Vietnamese Folklore Seen from an Adult's View

Bui Dieu Quynh

National Centre for Sustainable Development of General Education Quality,
Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, 101 Tran Hung Dao street, Hoan Kiem
district, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam

Email: buidieuquynh2019@gmail.com

Hanoi, October 03, 2019

Folklore, on its mentioning, depicts in our mind a world full of magical wonder and sweet dreams that fill the souls of any child. Folklore, from my childhood memory when I indulged myself in piles of folklore bedside books, is the firm belief that 'one good turn deserves another' ('The Story of Tam and Cam', 'The Hundred-Knot Bamboo Tree'), and 'whatever a man sows, that he will also reap' ('The Story of Thach Sanh'). The simplicity of good overcoming evil has been profoundly reassuring to my growth as a child struggling to make sense of this wide world, nurturing and walking me on the path of positive thinking and optimism: Remain pure of heart and become a princess! Folklore, I believe, is a manual for learning to appreciate the value of hard work, honesty, and kindness that not only myself but also many other Vietnamese people who have been reading and listening to folklore take into their later life. However, as much as I appreciate its moral values and beauty, my worldview as an adult reader has urged me to reflect on the scarcely discussed contradictions of norms and virtues in folklore. The reading of '*On how religions could accidentally incite lies and violence: Folktales as a cultural transmitter*' by a group of Vietnamese researchers has been enlightening to me in this regard [1].

Vietnamese folklore is diverse in characters and types but can be seen to address three main themes. Falling under the first theme are tales and fables featuring animals, either domestic pets (e.g. 'Buffalo and Horse,' 'Three-legged Dog') or wild ones (e.g. 'Uncle of Heaven,' 'Peacock and Crow'). These tales often use stories of weaker but clever animals tricking and defeating cruel, strong enemies to praise the intelligence of ordinary people who overcome or conquer great obstacles. The second theme commonly found in Vietnamese folklore has story plots revolving around the changing fate of those belonging to the grassroots social class. The most well-known tales addressing this theme are 'The Story of Tam and Cam,' 'The Story of Thach Sanh' and 'The Story of So Dua,' which often give the audience insights into

the Vietnamese ancients' desire for equality and fairness. The third theme, meanwhile, comprises narratives of unusual thrilling events that occur in the mundane world such as 'The Story of Truong Chi,' 'The Death of Four Monks,' or 'The Legend of the Quail.' Magical elements do exist but only play a minimal role in the development of the plot while metaphor is used as the main literary device.

There are apparent values in Vietnamese folklore that have secured its place in the country's general and literary education. Regardless of their themes, folktales in general end on a happy note in which karma always comes for the bad; the good are rewarded with a happy, affluent life; and the society becomes a better place with justice. These moral and aesthetic values of folklore have been an indispensable part of Vietnamese Literature in school, bedtime stories for children, lessons for family education, topics for literary analyses, and sources of inspiration for modern literature [2,3]. In a study conducted on 306 Vietnamese folktales, Vuong et al. took the religious values into consideration and found that the teaching of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism has penetrated and left their imprints quite deeply in Vietnamese folklore, particularly Buddhism – the long-standing religion from India with its very early presence in Vietnam [4]. Karma – the spiritual principle of cause and effect and the determination of the cycle of reincarnation – is the core concept of Buddhism that explains for negative outcomes as consequences from violence or lying act done by main characters. Vietnamese folklore has woven strong lessons in morality, including karma, in enchanting mythical stories.

Seen from my perspective as an adult reader who has years of life experience and who has developed some critical thinking, Vietnamese folklore sometimes teaches moral virtues in a controversial manner. On the one hand, it is quite common for characters in folktales to call one another by names, for example in such stories as 'Wolf and Goat,' 'The Hundred-Knot Bamboo Tree,' or 'The Toad Guy.' Such deviance from the acceptable norms in addressing and showing respect to others, especially in conversation with older people, can make it inappropriate for young learners to read or listen to certain folktales since they may have not yet mastered or may not have been able to appreciate subtle shades of meaning and tone in language use. For another, fairy tales often describe morally wrong behavior in much honest detail. 'The Story of Tam and Cam' ends with an act of revenge when Tam, the protagonist, poured boiling water onto Cam and took her corpse to make fermented sauce, which was then sent to Cam's mother as a gift. Tam, however, was still depicted as deserving her desired

marriage and enjoying the wealth and richness in the end. In ‘The Hundred-Knot Bamboo Tree,’ the poor young servant received a magical gift from the Buddha, with which he was able to tie the rich father to the bamboo tree and force the man to let him marry the daughter. A recent findings by Vuong et al. [1] revealed that the typical characters associated with Buddhism, who were engaged in violent or lying acts, still tended to have a happy ending ($\beta_{B_and_Viol_O} = 2.55$). It can be seen that acts of revenge in folklore have been taken for personal satisfaction and laws and relationship have been disrespected. The teaching or telling of folklore to children without being aware of how this can gradually become ingrained in their minds and affect the formation of their personality and behavior is detrimental. Apparently, we need to retain old tales and classic texts and pass these onto future generations. However, moral lessons in folklore need to be seen in today’s wisdom rather than being glued to the norms and values of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In short, the moral, cultural, and aesthetic values embraced in folklore are undeniable since it vividly reflects the history and life that was once associated with the Vietnamese people. Folklore will continue to be told to our descendants so that they can learn to appreciate kindness, honesty, benevolence, and love – the qualities that characterize Vietnamese people. In the meantime, it is of prime importance to re-evaluate the suitability and appropriateness of the content in folklore to the present-time teaching and educating of learners. Perhaps the endings of some folktale could be rewritten to show that forgiveness should be given more weight.

References:

- [1] Vuong, Q.-H., La, V.-P., Ho, T. M., Nguyen, H.-K. T., Vuong, T. T., & Ho, T. M. (2019, September 26). On how religions could accidentally incite lies and violence: Folktales as a cultural transmitter. *OSF Preprints* (Working Paper No. AISDL-1909), DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/nb7tg.
- [2] Lien, N. P. (2015). “Bài viết chuyên đề văn học dân gian” – Chuyên đề: Truyện cổ tích. [“Writings on traditional literature” – Topic: Folklore]. *Đào Duy Từ High School – Hà Nội*. Retrieved from <http://www.thptdaoduytu.vn/thay-co-va-mai-truong/516-bai-viet-chuyen-de-van-hoc-dan-gian-chuyen-de-truyen-co-tich> (Accessed October 3, 2019).

- [3] Trong, V. Q. (2010). Bàn về truyện cổ tích của nhà văn [On writer's fairy tales]. Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, S. 1, 47 – 52. URL: <http://www.vjol.info/index.php/khxbvn/article/view/32687>
- [4] Vuong, Q.-H., Bui, Q.-K., La, V.-P., Vuong, T.-T., Nguyen, V.-H. T., Ho, M.-T., Nguyen, H.-K. T., & Ho, M.-T. (2018). Cultural additivity: Behavioural insights from the interaction of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in folktales. *Palgrave Communications*, 4, 143. doi:10.1057/s41599-018-0189-2