-based literary journal founded in 1957) reprising the Lạc vs. Hùng Vương debate].

111 Quoted in Phạm Hoàn Mĩ, '18 Vị vua dựng nước ta?' [The eighteen kings who founded our country?], *Bách Khoa*, 49 (1959): 78.

112 Nguyễn Văn Tô, 'Lạc Vương chứ không phải Hùng Vương' [Lạc Kings and not Hung Kings], in *Tạp Chí Tri Tân 1941–1946, Các bài viết về lịch sử và văn hóa Việt Nam*, ed. Đinh Xuân Lâm et al. (Hanoi: Tâm Unesco Thông Tin Tư Liệu Lịch Sử và Văn Hóa Việt Nam, 2000), p. 124.

113 Phạm, '18 Vị vua dựng nước ta?', *Bách Khoa*, 54 (1959): 63.

114 Đào Duy Anh, *Viet Nam văn hóa sử cương*, p. 22.

the name of the ancient country of the Vietnamese nowadays. The Lạc Kings of the Hồng Bàng dynasty succeeded each other over eighteen generations until the year 257.¹¹⁵ Đào Duy Anh partially supported Maspéro, agreeing with his choice of *Lạc Vương* as the correct name for the first rulers, yet affirmed the other elements (e.g., the Dragon Lord, the Hồng Bàng, Văn Lang kingdom, etc). However, he shifted his stance when he revisited the question in a 1942 article, which examined the *truyền thuyết* in the Hùng Vương Epic from an anthropological angle. This time, Đào Duy Anh was less categorical, opting for both possibilities: ‘The term *Hùng-vương* or *Lạc-vương* is the name given to the feudal kings who succeeded each other just as the vassal lords were called *Lạc-hầu* and *Lạc-tướng*.’¹¹⁶ Later, as Đào Duy Anh assumed the role of a prominent DRV intellectual, he aligned his view with that of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which affirmed the materiality of the Hùng Kings Epic as part of an independent state’s identity reconstruction in the post-August Revolution of 1945.

Reacting heatedly to this Maspéro-influenced *Lạc Vương* school, a number of Việt scholars published articles rejecting this theory in terms that reveal a wounded sense of nationalistic pride even under tight French censorship. The distinguished Sinologist, historian, and literary critic who had participated in Phan Bội Châu’s *Đông Du* (Go East) learning-from-Japan movement in the 1900s, also a regular contributor to *BEFEO*, Lê Dư (Lê Đăng Dư) was among the most forceful critics of the Maspéro thesis. In two 1942 issues of a publication by the Hội Khai Trí Tiến Đức (Intellectual and Moral Development Association) entitled, ‘*Hùng Vương* is *Hùng Vương*’, Lê Dư wrote,

For Heaven’s sake! Could it be possible that we erred for so many centuries and it is only now that we have someone pointing out our error to us? . . . 1. A country’s history has to be examined by its own people to be accurate; 2. For an event that originated in a country, that country’s own texts should record it to be accurate; . . . ; 4. Whatever word as formulated by a people should be discussed only by them to be accurate.¹¹⁷

He remarked that the name of Hùng Vương appeared in a number of legends, but nowhere in these tales did the copying error of transforming *Hùng* into *Lạc* occur. He challenged Maspéro’s statement by asserting:

All the stories related to the Hùng dynasty that are clearly recorded in our texts, did Mr. Maspéro see them in any Chinese texts? Naturally not! I am certain (that he did) not as I have carefully examined Chinese texts dealing with the Southern country, perhaps without any exception. Mr. Maspéro has ignominiously slandered our historians of ancient times.¹¹⁸

Furthermore, he argued that since ancient times, Việt customs had always used the names of Hùng Kings, Hùng Mountain, Hùng temple, and Hùng mausoleum, it

115 Ibid., pp. 27–8.

116 Đào Duy Anh, ‘Những truyền thuyết đời thượng cổ của nước ta’ [Our country’s legends in antiquity], *Tri Tân*, 30 (1942): 3.

117 Quoted in Phạm, ‘18 Vị vua nước ta’, *Bách Khoa*, 49, p. 80.

118 Ibid.

could not have been otherwise. In conclusion, Lê Dư proclaimed that Maspéro's mistake is understandable since 'after all, he came from a completely different culture than ours'. Lê Dư thus felt obligated to correct this error by letting everyone know that 'Our national ancestor *Hùng Vương* is *Hùng Vương*, and never *Lạc Vương*. Our national history recorded *Hùng Vương* thus *Hùng Vương* is accurate.'¹¹⁹ Lê Dư was only one of many who reacted strongly against the Maspéro school of Lạc appellation.

Concurrently in 1932, appeared Nguyễn Văn Ngọc (1890–1942)'s *Truyện cổ nước Nam* (Legends of the Southern Country). Commenting on his collection of folktales and popular sayings, the author remarked, 'The phrase "Our Country has more than four thousand years of antiquity," is something that many Southern people often say, taking pride in their antiquity (considered) as the most precious quality. Thus, in what does the Southern Country's antiquity reside? In ancient race, ancient history, ancient customs, ancient government, ancient literature, and arts.' Nguyễn Văn Ngọc was careful to distinguish between 'Chinese' and 'Southern' legends, affirming that the stories that he collected 'are truly specific of *Nước Nam* (Southern Country), created and produced by the Southern people, and was not borrowed from, or inspired by, anyone.' The proof was that all the folk sayings were in *tiếng Nam* (Southern language), that is, the kind of particular language which renders the Southern Country truly what it is.'¹²⁰ The legends belong to the oral tradition, never before having been transcribed, as they mainly circulated at the village level among Việt peasants. As Nguyễn Văn Ngọc said, 'Being a Southerner, one needs to know ancient legends of the Southern Country. *The Southerner's soul is manifested in them; the essence of the Southern Country is preserved in them.*'¹²¹

The Hùng Vương vs. Lạc Vương debate never truly abated through the two Indochina Wars. It continued and escalated into a crescendo during the 1960–70s when Vietnam was divided into two political entities. It took on more strident ideological tones as each claimed to be the true descendant of the Dragon Lord and the Immortal, with each promulgating the Hùng Kings Anniversary as a national day of commemoration. Ngô Sĩ Liên's integration of the Dragon Lord and Lady Âu Cơ's myth into the official historiography of Đại Việt initiated the long journey into modernity of a tale believed to be an authentic founding myth of the Việt peoples. Nowadays, the Hùng Kings Epic and its related textual debates have left their lofty intellectual confines to seep completely into the national fabric of modern Vietnam to form its own mythos. Ethnic Việt or Kinh people, whether at home or overseas, whether fiercely anti-Communist or Party members, identify their mythological origins as descendants of the Dragon Lord and the Immortal. They do not doubt the antiquity of their culture nor that of the Việt people, rooted in a quadri-millennial past apparently inseparably woven into their ethos, issued from a civilisation founded by the eighteen *Hùng Vương*.

119 Ibid., *Bách Khoa*, 52, pp. 33–5.

120 Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Truyện cổ nước Nam* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1990), pp. 7–8.

121 Italics added; *ibid.*, p. 13.