

# Comparison between typical features in the last born story type of Vietnam and similar stories of some Asian countries

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## Abstract

After studying stories about the last born in Vietnam and in some Asian countries, it is apparent that there are certain similarities between them: The stories focus on depicting the conflict between brothers or sisters. They are family members but are polar opposites: the older brother is wealthy, greedy while the younger is poor, honest; the lazy older brother and the hardworking younger brother or the selfish older sister and the caring younger sister...; These stories are built on the common principle of fairy tales and are presented in a humane way which promote the good. The plot is a combination of popular motifs such as “appropriation of wealth”, “choice of marriage partner”, “unsuccessful imitation”, “reward - punishment”... Aside from these similarities, stories about the younger sibling in Vietnam and in other Asian countries also have unique character traits, motifs,... This shows a connection between the countries in terms of culture and literature and their similarities as well as differences.

**Keywords:** *last born, younger sibling, fairy tales, appropriation of wealth*

## 1. Introduction

With the diverse theme and plot system, fairy tales of any country are where man could impart his practical experience, moral lessons and his burning desires... The similarities in the plot lines, motifs and characters in particular have resulted in the close resemblance in terms of content and format among fairy tales worldwide. Comparative studies of Vietnamese last born story type in relation to similar

stories in some Asian countries will help us discover the cultural and literary relationships between countries and their alike-yet-slightly-different characteristic.

The reason we chose to do this comparison is due to the fact that Vietnam has many geographical, cultural and historical similarities to other countries in Asia. In addition, Vietnam is a country in the Southeast Asia area. This is a relatively ancient cultural area as well as a cultural intersection influenced greatly by two great Eastern cultures - the Chinese and Indian cultures. This particular feature has had a direct impact on the process of cultural interaction, inheritance and innovation of the Vietnamese. Folk tales, the artistic product of each country's unique language, always exists in parallel and vividly relays this process.

The comparative perspective on the motif – one of the highlighted aspects in the last born story type of Vietnam and some Asian countries will provide specific evidence for this issue.

## 2. “Appropriation of wealth” motif

Most Asian fairy tales have similar content to Vietnamese stories. These stories illustrate the division of wealth between brothers in the same family when their parents are gone. This can be explained through the basis of social history, leading to the birth of the last born story type. During this time, society was experiencing tremendous changes, the matrilineal clan was gradually dissolving, ceding its place to the patriarchy system which was closely associated with the denationalisation regime. Previously, property was mutual. It was owned by a

reputable woman and her youngest daughter who is respected by the community would inherit the property left by her mother. In the patriarchal system, property is no longer mutual and is owned by the man. The husband, the father, the elder brother have the highest authority and benefits; therefore, the person who has the right to inherit the property is the elder brother, not the youngest sister. This transition is an indispensable development of history, marking the great advancement of human cognition from barbarism to civilization. However, in reality, people have not adapted to the new. The lingering feelings of the nostalgic past and the community unity along with the emphasis on the benefits of the mother and youngest daughter have made them unable to regard the inheritance role of the first born son as a privilege. Hence, the folk authors did not hesitate to turn the oldest brother's inheritance right into a blatant appropriation of property. This is the reason behind the emergence of the "appropriation of fortune" motif in many stories of Vietnam and certain Asian countries.

Beside similarities in terms of expression and reflective meaning, the "appropriation of fortune" motif in the fairy tales of each country also has its own imprint. In a Korean story, the older brother appropriates all the wealth, becomes rich but irresponsible and leaves the parents in the care of the younger brother (The rod and the Tokkaebi - Korea). Generally, the appropriation of inheritance takes place only after the death of the parents, but the brother does so even if they are still alive. The older brother turns the common property into private property which leaves the poor brother with the responsibility to support his elderly parents. He is not only greedy in appropriating wealth but also heartless towards his parents. This action upsets the patriarchal regime, making the youngest brother more pitiful than ever. Stories highlighting the reality and remnants of the rule that the youngest ought to live with the parents have existed in reality in many places.

In another story tied to the theme of division of wealth but without the act of appropriation, two brothers whose parents are gone are left with a little wealth. They divided it into two equal parts (Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves - Arab). The opposite living situations between them are not a result of the unequal distribution of property like most stories of the same type. In fact, the older brother is rich because he marries a wealthy widow, in contrast, the brother is married to poor wife and so he suffers from poverty. Likewise, wealth division is also found in another story. A trader has two sons, after his death, the youngest son plays around all day and

spends money lavishly. This leads to the older brother dividing the fortune (The Magical Ring – India). The division of assets into two equal parts illustrates the worldview of the patriarchy system in the early stages of equality in the "oldest" and "youngest" relations. The patriarchic privileges are clearly not reflected here, which allows us to predict the relatively early occurrence of these unique elements. In both stories, the division of inheritance is not the cause of the conflict like in those of Vietnam but are only the details leading the story to develop on other topics. In the story Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, after the division of wealth, the development of the story is closely linked to the younger brother's actions when he discovers the treasure and his response to the robbers. As for the story of The Magical Ring, the division is the premise for the journey to leave home and embark on adventures of the protagonist. Thus, the character of the elder brother is described as faint and almost unrelated to the later life of his brother. The antagonism between the characters, as a result, is not expressed clearly as opposed to the same type of stories in Vietnam.

### 3. “Challenge” motif

Quite popular in Asian stories as we have surveyed, the younger sibling characters are always placed in challenging situations to affirm their quality and talent. It is apparent that in the story structure, the "challenge" motif plays the role of the "backbone", creating the seamless nature of the story when describing the fate of the protagonist. After conducting comparisons, we have found that the forms of challenges and the levels of challenges in the last born story type in Asia are very close to those of Vietnam.

Living under disadvantageous circumstances is a challenge at the start of the protagonist's life. The protagonists are treated unfairly by their greedy brothers, deprived of their inheritance, even worse, chased away from their homes and have to live in need. During the course of the survey, we found that this is a common form of challenge in the stories of some East Asian countries. Before dying, the father tells his three sons to distribute the family's wealth equally, but after the father dies, the oldest and the second oldest appropriate all of the property and kick the youngest out of the house (The Third Son and The Priest's Gift - South Korea); the covetous brother does not follow his father's will, takes the wealth and drives the younger out (The Greedy Older Brother,

The Salt merchant, and The younger brother – South Korea); The father leaves a will stating that the two brothers will split the stored rice in the warehouse. The brother appropriates the younger's part and abandons him (Two brothers - Japan)... After the heartless action of his brother, the younger is forced to engage in a challenge. This is the usual form of challenge in narratives that we have surveyed in Vietnamese stories.

In numerous stories, the protagonist is deceived and persecuted by his brothers and sisters for the purpose of appropriating wealth. The younger brother's acceptance of loss under every circumstance and situation is not enough to satisfy the selfish older brothers and sisters. They display immoral behavior in order to push their younger siblings into the most challenging situations. Three brothers all go out to catch a magical bird. The two older brothers choose a better path while the younger one chooses the "no return" route. After several trials and tribulations, the younger brother finally reaches his goal but on his way back, he is killed by his brothers and robbed of his work (Great Singing Bird – Uzbekistan); both brothers journey to kill a snake to rescue the princess. The cowardly older brother, jealous of the younger's bravery to save the princess, cuts off his legs and takes his credit (The King's Daughter and the Upstream God - Malaysia); upon hearing that his younger brother is rich, the older brother becomes jealous and attempts to kill him. He invites his brother over to do business in an attempt to carve out his eyes and leave him by a tree (Xuccato and Xuccata – Laos)... The evil mind and vicious actions of this rival character have placed the younger brother in the presence of significant challenges, showing the sharp conflicts in the sibling relationships whose popular characteristics have been demonstrated by the last born story type in various lands.

Challenges on honesty, kindness and love are common types in the last born story type in Vietnam and some Asian countries. When faced with difficult situations, the last borns are unable to seek assistance from their families and will receive a helping hand from a mystical force. However, before that, they must overcome certain challenges. The mystical force appears in the form of people in need or small animals to challenge the kind heart of the last born. In difficult times, the last born is still willing to share the already little food with people in the same boat (The Windmill – Japan, The Magical Mill – North Korea)... Acts of kindness are the opportunity for the last born to overcome challenges, turning his fate around.

In some stories, this form of challenge is reflected in details that are a bit different from Vietnamese stories. The younger one, after getting his half of the fortune, spends every penny, and leaves home. On the way, he pities the small creatures being sold and so he bought all of them. His kindness is repaid when he receives their help to acquire mystical objects (The Magical Ring – India). The situation of the last born in this story is different from the usual characters in these types of story as he is not mistreated, cheated or kicked out by his older brother. The detail of the younger brother spending of all the divided inheritance is an unusual excuse for him to leave his home and engage in challenging space. However, unlike European stories, the challenging space on the outside is often adventurous with difficult and dire journeys. The character here is placed in daily challenges and shows love and compassion – a virtue highly regarded by people. The loyalty and sincerity exhibited by the protagonist are sometimes viewed as "foolish" in the eyes of the cunning older siblings. Deeds of the younger brother (picking up money and bringing it back to the person who dropped it; seeing someone's sheep go astray and leading it back to the owner) are ridiculed by the two older brothers. Finally, the two brothers give the youngest a silver coin but he does not buy anything. Thinking he is too stupid, they chase him out of the house (Man was not born for himself – Mongolia). Every seemingly paradoxical action and thought of the youngest brother are actually the most effective method of handling challenging situations and bringing in the most worthwhile victory. It can be seen that the promotion of morality and humanity in daily life has culminated in the similarity of the kindness and love challenge in the stories of Vietnam and other Asian countries. This also shows the close resemblance in terms of artistic thoughts of the Eastern people.

#### 4. "Unsuccessful imitation" motif

In the plot structure, this motif serves as a gateway to eliminating any previous conflict. Hence, with the role of leading the development of the plot on a certain topic, the motif of "unsuccessful imitation" always brings unexpected excitement to the receiver and allows for the realization of deep moral teachings of fairy tales. Even though the task is the same, the protagonist is always successful while the rival is always defeated.

In the story of the younger brother, the "unsuccessful imitation" motif not only depicts the opposite actions of the characters, but it also points out the contrast in

their moral qualities. That rival characters imitate the protagonist but have different motives and goals is the most common form of imitation in the stories of many lands. In a few stories which have the same theme of marriage selection, the imitation act of the rival character is conducted after witnessing the happy married life of the last born and her disguised husband. The act of imitation shows the pitiful shortsightedness of the selfish older sisters. Thus, it is easy to understand why the results they receive are tragic, for instance, when they were harmed by the animals they placed their hope in (The Little Python and Phim Pha, the Snake Prince – Myanmar...). With stories about inheritance division, the mimetic action of the rival is also associated with evil purposes and bears fruit of failure as a natural consequence. The last born finds a small bird in distress, feels compassion and is willing help while the older has ulterior motives to offer "help" to the animal in need by deliberately breaking its leg, throwing pebbles at birds to injure them, even squeezing two out of three birds to death for fear that raising all three will be very expensive... The difference in motives and goals between brothers and sisters is the core problem which makes the opposite fate between them. In response to the younger's kindness, the mystical animals offer gifts to provide the younger with a good life. In contrast, the older brothers have to suffer for their evil doings, become poor and lead a life of endless wandering (Hung Bu Nol Bu – South Korea, Brotherhood – North Korea...).

It is apparent that the rule of opposition has been utilized effectively by folk authors in the process of composing the last born story type, especially in terms of the "unsuccessful imitation" motif. According Axel Olrik, "The rule of opposition always affects both the protagonist and the supporting characters. Their personalities and actions are constantly influenced by the personalities and actions of the protagonist, which exhibit antagonistic features" [4; page 249]. This is a simple but also very crucial rule in the process of writing folk tales. In every story, there exist conflicts and contradictions displaying antagonism between the older brother (sister) and the younger one. This is evident through the actions that they both perform. After their father's death, the older brother dreams of his father showing him where the gold is buried and the brother keeps all of it for himself instead of splitting with the younger one. Once, when the younger brother is sick, the sister-in-law tells the older brother to chase him away, forcing the brother to build a tent and farm in the forest. The father appears and shows him how to climb up the mountain and to pick his favorite item. He does not

pick gold but instead, picks a bottle. From the bottle climbed out a girl and they soon marry. The couple travel everywhere and use the magical water to do good things, making the younger brother king in the process. The older brother ask around and bring back some magical water but it has a foul smell. Infuriated, he digs up his father's grave and is pulled down to the underworld (Two brothers – Laos). The victory of the younger and the failure of the older are explained through the fair reward and punishment of the late father.

Similar to many Vietnamese stories, the unsuccessful imitation attempt may also stem from violating the forbidden or exceeding permitted limits. Ignoring instructions of the mystical creature, the older brother hugs all the gold and refuses to return. Eventually, the sun comes up and turns him into ash (The sun mountain – Israel). The act of self-exposure in the process of imitating is also the reason for the character's failure (The Rod and The Tokkaebi – Korea)... The failure of the older brothers and sisters, no matter how it is explained, is persuasive evidence for the causal relationship in the East which people in many Asian nations tend to teach through fairy tales.

## 5. "Reward and Punishment" motif

The "reward and punishment" motif in the last born story type, no matter what country, contains democratic ideals, justice and the desire for a better society in the future. The younger brother character, even if he is unfortunate or lost, will have a fulfilled fate and the older brother (sister) will receive appropriate punishment. This happy ending perpetuates a strong belief among the miserable people in the present society. This is a remarkable composition tendency in the last born story type in many regional countries, resulting in relatively uniform expressions of "reward" or "punishment" for characters.

As compensation for the unfortunate fates, the latter part of the story always refers to the form of "reward" for the main character. After surveying some stories in Asia, we have found that the protagonist is often rewarded in the basic forms as follows:

The reward of wealth is the form of reward with the most similarities to Vietnamese stories. The younger siblings who were despised and fell into a life of poverty go to their older ones' house to ask for help

but is refused. It is during the most desperate time that he receives help from the mystical force, follows the "sacred" hint of obtaining the magical object and obtains a life of abundance (The Windmill - Japan, Why Sea Water Is Salty – The Philippines...). There are occasions when the younger brother is kicked out of the house by the older one and while trying to find a means of living, he accidentally meets and learns the secrets of the animals and thus acquires wealth (The Rod and The Tokkaebi - Korea); or meets a crow, is taken to a mountain by the crow to retrieve gold (The Sun Mountain - Israel...). The reward of wealth is also described vividly in a story about the youngest daughter who, despite the objection of her parents and two sisters, marries a crab digger with low status. Once, they dig up a crab shell full of money and suddenly become extremely wealthy (The Crab Digger – Cambodia). This is the most deserving reward for the kind-hearted and courageous youngest sister who decided on her own marriage. The story holds the aspiration for a just society, without any distinction between the rich and poor, and in which the poor will undoubtedly enjoy a happy and prosperous life. Here, a mystical force was not involved in the miraculous change in youngest sister's life but the story still maintains its fairy tale romance and satisfies man's dreams.

Another type is the reward of happy marital life. Similar to Vietnamese stories, the younger sibling enjoys a happy marriage after overcoming many trials and tribulations. An ideal marriage for the younger brother is sometimes accompanied by a change of status when the brother marries a princess and becomes king for instance. Two brothers journey to kill a snake to save the princess. The cowardly older brother is jealous of the courageous younger one who rescues the princess and thus he cuts off the younger's leg to take all the credit. The truth comes out and the competent younger brother marries the princess (The King's Daughter and the Upstream God - Malaysia); three brothers try to capture a songbird that has eaten corns' leaves. The two older brother pick a better route and reach the citadel but become common workers while the last brother who chooses a path of no return achieves his goals (capture the bird, rescue the princess, find the magical steed). The two brothers grow jealous and attempt to kill the last born. Finally, with the help of the Monkey God, the brother marries the princess and becomes king (The Songbird with a beautiful voice – Uzbekistan)... The nature of the rewards in these stories similar to A Xanh, No return... of Vietnam and the younger sibling character is viewed as a strong and clever warrior. In another story, the younger brother gets to marry the princess after performing acts of compassion and forgiveness.

After receiving his inheritance and spending all of it, the younger brother leaves home. On the way, he encounters someone selling a cat with impetigo. Touched, he decides to buy it. As he continues to walk, he buys a dog, a parrot and a snake despite the ridicule of others. Thanks to the assistance of the mystical snake, he acquires the magical ring and marries the princess (The magical ring – India)... Sometimes, a calm and tranquil life is also a priceless reward for the last born who has been through bitter experiences. The evil brother after rejecting the poor younger one immediately tries to kill him upon hearing of his wealth. He invites him over to do business, carves out his eyes, abandons him by a tree and takes all of his goods. Lying by the tree, the younger sibling learns the animals' secrets of how to cure his eyes, helps the locals find a water source and with his valuable medicine, cures everybody and gains their love (Xuccato and Xuccata – Laos)...

We have compared some specific stories in the last born story type of Vietnam and Asia and have found interesting coincidences related to the "reward" motif. The younger sibling always receives the reward from the "giver" who may be the old man he meets on his journey after the greedy older brother refuses to help him. Adhering to the "divine guidance" grants the younger brother a magical item (a mortar, a jar) to become rich. The sacred items changing the protagonist's life detail is related to a type of plant – the zucchini. It is possible that the zucchini figure here is involved with the gourd – zucchini motif in mythologies. This is a long-standing motif in the folklores of the pre-agricultural society. Man in mythologies is born from this motif and fairy tales appear as an artistic detail filled with romance and fiction. Fairy tale characters tend to find their parents through the guidance of the gourd – zucchini. Y Uoi (Y Uoi Y Noong – Thailand) in the last born story type wishes to find his ruthless father and so he planted a zucchini seed by the front door which has grown wonderfully. Y Uoi follows the zucchini to meet his father. When mistreated by the older sibling, the younger brother in Vietnamese stories often go to the forest to farm and grow zucchini (Ha ram ha rac, The Zucchini Carer...). Thanks to the plentiful zucchini, the younger brother has a shift in living conditions. Hence, the gourd – zucchini seed is considered to be a present with a mediatory purpose to lead the last born to a prosperous and abundant life. The younger one saves a swallow in need and is granted a gourd seed (The Strange Gourd – Vietnam). Similarly, the younger brother saves an injured swallowtail and is rewarded with a zucchini seed (Hung Bu Nol Bu – Korea), saves a hurt canary and receives a gourd seed

(Brotherhood – North Korea). The gourd – zucchini is planted and receives lots of care which allows it to grow healthily and yields significant crop. Reward of a prosperous material life or compensation for the younger's disadvantages is demonstrated in this unique detail. After he slices the gourd – zucchini, the first zucchini is shown to be full of pearls, the second one is filled with rubies and jewels and the third and fourth one are full of gold coins and money. In a blink of an eye, the younger brother has become a wealthy man. The similarities of these stories also show through the animals bringing fortune: swallow (Vietnam); swallowtail (South Korea); canary (North Korea). Even though they are called different names, they are of the same family and the closeness of situation has allowed the authors, no matter what nationality, to depict this lovely animal figure in fairy tales.

In many stories of Vietnam, China, Myanmar and the Philippines, a familiar animal, the dog (cat or chicken), is present. It is the property the younger sibling inherits after splitting the wealth. They work closely with the last born on the farm. When there is no buffalo, dogs plow fields and give their owner a more prosperous life. Even when they are killed by the malicious older brother, they will still provide for the younger sibling in the form of “a magical tree”. The inspiration behind the magical animal figure in these tales may be the perception of the totemic animals of many Asian countries. In another story, mothers are mentioned to be dogs. Her appearance causes the older sisters to shun her. Only the last daughter loves and cherishes her ((The good daughter – Myanmar). Hence, the last born will receive rewards from her mother. Traces of totemic animals are quite strong here.

Along with the reward of the younger sibling is the punishment of the older brother (sister). The most common punishment is death. After performing wrongful acts, the older sibling will meet their end for their greed and selfishness. A slighter punishment but still belonging in the spectrum of strict teachings is: two older brothers are beaten up by the father (Man was not born for himself – Mongolia); two sisters are bitten by a snake and lose their hair (Ms. Bung su and the Snake – Indonesia); the older brother falls into poverty (Two orphans - Myanmar)... In some special cases, after being punished by a mystical force, the older sibling is forgiven by the younger one and they live together in harmony. This is an ideal ending, rare but not impossible in Vietnamese last born story type (Golden Smiles, Dangling Fruit...). The older brothers and sisters after committing such despicable crimes are still forgiven by the generous and kind

last born as they are family. Folk authors have written an ideal and happy ending for both character archetypes due to their longing of the distant past and to show the tendency to protect family relationships between members of a clan.

However, not every story has both “reward” and “punishment” motif at the end. Some stories do not mention the punishment meant for the older sibling. Particularly, in *Two Orphans – Cambodia*, after defeating the demon king, the brave younger brother marries the princess and cedes the throne to the cowardly older brother. Here, nobody is punished; even the coward is rewarded with absolute power. In Vietnamese stories, we have not found a story with a similar ending. The clear-cut nature of Vietnamese may make it difficult to accept the neutral and somewhat irrational handling of the story.

From specific comparisons, one may come up with the following remarks:

The last born story type of Vietnam holds various similarities to stories of the same type in Southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar...). Due to the influence of Indian culture as well as the native culture and being situated in the same geographical area, Southeast Asian countries are relatively uniform in terms of community humanitarianism which is evident in their social structure, daily activities and beliefs... In addition, the interaction in regards to culture, history and economy creates the unified rules of aesthetics, in the selection and social reflection method.

In the process of surveying materials, we have realized that plots which are most similar to those of Vietnamese stories mostly belong to East Asian countries like North Korea, South Korea, Japan and China. These countries have one thing in common: as they are all influenced by the Han culture, similarities in literature are understandable. Aside from that, Vietnam and East Asian countries have a long-standing historical, geographical and economical relationship. While countries are far apart, trades have created cultural exchange indirectly or directly through Vietnamese businessmen when they visit North Korea, South Korea, Japan and vice versa.

## 6. Conclusion

From the analysis above, one is able to see the obvious similarities and differences of nuclear motifs

in the last born story type of Vietnam and some Asian countries. In many cases, stories of Vietnam and these countries are identical. This is a specific evidence of the mutual influence regarding the artistic creation of countries in the region. Here, we do not discuss which version has more ancient elements and which country borrows from which. Our purpose in placing the narratives in comparison is not only to see their uniform nature, but also to identify the distinctive signs and interpret it as a unique culture phenomenon.

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