

## Cultural Code in the Legend of Vietnamese Rice Cakes

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### Abstract:

The article deals with how to learn the cultural code in the legend of Vietnamese rice cakes and in folklore works. Cultural code is used to interpret, understand folklore works and affirm the cultural beauty of the nation through each folklore work.

**Keywords:** Folklore, folk literature, legend, cultural code, Vietnamese rice cakes.

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Date of Submission: 02-05-2022

Date of Acceptance: 14-05-2022

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### I. Statement of the problem

Folk literature is a part of folklore that is directly influenced by folklore and is a means of preserving folklore. Born on the basis of a certain culture, folk literature is not only an art of words but also contains cultural imprints, beliefs, religions, customs and habits... of the community. Those cultural values make up the depth and multifaceted value of folk literature. However, despite close relation to folklore, it still has its own artistic characteristics. Therefore, when learning about folk literature, we need to interpret the "cultural code", or imprints of culture, history, beliefs... in folklore works to be able to understand, understand deeply, the value of content and art of literary works and apply that knowledge to continue to study other folklore works. "Cultural code" is the attraction of folklore works, including *the legend of Vietnamese rice cakes*.

### II. Overview of the research problem

As a composite art form, folk literature is an important corpus for studying folklore. This research direction has been interested by many scholars such as: Chu Xuan Dien, "*Folklore - methodological issues and research on genre*" (Social Science Publishing House, 2006), Do Lai Thuy, "*From cultural perspective*" (National Culture Publishing House, 1999), Tran Nho Thin, "*Vietnamese medieval literature from a cultural perspective*" (Education Publishing House, 2008), Nguyen Van Dan, "*Culture - culture from an interspatial perspective*" (The Gioi Publishing House, 2020). Do Lai Thuy has been very successful in using poetic and stylistic learning to interpret cultural and historical knowledge. In the work "*Vietnamese medieval literature from a cultural perspective*", Tran Nho Thin also pointed out that "*on the cultural background in which the work was born... not only integrated with medieval literature... but it is also possible to apply this approach to analyze literary composition in another literature or literary eras*". (Thin, 2007; p.36).

Folklore has influenced folklore and legends in many respects. Former Prime Minister Pham Van Dong once remarked: "*Legends often have a core of historical truths that people over generations have idealized and put into it their earnest feelings for poetry and dreams*" (Dong, 1969; p.53). The historical and cultural core in each legend is a valuable source of material for the study of culture and literature in an important historical period of the nation. Vietnamese people are very familiar with legends bearing the imprint of the Hung Kings' period when building the country such as *Lac Long Quan and Au Co (son of Rong, grandson of Tien); The Lord of Mountains - The Lord of Sea; Story of the betel leaf and the areca nut; The Legend of Vietnamese rice cakes; Thanh Giong...* Each story reflects the life, culture, and aspirations of Vietnamese ancestors that have been drawn up over many generations.

In 1971, in the book *Tradition of National Heroes in Vietnam's Types of Folk Narrative*, there were three articles affirming that legend is a genre of folk literature bearing the imprint of folklore. Kieu Thu Hoach commented: Legend is a type of oral narrative in the type of folk narrative. Its plot content is to retell the stories of historical figures or explain the origin of customs according to the people's conception.

However, legends in particular and folk literature in general, despite having an organic relationship with folklore, still cannot completely dissolve its artistic essence into folklore elements. Therefore, when studying folklore works, we need to understand the interaction between literature – culture and culture - literature.

### III. Research Methods

The first folk literature was born as a rich land that preserves many layers of national cultural sediments through many historical periods. However, folklore penetrates into folk literature through many refractions, most of which are expressed through cultural codes. Therefore, decoding folk literature in folklore is decoding cultural symbols.

To find and decode folk literature in folklore, it is necessary to:

- Find and identify elements that can be symbolic in real life because what is not in the reality of a nation's life cannot become a cultural symbol. Cultural symbols are often expressed through beliefs, customs, historical sites, festivals... A cultural symbol is repeated in many different aspects of a community's culture.
- Find cultural symbols in real life that appear in folk literature. Symbols in folklore are quite rich, but not all symbols present in folklore appear fully in folk literature. Therefore, in order to decode cultural symbols in folk literature, it is necessary to know how to connect, associate, and compare to find similarities.
- Mobilize all knowledge about culture and cultural codes to interpret those symbols in folklore, pay attention to the relationships that govern symbols such as beliefs, customs, festivals, folk myths... Decode cultural symbols after finding out the relationship between cultural codes and folklore.

### IV. Research results on "cultural code" in The Legend of Vietnamese rice cakes

#### 4.1. Cultural code of Wet rice culture

"The Legend of Vietnamese rice cakes" tells the story of the 6th Hung King who wanted to pass the throne to his son after defeating the An invaders. He opened a contest to choose talented people by offering sacrifices to ancestors. Prince Lang Lieu is one of the children of Hung King's family, but he has "a mother who was estranged from the king so she died alone" (Phap, 2017; p.82). Lang Lieu is the character representing the working people, the poor, the motherless, the most disadvantaged of the eighteen children of Hung King. He had to manually cultivate and work like ordinary people. Lang Lieu was unlucky, but he was helped by the gods through a dream that taught him about the preciousness of rice grains. "*There is nothing in Heaven and Earth that is as precious as rice because rice is the food that feeds people. Use glutinous rice to make round and square cakes to represent Heaven and Earth. You take the outer leaf, put the filling inside the bread, put the image of the mother and father...*" (Phap, 2017; p.83). Is it possible that the folk authors from the beginning recognized and sent a message to their descendants about the cherishing of rice grains - that is the origin of wet rice culture, one of the core values of Vietnamese national culture?

Since ancient times, the country of Vietnam has had many lakes, rivers, streams, canals, and convenient waterway transportation, creating a habit of thinking and living near the natural water environment. In a country where the water element is so abundant, the most preferred crop must be a water-loving, water-tolerant plant. Scientists believe that more than 10,000 years ago, in ancient Vietnam, there was a wild rice variety, and more than 9,000 years ago, the ancient Vietnamese knew how to domesticate rice to form a food crop... According to Vietnamese legends, before rice, people mainly lived by hunting and gathering. Life is precarious. There was a couple from a certain family who left the village to go to the forest to find food. The husband set a bird trap in a large grassy area. Once, when he caught a few small birds, he brought them back to his wife. When she dissected the birds, she found that they had very strange yellow seeds like the seeds of the grass near the house. The wife thought that if birds can eat this seed, people can also eat it. She cut the grass, smashed it, took the seeds, and tried to see if there was flour and fragrance. They brought that grain to cook and felt full and healthy. The couple immediately took seeds and planted them everywhere and brought the seeds back to the village for everyone to plant together. Since then, wild rice has become a valuable food crop for Vietnamese people.

The Vietnamese consider rice as their treasure. Rice not only feeds people but has become a sacred plant, carrying the soul of Vietnamese culture. That is rice culture. Every year many Vietnamese ethnic groups hold a ceremony to sacrifice to the God of Rice, a rice festival, a new rice festival, etc. as a cult to worship the rice plant. For rice, "water is the first", then other factors, water is the first factor that determines the success or failure of the crop. Therefore, the Vietnamese have known for a long time to do irrigation and build dikes to prevent floods and protect rice. Since then, Vietnamese people have worshiped water, the sun, and praised favorable rains and harmonious winds.

In spite of growing rice and having a full life, the ancient Vietnamese did not stop from the first grains of rice. They found many ways to make delicious dishes from rice grains. The legend of Au Co tells that, after raising hundreds of children, she divided the children to govern the mountainous and plain areas. She taught her children how to grow mulberries, raise silkworms and grow wet rice. Following the experience of growing wet rice that has been passed down from generation to generation, Lang Lieu has grown glutinous rice and plain rice but wondered what to make to offer to his father. In the dream, the god taught him how to use glutinous rice to make square and round cakes representing Heaven and Earth, symbolizing the great merits of his parents. The filial and good rice cultivator made rice cakes to offer to his ancestors. "*On the appointed day, all the princes*

brought delicious and exotic food on the tray. As for Prince Lang Lieu, there are only rice cakes, which look very simple on the outside. Hung King was surprised, and when asked, Lang Lieu brought the story of the gods to the dream and explained in detail the meaning of the two types of cakes. Hung Vuong tasted them, found them delicious, and gave them a meaningful compliment ...” (Phap, 2017; p.83). Lang Lieu deserves to be handed the throne to continue to lead the people to develop wet rice farming and honor the "real pearl" given by heaven.

From the domestication of wet rice to the time it became a staple food, feeding people, it has gone through a thousand years of history with many generations of sweat and effort. Wet rice culture is a great achievement of our nation, deeply and subtly taught by our ancestors through the legend of Vietnamese rice cakes.

Vietnamese rice cakes are the quintessence, the pinnacle of wet rice culture found only in Vietnam. This unique cake has existed since Hung King's time until now. Having eternal vitality because Vietnamese rice cakes contain the beauty of the spiritual culture, beliefs and traditions of the Vietnamese nation.

#### **4.2. Culture code of Square and Round**

The square and round shape of *banh chung* and *banh giay* (Vietnamese rice cakes) are a cultural code, representing the ancient Vietnamese concept of the universe. They thought that the sky is cupped and round, and the ground is solid, and square. So, they felt that "*the sky is round, the earth is square*". This perception was the first conception of the universe by the ancient Vietnamese that influenced many different types of folklore. In folk architecture, the communal house pillars and pagoda pillars are always the base of the stone blocks that are well hewn with squares below and circles above as if they were simulating a miniature universe. During the folk festival, people offer and procession of *banh chung* - square, *banh giay* - round as symbols of the universe, earth and sky. Having heaven and earth is a complete and perfect universe, so square and round also means fullness and completeness.

In *The legend of Vietnamese rice cakes*, square *banh chung* represents the earth mother. Round *banh giay* symbolizes the heaven father. The cake has all the five elements, including Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth. *Banh giay* is round, white, flexible, tasteless, signifying fullness and purity. *Banh chung* is square filling with red pork and belongs to Fire. Fire creates Earth which has the yellow color of green beans. Earth creates Metal with the white color of glutinous rice. Metal creates Water, *banh chung* is boiled in water. Water creates Wood, glutinous rice grains are green. It can be said that there are five elements in *banh chung*. Therefore, *banh chung* and *banh giay* contain Yin - Yang harmonizing and the five elements. *Banh chung* and *banh giay* are the quintessence of heaven and earth, evoking the prosperity of the countryside, thanking the universe for giving birth to the five elements, favorable rain and wind, good seasons, a prosperous and peaceful life.

Vietnamese rice cakes are noble items of the Vietnamese people, placed on the ceremony tray of the whole nation to worship the Hung Kings, and placed on the tray of families worshipping ancestors during the coming New Year and spring. Because of the beauty of culture, the concept of heaven and earth, the universe, and the five elements, *banh chung* and *banh giay* have existed for thousands of years of history and will continue to be passed down from generation to generation in Vietnam.

#### **4.3. Cultural code of the belief in worshipping Hung Kings**

Ancestor worship is a type of folk belief that has long had a profound influence on the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. This belief not only contains the good cultural and moral values of the nation but also shows the Vietnamese people's concept of the world and human life. Therefore, ancestor worship has a positive influence on the life of each individual, community and the whole society.

Ancestor worship is expressed through the custom of worshipping the National Ancestor (Lac Long Quan - Au Co, Hung Kings), the village lord, the ancestors of each family, and the grandparents in each family. Belief is an absolute belief, without explanation, with no other choice but the mysterious supernatural being in which they entrust their faith.

Ancestor worship is found in many genres of folk literature, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, proverbs, folk songs in different forms.

The legend of Vietnamese rice cakes tells about the situation where the 6th Hung King chose his successor by making offerings to his ancestors. Lang Lieu asked the gods to choose the most delicious glutinous rice grains to make *banh chung* and *banh giay*. The story has easily explained the origin of the principle of "*When drinking water, think of its source*". Offerings are simple but meaningful, expressing filial piety to ancestors, and gratitude to heaven and earth. That is the origin of ancestor worship, Hung King worship in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese people have experienced thousands of years of history. In the spirit and emotions of the people, they all believe that: Father Lac Long Quan and mother Au Co gave birth to our nation and Hung Kings were the people who had merits to build the country.

Belief in worshipping Hung Kings has existed and developed for a long time. It expresses the cultural, spiritual life, and faith of the Vietnamese people, becoming a morality of gratitude to the ancestors who have contributed to building and defending the country. Hung Kings Commemoration - Hung Temple Festival has been ingrained in the subconscious of every Vietnamese for thousands of generations. The belief in worshipping Hung Kings - the common ancestor of the nation will forever endure. Vietnamese generations today and in the future increasingly appreciate and preserve the achievements left by their forefathers, proud of their nation's past - all Vietnamese people having Lac Hong blood in them never forget their ethnic roots. Perhaps, there are few places in the world where there is a common ancestor worship belief like the Vietnamese people. That is the pride of our nation.

## V. Discussion

After discovering the hidden cultural codes in folklore works, we proceed to decode them. In other words, we analyze the symbols in the following direction:

*Firstly*, finding out which cultural codes are present in the works of folklore, and counting the number of repetitions. If there is stability and symbolic meaning, then it is folklore symbols. It is necessary to distinguish cultural codes from motifs which are elements that repeat many times in folklore works but are not folklore symbols.

*Secondly*, finding the transformation of the symbol, that is, finding the path of that symbol from folklore to folk literature. It is necessary to maximize cultural knowledge when analyzing this change.

*Thirdly*, returning to the image in the folklore work that we are analyzing to fully understand the whole culture – folk literature. It should be noted that a symbol can appear in many different works and genres of folklore. The richer the appearance of the symbol, the higher the reliability of the symbol. A folklore-cultural symbol can have many different layers of meaning. Therefore, when decoding folklore symbols, it is necessary to analyze and evaluate in many different aspects, exploiting symbols in all directions of meaning in which it participates.

*Finally*, reconstructing the symbolic structure diagram that we analyze to find out whether during the transformation of that symbol's history, meanings have been added or removed, and explaining the addition or removal of meanings.

It is the decoding of folklore symbols from cultural codes that helps us to understand the folklore work in its entirety.

## VI. Conclusion

The images and codes of folklore in legends in particular and in folk literature in general are the products of the beautiful imagination and creative thinking of the ancient Vietnamese people and have become familiar symbols in the minds of Vietnamese people. The legend of Vietnamese rice cakes is a legend with a unique cultural code with a profound traditional educational meaning that needs to be preserved and promoted. Relying on cultural codes to study folklore, learning cultural concepts and traces expressed in folklore is the shortest and most accurate way to discover the beauty of folklore works.

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Nguyen Hoang Hoa, et. al. "Cultural Code in the Legend of Vietnamese Rice Cakes." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(05), 2022, pp. 13-16.