

# The Moral Concepts of Vietnamese People through Stories about People in Animal Forms

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## Abstract

The report concerns stories about humans in animal forms. Through the analysis of several characters, it is found that characters who transform into animals often suffer from many misfortunes and challenges, but are all duly compensated. This reflects the moral concept “good begets good, evil begets evil” (ở hiền gặp lành, ác giả ác báo) of Eastern people in general and Vietnamese people in particular.

**Keywords:** *stories, humans in animal forms, Vietnamese*

## Introduction

Fairy tales are oral stories that originated very early but developed significantly in a class-divided society. Through the depiction of the relationships between people in such a society, fairy tales present life experiences, moral concepts, aesthetic concepts, dreams and social ideals of the working people. It can be seen that one of the notable content aspects in fairy tales is the identification of moral concepts in order, revealing the feelings and ways of thinking of fairy tale authors. In these stories, it is evident that the concept “good begets good, evil begets evil” is clearly expressed. “Good begets good, evil begets evil” is a philosophy, a deep insight into the way to be a human being that authors have embedded in fairy tales. The gentle, weak stepchild (“Tâm Cám” - Việt people) who was miserably tormented later became a queen, enjoying wealth and nobility; the foolish, kind-hearted orphan (“Thạch Sanh” - Việt people) was treated unfairly, but eventually became king; the honest younger brother (“Cây khế” - Việt people) suffered with many disadvantages, and became a rich man... The cruel stepmother or the greedy older brother are punished accordingly. The contrast in the fates of the characters is convincing proof of “good begets good, evil begets evil” - a concept with Buddhist origins but is very Vietnamese, which has expressed the aspiration for an ideal and fair society of the people. In Vietnamese fairy tales, stories of

people in animal forms also express the concept “good begets good, evil begets evil” in a unique way.

## Good begets good

The characters in the form of animals are lowly, small, weak and subject to many misfortunes and sufferings. They often encounter discrimination from other people. The ugly outer appearance is, in reality, a wall separating humans in animal forms from the community. In various stories, these characters are a source of disappointment for their parents and relatives. When frog man was born (“Chàng ếch và nàng công chúa út” - Cơ ho people), he brought shame and sadness to his parents. The grandmother, after witnessing the birth of toad man, immediately planned to bury him (“Chàng cóc” - Êđê people). The mother of the monkey man (“Chàng rết khi” - Êđê people), while hugging him, cried so much that she dried up her tears. His father even considered killing and burying him to be done with it. Toad man’s appearance (“Tướng cóc ra trận” - Pu péo people) made his mother feel disappointment, extreme fear, and embarrassment. The appearance of the snake man caused everyone around him to run away in fear (“Chàng rắn” - Chăm people).

The characters in animal forms generally suffer from many injustices. However, despite everything, they survived and matured. The toad men, frog men, monkey women, cow men,... are all able to affirm their presence in community life. They participate in activities like other normal humans, such as helping their parents with chores (“Chàng cóc lấy vợ tiên” - Lôlô people, “Người lấy cóc” - Việt people, “Chàng cóc” - Êđê people), herding buffaloes for the wealthy (“Chàng cóc” - Ka dong people, “Chàng ếch và nàng công chúa út” - Cơ ho people, “Con cóc con” - Tày people...), and even fighting enemies to protect their villages (“Chàng cóc con” - Tày, “Tướng cóc ra trận” - Pu péo people...). Not only that, the humans in animal forms also overcome multiple difficult challenges by utilizing their own special abilities.

With such abilities, these characters achieved seemingly impossible feats like marrying a beautiful wife (or handsome husband) and discarding their animal forms, becoming humans.

The characters appearing in the form of animals (toads, frogs, snakes, turtles, birds, fish...) are always magical. Because of this, the characters often have the ability to do extraordinary things that ordinary people cannot do. They can defeat an entire army alone like the toad man and frog man in “Chàng cóc con” - Tày people; toad man can make firewood come home on its own with a single croak, and cure the king’s illness with three croaks (“Chàng cóc lấy vợ tiên” - Lô Lô people); similar characters can make a squirrel dance, a cooked fish swim in a pot, corn stalks grow in the middle of a fire, and mushrooms grow on rafters (“Chàng cóc” - Êđê people); they can cover a basket with their fingernails, revive a dried fish in a water tube, and grow corn from the stove (“Chàng K’roa” - Giarai people); they can lift an entire hill to block a river, and drink an entire lake dry (“Chàng heo K’sur và chàng K’đrít” - Cơ ho people); they can magically build a magnificent palace in the middle of the sea, and with a wave of their hand, the palace sinks to the bottom of the sea (“Thàng Cao chúa” - Nùng people); they have the skills to weave mats, cook feasts, and sew clothes (“Kim Quế” - Tày people, “Hoàng tử và cô vợ xấu xí” - Nùng people). It is precisely the manifestation of these extraordinary abilities that helps the characters in animal forms overcome challenges and achieve their dream of finding a beautiful wife or husband and living a happy and prosperous life. Some characters even reach the pinnacle of power and status, such as the toad man who, after defeating the enemy, is married to the princess by the king and appointed Duke (“Chàng cóc” - Cao Lan people), the snake man who, after defeating the enemy, is given the throne by the king (“Chàng rắn” - Chăm people), and the monkey woman who became queen after helping her husband win competitions (“Hoàng tử và cô vợ xấu xí” - Nùng). These happy endings not only contribute to the uniqueness and enchanting quality of fairy tales but also fulfill people’s dreams of changing their fate in real life.

However, the creativity of fairy tale authors does not end there. Their rich imagination also allows them to take their characters to their ultimate destinations, which is shedding their animal skins. Usually, the characters in animal forms undergo two stages of transformation: They have animal forms at first, and then they shed their skin to become human. The fact that the characters in animal forms, after reaching a certain point in their lives, shed their ugly appearance and become handsome men or beautiful women, is another vivid proof of the idea that “good begets

good”. In the first stage, when they still have their animal forms, they often have to suffer losses and disadvantages. However, fate often brings them unexpected changes. The characters get beautiful wives (husbands) and live happily ever after. That is a wonderful reward for those who are unfortunate. However, fairy tale authors are not satisfied with what the characters in animal forms have achieved; the characters must shed their animal skins to become men or women of unparalleled beauty. Only then will it be consistent with the people’s desire when building the image of the characters in animal forms. The toad man (“Chàng cóc lấy vợ tiên” - Lô Lô people) sheds his skin to become a handsome man. Similarly, the toad man in “Chàng cóc con” -Tày people transforms into a big, strong young man with white skin. The snake man (“Hoàng tử rắn”- Cao Lan people) becomes a handsome man. The snake man (“Chàng Mai Hoa” - Mông people) turns into a man with rosy skin, a round face like the moon, and eyes as bright as two stars in the sky. The fish woman (“Nàng cá măng” - Thái people) becomes a beautiful girl. The monkey woman (“Hoàng tử và cô vợ xấu xí” - Nùng people) emerges anew as a girl with unparalleled beauty. All the animals: toads, frogs, snakes, turtles, monkeys, ferrets, wolves, deer, foxes, tigers, worms, birds, fish..., in an instant transform into beautiful men and women that few can rival. It can be said that the act of shedding one’s skin is the most important turning point in these characters’ lives. At the same time, it also deeply reflects the moral and aesthetic concepts of the people. To be conventional is the dream of those who are unfortunate and the working people. Once they shed their animal skins, these characters transform into humans who exhibit a harmonious blend of talent and appearance (Lê, p. 39), thus achieving true beauty (Lê, p. 26).

Fairy tale authors create the characters in animal forms with the intention of inspiring people to not treat those who are unfortunate in society any differently. These characters are, in reality, a miniature representation of a class of people who suffer from physical deformities. Creating stories about humans in animal forms, the authors express a desire to defend unfortunate people who are physically impaired. It is also in these stories that we can recognize the dream of perfection and harmony, from qualities to appearance, of ordinary people in society.

The moral concepts of the working people are also shown through a number of fairy tales about humans in animal forms in which these characters appear as a “gift” by fate for unfortunate individuals such as an orphaned boy, or a kind girl. In the stories mentioned, the concept “good begets good” is expressed through the husbands and wives of the characters. Ta Luong

(“Chàng Ta Luông” - Dao people) (“Tiếng hát của chàng câu cá” - Dao people), Tai Xi Phong (Tài Xi Phong – Nùng people) (“Quả bầu bạc” - Nùng people), A Trai (“A Trai” - Cà Tu people)... are all orphaned, poor boys but with kind hearts. They saved or accidentally caught a fish that led them to marry a beautiful girl who was the reincarnation of the fish. The orphaned boys who married a bird wife in “Chàng đi săn và nhà vua” (Mông people), “Chàng mò côi và đàn chim công” (Mông people), “Tìm mẹ” (Dao people)... were all brought by fate to wives who were both beautiful and talented. Tra Lo (“Sự tích vết trắng dưới cổ trâu” - Hà Nhi people), Bun (Chàng Bun) (“Chuyện con cây bay” - Thái people), Kadong (Nàng Kadông) (“Nàng Kadông và con cá vàng” - Chil-Coho people)... are lucky people.

The concept of morality and the philosophy of “good begets good” in stories about humans in animal forms are most clearly expressed through characters shedding their animal skins and becoming human. The earthly world, no matter how it is, is always the most attractive place for humans, more than any distant dream. The deep and passionate love for life is something humane and ingrained in the flesh and blood of many generations of Vietnamese people. The human form of the character brings their husbands and wives immense happiness. From here, they can stand on an equal footing with other members of the community.

Fairy tale authors also express their deep sympathy and understanding in these happy endings. It is not a condescending view, but rather a compassionate view of people in the same situation, revealing the good nature and beauty of the working people.

### Evil begets evil

Like most fairy tales of Vietnamese ethnic groups, stories about people in the form of animals often focus on describing conflicts that take place within the family, especially those between siblings, which are often caused by the fact that the protagonist becomes a beauty after taking off the disguise. The act of taking on human form brings joy and happiness to their spouse, but it leads to jealousy and envy from the brothers and sisters of the protagonist or their spouse. If they were asked to marry the human in animal form, they would decline; if they saw that their sibling would be marrying someone beautiful, they would grow jealous.

The older sister (“Chàng rẻ cóc” - Vân Kiều people) wanted to steal her little sister’s husband, luring her sister far away then seducing her brother-in-law; the six older sisters (“Chàng rẻ cóc” - Phù lú people) plotted to harm their little sister’s husband. Then,

there is the older brother (“Người vợ cá” - Mông people) who harmed his little brother to steal his beautiful wife, or the cruel older sister who pushed her sister down a deep pit (“Người chị độc ác” - Mông people)... It can be seen that these disaster-causing characters appear a lot in tales about people with snake or python forms. For instance, the folktales “Hoàng tử rắn” (Cao Lan people), “Chàng rắn” (Chàm people), “Chàng rắn” (Gia Rai people), “Chàng rắn” (Mông people), “Hai chị em và chàng trẻ tuổi” (Kar people), “Kon tung” (Ka Dong - Gie Triêng people), “Chakroá-Naytilui” (Gaglai people)... Evil elder sisters and brothers who harm their own kin to seek personal happiness are all duly punished.

The common form of punishment for the antagonists is being turned into animals or death. The six elder sisters in “Chàng rẻ cóc” (Phù lá people) were hanged by the king and died, turning into animals that always have their face down in the mud; the four elder sisters in “Con rùa vàng” (Tày people) were suffocated by smoke; the nine elder sisters in “Nàng Pia rơ chon” (Tà Ôi people), the two elder sisters in “Chàng chuỗi” (Việt people), and the elder brother in “Người vợ cá” (Mông people)... all had to accept death. Sometimes, the crime is exposed, and the antagonists feel ashamed and disappear like the nine elder sisters in the story “Nùng Chục và nàng Út” (Giê Triêng people), the elder sister in the story “Vợ chồng chàng rồng” (Mông people)... This is actually a form of strict punishment according to folk law, with the meaning of permanently eliminating evil from community life. This punishment is even more terrifying than hanging or beheading. This is the inevitable ending that the evil people must bear, which is in line with the concept of “evil begets evil” of the working people. One must not only promote good but also punish evil, otherwise good will be threatened, suppressed or destroyed.

While the protagonists - the humans in animal forms - get rewarded, the antagonists will be punished. This is a very common formula in fairy tales, which helps authors communicate their dream of justice. “Evil begets evil” is the opposite of “good begets good”. The significance of punishments goes beyond seeking retribution; it lies in the eradication of evil (Huỳnh & Bùi, p. 205). This shows the clear distinction between good and bad in people’s perceptions of morality.

### Conclusion

Besides realistic elements that reflect conflicts in a class-divided society, fairy tales about humans assuming animal forms convey the secret thoughts and burning dreams of working people. These are people who desire to change their fate, and they have

created for themselves truly magical moments of relaxation with such stories. Imagination has taken them beyond the reality of life filled with difficulties. It is also the mixture of the “illusory” and the “authentic” that is the unique feature of these fairy tales.

Characters in the guise of certain animals were created to illustrate the moral and aesthetic beliefs of Vietnamese people. Each of the stories examined expressed a moral lesson, containing a profound humanitarian spirit. Good people in society, no matter the hardship they must face, ultimately get to enjoy happiness. As for evil people, they must always receive their due punishment. These are the great values that working people always uphold for self-improvement.

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