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Confucianism and Political Strategies:

A Case Study of Dragon and King Narratives Recorded in the Việt Official Histories

儒家思想与政治策略：以越南官制史籍中的龙王叙事为例

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Abstract:

Purpose: In pre-modern Vietnam, Confucianism played a central role in shaping historical writing and legitimizing political authority. This study examines how Confucian literature strategically incorporated dragon-and-king legends into official historiography to construct a sacralized image of kingship and reinforce dynastic legitimacy. It further aims to identify recurring narrative motifs to uncover the mechanisms through which political discourse operated via legendary texts.

Methodology: Moving beyond the treatment of legends as mere folkloric elements, this study interprets them as instruments of power in the construction of collective memory and royal identity. Drawing on five official Vietnamese historical chronicles from the fifteenth to the twentieth

Keywords: Confucianism, invented traditions, Việt legends, intercultural interaction, political strategies.

关键词: 儒家思想、发明传统、越南传说、跨文化互动、政治策略。

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century, the research identifies ten representative legends and analyses them through key Confucian doctrines, including the *Mandate of Heaven*, *Rectification of Names*, and cosmological omens.

Main Findings: Three central motifs emerge: divine dragon lineage, dragon-protected rulers, and celestial signs of rightful rule. The findings reveal how the synthesis of Sinitic political thought and local belief systems generated a distinct mytho-political discourse, reflecting processes of intercultural adaptation in the construction of dynastic legitimacy and social order.

Applications: The findings offer valuable insights for understanding the role of myth and narrative in state-building processes, particularly in contexts where cultural hybridity and political symbolism intersect.

Novelty/Originality: This study is original in its interdisciplinary application of discourse analysis and Eric Hobsbawm's theory of "invented traditions" to demonstrate how folk legends were reformulated, or even invented, by Confucian scholars to serve ideological ends.

摘要：

研究目的：

在前现代越南，儒家思想在塑造历史书写和政治权威合法性方面发挥着核心作用。本研究探讨儒家文献如何策略性地将龙王传说融入官方史学，从而构建神圣的王权形象并强化王朝的合法性。本研究旨在进一步识别反复出现的叙事母题，以揭示政治话语如何通过传奇文本运作。

研究方法：

本研究超越了将传说视为单纯的民俗元素这一范畴，将其解读为构建集体记忆和王室身份的权力工具。本研究以越南十五至二十世纪五部官方史书为依据，甄别出十个具有代表性的传说，并运用儒家核心教义，包括天命、正名和宇宙征兆，对其进行分析。

主要发现：

三个核心主题浮现：神圣的龙族血统、受龙守护的统治者以及象征合法统治的天象。研究结果揭示了中华政治思想与本土信仰体系的融合如何催生出独特的神话政治话语，反映了王朝合法性和社会秩序建构过程中的跨文化适应过程。

应用价值：

研究结果为理解神话和叙事在国家建设过程中的作用提供了宝贵的见解，特别是在文化混合性和政治象征主义相交的背景下。

创新性/独创性：

本研究的创新之处在于它跨学科地应用了话语分析和艾瑞克·霍布斯鲍姆的“发明传统”理论，以揭示民间传说是如何被儒家学者重新表述甚至发明以服务于意识形态目的的。

1. Introduction

From the 7th century BCE to the 1st century CE, during the Đông Sơn cultural period, the ancestors of the Việt developed their earliest dragon symbol, known as *giao long* (蛟龙, literally “crocodile dragon”), which combined features of snakes, crocodiles, and other animals (Higham, 2022; Thơ, 2014). This symbol was used by both commoners and elites, reflecting a shared

cultural practice of venerating a protective deity. In the absence of a formal state apparatus capable of enforcing rigid social hierarchies, the symbol appeared on tools and was tattooed on individuals across various social strata as a form of spiritual protection. This is evidenced by archaeological findings such as Đông Sơn bronze drums and early textual sources, including the *Huai Nan Zi* (淮南子) and *Shan Hai Jing* (山海经). As Brindley (2015)

explains:

The Việt tattooed their bodies (with the image of *giao long*) for religious reasons, as a talismanic protection against evil water spirits. Their colorful bodies, resembling the dragon—which may have been thought of as a lord of the water—protected them. Therefore, the practice was rationalized and justified in utilitarian and religious terms (p. 166).

Chinese dragons have long been symbolically associated with imperial authority. According to Lee (2019), Diény (1994), and Dragan (1991), dragons in Chinese culture were closely linked to the emperor as embodiments of celestial power. The earliest regulated uses of dragon motifs in clothing appear in the *Book of Documents*, which prescribed the number and placement of dragon ornaments according to social hierarchy (Lu et al., 2014, pp. 391–392). From the Han dynasty onward (202 BCE–220 CE), Confucian thought contributed to a redefinition of rulership, exemplified by Emperor Liu Bang, a man of humble origin who claimed descent from a sacred dragon. This narrative was reportedly promoted by Confucian scholars as a means of legitimizing his sovereignty through divine lineage (Thơ, 2014, p. 54; Qiao & Zainuddin, 2025). By the time of the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, dragon robes had become exclusive imperial regalia, and unauthorized use by commoners was strictly prohibited (Rawski, 1998, p. 26).

During the period of Chinese domination, known as the *Bắc thuộc* (北属), from 111 BCE to 938 CE, Chinese cultural influences, particularly Confucianism, were introduced and gradually reinforced in what is now northern Vietnam (Whitmore, 2023). Confucian officials from the Han Empire propagated core ideological tenets such as the *True Dragon, Son of Heaven* (真龙天子), the *Mandate of Heaven* (天命), and the *Divine Right of Kings* (君权神授), leading to the assimilation of dragon symbolism into Việt cultural-political thought. Over time, the indigenous Việt dragon motif, initially distinct, became increasingly aligned with Han iconography, culminating in the stylized form recognized today (Phước, 2023a).

Following the restoration of independence in 938 CE, the Việt adopted a centralized imperial model inspired by Chinese governance, including the institutionalization of Confucianism (Ngân, Hằng, & Trung, 2021). During the medieval period, Confucian ideology in Vietnam was profoundly shaped by Neo-Confucian principles, particularly the emphasis on moral self-cultivation and the *Mandate of Heaven* as mechanisms for legitimizing political authority (Taylor, 2013). This framework conceptualized kingship as both moral and divine, a vision frequently reinforced through associations with supernatural entities such as dragons. As Confucianism gained dominance, Vietnamese monarchs increasingly asserted the dragon symbol as an exclusive emblem of royal sovereignty.

For example, King Lý Nhân Tông (1072–1128) issued an edict stating, “Those in servitude within the

household are prohibited from adorning their bodies with dragon tattoos. Anyone who violates this edict will be seized and consigned to servitude as a person enslaved on the frontier” (Liên et al., 2010, p. 118). During the Later Lê dynasty, particularly after 1427, Confucian orthodoxy became deeply entrenched, leading to increasingly strict prohibitions. In 1447, King Lê Nhân Tông proclaimed, “The common people are prohibited from using any implements or objects adorned with the image of the dragon” (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2007, p. 449). These measures institutionalized the dragon as a sacred emblem of imperial authority, thereby demarcating royal identity from the visual culture of the common populace.

Since the period of Sinic influence, Vietnamese rulers—including both leaders of uprisings during Chinese domination and monarchs of independent dynasties—have drawn upon the example of Chinese emperors and followed the counsel of Confucian officials by adopting the dragon as a distinctive emblem of kingship. To reinforce this perception among their subjects, they employed various strategies, one of which was instructing court historians to insert narratives into official chronicles that emphasized the monarchs’ connections with dragon deities. These narratives continue to appear in all six extant official national histories of the Vietnamese state.

Previous scholarship on the Vietnamese dragon motif has primarily examined the subject from historical and cultural perspectives. Historically, Brindley (2015) traced the evolution of the dragon from a mythic entity rooted in folk cosmology to a potent emblem intertwined with the consolidation of royal authority across Vietnamese dynasties. Scholars such as Điều (2013) and Phước (2023b) have further emphasized the dragon’s role in myths of ethnic origin and royal genealogy, particularly in narratives concerning the Hùng Kings – revered as ancestral founders of the Vietnamese people. Culturally, researchers like Zhao (1992) and Thơ (2014) have highlighted the dragon’s function in legitimizing feudal rule due to its deep resonance within popular belief systems.

In contrast to these approaches, this study adopts a political-historiographical perspective by examining how feudal regimes used the dragon motif not merely as a cultural artifact but as a calculated instrument of political strategy. Specifically, it asks: What discursive strategies did Confucian scholars employ in composing or curating dragon-monarch narratives to bolster royal legitimacy in premodern Vietnam?

Methodologically, this article applies discourse analysis to state-sanctioned historical records, drawing on Hobsbawm’s (2012) theory of invented traditions as its analytical framework. Hobsbawm defines invented traditions as “the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes” (p. 6). Within this framework, the article argues that the Confucian literati deliberately crafted and

embedded dragon-related legends in official historiography as a means of constructing a sacred kingship. These efforts illustrate how symbolic capital, drawn from preexisting religious and folkloric iconography, was repurposed by ruling elites to secure dynastic continuity and popular legitimacy, a dimension that has been largely underexplored in the existing literature.

2. A Survey of Narratives of Dragons and Kings in the Official Histories of the Việt State

Throughout the history of Vietnamese historiography, 14 major historical texts have been compiled. However, to qualify as an “official history” within the scope of this study, a text must satisfy two essential criteria. First, it must have been commissioned, authorized, or endorsed by a ruling authority, such as an imperial court or government institution, indicating institutional sponsorship (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2007). Second, the text must survive in complete extant form. Based on these criteria, five official histories were selected for analysis and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Existing Việt official histories and their editor-in-chiefs (compiled by the author)

Title of the Official Histories	Editor-in-Chief
Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư (1479, lit. Complete Annals of Đại Việt, henceforth 1-TT)	Ngô Sĩ Liên (director of the National Bureau for Historical Record) by the order of King Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460 - 1497)
Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên (1775, lit. Supplementary Edition of the Annals of Đại Việt, henceforth 2-TB)	Lê Quý Đôn, Vũ Miên, Nguyễn Hoàn (Court historians of the Lê dynasty) by the order of lord Trịnh Sâm (r. 1767–1782)
Đại Việt Sử Ký Tiền Biên (1800, Preliminary history of Đại Việt, henceforth 3-ĐVTB)	Ngô Thì Sĩ (Confucian scholar and royal historian) by the order of King Cảnh Thịnh (r. 1792–1802)
Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục (1884, lit. The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Việt, henceforth 4-KĐ)	Phan Thanh Giản (Grand Counselor at the Nguyễn court) by the order of King Tự Đức (r. 1847–1883)
Đại Nam Thực Lục (1925, lit. Chronicle of Đại Nam, henceforth 5-TL)	Trương Đăng Quế (Grand Counselor at the Nguyễn court), according to the orders of the Nguyễn Kings.

All compilers of these official histories were Confucian-trained scholars who earned their positions through the imperial examination system, which assessed the mastery of classical Confucian doctrine. Ngô Sĩ Liên, the principal compiler of *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (1-TT), worked under the Lê dynasty, a period in which Confucianism served as the dominant ideological framework and moral doctrine was central to statecraft (Yu, 2006, p. 75). Lê Quý Đôn, who led the compilation of *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (2-TB), and Ngô Thì Sĩ, the author of *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tiền Biên* (3-ĐVTB), belonged to a broader cohort of literati who not only composed historical texts but also interpreted and expanded upon the Confucian canon (Dutton et al., 2012, p. 151). Similarly, Phan Thanh Giản and Trương Đăng Quế—editors-in-chief of *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (4-KĐ) and *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (5-TL), respectively, were esteemed mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty, renowned for their firm Confucian orientation (Institute of History, 2005).

As a result, Confucian ideology shaped not only the content selection and historiographical structure of these works but also their broader intellectual and political

objectives. Consistent with the Confucian principle of the “unity of literature, history, and philosophy” (wen shi zhe he yi, 文史哲合一), these texts were not merely historical records but also literary and didactic works. As Điều (2013) demonstrated in her study of 1-TT, this foundational chronicle became the paradigmatic model for the structure and compilation of later histories, including 2-TB, 3-ĐVTB, and 4-KĐ.

Besides its historical significance, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* is also regarded as a major literary work in the Vietnamese tradition. Ngô Sĩ Liên, the chief compiler, frequently added interpretive commentary and supplementary narratives to historical accounts, many of which exhibited literary qualities. From his remarks, it is evident that Ngô Sĩ Liên sought not only to record events but also to articulate and transmit moral principles grounded in Confucian philosophy (Điều, 2013).

Based on an analysis of five official national chronicles of the Vietnamese state, ten dragon-related narratives (coded S1 to S10) depicting interactions between dragons and monarchs or political leaders were identified. These narratives are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Confucian Motifs of Dragon-King Narratives in Official Histories (S1–S10) (compiled by the author)

Code	Narratives	Summary	Appears in
S1.	Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan	The founding king of the Việt people was said to be of the dragon deity lineage.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB, 4-KĐ
S2.	The Legend of the Abnormal Conception and Birth of Emperor Nam Việt Đế2 (r. 544–548)	The mother of Nam Việt Đế was impregnated by a dragon, subsequently giving birth to him.	3-ĐVTB
S3.	Legend of lord Triệu Việt (r.554 - 571)	Lord Triệu was gifted a dragon's claw, with which he defeated his enemies.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB, 4-KĐ
S4.	Legend of Emperor Đinh Tiên Hoàng (r. 968 - 979)	King Đinh was protected by a dragon from the enemy.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB, 4-KĐ
S5.	Legend of Emperor Lê Đại Hành (r. 980–1005)	King Lê was embraced and kept warm by the dragon during a cold night.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB, 4-KĐ
S6.	Legend of King Lý Thái Tổ (1009–1028)	King Lý observed a golden dragon ascending, leading him to decide to relocate the capital.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB, 4-KĐ
S7.	Legend of King Lý Thái Tông (r. 1028–1054)	When King Lý was preparing to attack the Chăm army, a divine dragon appeared as a sign of victory.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB
S8.	The Story of Floods and Droughts in the Reign of King Trần Minh Tông	Prime Minister Khắc Chung attributed the 1315 drought to the Dragon King and advised King Minh Tông to build dikes to prevent floods instead of focusing on his own moral improvement.	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB
S9.	Legend of King Lê Hiến Tông (r. 1497 - 1504)	A queen had a dream of a dragon and gave birth to a prince, who later became King Lê	1-TT, 3-ĐVTB
S10.	The Miraculous Birth Story of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu (r. 1691–1725)	The queen dreamt of a golden dragon descending upon the palace, which was interpreted as a divine birth. The next year, Nguyễn lord was born. (see Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History 2002: 91)	5-TL

Among the five official chronicles examined, only *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* (2-TB) contains no narratives linking dragons and kings. This omission is likely attributable to the text's temporal scope, which covers a brief and politically sensitive period of the Lê dynasty, spanning the reigns of Lê Hy Tông to the early years of Lê Hiến Tông (1676–1753). During this time, real power rested with the Trịnh lords. As such, historians serving under Trịnh patronage may have perceived little incentive to construct or record mythic narratives that elevated the status of nominal Lê monarchs through divine symbolism.

Furthermore, according to the prefaces of these official histories, many of the included narratives were compiled by Confucian scholars who collected folklore and oral accounts from the populace (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2002, p. 2). Consequently, multiple versions of the same legends continue to circulate within the oral tradition. For instance, the *Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan* (S1) is popularly known as the *Born of Dragons and Fairies* legend, or the tale of the *Lạc Dragon Lord and Âu Cơ – Fairy Goddess*. Similarly, the *Legend of King Lý Thái Tổ Choosing the Capital* (S6) is more widely recognized as the *Thăng Long (Ascending Dragon) Citadel* narrative.

Although ethnographic surveys have recorded up to

32 folktales involving dragons and kings, only nine appear in official historiography. This disparity suggests a selective process in which only legends conforming to Confucian ideological frameworks were incorporated into state-sanctioned texts. The five official histories examined in this study were selected based on two primary criteria: (1) they were directly commissioned or endorsed by ruling authorities, and (2) they have survived in complete form, enabling systematic comparison. The findings of this research offer a framework for analyzing how official historiography selectively reframes folkloric material to serve dynastic agendas, and they may be applied comparatively to other East Asian contexts where Confucian discourse intersects with local legendary traditions.

In some cases, these narratives may not have originated in oral tradition at all, but were consciously crafted by Confucian historians and later framed as folklore. The *Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan* (S1), with its alignment to Confucian genealogical logic and moral structuring, exemplifies this phenomenon (Điền, 2013; Kelley, 2012; Phước, 2020).

In addition to its historical importance, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* is considered a foundational literary work within the Vietnamese tradition. Ngô Sĩ Liên, its chief compiler, frequently inserted supplementary narratives that not only elaborated on the lives of historical figures

but also reflected literary sophistication. These interpolated accounts, often structured as short moral tales, reveal his broader objective of conveying Confucian ethical values through historiographical narrative (Điều, 2013).

3. Dragons, Kings, and Confucian Orthodoxy: The Political Function of Legend

3.1 The Doctrine of “Rectification of Names” and the Symbol of the Lạc Dragon King

The doctrine of the *Rectification of Names*, or *zhèngmíng* (正名) in Chinese, originates from the feudal Confucian framework of hierarchical designations and relational ethics. Its foundational aim is to ensure social harmony by promoting conduct aligned with the moral and functional expectations associated with each social role (Oldstone-Moore, 2023, pp. 54–60). Mencius later extended the doctrine’s application to questions of political legitimacy, allowing subjects to assess whether a ruler was worthy of their title and adjust their loyalty accordingly. This political interpretation was appropriated by Vietnamese Confucian scholars, who invoked Mencian logic to legitimize the Lê dynasty, particularly during periods of heightened Chinese interference in domestic affairs (Yu, 2006).

One strategic deployment of this ideological framework was the inclusion of the *Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan* (S1) in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. This mytho-historical narrative was employed to reinforce royal legitimacy by embedding the Lê monarchy within a Confucian-aligned genealogical structure.

According to the narrative, Di Minh (帝明), a third-generation descendant of the Fiery Emperor Shen Nong (神農), appointed his son Di Yi (帝儀) as heir to rule the north and bestowed the title of king upon Kinh Dương (涇陽) to govern the south, which included present-day northern Vietnam. Kinh Dương subsequently married Thần Long (神龍, lit. Divine Dragon), and she bore a son, Lạc Long Quân (貉龙君, lit. Lạc Dragon Lord), who was considered an incarnation of a dragon deity. Lạc Long Quân was the father of the founder of the Vietnamese state, Hùng King (Liên et al., 2010, pp. 2–3).

Long regarded as the foundational myth of the Vietnamese people, the Hồng Bàng narrative was formally recorded by Ngô Sĩ Liên in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (1-TT). However, several aspects of the story suggest that it did not originate in oral tradition, but was instead a constructed narrative authored by Confucian literati. As Kelley (2012) notes, the myth exemplifies the Confucian principle of the Rectification of Names through its hierarchically ordered relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife (p. 99). This internalization of Confucian values undermines claims of the story’s prehistoric origin,

especially given that Confucianism emerged long after the alleged events (2879 BCE). It is therefore more plausible that the narrative was composed by court historians and later presented as “collected folklore” to serve ideological functions (Điều, 2013; Kelley, 2012; Phước, 2020).

Confucian scholars also applied the doctrine of the Rectification of Names to address a political dilemma faced by Vietnamese monarchs: the desire to adopt imperial titles such as *Hoàng đế* (皇帝, “Emperor”) and True Dragon, akin to Chinese emperors, while remaining diplomatically subordinate as a vassal state permitted only to use the title *Vương* (王, “King”). This selective invocation of *zhèngmíng* enabled rulers to assert domestic legitimacy without violating Sinocentric protocols in interstate diplomacy (Phước, 2020, p. 39). As Confucius stated in *The Analects*, “Let the ruler be ruler, the subject be subject; let the father be father, and the son be son” (Confucius, 2020), a maxim that Confucian historiographers operationalized to structure both moral governance and cosmic hierarchy.

Under the directive of King Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1442–1497), the court historian Ngô Sĩ Liên was commissioned to incorporate the Hồng Bàng founding myth into the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (1-TT). This marked the euhemerization of an origin myth with obscure roots into a politically sanctioned narrative of dynastic ancestry (Điều, 2013). While modern readers may find the myth problematic due to its implication that the Việt lineage descends from Han Chinese origins, it should be interpreted as a political construct tailored to its historical context. Ngô’s historiographical strategy aligns with the Confucian orthodoxy of “using the classics to prove history” (*yǐ jīng zhèng shǐ*, 以经证史), wherein Confucian texts were employed to legitimize rulership and genealogical claims (Trường, 2006).

Within the *Hồng Bàng* narrative, the Vietnamese political order is modeled after the Confucian imperial hierarchy, in which only the Chinese emperor – endowed with both the *Mandate of Heaven* and a dragon lineage – is entitled to universal authority. The elevation of Lạc Long Quân, the dragon-born progenitor, within the myth was strategically crafted to parallel this model and to establish symbolic equivalence. This rhetorical maneuver enabled Confucian scholars to argue that both the monarch and the populace of Đại Việt descended from a sacred dragon ancestry, thereby possessing intrinsic legitimacy for autonomous rule, independent of Han intervention (Điều, 2013; Trường, 2006).

By constructing a mytho-genealogy that extended beyond lineage-based legitimacy, King Lê Thánh Tông was able to assert *dan chính ngôn thuận* (名正言顺) – the rightful name that confers authority in both discourse and governance. This assertion culminated in his performance of the 1473 *Lễ Tế Giao* (郊天礼), a Sinitic-style Heaven Offering ritual traditionally reserved for the Son of Heaven. In this context, the *Hồng Bàng* myth

transcended its status as a foundational legend and was transformed into an instrument of state ideology, wherein the doctrine of the Rectification of Names served to legitimize royal sovereignty (Trương, 2006).

3.2 The Concept of “True Dragon, Son of Heaven” and the Motif of Transmigration

Raymond Dragan (1991) emphasized that the symbolic association between dragons and emperors originated during the Han dynasty (pp. 101–134). This connection is epitomized in the title *True Dragon, Son of Heaven*, which gained prominence among Han Confucianists who recognized the ideological advantage of portraying emperors as divine descendants of dragons (Zhao, 1992, p. 107). As a result, narratives emerged linking Han rulers to mythic dragon origins, most notably the account of Emperor Gaozu’s supernatural birth as documented by Sima Qian in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shi Ji*, 史记), where Gaozu (r. 202–195 BCE) was said to have been conceived by his mother and a divine dragon (Thor, 2014).

This symbolic narrative not only sanctified Gaozu’s humble origins but also established a precedent for legitimizing rule through divine association. Wu (2014) interprets this as a metaphysical framework in which “the dragon was a reference to the emperor, the Son of Heaven (Tianzi), and, by extension, his empire,” emphasizing that a true emperor must harmonize social order with cosmic order (p. 60). This ideological construction was further reinforced by the Confucian doctrine of the *Divine Right of Kings* (*Junquan Shenshou*, 君权神授), formulated by Dong Zhongshu, which asserted that emperors were divinely mandated to rule (Thor, 2014). The combination of dragon symbolism and Confucian orthodoxy thus functioned to consolidate imperial authority, inspire reverence among the populace, and frame the royal identity as both sacred and singular.

The concept of transmigration, defined as the passage of a soul from one life or body to another, is a central tenet in Buddhist belief (Suzuki, 2018). Confucian scholars skillfully appropriated this doctrine, widely accepted among the populace, to construct narratives that reinforced the divine legitimacy of imperial authority. These scholars portrayed emperors as reincarnations of celestial dragons, thereby imbuing their rule with sacred origins and positioning them as Heaven’s chosen representatives on Earth.

Two major narrative motifs emerged from this strategy, each serving distinct political purposes. The first motif sought to sanctify emperors of humble or rebellious origins by asserting that their mothers were miraculously impregnated by divine dragons. This trope is exemplified in the *Legend of Emperor Gaozu’s Abnormal Conception and Birth*, as recorded by Sima Qian in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shi Ji*) (Sima, 1993). By redirecting public attention away from

Gaozu’s modest status as a *pingchang* (亭長, a minor village official), this legend elevated his political legitimacy through his supernatural ancestry (Dull, 1983, pp. 285–318). This symbolic strategy aimed to cultivate public support among a superstitious populace (Wang & Wu, 1999).

This mytho-political formula was subsequently adapted by the Vietnamese rulers. For example, in the legend of Emperor Nam Việt—referring to Lý Bí (503–548), who proclaimed himself *Nam Việt Đế* (南越帝)—a similar motif is employed: his mother is said to have been impregnated by a divine dragon. The parallels between Lý Bí and Han Gaozu are striking: both rose from minor officialdom, led successful rebellions, and claimed imperial titles. Thus, the Vietnamese narrative appears to be a localized adaptation of the Han legend, consciously crafted with full awareness of its ideological function and modeled explicitly on its Chinese prototype.

Moreover, this narrative motif reflects the strategic synthesis of the Confucian concept of the *True Dragon, Son of Heaven* with the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, thereby reinforcing imperial legitimacy by anchoring it in a supernatural framework. The fusion of these ideas enabled the portrayal of emperors as singular incarnations of celestial dragons – appointed solely by Heaven to govern humanity. This symbolic framework served to justify monarchical authority not only in moral and political terms but also as a cosmological imperative.

Historical figures such as Liu Bang and Nam Việt Đế recognized that their ascent (from rebellion to emperorship) posed an inherent risk: they themselves could become targets of future revolts. In response, they adopted Confucian ideological instruments, particularly myths of dragon transmigration, to construct a singular and unassailable divine lineage. This narrative strategy cultivated the public belief that only they were Heaven’s chosen rulers, thereby preempting the legitimacy of any rival claims (Thor, 2014; Wu, 2014; Zhao, 1992).

A second recurring motif was developed to facilitate the succession of princes in dynastic politics. Typically presented in the form of dreams experienced by queens or imperial concubines, these narratives featured a dragon’s descent or apparition, interpreted as an omen foretelling the divine birth of a future ruler. The legend of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu’s miraculous birth, as recorded in *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2002), exemplifies this narrative type, functioning as a politically expedient sign of Heaven’s endorsement during a period of dynastic uncertainty.

In 1674, during autumn, the sky in the southwestern direction witnessed an opening, surrounded by a colorful cloud, with a beam of bright light shining in the middle. The queen had a dream in which a golden dragon descended upon the palace, which was interpreted as a symbol of a divine birth. The following year, Lord Nguyễn was born, filling the royal palace with a sweet

fragrance. (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2002, p. 91)

Within the historical context of its creation, the legend surrounding the miraculous birth of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu appears to be a calculated political strategy. At the time, the Vietnamese state was embroiled in a civil conflict between the Nguyễn and Trịnh factions. In this context, promoting a narrative in which Nguyễn Phúc Chu was portrayed as *The True Dragon, Son of Heaven* served to consolidate popular support and legitimize the Nguyễn faction's claim to rule. Moreover, Nguyễn Phúc Chu was the only surviving prince of his generation, as his four brothers had all died under mysterious circumstances. His safety and symbolic status became essential for the continuity of Nguyễn power (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2002). Consequently, the legend of a divine dragon descending to bless his birth functioned both as an omen of legitimacy and as a public affirmation of dynastic stability.

This motif is not unique to the Nguyễn lords. Similar patterns appear in succession narratives from other dynasties. Stories involving prophetic dreams featuring dragons, typically experienced by royal mothers or concubines, were commonly used to endow a particular prince with divine favor. For instance, such motifs can be found in the accounts of King Đinh Phế Đế, Lê Trung Tông, Lê Long Đinh (Khánh & Thảo, 2019), Lý Thần Tông (Sĩ, 1991), Đoàn Nam Vương (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2021), and Lê Hiến Tông (Liên et al., 2010). These stories were likely authored or promoted by individuals with vested interests in succession, and their unverifiable nature made them ideal tools for political persuasion. Notably, only the legends associated with those who ultimately ascended the throne have survived. This suggests a post-accession purging of rival narratives, in which dragon-related legends about other princes were eliminated to reinforce the exclusivity of the reigning monarch's divine origin.

The motif of transmigration, though rooted in Buddhist cosmology, was strategically appropriated by Confucian scholars to reinforce political authority. Buddhist influences are evident in several royal narratives, including tales in which a monk transforms into a dragon and is later reborn as a prince, as seen in the story of King Lý Thần Tông (Sĩ, 1991, p. 53), or a queen receives divine instructions at the *Phật Tích pagoda* (佛迹) to bear a son reincarnated from a dragon, as in the account of King Lê Hiến Tông (Liên et al., 2010, p. 523). Similarly, the birth story of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu, with its references to a “colorful cloud,” “beam of bright light,” and “sweet fragrance,” draws directly from imagery associated with the Buddha's nativity (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2002). These Buddhist motifs were incorporated not for spiritual purposes, but rather to appeal to the general population's reverence for Buddhism and thereby enhance the ruler's legitimacy.

However, this political co-optation produces a theological contradiction. Central to Buddhist doctrine is

the principle of *anicca* (impermanence), which holds that all conditioned phenomena are transient and illusory (Sharma, 1980). Furthermore, the ultimate goal in Buddhism is to attain *nirvana*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth and suffering (*dukkha*), rather than to return as a worldly ruler (Hashimoto, 2007). Consequently, royal narratives of divine reincarnation, while effective in legitimizing power, stand in opposition to core Buddhist teachings, particularly in their glorification of worldly authority and attachment to royal identity, a form of *moha* (delusion or ignorance) explicitly cautioned against in Buddhist ethics.

3.3 The Concept of “The Mandate of Heaven” and the Motif of Leaders Protected by Dragons

The *Mandate of Heaven* is an ancient political doctrine originating in the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), developed to legitimize imperial rule and later adopted across successive Chinese dynasties. It provided a divine rationale for the authority of kings and emperors, particularly during periods of dynastic transition (Park, 2024). Confucius reinterpreted the concept of Heaven (天, *tiān*) by shifting its meaning from a cosmic force of fate (*mìngyùn*, 命运) to a moral mandate (*mìnglìng*, 命令) that conferred both legitimacy and responsibility upon virtuous rulers (Marshall, 2015). Within this framework, the rise and fall of dynasties were assessed through a moral lens: the success of a rebellion against a corrupt regime was interpreted as evidence that Heaven had revoked its mandate and transferred it to a more virtuous leader. As such, some scholars have characterized the doctrine as a post hoc rationalization of political victory, or a form of “victor's justice.”

The motif of the *Mandate of Heaven* is pervasive in both historical records and literary narratives. Confucian scholars often cited signs of cosmic or social disorder—such as famines, floods, earthquakes, peasant uprisings, or foreign invasions – as omens that Heaven's favor had been lost by the reigning ruler (Jiang, 2011). Conversely, for figures perceived as rightful recipients of the mandate, stories frequently contain supernatural elements, particularly divine dragons appearing to protect or guide them. In this symbolic framework, the dragon embodies Heaven's will, and its intervention signals the celestial endorsement of the new sovereign. Among the ten narratives examined, three explicitly deploy this motif: the legends of Lord Triệu Việt (S3), King Đinh Tiên Hoàng (S4), and King Lê Đại Hành (S5). For example, in the legend of King Đinh Tiên Hoàng, the protagonist – at a critical turning point in his rebellion – is said to have been protected by two golden dragons, a narrative signifier of Heaven's favor and his destined kingship.

When King Đinh was gathering his troops to launch a rebellion, his uncle—then the local leader—attacked Đinh's army. At the time, Đinh's forces were still small and weak, forcing him to flee. As he crossed the bridge at Đàm Gia Nương, the bridge

collapsed, and Đinh fell into the mud. Just as his uncle was about to kill him, he suddenly saw two golden dragons shielding Đinh, causing him to retreat in fear. Đinh then regrouped his surviving forces, returned to battle, and defeated his uncle. The story spread widely, and people came to admire him. Supporters flocked to his side, and wherever he went, Đinh won decisive victories. He eventually earned the title *Vạn Thắng Vương* (万胜王, “King of Ten Thousand Victories”) (Liên et al., 2010, p. 58).

Narratives involving dragons protecting righteous leaders often follow a consistent structure: a morally upright but vulnerable leader encounters danger, is miraculously saved by dragons, and subsequently gains public support to overthrow the incumbent regime. Stories such as those of Lord Triệu Việt (S3), Đinh Tiên Hoàng (S4), and Lê Đại Hành (S5), as well as other legendary accounts excluded from official historiography, such as King Giản Định (Sĩ, 1991), King Lê Thái Tổ (Đôn, 2007, p. 3), King Quang Trung (Vietnamese Culture Research Institute, 2009, p. 205), and another version of Đinh Tiên Hoàng (Chi, 2019, p. 272), demonstrate this motif. A common feature is that each protagonist ultimately becomes the founding monarch of a new dynasty. These legends function as ideological mechanisms that reinforce the Confucian notion of the *Mandate of Heaven*. By embedding such stories in both historical and literary discourse, Confucian scholars not only provided divine justification for dynastic transitions but also reframed history through a sacralized narrative lens.

A central element of these stories is the recurring structure: “After being protected by the divine dragon, the people immediately believe, and the righteous army continues to grow stronger, eventually winning the battle.” Although no physical dragon ever appears, this motif functions as a psychological strategy to persuade the public that the leader is destined to ascend the throne as the *Son of Heaven*, possessing the *Mandate of Heaven*. This belief is grounded in the Confucian worldview, which equates political legitimacy with divine selection – a doctrine actively propagated by rulers and their Confucian advisors. As Confucius emphasized: “The superior man recognizes and stands in awe of the *Mandate of Heaven*. Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man” (*Analects* 20:3; Confucius, 2020).

Such reverence for the *Mandate of Heaven* inspired the creation of narratives in which divine dragons symbolically affirmed a leader’s right to rule. These stories not only attracted followers to join the leader’s cause but also reinforced the morale of existing troops. Recognizing their persuasive and mobilizing power, rulers had strong incentives to commission or authorize Confucian historians to compose or adapt accounts featuring this motif. In doing so, these narratives implicitly undermined the legitimacy of the reigning monarch by suggesting that Heaven had transferred its

mandate to a new, morally superior candidate—one now protected by dragons.

3.4 The Doctrine of “Auspiciousness and Disasters” and the Motif of Omens

The Confucian doctrine of *Auspiciousness and Disasters* (瑞祥灾异说), which became a pivotal Han political ideology, significantly shaped how dragons were interpreted in Vietnamese culture. This doctrine was formalized by Dong Zhongshu, a prominent Han Confucian scholar who integrated early Confucian cosmological and omen-based beliefs into a system of moral governance (Xun, 2016). Within this framework, omens – whether fortunate or ominous – were regarded as divine communications from Heaven, the ultimate moral authority, delivered to the emperor, who served as its earthly representative. As cited in the *Book of Odes* (*Shih Ching*), Dong Zhongshu declared, “We tremble at the awe and fearfulness of Heaven!” and observed that “the genesis of all ominous portents and wonders is a direct result of errors of the state, so if we examine these wonders and portents carefully, we may discern the *Will of Heaven*” (Dong, 2010).

Among all the symbols, the dragon was uniquely suited as Heaven’s emissary, given its longstanding association with emperorship and its widespread cultural reverence. From the Confucian perspective, a dragon’s appearance was typically interpreted as a confirmation of a ruler’s *moral integrity*. Schuman (2015) notes that “if the king is correct, then the original material force will be harmonious, wind and rain will be timely, lucky stars will appear, and the yellow dragon will descend” (p. 147). Consequently, throughout imperial East Asia, individuals who claimed to have seen a dragon, either personally or through local officials, would promptly report it to the monarch, signaling his virtuous rule (Hayes, 2002). This cultural pattern was reinforced by Confucian wisdom, such as: “When a ruler loves anything, those below him are sure to do so much more” (Wu, 2018, p. 158).

A vast body of literature that emerged in the late Zhou period focused on signs and auspices (Dong, 2010). In the Vietnamese tradition, such motifs appear in royal chronicles, including accounts of King Lý Thái Tổ (S6) and King Lý Thái Tông (S7). Nevertheless, some Confucian historians acknowledged that the proliferation of such stories could lead to exaggeration or even fabrication. Ngô Thì Sĩ, for instance, commented critically in *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* that the records claiming ten appearances of the golden dragon during King Lý Nhân Tông’s reign were suspect, and referred to the 1125 sighting at Lợi Nhân Palace as “a blatant falsehood” (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2007, p. 153).

In exceptional instances, dragons were not viewed as auspicious symbols but rather as harbingers of disaster. In such contexts, they functioned as messengers of Heaven, delivering warnings to the king and his people

regarding impending catastrophes. An illustrative example appears in *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục*, where the chroniclers recorded the following: “In 1053, a golden dragon appeared at the Đoan Minh corner. Entourages were thrilled, but only Zen master Pháp Ngữ said: ‘A dragon flying in the sky, now appearing on the ground, is not a good sign’. Then, in that year’s July, a great flood occurred” (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2007, p. 131).

In the summer of 1315, a severe drought occurred. The Imperial Censorate (御史台) reported: “The responsibility of the ruler is to harmonize *yin and yang* and nurture all living things to welcome peace and harmony. Now, with untimely rain and sunshine, it is clear that no achievements have been made.” [...] Prime Minister (宰相) Khắc Chung remarked: “This year’s drought is due to the punishment of the Dragon King (龙王, a mythical deity associated with water and rain).” [...] Shortly afterward, the rivers overflowed and caused flooding. King Minh Tông personally inspected the repairs of the dykes, but the Imperial Censorate again advised: “Your Majesty should focus on improving your moral conduct; repairing the dykes is a minor task, not something that requires the king’s personal attention” (Nguyễn Dynasty Institute of History, 2007, p. 262).

This excerpt illustrates the complexity of the relationship between nature and the king’s moral responsibility. According to Confucianism, the king is not merely a political figure but the central agent tasked with balancing the forces of *Heaven and Earth*, *yin and yang*. Natural disasters such as droughts or floods are not viewed as random phenomena but as signs that the ruler has failed in his moral obligations. The Dragon King, a deity associated with water and weather, plays a symbolic role in this system of omens. When Khắc Chung attributed the drought to the Dragon King, he shifted the cause from human failure to divine judgment. However, the Imperial Censorate rejected this interpretation, emphasizing that the king’s *moral action* was of greater consequence. This demonstrates that, within the Confucian framework, even when divine agents are invoked, moral governance remains paramount.

Although both King Minh Tông and the Imperial Censorate adhered to Confucianism, their differing approaches to the *Doctrine of Auspiciousness and Disasters* reflect a divergence in how they interpreted the relationship between morality and nature. The king focused on constructing embankments, emphasizing immediate, physical solutions. In contrast, the Imperial Censorate stressed that such actions were merely short-term, mechanical fixes; more importantly, they advocated for the king’s moral correction as a means of preventing future disasters. The Censorate followed the core principles of Confucianism, where the king’s virtue is the decisive factor, and natural phenomena are seen as external manifestations of deeper moral shortcomings.

Michael Loewe, a noted British sinologist, identified three foundational elements that underpinned the legitimacy and supremacy of the Han emperors; these principles were later appropriated into other East Asian monarchical systems, including that of the Việt state. These elements include the following: (1) the emperor’s divine origin, granted by supernatural powers; (2) his moral authority as a virtuous exemplar; and (3) his role as guardian of the sociopolitical and ethical value system (Loewe, 1987; Zhao, 2019, p. 93).

In the context of Vietnamese historiography, the first principle was materialized through narratives of divine dragon ancestry – most notably the myth of Lạc Long Quân and various tales of transmigration, constructed to validate the spiritual origins of Vietnamese kings. The second principle, centered on the emperor’s moral excellence, was deeply tied to Confucian cosmology: if the ruler lived virtuously, auspicious omens would manifest; if not, Heaven would respond with calamities, as seen in the motif of omens previously discussed. Finally, the third element, preserving value systems, can be interpreted as the upholding of Confucian moral doctrines. This function is exemplified in legends where dragons protect righteous leaders, symbolizing the moral collapse of the previous regime and legitimizing the rise of a new, virtuous dynasty (Loewe, 1987; Zhao, 2019, p. 94).

4. Results

This study identified ten dragon-related narratives embedded in five official Vietnamese historical chronicles spanning from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. These narratives were analyzed through the lens of four key Confucian doctrines: *Rectification of Names*, *True Dragon and the Mandate of Heaven*, *Transmigration*, and *Auspiciousness and Disasters*.

Three recurring motifs were observed across the corpus: (1) divine dragon lineage, (2) leaders protected by dragons, and (3) celestial omens signifying legitimate rule. These motifs were not passively transmitted from oral folklore but were consciously selected, restructured, or even invented by Confucian scholars to reinforce dynastic legitimacy and *moral authority*.

Among the ten narratives, the *Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan* (S1) exemplifies genealogical invention grounded in the Confucian moral hierarchy. Miraculous dragon-birth legends (e.g., S2, S9, S10) served to sacralize emperors of humble origin or stabilize contested lines of succession. In contrast, stories of divine intervention in battle (e.g., S3–S5) and celestial omens (S6–S7) provided moral and cosmological justifications for political ascent and military conquest. The omission of dragon-legitimacy motifs in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Tục Biên* further underscores the selective nature of myth integration depending on the political context.

These findings reveal that dragon-related narratives in official historiography were not merely cultural reflections but also instruments of political theology. By

embedding these myths within state-sanctioned texts, Confucian historians constructed a mytho-political discourse that legitimized royal authority, reinforced hierarchical order, and aligned Vietnamese historiography with broader Sinitic ideological frameworks.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that dragon-related legends in premodern Việt official historiography were not passive reflections of folk belief but strategically curated narratives designed to legitimize dynastic rule. Confucian scholars embedded selected legends in historical texts to construct a *mytho-political discourse* that fused *Confucian ethical doctrines* with the cosmological framework of vernacular belief systems. This integration reinforced hierarchical social structures and portrayed monarchs as cosmically ordained and morally exemplary. The results support the hypothesis proposed in the introduction: that the inclusion of dragon and monarch motifs in official chronicles served as a deliberate discursive strategy for consolidating political legitimacy.

In contrast to previous scholarship that approached such legends as cultural residues or mythic reflections of popular cosmology (e.g., Brindley, 2015; Phước, 2020), this study reinterprets them as ideologically structured texts produced under the influence of state power and Confucian orthodoxy. Scholars such as Điều (2013) and Phước (2023b) have previously questioned the historical authenticity of the legend of the Hồng Bàng Clan; this research extends that line of inquiry by analyzing a broader corpus and demonstrating how Confucian historians selectively appropriated, reformulated, or even invented dragon-related legends to align with doctrinal principles such as the *Mandate of Heaven*, *Rectification of Names*, and the *Confucian cosmology* of auspicious signs. By doing so, the study positions these narratives not merely as historical artifacts but as cultural mechanisms for *political theology*.

A major strength of this study lies in its interdisciplinary methodology, combining discourse analysis with Hobsbawm's theory of *invented traditions* to foreground the historiographical agency of the Confucian literati. This approach enables a critical reading of official historiography as a site of ideological negotiation and symbolic control. However, a notable limitation is the exclusive focus on surviving state-sponsored chronicles, which were themselves products of dynastic filtering and may omit alternative or counter-narratives from vernacular or subaltern sources. This constraint limits the study's scope to textual traditions sanctioned by political elites. Future research could expand the analytical framework to include regional oral legends, temple inscriptions, or ritual performances that preserved alternative versions of dragon-legitimacy narratives outside the formal historiographical canon.

These findings contribute to the broader scholarship

on political memory in East Asia by illustrating how official histories function as instruments of governance rather than neutral records of the past. The Việt case demonstrates that Confucianized legends operated within a shared Sinitic framework while also exhibiting culturally specific articulations of divine kingship. Comparative research into Korean, Japanese, and Chinese historiography may further illuminate the transnational patterns of legend-based political legitimation and the localized inflections of shared ideological vocabularies. In this sense, the study not only enhances our understanding of Vietnamese historical consciousness but also contributes to the growing body of scholarship on how elite-controlled narratives shape collective memory, sacred authority, and the construction of political order.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the political deployment of dragon-related narratives in Việt official historiography was not a passive act of preserving folk tradition but a deliberate enterprise of ideological engineering. By embedding these narratives within a Confucian framework and institutionalizing them in state-sanctioned chronicles, the Confucian literati constructed a layered system of political theology in which legend, ritual, and historiography converged to legitimize royal authority. What distinguishes the Việt case is the strategic synthesis of Sinitic imperial ideology with local cosmological beliefs, resulting in a hybrid legend-based political discourse that operated both vertically – reinforcing sovereign power – and horizontally – naturalizing hierarchical structures across society.

More significantly, this study offers a methodological template for interrogating the historiographical role of invented traditions in shaping collective memory and political legitimacy in East Asian monarchies. The Việt case challenges the dichotomy between “folk” and “elite” discourses by showing how Confucian scholars appropriated, reformulated, and even fabricated popular motifs to serve dynastic agendas. It also highlights the intercultural dynamics at play in the construction of historical authority, where Sinitic political thought was selectively adapted to local belief systems through the medium of legend. Such an intercultural synthesis not only enriched the symbolic repertoire of royal legitimacy but also generated uniquely Vietnamese expressions of divine kingship.

Future research may extend this approach to comparative studies in Chinese, Korean, or Japanese contexts, investigate subaltern responses to official mythography, or examine how these Confucianized dragon legends have been reframed in postcolonial and nationalist historiographies. Ultimately, this research calls for a more critical and interdisciplinary reading of official histories, not as neutral records of the past, but as ideological blueprints for political theology, moral order,

and social control.

Author Contributions

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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