

“Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country” or A Symbol of National Spirit - The Process of Canonizing "Nam Quốc Sơn Hà" from the Early 20th Century to the Present

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[Abstract]

Nam quốc sơn hà (Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country), generally attributed to the 10th century, is one of the most celebrated works in Vietnamese literature and is widely regarded as a symbol of national spirit and an early declaration of independence. This study examines the process of its canonization from the early 20th century to the present, tracing how it was elevated to the foremost literary symbol of national discourse. It analyzes the origins of this process, its key stages, and the social forces involved. The article argues that the transformation of *Nam quốc sơn hà* into a canonical text was not the result of intrinsic literary qualities alone but emerged through the coordinated participation of state institutions, scholars, the media, and—most decisively—the education system. By drawing on discourse analysis, canon formation theory, and reception studies, the research sheds light on how institutional and discursive practices embed literary works into collective memory and national identity.

Keywords: *Nam quốc sơn hà*, literary canon, national discourse, reception studies, Vietnamese literature

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I . Introduction

This article investigates the canonization of *Nam quốc sơn hà* (Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country), a medieval poem that has become a powerful symbol of Vietnamese nationalism. Although often cited as the nation's first declaration of independence, the poem's current status stems not from intrinsic literary merit, but from its mobilization in various historical and institutional contexts. Rather than treating *Nam quốc sơn hà* as a fixed text, the study examines how it has been repeatedly framed, interpreted, and instrumentalized across time.

Drawing on theories of canon formation and symbolic nationalism, the article argues that the poem's enduring prominence results from deliberate processes of cultural legitimation. While earlier scholarship has addressed its historical background, authorship, and textual form, few studies have explored how it became institutionalized in the national literary canon of modern Vietnam. This study fills that gap by tracing the mechanisms and agents involved in canonizing the poem from the early twentieth century to the present. It adopts a qualitative approach grounded in discourse analysis, reception theory, and Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field, focusing on how *Nam quốc sơn hà* has been embedded in educational curricula, literary historiography, and media representations.

There has been quite a lot of research on *Nam quốc sơn hà*. Over the past 100 years, much effort has been devoted to this work, both in print and later in the digital space. *Nam quốc sơn hà* has almost always appeared in anthologies of literature and works on the history of Vietnamese literature as one of the most important pieces. Among the individual studies on *Nam quốc sơn hà*, the most notable include Trần Nghĩa's 1986 article, *Thử xác lập văn bản bài thơ "Nam quốc sơn hà"* (Attempt to Establish the Text of the Poem "Nam quốc sơn hà") which focuses on the textual issues of the work; Hà Văn Tấn's 1988 work, *Lịch sử, sự thật và sử học* (History, Truth, and Historiography); Bùi Duy Tân's series of articles, such as *Truyện thuyết về một bài thơ: "Nam quốc sơn hà" là vô danh không phải của Lý Thường Kiệt* (The Legend of a Poem: "Nam quốc sơn hà"

is Anonymous, Not by Lý Thường Kiệt) (2000) and “*Nam quốc sơn hà*” và “*Quốc tộ*” - hai kiệt tác văn chương chữ Hán ngang qua triều đại Lê Hoàn (“*Nam quốc sơn hà*” and “*Quốc tộ*” - Two Masterpieces of Literature in Classical Chinese during the Lê Hoàn Dynasty) (2005); and Nguyễn Thị Oanh's 2002 study, which mainly addresses the poem's origin and authorship. So far, no study has approached *Nam quốc sơn hà* from the perspective of the process by which this work became one of the most significant literary works of Vietnamese medieval literature in the 20th and 21st centuries, symbolizing the national spirit of the Vietnamese people.

The concept of the literary canon refers to a body of texts regarded as foundational within a cultural tradition. However, contemporary scholarship emphasizes that canonicity is not the result of intrinsic literary value alone, but of historically contingent processes shaped by institutional and ideological forces. As John Guillory argues in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, “Evaluative judgments are the necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of canon formation, and it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries” (1993: viii). This perspective underscores the role of educational systems in canon formation, particularly in postcolonial and nation-building contexts, where canonical texts serve as tools for cultivating patriotism, historical continuity, and collective identity. In such contexts, literary works gain symbolic power through their institutional repetition and cultural embedding, not merely through aesthetic merit.

The study also draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the “field of cultural production,” which situates literature within a network of relational forces and symbolic struggles. As Bourdieu writes: “The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions” (1993: 30). From this perspective, canonization is best understood as

the outcome of ongoing contestation among institutional actors—critics, educators, publishers—who compete to legitimize certain texts through symbolic capital. The elevation of a poem like *Nam quốc sơn hà* is thus not solely a literary phenomenon, but the result of its discursive reproduction in school curricula, state-endorsed literary histories, and national rhetoric. Canon formation, in this sense, reflects broader mechanisms of cultural authority and ideological negotiation.

This study draws on three main sources: official Vietnamese school textbooks (1954 - present), national literary anthologies, and state-aligned literary histories. These materials are selected to trace the institutional processes through which *Nam quốc sơn hà* was canonized. Textbooks are analyzed for their role in shaping ideological narratives and transmitting nationalist symbolism in formal education. Anthologies and literary histories—often produced by state-affiliated scholars and publishers—reflect efforts to legitimize and stabilize the poem within the national canon. Supplementary materials include scholarly debates and public discourse on issues such as authorship and political interpretation. Together, these sources reveal how the poem's meaning has been constructed across educational, academic, and media domains, illustrating its broader socio-political function in Vietnamese cultural memory.

II. *Nam quốc sơn hà* – A Legend of the Medieval Era

According to Bùi Duy Tân, the earliest appearance of the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* in surviving historical records is in *Việt điện u linh* (1329). Bùi Duy Tân also stated: "The legend may have originated in the Ngô period and later in the Đinh and Lê dynasties, which was the beginning of the era of autonomy"¹ (2000: 40-41). In total, there are approximately 34 medieval texts that document legends associated with this poem. The version of *Việt điện u linh* that we still have today records the following: According to *Sử ký* by Đỗ Thiện, Trương Hồng and Trương Hát were brothers. In the past,

¹ All quotes in Vietnamese in this paper are translated to English by the author.

when Ngô Nam Tấn was fighting against the enemy Lý Huy in Long Châu, he camped at the mouth of the Phù Lan River and had a dream in which two deities appeared, claiming to be the brothers Trương Hồng and Trương Hát, who had served as generals under Triệu Việt Vương. After Lý Nam Đế seized the throne and invited them to serve as officials, the brothers retreated to live in seclusion on Phù Long Mountain. Lý Nam Đế sent people to hunt them down, and the two brothers committed suicide by drinking poison. The Supreme Deity, pitying their wrongful deaths, made them river gods. Previously, they had aided the former emperor in the Battle of Bạch Đằng. Upon waking, King Nam Tấn performed a ceremony, pledging that if the gods helped him win the battle, he would build a temple in their honor. Indeed, the king won the battle and immediately enshrined the deities, establishing temples for them at the mouths of the Như Nguyệt River and the Nam Bình River.

During the reign of King Lý Nhân Tông, the Song army invaded. The king ordered Commander-in-Chief Lý Thường Kiệt to set up camp by the river to defend the area. One night, the soldiers heard a divine voice reciting a poem from within the temple:

"The mountains and rivers of the Southern country belong to the Southern Emperor,

The boundary is clearly divided according to the Book of Heaven.
How dare the invading troops come to violate?

They shall face inevitable defeat."

And indeed, the Song army was defeated and had to retreat (Lý 2012: 81-83).

According to *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (late 14th - 15th century), the story is recounted as follows: During the Thiên Phúc era of Lê Đại Hành's reign, Emperor Song Taizu sent his forces to invade the southern lands. Lê Đại Hành and General Phạm Cự Lượng led their troops to the Đồ Lỗ River to confront the enemy, with both sides fortifying their positions. Lê Đại Hành dreamed of two divine beings on the river who said:

We are brothers, one named Trương Hồng and the other Trương Hát. In the past, we served Triệu Việt Vương, leading his army to conquer the traitors and unify the realm. Later, when Triệu Việt Vương lost

his kingdom, Lý Nam Đế summoned us. Out of loyalty, we refused to join him and took poison to end our lives. The Supreme Deity, recognizing our dedication and loyalty, appointed us as generals among the divine spirits, commanding an army of ghost soldiers. Now, since the Song army has invaded, bringing suffering to our people, we have come to present ourselves to the king, offering to help fight these invaders and save the people.

The king awoke and performed a ritual to request the deities' assistance. The following night, he saw the two deities leading two regiments of ghost soldiers to attack the enemy. At the third watch of the night on the 30th day of the tenth lunar month, under a pitch-black sky with stormy rain, the Song army was thrown into disarray. The deities, invisible in the air, loudly recited:

“Over the mountains and rivers of the Southern land reigns the Southern Emperor,

This has been ordained in the celestial book.

If the northern invaders come to trespass,

They will be struck down by our sharp swords as easily as splitting bamboo.”

The Song army, upon hearing this, became confused, trampled over each other, and mistakenly killed their own comrades as they fled back to their country. King Đại Hành celebrated the victory, rewarded the two deities, and established temples in their honor at the confluence of the Long Nhân and Như Nguyệt rivers (Vũ and Kiêu 1960: 75-76).

The two stories differ in terms of the time in which they occur. The legend in *Việt điện u linh* is associated with Ngô Nam Tấn, while the legend in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* is linked to Lê Đại Hành. The poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* in *Việt điện u linh* is set during Lý Thường Kiệt's campaign against the Song army under King Lý Nhân Tông (1076). In *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, the poem is tied to Lê Đại Hành's war against the Song Army (981).² However, the two stories share many similarities, and both are narratives that combine royal authority with divine power, using divine authority to reinforce the

² Bùi Duy Tân argues that this legend must have appeared no later than the year when the book *Việt điện u linh* was published (2005). Nguyễn Thị Oanh explains that there was a reconstruction of the legend, shifting from Lê Đại Hành to Lý Thường Kiệt, because Lê Đại Hành was harshly criticized by Confucian scholars for not fully supporting the son of King Đinh and for making Dương Thị (King Đinh's wife) the empress (2024).

strength of the monarchy. In these stories, of course, royal authority is placed above divine power.

Việt điện u linh and *Lĩnh Nam chíich quái* are also collections with official status in the state, recording ancient folk stories and legends of Vietnam. They use the power of divine authority to strengthen the royal authority of the dynasties and to build the cultural identity of Đại Việt. However, they are not yet considered official historical records. It is unclear whether *Đại Việt sử ký* by Lê Văn Hưu, the first official history of the Vietnamese people, which is now lost, contained anything about this legend. In *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the earliest official historical record that the Vietnamese have preserved, it is written:

In the fifth year of the Bình Thìn era (1076), in the spring, during the third month, the Song dynasty sent the envoy Guo Kui, the Commissioner of Guangnan, as the chief commander, and Zhao Xie as the deputy, leading an army of nine generals to ally with Champa and Chenla to invade our country. The king ordered Lý Thường Kiệt to lead troops to confront the attack. At the Như Nguyệt River, they defeated the enemy, killing over 1,000 Song soldiers. Guo Kui retreated but still took our Quảng Nguyên prefecture. (It is said that Thường Kiệt built fortifications along the river to strengthen the defense. One night, the soldiers suddenly heard a loud recitation from the temple of General Trương, saying:

"The mountains and rivers of the Southern country belong to the Southern Emperor,

The boundary is clearly divided according to the Book of Heaven.
How dare the invading troops come to violate?

They shall face inevitable defeat" (Ngô 2006: 301).

Then it truly happened. The two brothers, General Trương, the elder named Hồng and the younger named Hát, were both skilled generals of Triệu Việt Vương, who was defeated by (later) Lý Nam Đế. Nam Đế summoned them to serve as officials, but both said: "A loyal minister cannot serve a king who has harmed his lord" (Ngô 2006: 302). They then hid in the Phù Long mountains. When Nam Đế called for them several times without success, he issued an order that anyone who brought back their heads would be rewarded with a thousand gold pieces. Both brothers then committed suicide by

taking poison. When Nam Tấn Vương of the Ngô dynasty went to fight against the invader Lý Huy in Tây Long, he camped at Phù Lan. He dreamt of two figures asking to assist the troops, saying: "Heaven is merciful to loyal ministers who do not serve two kings; we have been appointed as the generals of Than Hà Long Quân, to oversee the two rivers Vũ Lạng, and as the deputy envoy of Chi Mạn." After defeating the invaders, Nam Tấn Vương of the Ngô dynasty honored the elder brother with the title "Đại Đương Giang Đô Hộ Quốc Thần Vương" and established a temple at the mouth of the Như Nguyệt River, while the younger brother was honored with the title "Tiểu Đương Giang Đô Hộ Quốc Thần Vương," and a temple was built at the mouth of the Nam Quận River, which is the temple in question (Ngô 2006: 302).

This is not the first time historians have borrowed legends as a tool to reinforce national identity. For example, the legendary system of the Hồng Bàng dynasty regarding the formation of the Vietnamese people has been used to introduce the official history of Đại Việt in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. The orthodoxy of these legends is fully established when they are incorporated into official history. The story of the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* is almost identical to the legendary account in *Việt điện u linh* that we mentioned earlier. However, when included in official history, this legend was legitimized, moving it from the realm of folklore to that of official history. The poem "Nam quốc sơn hà," whose authorship was originally unclear, has since been placed on par, in terms of historical value, with many other famous literary works that have also been incorporated into the official histories of significant historical figures, such as Trần Quốc Tuấn's *Hịch tướng sĩ* and Nguyễn Trãi's *Bình Ngô đại cáo*.

After *Việt điện u linh*, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, and *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* appeared in several other texts, such as *Việt sử tiêu án*, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, as well as narrative works like *Thiên Nam vân lục liệt truyện* and historical verse works like *Việt sử diễn âm*, *Thiên Nam ngữ lục*, and *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca* (which only mentions the legend of the deity reciting poetry without quoting the poem itself). In some instances, the poem is associated with Lý Thường Kiệt, as seen in *Việt sử tiêu*

án and *Đại Nam quốc sử diễn ca*, while in others, it is linked to Lê Đại Hành, as in *Việt sử diễn âm* and *Thiên Nam ngữ lục*. However, according to Bùi Duy Tân, the poem was never included in ancient collections of Chinese poetry, as it remained an integral part of folk legend throughout its history. (2005)

It can be concluded that, during the medieval period, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was a poem linked to a historical legend, incorporated into the official history, and legitimized due to its historical significance. In the cultural environment characterized by the indistinguishability of literature, history, and philosophy in the medieval era, the boundary between literature and history is quite thin. However, the fact that the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* has never appeared in any poetry or literary anthology indicates that it does not even lie on the boundary between literature and history but is firmly situated on the other side of legend and history. The emergence and circulation of this work in the medieval period are entirely tied to history and folk literature. In the perception of Confucian scholars, it does not belong to the realm of written literature. Therefore, it has never existed as an independent literary work before the 20th century.

III. *Nam quốc sơn hà* in the Trend of Restoring Traditional Values in Colonial Society (1900-1945)

In the late 19th century, Vietnam began to become a colony of France. The process of colonization transformed Vietnam from a nation with a traditional culture within the sphere of Chinese influence into a culture modernizing along Western lines. All of this led to significant and profound changes in Vietnamese society from 1900 to 1945, an extraordinary transformation that Trần Đình Hượu and Lê Chí Dũng described as “a change that no previous upheaval could compare to” (Trần and Lê 1988: 17). This period is considered the formation of modern nationalism in Vietnam, with concepts of nation and nationality that differ markedly from traditional notions, as explained by McHale:

These essentialist and constructivist arguments were deployed in a rapidly changing intellectual field. As Vietnamese writers appropriated a new social and political vocabulary and applied it to a newly invented object, “society,” they reconceptualized social hierarchy, gender relations, the common people, and the nature of the Vietnamese past. They shifted from the language that placed Vietnamese in Confucian hierarchies and orders (e.g., *tứ dân*, or four social ranks, and *quốc gia*, nation [literally “nation-family”]) to terminology that encompassed both equally and economic class; they used race (*chủng tộc*) and lineage (*dòng dõi*) less and less in conceptions of identity, while experimenting with ones that were more inclusive (like *dân tộc*, “the nation” or “the people”). This transformation took place so quickly that the discursive field saw many voices contradicting each other, appealing to different intellectual masters.” (2004: 69)

In the colonial context, while simultaneously influenced by Western concepts of nation and nationality, Vietnam during the period from 1900 to 1945 witnessed a trend of returning to the cultural values of the past, viewing history from a different perspective. Vietnamese intellectuals, including both traditional scholars (Confucianists) and modern scholars (Western-educated), utilized these traditional values to help establish the identity of the Vietnamese nation. Elements of traditional culture, including history, literature, art, philosophy, and religion, prior to the 20th century, were systematically rediscovered. The beginning of the construction of historical and literary histories, mostly written in *Quốc ngữ* (Vietnamese script) using modern Western methods, falls within this trajectory.

Việt sử yếu by Hoàng Cao Khải, written in Classical Chinese in 1914 with a relatively novel historiographical approach, was translated into the national language and published in *Đông Dương tạp chí* in 1915. In the section about Lý Thường Kiệt, it discusses *Nam quốc sơn hà* as follows: “Tradition holds that this poem was inspired by a divine dream, while we attribute the authorship of this poem to Lý Thường Kiệt to commemorate his military achievements” (2021: 164). Hoàng Cao Khải may have been the first to theorize that Lý Thường Kiệt is the author of *Nam quốc sơn hà*.

Among the historical works on Vietnam in the 20th century, *Việt Nam sử lược* (1920) by Trần Trọng Kim holds a particularly important role. This was the first history of Vietnam written in Quốc ngữ, systematically compiling the entire history of the Vietnamese people up to the colonial period. With a modern, systematic writing method, engaging storytelling, and a fresh historiographical approach compared to its contemporaries, *Việt Nam sử lược* has become a classic book for the Vietnamese to understand their own history since its first publication. The poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* appears in this work with the following story:

In the twelfth month of the year Bình Thìn (1076), the Song army invaded our territory. The Lý dynasty sent Lý Thường Kiệt to confront them. Thường Kiệt blocked the Song forces at the Như Nguyệt River (in Như Nguyệt village, Bắc Ninh, which is now the Cầu River). The Song troops suffered over 1,000 casualties in that battle, and Quách Quỳ retreated westward, encamping on the banks of the Phú Lương River.

Lý Thường Kiệt brought his troops and boats to intercept the Song army, preventing them from crossing the river. The Song forces then chopped wood to create catapults that rained down stones, severely damaging our ships and causing the deaths of several thousand soldiers. At that time, the Song army was very aggressive, and Lý Thường Kiệt fought fiercely to hold the line. However, fearing that his troops might lose heart, he devised a story saying that a deity had given him four lines of poetry:

[...]

When the soldiers heard the verses read aloud, they were all filled with a renewed spirit to fight the enemy, and the Song army could not advance. Both sides continued to hold their positions. The Lý court, fearing that a prolonged battle would not be advantageous, sent envoys to the Song to request a truce.

The Song emperor, seeing that his troops could not advance and were encamped in a disadvantageous position, noted that more than half of the original force of over 80,000 soldiers had perished. Therefore, he agreed to a truce and retreated, retaining control over Quảng Nguyên province (now part of Cao Bằng province), Tư Lang province (now Thượng Lang and Hạ Lang districts, Cao Bằng province), Tô province, Mậu province (located at the border between Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn provinces), and Quảng Lang district (Ôn Châu, Lạng Sơn province) (1964: 107-108).

Not stopping at mere speculation like Hoàng Cao Khải, Trần Trọng Kim was perhaps the first to firmly assert that Lý Thường Kiệt was the author of *Nam quốc sơn hà*, initiating a "literary controversy" that would last until the end of the 20th century. Moreover, from this point onward, with a new legendary text in Quốc ngữ, the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* also began to pave the way into the lives of the majority of Vietnamese people.

Not only at the field of historiography, *Nam quốc sơn hà* began to appear in literary historical works during this period. In *Việt Nam cổ văn học sử* (1942) by Nguyễn Đông Chi, one of the earliest literary history texts in Quốc ngữ, the belief that Lý Thường Kiệt had created the story of dreaming of a god who gave him the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* continued. However, he did not assert that the poem was composed by Lý Thường Kiệt:

In the military strategy of this general, there is also a way of utilizing the soldiers' superstitions to enhance their resistance. In 1076, when the Song troops came to attack us to avenge their previous defeat, Thường Kiệt, while urging the troops to confront the enemy, one day fabricated a story about having a dream in which a god gave him a poem that [...]. This poem spread, and all the soldiers were eager to unite in their determination to fight the enemy. Thus, the Song forces ultimately could not advance and had to bear the burden of a second defeat. (1942: 143)

Almost simultaneously, in *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu* (Vietnamese Literature History) (compiled in 1941 and first published in 1943), which is regarded as the first complete literary history textbook in Quốc ngữ, Dương Quảng Hàm, when writing about the poets of the Lý dynasty, only listed Lý Thường Kiệt as a representative figure and firmly affirmed that Lý Thường Kiệt was the author of *Nam quốc sơn hà*: "Lý Thường Kiệt was a famous general of the Lý dynasty who played a significant role in defeating the Song troops (1075-1078). When facing the enemy, he composed a poem to encourage his soldiers, with truly resolute words" (1968: 231-232). Furthermore, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was included as supplementary reading number 1, featuring the full Chinese characters, transliteration, and Quốc ngữ translation under the title "The Poem by Lý Thường Kiệt Composed During the Confrontation with the Song Troops" (1968: 239).

Thus, by the period of 1900-1945, the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà*

began to stand independently, separating from the legend. The belief that *Nam quốc sơn hà* was composed by Lý Thường Kiệt gradually formed and became increasingly certain. At the same time, the role of *Nam quốc sơn hà* shifted from the realm of legend and historiography to that of written literature. Associating the name of Lý Thường Kiệt, one of the great heroes in the history of Vietnamese resistance against foreign invasion during the medieval period, whether intentionally or unintentionally, significantly enhanced the value of the work in terms of both historical significance and the emotional response of readers. In the 20th century, during the age of reason, a story linked to the strategies of a talented general who also possessed literary skills seemed to carry much more weight than the vividly fantastical legends of ancient times. By this time, the national discourse surrounding the poem had been reinforced; however, *Nam quốc sơn hà* still did not hold a special place in the collective consciousness. During this phase, the most significant influence the role of *Nam quốc sơn hà* came from the intellectual class and the colonial social context.

IV. *Nam quốc sơn hà* and the Canonization Process of an Independent State after 1945

In 1945, Vietnam officially declared its independence after nearly a century as a French colony. However, the Vietnamese experienced over 30 more years of wars, officially uniting the country only in 1975, not to mention the border conflicts at the end of the 1970s. Therefore, it can be said that the national issue was the most pressing concern for the Vietnamese throughout the 20th century. This directly influenced all aspects of Vietnamese society, including culture and education.

After 1975, especially following the economic reforms of 1986, Vietnamese society began to shift from a wartime to a peacetime focus, concentrating on comprehensive economic and social development. At this time, the Vietnamese people faced many new challenges in developing the nation. The issue of nationalism was no longer at the center but continued to hold significant importance

in society. This entire social context influenced the process of transforming *Nam quốc sơn hà* into a major canon that expresses the national discourse of modern times.

Influenced by the contemporary political situation, the early literary history in the North after 1954, *Lược thảo lịch sử văn học Việt Nam* (1957) by the Lê Quý Đôn group, explicitly stated the concept: “we do not consider our poetry and prose written in classical Chinese as purely national literary works; (...) only those works written in the national language are entirely considered national literary works” (Vũ et al.: 6). For this reason, literature in classical Chinese was excluded from the scope of study of this literary history, only being briefly mentioned in the appendix of each literary period. This illustrates the strong impact of a certain extremist nationalist ideology among some literary researchers during this period. Consequently, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was also excluded from national literature. However, this exclusion did not last long. In the same year, the subsequent literary history, *Sơ thảo lịch sử văn học Việt Nam* (1957-1960), recognized the body of literature in classical Chinese as national literature, and *Nam quốc sơn hà* was mentioned as the first work in the section “National Consciousness in the Period of Autonomy” with a dedicated page introducing and analyzing the significance of the work: “The poem by Lý Thường Kiệt, which faked the words of a deity during the battle against the Song army in 1076, expressed national consciousness. [...] Lý Thường Kiệt cleverly borrowed divine authority to invoke the fighting spirit of the various classes of people” (Văn et al. 1958: 71).

From this point onward, *Nam quốc sơn hà* appeared in almost all the subsequent works of Vietnamese literary history produced in the North, gaining a solid standing as an independent literary work attributed to Lý Thường Kiệt. Influential literary histories by Hanoi University (1978) and Hanoi National University of Education, as well as later works, most recently *Lược sử văn học Việt Nam* (2021), have all dedicated honorable sections to this piece.³ In one of the

³ In the South during the period from 1954 to 1975, major literary history works like *Việt Nam văn học sử giản ước tân biên* (1961) and *Bảng lược đồ văn học Việt Nam* (1967) did not mention *Nam quốc sơn hà*. However, textbooks on literature did

most reputable literary history textbooks of this period, the textbook by Hanoi University, many pages are devoted to *Nam quốc sơn hà*. It states:

To motivate the troops, Lý Thường Kiệt composed the famous poem [...] According to the *Trương Tôn Thần Sự Tích* (The Story of the Deity Trương Tôn), this poem was recited twice by the deity of the Như Nguyệt River to assist in expelling foreign invaders, once to help Lê Hoàn (981) and once to help Lý Thường Kiệt (1076). This legend is based on folklore. The deity of the Như Nguyệt River was the two brothers Trương Hồng and Trương Hát. They were two generals who fought under the patriotic banner of Triệu Quang Phục, a national hero against foreign invaders in the 6th century. In gratitude to Trương Hồng and Trương Hát, later generations built many temples to honor them along the banks of the Cầu River and the Thương River. Of course, the appearance of a deity reciting poetry, as described in the legend, could not have happened. Literary researchers have unanimously agreed from past to present that the poem was composed by Lý Thường Kiệt. Historical records indicate that he instructed someone to enter the Trương Hồng, Trương Hát shrine, pretending to be the deity, and recited the poem to boost the soldiers' morale. If indeed he borrowed the authority of these deified national heroes from a previous era to strengthen the confidence of his troops, then Lý Thường Kiệt acted following the beliefs and mindset of his contemporaries (Đình et al.1978: 108-109).

This work concludes the value of the poem as follows: “The truth that Lý Thường Kiệt proclaimed 900 years ago has been powerfully proven by history from then until now. It is precisely because he expressed this great historical truth that, with just four lines, Lý Thường Kiệt added a glorious page to the history of literature. And with those same four lines, he brought honor to the literature of the Lý Dynasty” (Đình et al.1978: 112). This work was written during a period when the spirit of nationalism was high after the end of the war and the unification of the country in 1975, which is why the main discourse of the textbook is a nationalist one. The

mention this work in the section on Literary History: “The seven-syllable quatrain poem by Lý Thường Kiệt encouraged resistance against the Chinese Song army as follows” (Nguyễn 1969: 29). The situation was slightly slower compared to the North at the same time.

poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* and its context of origin, related to a battle against invaders nearly a thousand years ago, fits very well with the discourse of this textbook.

The poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* has almost never been absent from major literary anthologies since 1945 in the North, such as *Hợp tuyển thơ văn Việt Nam (thế kỷ X - thế kỷ XVIII)* (1976), *Thơ văn Lý - Trần* (1977), *Tổng tập văn học Việt Nam* (2000), and *Hợp tuyển văn học trung đại Việt Nam* (2006), among others. The anthology *Hợp tuyển thơ văn Việt Nam (thế kỷ X - thế kỷ XVIII)* (1976) officially listed *Nam quốc sơn hà* as the work of Lý Thường Kiệt, with the following note:

This poem has no title, so we have temporarily titled it 'Nam quốc sơn hà.' The origins of this poem are unclear. According to legend, during the fierce battle on the Như Nguyệt River (now known as the Cầu River in Hà Bắc), Lý Thường Kiệt had someone hide in the Trương Hồng and Trương Hát temple nearby, pretending to be the deity and reciting this poem to encourage the soldiers. According to *Trương Tôn thần sự tích* at the Trương Hồng and Trương Hát temple (the generals of Triệu Quang Phục), the deity recited the poem twice: once to assist Lê Hoàn and once to help Lý Thường Kiệt (Đình et al. 1976: 53).

This means that it was only at this point that the poem was given the name *Nam quốc sơn hà*. That name has remained consistent to this day.

The *Tổng tập văn học Việt Nam*, the most comprehensive collection that compiles the entirety of Vietnamese literary works from the beginning to the contemporary era, selected *Nam quốc sơn hà* as the first work to appear, with the following introduction:

The poem *Nam quốc sơn hà*, composed by Lý Thường Kiệt in 1077 amidst the fierce battle against the invading Song forces on the banks of the Như Nguyệt River, is one of the most renowned literary works of our country from past to present.“

[...]

It is clear that the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* embodies an unchanging truth and a tradition that remains ever vibrant. Thus, this outstanding work not only represents the essence of an era but also

symbolizes the quintessence of our entire literary history.

With this significance, the work is placed in a special position, even before the poem *Quốc tộ*, which is considered the opening work of Lý Dynasty literature" (Đình et al. 2000: 223-224).

The authors of this collection believe that *Quốc tộ* (around 981) by Đỗ Pháp Thuận is the first work of Vietnamese literature; however, they chose to begin the anthology with *Nam quốc sơn hà* because of the special significance of this poem. At this point, it is evident that *Nam quốc sơn hà* holds a particularly distinguished position as an independent literary work in modern times.

Particularly, the role of school textbooks was extremely important in the process of canonizing *Nam quốc sơn hà* in the latter half of the 20th century. In the textbooks from the period 1954-1975, the issue of nationalism was considered the most significant. Therefore, the discourse of the textbooks during this time highly valued the expression of patriotism. In this series of textbooks, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was not yet selected as a work for teaching. However, in the overview of the state of written literature from the 11th to the 15th century, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was introduced as an important work: "Especially, poems and writings that express patriotism and the spirit of resistance against invasion are the most valuable literary works. The “sacred” poem recited by Lý Thường Kiệt during the Battle of Như Nguyệt expressed the spirit of self-reliance of our people" (Bùi et al. 1969: 3).

During the 1980s, *Nam quốc sơn hà* was officially included in the 9th-grade literature textbook, Volume 1, as supplementary reading under the name of the author Lý Thường Kiệt (Nguyễn and Đỗ 1988: 10). Since then, this poem has never been absent from high school textbooks in subsequent periods, transitioning from supplementary reading to mandatory work. High school textbooks in Vietnam, from 1954 onwards, have a legislative nature, issued by the state, and typically feature only 1-2 sets of textbooks available at any given time for different educational programs.

By 2018, in response to the need for comprehensive educational reform to meet the demands of holistic societal development, Vietnam's general education curriculum underwent a

thorough transformation. The 2018 literature curriculum was introduced at a time when Vietnam had moved beyond the war for over 40 years and had also experienced more than 30 years of "renewal" (Đổi Mới), with the country developing in all aspects, especially in its economy. The Vietnamese people seemed to have shifted their focus from the lingering memories of war to looking toward a new future. Their concerns were no longer about war but about economic and cultural development, and building a strong nation in peacetime. The educational curriculum and textbooks during this period were adjusted to focus on developing students' comprehensive skills rather than purely imparting knowledge as before. As a result, there are currently three sets of literature textbooks in Vietnam, each officially recognized by the Ministry of Education as having equal legal value, allowing schools to choose the set that best suits their needs.

Nevertheless, the 2018 literature curriculum still designates six literary works that must be included in all literature textbooks, which are: *Nam quốc sơn hà* from the 10th century, *Hịch tướng sĩ* (Proclamation to the Officers) by Trần Quốc Tuấn, *Bình Ngô đại cáo* (Proclamation of Victory Over the Wu) by Nguyễn Trãi, *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) by Nguyễn Du, *Văn tế nghĩa sĩ Cần Giuộc* (Funeral Oration for the Deceased Soldiers of Cần Giuộc) by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, and the *Tuyên ngôn độc lập* (Declaration of Independence) by Hồ Chí Minh. Among these six mandatory works, five belong to the category of medieval literature, and their central theme is a patriotic inspiration. Although *Truyện Kiều* by Nguyễn Du falls into the category of humanistic inspiration, it is still regarded as a source of pride in Vietnamese literature written in the national language.

This approach reflects the state's intention to ensure that the discourse of nationalism remains at the heart of the curriculum. Textbooks are undoubtedly the most effective tools in canonizing these works as symbols of the Vietnamese spirit of nationalism. *Nam quốc sơn hà* continues to be unanimously recognized in these textbooks as the first declaration of independence of Vietnam. In the study guide for *Nam quốc sơn hà*, the authors of the "Chân trời sáng tạo" series ask: "'Nam quốc sơn hà' is considered a 'declaration of

independence' in Vietnamese literature and is referred to as the 'Divine Poem.' What is your opinion on this?" (Nguyễn et al. 2023: 9) The "Cánh diều" textbook introduces the poem as follows: “*Nam quốc sơn hà* is considered the first 'declaration of independence' of the nation” (Nguyễn et al. 2024: 9). The "Kết nối tri thức" series poses the question: “The poem is considered the first 'declaration of independence' of our country. What do you understand by the term 'declaration of independence'?” (Bùi et al. 2024: 70)

All suggestions and questions in these textbooks focus on conveying the discourse of Vietnam's inviolable national sovereignty. With these discourses, these works have become deeply ingrained in the minds of many generations of contemporary Vietnamese people as the foremost symbols of nationalism.

The symbolic significance of *Nam quốc sơn hà* is evident in the debates surrounding the poem that took place throughout the 20th century. This contributed to its canonization and demonstrated that it had indeed become a canonical work. The most significant controversy arose in the early 20th century when *Nam quốc sơn hà* became associated with the name of Lý Thường Kiệt, a national hero. However, in the last years of the 20th century, voices began to emerge that sought to correct this misunderstanding. The first was an article by Hà Văn Tấn (1997), followed by Bùi Duy Tân in a series of articles starting in 2000, and Nguyễn Thị Oanh (2002), among others. These authors asserted that no historian could prove that the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* was authored by Lý Thường Kiệt. Over time, these voices became dominant. Literature textbooks from the 2006-2017 period no longer affirm Lý Thường Kiệt as the author of the poem, introducing *Nam quốc sơn hà* as follows:

It is unclear who the author is. Later, many books (including the lacquer painting in the History Museum that is reproduced here) attribute it to Lý Thường Kiệt. There are many accounts regarding the origin of the poem, one of which is the legend: In 1077, the Song army, commanded by Quách Quỳ, invaded our country. King Lý Nhân Tông sent Lý Thường Kiệt to stop the enemy at the defense line of the Như Nguyệt River (a section of the Cầu River, now in Yên Phong District, Bắc Ninh). One night, the soldiers suddenly heard from the temple of the two brothers Trương Hồng and Trương Hát—

two skilled generals of Triệu Quang Phục, who are revered as the gods of the Như Nguyệt River—reciting this poem. (Nguyễn et al. 2011: 63-64)

This textbook still prints the lacquer painting from the History Museum, which attributes the poem to Lý Thường Kiệt.

In the current versions of the textbooks, while the editions by “Cánh Diều” and “Kết Nối Tri Thức” have updated their accounts with the legend recorded in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* associated with Lê Đại Hành, the current textbook by the “Chân Trời Sáng Tạo” group for Grade 8 still introduces the origin of the poem as being linked to Lý Thường Kiệt, unchanged from the 2006-2017 editions:

To date, it has still not been accurately determined who the author of this poem is. Historical records state that in 1077, the Song army invaded our country, and King Lý Nhân Tông sent Lý Thường Kiệt (1019-1105), one of the most outstanding generals of the Lý dynasty, to stop the enemy at the defense line of the Như Nguyệt River (a section of the Cầu River, now in Bắc Ninh Province). One night, the soldiers suddenly heard the recitation of this poem in the temple of Trương Hồng and Trương Hát (two skilled generals from the time of Triệu Quang Phục). (Nguyễn et al. 2023: 7)

The separation of the poem’s authorship from Lý Thường Kiệt still seems to be a challenging issue for the academic community even to this day. For the general reading public, this acceptance is even more difficult. As recently as 2022, there was still a newspaper article in the mainstream media that firmly stated that *Nam quốc sơn hà* must undoubtedly have been composed by Lý Thường Kiệt, expressed in a very extreme tone.

The extreme attitudes toward *Nam quốc sơn hà* extend even to its translations. Since 2002, textbooks have used a new translation to replace the familiar old version. This new translation has sparked considerable controversy. In 2015, public opinion ignited a noisy debate in the media and on social networks regarding this issue. Many argued that the old translation, which had become ingrained in the consciousness of countless generations of Vietnamese, did not need to be changed (Hoàng and Lan 2015). This indicates that for

many people, even the familiar translation of the poem is considered inviolable.

This process of canonization has created a significant influence of *Nam quốc sơn hà* in contemporary life as a primary symbol of patriotic nationalism against foreign invasion. *Nam quốc sơn hà* is not only taught in schools, but it has also permeated the daily lives of Vietnamese people. They continue to discuss it, quote it on social media, in statuses expressing national spirit, and recreate it in contemporary artistic expressions. For example, in music, several versions of songs set to the text or inspired by *Nam quốc sơn hà* have emerged in recent years and gained widespread popularity, with the most famous version achieving 11 million views after six years. Even in popular recent reality TV shows like “Chị đẹp đạp gió rẽ sóng 2023,” a cover of *Nam quốc sơn hà* garnered 1.1 million views after one year. All of these elements demonstrate the contemporary canonical status of *Nam quốc sơn hà* as a symbol of the national spirit of the Vietnamese people and the vitality of this work within contemporary culture.

V. Conclusion

The case of *Nam quốc sơn hà* demonstrates how a literary work from the medieval period can be elevated to canonical status through processes that are deeply embedded in modern institutional and ideological frameworks. Rather than being canonized for its intrinsic aesthetic value alone, the poem's current prominence stems from its alignment with nationalist discourses—especially those promoted by state education, literary historiography, and public memory. The study highlights how textbooks, as state-regulated instruments of knowledge, play a decisive role in stabilizing the poem's symbolic meaning and ensuring its transmission across generations. It also shows how competing narratives—such as debates around authorship or translation—further reinforce its canonical status by keeping it at the center of cultural attention. This case illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's insight that canonization is a relational process involving symbolic power, institutional legitimacy,

and cultural capital. In doing so, it offers a model for analyzing other cases of symbolic nationalism in postcolonial or semi-colonial societies.

Future research might extend this study by conducting a comparative analysis with other East Asian cases to explore how literature functions as a vehicle of national identity under varying historical conditions. A closer examination of student reception, regional curricula, or textbook discourse over time could also deepen our understanding of how canons are actively negotiated rather than passively inherited.

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