



## The Symbol of Hùng Kings: From a Founding Myth to Modern National Belief

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Using sociohistorical approaches, the paper shows that before the 15th century, myths of Hùng Kings, considered to be the descendants of the Dragon race and ancestors of the Vietnamese people, may have existed locally. Vietnamese rulers and people strongly supported the integration of these myths into indigenous culture to form a new belief: the worship of Hùng Kings. By way of discovering the transformation process from the founding myths to the modern national beliefs of the Vietnamese, this paper attempts to demonstrate that both myths and worship of Hùng Kings were politically created and encouraged. The article also focuses on the reasons why these myths and worship reached a broad public as these were integrated into Vietnamese culture.

**Keywords:** Hùng Kings' symbol, Dragon race, Vietnamese myths, worship, transformation.

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## I . Introduction

In the area that is now northern Vietnam, there were people living in the Paleolithic period, and their leaders were called Hùng (or Lạc) Kings. This is proven by the different types of scientific evidence. Archaeological evidence, for example, demonstrates that the ancient Vietnamese have been living in the Red River delta since the late Paleolithic and have created unique indigenous cultures (Truong 2007; Taylor 1991: 312). Historical evidence also shows that Jiaozhou Waiyu Ji (交州外域记, the Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region), written around the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was the earliest to use the term “Lạc Kings” (雒王), the other name of “Hùng Kings,” referring to the early rulers in the Red River Delta (Taylor 1991, Kelley 2012, and T. Đ. Nguyễn 2013). Consider this:

In the past, before Jiaozhi (this is present-day Red River Delta, Vietnam) had commanderies and districts, there were “Lạc fields”. [...] The people who cultivated these fields were called “Lạc people”. The leader who governed these fields was called the “Lạc king”. (Li 2013)

Other books also mention Hùng Kings, such as Guangzhou Ji (廣州記, Guangzhou Records) written by Pei Yuan (裴淵) in the 4th century and Nanyue Zhi (南越志, History of Nanyue) compiled by Chen Huaiyuan (沉怀远) around the 5th century. However, there is no scientific evidence to confirm that the related myths and the worship of Hùng Kings appeared at the same time.

Stories about Hùng Kings may have existed locally in the Red River Delta and were recorded briefly in the history books of the Chinese. However, they were not noticed by the medieval Vietnamese elite. Until 1435, by order of King Lê Thái Tông, Nguyễn Trãi, a prominent Confucian, compiled *Dư Địa Chí* (輿地志, Treatise on Geography; henceforth DDC). Noticeably, he began the history of Vietnam with the rule of King Kinh Dương, who was considered Hùng King I: “Hùng Kings succeeded each other and founded a realm called Văn Lang, with its capital at Phong Châu” (Nguyễn T. 2001: 742). *Ta Chí Đại Trường*, a Vietnamese eminent historian, attributed this to Nguyễn Trãi’s belief that the Hùng Kings mythologem should become an indispensable part of the Lê’s

monarchical nation-reconstruction process in the post-Ming occupation period (Tạ 2011: 76; Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013). From that, the Vietnamese euhemeristic transformation of an ancient myth of unclear origins into a historicized tale about the founding of the Việt realm had now been officially sanctioned by the court (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013). In 1479, by order of King Lê Thái Tông, Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư (大越史记全书, The Complete Historical Records of Đại Việt; henceforth ĐVSKTT) was compiled. This was the first official history book of the Vietnamese mentioning Hùng Kings, who came to be venerated as ancestral founders of them (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013) in a three-part story:

[Part 1, Lord Kinh Dương (涇陽王)] Originally, Di Ming (帝明), a descendent of the Divine Farmer Shen Nong (神农), sired Di Yi (帝伋) and Kinh Dương. Di Ming treated Kinh Dương specially and wanted to pass the throne on to him. Kinh Dương dared not accept this order and conceded the throne to his older brother. After that, Di Ming appointed Di Yi as heir apparent to rule the North region and Kinh Dương as the king to rule the South area.

[In Part 2, Lord Lạc Long (貉龍君)] Lạc Long, a descendent of the Divine Farmer Shen Nong (神农), was of dragon and he married Âu Cơ (嫫姆), who gave birth to a sac containing 100 eggs which hatched into a hundred sons. These are the ancestors of the Bách Việt (百越 Hundred Việt) people. [...] The eldest son, Hùng, ascended the throne.

[Part 3, Hùng King (雄王)] When Hùng was crowned king, he named his kingdom Văn Lang (this is present-day northern Vietnam) and Phong Châu region was the nation's capital (this is present-day Bạch Hạc district, Phú Thọ province). [He] established ministers called Lạc marquises, and generals called Lạc generals. The ruler of each generation was called “Hùng King”, in total there are 18 generations of Hùng Kings. (Ngô et al 2017: 3)

According to this book, Hùng Kings dynasty (also known as Hồng Bàng period spanning from Hùng King I in 2879 BC to Hùng King XVIII in 258 BC) is regarded as the founding period of Vietnam. This left an enduring legacy for later Vietnamese rulers. They used different methods to make these myths become part of

national consciousness to serve their political purposes. Gradually, stories about Hùng Kings are implicitly considered an inseparable part of Vietnamese history and culture, which facilitated the creation of the worship of Hùng Kings recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Vietnam in 2012.

Within the scientific community, there are controversies related to the historical intention and reliability of Hùng Kings'/Hồng Bàng's myths. Liam Kelley pointed out that the Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan (a famous story in the collection of myths about Hùng Kings) passed down orally through the centuries among the "people" or the "folk" (dân gian) is problematic, viewed from the perspective of Chinese sources (Kelley 2012). Nguyễn Thị Điều questioned the authenticity of Hùng Kings dynasty. She analyzed the textual-mythographical transformation of Vietnamese origin myths from their transcription in the distant past through their exploitation for political purposes in the 1950s by the scholarly elite; she asserted that "the Hùng Kings Epic would become the lightning rod of ensuing debates" (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013: 335).

While Liam Kelley viewed the stories of Hùng Kings as an emerging from the medieval invented tradition (Kelley 2012), Nguyễn Thị Điều studied these stories from the perspective of Euhemerism, a Hellenistically-influenced approach inspired by and derived from the work of the fourth century BCE Greek scholar Euhemerus of Messene who rationalized the question of myth and history (T. Đ. Nguyễn 2013). This study examines both myths and worship of Hùng Kings from the perspective of fakelore in cultural and social contexts.

## **II. The Myths and Worship of Hùng Kings as Fakelore**

"Fakelore" is a term coined in 1950 by American folklorist Richard M. Dorson (1916–1981) to describe anthologies and commercial materials presented as authentic oral folklore, but are actually fabricated or heavily edited. This label has been used to describe wholly new creations originating from a single author, those that put

characters from folklore into nontraditional situations, those that have undergone serious editorial revisions, and those that use these characters and legends for commercial or ideological purposes (Christopher and Jeffrey 2016: 360). This research aims to indicate that the myths and worship of Hùng Kings were deliberately created centuries later for “social coordination and ideological and cultural hegemony” (Susan 2013). This is substantiated by the following pieces of evidence.

As per historical evidence, an examination of historical documents written before the 14th century, including Vietnamese official history books and royal decrees, revealed that no piece of information about the Hùng Kings was mentioned. Nevertheless, the Hồng Bàng myths and Hùng-Kings characters have appeared suddenly and widely in these forms of documentation since the Lê dynasty.

As far as official history books are concerned, *Đại Việt Sử Ký* (大越史記, Annals of Đại Việt; 1272) written under the order of King Trần and *An Nam Chí Lược* (安南志略, Abbreviated Records of An Nam; 1335) did not mention Hùng Kings, whereas, *ĐVSKTT*, which was composed under the order of King Lê in 1479, mentioned the Hùng Kings as the founding kings of the Vietnamese.

Regarding royal decrees, official records named “*thần tích*” (神迹), “*thần sách*” (神册), and “*thần phả*” (神譜) in the Trần dynasty revealed that in 1285, the Trần dynasty began to promulgate the widespread village practice of Thần (spirit) worship by issuing decrees confirming the spirits’ ranks and titles (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013: 328). Meanwhile, they did not recognize the worship of Hùng Kings (Ta 2011). *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* (越甸幽灵集, Collection of Stories on the Shady and Spiritual World of the Việt Realm; henceforth *VDULT*; 1329), a work recording Vietnamese beliefs, mentioned the name of Hùng Kings but did not consider Hùng Kings as Thần to worship, despite sanctifying some characters related to Hùng Kings such as Sơn Tinh and Lý Ông Trọng, Hùng King XVIII’s son-in-law and servant respectively. This proves that, before the 14th century, the Hùng Kings and the worship of Hùng Kings were not exactly popular in Vietnam.

Regarding fieldwork data, there is a widespread misunderstanding that Hùng Kings' Temples, the holy sanctuary of Hùng Kings in Phú Thọ province, were built a long time ago. Some Vietnamese folklorists even suppose that they were built in the King An Dương period (r. 208 BC - 179 BC) based on The Legend of Oath Stone. This story narrates that when King An Dương was given the throne by Hùng King XVIII, he built temples to worship Hùng Kings, and then erected a stone to carve the oath of respecting the lineage of Hùng Kings and protecting the country. In fact, the period when these Temples were built was unknown, but verbal descriptions of Phú Thọ villagers and handwritten records of the Hùng Kings' Temples support the hypothesis that these were originally constructed to worship Mountain Spirits and the Solar Deity before being converted to worship Saint Gióng, a mythical hero of Vietnam. Finally, after a long period, they were renovated to worship the Hùng Kings (Vũ 1999: 48). The collected fieldwork data also showed that these Temples were turned into a place to worship Hùng Kings around the 13th-15th century. Some scientists such as Maspéro also affirmed that the Hùng Kings' Temples "could not be very ancient... at the most it dated back to the Trần dynasty (1226 -1400)" (Maspéro 1918: 2-4).

Given one possibility that the worship of Hùng Kings may have existed before the 14th century, it may have been conducted in too few local places to be mentioned in historical documents officially. When the Lê dynasty was established, Lê Kings focused on embellishing and circulating the founding myths, in which the Hùng Kings were considered the Vietnamese founding kings. Gradually, these myths took root in minds of the Vietnamese people, and this facilitated the efforts of the Vietnamese rulers to turn the Hùng Kings' myths into a national belief to serve their political purposes.

### **III. The Efforts of the Vietnamese Government to Turn the Hùng Kings' Myths into National Beliefs**

Since the Lê dynasty, the Vietnamese government has made sustained efforts to turn mythical stories into national beliefs by

means of:

### **3.1. Guaranteeing the legitimacy of the existence of Hùng Kings**

Under the Lê dynasty, in 1470, King Lê Thánh Tông ordered government officials to publish *Hùng Vương Ngọc Phả Thập Bát Thế Truyền* (雄王玉谱十八世传, Precious Genealogy of the Eighteen Reigns of Hùng Kings) (X. K. Nguyễn 1995: 461 - 467) to honor Hùng Kings as "the Kings of a Thousand Generations." After that, in 1479, resting on a variety of sources, including history, ancient stories, manuscripts, and folklore songs, *ĐVSKTT* was completed (by order of King Lê Thánh Tông) (Ngô et al 2017: 108). This book is considered the first historical document to mention the Hùng Kings as the first rulers of the Vietnamese. Under the Tây Sơn dynasty, "Hùng Kings" was mentioned in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tiền Biên* (大越史记前编, Annotations on the History of Đại Việt, 1800), compiled by Quốc Sử Quán (国史馆, National Institute of History). Under the Nguyễn dynasty, national historiographers mentioned and honored Hùng Kings as "Quốc Tổ" (National Founder) in *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (钦定越史通鉴纲目, The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Việt; 1871). In 1917, King Khải Định issued a decree declaring that Giỗ Tổ (Hùng Kings' Anniversary; on the tenth day of the third lunar month annually) was a national ritual. Throughout these successive dynasties, Vietnamese kings always ordered contemporary historians to write about Hùng Kings as the first kings of Vietnam in historical documents, which holds the key to the historicization of Hùng Kings' myths. In other words, this is the process of turning Hùng Kings' myths into a historical part of Vietnam."

In the early modern period, when the Republic was founded, both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (see Decree No. 22c /NV/CC was issued on February 18, 1946) and the Republic of Vietnam approved that Hùng Kings' Anniversary was a national holiday (Sales 1974: 36). Later, the unified-government (Socialist Republic of Vietnam) upheld this holiday (see Law No. 84/2007/QH11 of April 02, 2007, amending, and supplementing article 73 of Law on Labor). In 2012, with the constant efforts of the Vietnamese government, the worship of Hùng Kings was proclaimed

by UNESCO as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In 2018, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc supported the Global Vietnam National Ancestor's Day publicly, a non-government organization founded in 2015 specializing in honoring Hùng Kings (see Official Dispatch No. 12017/VPCP-QHQT of December 11, 2018). Later, some members of the Theoretical Council of Vietnam's Communist Party were required to participate in this organization to expand the influence of Hùng Kings globally.

These events not only highlighted the Vietnamese governments' recognition and respect for Hùng Kings but also helped reinforce the belief of the Vietnamese people in the existence of such Kings, who were considered their first rulers.

### **3.2. Encouraging the creation of cultural works praising the Hùng Kings**

**Folk music:** At first, people from Phú Thọ province used Xoan singing, a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, to pay homage to gods or “thành hoàng” (城隍, village guardian spirits). Then, Hùng Kings were transformed into “thành hoàng” consecrated by imperial orders and by popular fervor stemming from long traditions of ancestor worship (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013: 329). Gradually, Xoan singing was used to pay homage to Hùng Kings instead of thành hoàng, and more lyrics were also created to honor Hùng Kings and their generals. At present, we still preserve 31 songs, including 19 songs with contents related to Hùng Kings' rituals (Nguyễn Đ. B. 2017).

**Folk narratives:** Some folk tales of Hùng Kings were listed as inconsistent as they could be changed and set in the Hùng Kings period. For example, in *VĐULT* (1329), *The Legend of Saint Phù Đổng* (Lý 2012: 91) did not mention Hùng King XVIII, while in another version of the same story in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* (*The Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes*; 15th century) (Trần P. T. 2017: 44), Hùng King XVIII took a supporting character. Another example named *The Tale of Princess Thiệu Hoa*, a story that began with the phrase “in the reign of Hùng King VI,” stated that Thiệu Hoa was the first person to teach the Vietnamese



people about silk weaving. Meanwhile, in official history books, the Vietnamese weavers did not produce silk until 1040 (Ngô et al 2017: 97), aside from the fact that silk weaving techniques were too complex for the ancient Vietnamese in Hùng Kings dynasty. This proves that the Thiệu Hoa story was composed after the 11th century, with the writer trying to emphasize that the story was composed in Hùng Kings period. The Myths of Areca Tree and Betel Nuts and The Story of Đào Chín Phẩm are also similar cases. It is possible that long after the Hùng Kings period, the "once upon a time" phrases in the ancient stories were replaced by "in the reign of Hùng King [I, III, VIII, XVII, etc.] period" and then the "new version stories" were encouraged to spread. Given that the majority of people in feudal Vietnam were illiterate, and that these new versions of stories were versions of folk tales, these stories were easily passed on orally. Clearly, the more popular stories about Hùng Kings are, the more orthodox the belief in the existence of Hùng Kings in the Vietnamese mind is.

**Literature:** After the Lê dynasty, the governments asked writers to mention Hùng Kings in their works. For example, in 1428, when the Lê dynasty was newly established, Nguyễn Trãi, a skilled politician and principal advisor of King Lê, wrote Bình Ngô Đại Cáo (平吳大誥, Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu) and did not even mention Hùng Kings. Seven years later, when Lê kings succeeded in exercising their power in ruling the country and used many political measures to force writers to mention Hùng Kings in their historical works, Nguyễn Trãi composed DDC where he referred to Hùng Kings as the earliest leaders of the Vietnamese. Since then, Hùng Kings has continuously appeared in later works. For example, around 1682-1709, under the order of Lord Trịnh Căn, Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục (Annals of the Heavenly Việt, henceforth TNNL), the first national-popular poem composed mentioned the Hùng Kings. In 1870, under the order of King Tự Đức, Đại Nam Quốc Sử Diễn Ca (The National History of Đại Nam in Verse) was created. It stated that Vietnam's history dates back to the Hùng Kings era (2879-256 BC). In 1941, President Hồ Chí Minh composed Lịch Sử Nước Ta (The History of Our Country). In this work, Hùng Kings were recognized as the ancestral founders of Vietnam.

It should be noted that all popular works recognizing Hùng Kings were written in “Nôm” [also called “Quốc Âm” (国音), a traditional logographic writing system used to write the Vietnamese language] and used the freer “lục bát” (六八, lit. six-eight, a traditional Vietnamese folk verse form, referring to the alternating lines of six and eight syllables). Unlike Chinese characters (汉字) and Sino-Vietnamese Tang verse (唐诗) embraced by the higher class Vietnamese, Nôm and lục bát cut across classes, from the lowly peasants to the noble princes. This shows that these works were compiled to reach a broad public. Furthermore, besides supporting the works mentioning Hùng Kings, the rulers considered all books which did not mention Hùng Kings as "unorthodox books" and ordered soldiers to destroy them. For example, in the reign of Trịnh Tạc (r. 1657-1682) and Trịnh Cương (r. 1709-1729), while TNNL was encouraged to spread, other Nôm-characters works were burned because Lord Trịnh considered them “tà thuyết” (heterodoxy) (Huỳnh 1986: 79).

### **3.3. Supporting the Integration of the Hùng Kings’ Myths into Indigenous Culture to Form a New Belief: the Worship of Hùng Kings**

**At the local level,** Lê kings took advantage of their coercive power to sanctify Hùng Kings and consequently urged villagers to worship them. For example, under the reign of Lê Anh Tông (r. 1556–1573), Nguyễn Bính, an academician working at the Ministry of Rites, compiled Ngọc Phả Thần Tích, a collection of myths about Supernatural Beings and national heroes, including Hùng Kings. In 1741, under Lê Ý Tông (r. 1735–1740), Nguyễn Hiền, another academician, began recopying these sources. Numerous versions “embroidered” earlier versions and continued until the reign of Khải Định (r. 1916 - 1925), according to Nguyễn Thị Điều (2013). In all documents collected after the Lê dynasty, Hùng Kings were referred to as the first kings of the Vietnamese and were at par with gods/magical spirits worshipped in village temples. Hùng King II (Hùng Hiền Vương), for example, has been worshiped in Bình Đăng village, Bạch Hạc district (Tạ 2011). Hùng Kings were accepted by the villages which had originated them, reinforcing and perpetuating

the Hùng Kings' materiality and potency through village worship (Nguyễn T. Đ. 2013). Clearly, Lê kings capitalized on the influence of the village culture, a fundamental dimension of Vietnamese culture to popularise the worship of Hùng Kings. The village structure has not changed from Hùng Kings period to modern times (Vũ 1999: 59), so tapping into village culture and the belief of villagers to prepare the ground for founding a new belief in the worship of Hùng Kings was definitely a wise decision, and created long-lasting values.

**At the national level,** Vietnamese rulers facilitated the establishment and maintenance of Hùng Kings (and their relative) temples. For instance, in 1465, the Lê court published decrees to recognize the titles of Âu Cơ (mother of Hùng Kings) and ordered people to build Âu Cơ Temple (Trần N. 2005). Since the Lê dynasty, Vietnamese kings have delegated officials to perform rituals in these temples and exempted local people from taxes if they took care of the temples carefully. Gradually, the worship of Hùng Kings received the support of people all over the country.

## IV. The Reasons the Myths and Worship of Hùng Kings have won Public Acceptance

### 4.1. Support from the Vietnamese Rulers

While the earliest records of the Hùng Kings were written around the 4th century, in *Jiaozhou Waiyu Ji* (交州外域记, *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*), the Hùng Kings' myths were officially recognized since the Lê court (1428-1789). This raises a question: why the Lê dynasty but not the earlier courts approved them? The answer, I believe, lies in the foreign and domestic problems of the Lê dynasty that the previous dynasties did not have.

**In terms of foreign relations:** The Lê dynasty had to use the Hùng Kings' myths as a cultural weapon to enhance their position. It should be noted that most of the Vietnamese feudal dynasties implemented "the vassal status" policy in relation to China. This means that the Chinese emperor officially recognized and titled the

kings of Vietnam, and Vietnamese kings promised to provide military support or pay tribute to China when needed in return. While the previous dynasties were transferred peacefully (Đinh-Tiền Lê, Tiền Lê-Lý, Lý-Trần), the Lê dynasty was established after the war against the Chinese army, which was perceived to be a manifestation of disloyalty by the Chinese rulers. This explains why the Ming court refused to confer “An Nam Quốc Vương” (安南国王, King of An Nam) title on Lê Lợi, the founder of Lê dynasty, when he was crowned king. After that, the Chinese emperor ordered to find descendants of the Trần dynasty thrice to bestow on them the title King of the Vietnamese realm, based on the imperial decrees of Ming Chengzu (明成祖) in 1407, and of Ming Xuanzong (明宣宗) in 1427 and 1429 (see Ngô et al 2017: 435). When no one was found, Ming Xuanzong Emperor bestowed Lê Lợi “Quyền thụ An Nam Quốc sự” (权署安南国事, Acting Ruler of An Nam), a nominal role. Not being in agreement with the Chinese emperor on the given title, the Lê dynasty strived to regain the right to determine their own position. Therefore, the Lê dynasty intended the Vietnamese people to believe that it was reasonable for the Lê to proclaim themselves kings of Vietnam without approval from the Chinese emperor.

Spreading the Hùng Kings’ myths was one of many political measures which the Lê court used to realize their aspirations. By popularizing a myth which claimed that the Vietnamese ancestor (King Kinh Dương, also known as Hùng King I) gave up the throne to Di Yi, an ancestral king of the Chinese, and then established a new country in the south (this is present-day Vietnam), the Lê kings intended to convey the idea of “being not inferior to China” (无逊中华) among the Vietnamese people: the Chinese rule the North and the Vietnamese rule the South. With this, it has been made reasonable to put Vietnamese leaders and Chinese rulers on equal footing. Also, the Vietnamese have the right to choose their kings without waiting for approval from the Chinese emperors:

By creating King Kinh Dương’s part, the Vietnamese would like to imply that they had a brotherhood relationship with the Han Chinese, helping to raise the status of Vietnamese rulers and even make them the equals of Chinese emperors. [...] Therefore, to the Vietnamese, King Kinh Dương’s part was deemed a cultural weapon

(Hoàng 2020: 39).

***In terms of domestic problems:*** Calling for national unity is the main purpose of the Lê court when they intentionally promoted the dissemination of Hùng Kings' myths. While the Vietnamese have always made up the majority of the population in Vietnam, Lê Lợi, the founding king of the Lê dynasty, is from the Mường, an ethnic minority residing in the mountainous north of Vietnam. Trần Quốc Vượng affirmed:

Either Lê Lợi is 100% Mường or he is also 60% Mường. His mother is a Mường person from Thanh Hóa province. He was born in his motherland, and very fluent in the Mường language. He had many Mường comrades in the Lam Sơn uprising such as Lê Lai and Phạm Cương. (Trần V. Q. 1998: 279)

Gaspardone and Whitmore also agreed that Lê Lợi is from a Mường (Whitmore 1968: 4). Historical documents such as Lam Sơn Thực Lục (蓝山实录, Lam Sơn Records), Hoàng Lê Ngọc Phả (皇黎玉谱, Precious Genealogy of Lê's Royal Family), Lê Gia Phả Ký (黎家谱记, Genealogy of the Lê) all indicate that Lê Lợi was a phụ đạo Khả Lam (chief of the Mường in Lam Sơn region).

As chief of the Mường, Lê Lợi entered the political arena with both advantages and disadvantages. He easily enticed ethnic minorities such as the Mường to participate in the uprising he led against the Ming army. It should be noted that in the 15th century, "census showed that there were 5,120,000 people, including 2,087,500 ethnic minorities in Vietnam" (Maspéro 1910). This means that, unlike the current disparity of power, the influence of ethnic groups at that time was significant, especially when compared with the force of the Vietnamese. As a leader with a good relationship between the two forces, Lê Lợi really defeated the Ming invaders and became a king. However, when he ascended the throne and ruled the country, Lê Lợi was caught in a bind. He could easily gather forces to defeat the Ming army, but it was very difficult for him to equitably distribute the benefits gained from the war to participating forces. The conflict and power struggle between the dominant group of ethnic minorities originating from the

mountainous land and those ruled in the Red River Delta emerged (Whitmore 1968; Taylor 1991: 192). Because majority of the population in Lê Lợi's reign were Vietnamese, Lê Lợi did not receive widespread support. His origins created a complicated situation that he and his descendants had to deal with for centuries.

Therefore, the Lê kings had to constantly look for ways to reconcile the contradictions among the heterogeneous ethnic ideological views, in order to create unity among them. Lê Thánh Tông, one of the most enlightened medieval rulers in Vietnam, reconciled these by acknowledging the myth of Hùng Kings and as well as accepting that it was written in ĐVSKTT. More specifically, in part 3 of the Hồng Bàng myth, the Hùng Kings Part, the book stated that Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ were the parents of the Hundred Việt (a term to collectively refer to various ethnic groups who lived south of the Yangzi River, including the Việt and the Mường). This myth implies that the Việt, the Mường, or other ethnic communities in Hundred Việt groups shared the same ancestors and were of the same race, so any of them had the right to become king. This was an appropriate measure to reduce conflicts and call for unity.

In addition, worshipping Hùng Kings was also a way to prove that Lê kings were Confucian followers. While the previous dynasties (Lý and Trần) showed great devotion to Buddhism, the Lê kings also had to support Confucianism for political stability. The Lê enforced royal decrees to limit Buddhism and attempted to make Confucianism the dominant ideology. To achieve this, Lê kings pioneered "apply(ing the) principles (of Confucian philosophy) to make people believe" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 2007: 348). "King Lê Thánh Tông vigorously upheld Xiao (孝, being good to parents and ancestors)" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 2007: 347), a fundamental principle of Confucianism. All religions referred to the notions of filial respect, but Confucianism paid special attention to honoring ancestors. Confucius remarked: "Establishing oneself, practicing The Way, spreading the fame of one's name to posterity, so that one's parents become renowned-that is the end of Xiao" (立身行道, 扬名于后世, 以显父母, 孝之终也) (Xing Bing 1980: 2539). Therefore, Lê kings believed that

when they achieved success, they must honor their ancestors. They focused on the notion of “Đương Danh Hiển Gia” (揚名显家, make a glorious name for oneself, bring glory to one's parent and ancestor). From this perspective, the Lê dynasty stressed raising the status of Vietnamese ancestors, especially the national founders/first kings. This could be the main motivation for the Lê dynasty to focus on honoring and then worshipping Hùng Kings.

Finally, the myths and worship of Hùng Kings helped to extend the influence of Lê kings on people's consciousness. Believing that Vietnamese people were devout, Lê kings concentrated on controlling people's perceptions by taking advantage of the image of the gods: “If we believe that religion is a belief and practice affects the right behavior to life and to a supernatural world, we have to realize that Vietnamese people have such a high level of virtue” (Cadière: 2015). They understood that controlling people's minds is the best way to reduce subversive potential. To achieve this purpose, King Lê Lợi proclaimed that “I am a Lord of all Gods” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 2007: 341). He also named his reign “Thuận Thiên” (順天), which literally means “In Heaven's favor”. By doing this, he expressed very clearly the view that he transcended common people and was in a higher position than the gods. In other words, he was of opinion that only the king had the right to issue decrees to decide the ranks and titles of gods/spirits. The successive kings of Lê dynasty followed king Lê Lợi in deciding which gods could be beneficial to worship. For example, in 1437, king Lê Thánh Tông claimed that Hùng Kings were village guardian spirits, transforming Hùng Kings from mythical characters into supernatural beings (Vũ 1999; T. Đ. Nguyễn 2013; Tạ 2011). Clearly, the Lê kings wanted to rely on the prestige of gods to increase their power. This made “the deity became more royalized, so the king became more divinized” (Thomas 2015: 63).

#### **4.2. Support from the Vietnamese Commoners**

The Vietnamese people played a decisive role in the development of Hùng Kings worship. When worshipping Hùng Kings, they also have reaped significant benefits, explaining why the policies to popularize the worship of Hùng Kings have received widespread support.

Firstly, "since antiquity, the Han Chinese forced vassal countries to follow Han culture (also known as Sinocentrism, 中国中心主义)" (Hoàng 2020: 38), so worshiping Hùng Kings was a way for the Vietnamese to use to fashion a local identity and sense of place when they faced forced assimilation by China. Sources of information obtained from ethnographic fieldwork in Phú Thọ province showed that in 650, when Vietnam was under Chinese dynastic rule, an official of the Tang dynasty (唐朝) named Li Changming (李常明) ordered local people to build the Tongsheng (通圣) temple in Phú Thọ with the aim of turning this area into "a Taoism propagation center". To counter this threat, the Vietnamese established temples to worship indigenous gods such as Tản Viên Sơn Thánh (the God of Tản Viên Mountain) and Generals who defeated Chinese invaders (Saint Phù Đổng, Trưng sisters, etc.). Later, these temples were used to worship Hùng Kings as the Vietnamese perceived Hùng Kings to be the representative of Vietnamese indigenous culture. In other words, worshiping Hùng Kings is not only deemed an effective weapon against cultural assimilation but also a way to protect local identity.

Secondly, like their kings, the Vietnamese also needed to raise their status. In feudal times, the Chinese called the Vietnamese "Man Yi" (蛮夷) or "Nan Man" (南蛮), translated as a barbarian ethnic (Hoàng 2020). Positioned as inferior, the Vietnamese evolved a burning desire to transcend and consequently supported the spread of Hùng Kings' myths. It is not uncommon for some ethnic minorities to make up myths that they were blood-related to the Chinese in order to raise their status. Take the Buyei people (布依族) living in Guizhou (贵州), China for example. Although they were of Austronesian descent (not related to the Chinese), their founding myth stated that their ancestor is Pangu (盘古, a creator deity of the Han Chinese), a means to form an alliance with the Han Chinese.

Thirdly, Vietnamese culture has flexible acculturation and has graciously accepted customs that are different from its traditions. Thanks to this, the worship of Hùng Kings, a new belief created around the 15th century, easily entered Vietnamese culture without encountering too many obstacles.



## **V. Conclusion**

The above points and evidence lead to the conclusion that the Hùng Kings' myths may have existed locally before the 15th century, and that Vietnamese rulers implemented policies to facilitate the worship of Hùng Kings.

Firstly, the Vietnamese rulers issued decrees which recognized Hùng Kings as the first kings of Vietnam and encouraged the spread of Hùng Kings' myths. Secondly, the Vietnamese rulers ordered historians to include the Hùng Kings' myths in historical documentation as well as in folktales, songs, and verses. This way, the Hùng Kings were gradually recognized as first kings in official histories and folk culture. As a result, they were respected as founding national heroes. Lastly, when the Hùng Kings' myths were spread successfully, the rulers cleverly combined these myths with indigenous beliefs (ancestor worship and "thành hoàng" worship) to establish a new belief: the worship of Hùng Kings.

The following regimes after the Lê also realized the benefits of spreading the myths and worshiping Hùng Kings, so they drove the Vietnamese people to believe in the existence of Hùng Kings and convinced them of the importance of worshiping them. Thanks to this, the worship of Hùng Kings gained in popularity and gradually played an important role in Vietnamese culture. Undoubtedly, the myths and worship of Hùng Kings will continue to be embraced by the Vietnamese rulers and people.

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