

Vietnamese Matriarchy and Modern Nationalism

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The Vietnamese origin story of *Âu Cơ* is an “invented tradition” ingrained in Vietnamese culture as resistance against colonialism. This gender-critical essay will examine different theoretical approaches and interpretations of ethnosymbolism, “invented traditions,” and the power of collective forgetting in forging a romantic nationalist novel, as well as the consequences on women’s movements.¹

Children of Fairies and Dragons

The study of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm) describes a type of tradition created during a period of social change during which a nation seeks to break from its past. The Vietnamese origin story of *Âu Cơ*, in its modern nationalist context, is such an invented tradition created during a period of political consolidation and anti-colonialism, forming a “politically awakened ethnic group” from separate ethnic tribes. Elites manufactured Vietnamese common descent to form a “politically awakened ethnic group” to separate from colonialism.²

Often, when nations turn to “invented tradition” it is because older traditions have become ineffective for party politics, or must be appropriated and recontextualized for social change, such as a nationalist movement.³ Even though all traditions are invented at some point, Hobsbawm’s “invented tradition” distinguishes a nationalist phenomenon where “use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel

1 Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, editors. *Canto Classics: The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, 6.

2 *ibid.*

3 Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, editors. *Canto Classics: The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, 1-14.

type for quite novel purposes.”⁴

According to legend, *Âu Cơ* is the mother of the Vietnamese ethnic people. *Âu Cơ* is an immortal fairy-bird from Vietnam’s highland region, who is known for her skills in healing medicine and her compassionate heart. During her travels she is confronted by a sea-monster, and she transforms into a crane to fly away. When Lac Long Quan, the dragon prince of the sea, sees her in danger, he grabs a boulder and defeats the monster. The two fall in love, and *Âu Cơ* gives birth to an egg sac, which hatches 100 children. Despite their love, *Âu Cơ* longs to return home to the mountains, and Lac Long Quan to the sea. The two separate, each taking 50 children with them to populate the earth. When Vietnamese children are taught the story of *Âu Cơ*, they learn the story of how the Vietnamese people came to be.⁵

Anthony Smith references *la longue durée*, an ethnic consciousness that stretches back to ancient civilization, and culminates over time into the establishment of modern nationalism.⁶ With an ethnosymbolic theoretical approach to historical analysis, the role of common myths, memories, values, and shared traditions create a nation. The nation then, is dormant until the political upheaval prompts an awakening of a politically conscious ethnic group.⁷ Though postmodernist historians challenge the idea of nations as fixed and immutable identities, there is an undeniable role that elite members of society hold, in manufacturing nationalist identity.⁸

Though Vietnamese historians hold contradicting ideas about the history of the myth of *Âu Cơ*, the incorporation of the story into the “Biography of the *Hồng Bàng* Clan” (*Hồng Bàng thị truyện*) by educated elites in 15th century Vietnam coincides with the concept of invented tradition.⁹ The biography traces genealogy of ancient royalty, interwoven with mythology. This medieval text provides a window into the invented tradition surrounding the Kingdom of *Văn Lang*. The fifty sons who

4 *ibid.*

5 Leeming, David Adams, *Creation myths of the world: an encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2010, p. 270.

6 Smith, Anthony (2004). Guibernau, M.; Hutchinson, John (eds.). "History and National Destiny: Responses and Clarifications". *History and National Identity: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics*: 199.

7 *ibid.*

8 *Warwick Debates*, 1996, www.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/units/gellner/Warwick2.html.

9 Liam C. Kelley. "The Biography of the *Hồng Bàng* Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, pp. 87–130. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2012.7.2.87>.

followed Âu Cơ honor the eldest as the Hùng King, and form the Kingdom of Văn Lang, separate from dynastic China.¹⁰ The story weaves together mythical and historical, with a constant thread of ethnic identity connecting the Vietnamese people, and distinguishing them from their colonial enemies.

While some historians claim that long before the elite wrote “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan,” the story was passed down through oral storytelling since antiquity.¹¹ While a timeless oral history would indicate the true ‘navel’ of Vietnam, these arguments fail to provide evidence of an earlier invention of “Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan,” where Âu Cơ is the mother of the region's first kings. Vietnam’s territory in Southeast Asia was never homogenous in terms of ethnicity and languages, but rather consisted of many tribes without no clear boundaries where one particular people could be described as “Vietnamese” in the sense of a national-group.¹² Ethnosymbolic approaches to Vietnamese mythology consequently underestimate the influence of elites on inventing tradition to legitimize nationalist sentiment. Consequently, the “political conscious ethnic group” narrative becomes ethnocentrist and dogmatic.

Gendering of the Nation

When considering the history of ancient matriarchy in the geographical region of modern Vietnam, a collective forgetting makes room for a far more romantic nationalist thought: the Vietnamese nation is inherent, and long before it had been won, was already coursing through the blood of its women. However, gendered nationalism sentiments become dangerous, even when anti-colonial in nature, if they do not provide women tools for liberation outside of ethnocentric conviction.

Vietnamese scholars like Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet claim that the matriarchal aspect of Vietnam’s origin myth differentiates Vietnamese society from the spread of Chinese Confucian ideology, such as *The Three Obediences* that divided a woman’s life into three stages of

10 Leeming, David Adams

11 Liam C. Kelley.

12 Churchman, Michael (2010). "Before Chinese and Vietnamese in the Red River Plain: The Han-Tang Period" (PDF). Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies. 4. Archived from the original (PDF) on 8 March 2021.

obedience, obeying her father before marriage, obeying her husband after marriage, and her eldest sons in widowhood.¹³¹⁴ Vietnamese women's struggles for liberation from Chinese patriarchy, when framed inside a matriarchal origin myth, becomes a metaphor for the entire nation's anti-colonial struggle for independence.¹⁵

One could argue that matriarchal social orders, in addition to the important role of “*Nữ Anh Hùng*” (heroines), demonstrate Vietnamese women not only defended their precious homeland alongside their male compatriots, Vietnamese women also took up arms to protect their womanhood against colonial violence. In this argument, the celebratory and mournful history of women warriors and martyrs like Trưng Sisters, Lady Triệu, and Đặng Thùy Trâm echoed in Vietnamese classrooms and national holidays prove the existence of a “politically awakened ethnic group.”¹⁶ Though these heroines gave their lives fighting colonialism, and contributed to a gendering of Vietnam, they are not the subject of this paper.

Anti-colonial nationalism does not distinguish itself from official nationalism in the sense that both assert cultural identity as a way to empower women. Vietnamese people have endured hundreds of years of occupation, and many bloody wars for independence. Vietnamese nationalism is built upon the principles of anti-colonialism, and is highly critical of remnants of colonial rule. After Vietnam's reunification in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam became a one-party system. In turn, anti-colonialism and anti-colonial women's movements have become synonymous with party politics. Vietnam cannot responsibly distinguish itself as a type of bottom-up nationalism rather than top-down nationalism, wherein the proletariat shake off the shackles of the oppressive elite, without some contradictions.

With vastly differing gender roles and cultural values, much of the discourse between Eastern women's movements and Western feminism are incongruent or unsatisfying. For start, there is no direct translation of the English word ‘feminism’ in Vietnamese, and the historical waves of feminism within the West do not have the same cultural relevance to

13 Tu Mai Thi and Tuyet, Le Thi Nham. *Women in Vietnam* / Mai Thi Tu, Le Thi Nham Tuyet Foreign Languages Publishing House Hanoi 1978.

14 Roces, M., & Edwards, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851234>, 129.

15 *ibid* 125.

16 *ibid*.

the Global South. But Vietnamese gender studies scholars often use the term “women’s movement,” regarding movements supporting Vietnamese women’s right to education, autonomy, and equality.¹⁷

Vietnam’s limited advocacy for gender equality is demonstrated in Vietnam’s 2000 National Action Plan written after the UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It asserts cultural identity as a way to empower Vietnamese women, but consequently, does not imagine a women’s movement that approaches cultural identity without ethnocentrism. Such romanization of a primordial past is impractical, only hindering progress in the future.¹⁸

Modern Vietnamese nationalism asserts that women’s cultural identity is based on the history and folktales of Vietnam, but ethnic minorities make up 20% of Vietnam’s population, and have their own cultures and languages and gender histories. A shared cultural past referenced as the solution to women’s issues erases women’s rights issues facing ethnic minority women, who do not share the same cultural past even though they are Vietnamese citizens.

Customs and traditions grouped with anti-colonial nationalism become trite when used to hold back Vietnamese women’s movements and confine them to an ethnocentric solution to genuine limitations of gender equality. Perhaps put best by modern Vietnamese heroine Út Tịch, “Còn cái lai quần cũng đánh,” which can be translated, in essence, to “even by the string of your trousers, still fight to the end.”¹⁹

The Ethnic Navel

While educated elites invented these ethnic ties to a common matriarch, their quality of being invented does not make them any less real; Vietnamese people have drawn blood and laid down their lives for national independence. A sign of an effective nationalist movement then, is the combining of the ancient and modern, so that the two would be hardly distinguishable, or not even worth distinguishing, compared to a

17 Roces, M., & Edwards, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851234>, 124.

18 Wendy N. Duong, *Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman—Warrior and Poet*, 10 Pac. Rim L & Pol’y J. 191 (2001). <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wilj/vol10/iss2/2>

19 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Tỉnh Trà Vinh. “Người Nữ Anh Hùng Trên Quê Hương Tam Ngãi.” *Phunutravinh.Org.Vn*, 19 Nov. 2019, phunutravinh.org.vn/phu-nu-tren-cac-linh-vuc/guong-dien-hinh/nguoi-nu-anh-hung-tren-que-huong-tam-ngai.html.

far more romantic idea of “shared placenta.” Though its land is ancient, Vietnam as a nation is modern. Uncovering the history of Vietnam then becomes a sort of paradox, where origin stories and traditions that seem to point toward the primordial mists of a nation, are actually relics of modern history.

Ethnic identity and party politics are deeply intertwined in Vietnamese nationalism. The Vietnamese Fatherland Front, “*Mặt trận Tổ quốc Việt Nam*” is an umbrella group of movements aligned with the Communist Party of Vietnam.²⁰ As a single-party state, all Vietnamese people are tied by “*Tổ Quốc*,” or “fatherland.” The Vietnamese language faculty of the phrase “*Tổ Quốc*,” demonstrates that beyond just a country, Vietnam is something innate, it is “*Đồng bào*,” the term meaning “same placenta” as reference to *Âu Cơ*. As a political entity, the party chooses “*Tổ Quốc*,” rather than other more colloquial Vietnamese terms for “nation.” “*Tổ*,” closely translates to ancestor, and “*Quốc*,” nation. “*Tổ Quốc*,” indicates more than citizens united by a central government, it is a political statement, that Vietnamese people are descendants united by a common ancestor. For Vietnamese nationalism, origin stories like *Âu Cơ*, and the Vietnamese Fatherland Front are what historians have conceived as the national navel or “same placenta.”²¹

The consequences of imposing modern nationalism onto ancient history mean recontextualizing or manufacturing relics for political gain. While Vietnamese people have fought for independence from colonial oppression, and formed a community around a matriarch. Vietnam’s repetitive and prolonged war and poverty have overshadowed gender issues. Gender equality in Vietnam has become engaged in what this article describes as the “fallacy of a trio” where gender equality becomes synonymous with nationalism and socialism. Romantic nationalism cannot be the only solution without falling into euphemism.

20 “Trang Thông Tin Điện Tử Của Ủy Ban Trung Ương MTTQ Việt Nam.” *Ủy Ban Trung Ương Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*, 9 Mar. 2024, m.mattran.org.vn/#ref-vi.wikipedia.org/.

21 Warwick Debates

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