

National Identity in Conflict: The Reconstruction of King Ly Thai To on Vietnamese Screen*

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Born as Ly Cong Uan, Ly Thai To is the first king of the Ly Dynasty. The most important contribution of Ly Thai To in Vietnamese history is to move the capital from Hoa Lu to Dai La, and rename it as Thang Long (Ascending Dragon) in 1010. Nowadays, it is known as Hanoi. Ly Thai To promoted Buddhism, and reduced the centuries-old influence of Confucianism in the kingdom. The growth and prevalence of Buddhism brought about a long period of peace, where Buddhist literature consequently flourished with seminal achievements. Due to King Ly Thai To's enormous contributions, the Vietnamese have created several legends and anecdotes to mystify his life. Thus, although a historical figure, his life remains a mystery and controversy. In 2010, Hanoi celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Thang Long. On this occasion, Vietnamese historical films about Ly Cong Uan were produced. This created intriguing variations within historical facts, legends, and on-screen stories. This paper will explore the reconstruction of Ly Cong Uan's life from an adaptation studies perspective through four historical films: *Legend of the Capital Relocation* (Huyen su thien do), *Thang Long Aspiration* (Khat vong Thang Long), *Ly Cong Uan—The Road to Thang Long Citadel* (Ly Cong Uan: Duong toi thanh Thang Long), *Child of the Dragon* (Nguoi con cua Rong). This research also wants to clarify the issues of national identity, nationalism, and cultural interaction reflected through the representations of Ly Thai To in those cinematic products.

Keywords: Ly Thai To, Vietnamese historical films, Ly Dynasty, reconstruction, adaptation studies, identity, nationalism, cultural interaction

Introduction

Compared with other countries in East Asia, Vietnamese historical films are less developed in both quantity and quality because Vietnam has the least developed economy in this region and there are not several professional film trainings. Therefore, truly outstanding historical films are rare in Vietnamese cinema. In addition, the historical setting is a problem as well. Vietnam has modest number of historical monuments as well as insufficient funds to build the film studio because the cost for its building is quite expensive. Therefore, Vietnamese historical films often focus on themes of war in the 20th century. Films about the feudal dynasties and historical figures are mostly TV dramas but they are also a minority.

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In 2010, Vietnamese government celebrated the 1,000th anniversary of Thang Long. Marking the time when Vietnamese historical films began to develop and prosper. Several films have been generously funded by the government, including historical movies and television dramas. Amongst the topics of Thang Long, the topic of King Ly Thai To occupies the largest number because this is the first king of the Ly dynasty, who has great merit of choosing Thang Long as the Vietnamese capital. He is also the king who is most mystified in folk literature. The films about King Ly Thai To are also one of the discourses of filmmakers and culturalists about the longevity of Vietnam: Thang Long (now is Ha Noi), the Vietnamese ancient capital has had a long history of more than 1000 years. This is the great pride of the Vietnamese people. However, the mysterious life of King Ly Thai To remains a constant wonder for both the historians and the filmmakers. This paper will focus on three main issues: (1) King Ly Thai To in the Vietnamese history and the conflicts of the historians, (2) King Ly Thai To on the Vietnamese screen and the conflicts in the reconstruction of the myths, (3) King Ly Thai To on the screen and the conflicts in the reconstruction of the historical images.

King Ly Thai To in the Vietnamese History and the Conflicts of the Historians

In Vietnam, there are several historical collections in which contained the narration of King Lý Thái Tổ. As John J. Anderson in *A Manual of General History* in 1870,

History is a narration of the events which have happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as well as of other great changes which have affected the political and social condition of the human race. (John, 1870, p. 1)

It could be said that “narration of the events which have happened” is emphasized in most of other definition of history. There is a true that the history is written by the historians’ point of views. However, the events in history have to happened.

It is surprising that the historical documents about King Ly Thai To contain abundant myths and fictitious elements. *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* by Ngô Sĩ Liên (in 1479 C.E.), one of the first Vietnamese historical texts compiled the prophecy of coming to the throne of King Lý Thái Tổ. Born as Ly Cong Uan, Lý Thái Tổ was not a royal descent, but he was invited by the people and the officialdom to come to the throne, changing from the Đinh dynasty to the Ly dynasty. In the history of Vietnam, Ly Cong Uan’s father is unknown. *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* writes: “With Lý as surname and Công Uân as given name, he lived in Cổ Pháp, Bắc Giang. His mother, Phạm, rambled to Tiêu Sơn Pagoda and had a baby with the divine” (Ngo, 1993, p. 80). The myths about King Ly Cong Uan were also recorded very obviously in historical books:

Long ago in Cẩm Tuyền Monastery, Ứng Thiên Tâm Pagoda, Cổ Pháp region, a dog gave birth to a white puppy which had black spots on its fur that shaped the word “天子” (the son of God, King). Those intellectual said that it was a harbinger of a person born in the year of the Dog coming to throne. As it turned out, the king born in Giáp Tuất (the year of the dog) was crowned, what a miraculous thing. (Ngo, 1993, p. 80)

King Lý Thái Tổ not only began his reign in a different way as compared to previous kings, but also created a significant landmark in Vietnamese history by changing the Vietnamese capital from Hoa Lư to Thăng Long. This event was also mentioned in *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* as a myth:

In July, autumn, King Lý Thái Tổ moved the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La Citadel. While temporarily parking at the port, he saw a golden dragon appearing from the boat. As a consequence, the king renamed the citadel as Thăng Long. (Ngo, 1993, p. 81)

After become the king, King Lý Thái Tổ himself went to Dien Chau to pacify the country. On the return way, as the sky got dark, the thunder and the winds turned fiercely violent, the king burnt incense praying:

I am a person who lack virtues, [...] nervously apprehensive as if I was about to fall into a fathomless chasm, not daring to count on the powerful military to wage nonsensical wars. Yet because the Dien Chau ignored the teachings, ridiculously doing evil, abusing people, heaping crimes upon crimes, I cannot forgive but have to battle against them. If during the fighting, I mistakenly killed the loyal, or wrongly harmed the decent, to an extent that God flared up, please let me know. In that case, even if God punished me, I would not dare to lament. (Ngo, 1993, p. 82)

As he finished his pray, the thunderstorms subsided. Clearly, this is also a myth that Vietnamese historians have taken from the folk.

Le Van Huu was in Tran Dynasty, more than 200 years old from King Ly Thai To. The Tran Dynasty forced The Ly dynasty abdicate the throne but they continued to use the Li dynasty's inheritance, especially continuing to promote Buddhism, reducing the centuries-old influence of Confucianism in the kingdom. However, Le Van Huu's points of views on King Ly Thai To differ from those of the people. Lê Văn Hưu's criticisms on King Ly Thai To were written by Ngô Sĩ Liên, a Le Dynasty historian, in the 15th century, in *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt*, the oldest historical book of Vietnam that is still handed down to the present generation. Ngô Sĩ Liên himself is more or less sympathetic to such criticisms.

Ngô Sĩ Liên supposed that Lý Công Uẩn had become conceited when he heard the prophecy of his throne (Ngo, 1993, p. 82). Besides, two historians simultaneously criticized the behavior of Ly Cong Uan after he took the throne with the negative words such as: boast (received 50 honors-letters issued by the authorities), self-depreciation (because he did not grant posthumous honor to his father as an ancestor of the Ly Dynasty), dredging the fertile people (after becoming the king for two years Ly Thai To has built several pagodas), delaying granting posthumous hon to his grandmother (Ngo, 1993, pp. 78-79).

Actually, the issues which two historians criticized, are not so important. Moreover, their viewpoints originate from Confucian ideas and in comparison in the ancient Chinese references. Therefore, they do not appreciate the great magnitude of King Lý Thái Tổ's contributions. The King built many temples to develop Buddhism and reduce the influence of Confucianism on the country creating new national identities and ideology as a resistance to China's scheme to assimilate Vietnamese culture into their own. He confers the Vương (Wang) title on his relatives to show his respect for the previous dynasty.

King Ly Thai To on the Vietnamese Screen and the Conflicts in the Reconstruction of the Myths

Ly Thai To is one of a few Vietnamese kings crowned by the officials for his talents and virtues although he was not of noble birth. *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* presents the deep concern of King Lý Thái Tổ for the people such as: "free tax for three years, the orphans, widows and the elders who have tax for a long time will be exempt" (Ngo, 1993, p. 81), and the military "supply clothes, foods, and medicines to 28 soldiers arrested by the Ngoại Triều, then them to their hometown" and the enemies, "Release the people in the

Nam Giới, Thạch Hà district, Hoan region to help them return to their district” (Ngo, 1993, p. 85). Obviously, King Lý Thái Tổ’s deep concern for the people is the main reason for the myths about him in folk. After that, those myths went into the historical documents making the life of King Ly Thai To more interesting and mysterious. As *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt, The introduction of Vietnamese Historical Book*, a Vietnamese historical book in early 20th century, compiled by the historian Tran Trong Kim, also records the mysterious birth of Ly Thai To as the result of the relationship of man and god (1920, p. 39). This myth is derived from the narrative tradition in the Vietnamese legends of great heroes in which the hero is also born from a combination of man and god.

In order for the myths of King Lý Thái Tổ to go into the innocent souls of Vietnamese children and thereby create the collective memory from an early age, the animators of *Child of the Dragon* as a group membership reconstructed the myths of King Ly Thai To’s father on Vietnamese screen.

The term collective memory is largely traceable to Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), who wrote extensively in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) about commemorative rituals, and to his student, Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), who published a landmark study on *The Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925. (...) It is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts. Group memberships provide the materials for memory and prod the individual into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. Groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they never experienced in any direct sense. (...) (Darity, 2007, p. 7)

Because one of the greatest contributions of King Ly Thai To is to move the capital from Hoa Lu to Thang Long, the myth of Thang Long is always associated with the image of King Ly Thai To. The filmmaker of *Child of the Dragon* wanted that image to be highlighted in the Vietnamese children’s mind, so they create a detail: King Lý Thái Tổ’s is a dragon. In that context, the dragon that King Ly Thai To saw when he arrived in Thang Long is no longer accidental. That dragon is the king’s father. In Asia, the dragon symbolizes “the divine power, the creativity, the order”, “the symbol of emperor” (Gheerbrant & Chevalier, 1997, p. 781). Recreating this myth on screen, the filmmakers wanted to spiritualize the origin of King Ly Thai To. According to the filmmakers’ discourse, King Ly Thai To is crowned due to his royal lineage as the child of the dragon. Apparently, King Ly Thai To is the chosen one. This interpretation is also very suitable for the myths of Vietnamese, in which 18 Hung Kings, the first kings of Vietnam in the myths are sons of the dragon and the fairy. Lạc Long Quân as the father, is the dragon; Âu Cơ, as the mother, is the fairy.

However, this myth has narrowed the image of King Ly Thai To in the Vietnamese people in particular and the pure Vietnamese identity of a Vietnamese king in general. King Ly Thai To lived in the 10th century, until that time the feudal history had developed for a long time. Confucian thought and the hereditary tradition of the dynasties went into the Vietnamese folk literature, expressing the dissatisfaction of the people. However, Ly Thai To came to the throne without any mutinies. He was revered by the officials and the people. Besides, the life of Ly Thai To was associated with Buddhism in Tiêu Sơn pagoda. He had great merit in the development of Buddhist thought in Vietnamese feudal dynasty. Therefore, it is a pity that the Vietnamese animation film did not mystify issues relating to Buddhism to create the image of a patriotic, clement king of a Zen master. If they did that, this myth would create a pure Vietnamese feudal dynasty, unlike the previous feudal system of thought.

The boy “Little Ly” (Tiểu Lý) in *Child of the Dragon* also has features that are not linked to the characteristics of King Ly Thai To, a boy growing up in a pagoda, a person who wants to develop Buddhism

when he becomes a king. The name “Little Ly” is Chinese because the Vietnamese people always call each other by the given name, not surname.¹ The first word that Công Uẩn writes for other children is Wang (王) (means king), which affirms his desire and direction to become the king, not the wish to help the poor. Because the boy is supposed to be the dragon’s son, he could do several extraordinary activities such as: ordering the birds, talking to the monkeys, using the magic to exorcise the colossus to go more than 3,000 miles and so on. All of these actions only reveal his demigod nature, not creating pure Vietnamese identity as the Vietnamese audiences’ horizon of expectation in their point of view of King Lý Thái Tổ. The activities such as joking, conquering the horse and so on show the mischievousness of a child. The movie uses the myth of *Child of the Dragon* just to prove one thing: Công Uẩn is smart, mischievous, and possessing imperial qualities. The collective memory in this film is not clear because the filmmaker does not resolve the question of what makes the boy Ly Cong Uan so special that when he becomes the king he would construct a dynasty different from previous reigns.

Another historical film about King Ly Thai To that has created an image of King Ly Thai To who has more Vietnamese identity for Vietnamese audiences is *Thang Long Aspiration*. Although this film has failed in business, and Luu Trong Ninh, the film director himself refused to call it as a historical film but rather a historical-fiction², the film still is still intriguing to several film researchers and audiences in terms of how the image of King Lý Thái Tổ is repected and mystified in that film.

In *Thang Long Aspiration*, the image of King Ly Thai To is very familiar and simple. We will not discuss how indigenous it is, we just would like to say, most Vietnamese audiences seem to be pleased with the image of King Ly Thai To that the filmmakers have built after they have watched this movie. He is a king closely associated with familiar Vietnamese images such as buffalo riding, traditional martial arts, folk games, and so on. The filmmakers also chose to shoot beautiful, typical Vietnamese scenes such as the ancient village in Northern Vietnam, the imposing mountains in Quảng Bình, Ninh Bình, Tây Nguyên. Vietnamese girls in four-part dresses (áo tứ thân) and hat of three cubits (nón quai thao) playing swinging (đánh đu) create a characteristic cultural space. All these contextual features contribute to the image of a purely Vietnamese king, which can be easily distinguishable with kings from other countries. The main colour of this film is brown and indigo with the village blending, accentuating the atmosphere of a Vietnamese village.

The most important reconstruction of the image of King Ly Thai To in *Thang Long Aspiration* is to unite the Buddhist philosophy in character. Living in the pagoda as a child, Lý Công Uẩn absorbs Buddhist ideas into his attitude and behavior, becoming a king not only intelligent but also gracious and altruistic. Images of monks who recite Buddhist scriptures in the film make up the Buddhist atmosphere surrounding the character. The character who is immersed in the air of Buddhism, listening to the Buddhist scriptures everyday, has finally grown up as a young man.

The way he observes the monks reciting the Buddhist scriptures shows the curiosity and the desire to be integrated into the atmosphere of Buddhism. This is the reason why King Lý Công Uẩn sheds tears when his soldiers win over the enemies, instead of feeling joy of the victory.

¹ <http://thethaovanhoa.vn/xa-hoi/van-hoa-dat-ten-cua-nguoi-viet-nhung-cai-ten-chang-giong-ai-n20150518064749842.htm>.

² <http://afamily.vn/bat-ngo-voi-chat-viet-trong-khat-vong-thang-long-2010110611385124.chn>.

King Ly Thai To on the Screen and the Conflicts in the Reconstruction of the Historical Images

When making the historical films, Vietnamese filmmakers not only have difficulties of setting, characters, but also the re-imagining of characters when costumes, graphic depict is still controversial. Vietnam has not had enough ancient historical documents which record or sketch ancient Vietnamese costumes. Consequently, filmmakers have no unanimity about the reconstruction of the historical images. According to the book *A Thousand Years of Caps and Robes*, Vietnam mainly has re-created the costumes through Sino texts and the statues of historical figures (Duc, 1993, p. 17). However, the author supposes that that way is not precise because many statues manipulate the characters hundreds of years ago. For example, a statue of King Ly Thai To was made in the late 18th century while King Ly Thai To lived in the 10th and 11th century. That explains why Vietnamese historical films reconstruct different historical images. In all documents which research the Vietnamese costumes in feudal dynasty, *A Thousand Years of Caps and Robes* is regarded as the most elaborate and reliable research about the history of Vietnamese costumes. However, this work was released in 2013, i.e., three years after the films of King Ly Thai To were showed, so they could not refer to this work.

To solve the difficulties of setting and characters' costumes, the filmmakers of the film *Ly Cong Uan—The Road to Thang Long Citadel* borrowed Chinese film studio, costumes, props, and so on. This made the film excessively Chinese and, as a consequence, Vietnamese audiences were confused about its "nationality".

The film was then banned because it failed to construct a king indigenous to Vietnamese culture. Objectively, *Ly Cong Uan—The Road to Thang Long Citadel* also attempt to redesign the characters' dresses accordingly, such as adding the Lý dynasty's dragon pattern for Royal robe, the script based on the historical events in Dinh and Ly dynasty, especially those recorded in *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt*. However, all those efforts cannot counterbalance the foreign atmosphere that the film brings. Vietnam has gone through a bloody history of long and short wars in the past, so psychologically Vietnamese audiences is afraid of losing their identities. They are afraid that the foreign audiences could not recognize the differences between characters in Vietnam and China through the images they see on the screen. If we compare the costumes in *Thang Long Aspiration* with *Ly Cong Uan—The Road to Thang Long Citadel*, the later costumes are closer to the original ones depicted in *A Thousand Years of Caps and Robes*. However, the Vietnamese critics and audiences would rather choose a kind of costumes that is distinguishably Vietnamese no matter how historically truthful that is, than a kind of costumes which is similar to another country. Thus, in historical films, costumes are also a kind of discourse stated by the filmmakers.

Despite receiving high appreciation of pure Vietnamese features, *Thang Long Aspiration* forgets a significant detail in history, a typical feature of Vietnamese ancient people, that is: dying teeth black. Until now, there are not any films which show this image. The ancient Vietnamese, as well as people in some other Southeast Asian countries, have had the custom of dying teeth black. This custom has gone into the folk song and fairy for a long time. However, when creating traditional and historical images, the filmmakers always pass that detail.

Conclusions

Currently, Vietnam cinema is growing and increasingly to integrated into the world. Each month, there are several films released in Vietnam and making the audiences pay attention. However, Vietnamese historical films

are still underdeveloped for many reasons such as historical films are not belong to the majority of people, the cost for production is expensive, the scriptwriters have several difficulties in dialogue writing and the historical knowledge, and the filmmakers have several difficulties designing the costumes. It can be said, the Vietnamese historical films are only produced to celebrate the important historical events of the country. The films about King Ly Thai To is a case. In order to make historical films with high quality, the filmmakers have to have their vision and discourse to build historical figures who have the characteristics matching with collective memory or create the collective memory through their characters.

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