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Metaphysical Experiences in Postwar Vietnam

This article discusses a number of legends from contemporary Vietnam. Because international readers are unlikely to be informed about details of folklore and folklore scholarship in Vietnam, the article sketches this history before presenting and discussing a selection of contemporary Vietnamese legends.

A Short History of Vietnamese Folkloristics

Although the discipline of folkloristics was introduced to Vietnam only at the beginning of the twentieth century, the interest in folklore has an extremely long pedigree in the country. Archeological evidence indicates that since Văn Lang–Âu Lạc times in the third millennium BCE (Liên 18), the Vietnamese people lived in close relation to nature and practiced animism and polytheism. Today, Vietnamese people often spiritualize nature and elevate humans to the position of gods (Thịnh 27). At the same time, Vietnamese people from the mountains to the plains share a strong belief in magic and the metaphysical world. For example, they

believe that talismans or spells can drive away evil spirits or increase strength. Even Buddhist monks learn the ritual of exorcism that they use as a means of propagating their faith.

In many cases, the belief in the active interference of ancestral souls and the metaphysical world in daily affairs materializes in social contracts. People believe that the living and the dead can communicate with each other at specific moments. Consequently, they express the resulting obligations of human life in traditional ceremonies such as *giỗ* (annual anniversaries), *tết Thanh Minh* (Thanh Minh festivals), or *ngày sóc vọng* (Ancestor Memorial Day). This cultural characteristic originates not only from the peasants' fear of the uncalculable wrath of nature, it also derives from the desire to honor the heroes in a country whose history is marked by long series of bloody wars and violent clashes with China (Liên). Consequently, a system of gods and venerated warriors linked with an extended tradition of popular narratives circulates in popular tradition (Trường 18).

In the Middle Ages, becoming aware of the psychological qualities of folklore, the Vietnamese feudal dynasties used Confucian political theory to enforce the reassurance and consolation of the community, including the promotion of certain aspects of folklore to stabilize their reign. Led by the desire to create a harmonious community, the feudal governments propagated the fame of countless heroes and warriors and exemplary and virtuous women whose origins lay in popular belief and historical legends (An 123).

As early as the fourteenth century, Confucian officials recorded Vietnamese folk narratives, giving rise to compilations such as *Việt Điện U Linh* (Collection of Stories on the Shady and Spiritual World of the Viet Realm) by Lý Tế Xuyên and *Linh Nam Chích Quái* (Strange Stories in Linh Nam Realm) by Trần Thế Pháp. These collections make up the earliest preserved specimens of ancient narratives about strange and marvelous things and events from the tradition of the peripheral strata of the Vietnamese population while constituting the earliest documents for the Confucianist occupation with folk narratives (An 24). The latter phenomenon is grounded in a subtle combination of kingship, patriarchy, and theocracy aiming to increase the power of the government in the intense spiritual context of medieval times. Being deeply influenced by Confucianism, with its high esteem of rationalism, as well as the popular belief in the supernatural (Tữ 457), Vietnamese feudal dynasties engaged scribes to collect, edit, and revise stories collected from popular tradition (Kim 58). As a result of the collecting activities of the Confucian

metaphysical thought and the social context of a socialist country, between spiritually uniform states at the social surface and a delicate, flexible, innate spirituality of the people. On one hand, Vietnamese people are forced to face and adapt to the intense government censorship in unifying the spiritual world. On the other hand, they strive to maintain a balance in their lives, seek to adjust the mechanism of the inner spirit, and restrict the official dogma in a sophisticated way by creating colorful metaphysical stories in the digital world to overcome contradictions with the officially propagated ideology.

By telling each other metaphysical experiences in the legends of the postwar era, Vietnamese people reveal the obsessive horrors of modern wars, the suffering of the ill-fated victims, and the grief of their surviving relatives, as well as the spiritual contemplation of the finiteness of human life in historically turbulent times. As Ülo Valk has aptly stated, even “in cultures, where the dominant mind-set is sceptical or bound in materialist thought, the hauntings continue and ghosts have adjusted themselves to the secular environment” (Valk 92).

Conclusion

Despite the changes in folklore genres in the modern world, metaphysical stories disseminated in social media and by way of digital technology reflect basic historical, cultural, and psychological problems of humankind. The stories contribute to a spiritual unity of humankind, the formation of spiritual life, and the preservation of stability of a given culture. Folk narratives represent perspectives on all aspects of , including death, regeneration, energy, spirit, evil . . . and all still exist strongly in contemporary life through the symbols and archetypes of the haunting experiences.

With metaphysical experiences expressed by legends about haunted houses and psychic stories, Vietnamese contemporary legend has become the border zone in which the social world of humans and the metaphysical experience of death and ghost stories are merged into a context of mutual interaction. The colorful experiences appear and disappear alternately, not exactly in the past or the future but in the here and now simultaneously. The views of how life functions come from a deep experience over thousands of years, and it survives on a sophisticated spiritual mechanism that embodies opposite characteristics. Vietnamese legends in postcolonial and postwar times are thus a promising resource for

scholars studying the mode by which the effortless comingling of ancient tradition, indigenous cultures, and new society interact and define each other in the modern world.

The metaphysical experiences of the digital age expressed in Vietnamese contemporary legends provide unique examples of how folk narratives affect the community, how the psychology of the postwar community affects the identity of folk narratives, and how today's generations face the memory of war in the past. With the implicit conflict between popular belief and Marxism's atheist doctrine and its reconciliation that surfaces intensely in modern politics, society, and culture, the existence of contemporary legends in new media and cyberspace demonstrates the important role that metaphysical narratives play along with the traditional core values of folklore in Vietnam as a modern Asian nation.

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