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Folk Beliefs in the Gióng Festival in Vietnam

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Abstract

Giong festival in Phu Dong Temple and Soc Temple is a representative intangible cultural heritage of mankind included in the list of UNESCO in 2010. Up to now, many researches on Giong festival have been published. In this article, the author analyzes the folk beliefs that exist in Giong festival: natural god beliefs, fertility beliefs, worship of cultural heroes, national heroes, etc. cultural, scientific and historical values of Giong festival.

Key word: Beliefs, fertility, cultural hero, national hero.

Full paper

Thánh Gióng, the main character of the Gióng festival, which takes place in different localities, has been respectfully worshipped by local villagers for thousands of years. Amongst the gods belonging to Vietnamese traditional beliefs, it is hardly possible to dub a character of different appearances, meanings and values like the legendary figure of Thánh Gióng. Similarly, no legendary character, but the hero of Phù Đồng village, has been reverently venerated for thousands of years by all royal dynasties and common people in three sacred roles as a King, a Saint and a God.

The legend of the hero will serve as the core of the festivals relating to him. Layers of culture and religion remain from the development of these festivals. The Gióng festivals, held in the villages of Phù Đồng, Hội Xá, Đặng Xá (Gia Lâm district), Vệ Linh (Phù Linh commune), Dục Thượng (Tiên Dục commune), Xuân Dục, Đan Tảo (Tân Minh commune), Đức Hậu (Đức Hòa commune), Yên Sào (Xuân Giang commune), Yên Tàng (Bắc Phú commune), Phù Lỗ Đoài (Phù Lỗ commune), Thanh Nhàn (Thanh Xuân commune), and Xuân Lai (Xuân Thu commune) in Sóc Sơn district; Sơn Du, Cán Khê (Nguyên Khê commune) and Đồng Đồ (Nam Hồng commune) in Đông Anh district; Xuân Tảo (Xuân Đình commune) in Từ Liêm district; and Đông Bộ Đầu (Thống Nhất commune) in Thường Tín district, all have Phù Đồng village's hero - Thánh Gióng - as its main character.

The shrine dedicated to Thánh Gióng at all the aforesaid relics, excluding that in Sóc Temple, which is something different, is always located in the central chamber (See *Appendix of Temple Diagrams at Relics*).

According to Nguyễn Minh Ngọc and Hoàng Thu Hương, the seven statues in the central chamber of Sóc temple are named *Thần tướng* (Divine General), *Ngọc nữ* (Fairy), *Tỳ Sa Môn thiên vương* (Vaisravana), *Thánh Gióng*, *Vu Đế quốc vương* (King Vu Đế), *Tiên đồng* (Angel), and *Thần tướng*¹ (Divine General). Meanwhile, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hòa labeled them as *Phù Đồng thiên vương* (Heavenly King Phù Đồng), *Vu Đế quốc vương* (King Vu Đế), *Tỳ Sa Môn thiên vương*, *Nữ Oa Bộ Thiên*, *Na Tra thiên tử* (Heaven's Son Na Tra), *Tả Xiên xiên lực sĩ*, and *Hữu vạn vạn tinh binh*. We have doubts about the disorder of the shrine at Thượng temple because the temple in Sóc Sơn has been embellished several times. According to the geography books such as *Bắc Ninh toàn tỉnh địa dư chí*, *Bắc Ninh phong thổ tạp ký* and *Bắc Ninh tỉnh địa dư* on Bắc Ninh province, at the end of the 19th century, the locality was home to two temples and to the integration process, transforming *Tỳ Sa Môn thiên vương* into *Sóc thiên vương* and

¹ See also *Tỳ sa môn thiên vương* (Vaisravana), *Sóc thiên vương* and *Phù Đồng thiên vương* in "Religions of Vietnam in Middle Ages" in *Festival of Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, pp. 137–155.

then into *Phù Đổng thiên vương*, as implied by Như Hạnh quite profound analysis¹. The shrine to Thánh Gióng at the temple of Sọ (Thanh Nhân village) embodies the image of Thánh Gióng holding a bamboo stick, whereas the shrine at Đông Bộ Đầu temple, Thống Nhất commune, Thường Tín district, is differently designed. The statue of Thánh Gióng here is colossal, holding a sword in his right hand, carrying a valuable tower in his left hand, and treading on the head of two monsters, which reminds the viewer of the status of an anti-flood deity merged into Thánh Gióng. Is it true that Vũ Phương Đề was sound to write in *Công dư tiệp ký* in the 18th century: “Ever since *Thiên vương* rode his iron horse up to heaven, he has made his reputation brilliant. Is it possible that his mother was caught by the monsters? Maybe, there appeared another deity who was hallowed like *Phù Đổng thiên vương*, and thus used this title as his pen name. Please let me express my shallow opinion here for the distinguished readers to study”².

Legends and shrines at the vestiges of Thánh Gióng will dominate the sacred objects surrounding them and the development of the Gióng Festival in the villages where Thánh Gióng is worshipped.

The cult addressed to natural phenomena is first mentioned. After all-out efforts to travel and study the delta, scholar Cao Huy Đình recorded narrations from the regional inhabitants: “This is God Đổng’s footprint. He was an extraordinary big man, whose head was able to contact the sky, while his feet touched the ground and shoulders reached the clouds. He raked the ground into fields, piled up stones into hills and dredged sand into rivers. His step connected the peaks of mountains. His footprint resulted in subsidence on stones and holes in the ground. His voice sounded like thunder. His eyes were bright like a flash. He breathed out black clouds and violent wind and rain. He used to appear on rainy and windy days when eggplants fruited. He went in various directions, sometimes straight and sometimes revolving. Western and eastern cyclones occurred, respectively, when he traveled from West to East and vice versa. He beat rice, dropped eggplants and broke unaccountable bamboo and banyan trees”³. The figure of a natural god is engraved in the people’s mind as a legendary model. This is the motif of a miraculous character closely linked with the primitive age of the history of mankind. Regretfully, the Viet people’s legends, for some reasons, have dissolved into separate pieces of legendary figures in their contact with Northern culture, instead of consolidating into a system like the legends of the ethnic groups of Bana, Gia Rai and Êđê, etc., in Vietnam, of India or some other countries. Children’s verses in the Nghệ region (Central Vietnam) used to refer to such preeminent persons:

*Ông tát bể
Ông kể sao*

¹ Translated by Đoàn Thắng, in *General Collection of Hán Script Novels of Vietnam*, Thế Giới Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, Vol. 1, pp. 543.

² Translated by Đoàn Thắng, *opcit*, pp. 543.

³ *Hero of Dống Village*, in Cao Huy Đình’s collection of works winning the Hồ Chí Minh Award, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, pp.198.

Ông đào cây

Ông xây rú

(The man who bailed out water from the sea

The man who counted stars

The man who dug trees

The man who developed forests)

It is possible to say that the traditional cultural and religious layers of the ancient Việt people in the legend of Thánh Gióng trace back to God Đổng. People have hallowed a natural phenomenon into a belief and a character for worship. It is not by chance that Phù Đổng village formerly had an old shrine to God Đổng, who was offered a bowl of rice, a plate of eggplants and other vegetarian dishes on the ninth of fourth lunar month (stormy time). At eggplant harvest time, God Đổng was reserved a *sào* (equivalent to 360 square meters) of eggplants for him to pick when he came back. Meanwhile, adjoining fields were protected from the destruction of God Đổng by long bamboo sticks, whose one end was smartly whittled into fibers like cotton fixed next to eggplants. Such detail reminds one of the ceremonies of the northern ethnic minority groups, who gave rites to the Rice Mother prior to harvesting their rice. In other words, the ancient Việt people followed the belief in natural gods. As a god of thunder and lightning, God Đổng subsequently turned up on stormy nights. Such a reason has given birth to the event of the Gióng festival in Phù Đổng on the ninth of the fourth lunar month. How utterly sensible Prof. Trần Quốc Vượng is when proclaiming the Gióng festival “as a time of storm”¹. It is because, in the North, the spring festival closes to an end the dry season, while the early fourth lunar month signals the arrival of the rainy season:

Tháng tư cày vỡ ruộng ra

Tháng năm gieo mạ chan hòa nơi nơi.

“The fourth lunar month is the time to plough the field

May is the time to sow rice everywhere”.

The Gióng festival marks the start of a new cycle of rice plants, as well as new crops. People need it to rain for their crops. Such expectations have realized into a rain praying ceremony in people’s cultural and religious life. And as X.A. Tocarev, a (former) leading USSR scholar of religions, said: such ceremony exists in all religions.

The Gióng festival also takes reverent care of stone plants, in addition to natural gods. Everything in relation to the foreign aggressors Thánh Gióng killed was associated with stone. It was a stone horse. It was also in a stone pillar where the horses of the Yin enemy were kept in Châu Cầu. According to Trần Bá Chí’s notes on Sóc Sơn, Yin invaders were led by Thạch Linh

¹ “Basic arguments of Phù Đổng village’s hero and Dóng Festival”, in *Festival of Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, p. 440. Its copy is excerpted from *Study on Folklore Legacy of Hanoi*, Hà Nội Publishing House, 1994, pp. 203–225. The author used materials to write about the Gióng festival.

and their instruments were all made of stone. A stone bed and stone sickle were close to the mother of Thánh Gióng in Đồng Xuyên. The hero's footprint was left on a large rock in Thanh Nhân (Sóc Sơn). All of this indicates an age-old religion of the Việt people. Local notables told that the top of Sóc Mountain used to be home to an exceedingly sacred ancient shrine with a large rock. Tradition has it that a deep footprint of Mr. Đùng was printed on the rock¹. We are not clear about the source of materials on which professor Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh based the statement: "It is *Xung thiên thần vương*, or God Đổng, who is Thạch General (worshipped in Phù Đổng village). Many people believed Phù Đổng was Phnom-Núi (Mountain), based on the Khmer language system, while some others explained he was Pù Đổng-Núi based on the Tai-Dai language"². Such ideas urge us to look back on a deeper layer of culture and religion, but without even a few hallmarks of folk explanation.

Sacrifice to the sun, along with natural phenomena, is shown in the Gióng festival. Both Phù Đổng and Sóc temples have a white wooden horse at their shrine, which symbolizes faith in the sun. Legendary thought relies on the image of the horse/horse vehicle to represent the sun. Such belief is considered very important for those living mainly on rice cultivation. According to Lại Văn Tới, there were three kettledrums amongst the objects found in Cổ Loa, including one from Xóm Nhồi and two others from Cổ Loa I and Cổ Loa II. Cổ Loa I kettledrum stands out from the others. At the center of its surface is a relief of a 14-pointed star. Each point is designed with peacock feathers, while its hoop has 16 long-beaked birds flying anticlockwise³. The designs of the 14-pointed star on the kettledrum's surface, and the birds flying anticlockwise, show us the belief in the sun once pursued by the ancient Việt people in Cổ Loa. The legend of Thánh Gióng and sacred objects reminiscences one about the respect for the sun in the culture of Đông Sơn. As Prof. Trần Quốc Vượng explained: "The cult of the sun is a outline of Đông Sơn at the Gióng festival. Đông Sơn 'sun' has shifted from a symbol of "a star on the surface of a kettledrum, with birds flying anticlockwise, to the image of a white horse at Gióng temple and an iron horse in the legend of Gióng"⁴. It is necessary to study the costumes of the "enemy Generals" through *Bắc Ninh tỉnh khảo dị* (*Monography of Bắc Ninh*): "Those who acted as female Generals should wear red clothes and a military hat"⁵. And those who played the part of *Thiên vương* also wear clothes of the same color, which altogether originates from the belief in the sun. In which, the performance of the commanding flag by the Flag Master (who represents Thánh Gióng) is the most visible symbol of such belief. At Đổng Đàm, he shows three dances of the flag in a clockwise direction and three others in a anticlockwise direction. The flag's color signifies the sun. The "beating" of the commanding flag implies the daily temporal

¹ Trần Bá Chí: *Gióng of Sóc Temple*, Sóc Sơn District People's Committee, 1986, pp. 40.

² *Traditional and Modern Festivals*, Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 1984, pp. 98.

³ See *Cổ Loa-based Vestiges of Bronze and Iron at the Metal Age of the Red River Delta*, Ph.D. thesis on History, Institute of Archaeology, Hanoi, 2000.

⁴ "Basic arguments of Phù Đổng village's hero and Dóng Festival", in *Festival of Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, pp. 440.

⁵ Translated by Nguyễn Tô Lan, edited by Nguyễn Thị Hường and Đinh Khắc Thuân, manuscript, Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, 2008.

movement of the sun, which goes from East to West in the daytime and from West to East at night. The performance of Thánh Gióng entering the battlefield takes place when the sun is at its highest (that is, midday). The hero's journey from East (Châu Sơn Mountain) to West (Sóc Mountain), before flying to heaven, also indicates the movement of the sun from East to West.

Expression of faith is also found in the *hất phết* game [fighting over a ball] at the festival in Đìa (Đồng Đồ) village, Nam Hồng commune, Đông Anh district. This game is regularly held at the festival in honor of Thánh Gióng. The *phết* has an olive shape and colored red. The village's elders conduct a ceremony to carry the *phết* from its harem to the playground. Some 20 young men compete to catch the *phết* and toss it up into the sky. The more times the *phết* moves up and down, the more joyful the villagers feel. The elders said that Thánh Gióng formerly trained his army using this game, which also presently displays Đìa villagers' devotion to the sun.

In the meantime, Lê Chi villagers (Lê Chi commune, Gia Lâm district) compete in wrestling on the eighth of the first lunar month. Players coming from the hosting army are half-naked, wearing a red loincloth and yellow belt, while the opposite side, acting the role of Yin aggressors, is bare to the waist, wearing a green loincloth and white belt. Red reflects the ancient Việt people's belief in the sun. The ceremony of fighting with sticks to attain a coconut on the peak of a bamboo tree also stems from similar reasons. Unlike the cult of the sun as a national religion, such as that to the sun goddess of Japan, Amaterasu, the fact that agricultural citizens, like the ancient Việt people, held the sun in veneration is closely connected to their aspirations for good crops.

Popular at the Gióng festival in all villages, is the fertility cult, which is ranked amongst the oldest religions of agriculturalists. Born during the Neolithic era, it is, as said by X. A. Tocarev, "one of the most ancient, but independent, roots of beliefs and religious ceremonies close to sexual relations"¹. At the ancient layer of Southeast Asian culture, it is fairly progressive. In Vietnam, archaeologists have uncovered quite a large number of objects belonging to this religion. The stone statue excavated from the archaeological site of Phùng Nguyên (4,000 years BC) has two hands, not a big sex organ, removed. The other, dug up in Văn Điển (the 1st millennium BC), shapes a man with very large genitals. On the surface of the Đào Thịnh copper jar, dug up in Yên Bái province (in the 5th century BC), is the image of four couples having sexual intercourse. The fertility cult varies in different ways when cultural exchanges between Han and ancient Southeast Asian residents occur. In the South of the Gianh River, under no influence of Han culture, it has so far developed naturally as a flow or a component of the system of local beliefs. We can take the cases of *linga* and *yoni*, worshipped by Chăm people in the towers (*kalan*) in Central Vietnam, and sepulcher statues popular in the Central Highlands, as good examples. Meanwhile, the Red River delta witnessed cultural exchanges. The Trần dynasty (1266-1400), amongst some others, even ordered the elimination of obscene words, and strictly

¹ *Primary Religious Forms and their Development*, Vietnamese version by Lê Thế Thép, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1994, pp.141.

prohibited people from worshipping vulgar deities, which deformed, but failed to eliminate, the religion. Famous ethnographer Nguyễn Từ Chi was completely right in saying that: “Man and woman’s sexual relations, a symbol of the fertility cult and reproduction, are not a result of a long-term and moderate process of awareness, but rather an offspring of an unanticipated power, which unexpectedly rises up from the bottom of the human heart and the layer of human unconsciousness. It is instinct and nothing but instinct”¹. The religion’s small pieces have persisted in various forms of folk culture ranging from literature to art (sculpture of communal houses and folk pictures) and festivals. The Kinh Bắc region, where the ancient Việt people set foot early, is the place where such religion prospered. Until 1920, *Bắc Ninh tỉnh khảo dị* still recorded religion-based festivals like those held in Long Khảm commune, Đông Sơn chief town, Tiên Du district; Trường Lâm commune, Gia Lâm district; Phú Thị commune, Gia Lâm district, and so on². For such reasons, it should not be deemed unusual to see signs of the fertility cult at the festival at Phù Đồng temple. The selection of 28 beautiful girls from Phù Đồng village to play the role of the “enemy’s female Generals” is a most perceptible symbol of this religion. The strictly nominated girls must be between 10 and 13 years of age, nice and pretty, and come from a “pure” family. The Commander in Chief and Second in Command must be the most beautiful girls of all. Professor Lê Hồng Lý said that: “After watching the performance of the 28 Yin enemy’s female Generals at the Gióng festival and the battle of the Masters (Gióng’s Generals), Professor Radost Invanova, a Bulgarian folklore scholar, offered a suggestion. He wondered if it was past practice to rob a wife, as found in several ethnic groups in Vietnam and worldwide”³. According to documents of field studies, undertaken by scholar Cao Huy Đình at the Phù Đồng festival on the seven of the fourth lunar month during the 1960s, the sacrifice at Thượng temple with vegetarian dishes “is followed by the practice of men and women catching one another at the river ground at night. The men’s side always wore loincloths and kept bareheaded to prevent them from being pulled by the opposite side. This age-old custom grew so faded that it is now no more than teasing between men and women”⁴. The practice partly reminds us of the practice of *hát trùm đầu* (female and male singers of Quan họ folk songs), with kerchiefs or blouses covering their head, singing challenge-and-response phrases), filled with fertility characteristics, in the ancient *Quan họ* villages of Bắc Ninh province. Some of the songs sung by the Ải Lao troupe at the Phù Đồng Festival display the aspirations of young men and women to find a good partner. A person in the troupe holds a fishing rod while singing:

Người ta câu bể câu sông

Thì tôi câu lấy con ông cháu bà

Có chồng con, em nhả mồi ra

¹ “From some “performances” in village festival, in *Contributions to the Study of Culture and People*, Culture and Information Publishing House, *Culture and Arts Magazine*, Hanoi, 1996, pp. 367.

² I have not yet managed to update these localities according to the present administrative structure

³ *Studying Festivals of Hanoi*, Hà Nội Publishing House, 2010, pp. 243.

⁴ “Hero of Dóng village”, in *The Festival of Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, pp. 527.

Không chồng con, em cần, em dứt, em tha lấy mỗi

Khán giới phù hộ cho tôi

Để tôi câu lấy một người thanh tân

“Others arrive at sea and river to catch fish

While I just want to marry your child

Married woman ignores call

Unmarried woman reply call at once

May God bless me!

Enable me to get married to a maiden”.

The author of *Bắc Ninh tỉnh khảo dị* clarified the final two aforementioned sentences: “This person, who was surrounded by troops in front of the dyke, was carrying a fishing rod. When seeing a beautiful girl, he directed the rod towards the girl, singing the two verses, as a way of making fun”¹. In terms of the fertility cult at the Gióng festival, it would be a mistake to overlook the pillar to which the Yin enemy’s horses were tied in Châu Cầu (presently in Quế Võ district, Bắc Ninh province). This artificial stone pillar, some four meters tall, is stuck on a round flagstone, symbolizing *linga* and *yoni*.

Meanwhile, the festival at Sóc temple (Sóc Sơn district) finishes with the performance of beheading Generals. Three girls aged 13 to 16, from the three villages of Yên Tàng, Mậu Tàng and Xuân Tàng, are appointed to the role of enemy Generals. The ceremony begins in the evening of the seventh of the first lunar month. The commanding flags send out signals from the top of the mountain. Accordingly, the person who is assigned to cut off the Generals’ heads quickly repeats the fluently trained steps. At the same time, sound of drums and gongs are echoing, while a sea of viewers congregate. The commanding flag is repeatedly waved and a stroke of sword is brandished as quickly as lightning. Immediately, the female General runs swiftly into a hidden area, before having her family members take her home². The practice of beheading Generals has some resemblance to the scene of local young men and women walking to enjoy the spring atmosphere on the mountains. In other words, it is a manifestation of the fertility cult, which remains nowhere, but in small pieces of cultural and religious layers.

The cult of the trading forefather goes along with that of the natural gods, the sun and the fertility cult. In order to learn about it in Cổ Loa and surrounding areas, it is essential to study it in relation to others regarding Sơn Tinh in Việt Trì, Chử Đồng Tử and his two wives in Hưng Yên, and Thánh mẫu Liễu Hạnh in Nam Định. In regards to the four immortals, the worship of the trading forefather in Cổ Loa is something different. The two banks of the Red river, placing

¹ Translated by Nguyễn Tô Lan, edited by Nguyễn Thị Hường and Đinh Khắc Thuân, manuscript, Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies.

² “Gióng Festival of Sóc Temple”, in *Lễ hội Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, pp. 470-471.

Cổ Loa as its heart, are the cultural and religious areas dedicated to Thánh Gióng (or *Phù Đổng thiên vương*). It will be impossible to decode the character of Thánh Gióng, with different appearances, meanings and values, unless people's creativity is linked with the fact that the Việt people flocked to the delta to set up their own state. It will also be impossible to know the reason why Phù Đổng village's hero asked the messenger to tell Hùng King that he needed an iron horse, an iron whip and iron armor to defeat the aggressors, unless such weapons are intermingled in the fact that Việt people in Cổ Loa already had succeeded in the manufacture of metal instruments. Let's take the depot of copper arrows excavated by archaeologists in Cổ Loa as an example. "In Cổ Loa, during the time when the Hùng Kings were building up Văn Lang state, the ancient Việt in Đình Tràng, Đường Mây, Bãi Mèn, Xóm Hương, Xóm Nhồi, Mả Tre, and Cầu Vực, developed the brass refining technique to its highest level and adopted these methods to manufacture iron products"¹. Moreover, brass items found in Cổ Loa are not large in number, but are diversified in category, including production tools, utensils, weapons, and jewelries. Obviously, from the large heavy kettledrum of Cổ Loa I, with sophisticated designs on its surface, to smaller objects, one can see that local casters had completely mastered casting techniques or, in other words, felt completely confident in professional skills. Bronze products, including hundreds of ploughshares, as well as shovels, discovered in Cổ Loa, prove their appearance on the basis of its highly developed brass refining techniques.

Iron objects, unearthed in Đường Mây, demonstrate that iron forging had been introduced based on the brass refining technique. In Cổ Loa alone, iron objects found at the foot of Cổ Loa Citadel also reveal their manufacture date as being prior to the building of the relic².

In view of this, the stamp of a trading forefather can be vaguely seen from the portrait of Thánh Gióng. The iron horse of Phù Đổng village's hero shouted out fire, burning clusters of local bamboo trees and leaving clumps of glossy yellow bamboo trees growing there today. Is it a legendary story that makes the trading forefather distinct and sacred in the eyes of his followers? For this reason, his initial appearance may be that of a hero of culture or as a trading forefather. In other words, the legend of Phù Đổng village's preeminent child is reflected in the metal manufacturing achievements of the ancient Việt people, who reached the pinnacle of the technique and, at the same time, wrote down the legend of such an achievement. When heading to flat land to explore the Red river delta, they confronted the Northern aggressors. Is this the reason why new layers of culture were added to the faith in this forefather? Late Prof. Trần Quốc Vượng said: "The story of Gióng village's hero, whose last image is imbrued with patriotism and

¹ Hoàng Văn Khoán, Lại Văn Tới and Nguyễn Lâm Anh Tuấn: *Cổ Loa, the Rendezvous of Red River Civilization*, Culture and Information Publishing House and Institute of Culture, Hanoi, 2002, pp. 416. See also *Cổ Loa-based Vestiges of Bronze and Iron at the Metal Age of the Red River Delta*, Ph.D. thesis on history, electronic manuscript, Institute of Archaeology, Hanoi, 2000.

² Ibid, pp. 417-418, also Lại Văn Tới: Ibid.

strong determination to join all the people in defending the home village, stems from the legend of a metallurgy area of blacksmiths”¹. His remarks are correct in this case.

From the small pieces of legends in the cultural and religious areas devoted to Thánh Gióng, ancient streams of culture and religions can be imagined flowing smolderingly like artesian waters activated so far, but under a main stream of the cult of the enemy-fighting hero. According to the late professor Trần Quốc Vượng, “the cultural and legendary hero has entered the unconscious now, while the enemy-fighting hero perpetually appears in people’s awareness. Similarly, the agricultural ceremony has drifted into the past, while the performance of the hero is an indispensable part of the Gióng festival”². The movement of cultural and religious layers has portrayed an enemy-fighting hero with motifs popular in stories of the gods and epitaphs during the late 16th century. The victories of Phù Đổng village’s hero are temporally divided into two phases as follows:

- Fighting against the Yin aggressors on earth:

The historical context in this phase required the boy of Phù Đổng village to grow up rapidly into a hero, who beat the invaders from Trâu Sơn Mountain, Quế Võ and Phả Lại to Gia Lương, Lục Đầu river, Tiên Du, Đông Ngàn, Yên Phong, and surrounding Sóc Mountain. Comparing this with the exploitation of the Red river delta by the ancient Việt people, one can see that the battlefield where Thánh Gióng combated against the Northern invaders lies in the North of today’s Red river – that is, the fourth branch of the Red river during the early Christian era, as noted in *Thủy Kinh chú*. They are exactly the places of Long Biên, Luy Lâu, Tây Vu, Bắc Đái, and Kê Từ, etc. (that is, the later Kinh Bắc region). The Việt people from the midlands, who flocked into the delta with its dense forests and swamps, and lurking forces from the sea, desired to have their own hero. The Confucian scholars of future generations built up the figure of a national hero based on all of these legendized elements. “The legends of Lạc Long Quân, Mr. Gióng, Mountain God Tản Viên, and Nhất Dạ Trạch, were all introduced in an historical textbook written by Ngô Sĩ Liên in the 15th century. They were all condensed, relying on the cultural flows of the following centuries. Such legends are engraved in Vietnamese people’s minds due to the fact that they manifest the very first identity of the Vietnamese *as a nation* - emphasized by the editor”³. In *The Birth of Vietnam*, Keith Weller Taylor passed accurate remarks upon such case. The existence or inexistence of a national community at the dawn of history sunk the cultural and religious layers of agricultural citizens, while floating the figure of an enemy-fighting hero, at the same time. This common sense was heightened and transmitted by post-10th century Confucian scholars into the written documents and stories of the gods in the villages of Thánh Gióng. And it is Thánh Gióng who has become an exceptionally mighty hero

¹ “Some thoughts on the kettledrum”, in *Following the Flow of History*, Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 1996, pp. 18.

² “Basic arguments of Phù Đổng Village’s Hero and Dóng Festival”, in *Study on Folklore Heritage of Hanoi*, Hà Nội Publishing House, 1994, pp. 225.

³ *The Festival of Thánh Gióng*, Culture and Information Publishing House, 2009, pp. 326.

of the Vietnamese. Author Tầm Vu stated that Thánh Gióng undoubtedly appears as a deeply impressive figure in folk art. He was brimful of patriotism, hatred for enemy and strong determination for victory. He also fought for the peace of the community, but took no care for fame and fortune, joining himself into eternity upon the completion of his mission. Notably, the army led by Phù Đổng village's hero proved a gathering of all patriotic persons, which deepens the legend of Thánh Gióng into an epic in the aggressor fighting tradition¹.

- *Appearing to help royal dynasties to defeat the enemy:*

Unlike other heroes, Thánh Gióng turned up to help the First Lê dynasty drive away the Song enemy, Lê Lợi to squash Ming invaders, and so on. *Hiển linh từ thạch bia* inscribed in 1606, which remains at Phù Đổng Temple today, provides a good example of his support.

Royal dynasties played a pivotal role for Thánh Gióng as a result of two phases. They all consecrated their immortal saint with conferment letters. In addition to the notes of Confucian scholars in *Việt điện u linh* and *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* on conferment by the Lý and Trần dynasties, Phù Đổng Temple alone has been conferred by the following dynasties:

King Lê Thần Tông, on August 26 during the fifth year of Dương Hòa (1639): one letter

King Lê Chân Tông, on February 28 during the second year of Phúc Thái (1646): one letter; and, on July 17 during the third year of Phúc Thái (1647): one letter.

King Lê Thần Tông, on May 13 during the fourth year of Thịnh Đức (1656): one letter.

King Lê Huyền Tông, on April 18 during the eighth year of Cảnh Trị (1670): one letter.

King Lê Gia Tông, on July 29 during the third year of Dương Đức (1674): one letter.

King Lê Hy Tông, on June 24 (intercalary month) during the fourth year of Chính Hòa (1683): one letter.

King Lê Dụ Tông, on August 10 during the sixth year of Vĩnh Thịnh (1712): one letter.

King Lê Thuần Tông (Lê Duy Phương), on December 10 during the fourth year of Vĩnh Khánh (1732): one letter; and, on May 27 during the fifth year of Long Đức (1736): one letter.

King Lê Hiến Tông, on July 24 (1740) during the first year of Cảnh Hưng: one letter; on July 25 during the third year of Cảnh Hưng (1742): one letter; on August 8 during the 28th year of Cảnh Hưng (1767): one letter; on December 16 during the 38th year of Cảnh Hưng (1777): one letter; and, on May 16 during the 44th year of Cảnh Hưng (1783): one letter.

King Lê Mẫn Đế, on March 22 during the first year of Chiêu Thống (1787): one letter.

King Nguyễn Huệ, on March 27 during the third year of Quang Trung (1790): one letter; and, on March 29 the fifth year of Quang Trung (1792): one letter.

¹ See also Cao Huy Đình: *Hero of Dóng Village*, Chapter 1: Stories of Mr. Dóng in the Delta, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, pp. 197-213.

King Nguyễn Quang Toàn, on May 21 during the fourth year of Cảnh Thịnh (1796): one letter.

The Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), from the time of Minh Mệnh, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức Kings to Bảo Đại King, offered conferment letters to *Phù Đổng thiên vương*. It is necessary to focus on the compilation of stories of the god and epitaphs relevant to Thánh Gióng. All the temples of Phù Đổng, Sóc Sơn and Thanh Nhàn, etc., have stories of the god supposedly compiled by Academician Doctor Nguyễn Bỉnh during the first year of Hồng Phúc (1572), and later copied from the originals by Nguyễn Hiền during the sixth year of Vĩnh Hựu (1740). (In reality, 1470, the first year of Cảnh Hưng, was during the reign of King Lê Hiển Tông. Stories of the god refer to this year for reasons unknown - Author's notes). Royal conferment letters and stories of the god relating to Thánh Gióng have further consecrated him in the eyes of generations, aiming to deepen and perfect the legendary image of Thánh Gióng amongst the masses.

The idolization of the aggressor fighting hero has, therefore, brought him the new missions of an anti-flood hero and mild weather creator for farmers. The transformation of the stories of Thánh Gióng and his statue at the shrine of Đông Bộ Đầu temple (Thống Nhất commune, Thường Tín district) followed the motif of an anti-flood god. The statue of the hero treading on the heads of two monsters also indicates the posture of this god. In *Bắc Ninh địa dư chí* (Geography Book of Bắc Ninh], Đỗ Trọng Vĩ wrote about a rain praying ceremony in Đức Hậu (Nguyễn Văn Huyền in *Địa lý hành chính Kinh Bắc* (Administrative Geography of Kinh Bắc), noting that Đức Hậu commune belonged to Phổ Lộng chief town, Đa Phúc district, which is present day Sóc Sơn). "Local children picked fruits and built religious stages on the fields. They beat drums, folded flags from paper and designed tormentors from bamboo, before reaching Mã (Vệ Linh) temple where they carried incense burners onto the stage and found some miracles. Legend has it that a white-haired man came to beg for water from local children who were playing together. The children competed with one another to help the old man quench his thirst. The man called the village Thanh Thủy and the commune Đức Hậu, and told the kids: "From now on, if drought happens, please come to see me at the Buddhist temple. I will award water to you all". After saying this, he disappeared. He turned out to be *Thiên vương*. The epitaph at Phù Đổng Temple was inscribed with the following words: "*Thiên vương* in *Sử ký* (Records of the Historians) is a famous god for all generations, so he will be worshipped as the eight gods were. From the Đinh dynasty onwards, mandarins were assigned to conduct a rain praying ceremony in the correct way, which helped fortify the course of the stream. Similarly, in years of drought, the king ordered his mandarins, along with some young men, to pray for rain. It usually rained then. All the people enjoyed a life of peace and prosperity" ¹. Such words coincide completely with those inscribed on the epitaph, *Hiển linh từ thạch bia*, built in Phù Đổng temple in the sixth year of Hoằng Định (1606): "The legend of *Thiên vương* was recorded by all dynasties. As a national ceremony, the cult of him was ranked at the eighth position in the temple. Every year, young

¹ Copied from epitaphs on *Phù Đổng thiên vương*, preserved at the Institute of Social Sciences Information, Code FQ4o 18, IV, 42, translated by Nguyễn Kim Mãng.

men were entrusted to prepare customary offerings to pray for a peaceful country and wealthy people. A rain praying ceremony was regularly conducted in the event of drought. And rain poured down to help all living things reproduce”¹.

Thousands of years have passed. Thánh Gióng has become a symbol of different roles. He acts as a hero against foreign aggressors, a crop guardian, a mild weather supplier for rural areas, an anti-flood god, a kind carrier of loyalty, and so on. Different layers of culture and religion have gone under the surface, offering their seat to the portrait of nice, mighty and poetic hero against aggressors.

¹ *Hiển linh từ thạch bia*, translated by Nguyễn Kim Măng.

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