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The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition

For a period of roughly one thousand years when areas of what is today northern and parts of central Vietnam were within the borders of various Chinese empires, information about that region was largely recorded by Chinese writers. These men included information in dynastic histories about uprisings and the appointment of officials to the region, and placed in encyclopedias and collectanea entries about what they considered to be strange people and products from this peripheral area of the empire. Once this region became autonomous from Chinese rule in the tenth century, Vietnamese started to compile historical chronicles about their own land.¹ In the process, they also recorded detailed information about some people who had lived even before the period of Chinese rule, and about whom Chinese writers had not made mention. Given that there is this information about these early periods of history in Vietnamese works, which does not exist in Chinese sources, scholars have generally concluded that the Vietnamese must have had their own historical traditions that they transmitted orally and then eventually wrote down once their land had become free from Chinese control.² This widely-held view is false. Instead, it is clear that the novel information medieval Vietnamese writers recorded about their early history was created at some point in the centuries immediately prior to and/or after Vietnam became an autonomous polity in the tenth century, and it constitutes what we can call an “invented tradition.”³

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While every tradition is invented at some point, the concept of an “invented tradition” signifies a particular type of tradition. As characterized by Eric Hobsbawm, an invented tradition is a tradition that is created during a time of social change when “old” traditions and their promulgators become ineffective or eliminated, or when some group seeks to make a break with the past by deliberately ceasing to follow old ways. Invented traditions are often created quite rapidly. They appeal to and imply continuity with the past, and they make “use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes.”⁴

The information medieval Vietnamese recorded about their history prior to the period of Chinese rule accords with this concept of an invented tradition. This paper will demonstrate this point by examining an essay called the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” [*Hồng Bàng thị truyện*] from a fifteenth-century work known as the *Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes* [*Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*], a work which I will refer to as the *Arrayed Tales*. The “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” relates information about the origins of what we now refer to as “Vietnamese history.” It traces a genealogy from the mythical Chinese ruler, Shen Nong, to a supposed line of kings, the Hùng kings, who ruled over a polity reportedly called Văn Lang in the Red River Delta in the first millennium BCE. Ngô Sĩ Liên incorporated this same genealogical information into his late-fifteenth-century *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* [*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*], and scholars assume that he obtained this material from the *Arrayed Tales*. Its inclusion in the *Complete Book*, as I will refer to this work, essentially transformed this information into the official account of the origins of dynastic enterprises in the Red River Delta. Today, core information from this account, namely the information about the Hùng kings and their kingdom of Văn Lang, is widely regarded in Vietnam as historical proof of the ancient origins of Vietnamese history and of the Vietnamese nation. As we will see below, however, such a conviction is difficult to maintain once one has examined closely this story and the text it comes from. Instead, it is evident that the information that we find in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” constitutes a medieval invented tradition.

As we will see, questioning the veracity of the information in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” is by no means a novel enterprise. Premodern

Vietnamese scholars did so to a limited degree, and they were then joined by scholars of other nationalities in the twentieth century. By the 1960s, one could find a good deal of skepticism regarding the information in this account in the works of Vietnamese, Chinese and French scholars.⁵ However, it was precisely at that moment that this long history of questioning the information in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” took a novel turn. Scholars in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) made a concerted effort to “prove” the historical existence of the Hùng kings, and the information in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” was crucial for that effort. It is the arguments and approaches of that body of scholarship produced by DRV scholars beginning in the late 1960s, and which remains dominant in Vietnam today, that this paper primarily argues against. At the same time, as a study in English for an English-reading audience, this paper also challenges some of the positions in Keith Taylor’s 1983 monograph, *The Birth of Vietnam*, a work that was produced in agreement with the views DRV scholars started to present in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The *Arrayed Tales*, Oral Transmission and Anomaly Accounts

While today the *Arrayed Tales* is considered to be an important source for the early history of Vietnam, this has not always been the case. The current condition of the extant copies of this work make this quite evident. The *Arrayed Tales* was apparently never published. At present, there are some fourteen hand-written copies of the text in Vietnam, with many differences between some of the versions.⁶ While we do not know when most of these hand-written copies were produced, many of them contain a preface that purports to date from 1492 CE. This preface is attributed to a certain Vũ Quỳnh, who notes in it that the actual stories contained in the *Arrayed Tales* were written by others. “There is no record of when they were begun or who the person was who completed them,” Vũ Quỳnh says of the stories. “Perhaps a draft was composed by preeminent scholars during the Lý and Trần, and was then embellished in recent times by gentlemen who were learned and fond of antiquity.”⁷ A year after Vũ Quỳnh wrote these lines, a man known as Kiều Phú composed a postscript to what appears to have been a separate version of the *Arrayed Tales*. Finally, in the eighteenth century, the scholar-official Lê Quý Đôn recorded that it was “traditionally

held” [*tương truyền*] that the *Arrayed Tales* was the work of a scholar named Trần Thế Pháp, but Lê Quý Đôn did not know who this person was.⁸ Modern scholars, however, have argued that Trần Thế Pháp was a scholar who lived in the fourteenth century.⁹

There is thus much that remains unknown about the *Arrayed Tales*. It was possibly begun at some point during the Lý and Trần dynasties (1009–1400 CE), and then later embellished before Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú perhaps each produced their own versions of the text in the late fifteenth century. This text likely went through changes in the process. Vũ Quỳnh notes in his preface, for instance, that when he first read the *Arrayed Tales*, the text “was an absolute chaos of mistaken characters. Disregarding its vulgarity, I examined and corrected it.”¹⁰ It is unclear to what extent these corrections were limited to mistaken characters or extended into the realm of content. Kiều Phú, on the other hand, appears to have made substantial changes to the text. He recorded in his postscript that based on his consultation of other works, and following his own discretion, he made corrections and deleted extraneous information.¹¹

While there are many elements about this text that are therefore problematic, some scholars in recent decades have been willing to put aside the uncertainties surrounding it and embrace a belief in its inherent value as a source of ancient Vietnamese history. In particular, as scholars in the DRV sought to create a new history for their land in the immediate postcolonial years of the 1950s–1970s, some came to see the *Arrayed Tales* as an extremely valuable source. Namely, they viewed it as a repository of ancient legends [*truyền thuyết*] that had been passed down through the centuries among the “people” or the “folk” [*dân gian*], and that could be profitably used as historical documents.¹² In establishing this perspective, modern scholars have had to reconcile two contradictory statements about the *Arrayed Tales* from the premodern era. In his preface of 1492, Vũ Quỳnh notes that:

From the time before the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (722–221 BCE), not that far from antiquity, southern customs were still simple. There were not yet any histories of the kingdom to record affairs. Therefore, [information about] most affairs has been lost. That which was fortunate to continue to exist and not be destroyed are just the oral transmissions of the people/folk.¹³

Then in the eighteenth century, Lê Quý Đôn wrote of the *Arrayed Tales* that “This book borrows and passes on a lot [of information from other texts]; more than can be counted.” He then provided an example of this by citing Chinese texts that had inspired a story in the *Arrayed Tales*.¹⁴ Hence, Vũ Quỳnh attributed at least some of the material in the *Arrayed Tales* to oral transmission by the “people/folk” [*dân gian*] from antiquity, whereas Lê Quý Đôn argued that much of the content of this work had been taken from extant sources.

As DRV scholars in the 1950s–1970s sought to create a history for their newly independent nation, they turned to the *Arrayed Tales* for information about the period in the first millennium BCE when the Hùng kings had supposedly ruled and they had to make a decision regarding these contradictory appraisals of the origin of this material.¹⁵ Ultimately, what scholars began to do then, and what they continue to do at present, is maintain that while these stories may have been influenced to some extent by the elite writing in the centuries after they were first created, they are nonetheless oral tales transmitted from antiquity.¹⁶ In making such a claim, however, no scholar to my knowledge has ever examined a work like the *Arrayed Tales* in detail and indicated exactly what information was later added and where it came from, what information came from oral tales, and how we can determine all of this. Instead, scholars have only made general statements acknowledging elite influence while insisting on the primacy of the oral element.¹⁷

Connected to this belief, that at the core of a tale like the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” is information that was passed down orally through the centuries, is the conviction that there have been a “people/folk” throughout the period before the *Arrayed Tales* was compiled who maintained and transmitted this information. This, however, is a problematic assertion. Who exactly were the “people/folk” to a member of the educated elite in the fifteenth century, like Vũ Quỳnh? Scholarship on Chinese history has demonstrated that it was only in the twentieth century that educated Chinese began to take a serious interest in, and to identify with, the “common people” or “folk.”¹⁸ Vietnam was likely quite similar, and when historians in the DRV first worked with the *Arrayed Tales* in the 1950s–1970s, they did so at a time when the field of Vietnamese folk literature [*văn học dân gian*] was just beginning to develop and focus attention on the common people.¹⁹ To what extent

this enterprise was affected by the same romantic nationalism that influenced folklore movements in other countries around the globe, and to what extent historians were affected by the ideas being put forth at that time, is a topic that has yet to be addressed.²⁰ As a result, scholars in Vietnam have not questioned their construct of the “people/folk” and considered the degree to which it might differ from the concept of the “people/folk” of someone like Vũ Quỳnh in the fifteenth century. When he wrote of the “people/folk,” did Vũ Quỳnh mean the uneducated peasantry? Did he mean educated people like himself? These are basic questions that need to be asked, but have yet to be addressed.

Another issue that scholars have yet to address concerns the process of oral transmission. Vietnamese scholars envision the transmission of oral tales taking place through a process of what, following Stuart Blackburn, we could call “vertical inheritance”—stories passed down by members of the same linguistic group from one generation to the next.²¹ While these scholars do allow for contact between the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups and acknowledge that some of the information in a work like the *Arrayed Tales* may have been adopted from people like the Mường or have stemmed from a common source, they nonetheless see the Vietnamese at the center of this transmission.²²

There are numerous problems with such a belief. One concerns the evidence they cite to demonstrate that the people who lived in the Red River Delta in the first millennium BCE were fundamentally the same as the people who lived there in the medieval period. Vietnamese scholars have argued that the archaeological findings in the Red River Delta from the first century BCE, such as Đông Sơn bronze drums, and evidence of uprisings during the roughly one-thousand years of Chinese rule, such as that of the Trưng sisters in the first century CE, all point to the existence of a stable population in the region throughout this long period.²³ This type of evidence, however, does not necessarily support such a claim.

First, associating archaeological artifacts with the people who compiled the stories in the *Arrayed Tales* requires that one project the existence of a supposed historical ethnic group (the “Vietnamese”) identified from medieval texts onto prehistoric archaeological artifacts. As Siân Jones argues, scholars who engage in such a practice often uncritically identify a specific ethnic group from historical sources and then look for “ethnic markers” in the

archaeological record that correlate to this supposed historical ethnic group. In doing so, they ignore the subjective nature of both historical sources and ethnic identities, and the fact that material culture does not necessarily correspond to ethnicity.²⁴ Second, the existence of various uprisings over the course of a millennium does not necessarily reflect the existence of a stable cultural group that could maintain and transmit oral stories. Indeed, when Keith Taylor, unlike Vietnamese scholars, actually attempted to document the existence of a stable population across the millennium of Chinese rule, he resorted to using hyphenated terms, such as “Han-Việt” and “Tang-Việt,” to account for periods of increased contact with Chinese.²⁵ This then begs the questions of how similar the “Tang-Việt” of the ninth century CE could have been to the “Lạc Việt” of the first millennium BCE, and how stories could have been passed down through such a changing society.

Yet one more related problem is that the *Arrayed Tales* was recorded in classical Chinese, a language that was not commonly spoken and that would have been unknown to the people in the supposed Hùng king’s realm throughout most of its reported history. Further, if those inhabitants spoke an early form of what would eventually become the Vietnamese language, as some scholars in Vietnam believe, it must be recognized that this spoken language changed quite dramatically over the centuries, particularly as Chinese vocabulary entered it, first on a limited scale starting during the period of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and then more extensively during the medieval period.²⁶ So if core information in a story like the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” originated in oral tales passed down from antiquity, scholars need to account for how this was possible, and what transformations the information may have undergone as the Vietnamese language developed over the centuries and as this oral information was eventually translated into classical Chinese. Such a practice of attempting to determine what was in the oral realm before information was committed to print, and how we can detect traces of the oral language in written sources, has been central to the field of oral literature in the West for decades now. However, scholars have yet to critically investigate these topics in the case of Vietnam.²⁷

There are therefore many issues that need to be examined further in order to demonstrate that core historical information about Vietnamese antiquity could have been passed down orally through the centuries. That said, scholars

in the West have long realized that this search for historical truth in oral tales is at best extremely problematic, and at worst a “quest for a chimera.”²⁸ A more fruitful approach for historians is to examine the process of transmission of oral tradition, for that is historical. Hence, regardless of whether or not there is any historical truth in an oral tale, the form it takes can tell us a great deal about a particular moment in the past.²⁹ So rather than seeking to find the information that had not been “encrusted with elaborations stemming from the cultural currents of later centuries,” to follow Taylor’s description, we can seek to determine from these very “encrustations” when and why a story was expressed in a certain way.³⁰ When we do so, we also need to keep in mind the possibility that some written accounts of what we today believe must have originally been oral tales may have actually originated in written form. For instance, in the European context Ruth Bottingheimer has argued that it was not the case that an unlettered folk first invented fairytales and then disseminated them through oral storytelling until the stories were finally written down. Instead, fairytales were first written by members of the educated elite and initially spread through print.³¹

It is critical to keep such a view in mind when examining the *Arrayed Tales*. While most scholars have contended that the core material in this work originated as oral stories, such a belief does not accord with what we know of the genre to which it belongs, the “anomaly account” [*chí quái; zhiguai*] genre. Anomaly accounts were a type of text that Chinese literati began to write during the politically tumultuous Six Dynasties period (220–589 CE). They consisted of relatively short entries about people and events considered “strange” or “anomalous.” To write such accounts, scholars to some extent relied on oral information, but they also mined extant texts for information. During the Song Dynasty (960–1276 CE) there was a renewed interest in this genre and many collections of anomaly accounts were produced. *The Arrayed Tales* was likely compiled at some point after this period.³²

Because literati often compiled anomaly accounts by creatively selecting and embellishing information from extant texts, some scholars have categorized these works as an early form of fiction. Kenneth DeWoskin, for instance, has emphasized the fabricated or imagined aspects of these texts and argued that the emergence of anomaly accounts marks the birth of

fiction in China. This was followed by the development of short stories [*truyện kỳ; quanqí*] during the period of the Tang Dynasty (619–907 CE) and then vernacular novels during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911 CE).³³ Robert Campany, meanwhile, has argued against this perspective. Campany believes that anomaly accounts grew out of an early cosmographic tradition in which the capital collected anomalous goods and reports from the periphery as a means to bring order to the world. Anomaly accounts, he argues, performed a similar function in that they discussed the uncanny in the plain language of historical writing, thereby “domesticating” the strange.³⁴ Campany also notes that people of various intellectual predilections—what we can label for simplicity’s sake as Buddhists, Daoists and Confucian scholars—employed anomaly accounts to make arguments that supported their own beliefs about the world.

In his preface, Vũ Quỳnh unequivocally situates the *Arrayed Tales* in the anomaly account genre. He likens the work to Gan Bao’s fourth-century *Records of an Inquest into the Spirit Realm* [*Soushen ji*], one of the main early anomaly accounts.³⁵ He also places the work in a popular Confucian context by arguing that all of the stories essentially “promote goodness and punish evil” [*khuyến thiện trừng ác*], a statement that is fundamental to a genre of Chinese texts known as “morality books” [*thiện thư; shanshu*].³⁶ This genre of texts emerged during the Song Dynasty and employed the Buddhist concept of karmic retribution to argue for the importance of practicing Confucian virtues. Many of these works also claim their contents to have been revealed by spirits, a practice associated with Daoists.³⁷

Hence, the *Arrayed Tales* was clearly part of larger literary trends at the time. As for the extent to which one should view it as fact or fiction, I would argue that the *Arrayed Tales* is both. As we will see below, there is much in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” that is clearly fiction. However, it is also evident that the intent of this essay was to write the existence of a polity in the medieval Red River Delta into a larger historical and geographical context. Thus, in contrast to the fictive nature of much of the story’s content, this effort to create the story itself is an historical fact that we can locate in a relatively specific historical era. Let us now turn to the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” and examine its fictive and factual elements in more detail.

Descent, Local Marriages and the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*

The “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” is a genealogical story about a family identified as the Hồng Bàng, a name that is never explained. It begins by tracing the origins of this family back to the mythical Chinese ruler Shen Nong [Thần Nông].³⁸ The story states that Shen Nong had a descendent by the name of Di Ming [Đế Minh], who in turn had a son named Di Yi [Đế Nghi]. Di Ming went on an imperial inspection tour of the south, which took him all the way to an area known as the Five Passes, along the northern borders of what are today Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. There he obtained the daughter of a certain Vụ Tiên, a name that literally means “beautiful immortal,” and took her back to the north with him. This woman subsequently gave birth to a son named Lộc Tục. Di Ming wished to pass the throne on to this boy, but Lộc Tục refused and insisted instead that his elder half-brother, Di Yi, should succeed to the throne. Di Ming thereupon declared Di Yi to be the heir apparent and appointed him to rule over the north while Lộc Tục was invested as “King Kinh Dương” and appointed to rule over the south, where his realm was called the Xích Quỷ (literally “Scarlet Ghost”) Kingdom.³⁹

This opening passage thus discusses how a descendent of the mythical Chinese ruler, Shen Nong, married a woman in the south, and how the child of that marriage, as King Kinh Dương, was invested with the responsibility to rule over the south. This act of investiture indicated that King Kinh Dương was in a subordinate position to his elder half-brother who ruled over the north. Such an arrangement of course mirrored the suzerain-vassal relationship that China and Vietnam maintained at the time the *Arrayed Tales* was compiled. Meanwhile this story as a whole also mirrored a passage in an earlier text, the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua* [*Huayang guozhi*].

The *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*, compiled in the fourth century CE, is a history of roughly the area of what is today Sichuan Province in China. During the first millennium BCE, Sichuan was divided between such kingdoms as Ba and Shu, and the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua* deals with these areas separately. The “Treatise on Shu” begins with a passage that is quite similar to the opening passage in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan.” Rather than beginning with Shen Nong,

however, the “Treatise on Shu” starts with Ren Huang, a ruler who supposedly lived before Shen Nong, who in turn lived before the Yellow Emperor. Ren Huang is also reported to have divided the known world into nine partitions. The “Treatise on Shu” begins as follows:

Shu’s establishment as a kingdom began with Ren Huang who placed [Shu] in the same partition as Ba. At the time of the Yellow Emperor, his son, Chang Yi, married the daughter of the Shushan [Shu Mountain] clan, who gave birth to a son, Gao Yang, who became Emperor Ku. He invested members from the collateral branches of his family in Shu where they served for generations as marquises and barons. [This] continued through the Xia, Shang and Zhou [dynasties].⁴⁰

As is hopefully evident, the information in this passage is very similar to that in the opening section of the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” in the *Arrayed Tales*. In particular, like the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan,” this text makes a genealogical connection to a mythical Chinese ruler, has a child produced through the marriage of a local woman with a descendent of that same ruler, and then has members of this person’s family invested to rule over the local area. In other words, both the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua* invented a similar narrative in order to link their respective locales to a figure in Chinese antiquity. If we consider the opening passage in Ngô Sĩ Liên’s fifteenth-century *Complete Book*, a text compiled at roughly the same time that Vũ Quỳnh “corrected” the *Arrayed Tales* and wrote his preface to that work, we see even more similarities with the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*.

In his *Complete Book*, Ngô Sĩ Liên reproduces the genealogical information from the *Arrayed Tales* that connects Shen Nong to King Kinh Dương. He prefaces this material, however, with a note of his own that points to other connections between his kingdom and ancient Chinese rulers. In this note, Ngô Sĩ Liên refers to his land in antiquity as Giao Chỉ [Jiaozhi], an old Chinese name for the general area of the Red River Delta, and as Nam Giao [Nanjiao], a term that appears in one of the earliest Chinese texts, the *Venerated Documents [Shangshu]*, which may have referred to a similar area. He also mentions various ancient Chinese rulers, such as the mythical Yellow Emperor, Yao, and his official, Xi Shu, as well as the semi-historical Yu, the purported

founder of the Xia Dynasty (circa the twenty-first century BCE–sixteenth century BCE). To quote:

During the time of the Yellow Emperor, the myriad kingdoms were established and Giao Chi was delimited in the southwest, far beyond the area of the Hundred Yue.⁴¹ Yao commanded Xi [Shu] to take up residence in Nam Giao to fix Giao Chi's position in the south. Yu then demarcated the Nine Regions. The Hundred Yue were in the territory of Yang Region. Giao Chi was under its jurisdiction.⁴²

The Yellow Emperor, Yao and Yu are all recorded to have contributed to the demarcation and arrangement of the world as it was known to Chinese in antiquity, and Ngô Sĩ Liên links his land with these individuals and their efforts. The “myriad kingdoms” is a term one finds in early Chinese sources. However, I do not know of any passage in any source that states that “Giao Chi was delimited” during the time of the Yellow Emperor. Similarly, there is a line in the *Venerated Documents* that states that the ancient ruler, Yao, commanded a person by the name of Xi Shu to proceed to Nam Giao, but his purpose was to calibrate the agricultural calendar.⁴³ The *Venerated Documents* makes no mention of Giao Chi or its position in the south. And finally, Yu was credited with dividing the known world into nine regions, much like Ren Huang had earlier divided the world into nine partitions, but the texts that mention this say nothing about Giao Chi's place in this scheme.

Ngô Sĩ Liên therefore invented certain connections between his land and the actions of certain people in distant Chinese antiquity. In the *Complete Book*, he placed this information right before the account of the genealogical line from Shen Nong to King Kinh Dương, which originated in the *Arrayed Tales*. Taken together, this information established numerous links between various people in Chinese antiquity and the area where Vietnam would eventually emerge. Furthermore, it did so in a manner that closely mirrors the opening passage in the “Treatise on Shu” in the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*. Hence, while Ngô Sĩ Liên and the author(s) of the *Arrayed Tales* engaged in a good deal of creativity when they compiled their respective works, at that time there had long been in existence a clear model for such projects in the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*.

King Kinh Dương and the “Biography of Liu Yi”

While we can only speculate that the opening passage in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” took inspiration from a work like the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*, other passages in the story demonstrate more direct parallels with information in extant texts. The biography goes on to note that King Kinh Dương, the figure who had been invested to rule over the south, could enter water palaces [*thủy phủ*], a term Chinese sources employed to refer to the abodes of water spirits and dragon kings. Presumably it was in such a water palace that he met a woman called Thần Long, meaning “divine dragon,” who was the daughter of a certain Lord Dongting [Động Đình], a man who shared the name of a lake in what is today central China. King Kinh Dương married Thần Long, and she gave birth to a son, Sùng Lãm, who came to be called Lord Lạc Long. The biography then notes that Lord Lạc Long took over the governance of his father’s kingdom and taught the people to cultivate plants and engage in sericulture. It also notes that at this time there emerged a hierarchical order between sovereign and officials, superiors and inferiors, as well as the proper relations between fathers and sons, and husbands and wives.⁴⁴

Figures like King Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long are not mentioned in any Chinese sources. While the comments in this passage about a proper hierarchical order emerging during that early period clearly reflect a Confucian perspective, many scholars have tended to believe that King Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long must be authentic culture heroes of the Vietnamese, and have sought to explain their origins. Noted historian Đào Duy Anh, for instance, attempted to do this for King Kinh Dương in some of his scholarship in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Đào Duy Anh believed, like many others at that time, that the Vietnamese had historically migrated southward into the Red River Delta from areas in southern China.⁴⁵ He pointed out that the region around the Yangzi River where Lake Dongting is located had been known since ancient times as the area of the two regions of Kinh [Jing; 荆] and Dương [Yang; 楊]. The characters for these two regions are pronounced the same as those of the “Kinh” and “Dương” in King Kinh Dương [涇陽], but they are written differently. Đào Duy Anh recognized this and argued that the story of King Kinh Dương probably originated when the Vietnamese were

living along the Yangzi River in the areas of Kinh and Dương, and that for centuries the Vietnamese passed this story down orally as they migrated southward into the Red River Delta. When the story was finally written down, whoever did so chose the homophonous characters of Kinh [涇] and Dương [陽], thereby obscuring the actual historical link between King Kinh Dương and the geographical areas of Kinh [荊] and Dương [楊] in what is today central China. Hence, Đào Duy Anh argued that once one realized what Kinh and Dương literally referred to, the existence of a Lord Dongting also made sense as these names were all associated with the same region, which he felt was the original homeland of the Vietnamese.⁴⁶

This was an ingenious theory, and I note it here to provide an example of the kind of efforts Vietnamese scholars have made to rationalize the novel information in the *Arrayed Tales* and tie it to a more verifiable form of history. Ultimately, however, this theory is inaccurate. First, today the idea that the Vietnamese migrated southward into Vietnam has fallen out of favor as linguists now see the origins of Vietnamese in the area of what is today central Vietnam and parts of eastern Laos.⁴⁷ Second, this theory ignores clear connections between this passage and a Tang Dynasty short story called the “Biography of Liu Yi” [*Liu Yi zhuan*] by Li Zhaowei in the eighth century. This story first appeared in a Tang Dynasty anomaly account, Chen Han’s *Record of Strange Things Heard* [*Yiwen ji*]. It was then later included in a tenth-century encyclopedia, *Wide Gleanings Made in the Taiping Era* [*Taiping guangji*] in a chapter devoted to information about dragons.

“The Biography of Liu Yi” takes place during the Yifeng era (676–678) of Tang Gaozong’s reign. It is about a young scholar by the name of Liu Yi who, after failing the exams in the capital, decides to go visit a friend in Jingyang [Kinh Dương; 涇陽] District in Shaanxi Province. Note that the characters for “Kinh Dương/Jingyang” District here are the same as those for “Kinh Dương” in King Kinh Dương’s name. On the way, Liu Yi meets a shepherdess and discovers that she is the daughter of the dragon lord of Lake Dongting. Her parents had married her off to the lord of Jing River [Kinh Xuyên; Jingchuan; 涇川] in Shaanxi, but he had treated her badly and eventually discarded her. She then entrusts Liu Yi with a letter to deliver to her father, the dragon lord of Lake Dongting, and to make a long story short, Liu Yi eventually marries the dragon king’s daughter.⁴⁸

This story is clearly the inspiration for the marriage between King Kinh Dương and Thần Long, the daughter of Lord Dongting, which we find in the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book*. Indeed, it is a connection that did not go unnoticed in the past, for it was commented upon in the *Complete Book*. The text of the *Complete Book* is interspersed with some brief annotations. It is unclear if it was Ngô Sĩ Liên or some later scholar who wrote these comments. Either way, after the passage about this marriage, the *Complete Book* contains the following somewhat cryptic comment:

According to the Tang annals, Jingyang [Kinh Dương] at that time had a shepherdess who claimed to be Lord Dongting's youngest daughter. She married the second son of Jing River [Kinh Xuyên], but was later expelled. She entrusted a letter to Liu Yi who submitted a memorial to Lord Dongting. Therefore the marriages over the generations between Jing River and Dongting have a long history.⁴⁹

Whoever wrote this comment was obviously aware of the information in the “Biography of Liu Yi,” even though he claimed that it came from some “Tang annals.”⁵⁰ The comment is confusing, however, especially the final line, which notes that marriages between Jing River and Dongting “have a long history.” As mentioned above, Jingyang and Jing River are both places in Shaanxi Province and both are mentioned in the “Biography of Liu Yi.” Apparently, whoever wrote this comment somehow associated King Kinh Dương with Jingyang in Shaanxi since the characters are the same as those for “Kinh Dương.” It appears that the annotator was trying to say that since King Kinh Dương had married Lord Dongting's daughter in antiquity, and since there was a marriage during the Tang Dynasty between Lord Dongting's youngest daughter and someone from the area of Kinh Dương/Jingyang, that there was a long history of marriages between these two places.

The problem is that one of the figures who marries the daughter of Lord Dongting is a human being, King Kinh Dương, whereas the other is the son of a river, Jing River. This clearly does not make sense in historical terms, but that is understandable as the information from the “Biography of Liu Yi” is fiction, as is the story of King Kinh Dương. Eventually some Vietnamese scholars appear to have realized this. The nineteenth-century *Imperially Commissioned Itemized Summaries of the Comprehensive Mirror of Việt History* [*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*], a history of the realm

sponsored by the Nguyễn Dynasty, made no mention of King Kinh Dương's marriage with the daughter of Lord Dongting, a sign that someone had realized that this information was clearly an invention.

Lord Lạc Long, Âu Cơ and the “Biography of Liu Yi”

To continue with the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan,” the story goes on to say that although Lord Lạc Long replaced his father, King Kinh Dương, as ruler of the Xích Quỷ Kingdom, he spent most of his time in the water palace and only emerged when the people needed his assistance. Eventually a new ruler by the name of Di Lai [Đế Lai] came to power in the north. Recalling how one of his predecessors, Di Ming, had made a tour of the south, Di Lai did the same. There he left his wife, Âu Cơ, in a palace while he travelled about enjoying the riches of the land, forgetting to return to the north. The people suffered under this “harassment” [*phiền nhiễu*] and called out to Lord Lạc Long for assistance. Lord Lạc Long came back and found Âu Cơ living alone. He transformed himself into a handsome young man and the two fell in love. Lord Lạc Long then took Âu Cơ away, and when Di Lai sent his retainers to find her, Lord Lạc Long transformed himself in myriad ways to frighten them off. Di Lai thereupon returned to the north.⁵¹

The *Arrayed Tales* then recounts that Âu Cơ gave birth to some form of sac. Thinking that this was inauspicious, she discarded the sac in the wilds, but it later released one hundred eggs, each of which produced a son.⁵² Lord Lạc Long returned to his water palace and Âu Cơ was left to raise the sons on her own. Unable to manage this, she met with Lord Lạc Long and tried to leave the sons with him so that she could return to the north.⁵³ Lord Lạc Long then stated:

“I am of dragon stock, and am the leader of the water lineage. You are of immortal stock, and are an earthly being. Although the *qi* of *yin* and *yang* coalesced to produce sons, water and fire contradict each other. We are not of the same kind. It will be difficult for us to live long [together]. We should now separate from each other. I will take fifty sons and return to the water palace where they will each be allotted a place to rule over. Fifty sons will follow you to live on the land, and will divide the kingdom and rule.”

The fifty sons who followed Âu Cơ then honored the most dominant among them as their ruler, calling him the Hùng King, and calling the kingdom the Kingdom of Văn Lang.⁵⁴

This passage is extremely famous as many scholars in the modern era have written about what they see as the deep significance of the interaction between someone of the water realm with someone from the earthly realm. In particular, scholars have seen this as symbolizing the interaction of a maritime culture with a continental culture at some distant point in the past, an interaction that these scholars say deeply defined the Vietnamese as a people.⁵⁵ Keith Taylor, for instance, argued as follows:

The mythical traditions surrounding Lạc Long Quân [Lord Lạc Long] and the origins of the Hùng kings reveal a sea-oriented culture coming to terms with a continental environment. Civilization arrived with a culture hero from the sea who foiled a continental power by seizing his foe's wife and making her the mother of his heirs. This theme of the local culture hero neutralizing a northern threat by appropriating its source of legitimacy foreshadowed the historical relationship between the Vietnamese and the Chinese. The mythical origin of the Hùng kings reflects a maritime cultural base with political accretions from continental influences. This idea was later elaborated by Vietnamese literati into a genealogy of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ that brought together the southern aquatic line and the northern continental line of a single royal family, of which the founder was selected to predate the first mythical Chinese emperor.⁵⁶

Taylor's argument here is that the Vietnamese already possessed a "theme of the local culture hero neutralizing a northern threat by appropriating its source of legitimacy" prior to contact with the Chinese. However, it is unclear who this "northern threat" that was foiled by "a culture hero from the sea" might have been. His statement that "The mythical origin of the Hùng kings reflects a maritime cultural base with political accretions from continental influences" also implies that Vietnamese rulers were already adopting "political accretions from continental influences" prior to contact with the Chinese. But again, it is not clear what these "continental influences" or "political accretions" were. Nonetheless, according to Taylor, these themes as expressed in the story of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ were already present at the time of Chinese contact. Then at some later point, Vietnamese literati elaborated this story by adding the earlier genealogical information leading back to Shen Nong.

That a text likely compiled after the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century contained a "theme of the local culture hero neutralizing a northern threat" should lead us to question the antiquity of such a theme. Similarly, that the political leaders in a tale compiled in classical Chinese by a member or

members of a Sinicized Vietnamese elite are depicted as having adopted “political accretions from continental influences” should also lead us to wonder to what extent this “ancient myth” reflects medieval perspectives. To be fair, there might have been some story told by illiterate “folk” somewhere in the Red River Delta about a certain Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ that medieval scholars recorded and then elaborated. However, even if such a story existed, it is still dangerous to attribute to it the antiquity and deep cultural meaning that scholars have, especially when there is potentially much more prosaic evidence for the source of such a story. For instance, a seventeenth-century Chinese text based on documents obtained during the early-fifteenth-century Ming occupation includes a local story about a crocodile that concludes with the following information:

Each time a crocodile gives birth, it produces some several tens of eggs. When they hatch, those that descend into the water become crocodiles while those that ascend onto the shore become peculiar snakes and worms. Sometimes the mother will eat them to prevent them from multiplying.⁵⁷

Hence, is the story of fifty sons following Lạc Long Quân into the sea and fifty following Âu Cơ onto the land really a reflection of some deep cultural memory of the contact between maritime and continental ways of life? Or is it simply a medieval tale spun by a local scholar who was inspired by a narrative yarn about local crocodiles? We cannot say for sure, but clearly it is worth investigating the medieval context as a potential source for some of the information in these stories. And while local lore may have been a source of inspiration for the Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ tale, we should also not rule out the possibility that this story was inspired by some written source as well.

There are of course countless stories of dragons and immortals in Chinese literature concerning the areas to the south of the Yangzi River. Thus, in order to determine if anything is unique about the story of Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ, it would be wise to first mine the massive repertoire of Chinese stories about dragons and immortals. Here a good place to start would be the “Biography of Liu Yi,” given that there are clear connections between that story and the tale of King Kinh Dương and Thần Long. As it turns out, there are similarities between the “Biography of Liu Yi” and the above passage from the *Arrayed Tales*. The connections are not as direct as those concerning King

Kinh Dương and Thần Long, but they strongly suggest that this story at least inspired some of the ideas in the tale of Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ.

In the “Biography of Liu Yi,” Liu Yi delivers a letter to the underwater palace of the dragon lord of Lake Dongting on behalf of the lord’s daughter. When Liu Yi arrives at the palace, the text records the following information:

[Liu] Yi asked [a man who had showed him the way to the palace], “Where is Lord Dongting?”

“My lord is presently at the Dark Pearl Pavilion. He is discussing the Fire Cannon with the Sun Priest. They should be concluding shortly.”

“What is the Fire Cannon about?”

“My lord is a dragon. The spiritual power of the dragon relates to water; with a single droplet he can cover mountains and valleys. The priest, however, is a man. The spiritual power of man relates to fire; with a single torch he can burn down Epang Palace [a palace built by the first emperor of Qin]. Since these two types of spiritual genius are different in their functions, the mystic transformations are also distinctly different.”⁵⁸

While Lord Lạc Long’s statement to Âu Cơ takes on a new significance after reading this passage, there is of course no way to prove for certain that the author of the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” got the idea from the “Biography of Liu Yi” to explain the differences between the dragon, Lord Lạc Long, and the immortal/earthly being, Âu Cơ, as those between fire and water. Nonetheless, when one considers how the information in these two texts encompasses dragons, immortals, humans, water, fire, *qi*, *yin*, and *yang*, it becomes obvious that we are dealing more with ideas from the realm of Daoist lore than those of a deep historical consciousness of the ancient encounter between two distinct cultures.

Lạc and Hùng

After tracing a genealogy from Shen Nong to Lord Lạc Long, the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” then ends with a discussion of the Hùng kings and their Kingdom of Văn Lang. The information in this final section, like all of the preceding information, cannot be found in Chinese historical sources, with one partial exception—the name “Hùng.” One Chinese historical source records that there were rulers in the area of the Red River Delta in the first millennium BCE who were called “Hùng.” There are other sources, however, that

state that these rulers were called “Lạc.” This discrepancy has been the source of a debate that has raged on and off for the past century.

It was the French scholar, Henri Maspero, who began this debate when in the early twentieth century he noticed that in Chinese historical sources the characters for both “lạc” [雜] and “hùng” [雄] appeared in a passage that mentions rulers in the Red River Delta prior to the advent of Chinese rule in the region. Maspero examined these sources and concluded that a Chinese scribe had erroneously written “hùng” [雄] instead of “lạc” [雜] at one point, and the Vietnamese had simply perpetuated this scribal error. Maspero did not deny that there had been rulers in the Red River Delta prior to the inclusion of that area into the Qin and Han empires. Instead, he simply argued that the rulers were called Lạc rather than Hùng.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, there is a colonial arrogance to Maspero’s claim that the Vietnamese had simply copied a mistake without realizing it and had been referring to their founding kings by an erroneous term for centuries. Given the tone and implications of Maspero’s argument, it is not surprising that his claim eventually engendered a great deal of debate. The dispute began in the 1940s, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s it reached a political conclusion in favor of Hùng.⁶⁰ It has yet, however, to reach an academic conclusion. While scholars have argued at length about which character, “lạc” or “hùng,” is correct, few have discussed the larger passage in which these characters appear in early Chinese sources. In looking at the passage and its textual history, however, it becomes clearer which term is the more accurate.

This debate centers around three purported original sources. Two of them contain the term “lạc,” and one the term “hùng.” All of these works are now lost, but passages from them are cited in works that are still extant. The first main source is the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* [*Jiaozhou waiyu ji*]. Textual evidence suggests that this work dates from either the late third or early fourth century CE.⁶¹ The passage from this work concerning early rulers in the Red River Delta is preserved in Li Daoyuan’s sixth-century text, *Annotated Classic of Waterways* [*Shuijing zhu*]. To quote:

The *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* states that “In the past, before Jiaozhi [Giao Chi] had commanderies and districts, the land had *lạc* fields.

These fields followed the rising and falling of the floodwaters, and therefore the

people who opened these fields for cultivation were called *lạc* people. *Lạc* kings/princes and *lạc* marquises were appointed to control the various commanderies and districts. Many of the districts had *lạc* generals. The *lạc* generals had bronze seals on green ribbons.”⁶²

This passage contains contradictory information. It purports to describe a time before Chinese rule (that is, before the Chinese established “commanderies and districts”), but it employs Chinese terminology, such as “marquis,” “general,” “district,” and “bronze seals on green ribbons” in its description. This creates confusion. Who appointed the *lạc* kings/princes? Whose “bronze seals on green ribbons” were those? How could the *lạc* people have ruled over “commanderies and districts” if they lived in a time before the establishment of commanderies and districts? Finally, one other point that is unclear from this passage is what the term “*lạc*” refers to. In this passage, this character represents a sound from a foreign language rather than meaning. Many scholars have argued that it must have signified something in an indigenous language related to the statement that “These fields followed the rising and falling of the floodwaters,” since the text then states that “therefore the people who opened these fields for cultivation were called *lạc* people.” Nonetheless, the character itself provides no evidence as it was clearly used to represent a sound rather than meaning.

The other purported original source that contains the term “*lạc*,” and that has often been cited in this long debate, is a work known by various names. One text refers to it as the *Account of Yi Region* [*Yizhou zhuan*], and a later incarnation of that same text refers to it as the *Record of Guang Region* [*Guangzhou ji*]. Let us pause for a moment here to examine the textual trail of this source, as it reveals a great deal about the nature of the sources upon which this *lạc* versus *hùng* debate is based.

There is an early Chinese chronicle known as the *Historical Records* [*Shiji*] that was compiled in the first century CE. Later, in the eighth century CE, a scholar by the name of Sima Zhen wrote a commentary to this text entitled *Searching for Hidden Meanings in the Historical Records* [*Shiji suoyin*]. In this commentary, Sima Zhen included roughly the same information about the Red River Delta as was quoted above. The source for this quote was a work entitled the *Account of Yi Region*. However, Sima Zhen indicated in his commentary

that he had not actually consulted this text. Instead, he obtained the information from a citation in a work compiled by a certain “Mr. Yao” [Yao shi]. Rao Zongyi has determined that this Mr. Yao was probably Yao Cha, a scholar official who passed away in the early seventh century and who compiled a commentary, which is no longer extant, to the *History of the Han* [*Hanshu*]. It is perhaps from this work that Sima Zhen then obtained the quote about the Red River Delta attributed to the *Account of Yi Region*.

So in the eighth century, Sima Zhen cited a work by Yao Cha, a scholar official who had died in the previous century, who in turn cited the *Account of Yi Region*. As for that text that Yao Cha cited, it is unclear when it was written or by whom. Rao Zongyi found a few texts entitled either the *Account of Yi Region* or the *Record of Yi Region* [*Yizhou ji*] dating from the periods of the Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms and the Liang Dynasty (206 BCE–557 CE). So while it is unclear when exactly the *Account of Yi Region* as quoted by Sima Zhen was compiled, its passage on the Red River Delta is as follows:

Mr. Yao cited the *Account of Yi Region*, which says “Jiaozhi had *lac* fields that relied on the rising and falling of the floodwaters. The people who lived off these fields were called *lac* people. There were *lac* kings/princes and *lac* marquises. The various district [heads] called themselves *lac* generals. With bronze seals on green ribbons, they were the same as the current district magistrates.”⁶³

It should be obvious that this passage is much clearer than the same passage in the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*. Such issues as the contradictory information about *lac* kings/princes and marquises being appointed to rule over commanderies and districts at a time before commanderies and districts had been established, and the question of who appointed them, have been eliminated.

A few centuries after Sima Zhen included this information in his commentary to the *Historical Records*, this information was simplified still further. This occurred when Sima Zhen’s commentary, which up to this point had been a standalone text, was then incorporated into the actual body of the *Historical Records* and published as a combined text and commentary during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE). When this happened, for some reason the name of the text Mr. Yao had consulted centuries earlier was changed from the *Account of Yi Region* to the *Record*

of *Guang Region*. Some changes were also made to the quoted passage, so that it now appears as follows:

In *Searching for Hidden Meanings* [in the *Historical Records*], Mr. Yao cites the *Record of Guang Region*, which says “Jiaozhi had *lạc* fields that relied on the rising and falling of the water. The people who lived off these fields were called *lạc* marquises. The various district [heads] called themselves *lạc* generals. With bronze seals on green ribbons, they were the same as the current [district] magistrates.⁶⁴

In addition to the change of title, the other notable difference in this version is that there is no longer mention of “*lạc* people” or “*lạc* kings/princes.” This is an important point that we will return to below. For now, let us merely note that it is clear that this information, which is attributed to either the *Account of Yi Region* or the *Record of Guang Region*, went through multiple stages of transmission and changed along the way. From some perhaps original text, this information was then cited by Mr. Yao in the seventh century, who was then cited by Sima Zhen in the eighth century, whose comments were then altered when they were included in a new edition of the *Historical Records*, which was compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty sometime in the twelfth to thirteenth century.

The final main source that refers to early rulers in the Red River Delta is the *Treatise on Southern Yue* [*Nanyue zhi*]. This work is attributed to the fifth-century scholar, Shen Huaiyuan.⁶⁵ We know of it today as it is cited in two tenth-century encyclopedias. There is a longer version of it in the *Wide Gleanings Made in the Taiping Era*, and a condensed version in the *Record of the World in the Taiping Era* [*Taiping huanyu ji*]. The longer passage from the *Wide Gleanings Made in the Taiping Era* is as follows:

The area of Jiaozhi is quite fertile. Migrants settled there, and it was only then that [the original inhabitants?] learned how to cultivate by broadcasting seeds. The soil is dark and fertile, and the *qi* is strong [*hùng*]. Therefore, the fields are now called *hùng* fields, and the people, *hùng* people. There are leaders who are called *hùng* kings. There are assistants who are called *hùng* marquises, and the land is divided among *hùng* generals (This comes from the *Treatise on Southern Yue*).⁶⁶

There are a few points to note about this passage. The first is that the passage, as in the *Account of Yi Region* and the *Record of Guang Region*, omits the

reference to “commanderies and districts.” This text does not indicate that it is referring to some point in the past, prior to the period of Chinese rule, as the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* does. As a result, it eliminates obvious contradictions in meaning, such as the statement that people were appointed to rule over commanderies and districts during a period prior to the establishment of commanderies and districts, and the mention of bronze seals on green ribbons—Chinese accoutrements of governance—in this period prior to Chinese rule.

The next point to note is that the character “hùng” in this passage is representing meaning, not sound, as the term “lạc” did in the texts above. The *qi* in the land is strong [*hùng*], and it is because of this that the people in the area are called *hùng*, or strong, as well. In other words, this author did not simply make a scribal error and write “hùng” when he should have written “lạc,” as Maspero claimed. Instead, he dramatically changed this passage to match the meaning of the term “hùng,” as “strong.” To do this he added information at the beginning of the passage about the land being fertile and the *qi* strong, and then made a direct connection between this word for “strong” with the names of the fields and the people.

If the evidence of the degree to which this author invented information here is still not clear, we should also point out that the phrase “the soil is dark and fertile” is a very close copy of a line from the “Tribute of Yu” section of the *Venerated Documents*, where it says that “the soil is light and fertile.”⁶⁷ This is not a common expression in classical Chinese. Instead, this author was clearly mimicking the line from the *Venerated Documents*. In contrast, the same passage from the other two texts shows no evidence of borrowing from other texts.

A pattern emerges when one considers all of the above information. It is clear that this information we find in what are purported to be different sources ultimately derives from one original source. Each of these accounts provides the same basic information in the same order and essentially in the same way. It is also clear that this information was cited over and over. Further, each time it was cited anew, there was potential for a scribe to alter the passage. This clearly happened with the version that contained the character “lạc.” In particular, the author(s) altered the passage to make the information clearer and eliminate contradictions. Given that the version containing the

character “hùng” also provides the same basic information in the same order and the same manner, and that the changes it contains make this information clearer, it is logical to conclude that the version containing the character “hùng” was created by a scribe who altered the *lạc* version in order to make it clearer.

In the 1950s, French scholar Émile Gaspardone looked at these *lạc* and *hùng* passages and argued that they constitute two separate historical traditions. While he recognized a degree of parallelism between the two, he focused more on their content to argue that they represented the recording of the same type of information under separate historical conditions. The *lạc* tradition, he felt, represented an earlier account of the region, when Chinese first arrived and saw people living in the area who relied on the floodwaters to engage in cultivation. As more Chinese settled in the region—a fact Gaspardone felt was indicated by the phrase in the *Treatise on Southern Yue*, “migrants settled”—they became more familiar with the area and the properties of its soil. Gaspardone argued that at this point someone produced a new version of this same information, which reflected the more intimate knowledge that the Chinese now had of the region and its “strong” [*hùng*] soil.⁶⁸

In an appendix on this *lạc* and *hùng* question in the *Birth of Vietnam*, Keith Taylor reviewed Gaspardone’s theory and then offered a slightly different interpretation to explain the differences between these texts. He noted how the *Record of Guang Region* does not mention any kings, whereas the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* and the *Treatise on Southern Yue* both do. From this he argued that the reference to kings in these latter two texts “seem[s] to reflect the filtering of Vietnamese legendary traditions into Chinese literary sources.”⁶⁹ In other words, whereas Gaspardone saw a change in texts that indicated to him an increase in the knowledge of Chinese about the region, Taylor attributed change in texts to the inclusion of Vietnamese knowledge in Chinese sources.

What unites the work of Gaspardone and Taylor is a belief that changes in the content of texts were potentially the result of changes on the ground in the Red River Delta. Clearly, however, this was not the case. Taylor’s argument, based on the absence of any mention of kings in the *Record of Guang Region*, is a perfect example of this. As we saw above, this text is first cited in an edition of the *Historical Records*, which was compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty. In that work, the *Record of Guang Region* is mentioned in a

commentary attributed to Sima Zhen. However, Sima Zhen's original text cited the *Account of Yi Region*, not the *Record of Guang Region*. What is more, Sima Zhen's commentary originally *did* mention kings. Hence, the very title, *Record of Guang Region*, and the absence of any mention of kings in this supposed text, are both very late textual developments. And they developed for reasons that had nothing to do with the reality on the ground in the Red River Delta.

So in the end Maspero was right in arguing that “lạc” is the accurate term. However, he was wrong in asserting that a Chinese scribe had simply made a mistake in copying this character and writing “hùng” instead. While Chinese scribes undoubtedly did make errors, like medieval scribes in other parts of the world they also deliberately altered the texts they “copied.” In the case of the information about the Red River Delta, it is clear that scribes repeatedly altered this information over the centuries. We can see gradual changes to the *lạc* version and a more dramatic change with the creation of the *hùng* version, but all of these texts followed the same format and presented the same information. It is thus clear that there was only one tradition, a tradition of seeking to simplify and clarify confusing information, and the term “hùng” was created in this process.

Maspero was also wrong to assert that Vietnamese had simply copied a mistake, for they actually invented something new by using both “hùng” and “lạc.” While the *Arrayed Tales* records that the kings of Văn Lang were called “Hùng” kings, it then states that, “The ministers were called *lạc* marquises, and the generals were called *lạc* generals.”⁷⁰ In other words, whoever wrote the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” did not copy any single earlier text, but instead, created something new based on multiple texts. It is also interesting to note that when the *Arrayed Tales* introduces the term “Hùng,” it does so by noting that the fifty sons who followed Âu Cơ “honored the dominant one as ruler, calling him the Hùng King.”⁷¹ What is significant here is that the word for “dominant” [*hùng trưởng*] contains the same character meaning “strong” [*hùng*] that is used in the title “Hùng King.” When one considers that whoever wrote this information is perhaps also the person who chose to label the kings “Hùng” and their officials “lạc,” the play on words here perhaps points to the logic behind such a decision.

Modern scholars have argued that the combination of these two terms in the *Arrayed Tales* demonstrates that the “true names” of the Hùng kings and

their officials were passed down orally through the centuries by “the people.” The evidence for this type of claim is the absence of any evidence of such usage prior to the appearance of the *Arrayed Tales*. Earlier Chinese sources use either “hùng” or “lạc,” so the presence of both terms in a Vietnamese source is proof to some scholars of oral transmission from antiquity. Such claims, however, have not addressed the degree to which the rest of this biography is indebted to earlier texts. The above discussion covers some of the major links between passages in the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” and various texts. However, many other aspects of this document also support the claim that it is a medieval creation.

For instance, there are many problems with geographical terms in the text. The *Arrayed Tales* mentions that Văn Lang was divided into fifteen regions. Maspero pointed out roughly a century ago that the names for some of these regions were coined during the period of Chinese rule, and therefore could not have been employed earlier. Maspero also called into question the veracity of the name “Văn Lang,” a term as problematic as “Hùng.”⁷² The description of the extent of the Kingdom of Văn Lang is also a problem. The text states that the kingdom “pressed against the Southern Sea to the east, and came up against Ba Shu [that is, Sichuan] to the west. To the north it reached Lake Dongting, and to the south it met the Kingdom of Hồ Tôn (Today it is the Kingdom of Champa).”⁷³ While premodern Vietnamese scholars questioned the accuracy of this claim, no one to my knowledge has ever noticed the stylistic similarities between this passage and the description of the geographic extent of the ancient Sichuanese Kingdom of Ba in the *Treatise on the Kingdoms South of [Mount] Hua*. This text records that “Its land reached in the east to Yufu, and to the west it reached Ba Circuit. To the north it connected with Hanzhong, and to the south it went all the way to Qianfu.”⁷⁴

Chinese scholar Rao Zongyi, meanwhile, pointed out decades ago that this story is clearly inspired by elements from Chinese history and literature beyond the points made above. He argued that the story of Lộc Tục, the future King Kinh Dương, allowing his older half-brother to succeed to the throne echoes a famous story of a man named Wu Taibo who allowed his younger brother to ascend the throne. Di Ming’s tour of the south, where he obtains a wife, calls to mind the ancient Emperor Shun’s tour of the south, where he died and was lamented by his two wives. The fact that the Hùng kings were

called “Hùng” each generation is reminiscent of the kings of the ancient kingdom of Chu who were all called “Mi” each generation. The one-hundred sons of Âu Cơ seem to be connected to the Hundred Yue, the people who supposedly inhabited the area of southern China in antiquity.⁷⁵ Hence, when one thus considers this document as a whole, with all of the ways in which it reflects information from other texts, it becomes extremely difficult to see oral transmission in the midst of such intense textual influence and borrowing.

“Việt/Yue” as a Term of Self-Reference

The influence of Chinese history and literature on the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” is thus extremely significant, and it all supports the claim that this story is a medieval creation. That being the case, we need to completely rethink our understanding of Vietnamese history to accommodate for this fact. In what follows I will attempt to briefly sketch an outline of an alternative interpretation of early and medieval Vietnamese history that can help to explain who wrote the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” and why. Given the limitations of space, this discussion will be very impressionistic and will merely highlight a couple of trends that I argue we should consider when examining this period. First, in contrast to the belief that “the people” of the Red River Delta in the first millennium BCE possessed some identity that they maintained through a thousand years of Chinese rule, I argue that we can discern a gradual trend on the part of the Sinicized elite who lived in an area that stretched from present-day northern Vietnam across Guangdong Province to employ the self-referential term “Việt” [Yue], particularly for political purposes. Second, the further development of a local sense of identification, which we find represented in a work like the *Arrayed Tales*, was part of a larger transformation in the region. Particularly in areas ruled by members of the Sinicized elite, people leaned towards more localist forms of identification. In this process, members of the elite looked through earlier texts to find information they could use to fashion a local identity and sense of place.

Over a decade ago, historian Charles Holcombe wrote an extremely lucid account of the early history of what he called “China’s deep south.” In it he argues that there was no “Vietnam” in the first millennium BCE or at any time during the thousand years of Chinese rule. Instead, he demonstrates that this was a world that was, together with the area of what we today refer to as

southern China, slowly transforming as the Red and Pearl River deltas gradually became Sinicized islands amidst a multi-ethnic sea of non-Sinicized peoples.⁷⁶ Building on this observation, I would argue that rather than it being the case that this Sinicized elite eventually recorded information about local cultures, it was this Sinicized elite in these two areas who actually started to invent a sense of local identity for themselves. They did so not by turning to the local people, but to extant Chinese texts.

It is the Chinese who originally referred to the various peoples to their south as Việt/Yue, or collectively as the Hundred Việt/Yue. With the exception of an ancient kingdom called the Kingdom of Yue, Việt/Yue was a name that the Chinese gave to many disparate peoples who, as far as we know, did not use this term to refer to themselves.⁷⁷ Eventually, however, there would be some individuals who would consciously adopt the term “Việt/Yue” for their own use, particularly in the names of their kingdoms. Interestingly, the first people to do this were all either Han Chinese or of partial Han Chinese descent. Zhao Tuo [Triệu Đà], a Chinese official who established a kingdom in the late third century BCE over an area that stretched from modern-day Guangdong Province to northern Vietnam, was perhaps the earliest person to employ the term “Việt/Yue” for a self-referential purpose. He called his domain the Kingdom of Southern Việt/Yue.⁷⁸ In the centuries that followed, however, others would do the same.

There was a Kingdom of Southern Việt/Yue, for instance, which was declared by a certain Lý Bí in the sixth century in the area of what is today Vietnam. Lý Bí was reportedly the seventh-generation descendent of Chinese who had fled southward at the end of the Han Dynasty to the area of what is now Vietnam. Over the course of that period, it is likely that this family intermarried with local people and established strong bonds to the area. In 544, Lý Bí took advantage of political instability in the region to establish his own kingdom and declared himself to be the Emperor of Southern Việt/Yue.⁷⁹

Because the *Complete Book* mentions both Zhao Tuo and Lý Bí, modern scholars have argued that this is a sign that a Vietnamese consciousness persisted beneath Chinese rule. The Vietnamese wanted to be independent and never forgot the period when Zhao Tuo established a kingdom in the region. According to these scholars, information about Zhao Tuo’s kingdom was passed down orally from one generation to the other, and then in the sixth

century Lý Bí tapped into this local memory. One problem with this idea, however, is that there were people beyond the area of what is today Vietnam who also employed the term “Southern Việt/Yue” during this general period, thereby calling into question the idea that there were shared memories that were limited to “the people” in the Red River Delta.

In the early seventh century, for example, a man by the name of Lin Shihong rose through the ranks of a rebel group in the area of what is today Jiangxi Province in China and eventually led the group to defeat a Sui Dynasty army sent against it. Lin Shihong then declared himself to be the King of Southern Việt/Yue. Not long after this, he declared himself emperor and named his kingdom Chu.⁸⁰ Lin Shihong thus seems to have been testing out different political possibilities. He toyed with the idea of being the King of Southern Việt/Yue before he turned to another icon of the south, the ancient kingdom of Chu, and elevated himself to the position of an emperor.

Another figure from this same period considered following a similar path as Lin Shihong, but declined to do so. Feng Ang (?–646) was from the area of what is today Guangdong Province. His paternal ancestors, however, had come from northern China. At some point after the northern part of China came under the control of the Northern Wei in 386 CE, a member of the Feng family fled to Koryo, or what we today call Korea. From there he sent a son, Feng Ye, to proceed with three-hundred others to the area of southern China, then under the control of the Jin Dynasty. Feng Ye settled in Panyu, in current Guangdong Province. His grandson married a certain Madame Xian from a great local family, referred to as a “Việt/Yue” family in Chinese sources. Members of the Feng family subsequently served as local leaders, and it was into this influential southern family that Feng Ang was born.

As an adult, Feng Ang served the Sui Dynasty as a general. When the Sui collapsed, he returned to the area of Guangdong and eventually, after a great deal of battle, came to control a vast amount of territory in the area of what is today Guangdong, Guangxi and even Hainan provinces. Supporters told Feng Ang that given his power, he should declare himself King of Southern Việt/Yue. Feng Ang, however, refused. He acknowledged that he was the sole ruler in the area and that he was more prosperous than anyone else, but hesitated to refer to himself as a king, arguing that to claim such a self-aggrandizing title would insult the accomplishments of his ancestors.⁸¹

What these examples suggest is that in the first millennium CE there was no clear “Việt/Yue” identity restricted to a certain people in the Red River Delta or understood by the non-literate masses. Instead, these examples indicate that there were various members of the Sinicized elite in an area roughly encompassing present-day Guangdong Province and northern Vietnam—the two areas that Charles Holcombe has demonstrated were the most Sinicized in the region—who knew that “Việt/Yue” was a term that had long been used in written sources to refer to the people of this region. As a result, at times when some of these figures sought to create their own political space, they employed this term to designate their position in the larger world. However, there is no evidence that non-Sinicized indigenous peoples actually used the term “Việt/Yue,” or that the Sinicized elite’s use of this term was meant to appeal to such people.

From these beginnings in the first millennium CE, the term “Việt/Yue”—as a term used in the title of kingdoms created by Han Chinese or people of at least partial Han Chinese descent in the area from what is today Guangdong Province to northern Vietnam—was then taken up by the Sinicized elite in the Red River Delta in the first few centuries of the second millennium CE to refer specifically to the area under their political control. Here again, the textual evidence suggests that this term was still employed in a mainly political sense to indicate a royal enterprise. Indeed, the preface to the *Arrayed Tales* gives us a sense of this. I have cited some of this information above. What follows is the entire opening passage of the preface to that work:

Although the Cassia Sea is in [the area of] South of the Passes, the marvels of its mountains and streams, the numinosity of its land, the heroism of its people, and the divine miraculousness of its affairs can all be found there.⁸² From the time before the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, not that far from antiquity, southern customs were still simple. There were not yet any histories of the kingdom to record affairs. Therefore, [information about] most affairs has been lost. That which was fortunate to continue to exist and not be destroyed are just the oral transmissions of the people. Then during the Two Han [Dynasties], the Three Kingdoms, the Eastern and Western Jin, the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and into the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming there were finally historical accounts to record affairs, such as the *Treatise on Lingnan*, the *Extensive Record of Jiao Region* and the *Brief Treatise on Jiaozhi*, all of which can be consulted.⁸³ However, Our Việt is the land of the ancient

distant wilds. Therefore, the records about it are sparse. Nonetheless, its kingdom began with the Hùng kings. The slow stream of civility passed through the Triệu [that is, Zhao Tuo], Ngô, Đinh, Lê, Lý, Trần, and has now reached the sea. Therefore, records of the history of the kingdom have become particularly detailed. But with the creation of these accounts, is the information in them history? There is no record of when they were begun or who the person was who completed them. Perhaps a draft was composed by preeminent scholars during the Lý and Trần, and was then embellished in recent times by gentlemen who were learned and fond of antiquity.⁸⁴

In this passage, the term “Việt” appears in the expression “Our Việt” [Ngã Việt]. This is a difficult term to grasp. Theoretically, it could also be translated as “We Việt,” but in the context of this work, and in its usage elsewhere, it is evident that it does not refer to a people but to a dynastic enterprise, and by extension, a kingdom. Indeed, this is how we find the term “Việt” employed in the historical record for the medieval period. For instance, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, the founder of the Đinh Dynasty, named his kingdom Đại Cồ Việt in 968, and a year later granted his son the title of “Prince of Southern Việt.”⁸⁵ “Đại” and “cồ” both mean “great,” the first being a Chinese term and the second, Vietnamese. It is possible that Đinh Bộ Lĩnh chose this term to differentiate his kingdom from an earlier “Great Việt/Yue” kingdom, which was established in 917 in the area of what is today Guangdong Province.⁸⁶ In this manner, medieval Vietnamese appear to have continued the practice of the Sinicized political elite from this larger region of identifying their kingdoms as “Việt/Yue.” What is unique, however, is the extent to which the elite in the Red River Delta then sought to buttress this term, and their political enterprises, with further documentation from extant Chinese texts. This is a phenomenon clearly evident in the above passage from the preface to the *Arrayed Tales*.

All of the information in this passage is there to explain the location and existence of “Our Việt.” What is significant is that all of this information is made meaningful through reference to concepts that had long been extant in Chinese texts, and that were also quite Sino-centric. The *Arrayed Tales* states it is providing information about the “Cassia Sea,” a Chinese term for the coastal regions in the area of what is today southern China and northern Vietnam, which is “South of the Passes” that run along the northern borders of present-day Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. It is an area that was

originally part of the ancient “distant wilds” [*yêu hoang; yaohuang*], a Sino-centric geographic term from the first millennium BCE that refers to the lands most distant from the imperial capital. As this region then passed through Chinese dynastic time (from the Han to the Ming), it was made legible through the production, by Chinese writers, of texts about the region. This process then intensified under the Lý and Trần as the spread of “civility” [*văn minh; wenming*], by which is implied the entire repertoire of texts and teachings associated with the Chinese scholarly tradition, fully took hold.

Hence, from this passage we can get the sense that educated medieval Vietnamese must have examined extant Chinese texts and noticed that information about their region of the world gradually increased over the ages. They used this information to provide textual evidence for their place in the larger world. Proud of their current dynastic enterprise of Our Việt, they then projected its existence into the past by inventing an orthodox line of political succession from the Hùng kings to Zhao Tuo’s Kingdom of Southern Việt/Yue, to the various short-lived Vietnamese dynasties of the tenth century, and finally to the Lý and Trần dynasties. This was clearly an act of creation, for as the textual analysis of the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” above indicates, there were no actual Hùng kings. Further, there were other kingdoms of Southern Việt/Yue in the region besides Zhao Tuo’s. Selecting Zhao Tuo’s Kingdom of Southern Việt/Yue, rather than those of Lý Bí or Lin Shihong, was an arbitrary decision in this creative process.

The “Localist Turn”

This desire on the part of the medieval Vietnamese elite to identify with their local political enterprise and use texts to create a sense of importance for their region was mirrored in many areas of the Chinese empire in these very same years. Scholars of the Song Dynasty period have argued that a major transformation took place during this period as the elite turned their focus from the national stage to their respective local region. More specifically, as the political control of the empire started to fragment during the late Tang, and as northern portions of the empire were lost during the Song, literati focused more on strengthening their position in their local arenas than on seeking power at the capital. Over time, this “localist turn,” as it is often labeled, then manifested

itself in other ways, from marriage strategies to an increased scholarly interest in local areas.⁸⁷ In other words, the social changes of this period provided a perfect setting for the creation of invented traditions.

While the Red River Delta was distinct during this period in that it became autonomous from direct Chinese rule, one could argue that this was a “localist turn” comparable to similar changes in elite focus in various areas of the Chinese empire at that time. For instance, in the tenth century, following the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, a scholar by the name of Du Guangting compiled a collection of anomaly accounts for the area of Sichuan. This work performed a function very similar to that of the *Arrayed Tales* in that it “domesticated” accounts of oddities from the region and in the process brought a sense of coherence to the area.⁸⁸ Further, like the compiler(s) of the *Arrayed Tales*, Du Guangting relied heavily on extant sources to compile his text. Therefore, not only is the *Arrayed Tales* not a record of oral tales that had been passed down for centuries, it is also not unique in that there were other classical Chinese texts compiled at roughly the same time and created in the same style for the same purposes.

In addition, there were other people who turned to the same information medieval Vietnamese scholars did to create their own sense of a local identity. The people whom we today refer to as the Cantonese, for instance, engaged in many of the same literary activities as the Vietnamese and at roughly the same time. Like the Vietnamese, the Cantonese also referred to themselves as Việt/Yue. Today, a distinct character is used to represent this Cantonese Việt/Yue [粵]. However, in the past this character was used interchangeably with the homophonous character that today refers specifically to the Vietnamese [越]. Also like the Vietnamese, there were Cantonese scholars who looked through earlier Chinese sources to find historical information about the Việt/Yue, be it recorded with the character “粵” or “越.”

One example of this is Ou Daren’s (1516–1596) *Treatise on the Previous Worthies of the Hundred Yue* [*Baiyue xianxian zhi*]. A native of Guangdong, Ou Daren collected historical information on various members of the Hundred Yue whom he deemed “worthies” [*hiên; xian*]. Most of the people included in the work had lived in the area of what is today Guangdong, but there were others who had not. Among them was Shi Xie [Sĩ Nhiếp], a Chinese administrator who had governed over northern Vietnam in the third

century CE and whom Ngô Sĩ Liên honored in his *Complete Book* as a “king” [*vuông; wang*] for his contributions to the region, particularly his reported efforts to teach Chinese classics.⁸⁹

Another example of a text from Guangdong that employed some of the same source materials as the Vietnamese did is the *New Anecdotes of Guangdong* [*Guangdong xinyu*] by Qu Dajun (1630–1696). This work is an encyclopedia that covers many topics written about earlier by either Chinese from the first millennium BCE up to at least the Song, or by local Cantonese after that. One topic concerns Việt/Yue women. Here the *New Anecdotes of Guangdong* acknowledges that the Trưng sisters were the first Việt/Yue women to gain fame, but argues that this was due to the novelty of their having “usurped” the title of “monarch” [*vuông; wang*] for themselves, something that no woman had ever done before. It then goes on to mention Lady Triệu, a woman warrior of the third century who lived somewhere in the area of what is today central Vietnam and who rode into battle on an elephant with her long breasts hanging over her shoulders. The *New Anecdotes of Guangdong* largely dismisses her, however, as merely a “heroic bandit.”⁹⁰

Having recognized but played down the importance of these women who are central to what is today Vietnamese history, the *New Anecdotes of Guangdong* then goes on to argue that there were Việt/Yue women in the region in the past who were much more notable, such as a couple of the daughters of the Xian clan from Guangdong. One of these women predated the Trưng sisters and protected the region from “savage chieftains” [*man tù; man qiu*] during the tumultuous time after the fall of the Qin Dynasty in 206 BCE.⁹¹ This Xian clan is the family that Feng Ang married into. If we recall, he was the man mentioned above who at the end of the Sui Dynasty was encouraged by his followers to establish his own kingdom and call himself the “King of Southern Việt/Yue.” If Feng Ang had done so, and had his kingdom remained autonomous from Chinese rule long enough, perhaps today there would be two independent Việt/Yue countries, for in the medieval period the Red and Pearl River deltas were very similar. In both areas there was a small Sinicized elite that sought to create a sense of local identity, that is, a sense of being “Việt/Yue,” and both did so in the same way, by employing information from extant Chinese sources to create stories about themselves.

Conclusion

Keith Taylor once wrote that the Vietnamese “learned to articulate their non-Chinese identity in terms of China’s cultural heritage.”⁹² This is true to some extent. However, we need to be careful in how we understand this statement. Taylor argued then, as many scholars in Vietnam still do today, that the Hùng kings had actually existed, and that this political tradition predating Chinese contact created a Vietnamese sense of identity that persisted through a thousand years of Chinese rule until it was finally articulated “in terms of China’s cultural heritage” in the medieval era. However, I argue that the discussion of the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” in this essay demonstrates that the Hùng kings did not exist. Instead, they were invented in the medieval era as part of a process in which the Sinicized elite in the Red River Delta first created and then articulated a distinct identity in terms of China’s cultural heritage. This is not to say that there were no polities in the Red River Delta in the first millennium BCE. The bronze drums and other artifacts that twentieth-century archeologists have unearthed demonstrate that there likely were. However, there is no evidence to suggest that medieval Vietnamese scholars knew of the bronze drums or the people who had used them. That is a twentieth-century invented tradition. What the medieval Sinicized elite did know about, however, was ancient texts, and they relied on old texts for material and inspiration to create a history as well as a local identity for themselves.

The Sinicized elite in the Red River Delta were not alone in doing this. Scholars in areas of the Chinese empire, such as Sichuan and Guangdong, engaged in similar practices at similar times. All throughout this larger region during roughly the same time period, scholars turned their gaze and interests to their local areas. They composed writings about their locales, such as anomaly accounts, by examining what had already been written about their area. In the process, they contributed toward the creation of a local identity. In the end, the project initiated by the medieval Sinicized elite in what is today Vietnam developed the furthest. Over the centuries, the traditions they invented became second nature. Indeed, over the past half-century, under the dominance of nationalism in Vietnam, these invented traditions of the medieval Sinicized Vietnamese elite have now become unchallengeable truths. Meanwhile, the implications of Lê Quý Đôn’s remark—that the *Arrayed Tales*,

the main source of these invented traditions, borrowed “more than can be counted” from other texts—has been willfully ignored.

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines an account called the “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan” in a fifteenth-century text, the Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes [Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện]. This account is the source for the “historical” information about the Hùng kings. Scholars have long argued that this information was transmitted orally from the first millennium BCE until it was finally written down at some point after Vietnam became autonomous in the tenth century. In contrast, this paper argues that this information about the Hùng kings was created after Vietnam became autonomous and constitutes an “invented tradition.”

KEYWORDS: *Vietnam, history, legends, literature, Hùng kings*

Notes

1. To speak of “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” during this period is of course anachronistic as these are modern terms laden with nationalistic connotations. I use these terms in this paper in a neutral sense, as code words to indicate the historical inhabitants in the areas of what we today refer to as “China” and “Vietnam,” respectively.
2. This perspective is ubiquitous in Vietnam, and the number of sources that make this point are therefore too numerous to cite. In terms of English-language scholarship, Keith Taylor made this point in his *Birth of Vietnam* where he noted that the core material about the Hùng kings that this essay examines was “surely transmitted during the Chinese period.” See Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 357.
3. I use the term “medieval” here loosely to refer to the period from the seventh through the fifteenth centuries. This period encompassed the final centuries of Chinese rule in the Red River Delta and the first few centuries of Vietnamese rule.

4. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–14 (6).
5. For representative works, see Nguyễn Phương, *Việt Nam thời khai sinh* [Vietnam at the Time of its Birth] (Huế: Phòng Nghiên Cứu Sử, Viện Đại Học Huế, 1965); Rao Zongyi, "Annan gushi shang Anyang wang yu Xiong wang wen ti" [The Question of King An Dương and the Hùng Kings in the Ancient History of Annan], *Nanyang xuebao* [Journal of the South Seas (Society)] 24, nos. 1–2 (1969): 41–50; and Henri Maspero, "Études d'histoire d'Annam. IV. Le Royaume de Văn-lang" [Studies in the History of Annam. vol. 4. The Kingdom of Văn Lang], *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* [Bulletin of the French School of the Far East] 18 (1918): 1–10.
6. For basic information about the *Arrayed Tales*, see Trần Nghĩa, ed., *Tổng tập tiểu thuyết chữ Hán Việt Nam* [Collection of Vietnamese Novels in Classical Chinese], tập [vol.] 1 (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 1997), 145–152; Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 354–357; and Émile Gaspardone, "Bibliographie Annamite" [Annamite Bibliography], *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 34 (1934): 128–130.
7. *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* [Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes], (1492), Manuscript: A. 1200 (hereafter *LNCQLT*), Chapter/Page: 1/8a.
8. Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục* [Jottings about Things Seen and Heard], (1777), Chapter/Page: 4/3b.
9. Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm* [Investigating the Treasury of Books in Hán and Nôm], vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1990), 192.
10. *LNCQLT*, 1/9b.
11. Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, 190.
12. For an example, see Hoàng Hưng, "Giá trị của tư liệu về Hùng vương trong 'Việt điện u linh' và 'Lĩnh Nam chích quái'" [The Value of the Material Concerning the Hùng Kings in the "Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm" and the "Collected Oddities from South of the Passes"], in *Hùng vương dựng nước* [The Hùng Kings Establish the Nation], vol. 2, ed. Song Mai (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1972), 103–110.
13. *LNCQLT*, 1/7b.
14. Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, 4/3b–4a. The quote is from 4/3b.
15. This process of creating a history for the nation in the DRV has been covered by Patricia Pelley in her *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
16. For an example of such an argument, see Trần Quốc Vượng, "Từ tư duy thần thoại đến tư duy lịch sử" [From Mythological Reasoning to Historical Reasoning], in *Hùng vương dựng nước* [The Hùng Kings Establish the Nation], vol. 3, ed. Song Mai (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1973), 402–405.

17. See, for instance, Đinh Gia Khánh and Chu Xuân Diên, *Văn học dân gian* [Folk Literature], vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Đại Học Và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, 1972). Keith Taylor likewise noted that Vietnamese “mythical traditions were transformed through intimate contact with China,” but did not examine the details of this transformation. See Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, xvii.
18. For China, see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1985).
19. Đinh Gia Khánh and Chu Xuân Diên, *Văn học dân gian*, 9–10.
20. For a discussion of the influence of Romantic Nationalism on folklore, see Roger D. Abrahams, “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (Winter 1993): 3–37.
21. Stuart Blackburn, “Oral Stories and Culture Areas: From Northeast India to Southwest China,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (December 2007): 432.
22. For a representative work, see Phan Ngọc and Phan Đăng Nhật, “Thử xây dựng lại hệ thống huyền thoại Việt Mường” [An Effort at Reconstructing the Việt Mường Mythic System], *Văn hóa dân gian* [Folk Culture] no. 33 (1991): 5–15 and no. 34 (1991): 21–31.
23. The number of studies that makes this claim are too numerous to cite here. Keith Taylor’s *The Birth of Vietnam* was influenced by this same perspective and made many of the same arguments. Readers are encouraged to consult that text and the many Vietnamese works it cites to get a sense of this approach to the past.
24. Siân Jones, “Historical Categories and the Praxis of Identity: The Interpretation of Ethnicity in Historical Archaeology,” in *Historical Archaeology: Back From the Edge*, eds. Pedro P. A. Funari, Martin Hall and Siân Jones (London: Routledge, 1999), 219–220.
25. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*.
26. Mark Alves, “Linguistic Research on the Origins of the Vietnamese Language,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (February/August 2006): 111, 122–123.
27. The classic study is Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).
28. David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). Henige discusses, among other issues, the problems of establishing chronologies of dynastic traditions from oral tales. In African history, there was a vibrant debate that began in the early 1970s between ethnohistorians, who felt that historical information can be obtained from oral tales, and structural anthropologists, who argued that oral tales are representations of worldviews in the guise of history. For an overview of this debate and its larger professional

- context from one of its main participants, see Jan Vansina, *Living With Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 197–221.
29. James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 82 and 85.
 30. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 23.
 31. See Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).
 32. William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 280–283.
 33. Kenneth DeWoskin, “The Six Dynasties Chih-kuai and the Birth of Fiction,” in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 21–52.
 34. Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 201.
 35. *LNCQLT*, 1/9b. For a summary of this work, see Campany, *Strange Writing*, 55–62. For a translation, see Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record*, trans. Kenneth DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
 36. *LNCQLT*, 1/9a.
 37. For more on morality books, see Cynthia J. Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
 38. Some of the names in this story are of Chinese individuals who are mentioned in Chinese texts. Others, however, are unique to Vietnamese sources. I have rendered the names of Chinese in *pinyin* followed by the *quốc ngữ* readings of their names. The names of the individuals unique to Vietnamese sources are rendered only in *quốc ngữ*.
 39. *LNCQLT*, 1/12a.
 40. Chang Qu, comp., *Huayang guo zhi* [Treatise on the Kingdoms South of (Mount) Hua], (fourth century CE), 3/1a.
 41. “Hundred Yue” [Baiyue; Bách Việt] is a term that Chinese scribes used in antiquity to refer collectively to the many diverse peoples who inhabited the region to the south of the Yangzi River.
 42. Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt], (1697 edition, originally compiled in 1479), Manuscript: A. 3 (hereafter *ĐVSKTT*), “Ngoại kỷ” [Outer Annals], Chapter/Page: 1/1a.
 43. See *Shangshu* [Venerated Documents], Yao dian [Canon of Yao].
 44. *LNCQLT*, 1/12b.
 45. This view of early Vietnamese history was developed in the early twentieth century by French scholar Léonard Arousseau. See Léonard Arousseau,

- “Le Première Conquête Chinoise des Pays Annamites” [The First Chinese Conquest of the Annamite Lands], *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 23 (1923): 245–264.
46. See Đào Duy Anh, *Lịch sử cổ đại Việt Nam* [Ancient History of Vietnam] (Hà Nội: Văn Hoá Thông Tin, 2005), 206–209.
 47. For a defense of this view, and an examination of other arguments, see Alves, “Linguistic Research,” 104–130.
 48. Li Fang et al., comps., *Taiping guangji* [Wide Gleanings Made in the Taiping Era], (984 CE), 419/1a–13a. For an English translation, see Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds., *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 346–354.
 49. ĐVSKTT, “Ngoại kỷ,” 1/1b.
 50. The only “Tang Annals” I have been able to locate is a section devoted to the Tang Dynasty period in Sima Guang’s eleventh-century *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* [*Zizhi tongjian*], which goes by that title. However, it makes no mention of any of the figures in this passage.
 51. LNCQLT, 1/13a–14a.
 52. Other versions, such as in the *Complete Book*, simply state that she gave birth to one hundred sons or one hundred eggs. See ĐVSKTT, “Ngoại kỷ,” 1/2a.
 53. LNCQLT, 1/14a–15a.
 54. *Ibid.*, 1/15a–15b.
 55. For an example, see Phạm Đức Dương, *Biển với người Việt cổ* [The Sea and the Ancient Việt] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1996), 7–8.
 56. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 1 and 3.
 57. Léonard Arousseau, ed., *Ngan-nan tche yuan* [*Annan zhiyuan*] (Hà Nội: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1923), 216. This title is impossible to translate and appears to be mistaken. It was probably originally called the *Treatise on Annan* [*Annan zhi*]. Émile Gaspardone discusses the problems with this title. See Émile Gaspardone, “Le Ngan-Nan Tche Yuan et Son Auteur” [The *Annan zhiyuan* and its Author], in *Idem*, 11.
 58. Li Fang et al., *Taiping guangji*, 419/3b. With the exception of a few small changes of my own, this translation is by Russell E. McLeod and can be found in Ma and Lau, *Traditional Chinese Stories*, 347–348.
 59. Maspero, “Études d'histoire d'Annam,” 7.
 60. For a fairly thorough overview of the various arguments put forth in the debate over the characters “lạc” and “hùng,” see Huệ Thiên, *Những tiếng trống qua cửa các nhà sấm: nghiên cứu, trao đổi về ngữ văn và lịch sử* [Beating Drums Before Houses of Thunder: Research and Exchanges Concerning Language and History] (HCMC: Trẻ, 2004), 113–127. The degree to which a political decision, rather than an academic one, was reached in this debate is made evident in

this article. Meanwhile, Keith Taylor stated in *The Birth of Vietnam* that he wished to examine this issue further before making a decision on which term was more accurate, and that he would provisionally use the term “Hùng” “as it has traditionally been used by Vietnamese historians.” See Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 307.

61. Rao Zongyi, “Annan gushi shang Anyang wang,” 42.
62. “交州外域記曰，交趾昔未有郡縣之時，土地有雒田，其田從潮水上
下，民墾食其田，因名為雒民。設雒王雒侯主諸郡縣。縣多為雒將。
雒將銅印青綬。” See Li Daoyuan, comp., *Shuijing zhu* [Annotated Classic of
Waterways], (ca. 515–524 CE), 37/7a–b. There is a term in this passage, “triều/
chao,” that many scholars have translated as “tide,” arguing that the Vietnamese
were making use of tidal waters in their agriculture. While this term can mean
“tide,” it also refers to rising river levels as well. In this context, “floodwaters”
makes more sense to me. Note also that the character, “vương/wang,” can be
translated as “king” or “prince.”
63. “姚氏按益州傳云：交趾有駱田，仰潮水上下，人食其田，名為駱人。
有駱王、駱侯。諸縣自名為駱將，銅印青綬，即今之令長。” See Sima
Zhen, *Shiji suoyin* [Searching for Hidden Meanings in the Historical Records],
Siku Quanshu edition, (eighth century), 25/7b.
64. “索隱姚氏按廣州記云，交趾有駱田，仰潮水上下，人食其田，名為駱侯，
諸縣自名為駱將，銅印青綬，即今之令。” See Sima Qian, *Shiji* [Historical
Records], Siku Quanshu edition, (first century BCE), 113/3b.
65. Bai Yaotian, “Luo Yue kao” [Investigation of Luo and Yue], in *Zhuangxue lunji*
[Collection of Discussions on Zhuang Studies], eds. Qin Naichang and Pan
Qixu (Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1995), 86.
66. “交趾之地頗為膏腴，徙民居之，始知播植，厥土惟黑壤，厥氣惟雄，
故今稱其田為雄田，其民為雄民，有君長亦曰雄王，有輔佐焉亦焉曰雄侯，
分其地以為雄將。（出南越志）。” See Li Fang et al., *Taiping guangji*, 482/6b. For
the condensed version, see Yue Shi, *Taiping huanyu ji* [Record of the World in
the Taiping Era], (tenth century), 170/10a.
67. See *Shangshu*, “Yu gong” [Tribute of Yu].
68. Émile Gaspardone, “Champs Lo et Champs Hiong,” *Journal Asiatique* [Asian
Journal] 243, no. 4 (1955): 461–477.
69. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 307.
70. *LNCQLT*, 1/15b.
71. *Ibid.*, 1/15a.
72. Maspero, “Études d’histoire d’Annam,” 1–7.
73. *LNCQLT*, 15b.
74. See Phan Thanh Giản et al., *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*
[Imperial Commissioned Itemized Summaries of the Comprehensive

- Mirror of Việt History], (1881), Manuscript: A. 2674, Tiền Biên [Preliminary Compilation], Chapter/Page: 1/4a–b, for a nineteenth-century discussion of the supposed geographical extent of the Kingdom of Văn Lang. For the quote about the Kingdom of Ba, see Chang Qu, *Huayang guo zhi*, 1/2b.
75. Rao Zongyi, “Annan gushi shang Anyang wang,” 47.
 76. Charles Holcombe, “Early Imperial China’s Deep South: The Viet Regions through Tang Times,” *Tang Studies* 10–11 (1997–[19]98): 125–56.
 77. For more on the term “Yue,” see Erica Brindley, “Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples (~400–50 B. C.),” *Asia Major* 16, no. 1 (2003): 1–32.
 78. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 23–27.
 79. *Ibid.*, 135–143.
 80. Ouyang Xiu et. al., comps., *Xin Tangshu* [New History of the Tang], (1060), Chapter: 87, “Liezhuàn [Biography] no. 12.”
 81. *Ibid.*, 110, “Liezhuàn” 35.
 82. The “Cassia Sea” [Qué Hải; Guihai] is a reference to the coastal areas to the south of the Five Passes that run along the northern border of what is today Guangxi and Guangdong provinces and that separate the area of “South of the Passes” [Lĩnh Nam; Lingnan] from the areas of China to the north.
 83. These titles are problematic. There was a *Treatise on Lingnan* [*Lingnan zhi*], but I cannot find reference to a *Brief Treatise on Jiaozhi* [*Jiaozhi zhilue*]. Furthermore, in this text the final two characters of this title [*zhilue*] appear in reverse order [*luezhi*], which is a mistake. As for the *Extensive Records of Jiao Region* [*Jiaozhou guangji*], this appears to be a clumsy combination of the titles of two separate works, the *Record of Jiao Region* [*Jiaozhou ji*] and the *Record of Guang Region* [*Guangzhou ji*]. As this title is written in *Record of Guang Region*, the character for “Guang” would have to serve as a modifier for the word “record,” and that is why I translated it as “extensive,” which is what this character literally means. In consulting other versions of the *LNCQLT*, I have found that they are inconsistent in the titles they provide.
 84. *LNCQLT*, 1/7a–8a.
 85. *ĐVSKTT*, Bản Kỷ [Basic Annals], 1/2b and 1/3b.
 86. Pronounced “Dayue” in Chinese, the name of this kingdom was changed the following year to “Han” and is referred to now as the Southern Han. See Ouyang Xiu, *Xin wudaishi* [New History of the Five Dynasties], (1072), Chapter 65, “Nan Han shijia” [Great Families of the Southern Han], 5.
 87. Two of the classic works on this transformation are Robert Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformation of China, 750–1550,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (December 1982): 365–442; and Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-Chou, Chiang-Hsi,*

in Northern and Southern Sung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

88. See Franciscus Verellen, "Shu As a Hallowed Land: Du Guangting's *Record of Marvels*," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* [Journal of Far Asia] 10, no. 10 (1998): 213–254.
89. Ou Daren, *Baiyue xianxian zhi* [Treatise on the Previous Worthies of the Hundred Yue], (sixteenth century), 4/16b–17b; and *ĐVSKTT*, 3/42a–42b.
90. Qu Dajun, *Guangdong xinyu* [New Anecdotes of Guangdong] (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, [facsimile of 1700 edition], 1968), 8/1a.
91. *Ibid.*, 8/1b.
92. Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xxi.