

# Exploring Culture through Vietnamese Legends

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## **Abstract**

*This article addresses the role of legends in preserving the cultural and historical values of the Vietnamese people. By methods of classification, theoretical systematization, and comparison, the study demonstrates that Vietnamese legends are not only mystical stories but also deeply reflect the history, customs, beliefs, and community spirit. Vietnamese culture is depicted through legends, such as the culture of gratitude to ancestors, beliefs, festivals, customs, marriage concepts, and family culture. The maintenance and transmission of legends to younger generations are essential for protecting cultural heritage and supporting the sustainable development of national culture.*

**Keywords:** *Legends, Culture, Heritage Preservation, Community Spirit, ..*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Legends are a genre of folklore that plays a crucial role in preserving and conveying culture through historical periods. The content and narratives of legends not only recount historical events or explain local customs but also reflect the perspectives and spirit of the community. In this capacity, legends are valuable resources for understanding the history, customs, and cultural values of a nation. Legends act as a "super text" (Albahr et al., 2024) in developing literature, reflecting regional cultures and traditional cultural values. These stories not only record cultural features but also vividly portray the creators of these cultures. The regional characteristics and localities in legends contribute to the vibrant picture of Vietnamese culture.

Exploring culture through folk legends is a new approach that helps to refine the theory of folklore. This research direction not only focuses on specific issues but also expands to a broader literary context with a high level of generalization. Through the analysis of legends, cultural values, and national identities are recreated, helping to reconstruct the historical atmosphere, daily life, and social thinking of people in the past. This provides a fresh and comprehensive perspective on national culture.

This study aims to explore the cultural elements in Vietnamese legends, explore and analyze, and gain a deeper understanding of cultural values and national identity through these stories. The beautiful aspects of national culture represented in legends will contribute to honoring and preserving the culture while helping younger generations, especially students, to gain a comprehensive understanding of this genre. This, in turn, can be effectively and vividly applied in teaching.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of literary works from a cultural perspective began in the 19th century, with the literary-historical and positivist philosophy school in France led by H. Taine, the Birmingham school in England, and the Frankfurt school in Germany. In Vietnam, since the early 20th century, researchers have recognized the relationship between literature and culture. Cultural elements in literature have been explored, yielding significant achievements. Notable studies on folklore include "Folk Literature of Ha Tay and the Revival of Local Culture" by Nguyen Huu Thu (Nguyen, 2011), "Proverbs, Folk Songs, and Vietnamese Customs (in Family Relations)" by Pham Viet Long (Pham, 2004), and the monograph "Searching for Vietnamese Cultural Features in Proverbs" by Ngo Thi Thanh Quy (Ngo, 2010). Specifically, legends, as a genre of folklore, have been studied from various perspectives. Author Kieu Thu Hoach (1971) with the book "Heroic Legends in the Feudal Period" affirmed the formation and development of legends in the flow of Vietnamese literature. Nguyen (2012) with "Survey and Study of Folk Legends in Nghe Region" and Bui Van Hai (Bui, 2012) with

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"Legend of Phi Bong Marshal and the Festivals at Sinh Temple, Hoa Temple in Le Loi - Chi Linh - Hai Duong." Tran Thi An in "Genre Characteristics and the Textualization of Vietnamese Folk Legends" (Tran, 2014) established criteria for identifying the legend genre, assessing folklore materials, and analyzing cultural levels in the textualization of legends. Le Van Ky (Le, 1997) in "The Relationship Between Legends and Festivals About Heroes" studied the relationship between legends and festivals in community culture. Ho Thi Mai Huong with "Survey of Legends About Luu Nhan Chu in Dai Tu - Thai Nguyen" (Ho, 2009). Tran Xuan Chuong (2014) with the master's thesis "Legends and Festivals at Dau Pagoda" (Tran, 2014) researched the history of legends about the place and festival of Dau Pagoda - Thuan Thanh - Bac Ninh. "Deities in Vietnamese Legends from a Historical-Cultural Perspective" by Nguyen Huu Kim Duyen (Nguyen, 2022).

Although there have been numerous studies on Vietnamese legends and culture, there is still a lack of research analyzing culture through legends from a multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspective. Current studies often focus on describing and classifying legends rather than analyzing the cultural values and national identity within legends. The influence of legends on the formation and maintenance of national cultural identity through historical periods has not been fully explored.

This study initially approaches and analyzes the culture of Vietnamese legends. The article will explore cultural elements in legends, clarify the relationship between legends and national cultural identity, and provide a new perspective on the role of legends in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity throughout historical periods.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper employs content analysis to identify and classify cultural elements in legends. The classification and theoretical systematization methods provide an overview of the genre of folk legends. The comparative method is used to juxtapose Vietnamese legends with those of some ethnic minority groups to identify the cultural values reflected in Vietnamese legends. These research methods are combined and applied flexibly to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the relationship between legends and culture, thereby contributing to the preservation and development of the nation's traditional cultural values.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **Culture of Gratitude to Ancestors**

Legends are stories passed down from the past, believed to be based on real people and events. These stories create a profound connection between the present generation and the nation's past, fostering pride in the resilience and diversity of cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage. Vietnamese legends often narrate the origins of humanity and the Vietnamese nation. We owe our understanding of our origins, identity, and heritage to these legends. In the legends of "Lạc Long Quân" and "The Legend of One Hundred Eggs," symbols such as "Land-Water, Dragon-Fairy" have become emblematic of the Vietnamese people. Lạc Long Quân, representing the Dragon lineage, and Âu Cơ, representing the Fairy lineage, united and bore a sack of one hundred eggs, which hatched into a hundred talented and strong children, founding the Vietnamese community. This union reflects the cultural exchange and integration between northern and southern tribes, and between mountainous and coastal regions. The division of their children, with half following their mother to the mountains and half following their father to the sea, signifies a new stage of ethnic development. This union and separation process is a natural and common progression in human society. Furthermore, the content of the Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ legend indicates that it is a product of the Văn Lang period, the era in which the Vietnamese established their first primitive state.

Legends about the origin of the Vietnamese nation are closely linked to the prehistoric cultural phase of Vietnam, marking the formation of human society. To reconstruct the ancient history of human communities, archaeologists study archaeological sites and material relics, which are traces of human activities left at their dwellings. Discoveries of hominid remains in Thẩm Khuyên and Thẩm Hai caves (Lạng Sơn), and Thần Sa (Võ Nhái), among others, prove that humans have been present in Vietnam since very early times. The formation of the Vietnamese ethnicity in legends differs from that of other ethnic groups. In Vietnamese

legends, humans are born from eggs, with a Dragon father and a Fairy mother from different regions, both possessing extraordinary talents. They unite and give birth to miraculous, exceptional children. In contrast, other ethnic origin legends vary. For instance, the Khmu believe humans originated from a gourd, while the Muong believe they came from a divine bird. The Vietnamese concept emphasizes a noble lineage, with no blood relation among them, and an inherent extraordinary talent to be continued and preserved by future generations. This pride in noble origins contrasts with the legends of ethnic minorities, where human origins often involve siblings marrying each other with the help of a divine figure. This highlights a significant difference in the concept and ideology of human origin between the Kinh majority and ethnic minorities.

However, despite these differences, both Vietnamese legends and those of ethnic minorities share a common reverence for ancestors and the founders of "the land and community." This is in line with the Vietnamese tradition of "drinking water, remembering the source" and ancestor worship culture, which remains deeply ingrained in the people's consciousness.

### **Beliefs and Festivals**

Folk beliefs do not have a standardized doctrine, dogma, official religious leaders, or a unified system of worship, but they are primarily dependent on the economic and socio-cultural conditions of each locality. Explaining beliefs, Professor Dao Duy Anh wrote: "Admiration and superstition towards a religion or an ideology." Belief is the process of sanctifying a character in whom people place their trust. This process can involve mythologizing or historicizing the venerated figure. There is an interplay between different beliefs, and within each belief, multiple cultural layers are deposited (Le, 1997).

For folklore in general and the legend genre in particular, beliefs serve as a spiritual foundation for artistic creation. Moreover, beliefs are also artistically transformed into symbolic representations that carry dual meanings: spiritual and humanistic. Beliefs can be considered a cultural product formed from the relationship between humans and the natural world, society, and themselves. Prominent in legends are the beliefs in Mother Goddess worship and hero worship. In legend narratives, there are stories such as "The Tale of the Hong Bang Clan," "King Kinh Duong Vuong and Lac Long Quan," "The Legend of One Hundred Eggs," among others. The Mother Goddess – the mother figure is highly revered, with the most notable example being National Mother Au Co. The people have revered Au Co as the National Mother because she gave birth to a sack of one hundred eggs, from which the race developed into a populous nation as it is today. Au Co symbolizes the origin of birth, and thus the Mother or mother figure is always revered.

### **Mother Goddess Worship**

This belief system originates from primitive societies where clans were led by women who cared for the family, reproduced, and nurtured children. Originating from the veneration of women, natural goddesses, and female heroic figures in history, the Vietnamese language includes many terms associated with the feminine gender, known as "cái," such as "đường cái" (main road), "trống cái" (big drum), "đũa cái" (big chopsticks), and "sông cái" (big river). Vietnamese people call natural goddesses "Mẫu," with the hope of protection from natural disasters and calamities. Familiar names like "Tam Tòa Thánh Mẫu" and "Tứ Phủ Thánh Linh" are used to refer to natural goddesses such as Mẫu Thoải Phủ (water goddess) and Mẫu Địa Phủ (earth goddess). This belief extends to agricultural goddesses like Bà Dâu and Mẹ Lúa, with the belief that femininity is the optimal characteristic for crops and plant reproduction. This belief gradually spread to various fields, elevating the status of women, and leading to a rich and diverse system of female deity worship in Vietnamese temples.

Mother Goddess worship focuses on the present life, desiring health, wealth, and luck, and providing strength and faith to all social classes. Professor Ngo Duc Thinh stated, "Mother Goddess worship does not direct people to the afterlife but to the present world. This is a positive worldview, aligning with the existential view of humans in the modern world" (Ngo, 2018). Mother Goddess temples are widespread across Vietnam, symbolized by the worship of caves and eggs, representing fertility. The goddesses are often worshipped in caves and shrines, such as Huong Tich Cave, the temple caves in Luc Nam-Bac Giang, and Tay Ho Palace. This belief is also expressed through worship paintings, rich in themes and art. Mother Goddess worship contributes to preserving and promoting traditional cultural values, encompassing humanity, and art, and

fulfilling the spiritual needs of the people. It is an ancient custom that has contributed to the strength of the people in the history of nation-building and defense and remains valued to this day.

## **Hero Worship**

### **Worship of Battlefield Heroes**

Vietnamese history is a heroic narrative intertwined with the processes of nation-building and defense. The Vietnamese people have faced numerous invaders, particularly from the North. The struggle to protect the country and maintain sovereignty and independence is vividly reflected in Vietnamese history, culture, and literature. Folk legends often intertwine the themes of nation-building and defense, embodying the forefathers' notion of "strategic planning for great deeds and long-term goals." During the periods of nation-building and defense, many works extol the heroic feats of national heroes, creating epic legends. The heroic age was characterized by fervent battles among tribes to defend or expand territories. In these legends, the resistance of the Van Lang - Au Lac community against invaders is celebrated through the heroic deeds of figures like Hung Kings, Son Tinh, Thanh Giong, and An Duong Vuong.

The legend of "Thanh Giong" is the earliest major work on the theme of national defense against invaders, marking the beginning of a series of legends about resistance to foreign invasions and the larger genre of anti-invasion literature. The story of Giong vividly and comprehensively reflects the heroic struggle against the An invaders during the Van Lang period. The hero Thanh Giong is an idealized and generalized figure representing the birth, growth, battle, and victory against invaders, symbolizing the community's will and strength. Comparing Thanh Giong and An Duong Vuong in the "Legend of the Golden Turtle," we see the folk legends reflect a fair attitude. Thanh Giong is a symbol of flawless dedication and ascends to heaven. In contrast, An Duong Vuong, despite his contributions to nation-building, caused the loss of the country and was compelled to descend into the sea, signifying vigilance and responsibility.

Legends from the Northern Domination period record historical events with many works such as "Ba Trưng Nhi and Thanh Den," "Ba Trieu," "Trieu Viet Vuong and Ly Nam De," and "Mai Thuc Loan." These legends praise the patriotic spirit and sacrifices of heroes for independence. They focus not only on the entire lives of the characters but also on their feats and actions.

Throughout history, the Vietnamese people have consistently praised heroes who braved the battlefield. Consequently, the worship of battlefield heroes has become a distinct cultural feature of the Vietnamese. Folk legends deeply imprint this belief, expressing gratitude and the desire for protection from heroes.

The Vietnamese have established many temples to honor heroes, such as the Temple of Thanh Giong in Soc Son, the Temple of the Two Trưng Sisters in Hat Mon, the Temple of An Duong Vuong in Dien Chau - Nghe An, and the Temple of Mai Thuc Loan. These serve as evidence of the worship of heroes, reflecting respect and the preservation of cultural values across generations. The legends of deities have become valuable sources of national history (Ngo, 1993).

### **Worship of Cultural Creators**

In legends, humans are not only proactive in labor but also in the creation of culture, including cuisine. Legends such as "The Legend of Watermelon," "The Legend of Bánh Chưng and Bánh Giày," and "The Divine Rice Seed" demonstrate the Vietnamese people's progress in creating to serve their lives.

Since the time of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, the Vietnamese have been adept at creating a culture suited to natural conditions. The legends of the Hùng Kings continue to praise contributions to the construction and development of agricultural culture, such as teaching people to plant rice, transplant seedlings, and discover sweet potatoes.

Legends like "The Legend of Watermelon" by Mai An Tiêm and "The Legend of Bánh Chưng and Bánh Giày" by Lang Liêu highlight creativity in cuisine and contribute to Vietnam's culinary culture. The figure of Lang Liêu and the legend of Bánh Chưng and Bánh Giày have become a valuable intangible cultural heritage of the

nation (Trinh et al., 2019). Other legends, such as "The Goddess of Carpentry," "Weaving," and "Pottery and Salt," praise the heroes who created essential items for daily life.

The Vietnamese people have built temples to commemorate cultural creators, such as the Temple of the Ancestor of Blacksmithing in Quế Võ, Bắc Ninh, and the Temple of Bà Chúa Mía in Sơn Tây. This demonstrates gratitude and respect for those who contributed to the creation and dissemination of culture, helping improve the well-being and happiness of the people.

In summary, the worship of heroes is a beautiful aspect of Vietnamese culture, reflecting the people's gratitude, respect, and desire to emulate their heroes.

## Festivals

The Vietnamese people, primarily engaged in wet rice cultivation, often have spiritual needs linked to the cycles of nature and agriculture. Periods of rest provide opportunities to thank the deities for past harvests and to seek blessings for the upcoming ones. These cultural practices gradually evolved into festivals. There is a close relationship between legends and festivals. Legends, a form of folk literature, recount historical figures and events and serve as the foundation for festivals. Festivals, in turn, preserve religious beliefs, practices, and folk art, reflecting the Vietnamese consciousness through rituals and communal activities. From legends, festivals are formed and often base their existence on these stories. Legends about deities are closely connected to folk festivals (Ngo, 2018: 331).

Festivals consist of two parts: the ceremonial part and the festive part. The ceremonial part includes rituals conducted according to specific rules to mark and commemorate an event or figure, aiming to express gratitude and honor. The festive part comprises the economic, cultural, and social activities of a community, organized for widespread participation according to traditional customs or on special occasions. Festivals are a harmonious combination of ceremonial and festive parts, reflecting the conditions, capabilities, and development levels of the locality and the country at the time of the event. They are cultural, religious, and artistic activities of the community, meeting the needs for belief and entertainment while ensuring social order.

In Vietnam, there are nearly 9,000 festivals distributed across the country, from rural to urban areas, mountainous regions, and ethnic minorities. The Hùng Kings Temple Festival on the 10th day of the third lunar month has become the national day of ancestor worship for the Vietnamese people. On this day, the entire country has a holiday to respectfully commemorate the kings who founded the nation. This belief activity is captured in Vietnamese folk verses: "Dù ai đi ngược về xuôi/ Nhớ ngày giỗ Tổ mừng mười tháng ba" ("Wherever you go, remember the ancestor worship day on the 10th of March"). Festivals such as the Trưng Sisters Temple Festival, Bà Chúa Xứ Festival, Tản Viên Festival, and Hoa Lư Festival are linked to spiritual life and beliefs, carrying sacredness and expressed through cultural symbols. A notable example is the Trần Temple Festival in Nam Định, held from the night of the 14th to the 15th day of the first lunar month, to honor the merits of the 14 Trần kings. The "seal opening" ceremony takes place at midnight, marking the first working day of the new year. The Trần Temple Festival also includes cultural activities such as bài Bông dance, wrestling, dragon dance, and cockfighting. The Cổ Loa Temple Festival, organized on the 6th day of the first lunar month, commemorates An Dương Vương's contributions, as narrated in the legend of "An Dương Vương, Mỵ Châu, and Trọng Thủy." This festival features rituals such as the procession and folk games like wrestling and rice cooking, creating a lively and cheerful atmosphere.

Through these festivals, Vietnamese culture and history are widely transmitted and promoted, demonstrating the community spirit and solidarity of the people. Legends and festivals reflect and record the cultural values of the nation, serving as a means to convey the beauty of culture to the public.

## **Family Culture**

### **Culinary Culture**

Vietnam is an agricultural country, and this legacy is reflected in its people's meals. This is evident in Vietnamese legends. Eating, for the Vietnamese, is not merely a means of sustenance but is also a deeply valued cultural practice. This is captured in various proverbs: "Có thực mới vực được đạo" (Only when you're well-fed can you pursue righteousness), "Ăn trông nể, ngồi trông hướng" (Mind your manners while eating and sitting), and "Trời đánh tránh miếng ăn" (Even in dire situations, respect the sanctity of eating). For the Vietnamese, eating is a cultural act, more precisely, a cultural interaction with the natural environment. The diversity of ecological environments and natural conditions contribute to cultural diversity. Vietnamese meals typically emphasize plant-based foods, particularly rice. The culture of wet rice cultivation, with its plant-based nature, is deeply ingrained in the daily lives of the Vietnamese people. Meals are often structured around "rice - vegetables - fish," with "rice" always being the most important component. Vietnamese rice is renowned not only traditionally but also currently, with the ST25 rice variety being named the world's best rice in 2019 in Manila. In ancient legends, rice has been exalted, as seen in tales like "The Magic Rice Grain" and "The Hùng Kings Teach People to Plant Rice."

### **Marriage Concepts**

Through various legends, we can discern that the concepts of marriage held by our ancestors were quite progressive. Early legends, still influenced by mythology, bear the marks of a matriarchal society. Specifically, the legend "The Story of the Hồng Bàng Clan" narrates the formation of the Vietnamese people and the state of Văn Lang through the marriage of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân. Their union was consensual, but when they had children, Âu Cơ did not stay with Lạc Long Quân to raise them. Lạc Long Quân said: "I am of the Dragon lineage, ruling over aquatic beings; you are of the Fairy race, living on land. Although the union of yin and yang bore our children, water, and fire are incompatible, and our lineages differ, making it difficult to live together for long. Thus, we must part ways." Consequently, fifty children followed Âu Cơ to the mountains, while fifty followed Lạc Long Quân to the sea. It appears that although they married, they had to live apart, and the woman had the right to lead and nurture the children.

During the Hùng Kings period, legends marked a significant shift in marriage concepts. Family marriage was esteemed as a major life event. Within the family, the status and rights of women were respected, sometimes even equaling those of men.

A notable custom, the bridal challenge, reflected the status and value of women in society. In the legend "Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh," the 18th Hùng King had a daughter named Mị Nương, who was of marriageable age. Consequently, the king organized a husband selection and challenged the suitors, Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh, to bring gifts such as "an elephant with nine tusks, a rooster with nine spurs, and a horse with nine red manes." This custom allowed the woman to choose a husband of her liking, one who possessed both virtue and talent. It also demonstrates that marriage during this period had moved away from the practice of arranged marriages, replacing it with fair trials to ensure individual happiness.

However, the Hùng King's preference for Sơn Tinh was evident, as all the gifts were products of the mountainous region where Sơn Tinh resided. Consequently, it was understandable and aligned with the king's wishes that Sơn Tinh arrived with the gifts first and married Mị Nương. This bridal challenge tradition empowered the bride's family to set the challenge, requiring the groom's family to meet the terms, thus elevating the woman's value to a new level.

The bridal challenge and the trials the suitors underwent to win their beloved illustrate the establishment of monogamy, where couples were deeply bonded. Sơn Tinh, the mountain god, and Thủy Tinh, the water god, were equally matched in strength and ability. Both were deities in the territory of Văn Lang under the Hùng Kings, and both sought to marry Mị Nương and become the king's son-in-law. Despite their talents and respect for the king, only one could be chosen. Mị Nương's preference for Sơn Tinh, despite Thủy Tinh's furious

opposition and attempts to reclaim her by invoking storms and floods, underscores the emerging monogamous family structure. This era marked the formation of nuclear families, typically consisting of two generations, with marriages based on voluntary unions, reflecting progressive marriage concepts. Unlike the loose, promiscuous marriage customs of primitive times, this period saw the practice of the bride moving in with the groom's family, contrasting with matriarchal customs where the groom lived with the bride's family or couples lived apart like *Âu Cơ* and *Lạc Long Quân*.

Marriage in ancient society was thus highly regarded, marking significant advancements. The bridal challenge, monogamy, and the practice of "brides following husbands" are also highlighted in the folk tale "*Chử Đồng Tử*," depicting the free love between *Tiên Dung* and *Chử Đồng Tử*. These practices, maintained in modern, civilized society, reflect progress as human thought and perception evolved positively. Despite lingering matriarchal remnants, Vietnamese legends reveal that marriage rituals evolved with the advancing civilization.

## CONCLUSION

By examining Vietnamese legends through a cultural lens, this paper has highlighted the cultural values embedded in these stories, including the culture of gratitude to ancestors, the worship of heroes (both military and cultural), as well as festivals and marriage concepts of the Vietnamese people.

In Vietnamese belief, humans are not created by divine beings but have an extraordinary origin, such as being born from a hundred-egg sac. This is reflected in legends and, for thousands of years, the Vietnamese have not forgotten their origins. Consequently, the Vietnamese maintain the practice of ancestor worship to honor those who gave birth to them. This is a cultural beauty that almost every ethnic group in Vietnam upholds. The Vietnamese adhere to the belief that "trees have roots, water has sources," and thus they devoutly worship the deceased to remember them and remind future generations of their roots.

From the time of establishing the nation, the Vietnamese have had to defend it, leading to the development of bravery, responsibility, and deep patriotism. This has produced numerous heroic figures, whether in battle or cultural creation. To commemorate and emulate these heroes, the Vietnamese have established temples and organized festivals. These spiritual activities are held annually on specific days associated with the heroes or their achievements. As a result, Vietnam hosts numerous festivals, reflecting Vietnamese beliefs. This tradition is not only recognized domestically but also admired by international friends.

Furthermore, family culture is evident in the legends. The Vietnamese culture is reflected in everything from family meals to marriage concepts. The meal structure of "rice - vegetables - fish" stems from the natural conditions and the people's preference for plant-based foods. In terms of marriage, the Vietnamese hold progressive and civilized views. They transitioned from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system, embracing monogamy. These concepts are rooted in legends and continue to be upheld by the Vietnamese people today. Thus, it can be affirmed that the cultural characteristics displayed in Vietnamese legends have created a rich and diverse cultural identity that, in the technological era, needs to be preserved and promoted, as highlighted in the authors' recommendations (Yunindyawati et al., 2024).

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