

Relationship between Sơn Tinh - a Natural God of Mountain and Sơn Tinh - a Human God

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ABSTRACT: For a long time, Sơn Tinh is believed to be a human god only. However, some scientists recently argue that he is also a natural god of mountain. The paper deals with the question of whether Sơn Tinh is a human god only or he is also a natural god mountain. Analysis of related materials and archaeological evidence seems to support the author's interesting assumption that there existed two layers of belief regarding this one of the most controversial characters in the ancient history of Vietnam.

I. Sơn Tinh – a Human God and Worship

Sơn Tinh has a common characteristics with other human gods such as having specific name, surname, biography and achievements. People worship him with conferred title, biography, offerings, meeting ritual and festival. In the places where he is worshipped (temple or shrine), there are altar, votive tablet, chair, palanquin, and statue.

1. Title and Biography

Old materials, especially story of god, indicated clearly this god's biography. Sơn Tinh's name was Nguyễn Tuấn, born in Lăng Xương cave¹ on the 15th of lunar January in the year of Snake. His father was Nguyễn Cao Hành and his mother was Đinh Thị Đen, his godmother was Ma Thị and his younger cousins were Nguyễn Sùng and Nguyễn Hiên. He had a big legacy left by his godmother. Sơn Tinh competed with Thủy Tinh, a water god, got married to a Hùng King's princess called

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Mị Nương, fought against flood, advised Hùng King to abdicate the throne in favor of Thục Phán, then entered the realm of immortality with the King and his wife.

2. *Achievements*

Sơn Tinh, via folk stories, legends and festival, reveals to be the one with many great achievements:

- *Fighting against Flood*

This is very important. We have collected 56 stories about Sơn Tinh within which 21 stories (37%) are about the theme of fighting against flood. This is his big career to save the people, fields and properties from the severe flood. Flood took place so often that threatened lives of residents in the Northern delta. Sơn Tinh' great contributions in this task had been recorded in important historical books such as *Việt Điện U Linh* (Viet Ghost stories), *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete History of Đại Việt) and *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* (Stories of ghosts and spirits in Lĩnh Nam). In the modern times, many social scientists such as Hoàng Thiều Sơn, Đinh Gia Khánh, Cao Huy Đình, Nguyễn Xuân Kính, etc. have reaffirmed Sơn Tinh's key role in fighting against flood.

Hoàng Thiều Sơn stated that: "The real reason and origin of legend of Sơn Tinh is not the animosity between the two gods because of love but the fight of the Lạc Việt people against flood from rivers."²

Đinh Gia Khánh wrote: "Folk stories show that Sơn Tinh scored achievements in many different fields such as fighting against the foreign invaders, disease treatments and teaching people to cultivate. Yet the most prominent contribution is his fight against flood to protect paddy fields. Sơn Tinh is foremost represented for the people's power to control the flood."³

Meanwhile, Cao Huy Đình also said that: "We can see the stature and figure of a giant man who could build rivers and mountains to control great floods coming from the North West towards present Hà Tây province and forced Đà and Hồng rivers to peacefully running to the low land."⁴

And, Nguyễn Xuân Kính added: "... we tend to understand the story of Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh as a song of praising our ancestors' control of floods and fight against storms..."⁵

Sơn Tinh's credit in flood control is engaged with his marriage to Mị Nương and fights between Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh to seize this princess.

In short, the topic of flood control was emphasized because flood was the great danger and too often happened to residents in the middle and low lands of the North. Sơn Tinh was also a giant hero in fighting against floods with a universal stance the same as lady Nữ Oa in Chinese legend who could use stones to repair holes in the sky.

- Cultural development (21% stories): Sơn Tinh taught people to make fire, cultivate rice, hunting, fishing, carpentry and various forms of artist activity.

- Victory in wars (21% stories): Sơn Tinh implemented two kinds of war; war between Hùng and Thục, and war against Thủy Tinh.

Regarding the war between Hùng and Thục, many put that it was the war against the foreign invaders. Looking at the reality of Vietnamese history at the early times of establishing the nation, this is the internal war between Âu Việt and Lạc Việt tribes before the formation of Âu Lạc coalition. The result of this coalition was retold by story that Hùng King abdicated the throne in favor of Thục Phán. This was the critical need of the contemporary history. "To Việt land of the South (China) at that time, *fighting against foreign invaders* was a more critical task. In those conditions, the sole existence of one tribe (Văn Lang or Lạc Việt) would not be a good idea. Based on economical foundations which were more developed, and due to the need of fighting against the foreign invaders, *the union of tribes with closed blood, land, and level of cultural development was definitely a must*. This was the reason and foundation for the union of the two tribes of Lạc Việt and Âu Việt resulted in the birth of Âu Lạc nation."⁶

Regarding the war with Thủy Tinh, it could be called the war because of love dispute (according to Cao Huy Đình), or the war to seize a woman (according to F. Engel).

Nguyễn Tấn Đắc believes this is the main contribution of Sơn Tinh: "the story of Sơn Tinh – Thủy Tinh is foremost talking about a social phenomenon rather than a natural phenomenon, and annual floods are symbol of a true social phenomenon of the ancient time: fights for possessing woman."⁷

Besides, there are stories about Sơn Tinh's role in fighting against draught (16% of stories).

3. *The Worship*

Sơn Tinh is worshipped in many places. There are 161 places of worshipping Sơn Tinh in Hà Tây province only. Various forms of offerings, procession, rituals and festivals can be summarized as follow:

- Praying and reading the oration: Reading the oration is a way to recall Sơn Tinh's great contribution to the community in a solemn atmosphere in which his conferred titles and beautiful names are emphasized. There are festivals in which Sơn Tinh's great contributions are retold at the beginning of the ritual. In the festival at Mãng Sơn temple (Sơn Đồng village, Sơn Tây town), the ritual master on behalf of the community to rehearsal a scene that the villager enjoyed the foods brought back from hunting by Sơn Tinh - the Saint of Tản mountain.

In general, the oration ceremony is carried out with orderly procedures the same as ceremonies by the feudal regimes.

- Offering: There are many offerings, including chicken, pork, sticky rice, wine and fish. In the festival at Và temple, 99 fishes are collected and cooked into various dishes in the offering. All these dishes were taught by the Saint of Tản mountain. Besides, 9 live carps are put in a glass pot, reminding people of Sơn Tinh's contribution in teaching people to do the fishing and cooking fish. Worshipped items are bamboo frame, bamboo basket, sickle. These remind observers that Sơn Tinh was the one who taught people to make simple working tools.

- Procession: In procession, especially from Và temple (Trung Hưng village, Sơn Tây town) over a river to Dơi temple (Vĩnh Ninh village, Vĩnh Tường district, Vĩnh Phúc province), there is a rule of taking water from Hồng river to bath for the Sơn Tinh's statue.

- Festival: Besides popular activities such as swinging, playing Chinese chess or wrestling, there is a game of fishing which helps reminding people of Sơn Tinh's guide to the fishing profession.

- Heritages: There are number of places of worshipping Sơn Tinh the Saint. Among 121 places worshipping Sơn Tinh in Hà Tây, some are really big and beautiful, such as Và temple, Tây Đằng commune house, Mãng Sơn temple, etc.

Sơn Tinh can be said to be a human god in the belief system of Tutelary gods in Vietnam. However, some scientists argue that under the big cover of a human god

which is easy to recognize, there is a belief base originated from a natural god of mountain.

II. Sơn Tinh – A Natural God of Mountain and Worship

Trần Quốc Vượng puts that Sơn Tinh the human god is the interface which had been added later into history. He said “The interface of Sơn Tinh, the son-in-law of King Hùng, who defeated Thủy Tinh, who fought against Thục army, advised the King to abdicate the throne in favor of Thục Phán, then found himself a retreat in the mountain, was added later.”⁽⁹⁾ And both Trần Quốc Vượng and Từ Chi believe that Saint Tản/Đản in Ba Vì is the natural god of mountain of the ancient Việt (Việt Mường)¹⁰.

Thus, if one wants to see the primitive face of Saint Tản Viên, he must go to Mường area. He said “if we want to see the rather primitive face of Saint Tản Viên, we need to dig deeper to the layer of Bửu Ba Vì culture of the Mường which was less influenced by Taoism of the Chinese.”¹¹

Ngô Đức Thịnh argues that: “I think that in early times, Tản Viên, as many others gods of mountain, belonged to the belief system of ancient geomancy of the Việt and other tribes in our country.”¹² Meanwhile, Đinh Gia Khánh states more clearly: “Legend of Sơn Tinh came with fetishism. Sơn Tinh is the product of worshipping mountains. At first, people worshipped mountain Tản Viên, then they believed that there existed a god in the mountain. The god gradually took the shape of a human being.”¹³

Thus, in order to understand more about Sơn Tinh, we must investigate more about the layer of natural god of mountain. However, the question is How the cult of Natural god of Mountain was practised?

The belief of worshipping natural –mountainous god is the ancient fetishism that is still found today in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. The peoples in Central Highlands often worship natural gods such as Water, River, Mountain, Banian Tree, Stone, Rain, Cloud, Wind, Lightning, Rice, Field, etc. Besides natural gods, peoples also worship big rivers, mountains and springs with specific names such as Klu, Bir, Kplong, Ung, Drao, Ju, Prong, etc.

Their prayers are simple. They invite gods to enjoy offerings then help them to have a good health, good harvest with equable rain and wind. For example, prayers in a ritual at a river wharf in Klang village read as follow:

Oh Gods of Water, River and Mountain

Oh Gods of Bayan Tree, Fig Tree, God of the East, God of the West

Today, the master of River Wharf of Klang village prepares a ritual

Wishing that all Gods protect the village

The water source is pure, and never gets dried

Everyone is healthy

In new harvest, stores are full of corn and rice

Every family is well-off

Offerings include chicken and pig and wine drunk out of a jar through pipes is compulsory. There is no fixed place for carrying out ritual. It can be at the field, at home, at the river wharf, or at the stone by the gate of the village¹⁴.

What can be drawn are these characteristics of the worshipping of natural gods as follow:

- The name of gods can be general nouns or specific names of local, familiar rivers and mountains (not human names).

- Offerings often consist of chicken, pork, and wine. Buffalo's meat is required for big rituals.

- Prayers are simple

- There is no fixed place for carrying out rituals. There is no temple or shrines.

According to Trần Quốc Vượng's suggestion, we did dig in Khánh Chúc (Khánh Dương village, Ba Vì district, Hà Tây province – now Hà Nội) which is closed to Ba Vì mountain. The results are reported in details at the journal of *Folk Culture Studies*. People here are Mường of 100%.¹⁵

Main points are summarized as follow:

- + Worship of Tản Viên the Saint of Mountain is true and popular here.

- + Some forms of worship are:

- Worship at home separately with a bamboo pad called *réng*

- Worship at home combined with ancestor worship

- Worship at communal house, as one of Tutelary gods with the same ritual as in the low land of the Kinh.

+ Story of the god at Khánh Chúc temple is basically similar to story of god at the Kinh's temples of worshipping Sơn Tinh. It comes with biography: the God's name is Nguyễn Tuấn, his father is Nguyễn Cao Hành, his mother is Đinh Thị Đen, his godmother is Ma Thị, his cousins are Nguyễn Hiền and Nguyễn Sùng. Besides, there are five imperial conferments from 1853 to 1924. Every year, festival to remember Sơn Tinh is held with oration, offering, and procession.

Therefore, we can conclude that worship of Sơn Tinh by the Kinh is the ritual for a human god in the system of tutelary gods. There is no trace of a belief of a natural god of mountain. In Mường area, Sơn Tinh is also worshipped as a tutelary god. The worship of Sơn Tinh as a natural god of mountain is only left with spiritual belief and names such as: Tản Viên Sơn Thánh, Sơn Tinh, Thánh Tản, Tam vị Đại vương, Bua Pa Ví, etc.

Here is the table which provides a comparison:

Manifestation	Natural God of Mountain	Human God
Interface/names	Name of a mountain. He is often generally called a god of mountain	Specific human names (Tuấn Công, Sùng Công, Hiền Công)
Biography/ Acts	None	Clear biography with: - homeland - name and sure name, date of birth, parents and wife - Leads a life of an ordinary person. Has great contribution to the community - Has supernatural acts
Worship	- Prayers: generally to a god of mountain or a god who is identified with a specific mountain - Offerings: chicken, pig, wine - Oration: none - Procession: none - Festival: none - Places of worship: none	- Prayers: reading biography with imperial conferments - Offerings: various items, especially what engage with his great contributions - Oration: yes - Procession: yes - Festival: yes - Places of worship: shrines, temples, altars

We can see that, the primitive layer of worship of Sơn Tinh the natural god is left with names such as God of Ba Vì mountain, Sơn Tinh, Three Great Kings. At the present, the layer of worship of Sơn Tinh as a human god has been overlapped. The objects of worship are: Tân Viên the Mountain Saint, Saint Đản (Nguyễn Tuấn, Nguyễn Tùng), Three Great Kings (Nguyễn Tuấn, Nguyễn Sùng, Nguyễn Hiền). Besides, there are activities such as oration, procession, festival which engage with contribution and good deed of the god.

From the table above, the answer for the question of Whether Sơn Tinh can be both a human god and a natural god of mountain? is that there are two layers of belief in Sơn Tinh: Sơn Tinh – the natural god of mountain and Sơn Tinh – the human god. These layers have a relationship which can be explained as follow: Ritual to worship the God of mountain belongs to fetishism which is “a form of religion /belief worships things that were thought to have magic or supernatural power. It is one of the earliest religions in the primitive society.”¹⁶ Because the belief in the natural God of Mountain appeared long time ago, we can only find it out in underdeveloped ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands. This is the reason why the layer of belief in Sơn Tinh - the natural god of mountain of the Viet - is left with name and faith in folklore only. Yet it still exists until present because it acts as a root of belief.

- From a greater aspect, worship of Sơn Tinh as we see at the present is the worship of a human god which belongs to belief in Tutelary god. This belief is popular in general.

What has been said is the natural rule of the changes of religion and belief. Each form of belief has its own environment and period of existence. As society changes, the old layer of belief is adjusted, and turned into contemporary layer of belief, then the later becomes dominant./.

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