

THE “FRINGE HISTORY” OF HÀ VĂN THÙY, CUNG ĐÌNH THANH, LƯƠNG KIM ĐỊNH AND LÝ ĐÔNG A

LE MINH KHAI (LIAM KELLY)

<https://leminhkhai.blog/the-fringe-history-of-ha-van-thuy-cung-dinh-thanh-luong-kim-dinh-and-ly-dong-a/>

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One of the first posts that I ever wrote for this blog was called “Hà Văn Thùy and Ancient Việt Races (Has the BBC Gone Mad?) [5 May 2010].

I wrote that post in response to a letter that writer Hà Văn Thùy had sent to the Vietnamese branch of the BBC in which he argued that, to quote what I wrote in that post, “virtually everyone and everything in Asia originated in Vietnam with the Vietnamese.”

This was perhaps the first time that I encountered this idea, that is, the idea that the ancestors of the Vietnamese were the founders of what we can think of as “East Asian” civilization. However, after writing that post I started to notice this viewpoint more frequently, be it on web pages or from people in Vietnam.

So I started to investigate where these ideas come from, and I found that this idea has been circulating for many years, from at least the writings of a man by the name of Lý Đông A in the 1940s, to philosopher Lương Kim Định in the 1960s, to academic Trần Ngọc Thêm in the 1990s, to author Hà Văn Thùy in the 2000s.

I then discovered the writings of an overseas Vietnamese writer, the late Cung Đình Thanh, and came to realize that he played an important role in the late 1990s in stimulating thinking and writing about this topic as well, and that a group that he organized was particularly important in incorporating ideas from Western scholars into this narrative that had existed about Vietnamese writers for decades.

THE CENTRALITY OF “FRINGE HISTORY”: DIASPORA, THE INTERNET AND A NEW VERSION OF VIETNAMESE PREHISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, virtually all information about the past in Vietnam was produced by scholars working for the state, mainly university professors, and published in print media. In recent years, however, private individuals have begun to make use of the Internet to offer new perspectives on the Vietnamese past, and in some cases to print their work. Some of these amateur historians have now produced a new narrative about Vietnamese prehistory. This narrative presents an extremely positive view of the history of the ancient ancestors of the Vietnamese, seeing them as essentially the founders of East Asian civilisation. While some aspects of this narrative were first proposed by South Vietnamese philosopher Luong Kim Dinh in the 1960s, amateur Vietnamese historians in the diaspora around the turn of the 21st century added what they argued were “scientific” findings of “international” scholars to this narrative. Finally, scholars in Vietnam accessed these ideas through the Internet and synthesised them with the works of scholars working in Vietnam. This spread of ideas from South Vietnam into the diaspora and then back to Vietnam via the Internet offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which communication in the Digital Age has enabled some authors from the previously divided worlds of Vietnam and the diaspora to find common ground to promote a nationalistic vision of the distant past

This idea that the ancestors of the Vietnamese were the founders of East Asian civilization is one that cannot be found in scholarship on Vietnamese history from “professional” historians, be they Vietnamese or foreign. In that sense, this is a version of history that is on the “fringes” of the historical profession.

Nonetheless, these ideas can be found all over the Internet, on Wikipedia, and even on university web pages in Vietnam. As a result, I argue that they are becoming more “central” to what Vietnamese in general know, or have heard, about the past.

As a “professional” historian, I cannot accept this view of the past as it is not based on historical evidence. However, as a human being I can sympathize with the sentiments that have driven these men to write about the past in the way they have.

Essentially, all of these men, at least from Lương Kim Định onward, have feared that Vietnamese society and culture would be destroyed by outside influences. Their “imagining” of a glorious antiquity for the Vietnamese is part of their effort to create a sense of cultural groundedness in the hope that this grounding, or foundation, will enable Vietnamese to exist in the global age of the present without losing their “Vietnamese-ness,” however that is defined.

Personally, I don’t think their writings will achieve this goal, but again, I can understand and sympathize with their intent.

I have various blog posts and videos here about this topic, but I recently published an article about it as well. It is entitled, “The Centrality of “Fringe History”: Diaspora, the Internet and a New Version of Vietnamese Prehistory,” and can be viewed either on [my Academia.edu](#) page (free access through Facebook, etc.) or on [the International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies website](#).

I don’t know who peer-reviewed this article (and that’s the way it’s supposed to work!), but if they ever read this, I want to thank them for their very helpful comments!!