Another central issue concerns the relationship between popular religious cults and state authority—whether rulers give primary emphasis to cults as superstition or as culture. Dror uncovers a curious resonance between the premodern and socialist eras, during which rulers regarded popular religion primarily as a superstition to be regulated and controlled (if not eradicated), and the colonial and postcolonial eras, when rulers viewed religion as a cultural asset. Cult, Culture, and Authority will find a wide and appreciative audience among students and scholars of Vietnamese culture, religion, literature, and history, both modern and premodern, as well as those with an interest in popular religion and its cultural aspects across Asia.

OLGA DROR is assistant professor of Asian history at Texas A&M University, College Station.

HISTORY / ANTHROPOLOGY / GENDER STUDIES

“A unique and brilliant case study of a Vietnamese religious cult that traces its history, and the multiple significances with which Vietnamese society invested it, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Painstaking but far from dull, this extraordinary book will be a must-read for anthropologists, historians, and any other scholars interested in religion and culture.”

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“This work is a major contribution to our understanding of life, religion, and culture in early modern and modern Vietnam. The author’s expertise in the texts that she considers is quite special and reflects the increasing sophistication in the discovery and use of indigenous sources by a new generation of scholars. The book is strongly recommended for those interested in Vietnam, its culture and religion, its literature, and its history.”

—JOHN WHITMORE, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Cult, Culture, and Authority
Princess Liêu Hành
in Vietnamese History

Jacket photo: The goddess Liêu Hanh in the Mother’s Temple of the Perfume Pagoda complex in Hà Tây province. (Photo by Nguyên Xuân Diên)

Jacket design: Dianna Little

OLGA DROR
is assistant professor of Asian history at Texas A&M University, College Station.

Princess Liêu Hanh, often called the Mother of the Vietnamese people by her followers, is one of the most prominent goddesses in Vietnamese popular religion. First emerging some four centuries ago as a local sect appealing to women, the princess’ cult has since transcended its geographical and gender boundaries and remains vibrant today. Who was this revered deity? Was she a virtuous woman or a prostitute? Why did people begin worshiping her and why have they continued? Cult, Culture, and Authority traces Liêu Hanh’s cult from its ostensible appearance in the sixteenth century to its present-day prominence in North Vietnam and considers it from a broad range of perspectives, as religion and literature and in the context of politics and society.

Over time, Liêu Hanh’s personality and cult became the subject of numerous literary accounts, and these historical texts are a major source for this book. Author Olga Dror explores the authorship and historical context of each text considered, treating her subject in an interdisciplinary way. Her interest lies in how these accounts reflect the various political agendas of successive generations of intellectuals and officials. The same cult was called into service for a variety of ideological ends: feminism, nationalism, Buddhism, or Daoism.

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Cult,
Culture,
and
Authority
Southeast Asia

POLITICS, MEANING, AND MEMORY

David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp

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Cult, Culture, and Authority

Princess Liẽu Hạnh in Vietnamese History

OLGA DROR

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I PRESS Honolulu
To Michael, in the hope that someday he will discover Vietnam

To Keith Taylor, who has succeeded in it
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My path to this point of my life has been neither straight nor short. From the time I was first introduced to Asia in 1982 till now, a good number of years have elapsed. My way could have been shorter, no doubt. But new countries, new jobs, new interests have only confirmed that my allegiance lies with Vietnam and Vietnamese studies, which I was so fortunate to pursue at Cornell University.

This book on Princess Liêu Hạnh is a result of my studies and research there. But it is also a result of the enormous assistance I have received from many people along the way. Professor David K. Wyatt’s kindness, encouragement, and life energy, which were unwavering even during Ithaca’s long sunless winters—much hated by him—supported me during my six years at Cornell. He conveyed to me much more than his knowledge of Southeast Asian history: his dignity and his humanism. His comments on this manuscript were most helpful. Unfortunately, Professor Wyatt died untimely while this book was in press. I feel privileged to consider myself his student. Professor Jane Marie Law introduced me to her field of specialization, religious studies, with lively sincerity. Her contribution as a member of my dissertation committee was indispensable as were her warmth and her smile.

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officials in Hanoi and in the provinces shared their views and documents on popular religion. Guardians of Liễu Hạnh’s temples warmly welcomed me and facilitated my research; I learned a lot from them. But most of all, I want to thank all the Vietnamese who I met on my trips to the temples. Their willingness to discuss their lives and their beliefs inspired and focused my work.

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I can hardly exaggerate my good fortune to study at Cornell University under the direction of Professor Keith Taylor. With his vast knowledge of Vietnam and his sharp scholarly eye, he helped with this project from start to finish. I dedicate this book to him with gratitude for his guidance and friendship.

My family, far away in St. Petersburg, has always been a source of strength. Their encouragement has helped me in my work and in my life. I have another indispensable source of inspiration and support in Michael, who is my son, my teacher, and my friend—not necessarily in this order but always in this combination—who makes me laugh and to whom I also affectionately dedicate this work.

All the aforementioned people have done their best to improve my work. The errors and deficiencies are my own.
Principal Sites for the Emergence of Liễu Hạnh’s Cult
Introduction

Consider now all things fulfill high heaven’s plan,
Which sets humanity to thrive as best it can, yet foreordained.
Some, doomed in dust to live, when dead as much have gained,
And others gather dignities—those too attained by nod divine.
—Nguyễn Du, Kim Văn Kiều

Nineteen eighty-eight. My first trip to Vietnam. I discover the country I studied for five years at Leningrad State University. The pages read, the lessons learned, the conversations conducted, all these come alive. Back then, Vietnam and the Soviet Union were still brotherly countries. I was an interpreter for a Soviet delegation on a visit of friendship. During the day I dutifully translated negotiations to develop programs of cooperation. But some evenings I had for myself. And on these evenings I tried to imbibe and absorb as much of Vietnamese culture as I could. I was mesmerized by the temples and was eager to learn as much as possible about the deities worshiped there. At the university, our primary focus was on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. But in Vietnam I found so much I had not studied during my student years! I approached my Vietnamese friends with incessant queries about what I saw and heard about different deities. It turned out that I was just opening the first leaf of what would become a long journey in my attempt to understand the incredibly rich palette of Vietnamese religious and spiritual life. The worship of spirits—whether of ancestors; of heroic or supernaturally potent people from the past; of birds, animals, sea creatures, or forces of nature embedded in particular features of the inanimate world; or of divine beings—is a fundamental aspect of Vietnamese religious practice. As the prominent French missionary and scholar of Vietnam Léopold Cadière has testified, the Vietnamese worship legions of spirits.¹
After my first trip, I visited Vietnam again with another official delegation. But alas! I had even fewer opportunities to investigate what had previously stirred my curiosity. Later there were emigration, different countries, and different jobs. But I always wanted to go back to the Vietnamese temples and to become familiar with all the spirits that inhabit them. Consequently, when I was accepted for advanced study at Cornell University, I took the opportunity to enter the realm of this legion by following the traces of one of the most prominent spirits, Liêu Hạnh, usually respectfully called Princess Liêu Hạnh (Bà Chúa Liêu Hạnh) or Mother Liêu (Mẫu Liêu). Why her? To be a potent female deity in Vietnam is quite an achievement, and the princess definitely has gained this status. This strong-willed beauty, by all accounts, had a very complex life and counts among her worshipers people of both genders and of all walks of life. I was intrigued by the persistence of her cult under different regimes, whether supported by the government or not, and by the extent of the revival of her cult during the current renovation era.

My interest grew when I heard about the séances associated with Liêu Hạnh’s cult. She has proven to be a potent and responsive spirit in whom many people in many generations have been eager to find a protectress. But what sealed my decision to study Liêu Hạnh was a famous saying that links two popular temple festivals: “In the third month [we] celebrate Mother’s death anniversary; in the eighth month [we] celebrate Father’s death anniversary” (Tháng ba giỗ mẹ, tháng tám giỗ cha). The Mother and Father referred to here are Liêu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo, who are commonly thought to have died in the third and the eighth months, respectively. Not many historical personalities in Vietnam are equal in fame and stature to Trần Hưng Đạo, the thirteenth-century prince who led the army in victory against the Mongol invasions. Much is known about Trần Hưng Đạo as a historical personality as well as the object of a spirit cult. Liêu Hạnh, however, cannot be verified as a historical figure in the same way as Trần Hưng Đạo. In comparison with him, she is a mysterious and problematic personality. This curious contrast persuaded me to look into the history of Liêu Hạnh, the woman who was worthy to be paired with the most potent male spirit remembered among the Vietnamese. In addition, she is counted as one of the Four Immortals and, at the same time, is a leading figure in the Cult of the Mothers.

The Four Immortals (Tứ Bát Tự) constitute a pantheon that some modern Vietnamese scholars have described as “a symbol of the ability to
survive, the indestructibility of the nation and the country from antiquity
till now." Apparently, this pantheon was an outgrowth of the previous
Eight Immortals (Bát Tiên), who were chosen from among twenty-seven
spirits that appeared in a fourteenth-century courtly collection of tales.
In the twentieth century this pantheon came to include three male spirits,
Đức Thánh Tần Viên Sơn (the Spirit of Mount Tần Viên), Đức Thánh Giong (the Spirit of Phú Động Village), and Chữ Đống Tụ (the Consort of Hùng Princess Tiên Dung); and one female spirit, Liễu Hạnh. According
to an early-twentieth-century French colonial report: "There actually
exist in the province of Annam four temples that are particularly vener-
ated; they are designated under the name Tứ Bất Tứ, that is, the four
temples of immortals." These four temples were those of Chữ Động Tụ
in Đồng Yên district, Hùng Yên province; of Đức Thánh Tần Viên Sơn
in Bát Bạc district, Sơn Tây province; of Đống Thiên Vương Đức Thánh
Gìông in Tiền Dư district, Bắc Ninh province; and of Liễu Hạnh Công
Chúa in Thanh Hóa province. The three male spirits are benevolent, and
their appearance is attributed to the period of the legendary Hùng kings
of antiquity. All three were mortals who achieved immortality through
their human achievements, symbolized by struggles with nature or with
human enemies. Liễu Hạnh differs from them not only by being female,
but also by her much later emergence, her celestial origins, and her am-
biguous character, which will be examined in detail in this work.

Liễu Hạnh also stands out in the Cult of the Mothers, called in Viet-
namese Tam Phú (Three Palaces) or Tứ Phú (Four Palaces), in which
"palaces" represent different domains of nature of which the Mothers are
in charge: heaven, earth, and water in the Tam Phú or heaven, earth,
waters, and mountains and forests in the Tứ Phú. Liễu Hạnh governs the
celestial realm, the highest position. She has become the principal deity
despite her "youth," being the latest addition to the group of the Mothers,
as the cults of the others originated before the sixteenth century.

The cult of Liễu Hạnh ostensibly originated in the sixteenth century
in a small hamlet of Văn Cát village in Nam Định province, which occu-
pies the southernmost part of the Red River plain. Since that time, Liễu
Hạnh’s cult has spread throughout the northern part of what is now
Vietnam. City people joined villagers in their recognition of her divine
power. She is worshiped in Daoist as well as Buddhist temples. Initially
a spirit to whom mainly women prayed, Liễu Hạnh attracted numerous
male followers by the twentieth century. The establishment of commu-
nism almost obliterated her cult as well as many others. But in the late 1980s Liêu Hạnh’s cult was revived to become one of the officially recognized signifiers of Vietnamese culture.

In the introduction to Adriano di St. Thecla’s *Opusculum*, I analyze the Vietnamese terms that are today generally translated as “religion” (tôn giáo) and “religious belief” or “devotion” (tin ngưỡng).6 The concept for the modern word “religion” was first borrowed from Western languages into Japanese in the late nineteenth century and designated with a word invented from classical Chinese characters; from Japan this word penetrated into Chinese and Vietnamese (shūkyō in Japanese, zōngjiào in Chinese, tôn giáo in Vietnamese).7 This concept reflects the influence of Western religious thought in terms of a “church” with systematic doctrine and an ecclesiastic hierarchy. Before this, religious practice among Vietnamese was diffused into all aspects of everyday life and not understood as a particular doctrinal or institutional orientation toward the supernatural world. That is why we can hardly speak about Buddhism or Daoism in Vietnam as religion, since they are also, in the words of Nguyễn Tu Cuong, “of composite nature,”8 incorporating in themselves elements of each other and of popular beliefs, and thus diluting any single doctrinal or ecclesiastical position.

Accordingly, the cult of Liêu Hạnh has never been a “religion” in the sense that this word is used today but is usually considered as a “belief” (tin ngưỡng). Liêu Hạnh is the name given to a certain sublime personality that has gained currency in the milieu of popular religion as an efficacious deity.9 Vietnamese use two words to express the sacred or sublime potency of Liêu Hạnh, thiêng (Chinese qing) and linh (Chinese ling), both of which, while registering the effect of overpowering awe in Rudolf Otto’s term *mysterium tremendum*,10 more specifically signify divine responsiveness to human supplication and the ability to make things happen. At the center of popular religious cults such as that of Liêu Hạnh lies the potent idea that threatening realities encountered in life, such as the fear of illness or of failure, are dispersed by the application of a causal logic that connects the divine power of a deity with one’s own personal fate.

In this book I treat Liêu Hạnh’s cult in terms of two parts. The first refers to the sublime, or what puts people in awe of an event, a deed, a personality, or an object—what makes them start worshiping. This is the “form” of a cult. This experience of the sublime is solemnized by ritual, which is a signifier of the sublime.11 Ritual is a response to the awareness of utter difference, the difference between the divine and the
human realms. It marks out a space separate from everyday life where humans are enabled to experience the sublime and "is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest." Ritual is a mode of survival of the form, a bridge connecting it with the other part of the cult, which refers to discourses that position deities in different schemes of ideological affirmation. These discourses can be literary productions, but they can also mark relationships between a cult and state authorities, be this through the symbolic conferring of honorific titles or through direct state sponsorship of the deity. These elements constitute the "content" of the cult.

I started to think about the ideas of "form" and "content" in relation to popular cults during my fieldwork in Vietnam in 1998 and in 2000, when I conducted interviews with people attending temples of Liễu Hạnh. I was at first surprised to find that out of my ninety respondents 80 percent could not say anything about who Liễu Hạnh was or when her cult started. The other 20 percent simply repeated well-known aspects of the story of Liễu Hạnh written by Doàn Thị Diễm in the eighteenth century and thereafter retold and republished again and again. To the respondents who knew nothing, my question seemed to be utterly irrelevant. Liễu Hạnh's story had nothing to do with what attracted them to her place of worship. Seventy percent of them responded that it was Liễu Hạnh's divine potency that brought them to the temples, while 30 percent referred to the scenic locations of the temples that created a peaceful atmosphere for their souls and minds. Neither of these two groups was interested in knowing about Liễu Hạnh's personality or her deeds.

At first I attributed this to the fact that religious activity was suppressed during the years of communist rule in Vietnam between 1945 and the mid-1980s. Indeed, forty years could easily erase knowledge about Liễu Hạnh's personality and the legends surrounding her cult. But later I discovered materials that demonstrated that the communist regime should not be blamed for this lack of cognition. The apparent lacuna is, rather, an aspect of the Vietnamese approach to religious beliefs and practices.

In the 1930s the École française d'Extrême-Orient conducted a survey of spirit-protectors worshiped in different locations in Vietnam. The survey consisted of questions about the nature of the deity, his or her biography, and ways of worshiping. I found 360 responses to this survey from different localities that claimed Liễu Hạnh as their village protector. My main interest was in responses to the following questions: What is the hagiography of the worshiped deity (day of birth, day of death or deifica-
tion (ngày bính, ngày biến thành))? Since what generation has the deity been worshiped in the village? What merits does the deity have? Two-hundred eighty responded that they had no information on their deity’s hagiography; the date of birth was in most cases unidentified, and in those cases when it was identified, it varied greatly. However, the responses were unanimous in the indication of the day of Liễu Hạnh’s death and deification: the third day of the third lunar month. This date would be well known because for generations it has been the day designated for the annual festival of her cult.

Emile Durkheim saw communal ritual as a purely functional repetitive practice that integrates society by creating a religious identity to lend sacred sanctions to social norms. However, is ritual necessarily related to moral content? Not always, and perhaps usually not. Rodney Stark demonstrates with the example of popular religious practice in China that rituals of prayer are simply “a quite self-centered and self-serving activity, consistent with rapidly shifting from one God to another on the basis of results.” This statement echoes Martin Ahern’s view of Chinese rituals as acts of deference, bribery, and negotiation with officials, thus bearing the character of bureaucratic efficacy.

One of the most evident examples of a similar phenomenon in Vietnam is described by one of the leading scholars of popular culture, Dinh Gia Khánh. He refers to two deities both named Bà Chúa Kho, “Princess of the Storehouses,” who were keepers of military storehouses in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and who are worshiped in two different localities near Hanoi. According to him, the princesses deserve to be worshiped for their defense of national property and the sacrifice of their lives for this purpose. But he censoriously notes that people did not come to venerate them for their commendable contributions to the state; on the contrary, they came to ask for gifts from the deities. He concludes with this observation: “If the Princesses of the Storehouses were resurrected, they would flatly reject people coming to ask them to distribute national property to them” (Nếu Bà Chúa Kho có sống lại thì chắc bà sẽ kiên quyết cắt tuyệt những người đến cầu xin để bà & tận phát tài sản quốc gia cho họ). Should people be criticized for their hope to gain favors from those they worship? They are simply looking for assistance in their struggle with everyday life, which, in their view, does not always treat them fairly. What does this pragmatic approach tell us about their beliefs? It says that what counts is not moral norms but the deity’s efficacy. The rupture between moral norms and efficacy makes the deity’s “personality” or origins irrelevant to devotees.
The insignificance of a deity’s “personality,” in contrast with its “potency,” is evident in the cult of the Chinese general Mâ Viên (Ma Yuan), who in the first century C.E. suppressed the rebellion led by the Trưng sisters, a significant event in the nationalist historiography of early Vietnam. Mâ Viên’s role in subjugating Vietnamese heroines did not prevent him from being worshiped as a powerful spirit by the Vietnamese for many centuries. Elsewhere I have discussed my fieldwork on this deity and have described how local informants recall worshiping him for no other reason than that he was considered to be the local god, despite being presented in Vietnamese historiography as an oppressor. It was the “form” of his cult, its ritual practice, that enabled the memory of Mâ Viên to transcend the boundaries of his historical deeds and the limitations imposed by national historiography and to turn him into a spirit still worshiped almost two millennia after his death.

Thus, it is the “form” of a cult that becomes a tradition, an empty vessel of the ineffable sublime, a cultural form to be practiced and repeated generation after generation to acknowledge one’s dependence on forces and beings beyond human comprehension. It is constantly being filled with different “content”: stories that exemplify very human concerns and agendas. These narratives are all functions of language, and rather than signifying the sublime, as the “form” does, they signify human moral messages, the ideological contents that different authors provide for the popular cultic “form.” Perhaps a convenient metaphor for the “form” and the “content” is a flower vase and flowers. I refer here not to a disposable vessel used to display flowers occasionally brought to one’s house but to a cherished possession, an heirloom, that decorates one’s household and attracts bouquets by its very existence. This vase is the persisting ritual form, but the flowers are like the narrative contents that change from author to author and from generation to generation.

Just as a vase can exist without flowers, so the ritual form of a cult can exist without the narrative contents of stories. However, the precious stability of the vase/form endows the flowers/narratives with the additional force of plausibility and attractiveness, which otherwise might be lost among other flowers/narratives. These narratives are all functions of language, and, rather than signifying the sublime as does the “form,” they signify human moral messages, the agendas that different writers provide for the popular cultic form. Can these flowers/narratives exist without a vase/form and vice versa? Yes, they can. Vladimir Propp, one of the most famous of folklorists, connected the appearance of a tale with the
disappearance of a religion, thus suggesting that only on its death is a religion transformed into a narrative.19 I would argue that a religion does not have to die in order to give birth to a tale, but, on the contrary, its existence can empower a tale with greater conviction. Without it, the existence of the tale must rely entirely on its literary quality. In contrast, when unified with a cultic “form,” even a pedestrian tale is enhanced by an aura of the sublime and of a well-established ritual representation of this sublime, which extends its popular appeal.

Who creates these narratives? Gustave Lagrand, a French colonial writer, cautioned: “One should not be too demanding while interrogating an Annamite on religion, even when one interrogates temple priests in rural areas or guardians of temples. Each one of them can enumerate the genies he honors and the dates of big festivals during the year, but that is all. What is the history or story of the genies? Why did they become the object of the cult? This is often too much to ask.... Oral tradition, tales and legends, are the basis for the religious practice of Annamites. But to collect these it is necessary to talk with the old literati who are more and more rare, and to peruse rare books.”20 This suggests that the narrative contents of cultic practice were the business of literati and their books, that oral tradition was simply a means to popularize elite literary production.

Liêu Hành, as a sublime being, alert to hear prayers and able and willing to answer them, became the object of a cult that for several centuries has maintained a stable “form” through repetitive ritual observances. However, her personality was imagined differently at different times by different groups of people and by different institutions.21 All of the narratives that have been constructed to locate her existence in the context of human thought, whether in the form of genealogies, hagiographies, royal decrees, disputations, panegyrics, or creative literature, are both possible and plausible because her cult has endured amidst the perennial forms of temple ritual, the performance of which has no need whatever of these narratives.

Liêu Hành’s cult has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars. The works on her cult can be divided into two main categories: First is what I would call “anthropological” scholarship, which describes the “form” of the cult, that is, rituals and ceremonies connected to it. Second is “philological” scholarship, represented by numerous collections of works reproducing Liêu Hành’s story. One of the best anthropological works of the first group is Maurice Durand’s *Technique et panthéon des médi-

8 : introduction
ums vietnamien, in which he detailed the phenomenon of mediumship in relation to Liễu Hành’s cult and to several other cults. Pierre Simon and Ida Simon-Barouh extended this study, elaborating on differences between mediumship in Vietnam and shamanism elsewhere. Modern Vietnamese ethnographers, most notably Ngô Đức Thịnh, former director of the Institute of Folklore Studies, have published numerous articles on the practices connected with Liễu Hành’s cult, presented through descriptions of festivals and temples, and placing the practice of the cult into the context of Vietnamese religious systems. “Philological” scholarship mainly consists of republishing the “contents” of the cult, the stories of Liễu Hành in collections of folktales and stories of divine beings, especially the story written by Đào Thị Diễm, the celebrated female writer of the eighteenth century. Republishing these stories has recently been done on an unprecedented scale; many booklets containing these stories are available at temples where Liễu Hành is worshiped. Most of these works, while popularizing and preserving Liễu Hành’s stories as an integral part of her cult, do not bring them into the larger context of Vietnamese cultural and political history.

Research on popular religion in Vietnam has received a boost in recent years. Three seminal works appeared in English, among which Shaun Malanney’s brilliant anthropological study on the changes in a commune in Red River delta after the revolution pioneered the English-language scholarship. Thien Do expanded and systematized our knowledge of the Vietnamese folk religion in South Vietnam in a work that has become a first survey of religious practices in this area. Philip Taylor unveiled to us the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ, the Lady of the Realm, one of the famous and potent spirits in southern Vietnam, putting it into the context of the general practice of pilgrimage. This book differs from the previous studies in being concentrated on a cult in the north and also in being a historical rather than an anthropological work. It is the first systematic study of the historical changes in Liễu Hành’s cult and the various “contents” created for it. The task proved to be very challenging. I perused the numerous files in the French Colonial Archives in Aix-en-Provence (CAOM), the Archive of Foreign Missions, the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, and National Archive I in Hanoi. The archives, however, provide little evidence about popular cults, which reflects the status of both the cults and the followers of the cults as “subaltern” in comparison with major historical developments and personalities that occupy vast rooms in the archives. Thus, virtually the only
occasions when the cults are mentioned are when they have some political significance. Moreover, owing to the numerous dynastic changes that provoked revisions of the archives’ contents, the tropical climate, and limited capabilities of preservation in Vietnamese archives, a lot of material that might have been found there has failed to survive.

In addition, inscriptions that could have supplied us with an abundance of additional information also fell prey to the vicissitudes of time, climate, and politics. Coedès observed that, despite their ancient custom of commemorating important historical events, “the Annamites do not seem to respect their ancient inscriptions; they cut them down (búchent) without remorse for the most futile reasons; in particular, they do not hesitate to scrape them off to be re-carved with new inscriptions.”

Thus, while taking advantage of all possible sources, this work is primarily based on works produced by relatively unknown literati and officials as well as some prominent literary figures from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. According to Hayden White, whether a narrative tells a “factual” or a “fictional” story, it is “intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.” While all historical narratives have a fictive literary component that cannot be separated from their supposed objective historical basis, in Vietnam the conflation of history and literature is especially evident. Practically all the people considered to have been “historians” were also writers of other genres, in prose or poetry, that we would today consider literature. History and literature were not separate domains. To study Vietnamese history means to study also its literature or to study history through literature, engaging it in a dialogue with history. This is the point of departure for approaching the materials available about Liễu Hạnh. These existing narratives are creative fictions, yet not unrelated to historical context. The works analyzed here were written either in classical Chinese prose or in poetic vernacular Vietnamese character writing, so the intended audiences ranged from the educated elite to illiterate villagers whose culture was based on memory and oral recitation. This book endeavors to explore the degree to which a context of historical specificity can be established for the cult of Liễu Hạnh and the way in which successive generations of intellectuals and/or officials used this cult as a form in which to cast the content of their own ideological preoccupations. It places each story, to the extent possible, within the context of a historical
time and place and of the author’s personality and agenda. I believe that in doing this we are able to see most clearly both continuity and change.

In addition to textual study, I conducted extensive fieldwork at temples in several Vietnamese provinces and numerous oral interviews with followers of Liễu Hạnh’s cult, visitors at her temples, government officials, and other researchers. The reality of this cult continues as a living experience today, with throngs crowding into temples to offer their prayers and donations, with mediums consulting and performing Liễu Hạnh and her divine colleagues, and with academic institutes accumulating knowledge and publications.

This book answers many questions about Liễu Hạnh’s cult related to its historical specificity, the context of writings about Vietnamese popular religion in which it appeared and developed, and the materials on which our knowledge of it is based. However, the main question addressed in this book is how this cult has been used by intellectuals and the state. My thesis is that while the existence of the cult is testimony to the stability of the cultic form of popular worship, biographical information about Liễu Hạnh as a divine/human personality attached to historical and geographical contexts comes from intellectuals for whom Liễu Hạnh is not an object of worship as much as a means for expressing philosophical, ideological, or political messages.

The first chapter examines hagiographies as a mode by which Vietnamese dynasties appropriated popular spirit cults as extensions of royal authority. Texts datable to the eleventh through fifteenth centuries show that intellectuals wrote popular tales or invented stories about deities, deified beings, or divine personalities to propagate royal authority and to teach approved norms of behavior among the people. Beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, procedures were established for officially recognizing village deities and for organizing them into a divine host to support dynastic rule.

The second chapter reviews materials available for documenting the appearance and development of the cult of Liễu Hạnh in the context of northern Vietnam in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Important questions here are related to how deities are thought to appear as objects of human worship and to the historicity of Liễu Hạnh as a celestial being, a human paragon of virtue, or, as claimed by some, a prostitute. Liễu Hạnh is not an ordinary spirit; she quickly moved to the forefront of Mother worship and has occupied prominent places in a variety of
spirit pantheons. While her exceptional popularity precludes her from being considered as a representative or typical Vietnamese deity, it reveals qualities that have particular appeal and potency in Vietnamese society. This will help to explain why Liễu Hạnh was considered a useful focus of interest by educated people, who used her to advance their intellectual agendas.

The third and the fourth chapters examine literary works written about Liễu Hạnh in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries that promote themes such as feminism, antifeminism, Buddhism, Daoism, existentialism, and nationalism. While Chapter 3 deals with writings in Chinese classical prose, Chapter 4 analyzes vernacular Vietnamese poetry and explores the significance, in terms of audience, of bringing stories about Liễu Hạnh from the classical language into the vernacular language. For us today, the messages promoted by people who wrote about Liễu Hạnh convey all the information currently available about her. Consequently, a study of these texts draws us into the agendas of intellectuals and of apologists for particular ideologies or regimes.

The focus of the last chapter is the relation between cult and state. Governing regimes have demonstrated shifting perceptions of popular religion in general and of Liễu Hạnh’s cult in particular as superstition or as tradition in precolonial, colonial, socialist, and postsocialist times. There are definite resonances between the policies of the precolonial and socialist regimes and between the colonial and postsocialist regimes, with the former seeking to police a distinction between religion and superstition and the latter willing to accept popular religion as cultural tradition. Finally, in the context of the postsocialist renovation era, the current flourishing of Liễu Hạnh’s cult is described; the state now features it as a symbol of Vietnam’s distinctive cultural identity.

Perhaps Liễu Hạnh’s cult has survived through a variety of political regimes and intellectual agendas because it has been a point of struggle between rival visions of social authority. It initially posed a challenge to patriarchy and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attracted the hostility of ideologies that assert male ascendancy over women: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In the early twentieth century it was used in arguments about modernity and the nation. In fact, the history of Liễu Hạnh’s cult begins at the time when Vietnamese rulers turned to Confucianism and attempted to enforce patriarchal values in village society. The continuing survival of the cult may represent a critique of that and similar attempts.
Writing Hagiographies, Creating History

Words wreak havoc when they find a name for what has up to then been lived namelessly.
—J.-P. Sartre, *L'idiot de la famille*

An awareness of supernatural beings is a widespread human experience. Naming these beings and establishing rituals for experiencing their presence arises from the application of human thought and authority. The supernatural cannot be named without provoking questions about the meaning of the name as well as who has the right to speak on behalf of it and to what purpose. Our earliest evidence of answers to these questions among the Vietnamese comes from texts that reveal how rulers and their followers endeavored to systematize and narrate approved knowledge of supernatural beings. Over a period of several centuries, these texts document shifting concerns for harnessing the supernatural to various forms of human thought related to authority.

The discussion in this chapter is intended to expose a context of writings about deities within which the appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s cult can be situated. Later chapters in this book will show how narratives about Liễu Hạnh addressed a wide variety of agendas. Stories about deities have been aimed toward different purposes following the shifting intellectual fashions of successive generations. In general, we see the dominant trend shifting from a focus on the spirit itself to increasingly depersonalized aspects of human authority. First we note a shift from devotion to the spirits themselves toward devotion to rulers as the humans most able to establish relationships with deities. An emphasis on deities as the progenitors and guardians of dynastic history comes to the fore in the fifteenth century, when constructing a historical argument with Ming China was a priority. In subsequent centuries the state sought to gain control of the
spirit realm by subjecting it to a bureaucratic regime of official recognition, promotion, and demotion.

**FROM DEVOTION TO THE SPIRITS TO DEVOTION TO THE RULERS:**

*BÀO CỤC TRUYỆN AND VIỆT DIỄN U LINH TẬP*

The spirits worshiped among the Vietnamese apparently did not have any, or had very little, initial connection with a central ruling power. Each group or community worshiped its own deity, which it selected on the basis of its experience of the sublime and the responsiveness of a spirit to its immediate needs. People rarely (if at all) took a deep interest in collecting, recording, or processing stories about these deities. However, with time, the situation changed: the spirits or their cults came to the attention of scholars and/or authorities. The first indication of such interest known at the present time is the book *Bào Cục Truyện* (Stories of the Sublime), whose dating we will discuss below and which now survives only in citations in two later works: *Việt Điện U Linh Tạp* (Collection of Stories on Spirits of the Departed in the Viet Realm) and *Cổ Châu Phật Vạn Phật Bàn Hành Ngữ Lục* (Stories about the Buddha of Phật Vạn temple at Cổ Châu). We can say with a high degree of certainty that this was a collection of stories about supernatural beings who have been given an individual identity in human culture.

The *Bào Cục Truyện* is mentioned five times in *Việt Điện U Linh Tạp*, which survives in several manuscript recensions and has a preface by Lý Tế Xuyên dated 1329, and once in *Cổ Châu Phật Vạn Phật Bàn Hành Ngữ Lục*, which survives in a 1752 xylographic reprint and contains material that can be variously dated. In the former it is cited for information about the following spirits: Si Nhiphertext= (137–226), a Han governor in what is now northern Vietnam; Tô Lịch, ostensibly a local magistrate in the Hanoi area sometime around the fourth century C.E.; Hậu Thồ, the Goddess of the Earth, whose cult possibly came from Tang China in the late ninth century and who was worshiped by an eleventh-century king after she assisted him in an expedition against Champa; the Spirit of Mount Đồng Cô, who assisted an eleventh-century prince, first against Champa and then during that prince’s disputed succession to the throne; and the earth spirit of Phú Đông village, a center for Buddhist teachings in the ninth century. The citation in the *Cổ Châu Phật Vạn Phật Bàn Hành Ngữ Lục* is about the cult of A Man, the “Mother Buddha,” and the Cloud Dharma Buddha,
Let us consider the account of the spirit of Sĩ Nhiep in the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp, which includes a citation from the Bảo Cục Truyện that raises a number of questions suggesting an analytical framework for this chapter. The description of Sĩ Nhiep in the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp consists of two parts: one is an excerpt from his biography found in The History of Three Kingdoms, an official dynastic work from Chinese historiography, which describes his family, education, personality, and the praiseworthy achievements during his tenure in northern Vietnam. The other part is cited from the Bảo Cục Truyện and reads as follows: “King Sĩ was skilled at Daoist magic. From the time he died and was buried under the earth to the end of the Tần dynasty, more than 160 years passed. When people from Lâm Ấp [i.e., Champa] entered to plunder, they dug his grave open and saw his body intact and his face as if he were alive. In great terror, they reburied him. The local people have passed down this story and regarded him as a deity.”

While the extract from his official biography is significantly longer than this spare citation and provides much historical information about Sĩ Nhiep, it says nothing about the establishment of his cult among the people. By contrast, the very short citation from the Bảo Cục Truyện dwells exclusively on how Sĩ Nhiep became the object of a religious cult. Sĩ Nhiep became a deity not because of his personality or merit as a ruler but because of the awe provoked by his undecayed corpse, an awe that was “passed down by the local people” rather than recorded in his official biography as preserved in historical annals.

A number of preliminary observations can be made here. First, the Bảo Cục Truyện reveals a devotional rather than a historical character. Lý Tế Xuyên, the compiler of the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp, refers to it only for a depiction of Sĩ Nhiep’s posthumous life. I assume that the author of the Bảo Cục Truyện was aware of the historicity of Sĩ Nhiep, for he uses the name “King Sĩ,” which is how Sĩ Nhiep is named in the citation found in the Cổ Chầu Phá Truyện Ban. But even if the author of the Bảo Cục Truyện did not have materials to place his narrative in a historical context, this was no impediment to writing a description of Sĩ Nhiep’s cult: Sĩ Nhiep did not have to be historicized in order to postulate his divine nature. He was a supernatural being first and foremost. His achievements as a living man were irrelevant to this.

In contrast, Lý Tế Xuyên was very interested in the historical biogra-
phies of the spirits he described. Combining various accounts into one story in the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*, he notes the real historical merit ascribed to Sĩ Nhiếp as a human ruler as well as his posthumous apparitions. As a result, there came into being an image of a person whose veneration was justified from both historical and cultic perspectives, from the point of view of literati as well as of illiterates. This combination also brought a new note into the whole discourse of the spirits: if it is correct to assume that the Bảo Cực Truyện had a devotional connotation, the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* displays a much more pedagogical and politicized agenda. The shift is from belief to cognizance, the appearance of a trope of reason in the domain of sensual perception, the objectification of the subjective.

A legitimate question would be whether this “objectification” is consistent throughout the entire text of the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*. I believe the answer to this is yes. None of the citations from the Bảo Cực Truyện found in the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* contain specific historical descriptions of spirits. Their historicity was simply beyond the scope of the Bảo Cực Truyện; rather, the spirits as objects of cultic devotion are the center of attention. However, the reference found in the Cổ Châu Pháp Văn Phát Bản Hành Ngữ Lục initially appears to scatter this otherwise neatly constructed impression. This citation is much longer than those in the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* and does indeed describe the origins of the cult of A Man and the Cloud Dharma Buddha in a historical context. But, reading carefully through the text, we see that the description of the origins of this cult is actually akin to the account of Sĩ Nhiếp’s posthumous veneration. While indeed grounded in the historical context at the turn of the third century C.E., this text hardly constructs a real historical situation but describes strange and awesome events that are similar to the description of the Cham people discovering Sĩ Nhiếp’s undecayed body.

The events that take place in A Man’s story are extraordinary and supernatural: A Man, as a young girl of twelve, is impregnated by a Buddhist priest, Khâu Đà La, who was her father’s guest. Khâu Đà La bestowed on her the magical power to cause water to appear in time of drought. After giving birth to a daughter, she brought the infant to Khâu Đà La, who gave it to a tree. Later, the tree is uprooted in a storm and floats on a flood to the king’s palace, where it is recognized as a holy object and is subsequently carved into four female Buddha images to put into four newly built temples dedicated to rain, thunder, lightning, and clouds. The infant is found as a rock embedded in the tree and is wor-
shiped as the Rock Buddha. A Man is posthumously worshiped as the Mother Buddha.\(^8\)

This story narrates supernatural events rather than events that we would recognize as historically grounded. It does not objectify the worthiness of deities to be worshiped, providing arguments to prove their divinity, but simply affirms the fact of their divine nature and of their being worshiped. Furthermore, contrary to the stories included in the \(\text{Việt Điển Ú Linh Tạp}\), where the spirits are praised for their human virtues and loyalty to sovereigns, the A Man story does not describe people and/or spirits worthy of emulation for any reason beyond demonstrations of their sublime nature. None of the personages of the story can be seen as an upright person (indeed, the pregnancy of A Man is portrayed as a violation of social norms), and the theme of loyalty to the sovereign is altogether absent in the narrative. Hence, this story matches the story of Sĩ Nhiphertext missing‌'s posthumous cult in the \(\text{Việt Điển Ú Linh Tạp}\) and supports the devotional character of the \(\text{Bảo Cực Truyện}.\)

We can seek to explain the difference between these two works as either a difference in authorial viewpoint or a difference in historical context. We do not know the author or date of the \(\text{Bảo Cực Truyện}\), but the contents of the citations from it appear to fix it no earlier than the late eleventh century, during the Lý dynasty (1009–1225), and there is no indication that it would have to be dated later than that. The \(\text{Việt Điển Ú Linh Tạp}\), however, is definitely a fourteenth-century Trần dynasty (1226–1400) work. It is easy to fit our analysis of these two works into the respective contexts of these two dynasties. The Lý dynasty expressed a relatively decentralized and heterogeneous religious life formed by devotion to a wide variety of local cults.\(^9\) The Trần dynasty was much more centralized in all aspects of policy, not only in management of the royal family, direct control of localities, military organization, command of surplus, and education, but also in supervision of the monkhood and of religion in general. The Trần rulers, in comparison with their predecessors, effected what we can recognize as a major politicization of the realm, the extension of a relatively rational scheme of control over all activities within their reach. The differences between the Lý and Trần dynasties may in some degree explain the differences between the two texts.

The story of the two Trung sisters in the \(\text{Việt Điển Ú Linh Tạp}\) develops our analysis further to suggest a sociological context for the appearance of a cult. The Trung sisters led a revolt against Han imperial rule
in the 40s C.E. The revolt did not succeed, and the sisters died in battle.
The Trưng sisters have long been considered in Vietnamese historiography, and especially nationalistic discourse, as patriotic heroines to be venerated for their courage, leadership, and patriotism. Their position has been especially important for modern sensibilities as they exemplify female heroism and a high position in society rarely achieved by women in Vietnamese history, which only sparingly presents a woman-in-action but is generous in praising the virtue of submissive female behavior. But setting this aside, let us take a look at how the sisters were seen in the eyes of common people, among whom their cult became widespread. One word in Lý Tế Xuyên’s story of them epitomizes the entire discourse of the Trưng sisters cult, and this word is “pity.” He wrote: “The ladies were abandoned and died in battle. The local people pity the sisters and built a temple to worship them. They repeatedly demonstrated their divine efficacy.” The Hán (classical Chinese in Vietnamese pronunciation) word is āi meaning “to pity” or “to sympathize with.” Namely, the sisters died unfortunate deaths, without children to maintain their funerary cult, and thus they were efficacious for all who, moved to pity by their sad fate, propitiated their wandering ghosts and acknowledged them as supernal beings.

Pity for their sad end and not admiration of their unprecedented brave uprising was what caused their deification. According to the story, the sisters did not receive official recognition until the reign of Emperor Lý Anh Tông (1135–1175), when they proved themselves extremely responsive to prayers by granting rain in time of drought, for which the sovereign bestowed on them the title of Upright Efficacious Ladies, reflecting their current divine abilities rather than their heroic past. Their heroic status as leaders against the Han invaders came to light and was promoted much later with the centralization and strengthening of the state. The cult of the Trưng sisters is very popular in modern Vietnam and has been taken as evidence of “nation-building from below,” meaning that this cult represents an urge toward nationhood originating from the religious devotion of common people. On the contrary, I believe the evidence indicates that this and other cults developed into objects of “national devotion” not “from below” but “from above” as a result of rulers incorporating them into the circle of their authority. The position of the Trưng sisters in Vietnamese memory today is a result of their being supported by the state as patriotic figures. We can see that their cult arose because of their responsiveness to the prayers of people for their everyday
needs rather than because of their presumed devotion to the nation, despite all the efforts of authorities and propagandists to this effect.

The continued existence through many generations of this and other cults is one of the factors that has encouraged some scholars, both Western and Vietnamese, to suggest that the Vietnamese have a highly developed historical sense that permeates their culture.\(^\text{12}\) However, it is questionable whether the Vietnamese have a special awareness of their history or that what was transmitted through the generations had a particular historical sense. Rather, what is evident is simply that the names of people became signifiers of the forms of different cults, most often unrelated to the historical deeds for which these individuals were glorified in historical works. In this sense, we indeed witness an amazing continuity, for a significant number of cults popular in twenty-first century Vietnam are ostensibly rooted in contexts of a thousand or more years ago. But these demonstrate a continuous tradition of cultic forms rather than of historical context; it is these forms rather than their narrative contents that have provided the *longue durée* for some historical personages that have survived in people’s memories from generation to generation into contemporary times.

As mentioned above, the historicity of the people worshiped was not of primary concern for the devotees even in cases when the biographies of these persons were recorded and thus could be known. An extreme example of a lack of historical context is evident in the description of Lý Đỗ Úy:

According to oral tradition, [he] was called Lý Đỗ Úy ["royal commander Lý"]. It is not known of what generation he was. It is not known what his full name was. When crossing a river, he met with a fierce wind and died. His spirit did not dissipate. Often on the shores of the river at the time when the breeze was cool and the moon was bright, the sounds of laughter and speaking were heard. In the air the sounds of music and songs were heard. One night in the village, the dogs barked. The spirit manifested itself in a vigorous young man. He announced to the villagers: “I have been bestowed an honorific appointment from God on High to serve as the spirit of the mouth of the river.” The countrymen were extremely perplexed and afraid. They erected a temple for his worship.\(^\text{13}\)

Do we see any historical sense in this passage? There is not even a signifier, the name of a person, or a date. Who was he? Did he perform any
heroic deeds during his lifetime? Save his country? Help others? These questions are irrelevant. He perished crossing a river; that is, he died an "unfortunate" death, and this was the reason that his cult was established. His cult eventually received royal recognition, according to the story, because he assisted the king against invaders during the Nguyễn Phong reign period (1251–1258).¹⁴

Is the Việt Diện U Linh Tấp a collection of folktales as is usually suggested?¹⁵ I think not. If we take even a brief look at the structure of the stories, we are immediately submerged beneath a thick layer of minute details pertaining to temporal and spatial orientation as well as to genealogical specifications impossible to derive from oral tradition but undoubtedly based on written sources, as, in fact, references provided in the work itself show. All these stories celebrate moral virtue, loyalty to the sovereign, and heroism in defending the country.¹⁶ The spirits included in the Việt Diện U Linh Tấp make up only a tiny part of all spirits worshiped in the country. Lý Tế Xuyên opens his introduction with the following words: "The ancient sages said: 'Intelligence and upright conduct are necessary to be called a divine being; depraved ghosts, evil spirits, and wild demons cannot be given this honor.'" Thus, at the very beginning he constitutes the existence of two groups of spirits: those worthy of being worshiped and those unworthy of this honor. He declares his intention to write only about the first group, leaving in silence the unworthy spirits. The number of these unworthy spirits seems to greatly exceed the number of "worthies." Lý Tế Xuyên continues: "Divine beings dwelling in our Realm of Viet since ancient times, worthy of being worshiped with temples and sacrifices, are indeed many! But how many are able to perform great achievements that are a mystery to the living?"¹⁷ With these words he makes a further distinction between ordinary "worthies" and the "worthiest" ones. The ground for this classification is the performance of "great achievements that are a mystery to the living." Việt Diện U Linh Tấp is a register of the spirits to be emulated and worshiped, spirits approved by the political authority.

The Việt Diện U Linh Tấp is created in the genre of spirit hagiographies reported to the court in later centuries, at which time official recognition was granted in exchange for devotees adopting identities for their spirits that posed them as pillars of dynastic authority. In this sense, this is a collection of "antifolk" stories, as the spirits selected to be described were not selected by "folks" but by literati in order to distinguish between the good and bad customs of villages.
O. W. Wolters, analyzing the Việt Điện U Linh Tập, noted how successful relationships were established between Vietnamese rulers and local spirits "only if the ruler alertly apprehends a spirit’s presence, if necessary testing it, appoints it to a post of military responsibility, and rewards it for its contribution to victory. The spirit, who always salutes the ruler, now joins the entourage. When this procedure is followed, victory is certain." However, what if the ruler and the spirit are incompatible? In the collection itself we see a wonderful example of this. The story of Lý Thường Kiệt, a military leader and provincial governor in the eleventh century, relates that he acquired significant power over the spirits. "All rascals who gave importance to ghosts and demons and played at being professional mediums in order to deceive others were severely punished by the Thái Üy [the supreme military rank bestowed on Lý Thường Kiệt]; more than half of them were banished and their filthy practices were washed clean. From then on, shrines to evil spirits became places to worship benevolent deities.”

There are no successful relations, salutations, or entourage. On the contrary, this is a war of extermination between the authority represented by Lý Thường Kiệt and the evil deities expelled from their temples, where they had been worshiped by their devotees. In general, Việt Điện U Linh Tập is a first step by dynastic authority, represented by Lý Tế Xuyên, to politicize the world of spirits. This was done by selecting approved spirits and recording narratives chosen to describe them. At the same time, when Lý Tế Xuyên compiled his work, there were apparently a variety of other spirits worshiped by the people, and also stories about them, that he chose not to include in his work because they did not fit his purpose.

The texts we have considered in this section, dating from the Lý and Trần dynasties, show a concern for representing deities who exemplify the moral virtue of loyalty to dynastic authority. In the next section we will consider fifteenth-century texts from the early Lê dynasty that bring divine beings into historical narratives to give potency to dynastic claims upon the past.

SPIRITS AS HISTORY: LĨNH NAM CHÍCH QUÁI AND ĐÀI VIỆT SỮ KỲ TỔÀN THỦ

After the Việt Điện U Linh Tập, the next surviving work describing spirits is the Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái (Wonders Plucked from the Dust of
Linh Nam), a collection of twenty-two stories. While the time of the creation of these stories is unknown, the preface and postscript, written by the compilers and editors Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú, are dated 1492 and 1493, respectively. Both of these men were highly educated literati. Vũ Quỳnh (1452–1497) had a brilliant career as minister of war and director of the National Office of History. He wrote Đại Việt Thông Giám (General Mirror of Great Viet), a version of the official court chronicle, and actively participated in editing Đại Việt Sử Ký T Unable to read the text on the right. In their preface and postscript, these two men surmised that the stories they edited were heard and written down by literati of the Lý and Trần dynasties (eleventh–fourteenth centuries). They further suggested that the stories had been first written down before the Ming occupation of 1407–1427, when many texts were reportedly lost. They wrote that the stories were “wondrous” and “unorthodox,” though not extravagantly or fantastically so, and that they had been “enriched and adorned” by many hands in their own time. They reported that they compared manuscripts, added their own ideas, made changes and corrections, expunged the superfluous, and refined the stories to make them concise. The purpose of their efforts was to make it convenient to carry the compilation around in one’s sleeve for reading in moments of leisure. We can gather from this that these stories were especially popular reading among literati in the late fifteenth century, that many people were producing their own manuscripts of the stories, and that there was a definite demand for a concise version.

It is remarkable that this compilation was never printed xylographically. Today we have fewer than a dozen manuscripts, aside from the preface and postscriptum of 1492–1493, which bear the marks of much editing and addition of material. We can only conclude that if these stories were popular in the late fifteenth century, they were not popular enough in later times to be printed by succeeding generations, even when printing became widespread in the seventeenth century. So it is reasonable to conclude that this compilation reflects the fashion of the late fifteenth century, in particular of the famous Hồng Đức era of King Lê Thánh Tông (1470–1497).

Why were these stories popular then? A clue is that they were apparently used to construct an ancient past for the Việt kingdom in the historical work completed at that time. This is the annal titled Đại Việt Sử Ký
Toàn Thuật, presented to the throne by Ngô Sĩ Liên in 1479. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thuật contains much of the material that is found in the Lĩnh Nam Chí Chiqué. Both of these texts are a paroxysm of desire for antiquity and create a narrative of rulers for the southern Việt kingdom predating the first rulers in the historical narrative claimed by the northern kingdom (Ming China). The stories bear the clear imprint of a moral agenda that is Confucian and that emphasizes a critical perspective toward efforts by the northerners to subjugate the southerners, something at the forefront of the memories of educated Vietnamese in the fifteenth century after the wars with Ming.

Each story in this work ascertains one of the virtues highly regarded in Vietnamese society. As if to read the stories were not enough, Vũ Quỳnh in his preface instructs his readers what specific virtue each story exalts. For example, he describes the story of “Rice Cakes’ as celebrating filial piety, the story of “Tân and Lang” as expressing faithfulness between husbands and wives and between brothers, the story of “Hà Ô Lợi” as admonishing against lust, the stories of “Tù Đạo Hạnh and Nguyễn Minh Không” and of “Không Lỗ and Giặc Hài” as praising the ability to gain revenge against one’s father’s enemies. A historical sense of the longue durée seems to be a primary virtue for the compiler. That is why he defines as pivotal points in some of the stories the portrayal of “historical” events. For instance, he says about the story of “The Hồng Bàng Clan” that it reports the cause of the beginning of kings in the land of Việt or about the story of “King Đa Thoa” that it relates the first inklings of the destiny of Champa. Historicity and Confucianization were elements typical of the Hồng Đức era, when Vietnamese literati were shaking off the memory of Ming conquest at the beginning of the fifteenth century and striving to implement a certain Confucianization of their society.

The Lĩnh Nam Chí Chiqué, despite its attribution to earlier times, reflects the intellectual fashion of the Hồng Đức era and bears the imprint of an agenda to produce a historical narrative beginning with mythological material. In fact, the Lĩnh Nam Chí Chiqué might be seen as a history of Vietnamese “prehistorical” times. Out of twenty-two stories comprising the Lĩnh Nam Chí Chiqué, fifteen stories are situated in the times of or connected to prehistorical kings, starting from Dragon Lord Lặc, the ostensible progenitor of the Vietnamese, through the Hùng dynasty to King An Dương, who overcame the Hùng. The historicity of these figures has never been proven, but they have been inserted into Vietnamese historical annals to account for the existence of a Vietnamese royal tradition.
for more than four thousand years. Of these rulers, only the Hùng kings appeared in texts before the fifteenth century: the Việt Sử Lược described them in the following way:

In the time of King Chuang of Chou [696–682 B.C.], in Gia-ninh, there was an extraordinary man who was able to cause the submission of all the aboriginal tribes by using the magical arts. He styled himself Hùng king, established his capital at Văn-lang, and named his realm the kingdom of Văn-lang. He used simplicity and purity as the basis for customs and knotted cords for government. The realm was handed down through eighteen generations and each ruler styled himself Hùng king.26

In the Việt Điện U Linh there occurs but one mention of the Hùng kings in the story of the mountain and water spirits, but reign dates are not specified, and there is no apparent intent to create a picture of Vietnamese antiquity. However, in the fifteenth century these rulers gained prominence in the Linh Nam Chiê Chiquéi and in the Đại Việt Sử Kỳ Toàn That, the official court annal.27

Both of these works open with stories accounting for the origin of rulers in the land of Việt. Both of them trace the roots of Việt kingship to Thần Nông (Chinese, Shen Nong), a legendary Chinese emperor, a patron of agriculture, and one of the sage kings. The grandfather of Dragon Lord Lạc is identified as Emperor Minh, a descendant in the third generation from Thần Nông. Emperor Minh’s younger son, Lộc Túc, described as an extremely upright and intelligent person, was designated by Emperor Minh to succeed him on the throne. But Lộc Túc refused in favor of his elder brother Nghi. Emperor Minh succumbed to his request and instead appointed Lộc Túc to reign in the southern part of the kingdom under the name Kinh Dương. Kinh Dương begot a son, named Dragon Lord Lạc, who taught people agriculture and silkworm breeding and established the official organization to rule the country.

Meanwhile, Emperor Nghi was succeeded by his son Emperor Lai. Curious about the southern kingdom, he left his consort Âu Ca behind in his palace and went to explore the domain of his cousin. Seeing the abundance of this kingdom, he forgot to go back. The southerners were very miserable to be under the yoke of Emperor Lai as their own Dragon Lord Lạc resided in the watery kingdom. They cried out to him to save them from this misfortune. Dragon Lord Lạc answered their appeal by
appearing and stealing Emperor Lai’s consort from the palace. When Emperor Lai eventually came back, he was furious to find that his spouse had been stolen. But all his attempts to obtain her return were in vain as Dragon Lord Lạc was a skillful sorcerer and terrified anyone who approached his abode. When Emperor Lai was succeeded by his son Emperor Du Vương, the line of Thần Nông came to an end because Du Vương was defeated in a battle against those who tried to seize his throne. Dragon Lord Lạc continued to live with Âu Cơ, and they produced one hundred sons. But soon after that Dragon Lord Lạc again departed to his watery kingdom, and Âu Cơ raised their children. The abandoned mother and sons remained on land; in a time of distress they called out for Dragon Lord Lạc to return to them. Dragon Lord Lạc then appeared and explained that it would be impossible for him and Âu Cơ to live together as they were from opposite sources, yin and yang, mutually exclusive, and thus he suggested dividing the children so fifty of them would stay on land with their mother, while the other fifty would accompany him into the watery kingdom. From those hundred brothers all Vietnamese were born.  

While it can be noted that this story supplied the Vietnamese with a history on a par with that of the Chinese “golden age,” I would like to suggest that this story was intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Vietnamese over the Chinese, both of whom came from the same ancestor, Thần Nông (Shen Nong). This superiority has at least three different aspects: morality, natural resources, and the mandate of heaven. Regarding the first, the younger sibling, Lộc Tục, although designated as heir by his father, renounced the throne in favor of his elder brother, thereby demonstrating a moral quality comparable to that of the Duke of Zhou, who in classical history served as regent for his minor nephew and rejected the throne when it was offered to him in order to give it to the lawful heir. The Duke of Zhou (eleventh–twelfth centuries B.C.E.) was considered a pattern for emulation in Chinese history. The Vietnamese story appears to suggest that the Duke of Zhou was in fact emulating the more ancient virtue of Lộc Tục. Furthermore, it is usually the Yellow Emperor who is credited in China with establishing official institutions, but chronologically he follows Thần Nông. By portraying Dragon Lord Lạc as a cultural hero with the same merits that the Chinese credited to the Yellow Emperor, the Vietnamese could claim precedence in this domain also, since Thần Nông, Dragon Lord Lạc’s ancestor, supposedly predated the Yellow Emperor.  

Another point of superiority is seen in natural resources: Emperor Lai
forgot about his own kingdom when he saw the kingdom of his cousin. The south was much more affluent and attractive in comparison with the north. Moreover, a third aspect is the loss of the mandate of heaven in the north and its continuation in the south. The line of Thần Nông/Shen Nong in “China” was extinguished, while in “Vietnam” his line was in full blossom: at the time when Emperor Lai’s son perished in battle, Dragon Lord Lạc had produced his hundred sons.

What distinguishes the Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái from the Việt Diên U Linh is that the emperors, instead of having divine beings in their entourage, as happens in the latter, in the former are turned into divine beings themselves, and, as such, they are in command of godly powers. This may explain why Dragon Lord Lạc left his people and his family to reside in the watery kingdom, for he was sure that with his divine power he would be able to assist them in the hour of need from wherever he might be. Dragon Lord Lạc continued to exercise his divine power during his own reign, as is seen in stories about his slaying demons who tormented his people: the fish demon and the fox demon. Moreover, he continued to give supernatural assistance during the reigns of his descendants, the Hùng kings, of whom there allegedly were eighteen generations. There are stories about him advising them in times of need.

Nine of the stories in the Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái are put in the “historical context” of the Hùng kings. These stories vary significantly in their topics. Some of them explain the nature of Vietnamese habits and customs, as, for example, the stories about rice cake, watermelon, and betel. Some describe “historical” events, as, for instance, the story of the Heavenly King, who gained an upper hand against the An invaders, or that of Lý オン Trọng, a herculean man dispatched to the imperial court in the north. Others relate the origins of climatic phenomena such as the monsoon rains, as in the story of the mountain and water spirits, or show the divinization of mortals, as in the story of Chế Đông Tử and Tiên Dung. What unifies all these stories is that they celebrate moral virtues and refer to the time of the Hùng kings, or the time before contact with Chinese. While the ancient kings can be seen as guarantors of the antiquity of customs, in fact, I think, the customs here are to legitimize the Hùng kings as real historical figures during whose reign many features distinguishing Vietnamese from others are supposed to have developed.

The compiler of the Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái can best be understood as “the transcriber of his audience’s desires,” the definition Bruce Lincoln applied to James Macpherson (1736–1796), who published poetry attrib-
uted to Ossian, a third-century Scottish blind bard later proved to be fraudulent. Vu Quỹnh sensed the desire of the ruling dynasty to ascertain the antiquity of Vietnamese history and kingship, which apparently matched his own aspirations as an intellectual to see his kingdom able to boast a deep-rooted and rich heritage. Comparing Vu Quỹnh to Macpherson and the Lỉnh Nam Chích Quáí to Ossian’s ballads, I suggest that the role of “erudite gentlemen of the present time” to “edit and polish” the stories, as Vu Quỹnh mentions in his preface, surely exceeded mere editing and polishing and rather represented a much more active role of actually creating stories.

In this respect, different versions of one of the stories included in both the Viêt Điền U Linh Tạp and the Lỉnh Nam Chích Quáí may be instructive, namely, the story of the Heavenly King, the spirit of Phù Độ̀ng. The Viêt Điền U Linh Tạp does not provide any historical context for the appearance of this spirit, briefing the readers only on the fact that a temple was built, citing oral tradition and the aforementioned Bảo Cục Truyện. Moreover, this spirit is placed under the rubric of “spirits of nature,” together with the mountain spirits, water spirits, earth spirits, and the like, rather than with spirits identified as having lived as human beings. The only common feature of the stories in the two collections is the title Soaring to Heaven Spirit King (Xung Thiên Thần Vương), conferred upon the spirit by Emperor Lý Thái Tồ̄ (1009–1028), and the location of the spirit’s temple, which became the formal signifiers of this spirit’s cult.

In the Lỉnh Nam Chích Quáí, the spirit of Phù Độ̀ng is firmly and unmistakably rooted in the historical context of the Hùng kings, and the spirit is portrayed as a defender of the country against the Ân (Yin or Shang). This is a story of a miraculous boy who did not talk and could not sit up at the age of three, but then, having heard that his country was endangered, boldly volunteered to destroy the invaders and requested an iron horse, an iron sword, an iron rod, and an iron hat. He alone destroyed the Ân army and, victorious, flew up into heaven riding his horse. This story might be read not only in the historical context of the assertion of antiquity, but also as an allegory of Vietnamese potency, which remains dormant until the time of need and then fully reveals itself to wipe the enemies off the face of the earth. It is a reasonable supposition that this image of a hero withstanding hordes of foes appeared after the Ming invasion in the fifteenth century, for it is not found in the Viêt Điền U Linh Tạp, the predecessor of the Lỉnh Nam Chích Quáí, even though the former
was written almost half a century after the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{34}

The material in \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí}, as edited by Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú, represents leading voices in the orchestration of Vietnamese antiquity. It was the basis and stimulus for many other voices. For example, in the work \textit{Hồng Đức Quốc Âm Thi Tạp} (A Collection of Poetry in the National Language from the Hồng Đức period), attributed to Emperor Lê Thánh Tông and his circle of poets and dated 1495, we find poems about the Heavenly King, Mỹ Ê, Chư Đồng Tử, and Lý Ông Trọng that are prosodic extensions of material in \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí}. I say from \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí} and not from \textit{Đại Việt Sư Ký Tần Thụt} because these poems are more in tune with the former than with the latter. For example, Chư Đồng Tử, the commoner consort of a Hùng princess, is completely absent from the \textit{Đại Việt Sư Ký Tần Thụt}, while the \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí} relates this story. Another, perhaps more subtle, example is seen in the poem on the Heavenly King, in which he is described riding the “iron horse,” a detail absent from the \textit{Đại Việt Sư Ký Tần Thụt} but present in the \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí}.\textsuperscript{35}

Literatus Đặng Minh Khień (1456?–1522) gave precious documentation for the works we are discussing.\textsuperscript{36} Being, like Vũ Quỳnh, a high-ranking mandarin in the Office of History (Bí Thư) and later the minister of rites, he had access to all of the works we have been discussing, as documented in the preface to his \textit{Vinh Sư Thi Táp} (Collection of Historical Poems),\textsuperscript{37} written in the fifth year of the Quang Thiệu reign period (1521).\textsuperscript{38} “During the years of the Hồng Thuận reign period [1510–1516], I entered the Office of History. I wanted to write about antiquity, but the books kept in the Office of History endured great losses because of the fire of war. In their entirety I found only the \textit{Đại Việt Sư Ký Tần Thụt} of Ngô Sĩ Liên, the \textit{Đại Việt Sư Ký} of Phan Phú Tiến, the \textit{Việt Điện U Lính Tạp} of Lý Tế Xuyên, and the \textit{Lính Nam Chích Quáí} of Trần Thế Pháp.”\textsuperscript{39} He consulted these works and produced two of his own: one was \textit{Đại Việt Lịch Đại Sư Ký}, which can no longer be found; the other one is the aforementioned \textit{Vinh Sư Thi Táp}, which has survived to the present time. This work incorporates 125 poems on personalities starting from the Hồng Bàng period to the end of the Trần dynasty at the end of the fourteenth century. While this work still awaits a researcher, it is evident from first glance how much it was influenced by the works Đặng Minh Khień consulted, in terms of both borrowing information and
ideological inspiration in his quest to ascertain Vietnamese antiquity. But, for our purpose here, the most important point found in Vĩnh Sử Thập Tạp is the perception of both Việt Điện U Linh Tạp and Lính Nam Chích Quái as much more than merely “wondrous stories of spirits” or “collections of folktales” but rather as historical writings to be put in the same class with official court annals. Not only were these two works kept in the Office of History, but they deserved the attention of such a highly educated scholar as Đặng Minh Khải, who twice led diplomatic missions to the Ming court.

While the historical annals established a new framework for Vietnamese history, the spirits and the events described in the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp and especially the Lính Nam Chích Quái helped to popularize this history in the form of tales. Kiều Phú pronounced in his postscript that the latter book was intended for people to carry it in their sleeves to read in time of leisure. From these “sleeves” the stories became incorporated into many other stories, annals, and documents, and ended up firmly established as evidence of Vietnamese antiquity. Vư Quỳnh stated in his preface: “Everyone, from young to old, honors these stories, finding both pleasure and correction in them, thereby taking their place with the firm obligations of morality and associating themselves with public virtue.”

Thus, his intention was not to describe spirits and their cults but to use them to relate the history of his country and to propagate the moral standards to be observed by the people and the spirits worshiped by them.

Comparing the two texts, the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp and the Lính Nam Chích Quái, offers similarities and differences. The major similarity is that both works produce history, and, in both, history is presented not as a series of contingent events but rather as an immanent teleological process seen through a divine lens. Differences between the two texts are not seen as much in the structure of the narratives as in features related to their historical contexts. The Việt Điện U Linh Tạp is a product of the Buddhist stronghold of the fourteenth century and of leniency toward non-Buddhist spirits. The stories are explanations or attempted explanations of the appearance of the cults, and all end with lists of honorific titles bestowed by royal authority upon the described deities, signifying a relationship between the authorities at the center of the realm and the spirits scattered across the realm and out to the peripheries. The center was drawing divinity from the peripheries and including it in its entourage. On the contrary, in the fifteenth century, in the Lính Nam Chích Quái, honorific
titles granted to spirits are almost totally absent because, in the central-
ized and Confucianized kingdom, the center expanded to swallow the pe-
ripheries, making itself a divine power.

After the fifteenth century, a new trend toward rationalizing the
spirits appeared, whether by organizing them into pantheons based on
schemes of divinity to facilitate worship or by processing them into a
bureaucratic hierarchy to facilitate the assertion of royal patronage and
control over religious practices. This trend encouraged ideas about the
ranking of deities and gave new importance to providing deities with ha-
ghiographies to demonstrate their worthiness for acknowledgment by the
political authorities.

RANKS AND HAGIOGRAPHIES: THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF THE
SPIRITS

Eventually, to enable rulers to supervise a supernatural domain in-
creasingly understood by educated people in rationalized terms, the spirits
were registered and organized. Their “organization” was influenced by the
ideal of an earthly bureaucratic system. Signs of this bureaucratization are
seen in the idea of thành hoàng (commonly translated as “tutelary spirit” or
“spirit-protector,” chenghuang in Chinese) and that of granting honorific
titles to the spirits. In China, according to David Johnson, the idea of
chenghuang, which appeared in the sixth century, did not take root until
the eighth century.41 The custom of granting titles to local spirits was
common in Song China by the twelfth century, when Neo-Confucianism
affirmed a relation between the state and a metaphysical realm that came
to be popularly inhabited by a great host of spirits, ancestral and other-
wise.42 In Vietnam before the fifteenth century, only several instances of
granting a spirit the title of thành hoàng are known, and they, such as
those in the Việt Điện U Linh Tạp, were in the context of entourage rather
than bureaucracy. But in the early fifteenth century, during the course of
the Ming occupation when Neo-Confucian ideology gained a foothold in
Vietnam, the phenomenon of officially recognized village deities as a bu-
reaucratic exercise spread widely.43

The institution of thành hoàng was intended to help rulers to control
this multitude of spirits. The Chinese compound chenghuang means “em-
peror or god of the walls or moats.” Walls or moats served to defend
a place from outer threats. Gods of these walls rendered a supernatural
power to these physical defensive belts. In China chenghuang were city gods. As G. William Skinner observes, the chenghuang “was seldom worshiped by the rural populace, and his annual birthday festival was organized by and for residents of the capital.” In contrast, in Vietnam the thành hoàng is a spirit-protector of villages. I account for this distinction by the differences between Chinese and Vietnamese societies: in Vietnam the number and significance of cities was smaller than in China, and hence the main level of social organization in Vietnam was the village. Villages enjoyed very significant independence vis-à-vis central authorities. There is a Vietnamese saying that the laws of the emperor yield to the laws of the village. While village tutelary spirits were a major part of the religious life of the village, they could not be disregarded by the central authority and were to be included in a statewide religious hierarchy. Tutelary spirits were ranked as the spirits of the supreme rank, the spirits of the middle rank, and the spirits of the lower rank. Apparently, the appointment to a certain rank was initially a matter of the spirit’s capability to demonstrate its divine power. In the eighteenth-century account of Adriano di St. Thecla on Vietnamese religious life, we find the following description of the ranking of the spirits:

The spirits are ascribed to their ranks by means of a public test, this test is held with these ceremonies. An altar for all Thần [spirits] under examination is erected inside a certain enclosure at the designated place in the city, and on this altar names of all Thần are inscribed. After this, bulls are led close to the enclosure, in the same number as the number of spirits on probation, and on each bull the name of a Thần is written, to which the bull belongs. The highest prefect, sent here by the king, commands a Thần by calling his proper name; if the spirit wants to increase his rank, he kills the bull, and for that reason the bull is led inside the enclosure; and if this Thần, after being named, kills it, he is promoted by a royal certificate in which his services are praised, and his name is put into the register where other ranked spirits are listed.

As is seen from Adriano di St. Thecla’s description, the authority, in the person of the highest prefect, was present at the probation ceremony, but his role was limited to that of an observer or a guest of honor allowed to call the spirit by its name. His presence rendered royal aura to the whole ceremony and connected the margins, or the village, to the center, or the capital. However, the role of the highest prefect, and through him
of the authority, was not decisive, but rather the final verdict was left to the success of the spirit in killing the bull. Thus, the temporal authority merely had the role of recording the fact of success or failure in their registers. But, as Adriano di St. Thecla observed, “at the present time, nobody has seen this ceremony of promoting spirits, which is described as having taken place long before.”47 We are not aware of how “long before” this ceremony took place, but given that the account was written in the middle of the eighteenth century, we can surmise that it ceased its existence at least in the seventeenth century. I suspect it happened even earlier, perhaps in the late fifteenth century during the reign of the Confucianist king Lê Thánh Tông, during a phase of centralizing and systematizing political, social, and cultural authority.

So, why and how did the procedure of ranking the genies change? First, let us consider why. One explanation lies in the growth of the number of tutelary spirits, which could easily make it impossible to delegate an official, even if not the highest prefect, to supervise the ceremony. Second, the authorities, consolidating their power, decided not to leave the promotion of the spirit to chance or to the will of a spirit, especially because it did not depend on the moral nature of the spirit or the political orientation of its followers. The authorities started to see that the most important factors in terms of their pedagogical agenda toward the people were the biographies, the moral qualities, and the deeds of the spirits.

The people, the spirits, and the authorities were mutually dependent. People needed spirits to protect them, to reward the good, and to punish the evil. The spirits needed human recognition even to exist as part of human culture and experience. Spirits had no humanly discernible existence unless people erected shrines to them, made offerings to them, and honored them with high titles given to those listed in the official royal register. Moreover, the titles became a matter of pride for every community as they reflected the potency of their genies, which in turn was a signifier of the strength and status of the community itself. Since the titles were granted by the imperial court, both people and spirits were connected to the authorities. The authorities, by granting the titles, brought the spirits into the sphere of their influence. In this situation they reduced the spirits to the status of their subjects, even if venerated.

The number of spirits worshiped in the kingdom and their variety was indeed extensive at that time. According to the Annan chiyan, a text about the Vietnamese by a Ming author who used information from the Ming regime in northern Vietnam in the early fifteenth century, the wor-
ship of miscellaneous spirits to ward off troubles was the most prominent form of religious practice: “The ancient customs in Chiao-chih [northern Vietnam] were to venerate spirits. There was excessive building of shrines. When one encountered disaster, one hurried to witches and wizards... In the lands of frontier tribes these customs prevailed and need not cause wonder.”

Many of the spirits were not as worthy as the ones described above. People worshiped thieves, night soil collectors, and others whose moral qualities were dubious but who proved themselves responsive to the prayers of the people in time of need. The central authorities tried to eliminate the cults of these “unworthies.” In order to do so, according to one scholar, “[u]nder the early Le dynasty (1427–1527), the Ministry of Rites obliged all the villages to declare their tutelary genie, adducing the origin and legend corresponding to each deity. The genies of immoral character became the object of prohibition.” It was at this time that the first hagiographies (thần tích) apparently were written to be submitted to the throne to obtain official recognition of cults, that is, to obtain honorific titles for the genies.

However, state policy was unsuccessful, as people were faithful to their spirits and adamant to keep their cults despite official prohibitions. People were determined to exercise their liberty. In the words of Michel Foucault: “Liberty is a practice... The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them. This is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable of being turned around. Not because they are ambiguous, but simply because ‘liberty’ is what must be exercised.” Any exercise of governmental authority had to come to terms with the actual practices embedded in the habits of the people. James Scott suggests in a different context that hagiographies submitted to a court could be “hidden transcripts” that enabled public recognition of a deity behind which was hidden the authentic local attitude: “the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.”

Open conflict between the authorities and devotees was usually averted by the resourcefulness of the devotees. One of the means they used was, as Nguyễn Văn Ký described it, the “adoption” of a national hero as a tutelary genie, who is then officially declared to the central authorities: “Meanwhile our national hero finds himself surrounded by an army of servants, ‘necessary’ guardians of his grandeur. This circle of servants is
penetrated by the real genie, officially forbidden to be worshiped. For the village, the battle is finished and finished successfully. Not only did it not renounce its cult, but it also managed to get its genie, otherwise forbidden, endorsed by the central authority.” Another possibility was to invent a biography of the objectionable genie to turn him or her into a respected personality and a potent spirit.52

It was also possible to legalize an otherwise prohibited genie by supplying the deity with an invented legend of his or her origins and merits or else by tricking the authorities as described by Hà Văn Tấn in the case of so-called fertility deities, that is, worshiping male and female reproductive organs. Officially perceived as “lewd deities,” they were worshiped under the “roof” of highly praised national heroes and heroines:

For example, in Nơi (Văn Nhược) hamlet, Văn Phú village (Mỹ Hào district, Hưng Yen province), formerly there was worshiped a stone mortar and pestle set in the inner sanctuary, but we can clearly perceive the mortar and pestle as representing human reproductive organs, and the Thành Hoàng here is Phạm Thị Lương, a young woman who died in battle against invaders and who received royal appointment as Princess Lương Lang, but we can also recognize [from linguistic and local usage] that Lương and Lang are secret pronunciations of the word nồng in the expression nỗ nồng, which refers to male and female genitals. In Túc Mạc village (Nam Đình), one of three Thành Hoàng has the name Princess Thực Công, and in the demotic script her name was written as Công Nương. This woman deity was considered to have been a general of the Hải Bá Trường. But we see that the meaning of Công is a short stick, and this is again clearly written in the name Công Nương, so it is apparent that here is another nỗ nồng of reproductive organs.53

These practices were not unique to Vietnam. It has been demonstrated that the cult of the Five Emperors in China was repeatedly adapted to cultic forms approved by dynastic authorities.54 It is possible to assume that the authorities were aware of the tricky schemes of their subjects, but they preferred not to react to them, avoiding potential conflicts. In Vietnam, villages, while officially under the rule of the center, have generally lived according to their own laws, traditions, and customs, which in part might be explained by weak centralization until the fifteenth century, when Lê Thánh Tông succeeded in effecting a relative and temporary consolidation of dynastic power. After his reign central authority crumbled amidst in-
ternecine wars in the sixteenth century and the later division of the
country into two principalities, north and south, and endless dynastic
turbulence until the nineteenth century. Thus, villages were the most sta-
bile units in the shattered kingdom of Việt and expected to be treated
with due respect and indulgence. The “moralizing” pose of the authorities
and the “pragmatic” pose of villagers could comprise either mutual chal-
lenge or mutual toleration. Everyone preferred the latter. It was convenient
to both sides: the authorities could keep their face as the ruling, indo-
ctrinating agent, and, at the same time, they could gain the villagers
allegiance by acknowledging their spirits; the villages also did not lose,
as official status and honorific titles of spirits eventually became a subject
of competition among villages, who challenged each other over who had a
more potent guardian. Hence, the cults became a means for maintaining
peaceful coexistence between the center and the periphery and a focus for
accommodating competing local aspirations.

According to Đinh Khắc Thuân, the first people to compile hagiogra-
phies in Vietnam were Nguyễn Cơ and Lê Tung.55 I could locate only one
hagiography written by Nguyễn Cơ and no information on the author
himself.56 Of the hagiographies penned or signed by Lê Tung, however,
at least twenty-three have survived up to the present time.57 Lê Tung, un-
like Nguyễn Cơ, was one of the most famous scholars of his time. Born in
1451, he passed the second-level examinations in 1484 and occupied high
positions in the Lê government, including being an ambassador to China,
military governor of Thanh Hóa province, and minister of rites. In 1514
Emperor Lê Tương Đức charged Lê Tung with writing a concise version
of Vũ Quyển’s Việt Giảm Thông Khảo. The work that Lê Tung created was
titled Việt Giảm Thông Khảo Tòng Luận (General Summary of the Com-
plete Study of the History of Viet), and it traced Vietnamese history
from the Hồng Bàng period to the end of the Trần dynasty. This work
has survived as an introduction to the Đại Việt Sử Ký Thuận Thuật.58 In
addition to this historical work, Lê Tung penned another work in 1510,
when he was an official in the Ministry of Rites, titled Cao Sơn Đại Vương
Thần Tút Đồng Cổ (The Bronze Drum of the Great Spirit King Cao Sơn’s
Temple).59

The hagiographies ascribed to Lê Tung cast doubt about the authen-
ticity of his authorship, as one of them is dated 1429, twenty-two years
before his birth, and another one is dated 1573, sixty-one years after his
death. Seventeen are dated in the early 1470s, when Lê Tung definitely
had not yet occupied any post. Moreover, these seventeen hagiographies
describe genies worshiped in different provinces of northern Vietnam, implying that the person who collected this data traveled extensively. Lê Tùng’s young age and the requirement to visit different places do not necessary preclude his authorship, but they reinforce doubts produced by the prenatal and posthumous works. These hagiographies describe royal personalities, from the Hùng kings to Lê Thánh Tông. Considering the question of authorship is a way to examine relationships among surviving texts.

Aside from the work on Cao Sơn, there are only three other hagiographies dated in the year 1510, and they also describe Cao Sơn.60 If Lê Tùng indeed was the author of these hagiographies, his interest was concentrated on only one spirit, whose story was not reflected in any previous hagiographies and who for some unknown reason attracted his attention. The other manuscripts bearing his name, I surmise, were written later and attributed to him.

The next large group of hagiographies of which we have evidence was ostensibly produced in the 1570s. The huge number of hagiographies and the extensive territory indicated by them bring to mind a census. The project was ostensibly conducted by Nguyễn Định, of whom nothing is known except for the title ascribed to him in the manuscripts indicating that he was a member of the Academy of Sciences. Nguyễn Định’s name is not listed in the register of people who passed the examinations.61 He also is not known as an author of any literary works. But he seemed to be very prolific in compiling biographies of different genies, as more than a thousand biographies are signed with his name in 1572 alone, a fact suggesting that, rather than writing them, he might simply have signed them in the course of his official duties.62 A close examination of the census conducted by Nguyễn Định gives rise to further curiosities.

Seeming curiosities are the dates cited in the stories supposedly collected during this census. Documents signed by Nguyễn Định in the 1570s are dated with Lê dynasty reign titles, even though, as we shall see, it is most likely that he worked under the Mạc dynasty, in which case we should expect them to have been dated with Mạc reign titles. It is likely that Mạc reign titles in these documents were changed to Lê reign titles in later generations after the Lê victory over the Mạc, when indications of Mạc legitimacy, such as the right to name a year, were erased from the historical record.

Another puzzle is that the documents are from regions controlled by
both of the rival political powers at that time—the northern provinces under the Mạc authority as well as the southern provinces of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An, which were the stronghold of the Lê dynasty partisans under the leadership of the Trịnh clan. It is hardly plausible that Nguyễn Bình acted on orders from the Lê-Trịnh to collect data on religious cults in the northern provinces because, if he were a Lê-Trịnh official, he would have had no access to the northern provinces. However, it is plausible that he was executing a Mạc order to investigate and regulate village deities. The years of the census, in the 1570s, fall in a period during which the Mạc dynasty was in a relatively strong position.

In 1570 the internecine struggle between the Mạc and the Lê-Trịnh entered its second phase. Before this the struggle was characterized by repeated Lê-Trịnh attacks on the Mạc. From 1570 until 1583, however, under Emperor Mạc Mậu Hợp (1564–1593), the Mạc succeeded in consolidating their power, launching a counteroffensive against Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An provinces, and fortifying positions there.63 Surviving historical annals and comments by Vietnamese historians do not reflect any Mạc interest in social issues in the southern provinces. Written by enemies of the Mạc, extant historical materials emphasize the cruelty of Mạc attacks in Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An. However, it seems that the Mạc found it useful for the consolidation of their power to undertake a census of local cults, thereby affording knowledge of and a means for regulating an important aspect of culture for rural people. Since the dates of all the materials signed by Nguyễn Bình coincide with the phase of Mạc ascendancy and of Mạc penetration into Lê-Trịnh territory, it is more than likely that he served the Mạc. We can assume that the documents collected by him were later “edited,” after the Lê restoration, and the reign titles of the Mạc were then replaced by those of the Lê. It is not clear whether the Mạc issued any new instructions about what kind of genies were worth worshipping. It is conceivable that the new dynasty followed the practice of its predecessor, just as the Mạc continued to use the Lê law code rather than developing their own penal code.

Another question, as with Lê Tung, relates to the dating itself. We find some hagiographies dated to years falling outside the plausible span of Nguyễn Bình’s lifetime; they are dated 1470 and 1735, neither of which would plausibly allow him to conduct a census in the 1570s.64 Furthermore, some hagiographies describe the lives of spirits that, according to the dates adduced in them, did not end until after the hagiographies
were written. And some mention names of localities that did not appear until after the dates of the manuscripts. I will discuss these anomalies in the following chapter. All this suggests that these manuscripts suffered heavy editing even if they were not created from scratch in later periods.

It is difficult to say when exactly this editing happened. Perhaps it happened more than once. Most plausibly, we can date the first extensive editing and/or interpolation to the period after the restoration of the Lê dynasty, in particular between the mid-1730s and the mid-1740s, as is seen from the number of stories of genies signed by Nguyễn Hiền at that time, which count in the hundreds. Nguyễn Hiền is also a mysterious figure no traces of whom have been left except for these numerous hagiographies. His participation is registered in many cases where his name follows that of Nguyễn Bình or other people who compiled hagiographies before him. He is mentioned as a copyist (sao) of the works of his predecessors. No hagiographies are attributed to his authorship.

Nguyễn Hiền’s activity falls into the era of the Restored Lê dynasty after the demise and expulsion of the Mạc from Hanoi in 1592. Power was in the hands of the Trịnh warlords, who ascribed to themselves the glory of defeating the Mạc usurpation and restoring the Lê dynasty. The Lê emperors were completely excluded from government by the Trịnh, who eventually endeavored to polish their reputation by returning to the Confucian policies of the Lê dynasty in the fifteenth century, remembered as a golden age. Trịnh Tắc (governed 1657–1682) gradually reorganized a more regulated form of central administration, which had been in decline during the preceding century and a half of civil warfare. He did this by reviving the examination system to produce educated officials. These officials were educated with the textbooks of Confucianism, and Confucian thought soon permeated the rhetoric of government.

In 1665 the imperial court issued an edict consisting of forty-seven articles (known as the Instruction for the Reform of Customs, Công tục thập thất điển). Article 35 prescribes publishing only the classics, histories, literature, and works of philosophy that could serve public education: “As for the books of Daoism and Buddhism, superstitions and false doctrines, and the stories in the national language as well as ballads involving vagrancy and dissipation, they are not to be carved, printed, sold, and bought, as [they are] harming public morals.” This edict clearly demonstrates an attempt to install Confucianism as a guiding force for Vietnamese society.
Three successive governors of the Trinh family—Trinh Tac (1657–1682), Trinh Can (1682–1709), and Trinh Cuong (1709–1729)—managed to establish an administrative apparatus and to achieve relative stability in the territories they ruled. But, upon the death of Trinh Cuong, the country started to slip into disorder as Trinh Cuong’s son and successor, Trinh Giang (1729–1740), took the helm. Unlike his father, Trinh Giang did not enjoy popularity among his subjects. He had neither a strong program nor charisma to withstand the complicated economic and political situation that confronted him. According to one historian, Trinh Giang “plunged himself into pleasures and despoiled the treasury to satisfy his whims.” The period of his rule saw a deterioration in the political and economic situation of the country. In the eleven years from 1729 to 1740, there was a succession of three emperors, none of whom succeeded in regaining any authority. The position of the Trinh as “defenders of the Le” lost its aura when Emperor Le Hon Duc (Le Duy Phung) was strangled in 1732. This provoked a series of rebellions against the Trinh, provoking questions about their legitimacy as defenders of the royal line. The complicated situation in the country at this time was aggravated by an agrarian crisis and by an increase in taxes, which eventually led to peasant rebellions. However, this period was also marked by abundant construction of temples, especially Buddhist temples, and many Buddhist books were published. At the same time, striving to control cultural life, Trinh Giang forbade the uncontrolled importation of books from China.

In light of the above, it appears that no survey or census was conducted at that time, but rather that Nguyen Hiens work was intended to address the flimsy political situation in the country. By “making order” in its archives, the central authority eliminated any mention of the Mac. Mac reign titles were replaced by those of the Le to indicate Le authority over the entire country even during the years when it was known that the Le did not rule from the capital. By erasing positive trends under Mac rule, such as an interest in the spiritual life of rural people and the formation of cultural ties with villages, and by strengthening an image of Le royal authority, the Trinh tried to erase an image of the Le kings as powerless puppets. It is reasonable to assume that the name of Nguyen Binh was not removed from the manuscripts in the eighteenth century because the Trinh wished to retain and to appropriate the authority of his name.
However, it seems that some hagiographies were not edited but were added to existing ones, as in the next chapter we will see is the case with surviving materials about Liêu Hành. This leads to another consideration in explaining why Nguyễn Hiền was assigned to this task. The Trịnh regime was one of two Vietnamese-speaking domains. Educated people in the northern domain imagined that they were the custodians of a more venerable and authentic version of Vietnamese cultural memory than could be found in the southern domain. The rivalry between the northern and southern Vietnamese regimes was not only a military or political competition. It was also a rivalry for preeminence within a group solidarity named “Việt” that included cultural and religious practices. In establishing northern cultural authority over the south, Trịnh hagiographies sought to document a rich spiritual realm that could be used as a kind of regalia in competition with the southerners who dwelled far from the ostensible source of their culture and who worshiped spirits borrowed from foreign peoples. The Trịnh sought to produce a representation of an entire world of heroes and heroines, glorious ancestors and worthy descendants, potency and efficacy rooted in the imagined hearth of Việt civilization over which they exercised political dominance.

The crucial point is that Nguyễn Hiền reflects an attempt of authority to smooth tense relations between the court and the villages. This “revision” was conducted in order to bestow honorific titles on the spirits on behalf of the restored dynasty; a hagiography was a requirement for imperial authority to grant a title. In the eighteenth century there was an inflation of honorific titles granted to spirits, both in number and in grandiloquence. Granting titles became a means of contact between the Trịnh authority and the people. It facilitated the growth of the Trịnh entourage and the sense of identification between villages and the Trịnh regime.

The most eminent scholar of the eighteenth century, Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1783), described the devaluation of honorific titles. He said that in olden times it was not customary to give the spirits an honorific title of vương (Chinese wang, prince or king). Only the spirits of the Five Sacred Mountains and the Four Cardinal Points were given the title of vương; “as for other spirits, if they belonged to people [with a title of] duke, they would receive an honorific title of only Duke or Marquis.” From the time of the Lê restoration, the title of a deceased mandarin chosen to be a beneficial deity was conferred in accordance with his mandarin title when he was alive, “and it was decided [to what] rank [he was
to be assigned]: highest, middle, or lower rank of deities. From the Vịnh-Khánh [period, 1729–1732] to the present time, civil and military officials possessing the title of Duke and their relatives, royal teachers, royal deputies, and those with military merit when they passed away were appointed to become beneficent deities, and all were given the title of Đại Vương (Great Prince or Great King); shrines were erected to worship them and were provided with a mandarin guard."72 This suggests a well-developed system for the court to acknowledge deities of which it approved.

Indeed, we have ample evidence of granting titles to deities in the eighteenth century. The ease with which such titles were granted during this epoch demonstrates an intention to appease people, including a significant number of officials who were inducted into the high ranks of deified persons. Simultaneously, Lê Quy Đôn’s observation shows the intervention of the state into the spiritual life of the people. The increased numbers of high-ranked deities suggest an administrative procedure rather than a case-by-case approach. This is a plausible indication that a pattern was being applied for the selection of spirits, and we can reasonably assume that such a pattern was intended to affirm Confucian virtues in society. Deification manipulated human sentiment to stabilize the existing political power. This practice was common not only throughout the entire eighteenth century, but also in the nineteenth century: if, as Lê Quy Đôn informs us, there were approximately 2,500 deities listed and ranked in the royal register in 1722,73 by the reign of Tự Đức (1848–1883), according to Alexander Woodside, "the number of court-sponsored deities in Vietnam had swollen to 13,069."74

The authorities’ attempt to control spiritual life is also evident from the Nguyễn Code, article 141 of which stipulates the spirits to whom it is permissible to offer sacrifices. According to this article, each province was to establish a register of spirits “protecting the state, spirits of mountains and torrents, of wind, clouds, thunder, and rain, as well as of the spirits of the saintly emperors, illustrious kings, loyal subjects, and distinguished scholars” to whom sacrifices were allowed and required. Anyone who would make a sacrifice to a spirit not included in the register was to be punished.75

In his study of the cultural and religious aspects of the rise of the Nguyễn dynasty in the nineteenth century, Philippe Langlet emphasizes the practice of ranking deities: “Minh Mạng in 1836 and Tự Đức in 1867 retained as criteria of nomination and promotion of deities their
benevolent deeds toward the people and the state in accordance with their clear [and loyal] biographies as verified in books.”

Tu Đức also recognized less ideologically correct, more mythical, deities to obtain the protection of occult powers for his dynasty and to present his dynasty as being in harmony with local religious traditions. Minh Mạng, however, while supporting the cults of ancient sovereigns, wanted to eliminate impure deities (đãm thần). As we will see, in the 1980s and 1990s the Vietnamese government employed a similar practice.

Titles were granted at the request of a village or on a special occasion, such as the coronation of a new emperor, and were a sign of royal acceptance of local practice. The policy of granting certificates continued under French colonial rule. The requirement to submit a deity’s biography in order to obtain a royal certificate was also preserved at least into the early twentieth century, as is evident from a note of the governor of Bắc Giang province written in 1910 sending biographies of deities to his superiors. It says that “in 1907 we received the order to send the biographies of genies to obtain royal certificates.” The conferring of honorific titles on spirits through royal certificates did not start before the fifteenth century. We have only a few examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most certificates belong to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. While it is possible that certificates from earlier centuries have not been preserved, it is more plausible to conclude that during these centuries there was a tendency toward an increasing production of biographies and the proliferation of honorific titles. The reason for this is that the intellectual basis for a type of bureaucratic administration of spirit cults did not exist at the center of Vietnamese government before the fifteenth century and developed slowly in the generations after that time. Efforts in this direction became increasingly systematic from the mid-seventeenth century, when the Trịnh regime shifted from military occupation to civil government in the provinces surrounding Hanoi. It was then that the Trịnh tried to establish sympathetic contact with local communities in the northern provinces and took an interest in local religious practice, endeavoring to control and to use it to sustain the regime’s authority.

David Johnson observed that the tutelary genies in China “shared a label, not an identity.” It is also true for Vietnam. The thành hoàng protecting villages were a class of deities. It was their function that mattered, not the personality of the spirits themselves. The multitude of spirits were reflections of this functional approach, as each village chose its own spirit.
CONCLUSION

The practice of writing and anthologizing biographies of spirits existed before the fifteenth century, as we have seen, but there is no evidence of this being part of a systematic procedure for organizing recognition of and control over local cults by state authority at that time. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the Lê dynasty started to “unify” or “standardize” gods through the regulation of rites and the formalization of hagiographies as means for effecting spirit censuses. Because of the rebellions and civil wars in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, this procedure was not applied in a continuous or systematic way but was used at certain times when the state was particularly threatened by and in need of reaching out to village culture. “Writing the gods” amounted to “writing the history,” creating a common identity or social ideal.

Eric Hobsbawm defines three types of invented traditions oriented toward community, authority, and pedagogy. Although Hobsbawm relates these overlapping types of invented traditions to the period since the industrial revolution, it seems to me that “writing the gods” in premodern Vietnam also falls under his definition. Spirit biographies were written by educated men either on behalf of the royal court or to gain the favorable attention of the royal court. They were written with strong moral and political agendas. They cannot be taken as examples of folklore but rather, as I have suggested, as “antifolklore” that was recycled back into popular culture to edify public morals, to create a common memory of a distant past, to glorify an attitude of loyalty and obedience to rulers, and to exemplify Confucian virtues. These stories asserted the cultural hegemony of the state by creating a pantheon of approved deities to represent a common sense of history and a sense of social cohesion.

The collection or creation of these stories at the state level drew the attention of the literati to local cults, thereby provoking the production of numerous literary works. These works, although about gods and goddesses worshiped by ordinary people, were written by literati for literati and in themselves created a specialized context for narrating issues of interest primarily to intellectuals. This will become abundantly apparent when we turn to the biographies of Liêu Hạnh in later chapters.

In this chapter we have seen that the focus of writings about spirits in Vietnam during the past millennium appears to have shifted from devotion for a spirit, to reverence for a ruler, to loyalty for a dynasty or a state, to obedience for a bureaucratic regime. This motion from a sub-
lime experience of the supernatural to the rules and regulations of a bureaucracy is not purely diachronic. At any given time during recent centuries, these ways of representing a spirit cult in a text have been used by writers with a diversity of interests and agendas. Accordingly, the written materials about Liêu Hạnh appear to be heterogeneous and confusing until they are placed in the context of the historical specificity of their authors.
2
The Appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s Cult

Alas! A prostitute with such moral behavior is unsurpassable even by the paragons of chastity in the past.

—Liǔa zhuan from Tang Song chuanqi xuan
(Selected Chuanqi Tales of Tang and Song)

In general, in Vietnam, female deities occupy a rather modest position compared to their male counterparts. For example, of the one thousand entries in Di Tích Lịch Sử Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Historical and Cultural Vestiges of Vietnam), a recently compiled catalogue of cultural sites, only 250 sites are dedicated to female deities.¹ Among these deities are historical figures, mainly war heroines or royalty, and they are usually referred to as Kingdom/National Mother (Quốc Mẫu) or Royal Mother (Vương Mẫu). Others, usually legendary rather than historical, are famous for their supernatural powers and are simply called Mother (Mẫu) or Saint Mother (Thánh Mẫu), expressions that, lacking the stately register of kingdom/national or royal, are more endearing, giving respect to one who produces life. Liễu Hạnh is one of the most prominent deities in Vietnamese popular religion and the most famous Mother in northern Vietnam. Sometimes she is also called princess (công chúa) or noble lady (hà chúa), which creates an aura of her earthly social recognition.

Nguyễn Quang Lê, a modern northern scholar, has argued that Mother worship originated among northern Vietnamese and, like all other aspects of Vietnamese language and culture, subsequently spread to the central and southern parts of what is today the modern state of Vietnam.² The relationship between the cult of Liễu Hạnh and female deities originating in what is now central or southern Vietnam has been a topic of speculation among scholars. Nguyễn Thế Anh, a modern southern scholar working in Paris, has suggested that Liễu Hạnh was an embodiment of
the goddess Po Nagar, the most powerful female deity of the Cham people. He considers this to have been a result of the Vietnamese conquest of Champa, which extended over many generations and resulted in the absorption of aspects of Cham culture into Vietnamese culture. In this process of absorption, according to Nguyễn Thế Anh, Po Nagar’s name was Vietnamized to Thiền Y A Na, and later she entered the Vietnamese spiritual realm as Hậu Thọ Phú Nhạn (Imperial Lady of the Earth), achieving the highest status in the Vietnamese pantheon of spirits. But at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, severely restrictive and discriminatory measures were taken against the Chams, and Nguyễn Thế Anh surmises that these restrictions might well have diminished the greatness of the Hậu Thọ Lady and reduced her to the modest condition of a simple guardian spirit. Yet, as proof of the vitality of her cult, she soon became embodied as a new Saint Mother (Thánh Mẫu), the princess Liễu Hạnh.3

This is a plausible and interesting conjecture, but there is no evidence to demonstrate fluctuations in the status of the Hậu Thọ Lady. Furthermore, the legends of Po Nagar or Thiền Y A Na or the Hậu Thọ Lady do not have much in common with Liễu Hạnh. The only common feature of these two cults is their gender and their popularity. It is most reasonable to attribute Liễu Hạnh’s cult to the desire among women for a strong female deity. Such a cult could have been borrowed from Champa, or elsewhere, but it could also have arisen from among the Vietnamese, since mother figures are common to all cultures.

Trần Quốc Vương, a historian and ethnographer of Vietnam, has proposed to connect the appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s cult to the importation of Christianity in the sixteenth century, reflecting the image of the Virgin Mary in a Vietnamese indigenous deity.4 While this is a stimulating suggestion, it is very unlikely that Christianity could play such a significant role in the establishment of Liễu Hạnh’s cult in the sixteenth or seventeenth century since at that time the influence of European missionaries in Vietnam was insignificant, to say the least. However, since Liễu Hạnh’s cult and Christianity spread at the same time in seventeenth-century northern Vietnam, the image of the Christian Mother may then have influenced her appellation as a Mother.

Anthropologist Steven Sangren, in his study of Chinese popular religion, observes that the “Eternal Mother” was the supreme deity in several Chinese sectarian traditions. Her devotees believed that she was an ancestor of all the other deities of the Buddhist and Daoist pantheons and pre-
ceded them in age, status, and authority. Indeed, the idea of the Mother is very important in Daoism. For instance, Laozi, alleged founder of the Daoist school, according to all accounts had only a mother; his father is never mentioned. This undoubtedly highlights his divine genesis, a spirituality endowed by heaven, and his release from Confucian patriarchy. It was his mother who physically brought him into the world and enabled him to realize his earthly mission. Thus, she is a mediator, a connector between the spiritual and earthly realms. In the *Dao de jing*, the Dao is called the “mother” of the world, which, in the words of N. J. Girardot, “is reflective of numerous mythologies where creation involves a cosmic ancestral giant, animal, or Great Mother that spawns a male and a female offspring who in turn incestuously engender the human world.” The Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang Mu) came to occupy one of the highest positions in Chinese cultic practice long before the appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s cult.

How is it possible to date the origination of a cult? The simplest way perhaps, whenever it is possible would be to trace the life of the figure central to the cult, if this person was an actual historical figure. Another possibility is to try to determine the dates of construction of the shrines dedicated to the cult. Yet another possibility is to try tracing the history of this cult by looking for mention of it in written and oral sources. The case of Liễu Hạnh’s cult presents great difficulty in all these respects owing to deficiencies in the materials. We do not know whether she was a real or an invented personality, there are no reliable dates for the construction of her first shrines, and information available from stories about her is conflicting, if not utterly contradictory. Moreover, the stories about her cult are post-factum—they were created because their authors were attracted to the already established cult; the stories, at least the ones that we have today, most probably did not appear simultaneously with the cult. Nevertheless, this last possibility of an approach through studying narratives about the deity is the most promising.

Spirits in Vietnam are divided into two categories: *nhân thần* (human spirits) and *tiên thần* (heavenly spirits). The former category includes spirits who were or who were thought to have been real historical personalities and thus possess an earthly biography. The latter, on the contrary, were those who made themselves known as spirits coming down to earth from their abode in the heavenly realm and thus were thought to be of divine origin. The boundary between these two groups is often indistinct, and, consequently, the assignment of a spirit to one of these categories
was often quite arbitrary. For example, the survey undertaken by the French in the 1930s reveals that the same spirit was sometimes assigned to different categories in different localities. This division, rather than helping to establish a deity’s origins, speaks for an attempt to put the world of spirits under the human control of categorization and bureaucratization. The confusion about Liễu Hạnh’s origins demonstrates the indifference of worshipers to such bureaucratization.

LIỄU HẢNH AND THE EARLY LỄ DYNASTY (FIFTEENTH CENTURY)

The Early Lễ dynasty was proclaimed in 1428 and endured for a century. In the 1520s it was superseded by the Mạc dynasty, which, after decades of warfare, was pushed aside in the 1590s by partisans of the Lễ dynasty. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the so-called Restored, or Later, Lễ dynasty reigned in theory while governance was in the hands of two rival clans, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn; these clans ruled their regional domains, the Trịnh in the north and the Nguyễn in the south, and were at war with each other for much of the seventeenth century. In this section, I will discuss four stories that date the appearance of Liễu Hạnh in the time of the Early Lễ dynasty.

The earliest date for Liễu Hạnh’s appearance is found in the story written down in the 1880s by A. Landes, a French official responsible for indigenous affairs (Story 1). This story traces Liễu Hạnh’s appearance from the time of Emperor Lê Thái Tổ (1428–1433) and places her in the region of Đêo Ngang, a mountain range on the border of Quảng Bình and Hà Tĩnh provinces in north-central Vietnam. Another legend provided by Landes describes Liễu Hạnh’s appearance at the same time but in a different location: Ninh Bình province in the southern part of the Red River plain (Story 2). One other story, cited from a text found by modern Vietnamese scholars in Nghệ An province, just north of Hà Tĩnh, does not provide the date of Liễu Hạnh’s appearance, but its narrative clearly indicates that she was in Nghệ An province no later than the first half of the fifteenth century (Story 3). There is also a story of Liễu Hạnh from Quang Nap hamlet, Nhuy Nhữ village (now Vị Nhuệ village), of Nam Định province, south of Hanoi, which occurs both in a local text and in an article published by a French colonial writer. According to this story, Liễu Hạnh was born in 1434 during the reign of Emperor Lê Thái Tổ (r. 1433–1442) and disappeared in 1473 during the
reign of Emperor Lê Thanh Tong (1470–1497) (Story 4).12 These stories propose the earliest dates for Liễu Hạnh’s human birth.

The provenances of these stories are uncertain. Stories 1 and 2 were recorded by a French official at the end of the nineteenth century and do not provide any source of information except that they were obtained from soothsayers and scholars. Story 3 is not dated, while Story 4 is dated in the year Quý Mão of the Thành Thái reign period, corresponding to the year 1903.

Stories 1 and 2 are identical in dating Liễu Hạnh’s appearance during the reign of Emperor Lê Thái Tổ, in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Story 1 opens with Boddhisatva Quan Âm (Avalokitesvara) producing eight tướng (generals or assistants), who in Landes’ interpretation were chiefs of the spirit legion,13 who transformed into statues surrounding her, and for that reason their appellation was hát bộ kim cương.14 The story is as follows:

Being exiled to earth, this daughter of the Jade Emperor was incarnated into a beautiful young woman, a proprietress of an inn. Everyone who passed by would enter the inn to have a drink and to court her. Some of them, who tried to go beyond simple courtship, died; others became insane. The rumors about this beautiful innkeeper reached the ears of the son of Emperor Lê Thái Tổ, the heir apparent to the throne and a famous philanderer, who was not long in coming in person to see Liễu Hạnh. Under the pretext that his home was far from the inn, he stayed at the inn for the night. In the night, when he decided to visit Liễu Hạnh in her chamber, he could not find her there, as she first became invisible and then transformed herself into a beautiful maid, who explained that she was Liễu Hạnh’s younger sister. Disappointed and nonplussed by what was happening, the prince finally took great fright when he saw the maid metamorphosizing into a huge fire-spitting serpent. In panic, he mounted his horse and rushed back to his palace. Upon his return, he was struck by insanity, and no remedy was able to cure him. His parents, in despair, decided to implore the Eight Kim Cương. These eight Buddhas succeeded in evicting the demonic spirit of Liễu Hạnh from the heir’s body and soul; they gained the upper hand over her in a ferocious battle at Đèo Ngang, captured her, and brought her before the emperor, who interrogated her about why she was harming people. Liễu Hạnh explained herself in the following way: “I am a daughter of Heaven. I was exiled and sent to Đèo Ngang to put it under control. See-
ing people immersing themselves in debauchery, I decided to punish them." The emperor gave Liêu Hạnh three gold grains so that she would not torment people any more and told her to devote herself to Buddhism and follow its doctrine. As for the Buddhas, the emperor ranked them as spirits of the highest rank.

This story is cast in Buddhist motifs. Buddhist deities tame and gain mastery over Liêu Hạnh. What is strange is that the story is connected to Emperor Lê Thái Tông, who is not known for any interest in Buddhism. On the contrary, he endeavored to centralize power in the kingdom, employing Confucianism as the leading doctrine and throwing Buddhism into the background of its cultural and religious life.

The location of the story gives further cause for thought: Liêu Hạnh appeared at Đèo Ngang on the border of Quảng Bình and Hà Tĩnh provinces. This area has not been central to the cult, or at least no vestiges of its importance have survived there. Most probably the cult of Liêu Hạnh penetrated there later after spreading from farther north. This place is nevertheless of particular significance. For several centuries it was the border between Vietnamese and Cham territories. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it served as the border, and often a battlefield, between the Trịnh warlords who governed the north and the Nguyễn warlords who moved to the south and governed that part of the country. The explanation that Liêu Hạnh gives to Emperor Lê Thái Tông about being sent to control Đèo Ngang may refer to her role as a border protector for the northern realm against the south.

Story 2 moves the appearance of Liêu Hạnh from the border of Quảng Bình and Hà Tĩnh provinces into Ninh Bình province, not far south of Hanoi. Instead of being the proprietress of an inn, as in Story 1, she is portrayed here as a vendor of fruits, drinks, and pictures. But her treatment of others is akin to that in the first story: it depends on how men treat her as a woman. Those who show no desire to have relationships with her beyond commercial transactions are safe. But the fate of those who try to approach her on a personal basis is indeed unenviable. But contrary to Story 1, in Story 2 Liêu Hạnh gave birth to a son, whom she brought to a Buddhist temple and left to be instructed by the bonzes. After her son was accepted into the temple, she set fire to the palace where she resided and vanished. During her sojourn on earth, according to this legend, she caused numerous deaths among the people. People erected a temple to her on a mountain road that separated the provinces of Nghệ
An and Thanh Hôa, and called it, according to Landes, Palais des Amours (Palace of Lovers). She proved herself a very potent deity, but people were apprehensive of her power. This story, too, connects Liêu Hạnh to Buddhism—not as explicitly as in Story 1, but, nevertheless, she chose a Buddhist temple as the place in which to have her son raised.

Story 3, taken from a text about local customs in Can Lộc district of Nghệ An province that cites oral lore among the villagers, is primarily a biography of two brothers who became deities. Their mother is Liêu Hạnh and their father is the reincarnation of her husband during her first incarnation on earth. The brothers are military heroes during Emperor Lê Thánh Tông’s expedition to Champa in 1471, at which time they were sixteen and seventeen years old. Thus they were supposedly born in 1454 and 1455, suggesting her first appearance sometime before 1434.

Story 4 differs from all other stories about Liêu Hạnh in its philosophical tendency:

Liêu Hạnh was born into the Phâm family during the reign of King Lê Thái Tông (r. 1433–1442). The Phâm couple, renowned for their virtue but childless, implored the Emperor of Heaven day and night to grant them an offspring. Touched by the fervor of their prayers, the Emperor of Heaven requested his second daughter, Hồng Nương, beautiful as the aurora and full of grace, to descend to the earth to become a source of comfort for the couple. Hồng Nương took the request to her heart, and, thus, the Phâmns were blessed with the birth of a daughter. She grew up to be a beautiful and virtuous young lady to whom filial piety was a binding duty. Determined to serve her parents, she stayed celibate and returned to heaven on the sixth day of the third month, when she turned forty years old.

This story is an unequivocal Confucian portrayal of Liêu Hạnh as a paragon of filial piety. It differs from ambiguous accounts provided in the first three stories, where Liêu Hạnh is portrayed as a potent, but definitely not a benevolent, power. The central figure of Story 4, on the contrary, is a dutiful daughter with no trace of vicious or vengeful inclinations. She seems to be a completely different personality with nothing in common with the heroine of the previous stories. In twentieth-century works on Liêu Hạnh, this story is considered the first in the chain of her later apparitions on earth. However, it appears that the cult performed in Quảng Nấp hamlet, Nhuy Như village (now Vị Nhứ village), of Nam
Đình province, where this story is localized, was in fact the cult of a different being.

According to the story, the heroine was an adult during the reign of Lê Thánh Tông in the second half of the fifteenth century, which was marked by an unprecedented elevation of Confucianism. There could hardly be a more worthy object of veneration at that time than a dutiful daughter sacrificing her personal happiness to ensure the happiness of her parents. But what does this story have to do with Liễu Hạnh? Nothing whatsoever. If this story indeed appeared during Lê Thánh Tông’s reign, it obtained no popularity beyond the village of its origin. This story reveals a small number of local devotees and the limitations imposed by conformity to the official doctrine. It leaves no space to express any human inclinations other than those that had already been officially imposed. There is no room in it for women to feel some alleviation of their restricted existence. Quàng Năp hamlet is located not far from Văn Cát village, where Liễu Hạnh’s cult is based, so people in Quàng Năp probably knew about the cult of Liễu Hạnh. A reasonable conjecture is that they decided to conflate their own cult with that of the famous deity, providing Liễu Hạnh with a new biography by claiming her appearance in their village before her appearance in the place where her cult apparently took root and spread.

But an even more plausible conjecture is that this story not only was recorded in 1903 but was created at that time in Quàng Năp village by worshipers of Liễu Hạnh. There was a burst of religious activity in Vietnamese villages at the beginning of the twentieth century, to a significant extent prompted by and supported by the French colonial authorities. A prominent aspect of this activity was a strong effort to Confucianize village society, seemingly the strongest such effort since the time of Lê Thánh Tông in the late fifteenth century. Confucianizing village society was extremely helpful for colonizers in controlling the indigenous population. In this context, it appears that someone in Quàng Năp hamlet decided to “Confucianize” the deity worshiped for generations there. It is unclear whether it was done in order to report a decent biography to obtain an honorific title for the deity or in an attempt to reform an otherwise controversial deity. But the content of the story and the dating of it are in complete agreement with this conjecture. Moreover, the content and dating of this story provide a bridge from a Confucianizing Vietnam of the fifteenth century to a Confucianizing Vietnam of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, as with stories 1, 2, and 3, this story also ascribes Liễu
Hạnh’s apparition to a time before that designated in nearly all other sources and claimed to be true at the central location of her worship. This device of extending the deity’s chronology deeper into the past is not an unusual phenomenon. For example, we can see the “mobility” of Laozi’s and Buddha’s birth dates being adjusted in competition for primogeniture by the followers of these schools. Similarly, places where Liễu Hạnh was worshiped that were located away from the acknowledged home of the cult tried to claim their preeminence as places of earlier apparitions of the deity.

Notwithstanding their differences in describing Liễu Hạnh, all the stories we have discussed so far connect her cult to the Early Lê dynasty. This is at odds with the stories about Liễu Hạnh that date her appearance to 1557, a time when the ruling dynasty was the Mạc (1527–1593), which overthrew the Lê.

**LIỄU Hạnh’S APPEARANCE AND THE MẠC DYNASTY (SIXTEENTH CENTURY)**

Aside from the four stories considered in the previous section, all other stories of Liễu Hạnh, with one exception that we will consider in the next section, place her appearance in the year 1557. This date is the most reasonable one on which to base a theory about the appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s cult, for this is where the evidence points. Even if a cult of Liễu Hạnh existed in the fifteenth century, it did not become prominent until the sixteenth century during the Mạc dynasty.

There are a dozen stories of Liễu Hạnh dated 1572 and signed with the name of Nguyễn Bình, whom I discussed in the previous chapter, that are ostensibly the earliest official accounts of this deity. According to the texts attributed to Nguyễn Bình, Liễu Hạnh was born into this world in the year 1557. However, Nguyễn Bình puts her death in the year 1577, that is, five years later than the date given in the text for the compilation of the story. This is an indication of the problems encountered in dating these texts. Also, there are events and allusions in these manuscripts that belong to the seventeenth century, which further eliminate the possibility of Nguyễn Bình being the compiler.

We noted in the previous chapter that in these texts Nguyễn Bình’s name is followed by the name of Nguyễn Hiền, who “reverently copied the manuscript from the original” in the third year of the Vĩnh Hưu
reign period, that is, in 1737. This date allows most of the events incorporated into the narrative to be known to the compiler, suggesting Nguyễn Hiền as a plausible candidate for this role. But even Nguyễn Hiền was not the last one who took a hand in the version of the records we have today. This is evident from the opening passage, which states that the name of the natal commune of Liễu Hạnh—Yến Thái—was changed to Tiên Hương in the fourth year of Emperor Gia Long, that is, the year 1805. Thus, the nineteenth century, if not the twentieth, is when the last changes in the manuscripts must be dated, although it is possible to surmise that, aside from changes in toponyms that can be attributed to copyists, no significant changes were made after Nguyễn Hiền. Because of these problems with the texts signed by Nguyễn Bình, we cannot use his signature with confidence to date the narratives attributed to him, but the fact that a story is attributed to him at least shows a desire to give the story a worthy pedigree.

I believe that the earliest story of Liễu Hạnh that can be dated with confidence is by Đoàn Thị Điểm, who wrote in the eighteenth century. I will discuss the work of Đoàn Thị Điểm in the next chapter. Here, I simply want to note that she dates Liễu Hạnh’s birth to 1557. Whether this date passed from earlier stories to Đoàn Thị Điểm or from Đoàn Thị Điểm’s influential story to subsequent versions of other materials is not possible to ascertain. Nevertheless, as I will argue, the year 1557 or thereabouts corresponds most plausibly to the historical, political, social, and economic context that we can conjecture for the appearance, or at least the initial flourishing, of Liễu Hạnh’s cult.

In these stories, Liễu Hạnh is portrayed as a daughter of the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity of the Daoist pantheon, who descended to earth to be born in a human family. This complicates our understanding of whether Liễu Hạnh was a real human being, albeit thought to be of divine origin or endowed with divine qualities, or whether she was purely an invention of the human imagination. This aside, the fact of her being called the daughter of the Jade Emperor indicates that the stories about her appearance in the fifteenth century were probably created later than that. In China the Jade Emperor was not elevated as the supreme deity of a spirit pantheon until the twelfth century. It might be conjectured that popular knowledge of him spread among Vietnamese during the Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century, but it is difficult to imagine that already in that century he would so quickly strike such firm roots
in the local soil as to become a parental figure in Liễu Hạnh’s stories, particularly since there is no evidence for it, and also this was a time of state promotion of Confucianism. The ideas of a celestial court presided over by the Jade Emperor and of celestial beings from that court being incarnated in human society do not appear among the Vietnamese until after the fifteenth century.\(^{18}\) The earliest era for which a plausible argument can be made for this is the time of the Mạc dynasty in the sixteenth century, when there was a major resurgence of popular religious observances in the villages of northern Vietnam.

The second half of the sixteenth century is one of the most turbulent and least studied periods in Vietnamese history. It is marked by warfare between partisans of the fallen Lê dynasty and the newly ascendant Mạc dynasty. In 1527 Mạc Đăng Dung, who rose from humble circumstances to be one of the most prominent generals at the Lê court in the early sixteenth century, overthrew Emperor Lê Cung Hoàng (1522–1527) and founded a new dynasty. Partisans of the Lê, however, reappeared in the provinces south of Hanoi and launched a struggle for power. In 1533 Nguyễn Kim, the leader of the Lê partisans, proclaimed a descendant of the Lê kings as King Lê Trang Tông. The Mạc governed the northern part of the country, the lowland provinces surrounding Hanoi, while the Lê, the Trịnh, and the Nguyễn families ruled the territories from Thanh Hóa province south. Thanh Hóa was the homeland of these clans and the site of their capital. The struggle between the Mạc and the Lê lasted for half a century and resulted, in the 1590s, in the restoration of the Lê to Hanoi and the expulsion of the Mạc from the lowlands. The Mạc took refuge in the northern mountain province of Cao Bằng and were protected there from their Vietnamese enemies by the Ming dynasty until that dynasty fell.

During the years of Mạc rule, the veneration of spirits flourished. This form of religious practice had been popular for centuries but had been significantly restricted under the Lê dynasty (1428–1527) during the fifteenth century, when Confucianism was elevated to an unprecedented level of prominence. Under the Mạc, this spiritual activity began to blossom again. Trần Quốc Vương has written that the suffocating atmosphere of Confucian domination under the Lê dynasty in the fifteenth century was significantly alleviated during Mạc rule: not only did Buddhism flourish, but also many local spirits were venerated.\(^{19}\) The rejuvenation of spirit cults at this time was related to the widespread building of
dinh, communal houses where the social and religious life of the village was concentrated. It was from this time that we have the earliest sign of the worshipping of tutelary spirits in the dinh.20

This renewed interest was stimulated by some factors distinctive to the Mac. Although Mac Đăng Dung was of low-class origin, his ancestors belonged to one of the most prominent families of Vietnamese intellectuals in the fourteenth century. This family collaborated with the Ming occupation of northern Vietnam in the early fifteenth century. After the evacuation of Ming forces, the Mac fled to dwell in the coastal province of Hải Dương and there merged with ordinary people in order not to attract attention. Despite their new, low position, the Mac managed to raise their children with good education. In my opinion, it was exactly this alloy of a high intellectual level with the experience of living among lower classes that permitted the Mac to understand the common people’s psychology and to use this understanding to their advantage. It might be that the Mac considered that giving more religious freedom would pacify a population exhausted by long wars. Also, by giving encouragement to local cults, they tried to strengthen their own position as patrons of both established and newborn cults that “belonged” to their dynasty.

For village people, there were also good reasons to develop an interest in supernatural powers at this time. Confucianism, after playing a dominant role under the Early Lê in the fifteenth century, was in decline in the sixteenth century, and ordinary people, especially women, felt a relative freedom for their spiritual activity. Also, people were tired of the difficulties of the internecine war and were looking for new hope to alleviate the uncertainty of their lives.

The literati of this time found themselves wedged between the Confucianism of their education and the numerous deities and spirits of Daoism, Buddhism, and popular cults that were venerated in the villages. Many, in the words of one Vietnamese scholar, turned away from “their predecessors’ [critical] attitudes towards the other [i.e., non-Confucian] religions, and rationalized their involvements [sic] in non-Confucian religious activities in their local communities.”21 There began a phenomenon that would persist until the twentieth century: as officials of the royal court, literati would distance themselves from popular cults; as members of their village communities, they would embrace those cults.

The cult of Lưu Hạnh either appeared or became prominent under these conditions. Why, apart from being the alleged place of the human birth of the goddess, did Văn Cát become the center of this cult? Nam
Dinh province, in which Van Cát was located, was under Mac jurisdiction. It is located exactly in the center of a triangle formed by the Mac capital at Hanoi, the home locality and second capital of the Mac at Hai Duong, and Thanh Hoa, where the Later Le were proclaimed and where the anti-Mac forces had their headquarters. Consequently, the fighting forces of the two sides constantly passed through the province where Van Cát is located. The various headquarters of the Mac armies were often located here during offensive operations against Thanh Hoa, and many battles were fought here. Most of the male population, apparently, was conscripted into the army. The women had to manage on their own in everyday life and to live in a permanent worry about their husbands and sons. Who could better understand their troubles than another woman, a female deity?

By the eighteenth century, Lieu Hanh’s cult had not only spread but had become extremely popular in locations rather distant from Van Cát. The witnesses of its popularity are a story written by Doan Thi Diem in the 1730s and missionary accounts available from the eighteenth century. Some people were spreading the cult from place to place, and those people were certainly travelers. This is corroborated by the locations of most of the temples at strategic locations on major roads or water routes easily accessible to travelers. Moreover, many of these travelers were certainly female traders and entertainers. Women dominated market and trading activities in the north, and the cult itself bears many distinctive female features, including an association with commercial activities.

At that time, so far as we know, men worshiped female deities on a very limited scale, if at all, unlike today, when many men can be found worshiping at Lieu Hanh’s temples. A distinction between male and female cults is seen in many forms of religious observance. For example, according to Przyluski’s study of tree worship, “Each village is separated into the two religious organizations of the two sexes, that of the men venerating the trees inhabited by male spirits, and that of the women venerating the trees with female spirits.” There was even a formal distinction, as different societies were organized to maintain different cults. For example, the Hoi Tu Van (Society of Educated Men) conducted the ceremonies for celebrating the arrival of spring and autumn; the Hoi Van Pha (Society of Scribes without Academic Titles) observed the cults of cultural heroes; the Hoi Vo Pha (Society of Military Officials) observed the cults of military heroes. All of these societies were for men. For women there were the Hoi Chut Ba (Society of All Ladies) for women to organize cultic and
pilgrimage activities and the Hội Đồng Nam (Society of Mediums) for female mediums dedicated to the cult of the Holy Mothers.23

Up until the twentieth century, women could not enter the đình, where villagers venerated their spirit-protectors. As Shaun Malarney has observed:

The communal house and the cult of the village guardian spirit constituted one of the primary armatures of male power in the prerevolutionary village. Its cultic activities, as well as the exclusive symbolism and taboos associated with it, contributed to the marginalization of women in village communal ritual practice. The fates of women were thought to be directly influenced by the success of the men in propitiating the village guardian spirit, but they were powerless to directly propitiate the spirit themselves. The marginalization of women in the men’s cult, however, did not translate into an absence of female religious practice in the village. To the contrary, public female religious practice centered on the other focus of public ritual activity in the village, the Buddhist temple.24

In my opinion, the communal houses and the cults of the village guardian spirits were not a “primary armature” of male power so much as a consequence of the subordination of women in the formal organization of village ritual life beginning in the fifteenth century. This subordination was the result of patriarchal family values that transformed women into subaltern “others.” Their social status was restricted by a new distinction between public and private, between the village commune and the family. The framework “commune versus the heavenly world” was a direct replica of the framework “family versus the outside world.” Even as in families men were in charge of contact with the outside world, so in the commune the connection with the spirits was relegated to the male population of the village. Women could not trespass the boundary separating the personal and the collective, between the personal realm of family responsibility and the collective realm of responsibility to care for the village unit as a whole. From this came the prohibition against women propitiating on behalf of the community. A subaltern can speak, but only for herself. Accordingly, women were not barred from chử (Buddhist pagodas), from đền (Daoist temples), or from miếu (shrines). In these places, they could contact the deities on their own behalf, not as representatives of the commune, and thereby create their own space of religious experi-
ence. Consequently, the majority of worshipers attending chùa, đền, and miếu were women.

Initially, Liễu Hạnh’s cult appeared not as a cult of a village spirit-protector but as one of numerous “private” cults that were popular among women. Such cults appeared from a combination of women’s subaltern social position and the strong economic status of some of them, especially of those who successfully engaged in trade and marketing, for establishing shrines and maintaining a cult required substantial financial contributions from the worshipers. In my opinion, female merchants, and possibly entertainers, played a crucial role in the dissemination of Liễu Hạnh’s cult. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the only village women to travel seem to have been merchants or entertainers, and only they were in a position to finance the development of this cult. It is entirely appropriate that such people would revere a deity thought to be close to traveling women and to be able to protect them and to grant them favors. Liễu Hạnh is portrayed in most stories as engaged in some kind of market or business activity, as the owner of a stall, tavern, or inn, which attests to the connection between her cult and female merchants.

Moreover, one of the main elements of the celebrations dedicated to Liễu Hạnh has been a ten-day market, called Chợ Vỉn (Vien Market) held at the Phú Đài cultic center for her worship starting from the eighth day of the first lunar month. It precedes Liễu Hạnh’s annual festival and marks the beginning of spring. This is not a usual local market but one where people arrive from both near and distant places in the country to display and sell their products. Besides commercial interest, this market has also become a center of entertainment with numerous games. People at the market also take the opportunity of being at the center of Liễu Hạnh’s cult to approach her with their requests and to demonstrate their veneration. The Vietnamese say that at this market one may mua may, bán rủi (buy luck, sell evil). This market is a prelude to the main celebrations for Liễu Hạnh that reach their peak in the third lunar month.

Despite eradication from written history during the Later Lê dynasty, some trace of a connection between the Mạc and Liễu Hạnh appears to have been kept in popular memory. According to a legend, the Mạc dynasty recognized Liễu Hạnh as “Mother” and in 1580 erected a stele to Liễu Hạnh conferring upon her the title “Mẫu Vàng Công Chúa” (Golden Mother Princess). The explanation for Liễu Hạnh’s official recognition might lie in events that are described in the Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thuật
(The Complete Historical Annals of Great Viet). Under the seventh month of the year 1580, we read that the Mạc ordered their generals to invade Thanh Hóa province; they "plundered money, property, and domestic animals of the inhabitants of the districts located on the banks of the river and went back." 27 It may well be that, during the course of this campaign, the Mạc honored Liễu Hành to gain support from people in the province that lay between their bases in Hải Dương and Hanoi and their Lê enemies in Thanh Hóa.

Although no material evidence of this Mạc stele remains, we know that a great number of the steles from the Mạc period perished in the course of time, especially after the restoration of the Lê, who sought to erase all remembrance of the Mạc, and we can conjecture that the commemorating stele in Phụ Đẫy, kept in the memory of local people, was among the steles that have not survived. Even though the existence of this stele will always remain a mere conjecture, it is still significant that the memory of this commemoration has lived among the people, crossing the barriers of official censorship. We can be confident that there were people who connected Liễu Hành to the Mạc, whether or not they in fact granted her an honorific title.

What is of even greater interest in this legend is the substance of what was remembered, that is, the granting of a title. It reveals what was important for the people to remember: not the story of the deity, not her chronological appearance, but official recognition of her potent divinity. This was something concrete, pertaining to the publicly acknowledged form of the cult, something cherished by the people, proving the efficacy of their deity. Taking this memory at face value, we can conjecture that this event dated in 1580 was the first official recognition of Liễu Hành and perhaps the only one by the Mạc. The sixteenth century was almost certainly the time of her cult’s appearance or of its supralocal development. The Mạc era ended before the cult acquired its overwhelming popularity all over the north, which we see fully developed in the eighteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, under the Lê dynasty, Liễu Hành received numerous honorific titles from the court, but I could not find any certificates earlier than the Càn Hưng reign period (1740–1786), of which one is located in the main Liễu Hành temple in Phụ Đẫy. 28 Whether information regarding such certificates has not survived or whether Liễu Hành was not recognized by the Lê dynasty before the Càn Hưng reign
period is a matter for conjecture. However, the former possibility is more plausible, for, by the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Liêu Hạnh’s cult had become one of the most popular cults in northern Vietnam, as is evident from the story written about her by Đoàn Thị Diễm in the 1730s and from the account by Adriano di St. Thecla in 1750.

Moreover, Liêu Hạnh transcended gender and social borders, eventually being acknowledged as thánh hoàng, or guardian spirit, protecting not just women but whole village communities. As a thánh hoàng she was worshiped in the communal houses and thus worshiped by men. It seems impossible to date when this happened with any certainty. The first categorization of Liêu Hạnh as thánh hoàng is in Nguyễn Bình’s account on spirit-protectors, the problematic dating of which has been discussed in Chapter 1.

**LIÊU HÃNH AND THE LATER LÈ DYNASTY (SEVENTEENTH–EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES)**

Evidence from after the sixteenth century reveals a definite effort to connect Liêu Hạnh’s cult to the Lê dynasty and to erase any memory of the cult’s association with the Mạc dynasty. We have already discussed the stories that place the appearance of Liêu Hạnh during the Early Lê dynasty. But there are some stories that place Liêu Hạnh’s appearance in the seventeenth century, thus forfeiting any possible relation between the princess, her cult, and the Mạc. The Hội Chấn Biên, a description of Daoist deities that was written or edited in the mid-nineteenth century, which I discuss in the next chapter, gives the latest date found in any text for Liêu Hạnh’s human birth, in the Vĩnh Tồ reign period (1619–1629) of the Later Lê dynasty.29 A similar date is found in one of the most elaborate, curious, and problematic family records that came to light in the twentieth century, titled Vấn Cát Lê Gia Ngọc Phả (The Jade Annals of the Lê family of Văn Cát).

In 1939 a zinc box was discovered during restoration work at Đền Sòng, one of Liêu Hạnh’s temples in Thanh Hóa province. It contained a book with bronze pages, upon which were inscribed the family records of the goddess Liêu Hạnh. The French Resident in Thanh Hóa, A. Lagrèze, published an account of this discovery a year later, providing a translation of the book.30 Since then, the bronze book seems to have perished with-
out a trace. However, in the Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi, I found a copy of a manuscript practically identical, with only a few exceptions, to the translation given by Lagrèze.

The record of Liễu Hạnh’s family in this text was ostensibly compiled by Lê Tư Thằng, identified as Liễu Hạnh’s father, in collaboration with his fellow villagers and the notables of Văn Cát on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the fifth year of the Vĩnh Tồ reign period (1623). This was putatively done in order to ensure the future worship of his ancestors by the village since he had no descendants to fulfill this obligation. The family records were edited by Nguyễn Quốc Trinh, a graduate of the special examination (đnst khoa) held in the year Mậu Dán (1638). The family record is an eloquent narrative incorporating not only genealogical history but also poetry, philosophical discourses, and even a list of property assigned to maintain the cult of the Lê family’s ancestors in the village upon the death of its last member.

According to these family records, Liễu Hạnh was a direct descendant of the Lê dynasty. Her paternal grandfather, Lê Tư Vinh, was the fifth son of Emperor Lê Nhân Tông (1442–1459). The text describes the life of Lê Tư Vinh as follows. The Lê dynasty was in decline; the Mạc usurped the throne; the royal family had to flee and disperse in all directions. The capital, Thăng Long (Hanoi), ceased to be the royal territory of the Lê clan; Lê Tư Vinh, fearing for his life, carried some gold and silver and fled, finding refuge in Văn Cát village. Immersing himself in agriculture, after ten years of hard labor he had established himself, acquiring wealth and respect among his fellow villagers. Lê Tư Vinh took in marriage a virtuous woman from the Trần clan. As a result of this perfect union, a son was born, named Lê Tư Thằng, who was to become the father of Liễu Hạnh. According to Văn Cát Lê Gia Ngộ Pháp, at the time of Lê Tư Thằng’s birth, Lê Tư Vinh was forty-four years old (thirty-four years old according to Lagrèze’s translation). Lê Tư Thằng increased the family’s fortune and also married a virtuous woman, with whom he devoted much time and effort to charity. However, for a long time he was not blessed with children.

When Lê Tư Thằng was forty-one, a son was born to him, but the child died soon after. In the year Đình Ty of the Thiên Hựu reign period (1557), on the fifteenth day of the eighth month (the mid-autumn festival day), at the age of forty-five, Lê Tư Thằng fathered a daughter. He named the daughter Giáng Tiên (“fairy who came down to earth”) because in a dream he was foretold of her birth and that she was a heavenly fairy banished to earth for breaking a precious jade cup. The text then narrates the
story of Liễu Hạnh. She is depicted as an embodiment of perfection in beauty, intellect, uprightness, and mastery of all four female virtues in work, grace, conversation, and behavior. She was married at the age of eighteen to Trần Đạo Lang, a son of Liễu Hạnh’s foster father. She disappeared after three years of happily married life, on the third day of the third month of the year Định Sưu of the Gia Thái reign period of King Lê Thanh Tông (1577). Before disappearing, she excused herself by citing the expiration of the period of her exile on earth and the necessity to go back to heaven, where she belonged. Desperate in his grief and aware that he was not able to have any other children because of his age, as he was already in his late sixties, Lê Tư Thường bequeathed his property to the village. In return and in gratitude for his family’s charitable deeds, the village took it upon itself to continue worshiping the ancestors of the Lê family. All this was inscribed in these family records.

These family records arouse strong doubts about their authenticity. Emperor Lê Nhân Tông was murdered at the age of seventeen. I failed to locate any traces of his offspring, not to mention a fifth son. But even if my conclusion of his childlessness is based on mistaken premises, there are a number of other points in the family records that arouse a reader’s suspicions about them. Relying on the information provided, we can easily figure out that if Lê Tư Thường was forty-five at the time of the birth of his daughter in 1557, then he was born in 1513, and his father, Lê Tư Vĩnh, must have appeared in this world in 1478 or 1468, depending on which version, Lagrèze’s or that of Văn Cát Lê Gia Ngọc Phả, we choose to believe. Taking into consideration that Emperor Lê Nhân Tông was murdered in 1459 and thus was unable to take part in Lê Tư Vĩnh’s birth, we cannot help but suspect some confusion or imprecision, to say the least, in these family records.

Even if we suppose that there were some mistakes in dating and try to make the ends meet from the other side, we will hardly succeed in this, and the inescapable conclusion will be that this is a piece of fiction with a remarkable disregard for historical specificity. The latest possible date of Lê Tư Vĩnh’s birth as Lê Nhân Tông’s son would be 1460. This leaves us with a ninety-seven-year gap between 1460 and 1557, the year given for Liễu Hạnh’s birth, to be covered by two people. Most sources relate that Liễu Hạnh’s father was around forty years of age when she appeared in his family, which requires that her grandfather Lê Tư Vĩnh would be around sixty years old when he produced his son. This is possible, but let us note that while Lê Tư Thường complains about not having children till
old age (his forties), he does not make any mention of being a late child himself.

As though this problem with birth dates is not enough, we face another conundrum—Lê Tự Vinh fled the capital as a result of the Mạc coup d’état. The Mạc overthrew the Lê dynasty in 1527. As noted above, the latest possible date for Lê Tự Vinh’s birth is 1460. Thus, by 1527 he had to be sixty-seven years old, a fact that eliminates the chronological plausibility of the rest of the narrative.

One more point that cannot be disregarded: the family records were compiled in 1623. If he were born in 1512, by 1623 Lê Tự Thắng would have reached the age of 111 years. Again, if we imagine that he was an example of exceptional longevity, unusual in general and in sixteenth-seventeenth-century Vietnam in particular, it is still not obvious why he should have waited for such a long time to produce this document, having lost his daughter in his sixties. We cannot attribute the distortions found in the text to his declining years and the aberration of his memory, considering the declaration that it was created in collaboration with the notables and his fellow villagers and was edited by another person, Nguyễn Quốc Trinh. Moreover, the family records read: “I [Lê Tự Thắng] am over sixty years old, I do not have any more children, nor do I have a reasonable hope to have them.” Taking the age of “over sixty,” we would arrive somewhere between 1573 and 1581, and in no case at 1623. It would be reasonable to suggest that if the family records were indeed written by Lê Tự Thắng, they could and should have been written between 1577, the date of the death of Lê Tự Thắng’s daughter, and 1581, when he became seventy. While it is not clear why the exact year 1623 was chosen to date the annals, the significance of the difference between the years 1577–1581 and 1623 is apparent when considering the change of dynastic rule. The years 1577–1581 are during the period of Mạc rule; 1623 is after the restoration of the Lê.

It seems quite obvious that these family records are a forgery. The question arises: why were they written? One supposition is that they created an honorable family tree for a person who did not have one. What is invented is a portrayal of the Mạc as the culprits of Liêu Hạnh’s ancestral exile and loss of position at the imperial court. In addition, this text demonstrates the ties of this person to the Lê dynasty and highlights alienation from the Mạc dynasty. The clumsiness of the family records, filled with unquestioned discrepancies, appears to have been produced by a desire to create a new biography, not to document an existing one. The per-
son who compiled the family annals was not preoccupied with the authenticity of his narrative. However, this is a very plausible demonstration of the Lê-Trịnh desire to eradicate any surviving connection to their rivals, the Mạc.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the creation of stories about spirits was often a result of an official requirement. They were written for official consumption. This family record was a sign of obedience to the restored dynasty and, perhaps, blatant Lê dynasty propaganda aimed at Liễu Hạnh’s devotees. Through this and similar writings, the Lê-Trịnh did succeed in eliminating the whole period of the Mạc reign from the map of religious life. Peculiarly enough, the extensive sources on village spirits I consulted for this book do not contain a single mention of any spirit as having appeared during the Mạc reign. It does not mean that the sixteenth century was devoid of spirits. Quite the contrary, it was a time for which we have perhaps the most evidence of interest in the activities of spirits. But, everywhere, the chronological time of the Mạc reign was later “fixed” and ascribed to the overlapping and corresponding Lê reign periods. The Lê-Trịnh rewrote history, rewrote life, rewrote the spirits.

SINGING GIRLS AND BAD DEATHS

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Liễu Hạnh’s popularity is found in an account written in 1750, *Opusculum de sectis apud sinenses et tunkinenses* (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese), by Adriano di St. Thecla. Adriano di St. Thecla was an Italian missionary of the Order of the Discalced Augustinians who spent thirty years in northern Vietnam, from 1737 to 1768. Despite being a missionary, Adriano di St. Thecla produced an unprecedented study of Vietnamese religions based on both historical materials and oral inquiries. Page after page, he presents a lively picture of popular Vietnamese beliefs. The authenticity and precision of his descriptions is supported by comparison with other materials on Vietnamese religion. Thus, his account of Liễu Hạnh’s cult deserves to be considered with all due seriousness along with the materials written by Vietnamese.

Adriano di St. Thecla’s account of Liễu Hạnh is important in two regards. First, it is corroboration by an outsider of the Vietnamese claim of long-term popularity for the princess’ cult. Second, it is the only account
that does not connect Liễu Hạnh to heaven but squarely defines her as a human being. The account does not provide any temporal or political orientation, connecting it neither to the Lê nor to the Mạc. It concentrates only on the nature of the deity and offers a clue for explaining some of the ambiguities and complexities in the stories discussed above. Adriano di St. Thecla writes of her as follows:

A very famous woman named Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh (Princess Liễu Hạnh) is added to them [i.e., to the most prominent spirits]. She was born in Thiện Bàn district of the southern province. Since she had sung, as they say, disgracefully and impudently, people, being jealous, killed her and threw her into the river. The Devil took her shape and name and introduced, developed, and secured her cult in many provinces. She is worshiped mainly in Quênh Lưu district in Cửa Táu village of Nghệ An province. Her temple, or miếu, is built there, where two girls attend her. When one of them leaves, another is put in her place. The girls are selected from all the girls of that district by Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh herself or by a demon with her name. The one selected is assigned to serve as one of the two attendants, or zealous servants. She is [expected] to speak when possessed by her [Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh] or by the demon. The girl, upon leaving the temple, is paid a considerable amount of money, according to the way of life she chooses.34

First of all, the opening of this passage shows that the popularity of Liễu Hạnh is not an ordinary matter. She is one of a very few famous female spirits among the multitude of male spirits with whom Adriano di St. Thecla became familiar and whom he described in his account. As for Liễu Hạnh’s origins, even though this statement does not directly address the issue of who Liễu Hạnh was or who her killers were and what the motive for their jealousy was, we can assume with a high degree of probability, based on linguistic considerations, that her murder occurred under circumstances related to sexuality. The Latin word impudica (impudicus), which is generally translated into English as “shamelessly” and which I translate as “impudently,” has a definite sexual connotation in Latin. This suggests that Liễu Hạnh was a woman of easy virtue, a singer and a prostitute, or merely a prostitute who entertained her clients with songs of a sexual character, and the people who drowned Liễu Hạnh were apparently her lovers or clients. This information is in full accord with that provided by another missionary, François-Louis Lebreton, from the Foreign
Missions of Paris. In 1782 he reported a conversation with some Vietnamese on the matter of different spirits during which he was told that the princess Liễu Hạnh was "a prostitute worshipped in numerous locations."  

The accounts of Adriano di St. Thecla and of Lebreton raise the question: was Liễu Hạnh indeed a prostitute? I am not able to evaluate the reliability of Lebreton's information on other issues. However, I can say that Adriano di St. Thecla's information is in most cases very trustworthy; he shows a sympathetic interest in local religious practices that reveals that he was not a mere purveyor of propaganda. His account should not be dismissed simply on the basis of his belonging to a missionary order and that, consequently, his account is no more than an attempt to besmirch Liễu Hạnh's reputation. In my view, Adriano di St. Thecla's description of Liễu Hạnh, supported thirty years later by Lebreton, is not without reason.

Actors and singers were reckoned beyond the pale of proper society. Their social position was among the most despised, as can be seen, for example, in the Lê Code of the fifteenth century, which legislates the inferior position of actors and singing girls (singing the ưu). In 1462 a regulation was issued requiring each candidate for the provincial examinations to submit a document from his superiors testifying to his moral character. "Singers, actors, rebels, and collaborators with enemies, along with their descendants, are forbidden to take the examinations." Notice that actors and singers are listed along with persons placed in the criminal category of the "ten heinous crimes," which was applied to the most evil of transgressors.

Descendants of those accused of some of these crimes were allowed to atone for the guilt of their ancestors. For instance, on the one hand, descendants of traitors, according to article 628 of the Lê Code, could still join officialdom under special circumstances and could redeem their position in society. On the other hand, singers and actors, as well as their descendants, according to the decree of 1462, as we have noted above, were deprived of this opportunity, as they were not permitted even to take part in the official examinations. A decree of 1499 reiterated the impossibility under any circumstances for singers and actors to be appointed to an office. Thus, singers and actors were the only professional group permanently ejected from society without any prospect of redemption, whose occupation by definition was equated with crimes considered to be the most outrageous and dangerous for society. Furthermore, not only...
could they not occupy an official post themselves, but neither could they
be married to officials. Article 323 of the code reads: "Officials or clerks
who take singers or actresses as principal or secondary wives shall receive
seventy strokes of the heavy stick and be demoted three grades. Public
servants’ sons or grandsons who contract marriage with these kinds of
girls shall receive sixty strokes of the heavy stick. In every case, the mar-
riage shall be dissolved." These restrictions were still in effect in the
early seventeenth century, as can be seen in the case of Đạo Duy Tú, a
high official in the south.42

The character pronounced 倡 (Chinese chang 倡) and used in the
code as well as in all the edicts is interchangeable with the character 娼,
unambiguously designating a singing girl or a prostitute. Thus, it appears
that “singers” were at the same time considered to be prostitutes. Support
for this interpretation is found in article 340 of the Nguyễn legal code,
which concerns the punishment of officials and their employees who go
to be entertained by singsong girls. According to the nineteenth-century
French translator’s note for this article, “[it] seems that the expression
‘public singers’ does not exclusively designate persons from families of
musicians, but also women who for a long time have devoted themselves
to prostitution, who lost all decency, whose families were registered as
people of a base condition.”43

An element of Adriano di St. Thecla’s account is echoed in other sto-
ries. For instance, the Palais des Amours, mentioned in Story 2 at the be-
beginning of this chapter, is a euphemistic translation of the original Viet-
namese Cung Đâm,44 which literally means “Palace of Lust.”

When I began my research on Liễu Hạnh, Vietnamese colleagues told
me that she was an extremely complex figure. In reply to my inquiry into
the nature of her complexity, I was told that people were apprehensive of
her because she had inflicted harm on many. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, a
modern scholar, explicitly defines Liễu Hạnh as a vicious spirit (thần
dĩ).45 Where does this malevolence come from?

Is this Liễu Hạnh’s own nature, her immoral conduct during her life-
time, to which Adriano di St. Thecla testifies? If so, why would the Viet-
namese deify a prostitute and not a virtuous woman? One of the most cel-
ibrated missionaries in Vietnam, Alexandre de Rhodes, writing in the
mid-seventeenth century, explained the reasons for deification: “If some
unworthy crook or criminal had been executed by the decision of law out-
side of the city, and if it happens by accident or by a trick of the Devil
that an ox or a buffalo, or even a pig, fell near the corpse or on the tomb
of the criminal, this vicious man is henceforth held to be a tutelary genie or a king [i.e., deity] of that place."\textsuperscript{46} Here again we see that tragic death, whether by law or by accident, resonated with the experience of misfortune and suffering, which as Paul Ricoeur has remarked, evokes both terror and pity.\textsuperscript{47}

The idea of tragic death transcends the virtues and sins of earthly life, bringing together into the heavenly realm the Trưng sisters, fighters for independence, and the alleged prostitute Lệ Huệ. In Vietnam as well as in China, these two modalities of suffering (terror and pity) are manifest in the common belief that persons whose misfortune it was to die violently would take revenge for their suffering and that their souls would not find peace but would continue to wander among the living inflicting harm.\textsuperscript{48} The suffering of such persons was aggravated if there were no descendants to perform the funerary rituals and thereby appease the fury of the dead. In the case of no descendants, the soul of the deceased became an “abandoned soul,” whose evil power was intensified. To avoid this, people venerated abandoned souls so that eventually these ghostly beings might shift their anger to mercy, and their desire for revenge would be appeased by recognition of their divine power among the living. They would become benevolent protectors of those who offered devoted worship, but they would cruelly punish those who neglected them or, even worse, showed disrespect toward them. Such abandoned souls, without the veneration of living descendants, could be more widely worshiped by people without any family connection to them. They were in a position to treat all with equality and impartiality.

The complexity of Lệ Huệ’s reputation fits exactly with this syndrome of unfortunate death and ritual abandonment and probably explains the initial reason for worshiping her. Consequently, all indications are that Lệ Huệ, whatever her real name may have been, was a real person who died a violent and premature death and who was subsequently deified.

MODE OF WORSHIP: FIRST TEMPLES AND CELEBRATIONS

Little is known of the history of Lệ Huệ’s temples. Lệ Huệ has traditionally been called the Goddess of/from Văn Cát, and Phú Văn temple in Văn Cát is considered Lệ Huệ’s place of birth as the inscription on the temple gate reads “Giáng Sinh Tụ” (Temple [to commemorate
According to the Tien Tu Phat Ky (Record of the Tien Temple) manuscript, the first shrine was built there in 1642, to be rebuilt in stone in 1670. According to an inscription in the temple itself, a modest construction was completed in the Canh Tru reign period of the Le dynasty (1663–1671).

Nearby appeared Tien Huong temple, which later became the main center for Lie Anh’s cult. Pham Dinh Kinh (1669–?), a native of the locality, describes it in a poem titled “Ba An Thai Tien Nu Tu” (Visit to the Temple of the An Thai Fairy). The poem traces the history of Lie Anh’s place of worship to the reign of Emperor Le The Tong (r. 1593–1599), when a small “grass-thatched” shrine was built; this was rebuilt and expanded into a stone pavilion during the reign of Emperor Le Chanh Tong (r. 1643–1649). According to the poem, Lie Anh was worshiped there because her husband’s family lived there. There is no extant inscription or any other material to corroborate Pham Dinh Kinh’s poem, but the earliest date he assigned to the temple in Tien Huong is as close to the date of her alleged death in 1577 as is possible without acknowledging the Mac dynasty, for Emperor Le The Tong was the first emperor of the Le restoration after the expulsion of the Mac. Another document dates the first construction to 1642, similar to one of the dates suggested for Van Cat temple. In Chapter 5 we will analyze the relationship between these two first shrines, where the first festivals of the princess also originated.

The annual festival dedicated to Lie Anh has been held on the third day of the third month, the day that is marked in the tradition as the day of her death or disappearance. In Vietnamese tradition it is the date of death, not birth, that is considered of paramount importance, as the Vietnamese count one’s age not from the time of physical appearance in the world but from the time of conception, and the exact date of this cannot always be ascertained. The date of death is even more significant for a person who is posthumously deified for this is the date when a person ceases to exist as a physical body and joins the realm of spirits. In this sense, the date of one’s human death is in fact the date of a spirit’s birth.

Lie Anh’s date of death coincides with another festival or sometimes two, both also celebrated in China. They are Thanh Minh (the Pure Brightness Festival, Qing Ming in Chinese) and Hanh Truc (the Cold Food Festival, Han Shi in Chinese). These two festivals were at one time held on the same day and were even considered to be the same holiday with two different names.
The Pure Brightness Festival corresponds to one of the first days of the third lunar month. If it occurred on the third day of the third month, it was called “the true Qing Ming,” or more colloquially “the grave-sweeping day,” as on this day people visit and tidy the graves. Special attention was given to those whose graves were abandoned, that is, had no one to care for them. From China this festival went to other countries, most notably to Korea and Vietnam. The opening scene of *Kim Vân Kiều*, a well-known classic of Vietnamese literature, describes the heroine at the abandoned grave of an ill-fated woman on the day of the Pure Brightness Festival.

The name Liễu Hạnh consists of two words: liễu (willow) and hạnh (almond or apricot). One of the main symbols of the Pure Brightness Festival is willow, which, being extremely long-lived and enduring, is considered to be a connection between the living and their ancestors. Since Liễu Hạnh was thought to have died on the third day of the third month, her cult thereby acquired symbolism from the Pure Brightness Festival. Alternatively, her death may have been commemorated on this day because it was the appropriate time to pay respects to abandoned souls.

Another consideration is the water element. According to a legend, King Chao of the Zhou dynasty and his two daughters, Nụy An and Juan-yen, were drowned during a boat ride, and therefore the festival of the third day of the third month has been celebrated at the shore. Water is also a factor in Liễu Hạnh’s death as reported in Adriano di St. Thecla’s account. Liễu Hạnh is sometimes perceived as a “sea deity” (thần biển). Tạ Chí Đại Trường believes that the “maritime essence” (tinh chất biển) of Liễu Hạnh enabled her to turn into a potent deity. He remarks that Văn Cát village, where the main temple of Liễu Hạnh is located, lies in a low, wet region. He further writes that in the vicinity of Liễu Hạnh’s temple there were two other temples, dedicated to Triệu Quang Phục and Lý Phát Tứ, both of whom, according to him, were victims of disasters connected to water. If she really was thought to possess a “water essence,” as Tạ Chí Đại Trường claims, then this supports Adriano di St. Thecla’s account of Liễu Hạnh encountering her death in a river.

All major temples and most of the other temples of Liễu Hạnh are indeed located near some body of water: the sea, a lake, a river, or a pond. The temple of Liễu Hạnh in Nghệ An province, mentioned by Adriano di St. Thecla, was also located near water, for the name of the locality, Cửa Tưấn, indicates a seaport or mouth of a river. But, there
are also other factors that connect Lý Ún’s cult to water, and they are topography and art. Most of her temples are located at strategic points on what were formerly main trade and communication routes, many of which were riverine, as water transport was the easiest way to travel in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. This was the way most of her devotees traveled in the course of their trading and entertainment activities, and along the way they propagated news about a potent deity that helped them in their lives. Also, the proximity to water played an important part in the aesthetics of temples: the water gave a sense of freshness and purity.

Borrowing some symbolic features from the Chinese Festival of Pure Light, Lý Ún’s cult undoubtedly developed its own traditions, one of which is the main festival commemorating the date of her death on the third day of the third month. An account found in the archives, dating from the 1960s, relates the origins of her festival to Trịnh Thị Phi Trần Thị Đại (Trần Thị Đại is this person’s personal name; Trịnh Thị Phi indicates that she was a concubine in the Trần clan), who, like Lý Ún, was a singing girl. Unlike Lý Ún, however, Trần Thị Đại was married to an actor. Upon his death she remarried a man from Vũ Bàn district and gave birth to a boy. However, she was soon widowed again. One day Chủa Trịnh Tùng (r. 1570–1623), the ruling warlord, heard her singing a wonderful song as he traveled by. He stopped to see who the singer was and to listen to her singing. Captivated by her beauty, Trịnh Tùng inquired of her background and family status. Respectfully replying to his questions, Trần Thị Đại said that she had not yet been married. Trịnh Tùng left for the capital. As for Trần Thị Đại, she nurtured the hope to marry Trịnh Tùng, the ruler. In her despair she entreated help from Lý Ún, and, indeed, to her joy, one day Trịnh Tùng sent an envoy to bring Trần Thị Đại to the capital to be his concubine.

At that time, people of Thiên Bàn district were in the capital performing corvée labor and were anxious to return home. When she learned about it, Trần Thị Đại devised a plan by which the people from her native locality who were working in the capital were to eat only bran and to wear only rags. Sometime later she brought Trịnh Tùng to the place where the people from Thiên Bàn worked. Seeing them in such a pitiful state and heeding Trần Thị Đại’s request, he granted the people permission to go back to their homes. Trần Thị Đại instructed the exhilarated villagers to establish a custom that each year on the third day of the third month they
would thank Liễu Hạnh while clad in ragged clothes similar to what
they wore at that moment and while carrying hoes and spades, the tools
they used in their construction work. The villagers complied with Trần
Thił Dài’s words, and since that time the festival has been observed. In
the course of time, the spades and hoes were replaced by sticks with tas-
sels, which were arranged into classical characters spelling clichéd Sino-
Vietnamese phrases pleasing to the eye and mind.59

This character arrangement has become one of the main elements of
the annual festival of Liễu Hạnh at Phát Đẫy and is called kẹo chử (to pull
the characters). Young people of Văn Cát and neighboring villages gather
in front of the main temple and line up to create one of the following
phrases: Văn Thọ Vô Cường (Limitless Longevity), Quang Phúc Thánh
Thiên (Restoration of Saintly Goodness), Thiên Hạ Thái Bình (Peace and
Prosperity under Heaven), Quốc Thái Dân An (The State Is Prosperous
and the People are at Peace), and Mẫu Nghĩa Thiên Hạ (Mother Rules Ev-
erywhere under Heaven). Then one of the elders comes to inspect the cor-
rectness and aesthetics of the arrangements.

The connection with the Trịnh warlords in this case does not neces-
sarily appear to be a propaganda maneuver to extricate Liễu Hạnh from
the Mạc context. This story offers a measure of plausibility, at least from
the temporal perspective, as it overlaps with the years of Trịnh Tùng’s
rule, thirty of which he indeed ruled from Thăng Long (Hanoi). But the
Trịnh–Liễu Hạnh line also brings popular culture, of which Liễu Hạnh’s
festival is an element, under the auspices of the court. Kẹo chử signifies the
“elite” element of the festival. Arranging characters, especially classical
Sino-Vietnamese characters, is certainly not a tradition initiated by ordi-
nary peasant devotees of the cult. It corresponds to no known popular
entertainment in the villages. On the contrary, it demonstrates that the
festival was under the observation of the court, which endeavored to “civ-
ilize” the more popular elements of the festival.

THE PANTHEON AND SPIRIT POSSESSION

Another element objectionable to authorities found its way into ob-
servances connected to Liễu Hạnh’s cult: spirit possession.60 Spirit posses-
sion apparently existed in Vietnam long before the emergence of Liễu
Hạnh’s cult, but she has become one of the most responsive and popular
deities in the system of spirit possession. It is worth noting that this is the only spirit that Adriano di St. Thecla singles out by name in connection with spirit possession.

Liễu Hạnh has presided at the pinnacle of an entire pantheon of deities associated with this practice for at least the last 150 years. This pantheon is called Three Palaces/Domains or Four Palaces/Domains (Tam Phủ or Tứ Phủ) and incorporates three or four mothers (according to different traditions) that govern different domains of the universe. These domains are the Celestial Domain (Thiên Phủ), the Earthly Domain (Địa Phủ), the Water Domain (Thủy Phủ), and the Domain of Mountains and Forests (Núi Phủ). Liễu Hạnh is the supreme mother of the pantheon in charge of the Celestial Domain.

This pantheon is a reflection of the concept of the creation of the world as found in most early mythologies. Possibly, the concept of the pantheon of the Three/Four Domains/Palaces was initially borrowed from China, where it existed in the form of Tam Giới Cồng (Chinese: San Jie Gong) or the Sovereigns of the Three Worlds, that is, of heaven, earth and water. However, even if this were the case, the Vietnamese made significant changes. The most important of these changes was the replacement of men with women in the functions of governors or creators of those worlds.

This pantheon did not appear in Vietnam until late, probably not until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. There is no mention of it in any source earlier than the nineteenth century, but in the nineteenth century it is discussed as something already well established. It is reasonable to suppose that its appearance is connected to two major factors: bureaucratization of the state and the encounter with the West. These points will be developed in what follows.

If we consider the “creation” accounts found in early Vietnamese sources, which we discussed in the previous chapter, we will see that the Vietnamese who compiled them were not preoccupied with the idea of the “creation” of the world but with the idea of the “creation” of the Vietnamese people. Of course, this can be related to the agenda of scholars who modeled their accounts on Chinese texts or wrote their accounts in response to Chinese texts. If any concept of the “creation of the world” existed in Vietnam, it was borrowed from Chinese sources in the form of Nữ Ốa (Chinese: Nü Gua), who, according to legend, separated heaven from earth.

Worshiping sovereigns of heaven, earth, water, and mountains ex-
isted only as the worship of separate spirits in different regions, the most prominent of whom was the Mother of Earth (Mẫu Địa or Hậu Thổ). The stories of the Mothers of earth, waters, and forest and mountains, in the words of a modern Vietnamese scholar, “are linked to Vietnamese prehistory,” and the cult of Liễu Hạnh is simply the latest addition to the pantheon.65

However, it seems to me that it was not Liễu Hạnh’s cult that was added to a previously existing pantheon but rather that the pantheon itself was invented to be attached to Liễu Hạnh’s cult. The Mothers governing the domains of heaven, earth, water, and forests and mountains, after which the pantheon was called, represent only an upper rank of the entire pantheon, which includes many subordinate spirits. They are nominally under the control of the Jade Emperor, the official head of the pantheon. Under the command of the Jade Emperor and of the Mothers are some fifty “servicemen and maids”: five great mandarins (vương quan), four holy dames (thánh bà or chầu bà), ten princes (vương), twelve royal damsels (vương tỏa), ten or twelve boy-attendants (câu), five tiger-mandarins (quan hổ), and Mister Snake (Ông Lợt).66

The rigid hierarchical structure of the pantheon replicates the ideal of the Neo-Confucian state’s bureaucratic apparatus. This ideal, although admired by Vietnamese rulers from the fifteenth century, did not attain a semblance of implementation until the late seventeenth century. The idea of the Jade Emperor being the head of this pantheon cannot be plausibly dated before the seventeenth century because he was not popular in Vietnam before the sixteenth century. Consequently, it is unlikely that the idea of this pantheon could have existed at the level of popular culture before the late seventeenth century. In the early to mid-eighteenth century, decades of peasant uprisings reveal the vigor of popular culture at that time, which, accordingly, appears to be the most likely time to date the appearance of this pantheon.

We should also consider what Steven Sangren describes as the challenge to male celestial bureaucrats by sectarian cults.67 The Jade Emperor’s weak presiding role in the pantheon is a reflection of the view most women had of men, confronted as they were with the harsh reality of bearing almost sole responsibility for managing the household. There is a saying in Vietnamese referring to women as “inner generals” (nội tướng), meaning that while men represent the family outside the house, inside the family it was a woman who decided important issues concerning raising children, daily expenditures, and maintaining proper relations among the
family members. Similarly, the Jade Emperor is the nominative representative of the pantheon without a firmly defined role within the pantheon itself. It is the female deities who are most effective in the pantheon, just as women exercise direct control over the material domain. In modern times, the reference to a woman as the "inner general" has been used in the discourse of nationalism to demonstrate the respect that Vietnamese women ostensibly enjoyed in society through the centuries. However, this idea has been construed by women not as a mark of respect given to them by men but rather as an indication of the absence of men from the details of family matters. And it found expression in the pantheon of the Mothers, the deities of which were worshiped predominantly by women. The absent-minded sovereignty of the Jade Emperor over the pantheon of the Mothers reflects the lack of involvement of Vietnamese men with family matters.

Dinh Gia Khánh has suggested that while the pantheon of the Three Palaces/Domains had existed from antiquity in Vietnam, in the course of time the images of the Mothers as sovereigns of natural domains had become distant from the common people, unrelated to the concrete and immediate problems of their lives, and under these circumstances Liễu Hạnh’s cult was incorporated into the pantheon and soon became its dominant element. In this case, we would have to acknowledge that before Liễu Hạnh’s appearance in Vietnam there was no Mother governing heaven, the position she occupies now in the pantheon, which would leave a strange void in covering the domains of nature. Or, we would have to acknowledge that Liễu Hạnh replaced some other deity as Mother of Heaven, something for which there is absolutely no evidence. However, if we first assume that Liễu Hạnh achieved eminence as a potent and responsive deity in spirit possession, it is easy to imagine that other spirits were joined to her cult from different locations eventually to form the pantheon.

Spirit possession is the main characteristic and raison d’être of this pantheon. It is an ecstatic ascent to the hidden sublime. The spirit possession ceremony includes getting in contact (lên đồng) with different spirits of the pantheon through their successive incarnations in mediums. According to Maurice Durand, it appeared under the Lê dynasty, a dating that corresponds with the growth of Liễu Hạnh’s cult. Those who perform this are predominantly women. These women are called bà cội or bà đồng (woman-mediums). According to a Vietnamese writing in 1930: "The bà đồng are recruited among childless widows or old maids; the obligations
of a mother to take care of children are incompatible with the status of bà đong. One becomes bà đong by following a dream or from consultation with a soothsayer.” With some women, their destiny to be bà đong is marked by a hairlock that becomes entangled by itself and is resistant to the comb. “With others, it is a malady or a repulsion to all household chores.”

Spirit possession is known as shamanism in most world cultures. Possessed, the woman is a medium between spirits and the living. Through her the spirit announces its will, provides answers to questions, and treats the sick. This kind of spirit possession is described in the aforementioned account of Adriano di St. Thecla. It is a “professional” mediumship with the medium publicly conflated with the spirit, often living at a temple with her family to serve the spirit. However, in Vietnam, the Mothers’ pantheon has a distinctive feature by which it expands far beyond the boundaries of professional mediumship. This pantheon embraces not only professional mediums, bà đong, but also those who, according to Maurice Durand, were capable of entering into contact with a spirit but did not devote their lives to attending upon the spirit. These were called bà bồng. The elitism of an initiated group of professionals was “democratized,” and those who sought a spirit’s patronage could circumvent the professional medium. Believers could establish direct, individual, and intimate contact with spirits. By the twentieth century anyone who wanted could proclaim herself a medium.

Spirits who incarnated into “nonprofessional” mediums gained a larger pool of followers. Such mediums were reluctant to leave their worldly lives to consecrate themselves to a deity and found it appealing to obtain privileges without the unavoidable restrictions of a professional life. With the circle of those attending séances expanded, the fame of a spirit’s efficacy could spread more quickly and attract novices on a large scale.

Furthermore, the séances present spectacular performances involving numerous changes of clothing, dances, and ritual songs. The changing of clothes marks each subsequent incarnation of another spirit of the pantheon, of which in any single séance there are at least ten to fifteen. Dances also correspond to the deity possessing the person at each particular stage of the séance: there are dances with fans, oars, swords, scarves, flags, and so forth. Some thought that these dances were akin to dances in Europe, as this manner of expressive female dancing “to show their beauty to all the world” had not existed in Vietnam until the en-
counter with European culture. This dancing was “an occasion for women to demonstrate their grace, their suppleness.” However, these dances are not only connected to European influence, but are also rooted in Vietnamese culture for in their appearance they are much closer to the theatrical forms of Asian popular theater than to any European type. They are reminiscent of Vietnamese cải tiến theater. Unlike another form of theater, tuồng, which was “court theater” and presented performances about court life, cải tiến was rooted in the rural milieu and through songs and dances explored topics close to village life. The most characteristic topics for cải tiến performances were “legends about the genies, or national heroes; scenes of fieldwork; certain aspects of relations among the members of the community.”

Cải tiến was prohibited under the Lê dynasty. In 1437 Emperor Lê Thái Tông, during his visit to the Imperial Ancestral Temple, following the advice of his official Lý Ý, put an end to performances by singers and actors and playing obscene music (bài xướng bu bols và âm nhạc). Later, this order was incorporated into the Lê Code. Article 58 of the Lê Code prohibited “obscene music and songs” as well as the instruments accompanying them in the residential palaces. Most plausible is that the reference here is to cải tiến performances. The performers were expelled from the official temples, the court, and administrative centers. This restriction had two consequences: the performers moved to the villages and tried to interpolate their art into religious ceremonies. Ritual songs performed by a special musical group created a background for the dances and praised the incarnating deity. These performances, while pleasing the spirits, at the same time constituted entertainment for the village community.

The authorities succeeded in eradicating neither the art nor the tradition of performances, as subsequent laws clearly demonstrate. Edict 103 (b) of the tenth year of Minh Mạng (1829) reads: “The practice of singing and performing theatrical shows in front of the altars on the occasion of the ceremonies, be it to implore for rain or to thank for giving favors, is prohibited in all the provinces.” Because of limited accessibility to popular performances restricted by the court, séances became a sort of a substitution or supplement embellishing people’s lives, especially women’s, which is why séances are usually attended by numerous spectators.

This spectacle, while attracting people, simultaneously involved significant expense. Séances required a substantial financial contribution from the person contacting the spirits. She had to provide not only offerings to the spirits, but also a set of different costumes corresponding to
each of the incarnating spirits. In addition, she presented lavish gifts on behalf of the deities to every person present at the séances. This prompted Maurice Durand to state that the women exercising spirit possession were usually wealthy, which also corroborates my hypothesis about the active involvement of female traders in the development and dissemination of the cult. But it was possible to reduce the expense with fewer costumes and more modest gifts or to appeal to family and friends to defray costs. This enabled women of constricted means also to take part.

However, women who participated in the séances were not highly regarded in society. Male mediums also existed, but they usually contacted the thirteenth-century military hero Trần Hưng Đạo, called by many Vietnamese Đức Thánh Trần (Virtuous and Holy Trần). Trần Hưng Đạo was the honorific title given to Trần Quốc Tuấn (c. 1232–1300), the prince who led the Vietnamese against the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. His main temple is located in Kiếp Bạc of Hải Dương province, but he has enjoyed enormous popularity all over the country and is considered a versatile deity patronizing people from all walks of life and assisting with any problem: drought and epidemics, protecting children, and granting fertility to childless women. Séances with the participation of Trần Hưng Đạo and his retinue, consisting of other celebrated personalities of Vietnamese history, like those of Liễu Hạnh, have been very popular, and during them he has also proved himself to be responsive and efficacious in exorcising evil spirits. His mediums were all male and were called ông đồng, thanh đồng, or đồng nhấn. Unlike Liễu Hạnh’s séances, those of Trần Hưng Đạo are distinguished by their “masculinity,” if not violence; mediums were known to strangle themselves with scarves and pierce their tongues and cheeks with lances. They collected blood caused by these operations to swallow or to keep as amulets.

There can hardly be two more different personalities than Liễu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo in terms of their origins, merits, retinues, circles of followers, and patterns of devotion. I surmise that the efficacy and responsiveness of Liễu Hạnh’s and Trần Hưng Đạo’s spirits established them as the most famous for séances and marked Phú Đãi and Kiếp Bạc temples as the biggest centers for spiritism in northern Vietnam. Consequently, their temple festivals were paired in the saying “In the third month [we] celebrate Mother’s death anniversary; in the eighth month [we] celebrate Father’s death anniversary.” While no written history of this pairing has survived, an old Vietnamese told me that it has existed at least from the
beginning of the twentieth century. At the present time, there are female mediums performing séances with Trần Hưng Đạo and male mediums performing séances with Liễu Hạnh. Moreover, in very recent times there has appeared a tendency to conflate these cults so that the two spirits share temples and séances.

CONCLUSION

Liễu Hạnh’s cult was established, disseminated, and maintained as a religious niche by women at a time when women were excluded from the official forms of village religious practice, mainly accessible to male worshipers, instituted by the political authority. The goddess did not serve as a model of moral perfection as propagated by state ideology, but she was a force to alleviate the hardships of women’s lives. She was a refuge in the years of wartime calamities as well as a protection against natural disasters, but most of all she was a protection against the male-biased society. Most of the stories about Liễu Hạnh demonstrate her ability to withstand male pressure, and that is why her manifestations are ambivalent and full of paradoxes. She was both lenient and belligerent, kind and cruel; she granted life and punished with death. An important conclusion of this study is that she was a deity established not by and for state ideology but by and for ordinary people.

This brings to mind Arnold Toynbee’s theory about religion arising from the creativity of an internal proletariat that is “alienated from the broken-down society from which it is in process of secession” and is “seeking a new revelation.” The cult of Liễu Hạnh did arise in a time of prolonged warfare and insecurity, when the “dominant minority” was incapable of guaranteeing social order, and popular aspirations and beliefs found expression in new religious cults. Such cults opened public space in a society where what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “carnival” could take place: “carnival is the place to act out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationship of noncarnival life.” When life is difficult, people look for opportunities to relax from the pressures of everyday life, to worship, to pray, to think beyond the surface of material existence, to be entertained, to have fun. The cult of Liễu Hạnh offered all of these.

Liễu Hạnh’s cult became popular among the Vietnamese through a
combination of a desire to have an all-encompassing mother-figure deity as a potent spirit-protector, especially for women excluded from male-oriented cults, and the death under tragic circumstances of a young woman on the day of the Pure Brightness Festival and the fear that people felt because of this unfortunate death. If the cult of Liễu Hạnh was inspired by a woman who found her end at a young age and under tragic circumstances, as Adriano di St. Thecla described, she would indeed have been an ideal figure to attract a large number of devotees.

But hers was not the sole sad end that people had witnessed, and that by itself could make a potent deity only for the community where she lived or died, at best. As Philip Baity rightly observes:

The popularity of community gods is a result of their proven efficacy, which leads to the spread of the cult. No cult spreads unless its God is efficacious, and this in turn depends upon the willingness of the deity to make efficacious answers to worshippers in return for their worship. Since the most efficacious gods are those which respond to the widest number of worshippers, across kinship and ethnic lines, no ancestor is likely to become a community god, because his particularistic ties prevent him from responding to non-agnates.\textsuperscript{91}

In the case of Liễu Hạnh’s cult, it was the sociopolitical situation in the country at the time of the appearance of her cult that stimulated and enabled the spread of her cult beyond its original area. Women merchants, able to travel around the country, professed Liễu Hạnh’s cult. The skillfully organized festivals and séances attracted numerous people not only because of their potential “usefulness” for practical human needs, but also as undeniably spectacular events, which augmented the popularity of the deity and helped to stabilize her cult as one of the most prosperous in the country. As a “mother” without her own children, she was potentially the mother of everyone. Without blood descendants to maintain her posthumous cult, she was free to be worshiped as a female ancestor by anyone.
For it may be doubted, firstly whether there exist any antitheses at all, and secondly whether these popular evaluations and value-antitheses, on which the metaphysicians have set their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground valuations, merely provisional perspectives, perhaps moreover the perspectives of a hole-and-corner, perhaps from below, as it were “frog-perspectives,” to borrow an expression employed by painters.

—Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, first part, “On the Prejudices of Philosophers”

Once Liễu Hạnh’s cult was established as a visible aspect of popular culture, educated people found ways to make use of it. From being a dynamic aspect of village life, a focus of religious practices and community events, it was given literary form and philosophical significance, thereby becoming a figure of contention among intellectuals, who made it represent their preferred visions of social authority.

This chapter will discuss three works written about Liễu Hạnh in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of them were written in Hán (the classical Chinese language). Together they constitute a discussion of the role of women in Vietnamese society. Moreover, they reveal an open fight between Daoists and Buddhists. This argument lasted for more than a century, from the 1730s to the 1850s.

The starting point is a story written in the eighteenth century that became the source text for all later writings about Liễu Hạnh. It is immediately apparent that this story—as well as its many offspring in subsequent years—is not about Liễu Hạnh as a personality embedded in markers of historical specificity but rather uses her to make arguments about controversial issues of concern to various authors. Rather than
bringing us closer to Liêu Hạnh, the stories written about her bring us closer to those who wrote the stories.

LIÊU HÀNH AS FEMME ÉMANCIPÉE

As we have seen, Liêu Hạnh’s cult was already blossoming in the first half of the eighteenth century. This is when Đoàn Thị Điểm, the most renowned woman of letters in the eighteenth century and one of the most famous female writers in the history of Vietnamese literature, created her work about Liêu Hạnh titled Vân Cất Thần Nữ Truyện (Story of Vân Cất Goddess).

Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story is the foundation of what I call “the content” of Liêu Hạnh’s cult—first, because it is, according to some Vietnamese scholars, “the earliest and the fullest story of Liêu Hạnh,” and, second, because it is written by an acclaimed woman writer about another woman, which lends a special point of view for understanding the content of Liêu Hạnh’s cult. Moreover, most later writers and scholars regarded this text as an authoritative account of the goddess Liêu Hạnh. Đặng Văn Lượng observes: “Generally speaking, all the books acknowledge the earliest book describing the story/history (sự tích) of Mother Liêu, that of . . . Đoàn Thị Điểm. . . . After Đoàn Thị Điểm a lot of people described the origins of the Mother in Nôm [the vernacular Vietnamese language] poetry . . . . As for the plot, in general, all the manuscripts are similar to each other, but some details are added.” Virtually all existing accounts of Liêu Hạnh are based on Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story.

Đoàn Thị Điểm’s text is a piece of fiction based on the cult of the princess Liêu Hạnh as she knew it and on her own life experience. It was written to promote the author’s personal agenda, which was to express the critical attitude of an educated woman toward the society of her time.

Đoàn Thị Điểm

Đoàn Thị Điểm was born in Giai Phảm village, Văn Giang district, of Bắc Ninh province in 1705 but was raised by her mother’s family in Vũ Điện village, Nam Sang district, in modern Nam Định province. Her ancestors were from the Lê clan. Her father, Đoàn Đoạn Nghị, failing to pass the provincial examination, came back home and established a school and a medical practice. He had two children: a son, Đoàn Đoạn
Luân, who was the elder, and Đoàn Thị Diễm. Despite being a girl and therefore usually excluded from educational opportunities, Đoàn Thị Diễm studied with her brother. When she was sixteen, she was given as an adopted daughter to a high-ranking mandarin, Lê Anh Tuấn, a friend of her father, who later wanted to send her to the Trịnh court. However, she did not agree with this arrangement and preferred to go back home. Both in Lê Anh Tuấn’s house and in her parental house, she was in contact with contemporary intellectuals. She was a beautiful and well-educated young woman, and many men sought her in marriage, but she invariably refused, considering them unsuitable for her intellectual level. According to one scholar, Đoàn Thị Diễm “used to say frequently with good reason that it would be better not to get married at all than to unite with a person with whom she did not feel any affinity.” Not finding a suitable partner, Đoàn Thị Diễm remained single.

In 1729, when she was twenty-four years old, her father died; not long after this, her brother passed away, leaving her responsible for his two children and his seriously ill wife. Đoàn Thị Diễm had a medical practice and taught children in order to support her brother’s family and her aged mother, but she also continued her studies. She later accepted a suggestion to become a private tutor in the royal palace. She left this job after some time, came back home, and opened a school. She married in 1742 at age thirty-seven to Nguyễn Kiều, a scholar and official with whom she apparently found an intellectual union. But, almost immediately after the wedding, her husband left for China for three years to fulfill his official duties, while she was left in Vietnam. After his return, Nguyễn Kiều was appointed to serve in the administration of Nghệ An province, and Đoàn Thị Diễm eventually followed him. In 1748, seven days after her arrival in Nghệ An, at the age of forty-four, she died childless.

It is not known exactly when Đoàn Thị Diễm wrote the Truyện Kỳ Tần Phả (New Collection of Marvelous Stories), of which Văn Cát Thán Nhũ Truyện is a part, but we do know that during her lifetime Vietnamese literature was entering a new phase of development. There were many educated freelancing literati, some from poor families, who were without government appointments and who, like Đoàn Thị Diễm’s father, practiced medicine and taught. These people produced an open intellectual environment that resisted Confucian ideology, and they wrote with great interest about the lives of individuals and personal feelings. They borrowed plots for their stories from folklore and from the lives of poor people to challenge Confucianism, though not directly.
Since it is such an important text for our knowledge of Liễu Hành, I will begin by analyzing Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện. For convenience of discussion, I separate the story into thirteen parts. Twelve parts, indicated by Roman numerals, function in this analysis as pairs (described below), and one part, indicated by the letter “T”, serves as a transformative turn at the center of the story. First, a brief summary of the thirteen parts of the narrative:

I. In Văn Cát village, Thiên Bân district, lived a righteous man, Lê Thái Công, who constantly prayed to Buddha and burned incense. He had one son. In the Thiên Hựu reign period, his pregnant wife passed beyond the term for delivery. She fell seriously ill and could not eat or drink anything, but she enjoyed the aroma of joss sticks. Despite the efforts of magicians, her illness grew worse. One day a strange man appeared, claiming that he could make the woman quickly give birth, but the doorkeeper refused him. Thái Công heard of it and hurried to invite him in. The man was a Daoist and had a jade hammer in his sleeve. He threw it down, and Thái Công immediately fell unconscious.

II. In a dream, Thái Công, with a giant assigned to accompany him, arrived at the Heavenly Palace of the Jade Emperor. There he saw a young lady, second in the ranks of the Heavenly Palace, who dropped and broke a jade offering cup while presenting it to the emperor. For this, the emperor ordered her expelled from the palace to the earth, and the giant explained to Thái Công that “this time she surely will be expelled from heaven.”

III. When Thái Công regained consciousness, his wife delivered a daughter. That night the incense was unusually fragrant in the house. Thái Công concluded that his dream signified that a heavenly fairy was born, so he gave to her the name “Giáng Tiến” (Fairy Who Came Down). When she grew up, she was very beautiful. She liked to read books, play the flute, and compose poetry, which she sang. One day Thái Công realized that the songs of his daughter had become very sad, and he understood that it was her time for love. He gave her as an adopted daughter to a retired mandarin who resided in Văn Cát. There she met a student named Đào Lang, who was this mandarin’s adopted son. He proposed, and the parents agreed to their marriage. After three years of happy life and giving birth to two children, Giáng Tiến, at the age of twenty-one, died suddenly on the third day of the third month, without any apparent cause. The family grieved.
IV. The fairy ascended to heaven, but there she still felt very much connected to her earthly fate; she was sad, and other fairies, feeling compassion for her, persuaded the Jade Emperor to let her go back. Before her departure, the emperor conferred upon her the title of Princess Liêu Hạnh.

V. She returned to her village on the second anniversary of her death and found her parents, brother, and adopted father grieving her death. Liêu Hạnh explained to them that she was a fairy and her place was in the Heavenly Palace; she came back because she missed them, but she was not able to stay with them since her spirit was no longer bound to the earth. But she promised that they would reunite in the future because her parents had merit and their names were registered in the Heavenly Book of Fate.

After that, Liêu Hạnh visited the capital where her husband had moved with their children. He lived alone, had quit all studies, and was depressed. Liêu Hạnh explained to him that she was a fairy and that their earthly love was predestined, so he should not feel so unhappy, for they would reunite later. She admonished him to recall his duty toward her parents and his adopted father, to strive for self-improvement, and to manage his household affairs. After spending a part of the night with him, she disappeared. The only traces of her were the clouds in the sky.

Later she sometimes disguised herself as an old woman and sometimes as a beautiful young woman playing the flute under the moon. People who tried to tease her were punished with disasters, while those who made offerings to her received her benediction. People offered her silver and silk, which she gave to her parents. Eventually her own and her adoptive parents as well as her husband died, and the children grew up. Nothing connected her to the earth anymore, and she began wandering all over the country in search of beautiful landscapes.

VI. Once she happened to be in a desolate place in Lang Sơn province, where she visited a temple and sat down to sing her songs. Phùng Khắc Khoan, a famous scholar, appeared, and was deeply impressed by her poetic abilities, but at the moment he wanted to express his appreciation, Liêu Hạnh disappeared without a trace. Nothing but a stick remained behind with two tablets on which were inscribed some characters that only Phùng Khắc Khoan could interpret. The characters of the first tablet meant “Princess Liêu Hạnh”; those of the second tablet meant that someone from the Phùng family would repair the temple.

T. From then the princess’ whereabouts were not clear, but traces of
VII. Phương khắc Khoan was then in the capital, having returned from a mission to China; he had just assumed a high position in one of the ministries and considered it a burden compared with a peaceful life in the countryside. Once, trying to find solace for his spirit, he invited two friends, from the Ngô and Lý families, to join him for a stroll and to drink some wine. While walking and composing poems, they found themselves at West Lake in front of a tavern, whose proprietress happened to be Liệu Hạnh. While having their meal, they had an opportunity to esteem not only her abilities to compose parallel poems, but also her wisdom in explaining the words of a strange fisherman, a giant “with his legs on the ground and his head in the sky,” who appeared near the tavern and left three fish. In the evening, the three men went back home by moonlight. Later they returned to this place but saw only the water of the lake with no trace of the tavern where they had once been. Then Phương khắc Khoan told his two young friends about his meeting with a fairy in Lang Sơn while on his way to China. All three aspired to have an opportunity to see the fairy again.

VIII. As for the princess, after she left West Lake, she appeared in Nghệ An province, where she met a young, poor orphan student, Sinh, whom she identified as an incarnation of her late husband Đạo Lang. Not revealing her identity, Liệu Hạnh tried to persuade him to let her stay for a night at his home, but he, keeping his integrity and virtue, rejected her request. Several days later, while walking, the student saw a piece of flower-filigreed paper on a peach tree with a verse, which he found splendid and hardly resembling anything written by human beings. He immediately composed his own verse as an answer to what he had just read and inscribed it near the first one. From this time on he began to long desperately for the woman who he thought was the author of the poem. He looked and waited for her but in vain. One day, after a long period of rains, while walking, he heard a female voice greet him from afar. Happily, the student admitted how much he had missed her since their first meeting, and the woman told him her story. She said that she was also an orphan, and she avoided people because they teased her. She admitted that she at once recognized in him a refined Confucian scholar and felt very attached to him. When he suggested that he would find a matchmaker, she declined this suggestion as prejudice, insisting on a marriage without any formalities. They went home together and became
engaged under the moon. They respected and loved each other; the fairy admonished her husband, who had quit his studies in order not to be separated from his wife, to resume them and to become not just a scholar, pleasing his vanity, but an official to help other people. He agreed with her arguments. After one year, a son was born; the husband successfully passed an examination and was appointed to the Academy of Science. But, one day, the princess burst into tears. She explained to her husband that she was a fairy and had broken a jade cup and been expelled from heaven and that now the period of her punishment was over, and she should go back to heaven even though it made her sad. After her departure, her husband became very depressed and, not seeing any further purpose for being an official, retired to a remote, desolate place and there raised his child. He never married again but put all his spirit into poetry.

IX. The princess, having returned to heaven, missed her eternal love, and she persuaded the Jade Emperor to let her go back to earth.

X. This time she was accompanied by two other fairies, Quế and Thị; she arrived at Phổ Cát village in Thanh Hóa province.

XI. The princess was awe-inspiringly powerful: good people received blessings, ferocious people were punished with disasters. Seeing this, the people of the region were frightened and built a temple to pray to her. In the Cạnh Trị reign period (1661–1671), the dynasty heard rumors about her, thought that she was an evil spirit, and ordered the army to go with magicians to suppress her. The temple was turned into ashes. It was not the king’s army that overcame the princess; rather, the magicians’ tricks turned out to be more powerful than the princess.

Soon the region was affected by an epidemic that wiped out all the flocks and herds. The people in this region were in a panic and erected a platform to make offerings. The princess appeared on the platform, declared that she was a fairy, and told the people to ask the dynasty to build a new temple. Only then would she eliminate calamities, ward off misfortunes, and bring blessings; otherwise, nobody would survive in the region.

XII. The dynasty acknowledged her as linh dật (supernatural and extraordinary), conferred upon her the title Mạ Hoàng Công Chúa (Golden Princess to Whom Sacrifices Are Made as to the God of the War), and ordered that a new temple be built on Phổ Cát Mountain. Furthermore, when the king’s army went to suppress an enemy, the princess helped in the fighting. The dynasty conferred upon her one more honorific title, Chế Thắng Hoàng Điều Đại Vượng (Great King Who Grants Victory and Peace),
and wrote her name in the annals; since then all the kings have raised statues of the princess and have built many temples to worship her.

The first section, parts I through VI, tells of Liêu Hạnh’s earthly incarnation up through her first encounter with Phùng Khắc Khoan, the preeminent intellectual of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The second section, part VII to part XII, tells of her second encounter with Phùng Khắc Khoan and her later incarnations until she was recognized by the earthly powers as a goddess. The sections are connected by the part indicated with a “T”, which contains the “turn” or “hinge” in the story that holds the key for revealing the meaning of the plot’s development. This turn, appearing between her first and second encounters with Phùng Khắc Khoan, reveals the freedom or free spirit that an educated woman might and should acquire in establishing intellectual and social equality with educated men.

The inner structure of the story contributes to its content. It is semantically parallel and reminiscent of Vietnamese parallel sentences (câu đố), each component of which has its own value and sense that cannot be fully understood until we read the parallel component and consider both as a whole. According to the numbers with which I have designated parts of the text, parallel pairs are as follows: I–XII, II–XI, III–X, IV–IX, V–VIII, and VI–VII. Each pair is not only a step in the development of the plot, but also constitutes by itself a separate completed piece reflecting an aspect of the evolution of Лиêu Hạnh.

The way in which I have analyzed the story produces pairs in inverse order, moving from the beginning and the end of the story toward its climax and explanation point at the center. What follows is a brief analysis of this structure.

Pair I–XII (Liêu Hạnh is unknown on earth—recognition of Liêu Hạnh by the dynasty and people as a goddess). This pair serves as a framework for the whole story. Part I, the beginning, shows us the world before Лиêu Hạnh came down to earth: people prayed to the Buddha, though Daoism was also popular. The closure, in part XII, reveals how Лиêu Hạnh altered the world: people still pray, but now they pray to her. If part I does not present any evidence of Лиêu Hạnh’s impact on or intervention in earthly affairs, part XII witnesses her active role in the world, which forces people to recognize her as a deity. This intensification of her role can be traced clearly in all the other pairs. Thus, this pair witnesses
the transformation in Liễu Hạnh’s cosmological position vis-à-vis the people: from being an unknown fairy in heaven, she became a mighty deity to whom people on earth prayed.

Pair II–XI (Liễu Hạnh’s misdeeds in the Heavenly Palace—Liễu Hạnh’s misdeeds on earth, in Thanh Hóa province). Part II presents Liễu Hạnh as a fairy in the Heavenly Palace who, apparently, was not very obedient or careful, and it tells of her dropping a jade cup, which exhausted the Jade Emperor’s patience so that he expelled her to earth. The words of Thái Công’s guide explaining what was happening (“This time she surely will be expelled from heaven”) imply that this was not the first misdeed of Liễu Hạnh in heaven. Her previous misdemeanors were, perhaps, not serious, and even breaking the cup did not cause a dire punishment but only twenty-one years of exile on earth, and twenty-one years for fairies is not a long time, considering they are immortal. Part XI suggests that in Thanh Hóa her misdeeds were more serious and cruel, which caused the ruling dynasty to seek to eradicate her and her temples, and this appears to be a punishment equivalent to more serious misdeeds than exile to earth for breaking a jade cup. But in both cases, her punishment turned out to be a kind of reward to her. In the first case, she so enjoyed being on earth that she could no longer separate herself from earthly life, and her role is passive as a subject of punishment for the accidental action of breaking a jade cup. In the second case, however, she deliberately applied effort to force people to rebuild her temples and to recognize her as a deity, and thus her misdeeds in Thanh Hóa led to the reward of official recognition and a widespread cult. In summary, this pair shows Liễu Hạnh’s punishments transformed into rewards and a shift from her passively accepting punishment to actively responding to it.

Pair III–X (Liễu Hạnh’s exile to earth as a human being—her voluntary coming back to earth with two other fairies, Quế and Thị). Part III suggests that the Jade Emperor expelled Liễu Hạnh to be born on earth in a family of righteous people with the intention that these righteous people could correct features of Liễu Hạnh’s character that annoyed him and disturbed the peace of the Heavenly Palace. But Liễu Hạnh was not successfully corrected, as proven by events following her death and by her first reappearance on earth. In part X the emperor sent her back to earth a second time with two other fairies who might be considered Liễu Hạnh’s guardians. The Jade Emperor apparently gave up trying to correct Liễu Hạnh’s character by relying on human beings, but instead he sent heavenly creatures whose supernatural powers were supposed to prevent Liễu
Hạnh from misbehaving on earth. But as part XI shows, Quê and Thi, the accompanying fairies, failed in this mission. The pair III–X reveals that neither righteous earthly people nor the powers of heavenly beings could restrain a process of transformation in Liễu Hạnh’s personality.

Pair IV–IX (Liễu Hạnh in the Heavenly Palace after her first sojourn on earth—Liễu Hạnh in the Heavenly Palace after her second sojourn on earth). Here we also witness significant alterations in Liễu Hạnh’s behavior. In part IV the compassion of other fairies for her sadness persuades the Jade Emperor to permit her to return to earth. In part IX Liễu Hạnh’s role is already very active, and she, by herself, convinces the Jade Emperor to allow her to resume her presence on earth. This pair suggests that changes in the character of Liễu Hạnh altered her behavior toward the Jade Emperor as well as her position in heaven itself.

Pair V–VIII (Liễu Hạnh’s first sojourn as a returned fairy with her family—Liễu Hạnh’s second sojourn as a fairy with her family). Part V describes Liễu Hạnh’s appearance in Văn Cát on the day of the second anniversary of her death; finding her relatives grieving her death, she consoled them with a prediction that after death they will reunite forever. But even though her main reason for leaving heaven a second time and returning to earth was to be with her family, Liễu Hạnh stayed with her relatives a very short time and then went to the capital, where her husband and children were. Her meeting with them was also very brief, only a few hours; she arrived late in the evening and left before dawn. Why so brief?

Liễu Hạnh was expelled to earth and born in Lê Thái Công’s family according to the Jade Emperor’s desire and not of her own choice. She married her husband because he liked her and proposed and the parents agreed; Liễu Hạnh’s passive role is defined by filial piety, obeying her parents and husband. It is a typical patriarchal situation in Vietnam, and this situation could not satisfy Liễu Hạnh’s personality. Thus, still having some sentimental gratitude to the family and respecting the values of Lê Thái Công’s family as well as, perhaps, those of the Jade Emperor, she visited her parents and husband but could not stand to stay with them for any length of time. Still, she sometimes would return to her parents (only to the parents, not to the husband or children) and bring them “the silver and silk that people offered her.”

The situation in part VIII is entirely different, for she appears as a completely free woman, free in all senses. There is no sign of parents on either her or her husband’s side in this part (“We don’t have parents or
any relatives,” Liệu Hạnh says to Sinh, and she, not he, proposes marriage; she insists on cohabitation without formalities, “not standing on trifling ceremonies.” This time, Liệu Hạnh stays with her husband for a considerable length of time. “They respected and loved each other,” reads the text. During her previous marriage she only “took reverent care of the husband’s parents and was obedient to the husband,” being a subordinate to the husband rather than an equal partner. The second time, she was the leader in the union. The main transformation is in her and not in her husband; the incarnation of her previous husband was more or less in the same situation as before (a student and orphan). Describing Sinh as being in a similar situation to his earlier incarnation as her first husband highlights Liệu Hạnh’s transformation from an obedient wife to an independent woman, a leader in this marriage. But even such a union could not quiet Liệu Hạnh’s quest for freedom. Neither a loving husband nor a newborn son could bind her to one place, to one man, to a routine of the family. Not being able to provide a plausible excuse for leaving her husband this time, she offers a patently untruthful explanation (evident to readers but not apparent to her husband), repeating her previous story about having dropped a jade cup and being punished for that, and claiming the necessity to go back to the Heavenly Palace since her punishment was over. The reason for such an untruthful explanation apparently lies not in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s inability to invent a new excuse for Liệu Hạnh to escape from the situation in which she found herself after a period of marriage routine and constraint,¹⁰ but rather in her deliberate indifference to such a detail. Đoàn Thị Điểm might have intended to underline by this that it does not matter what the pretext was; Liệu Hạnh wanted to be emancipated at any price (is it also advice to other women to try to feel free by any means?). Freedom became much more important for Liệu Hạnh than any human bond or narrative continuity. In the story there is no evidence of any later attempt to see her husband and son. Thus, in this pair we see the transformation of a faithful, obedient daughter and wife into a free woman who decides her life on her own.

Pair VI–VII (Liệu Hạnh’s first meeting with Phùng Khắc Khoan in Lang Sơn—Liệu Hạnh’s second meeting with Phùng Khắc Khoan in Hanoi). This pair is the path leading to the climax of the story, not only because it is in the textual center of the story and occupies fourteen out of thirty-four pages, leaving only twenty pages for the other five pairs, but because, from an intellectual point of view, the transformation from a pas-
sive woman-fairy into an active woman-deity plays the most important role in these parts of the story.

Liêu Hạnh’s first meeting with Phùng Khắc Khoan took place in the remote border region of Lang Sơn while she was wandering all over the country “in search of beautiful landscapes,” which means that she was not looking for contact with people. During her first meeting with Phùng Khắc Khoan, her role is limited to reciting her poems while accompanying herself on the lute, which was heard by Phùng Khắc Khoan as he passed by. There was almost no contact between them. Phùng Khắc Khoan was impressed by Liêu Hạnh’s verse, he declaimed a verse in response, and she disappeared. But this brief contact revealed to Liêu Hạnh a new world: she felt in Phùng Khắc Khoan a person from a world other than that of her relatives, a person who was well-educated, occupied a high position, and was strong.

It is not a coincidence that after this meeting she got tired of visiting natural landscapes and began missing “noisy places” (the “turn” in section T), which means that from her solitude she started to look for contact with people. Her second meeting with Phùng Khắc Khoan is completely different from the first. She is the owner of a tavern, the hostess of Phùng Khắc Khoan and his two young friends, who had also passed academic exams. She not only initiates contact with them and composes parallel poems, but she also explains to them the meaning of an obscure poem of an unusual fisherman. These three well-educated men admit her intellectual superiority over them. These components of the story reveal an intellectual transformation in the context of her life from wandering through the countryside viewing landscapes to an urbanized lifestyle in Hanoi, which is indicated in part T and which is the major turning point in Liêu Hạnh’s earthly life; in other words, Liêu Hạnh gained solid experience, which caused all the other transformations we see in the previous pairs—the change in her position toward her family, her intellectual superiority vis-à-vis the famous scholar and his well-educated friends, her alteration of behavior in the Heavenly Palace, and, as a result of all this, her transformation from a fairy into a deity, officially recognized by the ruling dynasty and venerated by the people.

The heroine of the story, Liêu Hạnh, is the product of both heavenly and earthly aspects, but mostly of the earth, because the transformation that drastically changed her occurred on earth. This is a story of a woman’s liberation, of one who succeeded in self-affirmation both in heaven
and among people in earthly society through pursuit of an independent character and the development of her intellectual abilities. Furthermore, through deification, Liễu Hạnh crossed the gender boundary: the title Chế Thắng Hòa Diệu Đại Vương (Great King Who Grants Victory and Peace) conferred upon her by the Lê dynasty (part XII) refers to her not as a female deity but as if she were a male king. Similar titles were conferred upon the most renowned male Vietnamese heroes, such as Trần Hùng Đạo, a military leader of the thirteenth century. Since the status of males was much higher than that of females in Vietnamese society, this title was an additional recognition and proof of Liễu Hạnh’s prowess, authority, and victory over the stigma borne by women in traditional society.

The author does not conceal the difficulty and pain of such a transformation, for to gain freedom she sacrificed her personal happiness and caused pain to people close to her. Her wandering between heaven and earth, all over Vietnam, turning into clouds (which means everywhere and nowhere) reveals not a quietness of spirit but a quest. Furthermore, a constant presence in the story is the moon, the symbol of “yin” or “femaleness,” which aggravates this impression, since the sun, symbol of “yang” or “maleness,” is mentioned only once. On the one hand, it shows the significance of the female factor in the world, but, on the other hand, it also shows a lack of harmony that can exist only as a combination of yin and yang. I think by this the author wanted to emphasize the difficulty of a woman developing her independence. But Liễu Hạnh made her choice. Was it only Liễu Hạnh, or was this a reflection of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s aspirations?

From what we know of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s life, there are at least eight points of similarity with her story of Liễu Hạnh in Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện. First, Đoàn Thị Diễm was raised in a village very close to Văn Cát, the “native” village of Liễu Hạnh. Second, she had an older brother, and, according to her story, so did Liễu Hạnh. Third, she and the heroine of her story both were highly educated women. Fourth, Đoàn Thị Diễm, according to her biographies, and Liễu Hạnh, according to Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story, both were beautiful women whom men found attractive. Fifth, the fathers of both gave them for adoption to a person of higher social rank. Sixth, both Đoàn Thị Diễm and Liễu Hạnh were reverent and caring toward their parents. Đoàn Thị Diễm did not have children of her own; Liễu Hạnh, on the contrary, did have, but there is no evidence of her affection for them in the story. Seventh, both encountered male intellectuals and succeeded in gaining an upper hand over them. Eighth, they
both guarded their personal freedom, considering it the most precious
treasure.

The three latter points can be considered in relation to Confucian
thought, the dominant orthodoxy of educated people. Đoàn Thị Diễm’s
complicated attitude toward Confucianism can be seen in her life. She
long refused to get married and, consequently, to have children and to
concentrate on family life, which would limit her intellectual life. Fur-
thermore, in her writing not only did she invade a traditionally male field
of intellectual activity, but she also created a heroine, Liễu Hạnh, who
undermined the basis of Confucianism. Outwardly, Liễu Hạnh acknowl-
edged Confucianism. Her first husband, Đào Lanh, was a student, and her
second husband, Sinh, Đào Lanh’s incarnation, was chosen by Liễu Hạnh,
as she explained, because he was a decent Confucian. Moreover, Phùng
Khắc Khoan’s reputation as a Confucian is one of the components that
creates his impressive image. But, in fact, Liễu Hạnh, as she is described
by Đoàn Thị Diễm, is an apostate. She lacks filial piety toward her elders
(she abandons both of her husbands and her earthly parents, and the Jade
Emperor is not able to tame her in heaven), and she lacks responsibility
toward her children (in both cases Liễu Hạnh left them behind and hardly
remembered them, or at least Đoàn Thị Diễm does not mention it).11

Not only does Liễu Hạnh lack Confucian conviction, but so do
her husbands. She influences her husbands to continue their Confucian
studies, but when she disappears, both husbands leave their duties to
lead a secluded life. This proves that Confucianism did not play the most
important role in the husbands’ lives, but rather family and love were
much more precious for them, and without a woman’s support they failed
to succeed in their studies and careers. Đoàn Thị Diễm’s description of
Liễu Hạnh’s behavior is a retaliation of women against Confucianism,
which treated women with a certain disrespect and disregard. Liễu Hạnh
seems to be a Vietnamese version of the Paduan “shrew” described by her
contemporary Shakespeare, far away in England. But if eventually Petru-
chio tamed Katherina, Liễu Hạnh achieved her emancipation and tamed
both men and women, making them worship her.

Was Đoàn Thị Diễm aware of the story recorded by Adriano di St.
Thecla according to which Liễu Hạnh was a prostitute? We must assume
that she was. First, we can take Adriano di St. Thecla as a reliable source
of information. He demonstrates deep knowledge of Vietnamese culture
and religion as well as careful attention to detail. Even if the story he re-
lates was not true, we can be certain that it reflects rumors circulating in
his time. If a foreign missionary, Adriano di St. Thecla, heard and recorded such a story, then it is more than probable that Đoàn Thị Điểm, a native of the place where Liễu Hạnh was supposedly born, knew it as well. But this knowledge and these rumors did not find their way into Đoàn Thị Điểm’s work. Or did they?

According to Đoàn Thị Điểm, Liễu Hạnh was expelled from heaven to earth to be raised in a virtuous family because all the heavenly powers were unable to instill virtue into her. Her detachment from her earthly family and wanderings around the country, while a sign of independence of spirit, might also serve to disguise a different story of independence of spirit as told by Adriano di St. Thecla. Moreover, at the end of Adriano di St. Thecla’s story, Liễu Hạnh reveals herself not as a saintly caring mother but as an evil spirit. Where did this evil quality come from? The only possible answer is that it came from fear: fear because one did not treat her properly and feared retribution, or she was an evil person by nature, or she died an unfortunate death and became a wandering malevolent spirit. Đoàn Thị Điểm does not reveal to us the reason, but her story shows smoke indicating the likelihood of fire. The complexity of Liễu Hạnh as a spirit allowed Đoàn Thị Điểm to create complexity in the character of Liễu Hạnh as a woman.

Liễu Hạnh, Đoàn Thị Điểm, and Phùng Khắc Khoan

Let us take a closer look at one of the most prominent themes of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story, that of the relationship between Liễu Hạnh and Phùng Khắc Khoan. According to a modern Vietnamese scholar, Hà Đình Thành, Đoàn Thị Điểm offers “the earliest and the fullest description” of encounters between the two. The fact of their meeting became deeply rooted in the literary and historical legacy of Liễu Hạnh’s cult, and since Đoàn Thị Điểm’s time it has appeared in many works. Moreover, allegedly to commemorate their second encounter, Tây Hồ temple (Phủ Tây Hồ) was erected on the shore of West Lake in Hanoi. Nguyễn Hưu Thúc suggests that this story was created in popular tradition. I believe that the best explanation of these episodes is that they are a pure invention of Văn Cát Thân Nữ Truyện’s author in pursuit of her goal of glorifying women’s emancipation.

Why was Phùng Khắc Khoan chosen for this role? To understand this, we not only should consider the pair Liễu Hạnh–Phùng Khắc Khoan, but we need to add Đoàn Thị Điểm and her use of Phùng Khắc Khoan, and put all three of them into the same boat, paraphrasing the
title of Jerome K. Jerome’s famous book. The incorporation of the episodes describing two encounters between Liễu Hạnh and Phùng Khắc Khoan was first and foremost an opportunity for Đoàn Thị Diễm to display Liễu Hạnh’s intellectual prowess, and she achieved this by including a lot of poetry in the story. These episodes could not have been in oral versions of the legend, created by ordinary people, not only because the poetry was written in the classical language, inaccessible to the illiterate, but also because the figure of Phùng Khắc Khoan would appeal mostly to educated people, among whom he was so famous and acclaimed. Furthermore, popular beliefs have no essential need for factual material, historical figures, or prosody. By bringing together the goddess and the literatus, Đoàn Thị Diễm legitimized Liễu Hạnh as a person of at least the same social level as Phùng Khắc Khoan and, consequently, as a person equally worthy of deification, for it is known that, by the time of Đoàn Thị Diễm, Phùng Khắc Khoan was worshiped in northern Vietnam.

What was Phùng Khắc Khoan for Đoàn Thị Diễm? She, being a well-educated person with contacts among intellectuals and serving as a tutor in the palace, not only knew of Phùng Khắc Khoan and his reputation as one of the most decent and faithful people of his generation, but apparently also admired him for personal reasons. Phùng Khắc Khoan appears in another story of Đoàn Thị Diễm, *An Áp Liệt Nữ Truyện* (A Story of an Indomitable Woman from An Áp), also in the collection *Truyện Kỳ Tân Phả*. In this story, Đoàn Thị Diễm compares a royal envoy to China to Phùng Khắc Khoan, whom she apparently regarded as the ideal model of an envoy. In her story of Liễu Hạnh, she uses Phùng Khắc Khoan to enhance the reputation of a woman not only by his presence in the story, but also by his admiration of Liễu Hạnh and, eventually, his admission of her intellectual superiority.

The lack of any historicity of these episodes is indicated by the absence of any traces of these or similar encounters in Phùng Khắc Khoan’s writings or writings about him. The only exceptions are references to Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story or general statements that encounters took place without any further precision, which might be considered as a silent and habitual reference to this same and only source. For example, one modern author asserts that there are some materials in which Phùng Khắc Khoan himself tells about his meeting with the fairy Liễu Hạnh. But this author’s reference to the source of this information is not persuasive, for the text to which we are referred is simply another modern scholar, who writes: ”Mr. Tráng Bưng [Phùng Khắc Khoan] said that he met a woman
from heaven, Liễu Hạnh...she composed parallel poems with him”;¹⁷ there is no indication of when Phùng Khắc Khoan said this, where this was written down, or if this was an oral tradition. A second source dwells on the supposed fact of Phùng Khắc Khoan’s encounter with Liễu Hạnh and cites poems recited during their meeting, but it states that all this information is based on Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện.¹⁸

The enhancement of Liễu Hạnh’s reputation was not the only role to be played by Phùng Khắc Khoan. His other role in the story is at least as important and can be characterized as political affiliation. Đoàn Thị Điểm’s ancestors were members of the Lê royal clan. Phùng Khắc Khoan was known as one of the partisans of the Lê royal family. When he came of age, he chose to serve the Lê cause in the Lê-Mạc wars and was prominent in negotiations with the Ming dynasty that achieved Ming recognition of the Lê. The fact that Đoàn Thị Điểm indicated the year 1557, the date of Liễu Hạnh’s appearance, with the reign title Thiên Hựu, which belonged to the then-defeated yet aspiring Lê dynasty rather than to the then-ruling Mạc dynasty, suggests that the author wanted to associate the deity with the Lê. The significance of this cannot be very large, considering that Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện was written long after the Mạc had been finally defeated. But, given dynastic sensitivities, it would hardly be possible for Đoàn Thị Điểm to use the the Mạc reign title, even if she had wanted to do so.

Setting aside the dating question, Phùng Khắc Khoan’s role in the story unambiguously points to where the allegiance of the princess lay. There is no place in the story for the supporters of the Mạc. Liễu Hạnh appeared under the Lê reign title, was associated with its supporters, and was deified by them. In brief, Liễu Hạnh was a deity of the Lê, not of the Mạc. Phùng Khắc Khoan’s presence in the story serves a useful role in erasing any association of Liễu Hạnh with the Mạc and turning her into an “indigenous” spirit of the Lê. In Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story, Liễu Hạnh is recognized as a deity only after events dated in the Cánh Trị reign period of the Lê dynasty (1663–1671). Before that time she is portrayed as simply a heavenly being; she was not yet worshiped by people nor was there yet a temple built for her. Phùng Khắc Khoan’s association with Liễu Hạnh, decades earlier, indicates that she was already under the Lê dynasty umbrella in her years as a wandering spirit.

An inscription in Chùa Ngọc Hồ, a Buddhist temple in Hanoi near the Temple of Literature, identifies Liễu Hạnh as a deity from Thanh Hóa province. Why Thanh Hóa province and not Nam Định province, where
Văn Cát village, Liễu Hạnh’s natal place, is located? Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Phạm Văn Ty suggest that this can be accounted for, as Thanh Hóa was the place of Liễu Hạnh’s deification. But it also can reflect the desire of the Lê partisans and their followers to obliterate any connection between Liễu Hạnh and the Mạc. Nam Định province was located in the territory under the Mạc, while Thanh Hóa province was the hereditary domain of the Lê and their supporters. By claiming their own home province as the birthplace of Liễu Hạnh, the clans who supported the Lê denied her identification with territories governed by the Mạc.

What Is Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện?

Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện has been extensively used as a basic account of Liễu Hạnh’s life and as the fullest version of her legend. The Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, discussing legends, observed that from an artistic point of view legends are usually poor; they are not an aesthetic genre. The narrator seeks neither consciously nor unconsciously to embellish the story but wants only to transmit what he considers to be reality. The Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện is different from this with its panoply of literary allusions and plenitude of highly polished poetry.

The structure of the story is so elaborated that it can hardly be considered as conforming to the structure of legends or myths, which are commonly told by and for nonliterary people and, thus, are relatively simple in their structure and in their display of events. In addition, the numerous dialogues, the complicated philosophical parallel poems, and the well-developed psychological portraits of the characters that fill the story are alien to legend and myth. Legends usually are the products of a collective creativity.

Although a hagiography is most often written by a single author, neither can this story be considered as a biography or hagiography of Liễu Hạnh. A hagiography does not concentrate on psychological development but tries to display the life and main concept of a saint as clearly as possible in order for it to be understandable to all strata of the population and to attract new followers. Moreover, the author of a hagiography usually directly states the purpose of the work, while Đoàn Thị Điểm not only did not state that her production was a hagiography of Liễu Hạnh but incorporated her story into a book with the title Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát (New Collection of Marvelous Stories).

This collection includes at least three other stories. One of them, An Áp Liệt Nữ Truyện (Story of an Indomitable Woman from An Áp),
seems to go in the opposite direction from the images created in my analysis of Văn Cất Thần Nữ Truyện. This is a story about a Vietnamese envoy named Dinh Hòan, a contemporary of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s whom, as I have mentioned above, she compared to Phùng Khắc Khoan. He died while on his mission. His wife was incapable of surviving his death, and after days, months, and years of grief and tears, she committed suicide. Her loyalty to her spouse was recognized by the people and the dynasty, who erected a temple to worship her. Unlike Văn Cất Thần Nữ Truyện, in which Liễu Hạnh appears as something of a shrew, An Ẩp Liệt Nữ Truyện depicts the sufferings of a lonely woman. She is connected to her husband and dependent upon him; she is tender; she is feminine; she is loyal. Indeed, the woman is considered a paragon of female virtue.

We see a very similar plot and description of a woman in the poem Chinh Phụ Ngâm (Lamentation of a Soldier’s Wife), another work associated with Đoàn Thị Điểm’s name in Vietnamese literature. Chinh Phụ Ngâm was written by Đặng Trần Côn (1710–1745) in classical Chinese. Đoàn Thị Điểm translated it into vernacular Vietnamese. While ostensibly set in China, this poem undoubtedly was inspired by events taking place in the first half of the eighteenth century in northern Vietnam, which suffered many insurrections, the suppression of which required the mobilization of thousands of men, who left behind their wives and families. The poem reflects the feelings of a woman whose husband had to go to fight and for whom she longs. But the similarities of the Chinh Phụ Ngâm and An Ẩp Liệt Nữ Truyện are not confined to the depiction of the miserable fates of two women bereft of their men. Despite the last several lines of the poem that affirm Confucian principles and the husband’s duties to the state and the ruler (which will be discussed below), Chinh Phụ Ngâm is an antiwar poem that defies Confucian principles, which required endless patience from a woman and willingness to part with her husband when his sovereign summons him. Apparently this is what aroused Đoàn Thị Điểm’s interest in Đặng Trần Côn’s work and prompted her decision to render this poem into vernacular Vietnamese.

Defiance of Confucian principles is evident in An Ẩp Liệt Nữ Truyện too. Despite claims that the story praises the female virtue of loyalty, it is apparent that Đoàn Thị Điểm had a different goal in mind: not to praise the woman for her virtue but, as in Chinh Phụ Ngâm, to let the woman’s grief be heard and to bring to light the disregard in which women had to live. Thus, the pivotal point of An Ẩp Liệt Nữ Truyện is found at the end of the story, in the return of the woman to earth as a
spirit and her appeal to the reincarnations of her former husband and of all Confucian gentlemen (quân tuồng) to see their wives as the root of their righteousness and, when embarking on a mission, always to take into consideration the members of their households. She appeals not as a woman but as a deity, because as a woman she was not supposed to have such thoughts, much less speak them.

According to the mournful wife returned as a deity, if a Confucian gentleman himself should express an opinion in favor of the importance of valuing his wife, he would be derided. She invokes Chinese classical works, attributed to Confucius, among them the Book of History, to demonstrate a contradiction between the “original” thought of Confucianism and its distortion by men in her time. In doing this, she proves herself rather creative. For example, she suggests as evidence of the necessity for a man to respect and value his wife the example of the mythical Chinese emperors Yao and Shun. Yao married two of his daughters to Shun to test Shun’s ability to manage the state and to inherit Yao’s throne. Shun’s task was to be able to keep peace in the household between his two wives.

The apparent intention of the deified woman in citing this example is to demonstrate the importance of wives for men. And, undoubtedly, Yao’s daughters were thought to have played important roles in Shun’s reign. But the significance of the example in the Book of History itself is something else. If we read the Book of History, we will see that Shun was chosen for a trial because he demonstrated “his filial piety to live in harmony” with his wicked family. Moreover, he led his evil family members “gradually to self-government, so that they no longer proceed to great wickedness.” Hence, Shun had already passed a very difficult test. Yao apparently considered Shun’s marriage to Yao’s daughters a task more difficult to carry out than Shun’s dealing with his own family. If one can succeed in managing two wives, then one will be able to manage the state. When Yao sent his daughters to Shun, he instructed them to be reverent. From this we can gather that, far from being the root of righteousness, wives needed instruction, unlike husbands. We do not see any indication of Shun being instructed on his behavior toward his wives. The importance of women is evident, but this example does not indicate that the Book of History saw in women the root of righteousness. Rather, the message is that managing wives is a hard task, harder than managing a family of wicked relatives.

The goddess in An Ẩp Liệt Nữ Truyện, like Liễu Hạnh, while acknowledging Confucianism, tries to reinterpret it to improve the position
of women. Her protest, however, is much quieter than Liễu Hạnh’s, as her personality also seems more peaceful. Liễu Hạnh is controversial, sometimes malicious, always fighting, and is shown to have succeeded in gaining widespread fame, being worshiped in several provinces. The virtuous goddess of An Ấp, on the contrary, is worshiped in only one locality. But perhaps her significance for ordinary women is greater. Note that the goddess in this story, unlike Liễu Hạnh, does not have a proper name; she is always referred to as phu nhan (madam, lady). This certainly resulted from authorial intent. Đoan Thị Diễm deliberately kept this indomitable woman from An Ấp nameless to suggest her identification with all other women. This goddess, unlike Liễu Hạnh, was of earthly origin like any other woman. Unlike Liễu Hạnh she had complied with all societal norms and earned her deification from her virtue, not from awe-inspiring divine power. But having gone through this pass of sorrow and glory, she, once a goddess, felt the need to talk about her dissatisfaction with her position as a woman. An Ấp Liệt Nữ Truyện is a call to women to think about their position while they are still alive, and it is a call to men to do something to make women feel valued as members of their marriages and of society.

It is tempting to claim that Vân Cát Thân Nữ Truyện, on the one hand, and An Ấp Liệt Nữ Truyện and Chinh Phu Ngâm, on the other, were written during two different periods of Đoan Thị Diễm’s life: before and after her marriage. This conjecture would fit well with the feelings of a woman left behind as Đoan Thị Diễm had been by a husband sent away from his newlywed wife on a royal mission only months, if not weeks, after his wedding. The mixture of new feelings experienced in marriage with her persistent opposition to the Confucian restrictions of society might account for the differences in Đoan Thị Diễm’s works. But I will stop short of this claim, as it would deprive Đoan Thị Diễm of the complexities of her nature, imagination, and authorship, enslaving her to the events that, according to us, would need to occur in her life in order to enable her to create a new image. Instead, noting these considerations simply as a point of interest and leaving to specialists in literature the honor of dating Đoan Thị Diễm’s works, I will continue with comparing her works.

Despite obvious differences, Vân Cát Thân Nữ Truyện and An Ấp Liệt Nữ Truyện are very similar: both stories depict beautiful, well-educated, and accomplished women, and both employ elaborate poetry and carefully developed characters. From time to time the reader may find that the same situations (husband and wife composing poetry and drinking wine to-
gether, meeting a dead husband’s reincarnation, and so on) are dragged from one story to the other, but this reflects both the genre in general and the peculiarities of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s writing style in particular.

These works belong to the well-known genre of chuanqi, or marvelous stories, that appeared many centuries earlier in China and was transplanted to Vietnam. The best-known example of a Vietnamese work in the chuanqi genre before Đoàn Thị Diễm’s time is Nguyễn Dữ’s Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lực (Collection of Marvelous Stories). Written in the sixteenth century, also in classical Hán, this work creatively imitated the stories of the Chinese collection Jiandeng xinhua (New Tales While Trimming the Lamp) written by Qu You Zongzi in 1378. Nguyễn Dữ transferred them into Vietnamese contexts. Transferring them, he filled the stories with new messages and new tasks, turning them into didactic material. Many of the stories in this book are about witches, fairies, and other supernatural creatures. The motifs of some of the stories are similar to some parts of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s writings (for example, the motifs of mortals visiting the Heavenly Palace, of love between a mortal man and a fairy, and so on). Furthermore, the title of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s collection Truyện Kỳ Tân Phà (New Collection of Marvelous Stories) directly alludes to Nguyễn Dữ’s book Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lực. She used the genre and Nguyễn Dữ’s well-known work, fully recognized in literati society, as a shield for her own work to avoid making it a direct challenge to her society, which to a large extent acknowledged Confucian principles.

This may account for the striking contradiction between the lamentations of the aforementioned Chinh Phủ Ngâm (“why should men and women so live apart, when other creatures will not be parted?”) and its “unfittting” ending, which constitutes only 20 lines of a 408-line poem. Contrary to the body of the poem, the ending affirms the husband’s duty to the state as having precedence over his wife: “Serve well your country with a true-red heart, defend your people with an iron will.” But this ending is not sufficient to establish Chinh Phủ Ngâm as a Confucian poem praising female virtue. This forcing together of a long poem about a woman’s suffering in a man’s world with a contrived happy ending that puts the woman securely in her proper place is similar to the most celebrated work of Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Du’s Kim Vân Kiều. At the end of this work, the main character, Kiều, is removed from the Buddhist retreat where she has found peace and forced back into the Confucian family where she can practice submissive womanly virtues. This was the Confucian ending required for a work to be published and distributed.
in that time and place. Unlike *Truyện Kỳ Môn Lược, Chinh Phụ Ngâm* did not belong to the genre of “marvelous stories,” was not inhabited by deities, and, thus, had to comply with the ideological requirements of society and the authorities who enforced orthodox thought.

On the basis of all the materials presented here, it is clear that the *Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện* is neither legend, myth, nor hagiography but a highly elaborated, for the author’s time and place, novel that entangles elements of myth, legend, romantic imagination, and Đoan Thị Diễm’s own biography with her intellectual inclinations and aspirations. It was written as a novel in which Liễu Hạnh appears not as a figure in peasant or folk religion, but as a figure worthy of being emulated by women in the highest classes of society. The audience of readers of the story was restricted to the stratum of well-educated people. The classical Hán language, in which it was written and which was accessible only to a thin layer of readers, is an indication of this. Furthermore, the elaborate structure of the narrative, which reveals abstract philosophical ideas and literary tropes, supports this point.

Having been raised in a region where Liễu Hạnh’s cult was widespread by her time, Đoan Thị Diễm would have been familiar with the cult, and she used the deity to tell her own story of a woman’s position in society. Đoan Thị Diễm did not write this story in order to attract high-class followers to become devotees of a folk cult; rather, she wanted them to be acquainted with the folk phenomenon of Liễu Hạnh seen through her own eyes, the eyes of a well-educated person writing for other educated people.

Đoan Thị Diễm’s main achievement in writing this story was to show the development and emancipation of a woman. She could hardly do so in real stories because of official disapproval, but such a theme could easily be hidden in the *Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát* as historical fiction. According to Nguyễn Thị Huệ, “the legend of Holy Mother Liễu Hạnh goes beyond the frame of a primitive popular belief and has acquired a more developed character.”34 It is tempting to ascribe this “overcoming of the frame” to the merits of Đoan Thị Diễm’s novel, but I am inclined to see this in a different way: Đoan Thị Diễm created a new image from an existing cult but not to promote the cult. The “form” of the cult served her as a vessel to fill with wine awaiting the one who would come to taste it. And come they did.

Đoan Thị Diễm’s work became widely known and was used by many other authors without mentioning her authorship. Her story was even cited
as a “folk” legend and details were indiscriminately added or subtracted. One of the most remarkable examples of an unattributed citation of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story is from Phan Kế Bình (1875–1921), one of the most celebrated authors to write about popular culture in the early twentieth century. He had a complex view of popular culture, cherishing some of its aspects while despising other aspects that he believed obstructed the progress of his country. In 1912 he published a book called Nam Hải Dị Nhân (Extraordinary People of the South Sea) in which he presented fifty-five stories about celebrated and influential people in Vietnamese history. Of these fifty-five stories only three are about women: the Trưng sisters, Liễu Hạnh, and Đoàn Thị Điểm.

By Phan Kế Bình’s time, the Trưng sisters occupied an incontestably exalted position in Vietnamese historical memory. They almost single-handedly bore the weight of representing the high status of women in Vietnamese society as well as female leadership, heroism, and patriotism. In the absence of other similar examples of heroic women, their assigned position is curious, even suspicious, which may explain the significance of there being two of them. Thus, it should be considered a great honor for Liễu Hạnh and Đoàn Thị Điểm to share their company in Phan Kế Bình’s esteem for worthy women.

Liễu Hạnh’s story, placed in the section of the book titled “Efficacious Spirits” (Cảc Vị Thánh Linh Úng), is an abridged version of Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyền. It is nevertheless one of the longest stories in Phan Kế Bình’s collection. The parts left in are Liễu Hạnh’s birth to a virtuous family and her marriage, early death, and deification; some sentences are repeated verbatim from Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story. The parts left out are Liễu Hạnh’s father’s trip to heaven, her relations with her earthly family after her death, and her remarriage to the reincarnation of her former husband. Her encounters with Phùng Khắc Khoan are mentioned but without the long presentations of poetry.

It is with poetry, however, that Phan Kế Bình’s story of Đoàn Thị Điểm is most concerned. He describes her life, praising her education and wit, because of which she attracted a number of famous scholars, including Đặng Trần Côn, the author of the original Chinh Phù Ngâm. Most of Phan Kế Bình’s account describes how Đoàn Thị Điểm bested these men by displaying her poetic skill. Đoàn Thị Điểm’s reputation for successfully competing with men in composing poetry was an accomplishment she attributes to Liễu Hạnh in Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyền. Phan Kế Bình did not include Đoàn Thị Điểm in his category of “literary figures of great talent”
(các bác văn tài), but rather in his generic catchall category of “famous people” (các người có danh tiếng), suggesting that Đoan Thị Diễm’s literary skill was in his view a kind of monstrosity, something remarkable but not normal.

Phan Kế Bình’s stories about Liễu Hạnh and Đoan Thị Diễm are essentially a single story about the author and her creation in Văn Cát Thân Nữ Truyện. If the Trưng sisters are thought to be extraordinary because of their courage, charisma, and patriotism, Liễu Hạnh and Đoan Thị Diễm are extraordinary because of their intellectual prowess. Using the name and the cult of the famous deity, Đoan Thị Diễm created an image of a highly cultured and independent woman far ahead of her own time. Because of this, she served well the agenda of a twentieth-century scholar like Phan Kế Bình, for her story became the “orthodox” version of descriptions of Liễu Hạnh’s life by intellectuals striving to bring their country from what they considered backwardness into modernity and civilization. Đoan Thị Diễm’s story has also enabled scholars of the socialist and postsocialist periods to present Liễu Hạnh not as a deity of unknown or dubious origins but, on the contrary, as one that exemplifies the best of traditional culture, worthy of pride and able to share the burden, honor, and glory of the famed Trưng sisters as representatives of Vietnamese women.

Đoan Thị Diễm seems to be the first known Vietnamese feminist, but in fact there is an important difference between her position and that of modern feminists. While that of modern feminists seek equality with men, she showed that a woman could establish her supremacy in the domain of men using feminine qualities. Not only did Liễu Hạnh overthrow the conventional gender subordination of women, but she achieved divinity and was capable of overwhelming and terrorizing those who disrespected her. Đoan Thị Diễm heroicized a woman capable not simply of successfully competing with men in a male-dominated society but of taking on the challenge to defy the norms of that society.

**Liễu Hạnh and Buddhism: Princess Tamed**

Đoan Thị Diễm’s Văn Cát Thân Nữ Truyện presents Liễu Hạnh as an independent woman, triumphant over men and circumstances. In response to her work, there appeared a narrative that presents Liễu Hạnh in a male discourse, in which she is shown as a powerful female spirit defeated by
male power. I am talking about the annals of the Nơi Đạo Tràng (School of the Inner Religion). This was a school of magicians, famous for its struggle against evil spirits and for healing people, which is thought to have appeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The history of the School of the Inner Religion is recorded in its fullest, and possibly for the first time, in the manuscript Đại Việt Lê Triều Thanh Hóa Nơi Đạo Tràng Tam Thánh Bảo Lục (A Precious Record of the Three Saints of the School of the Inner Religion in Thanh Hóa Province in Great Viet during the Lê Dynasty), commonly abbreviated as the Tam Thánh Bảo Lục. The founding of the school is connected to the time of the restoration of the Lê dynasty, when “fiendish goblins, using the inauspicious atmosphere, harmed people to an extent never seen before.” This describes a time when, after almost a century of internecine war, many different sects and cults had arisen.

History of the School of the Inner Religion

There are various accounts regarding the founder of the school. Tam Thánh Bảo Lục lists him as Trần Ngọc Duệ, born in the year Quy Mùi, while three other manuscripts give his name as Lành (honorable name Ngọc Trần), born in the eighteenth year of the Quang Hùng reign period (1595); Nguyễn Văn Huyền, an early twentieth-century scholar, proposes that his name was Toàn and does not mention any date for his birthday, indicating only that he lived in the seventeenth century. However, there is no disagreement among the various sources about the birthplace of the founder, which is referred to as Đông An community of Quảng Xương district in Thanh Hóa province. All the sources also picture him as an offspring of a prominent Trần family, which numbered several generations of high officials. Even though he was a successful scholar, Duệ rejected a promising career and retreated to his native Thanh Hóa, where he settled in Tự Minh community of Hoàng Hóa district. Thus, the information available to us, even if revealing some conflicting details, clearly points out that the school appeared in the province that was a stronghold of the Lê and the Trịnh clans. The affiliation with these two families is strengthened by the founder belonging to the Trần clan, which supported the Lê. Furthermore, an association with the imperial family is seen in the direct interaction described between Trần Ngọc Duệ and Emperor Lê Thần Tông (1619–1643, 1649–1662).

The story goes that, upon his return to Thanh Hóa, Duệ met a strange person who turned out to be Phật Sư Phật (Buddha Bhaishajya-
guru) and who instructed him in the wisdom of exorcism to expel witches and evil spirits, the art that he taught to his students. He was proclaimed Thường Sư (Supreme Monk). At that time Emperor Lê Thánh Tông had just ascended the throne, and he suddenly fell sick with a strange illness. No one could cure him. Only the art of Thường Sư proved to be helpful. The emperor wanted to bestow upon his savior the title Quốc Sư (State Advisor), but Thường Sư rejected the imperial offer. He decided to continue his quiet life in the village, striving to reach the peak of perfection. By the end of his life, three sons were born to him. They successfully passed the examinations but followed in their father’s footsteps and rejected government careers. When their father passed away, he became a Buddha. It is noteworthy that no mention of a wife or mother is made in this narrative; women have no place in the School of the Inner Religion.

The three sons, known as Tả Quan (Master of the Left), Hữu Quan (Master of the Right), and Tiên Quan (Master of the Front) continued the father’s legacy. In due time they also achieved Buddhahood and became Bảo Không Buddha, Vĩnh Không Buddha, and Tô Không Buddha, respectively. The brothers formed the triumvirate of Tam Thánh (the Three Saints), which is reflected in the alternative name of the School of the Inner Religion as well as in the title of the Tam Thánh Bảo Đức.

This narrative, in addition to demonstrating close ties with the Lê, is also striking evidence of Buddhist influence in the formation of the school. It connects the time of its appearance with the time of Emperor Lê Thánh Tông, a staunch Buddhist who endured his royal duties while dreaming of devoting himself entirely to Buddhism. The Vietnamese historical annals described him as “an emperor with a prominent nose and an imperial face [long chứa long uhan; literally “big nose and dragon face,” the cliche for a royal demeanor], intelligent and an avid reader, a deep strategist, skilled in literature, praiseworthy as a good monarch. However, disorder in the palace and in the examination system and the deluded teachings of Buddhism were his weak points.” Lê Thánh Tông was popularly considered to be a reincarnation of Emperor Lý Thanh Tông (1128–1138), who was, in turn, considered to be a reincarnation of a famous Buddhist monk and magician. Lê Thánh Tông’s attempt to bestow the title of State Advisor on Due is a patent allusion to the episode that allegedly took place between Lý Thanh Tông and the Buddhist monk Nguyễn Minh Không. In 1136 the monk saved the emperor from a strange illness, and the emperor bestowed on his benefactor the post of State Advisor.
The time of Lê Thái Tông was marked by a Buddhist revival. Not only was Lê Thái Tông a devoted adherent of Buddhism, but others from his milieu also followed this doctrine. According to Ralph Smith, “Triệu Tráng, virtual ruler of northern Vietnam between 1623 and 1657, seems to have been a patron of Buddhism, and the empress of Lê Thái Tông (1619–1643) was converted to that religion by a Chinese monk in the 1630s.” At this time a number of Buddhist schools appeared in Vietnam. Among them was the School of the Inner Religion. However, the “Buddhist” character of this school is very peculiar. Almost the only feature connecting it to Buddhism is the use of Buddhist terms. It has a syncretic nature similar to that of other Vietnamese cults. Even though the differences between Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion in Vietnam had been blurred, they were still contesting the right to appropriate Liễu Hạnh.

Liễu Hạnh and the School of Inner Religion: First Encounter, First Defeat

It is to the period after Trường Sư had passed away that the tradition of the School of the Inner Religion ascribes the encounter and struggle between one of his three sons and Liễu Hạnh in the episode labeled the Sùng Sơn battle, named after the place where the princess resided at that time, having chosen it for its scenery and tranquility. She is described as one of whom everyone was frightened and who inflicted enormous harm on the people of the region: “Merchants and students were hurt frequently. After people learned about her, everybody tried to stay away; they did not dare to approach her. There were no more people on the roads. . . . During the day the sounds of gongs and drums were heard, and flags and banners were seen; during the night the sounds of cheering and of songs and dances were heard.” The story goes that the Lê kings and the Triệu lords became extremely worried about this chaotic, disastrous situation. After they failed to find anyone equal to Liễu Hạnh in power, they regretted the absence of the late Trường Sư but were informed that his three sons were still alive and well.

There immediately followed the order to bring them to the capital, but the brothers did not express any interest in leaving their habitation. Eventually, however, the youngest son, Tiền Quan, agreed to the royal request to rid the country of Liễu Hạnh’s evil spirit. Arriving at Liễu Hạnh’s abode in Sùng Sơn, he successfully deluded the princess about the goal of his visit, pretending that he was there with no other purpose than to warn her of the imminent danger of the approaching royal forces and to help
her to avoid defeat. Touched by his care for her, Liễu Hạnh revealed to Tiến Quan her three thousand magic tricks, which she performed with her hands. Tiến Quan managed to get a red kerchief from his sleeve and cover the hands of Liễu Hạnh, thus stealing her magic secrets.

Liễu Hạnh realized the awful trick only after Tiến Quan’s departure. She gathered her army of water and mountain spirits, devils and witches to prepare for a fight. But with Liễu Hạnh’s abilities no more a secret and her power diminished, her army was crushed after three days of heavy battle. The survival of Liễu Hạnh herself was in doubt, and if not for Buddha Sakyamuni, who found it necessary to spare the life of the Jade Emperor’s daughter, the princess would have perished in the struggle with the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion. Buddha decided to bring the prodigal daughter of the Jade Emperor to the tenets of his teaching, thinking: “She will listen to my prayers and my law. In my pure and quiet land, she will change her bad passions into tender compassion.” Tiến Quan was also willing that this time Liễu Hạnh be spared if she made a promise in the presence of Sakyamuni to change her ways. The princess willingly agreed and accepted the Buddhist robe to become a nun, corrected her ways, and became imbued with compassion. So ends the narrative about Liễu Hạnh and the School of the Inner Religion.

Comparing this story with that of Đoàn Thị Điểm, it is unavoidable to conclude that they are directly opposite, if not mutually exclusive. Here, Liễu Hạnh’s cult is occupied by new content, subverting the content provided by Đoàn Thị Điểm. The intelligent and powerful Liễu Hạnh of Đoàn Thị Điểm disappears, yielding her place to an unreasonable evil demon. The school demonizes the princess, expanding on what Đoàn Thị Điểm relates as Liễu Hạnh’s mischievous deeds or retribution for treating her with a lack of respect, making her a wild power punishing without any reason. In fact, this behavior conforms to what would be expected from the spirit of a singsong girl who died in her youth, an abandoned soul. While Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Liễu Hạnh excites admiration as a strong and reasonable woman, Liễu Hạnh of the School of the Inner Religion stirs up negative emotions as a nightmare for the population. Even more important, free, independent Liễu Hạnh loses her dominance over the male world in the annals of the School of the Inner Religion.

It is evident that this story puts Liễu Hạnh under male authority; she is unable to withstand the guile of Tiến Quan and the strength of the School of the Inner Religion. Her meeting with Tiến Quan is an allegory of the classical opposition between yang and yin, between male and fe-
male potency. The ease with which Tiên Quan outsmarts the princess, ingratiating himself with her and robbing her of her magical tricks, leaves no doubt about whose intellectual abilities prevail. Defeated first on the intellectual level, Liêu Hạnh finds herself inadequate as well in the competition of martial prowess. A leader without an army, a spirit without magic, she eventually turns into what she is supposed to be: a weak and defenseless woman begging the men to spare her humble life. It does not really matter that her addressees are not common men, as she is not an ordinary woman herself. Indeed, clemency is granted by Buddha Sakyamuni and confirmed by Tiên Quan. This confirmation is peculiar: could Tiên Quan oppose Sakyamuni? Hardly so. But the confirmation is important, as it ascertains male dominance over the princess: Buddha, the highest power, may decide, but in any case a woman is under the authority of a living man, who exerts his power over her. No woman is allowed to go wild; she should be domesticated or tamed. The terror and awe of Liêu Hạnh experienced by the people is lifted in the text of the school to a new height. The more the sublime mysterium tremendum is increased, the more striking is the success of domesticating it.

In contrast to Đoan Thị Diệm’s text, this is a narrative by and for men. Is it the case, in the words of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, that the “man cannot speak for her”?49 I think it is. No male supported feminism at any time during the period we are discussing. This text, in my opinion, is not aimed against Liêu Hạnh but against the person who created her emancipated image: Đoan Thị Diệm. The text of the School of the Inner Religion summarizes Đoan Thị Diệm’s story as a prelude to its own discourse, but there is no connection between the two, even though they co-exist in the same manuscript. While Đoan Thị Diệm’s story is used to introduce the Sùng Sơn battle, the rest of the text of the School of the Inner Religion does not logically follow from that story. There is an irreparable break between them that is so final that the only apparent connection between them is Liêu Hạnh’s name. It is not clear whether the author(s) sensed the contradiction between their story and that of Đoan Thị Diệm. Maybe they intentionally played on this contradiction to highlight the strength of their own teaching, capable of overpowering a mighty deity. In any case the discourse of the School of the Inner Religion sought to eliminate the free spirit instilled into Liêu Hạnh by Đoan Thị Diệm. Furthermore, because of the widespread popularity of Liêu Hạnh and the fact that her statues appeared in many Buddhist temples, this discourse was an effort to explain her worship within the context of Buddhism. It is very
probable that the story of Liễu Hạnh’s defeat by the representatives of Buddhism was created to justify the fact that she was worshiped in many Buddhist temples.

*Liễu Hạnh and the School of Inner Religion: Second Encounter, Second Defeat*

While some stories in this vein end with Liễu Hạnh’s compliance with Buddhism, other manuscripts narrate a continuation of Liễu Hạnh’s saga, extending the history of the friction between Liễu Hạnh and the School of the Inner Religion beyond the Súng Sơn battle.50 The conflict arises anew between the princess and a student of the three brothers, Pháp Công, when they meet after Liễu Hạnh’s conversion to Buddhism. According to the annals of the School of the Inner Religion, she, even though pacified, still longed for the scenery of Súng Sơn and obtained permission to take a leave to visit the place. There, while picking flowers, she met Pháp Công, whom she approached with the following question: “Do you know how to compose verses?” As the reply she got from him was “I am the King of the Poets; the entire country knows my name,” the two entered a poetic competition lasting for two days. In the final round, it was decided that the first to complete a composition of a hundred poems would get as prize a quart of wine, whereas the other would be fined.

Even though the princess could compose poetry faster than her opponent, he had the advantage of being able to write down characters faster. Victorious in the competition, Pháp Công offended Liễu Hạnh by calling her “stupid” and playing a trick on her. Outraged, she could never forgive him. Her rancor did not disappear even after she returned to her studies with the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion and was given the title Đại Thùa (Great Vehicle; Mahayana). Previously a brilliant scholar, Pháp Công was not able to pass the preliminary examinations. After his second failure, he recognized the avenging hand of the princess and complained about her. His teacher, Hậu Quan (Master of the Rear),51 admonished him to abandon his worldly ambitions and to concentrate on his spiritual perfection: “Why are you still reluctant to part with office and fame; why compare talents with a woman?” Pháp Công immediately apprehended his fault, entered the monkhood, and achieved the status of a saint.

I see this history of continuing friction between the two cults as an attempt to reconcile Liễu Hạnh’s cult with Buddhism. It is nevertheless a
weak attempt, for the narrative does not constitute a plot of reconciliation. Rather, it is as if two different stories contend within the narrative without resolution. The subordinated woman continues to obtain her revenge, and the triumphant man can do no better than to withdraw from the struggle in search of inner peace. This narrative conflates two confrontations. One is between the cult of Liên Hạnh and Buddhism as forms of religious practices. The other is between the gendered realms of women and men. It is significant that in this narrative, aside from Liên Hạnh, there is no mention of any woman, whether the wife or the mother of any of the male protagonists. While in these narratives Liên Hạnh is defeated by the School of the Inner Religion and redeemed and tamed by Buddha, these narratives, I surmise, actually reflected the opposite situation in reality. The popularity of Liên Hạnh’s cult was such by the eighteenth century that images of her appeared in many Buddhist temples, and from this there later appeared a saying: “the front is worshiping Buddha; the rear is worshiping Mothers.” Incapable of stemming Liên Hạnh’s invasion, Buddhist adherents compiled a narrative positioning the newcomer as a grateful subject rather than an equal partner.

LIÊN HÀNH AND DAOISM: THE BUDDHIST-DAOIST ARGUMENT

Buddhism was not the only religion to claim Liên Hạnh into the circle of its deities. Daoism followed suit, as we can see in the book Hội Chấn Biên (Collection of Genuine Records). There exists an edition of Hội Chấn Biên dated 1851, written by Thanh Hôa Tự in 1847 and revised by Quế Hiền Tự.52 We do not have any exact information on these two people. However, in the Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi, there is a manuscript titled Thiên Nam Từ Điển Âm (Phonetic Transcription of All Things in the Heavenly South), describing the geography, history, and customs of Vietnam, which was written by a Quế Hiền in 1907.53 It might well be that this is the same person who revised the Hội Chấn Biên. The book consists of thirteen stories of male immortals and twelve stories of female immortals. While all the male immortals were of earthly origin, ten of the female immortals were of heavenly origin but manifested themselves in the earthly realm incarnated as human beings.54 This reinforces the impression that, since men dominated earthly society, women not thought to be of heavenly origin were seldom considered for deification.
The story of Liễu Hành as we now have it in Hội Chấn Biền is already an abridged version of a narrative that no longer exists. The title page includes the information that this text was “respectfully abridged by Thanh Hòa Tự.” Thus this story presents us with the task not only of considering its contents, but also of noting what the editor chose to omit. While the first part of the text basically repeats Đoàn Thị Diệm’s version of Liễu Hành’s story, there are some deviations from it. Thanh Hòa Tự’s story is a celebration of a Daoist current in Liễu Hành’s cult.

Let us take a look at how this story differs from that written by Đoàn Thị Diệm. First of all, in this text Liễu Hành is ascribed an honorific title that is not seen in any other text: she is called Liễu Hành Nguyên Quán (Primordial Sovereign), the Daoist title for female deities. To enhance this impression, Thanh Hòa Tự describes in a rather detailed way Liễu Hành’s birth, including the appearance of a Daoist who ensured Liễu Hành’s birth by magical rituals. While this description by itself is found in many other versions (including that of Đoàn Thị Diệm), it draws attention here because the rest of the text is concise and abbreviated, omitting many details that are important in other stories of Liễu Hành. The author’s decision to keep a full description of Liễu Hành’s birth in the text indicates its importance for associating Liễu Hành with Daoism. This direct reference to Daoism is intended to eliminate any possible displacement of Liễu Hành as a goddess primarily associated with Daoism.

Consider the title of the story: in Hội Chấn Biền it is titled “The Saint Mother of Sùng Sơn [Sung Mountain].” Comparing this title to the title of Đoàn Thị Diệm’s story, we see two main discrepancies. Instead of “the Goddess,” Liễu Hành is called “the Saint Mother,” and instead of her attribution by Đoàn Thị Diệm to Văn Cát, she is attributed to Sùng Sơn. Why? If we assume that a title serves as an indication of the content of a story, we may conjecture that, apparently, during the interval between the creation of Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyền and Hội Chấn Biền, Liễu Hành became more widely known as a Mother, not simply as a goddess, at least in certain circles. Her further identification with Sùng Sơn rather than with Văn Cát village signals a shift not only in terms of locale, but also in terms of the primary event associated with her story. Đoàn Thị Diệm called Liễu Hành the Văn Cát Goddess, emphasizing her natal place as the origin of Liễu Hành and her story. The author of Hội Chấn Biền seems, on the contrary, to regard Sùng Sơn as the place of importance. I surmise that he does so because it was there, as described in his story, that Liễu Hành manifested her power to the greatest extent.
This is remarkable considering that in earlier stories, as we have seen, Sùng Sơn is the place where Liễu Hạnh is defeated and domesticated by powers in the service of Buddhism. To achieve his purpose, Thanh Hóa Từ completely omits Liễu Hạnh’s defeat by the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion, which was the main element of their story of Liễu Hạnh’s appearance at this place, replacing it with his version of this event. He writes:

As people, being stupid and vulgar, saw in her only “a female deity,” many neglected to show her respect. The Mother could not help but manifest her great prowess. . . . But, in the course of this, the generalissimo Trịnh surmised that she was a demon. He demanded that the king use a magician of great talent to put her down, but this was without success. Among the court officers were those who knew that this was a manifestation of the Mother, and, supplicating, they requested to bestow upon her an honorific title and to erect a temple to her. The emperor agreed. Since that time, the region has remained at peace, and people from all four corners of the country do not skip a single day in manifesting their utmost sincere devotion to her.55

Like Đoàn Thị Điểm, Thanh Hóa Từ chose not to discuss the Sùng Sơn battle and Liễu Hạnh’s defeat. However, their reasons for doing so were not identical. If Đoàn Thị Điểm constructed her plot so as not to let pass any occasion to highlight Liễu Hạnh’s preeminence over men, Thanh Hóa Từ, in addition to this, expresses his unbending Daoist attitude toward Buddhism, since the School of the Inner Religion was built on Buddhist premises. While the School of the Inner Religion explains Liễu Hạnh’s appearance in Buddhist temples as indicating she had yielded to Buddhist authority, Hội Chân Biên neglects any mention of Liễu Hạnh’s compliance with Buddhism. The Hội Chân Biên simply says: “Even Buddhist temples established her statues to exercise her cult.”56 This statement can be read as being completely at odds with the message of the School of the Inner Religion: it is not that Liễu Hạnh submitted to Buddhism, but rather that Buddhism was overridden by her prowess and was constrained to accept her into the Buddhist temples on a par with its own deities.

Contrary to Đoàn Thị Điểm’s text, Liễu Hạnh’s birth does not fall in the time of the Thiền Hựu reign period of King Lê Anh Tôn (1556–1573) but in the Vĩnh Tô reign period of Emperor Lê Thần Tông (1619–
1628). It appears that the author of the Hồi Chấn Biên wanted to extract Liễu Hạnh from the context of the Mạc dynasty, not only by name as Đoàn Thị Điểm did but by time period, and to affirm her as a deity of the Lê dynasty, which may seem strange given that the author was a man of the Nguyễn dynasty. Yet the Nguyễn developed their political role in the sixteenth century as enemies of the Mạc, helped to restore the Lê dynasty, and posed as loyal subordinates of the Lê kings for two centuries. Furthermore, the Nguyễn justified their rise to power by denouncing their enemies as destroyers of the Lê dynasty. It is clear that the author of Hồi Chấn Biên was as much concerned with the contemporary events of his lifetime as he was with fighting historiographic battles about how to remember the past.

Hồi Chấn Biên, according to its author, was written for foreigners as well as for Vietnamese, and it was written with an eye on the violent events attending the entry of nineteenth-century European military power into Asia. In his preface, dated in 1851, the author writes: “Foreigners who view this composition will be amazed by the supernatural power of our country’s deities and will shiver in fear of the valorous heroism of our country, and perhaps customary relations can be restored in the future and what has already collapsed can be saved; so do not say that old traces are without proof or ask of what use are empty words.”

The author sees himself as living in a time when “customary relations” had collapsed and were in need of restoration. The expression that I translate as “customary relations” is not a standard term in the classical language and appears to have been coined in the context of what was perceived as a time of unprecedented change and of great threats from outside powers. China, whom educated Vietnamese perceived as their protector, had been humbled by British military power. French naval ships had begun to patrol Vietnamese waters during the preceding decade and four years earlier had bombarded a city not far from the capital and had killed thousands of people. The author appears to have been motivated, in part at least, by a desire to find an answer to the dangers posed by these “foreigners.” He imagines that his readers will associate the realm of deities with “empty words.” But he believed that if the foreigners were informed of a Vietnamese goddess such as Liễu Hạnh, then they would treat his country with the respect that it expected from other countries according to “customary relations.” The expectation of foreign readers is not so extravagant considering that the text is in classical Chinese and that by the mid-nineteenth century European sinology was already active.
If people nowadays know anything about Liễu Hạnh, it is almost entirely because of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story. Even people who disagreed with Đoàn Thị Điểm’s portrayal of Liễu Hạnh or who had agendas that contradicted her own nevertheless based their arguments on her narrative. We have seen how Liễu Hạnh was appropriated by proponents of both Buddhism and Daoism and was used to confront the West as a powerful representative of Vietnamese culture. In each case, this was done by taking up Đoàn Thị Điểm’s narrative of Liễu Hạnh and using it as the basic text from which to develop a view of her to reinforce other, more elitist, religious currents.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize two points in my argument that Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Vân Cất Thần Nữ Truyện represents an educated woman’s critical view of men in the so-called Confucian society of her day. First, even though it may superficially seem that, in besting Phùng Khắc Khoan’s skill in poetry, Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Liễu Hạnh was simply proving herself to be more accomplished than he in mastering the literary aura of a Confucian scholar, the main object of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s critique was not Confucianism per se but rather the behavior of men who called themselves Confucians. She did not object to Confucianism so much as to how men acted toward women. Consequently, Phùng Khắc Khoan, a man she apparently acknowledged as a great and good Confucian scholar, was the perfect competitor for Liễu Hạnh because even the most exemplary of men were no match for her. The issue was gender rather than ideology. It would have been easy and meaningless to match Liễu Hạnh against an unpleasant or misogynic man.

Second, and following upon this, what enabled Đoàn Thị Điểm’s critique was the voice not of a human woman but of a divine being. Only in the voice and behavior of a goddess could men be challenged. Real women, such as those portrayed in Chinh Phu Ngâm and Kim Vân Kiều, were allowed to complain only as long as in the end they accepted their assigned place in the family. Liễu Hạnh and the woman in An Áp Liệt Nữ Truyện could voice their complaints from the protected space of the supernatural realm as deities, no longer subject to the restrictions placed on a woman in society. Here we see the importance of the chuanqi genre in opening up a literary realm of supernatural phenomena beyond the reach of human authority.

Why was Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story so universally accepted by educated
people as the authoritative source of information about Liễu Hạnh? The answer is surely very simple. Her account was the first and only source for Liễu Hạnh available to the relatively small circle of educated people. Even those not in sympathy with her feminist rendering of the deity had no alternative but to follow the general line of her narrative while pulling it toward their own purposes. For them, there simply was no other Liễu Hạnh than the one Đoàn Thị Điểm had provided. The tragic singing girl of whom the Christian missionaries heard was either beyond earshot of the elite Vietnamese who wrote our texts or else she was simply of no use to them. A murderous tale of a despicable prostitute held very little interest for people who wanted a figure able to bear the weight of their high-minded reflections about social relations and religious authority.

Each text analyzed in this chapter was written in the classical, literary language. This in itself prejudices the kind of material to be recorded, as we know from Vũ Quỳnh’s preface to the Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái, which describes a process of expunging the lewd and lascivious when writing oral tales into the classical language. The great advantage to educated people of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Liễu Hạnh is that she was sanitized and thereby made available for use in philosophical and religious debates. When, in the nineteenth century, the Liễu Hạnh story began to be written into the vernacular, this reliance on Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Liễu Hạnh did not change. What did change was orientation toward a more general audience, beyond the confined circle of those educated in classical studies.
Then seek a Poet who your ways do’s bend,
And chuse an Author as you chuse a Friend:
United by this Sympathetick Bond,
You grow Familiar, Intimate, and Fond;
Your thoughts, your Words, your Stiles, your Souls agree,
No longer his Interpreter, but He.
—Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon,
An Essay on Translated Verse, 1684

In the previous chapter, we saw how in the eighteenth century Đỗ Văn Thiệu wrote her story about Liễu Hạnh in classical prose to harness the sublime for the emancipation of educated women. It was addressed to the restricted audience of educated people. This chapter discusses two works on Liễu Hạnh written in vernacular poetry, one from the mid-nineteenth century and one from the early twentieth century. Both of these works use Đỗ Văn Thiệu’s Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện (Story of the Văn Cát Goddess) as a master text; however, each processes this master text into the vernacular in a different mode and for a different purpose. One poses an existential being in nature; the other poses a politicized being in human society.

First, consider the implications of rendering a classical prose text into vernacular verse in terms of audience as well as with respect to the content of the message. As a demotic writing system based on classical Hán characters, Nôm required a significant investment of study. Nôm characters were either Hán characters used for their phonetic value or were created on the basis of phonetic and semantic elements taken from Hán characters. The language was vernacular but the system for writing and reading required a classical education. There is no evidence that there were more people able to read Nôm than able to read Hán. However, a vernacular
verse text could be read aloud and thereby understood by large numbers of illiterate listeners; moreover, it could be memorized and recited by illiterates.

A characteristic feature of Vietnamese society, at least until the nineteenth century, was a blurred distinction between the culture of the elite, that is, the literati, and the culture of common people. In more general terms, there was no sharp cultural distinction between the educated and the uneducated. This phenomenon was caused by the relatively large number of people aspiring to take the official examinations and by frequent changes of power, which produced a constant whirl of people moving between the capital and the villages, a society in perpetual flux. Educated people who returned to the villages exerted an immense influence on the development of culture and education there. Since, unlike in China, there was no significant development of towns where literati culture separated from village life, educated people not serving the royal court lived among peasants. They created a symbiosis between the culture of the lower stratum of the population and high culture, and they were a fertile milieu for the creation and development of literature. Moreover, as many of them were village teachers, a relatively large portion of the population acquired some knowledge of characters and of literary modes. As a result of the relatively large number of educated people living in villages for many generations, the level of oral and written engagement with literature among Vietnamese peasants has compared favorably with other societies in Southeast Asia and China, and this helps to explain the widespread interest in literature among Vietnamese.

Poetry is a large part of popular culture. Apart from anonymous nursery rhymes and popular songs (ca dao), there are also a significant number of poems by "individual" poets. That poetic genres account for such a large percentage of Nôm writings is not accidental. Vernacular poetry was accessible not only to those partly educated, but also to those who remained illiterate yet were drawn into the acculturated milieu of village life. Such people would hear poems in their own language, in prosodic forms easily kept in their minds, and they would memorize them. The abundance of poetry written in Nôm proves that it became an important part of life. Most Nôm poetry was of mediocre quality, if we judge it as "art," expecting from it artfulness as, for example, Victor Shklovsky understands it. He says that "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself.
and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*—but this kind of artfulness was apparently not the main object of Nôm poetry; the object, or subject matter, of the work remained an important feature. Instead of “defamiliarizing” their narratives, Nôm poets rather familiarized the objects of their work to bring them closer to the audience. Hence, the language comprised many colloquial words, expressions, and allusions.

It is in the context of these factors that poetry gained such huge popularity among Vietnamese. According to Neil Jamieson, writing of modern times:

> It is very difficult for Westerners, especially Americans, to apprehend how significant poetry can be as an expressive mechanism in society. For many of us poetry has connotations of elitism, obscurity, impracticality. Few of us read poetry, and fewer still have a real appreciation of it. But in Vietnam this is not the case. Many Vietnamese read poetry with enjoyment, commit it to memory, and recite poems to each other with unfeigned enthusiasm. Everyday speech is liberally sprinkled with poetic allusions. Even the poor and illiterate imbibe deeply of a rich oral tradition that has incorporated much that originated in the written literature of the educated elite.

This lively exchange between the literati and the illiterati gives a particular significance to classical cultural material that was vernacularized. Those who chose to vernacularize classical material did so with an expectation that an audience was ready and waiting for them.

There are two prominent examples of putting narratives about Liễu Hạnh into vernacular verse, written by Nguyễn Công Trứ in the mid-nineteenth century and by Kiều Oanh Mậu in the early twentieth century. Nguyễn Công Trứ’s narrative poses Liễu Hạnh as an existential being in nature beyond human comprehension. In contrast, Kiều Oanh Mậu’s narrative rationalizes the divinity of Liễu Hạnh to serve a particular moral and political agenda. These two narratives offer a contrast between perceiving Liễu Hạnh as a divine being with the incalculable force of nature, beyond human morality, and positioning her as a paragon of moral virtue within an argument about tradition and nationalism.

In this chapter we will consider these two examples in detail to explore the contrast between the use of Liễu Hạnh as a divine personality whose existence is fundamentally separate from that of humanity and as
a figure of human aspiration and moral exhortation. Nguyễn Công Trữ described Liễu Hạnh as a force in nature, overflowing with her own potency and willfulness, acknowledging no responsibility to serve the good of human society; he gave her a philosophical position similar to existentialism but probably derived from his understanding of Daoism. Kiều Oanh Mẫu described Liễu Hạnh as a paragon of Buddhist and Confucian virtues, the mother of her country, the guarantor of tradition, and the foundation of a proposed national identity. The cult of Liễu Hạnh was a form of popular devotion that educated men found useful for the display of their intellectual concerns.

**LIỄU HẢNH AS A FORCE OF NATURE**

All surviving texts about Princess Liễu Hạnh until the mid-nineteenth century were written in the classical Chinese (Hán) language. Whether no one until then was interested in creating a story in the vernacular language (Nôm) or whether such works simply did not survive is unknown. The earliest Nôm text presently available is *Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Điện Âm* (Phonetic Transcription about Princess Liễu Hạnh; the expression “phonetic transcription” refers to the phonetic transcription of the story into the vernacular language using Nôm characters). This work is part of a larger manuscript titled *Đại Nam Quốc Âm Ca Khúc* (Songs of Great Viet in the National Language), compiled by one of the most famous intellectuals and poets of the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Công Trữ (1778–1858). Nguyễn Công Trữ’s biographers usually divide their narratives of his life into three periods. The first was a period of dire poverty that began with his birth in Quyển Cơi district of Thái Bình province in 1778. His childhood fell into the period of the Tây Sơn rebellion. While some intellectuals, such as Ngô Thị Nhâm, Trần Bá Lắm, and Phan Huy Ich, joined the Tây Sơn brothers, Nguyễn Công Trữ’s father, Nguyễn Công Tần, a bachelor in the interprovincial examinations and a faithful supporter of the Lê dynasty, fought against the rebels. After the Lê were defeated in 1787, he returned to his native village, built a bamboo hut, and lived there in extreme poverty, remaining loyal to his defeated monarch until his death in 1800. His family’s experience was similar to that of many educated clans who had been loyal to defeated regimes; in Vietnamese history they are referred to as “poor but erudite.”
Hence, Nguyễn Công Trứ in his childhood experienced economic hardship and a father’s frustration. The spiritual solace he could find was in reading, which, together with the influence of his father, nurtured in him a Confucian attitude. In 1802, after the Tây Sơn were defeated, Nguyễn Anh imposed peace and assumed the title of emperor under the name Gia Long. Yet neither dynastic change, entering into adulthood, nor diligent study delivered Nguyễn Công Trứ from the economic hardship that he and his family continued to endure. Poverty became a perennial theme in his writings.

Nguyễn Công Trứ attempted the official examinations several times but was unsuccessful until 1819, when, at the age of forty-one, he managed to become the laureate at the regional examinations. His success in the exams opened new opportunities for him and marked the second period of his life, a period of state service. His career began with a series of posts as a civil administrator responsible for irrigation work and as a military official fighting against peasant rebels. But he obtained neither social nor financial stability. After twelve years of service, his career was marred by several demotions. The first occurred in 1832, ostensibly because envious mandarins accused him of taking bribes; he was demoted to the post of district chief. The following year he was promoted, but he was demoted again in 1837 because a prisoner escaped from jail. His career was partially restored the following year, but the chain of ups and downs did not come to an end. In 1840 there was a new demotion, and he subsequently returned to Hanoi as chairman of an examination board. Thereafter, he volunteered to enter the military; eventually he obtained a high-ranking post in the civil service. But in 1843 he was demoted again, this time accused of smuggling rhinoceros horn and nutmeg; he was exiled to be a border guard in Quảng Ngãi. In the following year he returned to the civil service and enjoyed a series of promotions, crowned in 1847 by the governorship of Thừa Thiên province, in which the capital of Huế was located. The same year, already seventy years old, Nguyễn Công Trứ asked to retire. However, his request was denied by Emperor Thiệu Trị (1841–1847) and was accepted only a year later when Emperor Tự Đức (r. 1848–1883) succeeded to the throne.

After his retirement, Nguyễn Công Trứ entered what is conventionally seen as the third period of his life, that is, the period of leisure. He indulged in poetry and wine, writing poems praising detachment from the worldly vanities of honors and privileges. In September 1858,
troubled by the French-Spanish attack on Danang, Nguyễn Công Trứ petitioned to return to service. The emperor, however, rejected his request, and he passed away shortly after in the same year.\(^7\)

Nguyễn Công Trứ's writings are vast, varied, and not sufficiently studied; the books about him seldom go beyond a certain selection of poems the constant repetition of which has already canonized them. The Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi is bulging with manuscripts written by or ascribed to Nguyễn Công Trứ that are waiting for researchers. His writings in classical Chinese include a significant number of different petitions and essays discussing aspects of state policy. As for his literary production, it was written primarily in Nôm.

Đại Nam Quốc Âm Ca Khúc is a 232-page undated manuscript that contains many works belonging to Nguyễn Công Trứ but includes as well some works written by other intellectuals, such as Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1783). Among the items in this compilation are Nôm versions of Hán texts, apparently made by Nguyễn Công Trứ. One of these is Liên Hành Công Chúa Diên Âm, which is an abridged and edited versification of Đoàn Thị Điểm's Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện.

Some have suggested that it is not evident whether Nguyễn Công Trứ himself produced this text or whether he simply included someone else's Nôm poetic version of Đoàn Thị Điểm's Hán text in his collection.\(^8\) However, I believe that Nguyễn Công Trứ is the author of this text not only because it appears in his compilation without attribution to another author, but more significantly because of its exceptional quality as poetry and the themes it exemplifies. Very few writers have displayed the high quality of poetic language revealed in this text, and Nguyễn Công Trứ was one. This work is consistent with his other poetic writings in terms of skill and sensibility. Furthermore, the main topics of his poems are poverty, descriptions of scenic places, human feelings, and how a person should confront the vicissitudes of life. All of these themes are exposed in Liên Hành Công Chúa Diên Âm in a manner that is typical of his poetry.

Nguyễn Công Trứ's Liên Hành Công Chúa Diên Âm is related to Đoàn Thị Điểm's Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện both as a translation from classical to vernacular and as a translation from prose to poetry. Uncompleted in the opinion of some, this work consists of 203 lines.\(^9\) It is written in the 7-7-6-8 meter (song thất lục bát). The language is beautiful and smooth, easily memorized. The narrative is at an elementary structure of intelligibility. Developing characters and even developing consistency in the narrative...
seem not to have been his main goal as was the case in Đoàn Thị Diễm’s Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện.

For example, on the one hand, some personages, such as Liễu Hạnh’s brother or her two attendants, are suddenly referred to in the midst of the narrative without any previous introduction; on the other hand, her father disappears from the text without explanation of what happened to him. The narrative seems to be depopulated and concentrates on only one person, Liễu Hạnh, whose story absorbs all other narrative lines; being supplemental, they cannot stand by themselves and simply serve to develop Liễu Hạnh’s story. The few other people presented are left nameless: the only personages given names are celestial beings: Liễu Hạnh’s two fairy attendants, Quế and Thi, and Liễu Hạnh herself. But even she is mentioned only under the name given to her by the Jade Emperor; the name given to her by her earthly family is not mentioned. Her father is identified only as belonging to the Trần family and her mother as being from the Lê family. The names of her husband, brother, and child are not mentioned. The presence of concrete people would have tended to ground Liễu Hạnh into a specific human milieu. Instead, Nguyễn Công Trứ emphasizes her sublime divinity.

The narrative largely follows that of Đoàn Thị Diễm in terms of plot structure. By plot I mean the generic narrative elements that occur in virtually all accounts of Liễu Hạnh: the daughter of the Jade Emperor came down to earth, wandered around, did amazing things, and was worshiped by human beings. While the plot does not change, the story is different. By story I mean the elaborated narrative that observes the basic plot while exploring a specific interpretive strategy with a particular set of details. A major difference in Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Âm is omission of any description of Liễu Hạnh’s intellectual powers and of the whole narrative line about her encounter with Phùng Khắc Khoan and his two young intellectual friends, all of which appear in Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện. It seems that Nguyễn Công Trứ deliberately omitted the episodes demonstrating Liễu Hạnh’s intellectual superiority, as they would rationalize her cult, offering an explanation grounded in human culture for why people were in awe before her. The power of language, so clearly demonstrated in the poetic encounters of Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện, becomes unnecessary in the Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Âm, where it is replaced by the sublime. Nguyễn Công Trứ shows that there is no rational reason to worship her. In Schiller’s words, “The beautiful is valuable only
with reference to the human being, but the sublime with reference to the pure daemon." Asserting that Liêu Hạnh was a great scholar and poet, an important part of Đoàn Thị Điểm’s agenda, is neither here nor there for Nguyễn Công Trọng. All that matters for him is that she is divine.

However, the most important change appears at the end of the poem. Văn C crt Thần Nữ Truyện ends with Liêu Hạnh abandoning her capricious ways after the people appease her with a temple and after the dynastic powers recognize her as a mighty goddess; human acknowledgment of her divinity has a taming effect upon her. Liêu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Âm presents a completely different turn of events with Liêu Hạnh being summoned by the Jade Emperor when he is moved to pity for those suffering at Liêu Hạnh’s hand. The last lines relate only that Liêu Hạnh obediently complies with the summons, returns to the Jade Emperor, and is welcomed by her peer fairies. Although it might be conjectured that this rendering of the story is incomplete, it is equally possible that the author ended the story in this way to affirm Liêu Hạnh as a divine being whose destiny is without any necessary reference to the prevailing values of human society.

The move from classical to vernacular and from prose to poetry crystallized Liêu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Âm not as a translation of Văn C crt Thần Nữ Truyện but as, in the words of Bakhtin, an “authentic environment... filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.” The femme émancipée of Đoàn Thị Điểm has lost her “emancipation.” Nguyễn Công Trọng achieves this by eliminating the narrative line about Liêu Hạnh’s intellectual prowess, praising only her beauty and omitting her literary talents, to which Đoàn Thị Điểm had devoted pages. All the poetry ascribed to Liêu Hạnh, which demonstrated not only remarkable poetic skill but also a certain philosophical depth, has disappeared, leaving her almost silent. The only direct speech remaining in the story is Liêu Hạnh’s explanation to her relatives of her divine origins. Muting Liêu Hạnh, Nguyễn Công Trọng necessarily excludes the entire narrative line about Phùng Khắc Khoan and his two young intellectual friends, as there is no longer an educated and intelligent woman with whom to converse. This creates an intellectual vacuum in the story, which is filled with discourse about family.

Seventy-seven out of 204 lines, which is more than one-third of the whole poem, portray the princess either in the family environment or describe the feelings of Liêu Hạnh or her kin during their separation. The suffering of Liêu Hạnh’s human family after her return to her native heav-
enly abode, perceived as her untimely death, is described in detail, stress-
ing the loneliness of the aged parents without their beloved daughter. The depth of their grief plunged Liêu Hạnh into great sorrow when she returned to earth to visit them: Chúa cống thêm thương tài sau bi (The princess all the more felt pity and sadness). Nevertheless, despite her sadness, she left them to continue her earthly travels: Khóc thưa cháu lại biến đi (The princess stopped weeping and again vanished). Thôi (to stop) and lai (again, still) reflect a rupture between Liêu Hạnh’s feelings and her deeds. This rupture is left unexplained.

Also unexplained is Liêu Hạnh’s neglect of her husband; she does not visit him even as briefly as she did in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s narrative. This neglect of family is at odds with her tearful feelings. Her marriage in Nghệ An province to a scholar, an apparent avatar of her first husband, also did not make her settle down, even after the birth of her son: Đề con cho chồng, cháu lại trở ra (left the child with the husband and the princess again disappeared). She continued her wanderings all over the country inflicting suffering on the people.

However, the text is very particular about Liêu Hạnh caring for her relatives’ welfare; she occasionally supplies them with food and other goods apparently received from people who were in awe of her. Perhaps this emphasis on material goods arose from Nguyễn Công Trứ’s own poverty. Despite this, Liêu Hạnh is not a reliable support for her relatives, and as a symbol of kinship she loses coherence and stability. In the end, there is a heart-rending episode of bidding what seems to be a final earthly farewell, breaking even these fragile connections. The transition to the next part, or more precisely the lack of any transition, demonstrates, as in the episode with her bereaved parents, rupture in the narrative:

\[\text{Giận chẳng主题教育 lại về ngọn Tiên Sơn,}\\ \text{Rất ấy lại nhanh nhanh uy dầy}\\ \text{Làm người ta ai thấy chẳng kinh.}\\\]

Farewell, my love, I return to the forests of Fairy Mountain; From then she put on a brazen face and majestically blazed up, Terrifying all who saw her.\(^13\)

The absence of an explanation for her departure stresses her individual freedom and the lack of connection to her earthly family. She seems to be a Little Prince or a Peter Pan, unable to grow up to become a human
adult fully responsible for her own life and for the lives of her kin, and incapable of controlling her impulses.

Descriptions of nature take up almost as much of the text as descriptions of family relations. Nature and family together create the background for Nguyễn Công Trứ’s story of Liễu Hạnh. These two topics, unavoidable aspects of life and dominant themes in literature, are both of importance to ordinary people uninterested in the refined discourse of high culture. Nature is particularly significant for Liễu Hạnh in Nguyễn Công Trứ’s narrative. If, in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Văn Cサイト thần Nữ Truyện, Liễu Hạnh’s transformation was closely connected with her encounters with people, here it seems to be connected to nature. No other people are present in the narrative aside from her family members, and nature is as much a part of her life as is her family, perhaps even more so. If we remember that she came down to earth from heaven, her alliance with nature might seem more plausible than ties to her earthly family. In a sense, she is a child of nature or of Nature as a divine being. The changing manifestations of nature are akin to the fickleness of the manifestations of Liễu Hạnh. But at the same time, as the origins and essence of Nature are divine and imperishable, so are the origins and essence of Liễu Hạnh.

Devoid of intellectual preeminence or traditional propriety in conduct, she is the elements, elemental nature, the sublime that forces people into awe. Liễu Hạnh’s power is measured by the terror and awe people experience in her presence, which compels worship. From a humanist perspective she is an “antihero” because of her nonhuman sublime nature.

Kant argues that the sublime does not exist if the danger is real because then we turn and flee, without pausing for the sublime moment. Thomas Weiskel rightly observed that Kant failed to see that “the anxiety which precipitates both the imaging of injury and the subsequent identification with the higher power within is not objective but subjective.” In other words, the truly sublime overwhelms our senses and makes impossible the rational thought necessary to turn and flee; the only possible positive response is worship. The anxiety that inspires worship in Liễu Hạnh’s divine presence is comparable to a paralyzing terror or awe inspired by an earthquake or a typhoon.

The close association of the natural and the transcendentally superhuman made the image of Liễu Hạnh readily accessible to ordinary people. Reducing the volume of direct speech in the poem leaves only the narrator and Liễu Hạnh. Liễu Hạnh does not address the narrator; he is only an overwhelmed witness to her divine transgression of human norms. She is
the only one to speak. This is consistent with what can be seen in most religious traditions; very few human beings are thought to have conversed with god.

Her divinity is also seen in that, rather than being defeated in the Sùng Sơn episode by the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion, Liêu Hạnh is summoned back to the Heavenly Palace by the Jade Emperor to be reprimanded. No humans, not even the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion, are able to overcome her power or to discipline her. Only superior divinities can tame her. This text suggests a dialogue between the story and its anticipated reception by listeners who require no intellectualization for the awe and devotion they are prepared to offer to a god. Any hermeneutic effort to explain the text is canceled by Liêu Hạnh’s sublime presence. This is the key to understanding the author’s engagement with this story.

Nguyễn Công Trứ’s portrayal of Liêu Hạnh as a sublime existential being explains why her cult interested him enough that he vernacularized his version of her story. I believe that Nguyễn Công Trứ was what we would call an existentialist thinker, and his portrayal of Liêu Hạnh’s sublime nature conforms with his existentialism. We find in his poetry a concern for subjectivity, moral individualism, choice, fear, and anxiety—all main components of what we know as existentialism. Commitment to and responsibility for others, while common themes in his other poetry, are not evident in his portrayal of Liêu Hạnh. We might conjecture that if he had “finished” this work with a more conventional ending, he would have shown Liêu Hạnh, like the Little Prince, feeling that she was “responsible for those whom she tamed.” However, taking the text as it is, we see a strong existentialist gesture toward the sublime, which draws on another set of qualities in Nguyễn Công Trứ’s writings that emphasize the loneliness of the individual’s responsibility for one’s own existence and the commitment needed to be happy and to bear one’s own fate without complaint. There is no concern to explain Liêu Hạnh’s behavior. She simply is, and she does whatever she does without revealing any opening for a hermeneutic move, without any explanatory justification for her actions. Nguyễn Công Trứ vernacularizes Liêu Hạnh into a popular prosodic form in which an existential acknowledgment of the sublime is the burden of the content.

I use the term “existentialism” as a way to gain a measure of access to the thought of this text. Of course, as a term that has arisen within the historical specificities of European philosophy, it cannot be used to de-
fine Nguyễn Công Trứ, however suggestive and resonant it may be with respect to his work. But it does offer a point of entry into his view of Daoism as pointing to a realm of nature beyond the constraints and obligations of human society. It is in just such a realm that he paints Liêu Hạnh.

Liêu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Ám at first glance relates a simple poetic narrative about a goddess and does so in a form accessible to virtually anyone. However, the contents of the narrative are a highly philosophical presentation of the sublime in possibly its purest form as something unexplainable that consequently requires worship. Words can neither adequately express nor coherently reflect the sublime, which is beyond the human grasp. This story processes and displaces the sublime by “reconstructing” it in narrative form and turning it into an act of representation in words. What might be Nguyễn Công Trứ’s purpose in so processing Liêu Hạnh’s sublimity? To answer this question, we should consider when he wrote this work.

It is almost certain that Nguyễn Công Trứ wrote this work during the third period of his life, when he had retired from state service. It is commonly accepted among contemporary scholars that during this time, in addition to his interest in Confucianism and Daoism, he also took an interest in Buddhism. If that were the case, it is reasonable to conjecture that this was when he wrote Liêu Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Ám. His interest in religion and philosophy went beyond the conventional three teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism to include cults such as that of Liêu Hạnh. Almost certainly these cults constituted for him, as they did for other Vietnamese, a part of the tradition of the “three teachings.” In Vietnam, since at least the twelfth century, many intellectuals considered Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as a single religious and philosophical tradition; they were viewed as inseparable from each other and also as inseparable from other cults that were brought into their realm.

Vietnamese scholars often distinguish among doctrines to show the sources of different trends in Nguyễn Công Trứ’s works. For example, Vũ Khắc Khoan and Nguyễn什 Tế assign the emphasis on action in his poetry to Confucianism, while holding Daoism responsible for hedonistic or contemplative themes. In my view, however, these themes are inseparable in Nguyễn Công Trứ’s creative work; they comprise an alloy recognizable as an existential subjectivity, a commitment to act with full acceptance of the materiality of life and of the limitations of rational knowledge. Nguyễn Công Trứ depicts Liêu Hạnh as a sublime existential
being who assumed the material form of a human and acted within that form while retaining the freedom of choice conferred by her divine nature.

After the first Opium War (1839–1842), European expansion began to be felt as a real danger in Vietnam, as Europeans moved from commercial and missionary activity to direct military action. In 1847 the first armed conflict took place between Vietnam and France in Danang, as a result of which Vietnamese ships were sunk, harbor defenses were destroyed, and more than two thousand people perished. Relations between the two countries worsened. Vietnamese rulers intensified measures against Christians. In 1851 the Hồi Chân Biên (A Genuine Record), discussed in the previous chapter, was published. Among other reasons, according to its preface, it was written to make the power of Vietnamese spirits and heroes known to foreigners. This was written in classical Chinese, apparently with the idea that learned foreigners would be able to read it, which by the mid-nineteenth century was a reasonable supposition. Liêu Hành Công Chúa Điện Âm may have been written with a somewhat analogous intent to proclaim the power of a local spirit, but it was hardly aimed at a foreign audience since Europeans were not able to read it, and only those very few who had mastered colloquial Vietnamese would have been able to understand it when recited.

Liêu Hành Công Chúa Điện Âm, however, undoubtedly served to maintain or revitalize Liêu Hành’s cult for a domestic audience in a time of perceived foreign threats. In such a time of increasing danger posed by humans from afar, Nguyễn Công Trút sketched a vision of a divine presence beyond human control that was very near. By writing in the vernacular, he addressed the followers of Liêu Hành’s cult who were already attached to the ritual form of the cult, those who were familiar with her cult, and those who were susceptible to the appeal of her cult. However, he provided a new content with which to fill this form, namely, his retelling of Liêu Hành’s story to affirm her sublime existential nature.

In his narrative of Liêu Hành, Nguyễn Công Trút verbalized the sublime, recovering as much of it as is possible with words. He achieved this with his existential focus on direct experience rather than by appeal to an abstract construction of cultural authority. In this way, he deintellectualized Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story and made Liêu Hành accessible to anyone with a worshipful attitude. He did not give Liêu Hành the burden of a message about social or political affairs, as did Đoàn Thị Điểm and, as we shall see, Kiều Oanh Mẫu. Rather, his message is completely absorbed
into a human experience of the sublime that we in our time can best as-
associate with existentialism.

LIEW HANH AS THE MOTHER OF THE COUNTRY

At the beginning of the twentieth century, another literatus, Kiều Oánh Mâu, was attracted to Liew Hạnh’s cult, and he also vernacularized her story. But times had changed and his agenda was different from Nguyễn Công Trứ’s. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, under the new colonial regime, intellectuals of the old school encountered what they called “new teachings,” namely, European science and culture. Receptive to novelties, many willingly broke with old traditions and assumed that the new knowledge was superior. Sometimes this took rather curious forms. Đặng Thai Mai describes an official, a holder of the highest scholarly degree, who sold his land to buy equipment for his experiments in chemistry and electricity, and turned his ancestral shrine into a physics and chemical laboratory.18

One of the new curiosities of the modern age was nationalism. The end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century was a time when several nationalist movements were formed. It was also the time of the two “fathers” of Vietnamese nationalism—Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh. As different as they were, both of them advocated the necessity of apprehending Western knowledge to regain Vietnamese independence. For example, Phan Bội Châu wrote as follows in a well-known poem, written in classical Chinese characters, titled “Letter from Overseas Written in Blood”:

In the state school named Franco-Vietnamese,
People of the South are taught the language of the West;
As for the hundreds of trades:
Military affairs, mechanics, electrotechnology, chemistry,
There is no teacher to teach these skills.19

Against this background stands a different group of intellectuals who chose not to break with the old traditions. These people wrote in Nôm, the demotic Vietnamese writing system that evolved from classical Chinese. At the turn of the twentieth century, there appeared a number of works in Nôm that promoted the vernacular language to mark a national
culture and a national character. These works were concerned to distinguish Vietnamese culture from the cultures of others. The "others" were the Chinese, whose classical Hán language in vernacular pronunciation had for centuries been the official language, and also the "newcomers," the Europeans who had invented the Latin-based quốc ngữ (national language) alphabet for writing the vernacular. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was not obvious, as it now appears in retrospect, that Nôm was doomed as a form of writing. Nor was it obvious that quốc ngữ was destined to eclipse both Hán and Nôm to become the only form of writing among Vietnamese. These people writing in Nôm at the turn of the century dared to see their own culture on a par with the cultures of the Chinese and of the Europeans, and they wanted to present it as a model for their own nation.

They created their works in a "national nonprint language." This is different from the "national print language" proposed by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*. While Anderson is concerned only with reading and with an audience of readers, a national nonprint language is concerned with reciting and with an audience of listeners and potential reciters. Anderson proposes a national print language that mobilizes literate people, primarily the bourgeoisie; in his words, "an illiterate bourgeoisie is scarcely imaginable." A national nonprint language, in contrast, is a means to mobilize the illiterate, in our case the Vietnamese peasantry, which comprised the overwhelming majority of the people in French Indochina, where a bourgeoisie had barely begun to come into existence. What we see here is an effort to use Nôm to present Liêu Hạnh as the bearer of a national message addressed to the illiterate majority of the population. Kiều Ông Mậu took Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story and the annals of the School of the Inner Religion as master texts and transformed them into a vernacular novel-in-verse.

Kiều Ông Mậu was born in 1854 in Hà Tây province, passed the examinations at the level of phổ bằng (junior doctor) in 1880, and embarked on his career as a government official; but after ten years he had failed to reach any post higher than chief of district (tri huyện). By the end of 1890, he had occupied posts in six different places, spending hardly more than a year and a half in any one place.

The turbulence in Kiều Ông Mậu’s career cannot be explained by any specific actions of his in office, as can be seen in his personal dossier. In December 1888 his superior, the French Resident of Phú Lý, wrote as follows about Kiều Ông Mậu: "[He] showed initiative and was active
[during his] very short time with me in Phú Lý. I cannot clearly define his political attitude. His relations with [other] officials were rather strained.”

This inability to define Kiều Óánh Mậu’s political preferences may offer a clue about the reasons for Kiều Óánh Mậu’s turbulent career; apparently, his political views did not conform to the administration. Moreover, given his strained relations with other officials, it appears that his views did not conform to those of his colleagues.

For some unknown reason, Kiều Óánh Mậu was to be punished. As a disciplinary measure, in June 1889, his official title was diminished by two grades, and he was transferred to Nam Định, the Resident of which was also asked to relate his opinion of Kiều Óánh Mậu. His report reads: “This official [is] very educated. I am hardly well acquainted with him. After receiving his degree in the examinations . . . his career has been in decline. Today he is a trainee without post despite his grade of sixth-first. Perhaps the circumstances were not favorable for him. That is why I am of the opinion he should be allowed to take one more test, reserving for him the first vacant place as vice-chief of a district.”

Despite his superior’s benevolence toward him, Kiều Óánh Mậu seemed not to have passed this test, for in 1890 we find him in a different province, Bắc Ninh, as chief of Vô Giang district, and then subsequently stripped of his rank and his academic degree. Kiều Óánh Mậu’s personal dossier, preserved in the French colonial archives, sheds some light on what happened that year. His infuriated superior, the provincial Resident, a Frenchman, described Kiều Óánh Mậu as follows: “This official, during his seven months in Bắc Ninh, appears to be occupied much more with his private and financial interests than with the interests of his district; I do not have enough evidence against him to demand an investigation, but I can attest that he is to no extent worthy of benevolence.” The Frenchman elaborates his accusations, referring to him as “a deplorable official. Lazy and a reveler, he does not have any other concern but to squeeze money from the people under his jurisdiction . . . . All the flaws of the Annamite race are condensed in this man, who does not possess any good qualities. The mandarins of the province are ashamed of their colleague whom no one dares to defend.” In July 1891 the Resident of Bắc Ninh dismissed Kiều Óánh Mậu from his his post and revoked both his grade as a mandarin and his scholarly degree.

Kiều Óánh Mậu’s personal dossier contains no information from July 1891 to January 1896. What he did during those four years and a half remains unclear. Only two facts are known. In 1891 Kiều Óánh Mậu
translated into Nôm a Chinese novel by Gao Ming, an author from the
Yuan dynasty, titled Pipa ji, and in July 1894 he regained his scholarly
title of phó hàng. In January 1896 he launched his career anew, granted
the same grade (seventh-second) with which his career began some sixteen
years before. This time Kiều Ông Mậu took the post of editor for a
"journal written in characters," a post he occupied for eight years. He
departed this post only in 1904 for the post of a provincial education of-
fer in Vĩnh Yên.

The period of this editorial job was perhaps the time of greatest con-
tenment and triumph for Kiều Ông Mậu. His own literary work was
also prolific during these years. At the dawn of his career as an editor, in
1896, Kiều Ông Mậu wrote a preface to a late-eighteenth-century manu-
script, Tang Thượng Nguyên Luc (Collection of Unforeseen Vicissitudes), by
Phạm Định Hồ and Nguyễn Ẩn, consisting of ninety legends and tales
about historic personalities and temples. Here we see his interest in the
past and in local culture.

In 1901 Kiều Ông Mậu wrote Bận Triệu Bản Nghịch Liệt Truyện
(Biographies of Revolts during the National Dynasty). This book is a re-
markable deviation from the rest of Kiều Ông Mậu’s literary production
and thereby deserves special attention. It presents a concise history of the
rebellions (along with biographies of some of the rebels, which is appar-
ently why the word “biographies” appears in the title) that took place
from the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802 to 1885. While the
subject of this book hardly fits into the apparent sphere of Kiều Ông Mậu’s interests, what is even more remarkable is his preface to the book,
which is a panegyric to both the ruling dynasty and the French regime.
Moreover, it unreservedly puts the blame for all the troubles of the coun-
try on the backwardness of his fellow countrymen. His statement is worth
citing here in full to demonstrate Kiều Ông Mậu’s fervor on the issue:

[Under] the national dynasty, after the great pacification, [during the
reign of] Emperor Gia Long [1802–1820], the whole country was stable,
and people were happy and relaxed. Even though there were some incite-
ments to rebellion, they were subdued as soon as they sprang up. That is
to say, life was peaceful, thanks to the care and the virtue of the king,
and this is indeed true with regard to that period.

In the years of the reign of [Emperor] Minh Mạng [1820–1840],
because of the failures of both vassals and imperial officers to placate
[the people], disloyal groups again became a problem for the dynasty’s
army. [The country] was upset for a long time; from that time on the
country abounded with thugs. Both regions [the South and the North]
were involved. It can be said that there was not a single year without a
mobilization of troops. Perhaps, [this happened] also because the intel-
lect of the people was not yet developed; furthermore, many were de-
luded by spirits and by Buddhism, and they credulously believed in
superstitions, which is why groups of dishonest [people] either used
sops to induce people to follow them or else used violence to intimidate
them. Common people, completely dim-witted, easily went astray. In
this way, mistakes occurred in the application of the law. What a pity,
indeed!

Since the time Great France [started] to administer [Annam] as a
protectorate, all [necessary] work is being carried out, jobs are being de-
veloped, and education is also being expanded. Poor people without em-
ployment now also have means to exist and are not at all hungry or cold.
Even though there still have been a number of stubborn groups trying to
induce [others] to seize opportunities to start [a revolt], they are either
suppressed, or killed, or give themselves up, or die. Thanks to the au-
thority and virtue of the state, since that time, from south to north, there
has been nothing to worry about; the four [categories] of people [literati,
peasants, workers, and merchants, that is, all the people] have settled
down, are happy, and furthermore enjoy stability. How great it is!

Kiều Oánh Mẫu ostensibly ends his work with the year 1885, the
year of the start of the Cân Vương anti-French resistance movement.
However, despite not mentioning any later date, he actually gives a de-
scription of the rebellions of this movement until its last stages. This
description, otherwise very dry, gives some indication of his feelings to-
ward the movement. He mentions that Hạm Nghị, the young king, was
‘‘compelled’’ by Tôn Thất Thuyết, the powerful anti-French regent, to
leave the capital for Cam Lộ. He thus separated the king and the dy-
nasty from any intention to oppose the French, leaving Tôn Thất Thuyết
to bear the blame for this act of rebellion. Moreover, Kiều Oánh Mẫu
rounds off his description by an open celebration of the defeat of Cân
Vương: ‘‘Now the two parts [the North and the South] are both peaceful,
and the hordes of bandits from the mountains and the sea have also
stopped [their activity]. Inside and outside [everywhere] there is nothing
to worry about; the four directions are sleeping without anxiety. How
great it is! It has become a peaceful and prosperous place!’’
This panegyric to the French regime is at odds with nearly everything else we know about Kiêu Ngân Mậu. But it should not be considered utterly incongruous given that he was living and working within that regime. It was written near the end of Paul Doumer’s term as governor-general of French Indochina. This was a moment of great hubris and glory for the colonial regime, just after the successful pacification of Vietnamese resistance and the establishment of the Indochinese government and just before the messy combination of uprisings and unstable compromises that would characterize the subsequent history of Franco-Vietnamese relations. Kiêu Ngân Mậu lived to see the beginning of this later period, which appears to have been more congenial to his belief that vernacular culture was a surer model for the future than blind faith in foreigners. It is possible that the production of this work was the price he had to pay in order to avoid new investigations and demotions.

In 1902 he undertook an annotation of Nguyễn Du’s Kim Văn Kiều (sometimes translated into English as The Tale of Kieu), a work from the early nineteenth century that would eventually come to be regarded as the masterpiece of Vietnamese literature; he titled his work Đoạn Truyện Tân Thanh (New Sound of a Broken Heart). His superior spoke of him with evident satisfaction, describing him as “a precious collaborator.” Within a few years, as early as 1909, French educational authorities began openly to promote Kim Văn Kiều as an important work to be taught to schoolchildren for the moral values it espoused. Here was a place where the interests of Kiêu Ngân Mậu and of the French authorities overlapped.

In 1904 Kiêu Ngân Mậu was appointed an education officer/superintendent (động bộ), a post to which he aspired. Having attained this post, Kiêu Ngân Mậu “seems to have overworked,” in the words of the Resident of Vĩnh Yên province, written in November 1904, eight months after his taking up the post. However, a year later the same superior, while acknowledging Kiêu Ngân Mậu as a very correct mandarin, noted that Kiêu Ngân Mậu “was not very brilliant in his functions as superintendent, at least as I judge from the results of his teaching methods.” Despite his apparent ineptitude, Kiêu Ngân Mậu kept his position. However, as a result of some undisclosed conflict, he was transferred from Vĩnh Yên to Bắc Giang.

There, in Bắc Giang, his last scandal broke out during the celebration of the new lunar year in 1908, when he refused to salute the royal tablet, declaring that he would not bow in front of a “child-king.” Moreover, Kiêu Ngân Mậu publicly advised the villagers present at the ceremony to
“be suspicious of the Japanese and to do the same in regard to the French. Do not listen to either one or the other, but try to accomplish what you are able to achieve by yourselves.” The document describing this affront by Kiêu Oanh Mâu requests the Resident Superior of Tonkin to revoke Kiêu Oanh Mâu’s office and to summon him to Hanoi. Supporting the accusation, it states: “Superintendent Kiêu Oanh Mâu has a very bad record, neglects his position, is not held in any esteem, and is despised by other provincial mandarins. Furthermore, he is correctly said to be an adversary of the French cause.”

This episode came shortly after King Thanh Thại had been forced by the French to abdicate and was sent into exile to be succeeded by his seven-year-old son, Duy Tân. Thanh Thài was reportedly deposed because of his supposedly erratic, even criminal, behavior, which some, perhaps including Kiêu Oanh Mâu, viewed as a form of resistance to French arrogance. In refusing to acknowledge the succession of Duy Tân and in publicly speaking out against reliance on foreigners, Kiêu Oanh Mâu made a strong political statement. That he did not suffer any more serious consequence than yet another setback in his career is most probably explained by the fact that he was a loner and was viewed by the authorities as nothing more than a harmless blathering bother.

The archives contain no information about Kiêu Oanh Mâu’s fate after the official investigation of the episode in Bác Giang. However, he was no longer a superintendent on August 11, 1910, the date permission was granted by the mayor of Hanoi, Mr. Logerot, to publish Kiêu Oanh Mâu’s work on Liêu Hành, in which he is identified as “ex-Superintendent.” Before this work, in 1909, Kiêu Oanh Mâu wrote another substantial work titled Hướng Sơn Quan Thê Ám Chân Kinh Tân Dịch (A New Translation of the Original Book on Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara of Hướng Sơn). This narrates the legend of Chúa Ba (Third Princess), who, because of her devotion to Buddha, allegedly became Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and is worshiped in Hướng Sơn temple. Kiêu Oanh Mâu’s turbulent life ended in 1912.

The drastic shift from Kiêu Oanh Mâu’s Bàn Triệu Bản Nghịch Liệt Truyện in 1901 to Tiền Pha Dịch Luc (Translation of a Fairy’s Record) in 1910 has remained a puzzling and intriguing question. Was he indeed a fervent proponent of the French and of the novelties they brought in, including Western teaching? Did he later change his values? If so, a comparison comes to mind between Kiêu Oanh Mâu and Fyodor Dostoevsky,
who at first subscribed to what he later saw as a Westernized position and then increasingly turned to conservative Slavism. He openly affirmed the value of the Russian Orthodox religion, mother Russia, and the simple, pious Russian people. What led Dostoevsky onto this new path was his mysticism intensified by years of harsh exile in Siberia and the only book available to him there, the New Testament.

The reasons for Kiều Ông Mậu’s seemingly dramatic change are not clear. Apart from his problems with the administration and possible personal reasons, one factor could be a shift in French policy or, even more so, a perception of this shift by some Vietnamese. In December 1896, Paul Doumer was appointed governor-general of Indochina and succeeded in bringing order to the previously chaotic administrative affairs of Indochina. Doumer created an impression of forward movement and progress. As we have seen, it was near the end of Doumer’s tenure in Indochina that Kiều Ông Mậu wrote Bàn Triệu Bầu Nghịch Liệt Truyện, with its positive evaluation of the French regime. However, in 1908 there occurred a series of peasant uprisings provoked by heavy taxation and French demands for corvée labor. The French ruthlessly crushed the uprisings, and hundreds of people were arrested, exiled, or executed. The uprising and its consequences had a strong impact on the position of educated Vietnamese vis-à-vis the colonial power. In Kiều Ông Mậu’s case, it appears to have shifted him to an explicit anti-French pose, as can be seen in his preface to Tiền Phá Dịch Lục, in which he argues forcefully against those interested in Western learning, viewing them as having lost their way amidst foreign doctrines without the anchor of their own culture.

It may have been plausible for Kiều Ông Mậu to maintain both his admiration for the political order of the French regime, which guaranteed peace from the disorders of rebellion, along with his commitment to vernacular culture as the basis for the future of his country. This implicit contradiction may account for his reputation as a problematic administrator and for the fact that his dossier in the French Colonial Archives shows that he was under a form of surveillance, being closely observed by his superiors. In any case, the events of 1908 traumatized the mandarinate, with the more “modern” mandarins being denounced by the more “conservative” mandarins for having excited the people with their progressive ideas. Thereafter, Kiều Ông Mậu appears to have found it both safer and more congenial to his personal inclinations to focus his attention on pop-
ular religion, a topic not taken seriously by the new mandarinate being constituted by the French after 1908. Nevertheless, it is apparent that he was seeking a wider, more popular, audience.

Unlike much Nôm writing, Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s vernacular text about Liễu Hạnh does not hold itself aloof from popular culture in a literary form only partially disentangled from the high register of classical Hán writing. Tiến Phá Dịch Lục popularizes existing stories about Liễu Hạnh in a simple colloquial style with a minimum of allusions to classical texts. The vernacular idiom of this text highlights the “popular” character of the goddess.

Kiều Oanh Mẫu based his work on several sources: Tiêu Tự Phó Ký, copied or edited by Trần Bình Hạnh,36 and based in turn on the Văn Cát Thán Nữ Truyện of Đoàn Thị Điểm; Nội Đạo Trạng Thục Lục (The Indigeneous Annals of the School of the Inner Religion); and Nam Sử Tập Biên (A Collated History of the South), written by Vũ Văn Lập.37 In addition to texts, he also relied on his own visits to Phú Đày, the center of Liễu Hạnh’s cult. The manuscript available to me consists of two poems, one penned by Kiều Oanh Mẫu himself and one by Phạm Quý Thích; an introduction by Kiều Oanh Mẫu; and the main body of the narrative poem Tiến Phá Dịch Lục. It also includes the aforementioned Tiêu Tự Phó Ký, an abridged version of Văn Cát Thán Nữ Truyện, and Nội Đạo Trạng Thục Lục, the first two of which are embellished with short commentaries. Finally, several văn châu (ritual texts) recited during temple rituals are appended. This entire collection of materials concludes with an epilogue by Kiều Oanh Mẫu.

From all the writings and materials collected by Kiều Oanh Mẫu for the manuscript, it is evident that the author saw in Liễu Hạnh’s cult the embodiment of the spirit of his people. It is not clear whether he believed in her himself, but his deep interest in her is beyond any doubt. In his writing, Kiều Oanh Mẫu expresses his disdain for the modernization of Vietnamese society in the colonial context. This idea is central in his introduction to the work, which directly reflects the clash between “new civilization” and “old tradition.” It contains an argument between the author and a proponent of the “new school,” who rebukes him for working on such outdated topics as Liễu Hạnh. Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s opponent says: “Now, when real knowledge daily prospers and there are books and articles of research enough to fill a house to the rafters and to cause oxen bearing them to perspire, you, sir, do not translate them. Already last
winter it was Buddhism, and now in the spring it is a petty deity; consequently [you] delude and greatly stir up the people.’’

Kiều Anh Mẫu’s reply to this accusation is remarkable for his sense of alienation and solitude facing impending change. He says:

As for this that you have said, why not speak about carnivorous deer? It does not matter that those among the hungry in years of drought who are meat eaters prepare cranes [as food] and think they have [thereby] obtained meat. . . . Now these worthless and outdated things of mine I simply intend to make ready to use as vegetables and rice gruel in time of famine, and it may still be possible to revive and rise up to the extent of eating regularly when meat has been completely used up in the kitchens of the east and the north, thereby serving to ensure that the oppressed masses survive.

Decoding all these allegories, we can’t help but see that Kiều Anh Mẫu denounces first and foremost the educated people of his own class who were seduced by Western thought. The “carnivorous deer,” an herbivorous animal eating meat, in its absurdity, manifests for him the incompatibility of modernity with Vietnamese culture. The era of French colonialism is a time of drought for his country, and he holds up to shame the “meat eaters,” the modernizing literati, who, in order to survive in the age of modernity, abandon traditional fare to cook and eat the “crane,” which is not part of Vietnamese cuisine but is rather the symbol of a traditional and virtuous scholar.

But even more fundamentally, Kiều Anh Mẫu also denounces the traditional intellectual heritage itself as having failed. It can no longer be considered an anchor of Vietnamese identity if its bearers can discard it in favor of modernity with such ease. This classical knowledge, transmitted from one generation to another, has been replaced, in Kiều Anh Mẫu’s words, by “a loud clamor of querulous cries in the classroom that north is north, west is west, south is south, then suddenly that north is not north, west is not west, south is not south.” Consumption of the crane is so disgusting to the author that he exclaims: “I fear that if I once swallow [a bite of it] then my life will not revive!” Instead, he is going to prepare “vegetables and rice gruel”—his “outdated” or “nonintellectual stuff” of the old traditions, which did not succumb to the new winds. Though his “vegetables and rice gruel” are poor and simple, they are also the basics
able to sustain people in the “drought” years of French colonialism, for, according to him, “from among the teachings of obscure deities are expounded true and genuine principles.”

The introduction, unlike his Nôm novel-in-verse, is written in Hán, clearly addressed to his fellow literati. The choice of language is significant. As Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests in his *Philosophical Investigations*, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” Language is inseparable not only from the life of its users, but also from the sense of self-identity chosen by a group to distinguish what its members consider their cultural tradition. Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s work is a brilliant example of the “language game.” Writing his introduction in Hán, the author first demonstrates that he can use the language of literati. And he chooses this language to rebuke his peers for discarding their intellectual tradition, which constituted their perception of the world. Writing his novel-in-verse in Nôm, he dissociates himself both from his fellow literati and from their tradition, which seemingly proved helpless in the encounter with modernity. Nôm for him represented a phenomenon embedded not in the knowledge of high culture but rather in everyday forms of life. Thus, Nôm is the signifier of a stable form (vernacular poetry) that he believes can resist Western influence, while Hán classical prose is the signifier of an evasive content that he believes is vulnerable to Western assault.

The body of Tiền Pha Dịch Luc consists of 776 lines written in liệu bắt (six-eight) meter, named for the rhymed couplets with lines of alternating six and eight syllables, the most popular meter in vernacular Vietnamese poetry. The poem is divided into twenty-five sections. The first eleven sections are simply a vernacular poetic version of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story. The rest of the text is based mainly on other sources. Section 12 is an account of Liễu Hạnh’s divine manifestations at Phổ Cát, in Thanh Hoa province, which became a major center of her worship. Sections 13 through 17 relate Liễu Hạnh’s encounter with the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion who had been summoned by the court to pacify Liễu Hạnh’s malevolency, her salvation by Buddha, and her “reeducation” in the Buddhist monasteries to master the doctrine of her savior.

Section 18, titled “Patriotism of the Fairy Princess,” briefly records the honors bestowed on Liễu Hạnh by the Lê dynasty. Even though it repeats the titles mentioned in Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story, this chapter reveals a sharp contrast with Đoàn Thị Diễm’s work. Kiều Oanh Mẫu connects Liễu Hạnh’s “patriotism” to her compliance with the Buddhist doctrine.
The princess, since following the broad-way doctrine [Buddhism],
Repeatedly taught others her feelings of love for the country.\textsuperscript{39}

In sections 19 to 21 Kiều Oanh Mẫu relates the expansion of Liễu Hạnh’s cult in the nineteenth century and presents this as closely connected with Buddhism. For example, in section 20, while describing the temples at Hương Sơn in Hà Tày province, he says: “Trời nam có Phật, tượng Ngữ có bên” (The southern sky has Buddha, and [Liễu Hạnh’s] statue is at his side).\textsuperscript{40}

Sections 22 and 23 contain vivid descriptions of the “Fairy Market,” which takes place on the eighth day of the first lunar month in Tiền Hương village and of the festival on the third day of the third month in the same village. This reinforces the connection we have observed elsewhere between Liễu Hạnh and market women. The extension of Liễu Hạnh’s cult into the south is the topic of section 24.

Section 25 is a “Summary from Beginning to End,” and the lines of vernacular poetry are preceded by a short prose summary in the classical language: “The Buddhists record that the Fairy Princess was blamed and exiled; at the time of her departure, the Supreme God saw her going astray and knew that she was sure to be an evil demon, so he consulted with Buddha [for her] to be born as a human being and for the Three Mandarins [of the Inner Religion] to take and correct her.” Here the classical voice emphasizes judgment and discipline, giving pride of place not to the goddess but to the powers and agents who punish and correct her so that her divine powers can be used for good. The audience here is Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s fellow literati, those who need reassurance that no wild spirits are being offered for popular devotion. However, the body of this section, written in vernacular verse, is clearly addressed to a larger audience. It offers a different message and enunciates a subjectivity for those who believe in the goddess: Liễu Hạnh has both a human and a divine nature; she venerates Buddha and is filled with soteriological compassion “to save humanity from all calamities”; she belongs to this country, is powerful, and endures through time as does the natural world; even those of the Inner Religion assigned to correct her are found on her path; those who believe in her will learn from her how to awaken and to love their country, which
she protects. Here follows the final section of Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s work in its entirety.

In sum, the fairy is also a mortal;
Is it not strange that a mortal is also a fairy in the life above,
Then leaving the upper world in banishment,
Bends [her] legs to step down because of a careless slip?

Twenty years, so many days;
Conjugal love, heavy with child, filial piety.
There came a time to report to the Heavenly Court;
The illusory world harms people [but] the spiritually profound does not yield [to it].

So many times was manifested [her] majestic spiritual power,
With a heart to save humanity from all calamities.
In the broad path [i.e., mortal life] still knowing to hold fast
To the Buddha, the doctrine, obedience to vows, everything!

In every place are also our hearts,
Which carry [Liễu Hạnh’s] teaching to awaken the country.
The civilized of the four seas [i.e., good people everywhere] all hear
And open their hearts to love the country because of [Liễu Hạnh] above.

Do not say the Buddha in your own house is not powerful;
The Mother Goddess of the South Sea is everywhere.
The sky remains, the waters remain, the hills remain,
Mausoleums remain, shrines remain, and still the fairy’s village remains.

For a thousand autumns the kingdom’s annals have endured,
The wonderful story is still recorded, the genealogical register is still well known.
Also still in the book of the Inner Religion:
Two sides with different traces [but] one and the same path.

The fairy way, the way to the source, the mysterious way;
In which is abundant virtue: therefore, believe in demons and deities.
Lạc Hồng [mythical name for Vietnam], a region beside the sea,
Within and without are known [her] doctrine, far and near are made known [her] name.

Steadfastly awaiting the ascending and descending from above,
To protect the people and defend the country; [our] hearts beg to inscribe [her] heart.

In the first three quatrains we see a divine being who has lived on earth as a woman, has confined her supernatural powers within the limits of human morality as defined by Buddha, and acts to help suffering humanity. The fourth quatrain is the pivot of this text, presenting those whom she saves as awakened by Liễu Hạnh’s teaching, or doctrine, to love the country. Liễu Hạnh in fact awakens the country by awakening the people’s love for the country. Here we clearly see the author’s advocacy of a sense of nation based on the cult of a spirit, which he describes as saving and protecting the people and the nation. He takes what for his generation was the new concept of the nation state, the form of modern political action, and fills it with an old content. This content is described in the fifth quatrain as the Mother Goddess who is a natural part of this southern land and whose cultic markers (mausoleum, shrine, village) are of the same enduring nature as the sky, waters, and hills. The sixth quatrain appeals to textual verification of the goddess’ cult, referring even to the book of her adversaries to affirm their reconciliation with her. The seventh quatrain appeals to his audience to believe in the supernatural, and he names the Vietnamese land as the place where the teaching and the name of the goddess is known. The name given for this land, Lạc Hồng, comes from myths having to do with the most antique stories of a local dynasty. The closing couplet offers the comforting image of the goddess circulating between heaven and earth on duty “to protect the people and defend the country”; this image is stamped with the closing thought of a “heart to heart” relation between goddess and believers, between goddess and nation. It is reminiscent of the Zen rhetoric of a disciple’s heart being sealed, or inscribed, with the enlightenment of a teacher.

Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s translation of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s Hán story into Nôm is an attempt to put both the form of the cult and its content on the same vernacular plane. Nôm, in addition to being a printable form of writing, is also a nonprint language, which some Vietnamese at the turn of the twentieth century considered a potential national language, an oral language, a language communicated and distributed orally by being re-
cited and listened to and retold. This may appear implausible in comparison with the alternative path of literacy in the Latin-based alphabet imposed by the French regime and supported by many modernist Vietnamese, which by the 1920s and 1930s had gained ascendancy as the “national print language.” But there is more to it than that.

Even before Kiều Oánh Mẫu worked on his version of Liễu Hành’s story, Nôm had been used by poets and storytellers for generations. Built into habits of cultural practice was a dialogue between the educated and the illiterate, and the mode of this dialogue was Nôm writing, which was the means for educated people to acknowledge the vernacular idiom and at the same time disseminate their own ideas. Writings in Nôm were performed on a fertile edge where literacy and orality overlapped. The classical-vernacular dialogue embodied in Nôm had already for many generations created a lingual space in which cultural choices were proposed, made, and broadcast. Kiều Oánh Mẫu endeavored to mobilize this space for a certain kind of response to nationalism and modernity. Although this response was eventually drowned out by other options, it is not so different from the political romanticism that characterized an important stream of thought in the early stages of nationalism and modernization in Europe, as I hope to show below. Furthermore, it appeared several years before a new generation educated in French and the quốc ngữ alphabet, rather than in the Hán and Nôm character scripts, began a print discourse about the nation that we associate with modern Vietnamese nationalism.

We can distinguish two main patterns of anticolonial activities among Vietnamese that Kiều Oánh Mẫu witnessed and by which he could have been influenced. The first is the heritage of the Cần Vương movement, which actively resisted the French conquest. In 1885 the French prepared to move against the anti-French opposition in the imperial court; the regent, Tôn Thất Thuyết, rallied resistance to the French by taking the teenage king, Hâm Nghi, into the mountains and issuing a royal proclamation calling on all the people to rise up. In response, the French deposed Hâm Nghi and elevated his brother, Đặng Khánh, to the throne. These events provoked numerous anti-French uprisings under the slogan Cần Vương, or “loyalty to the king,” which shook the country until 1896, when its last supporters were defeated. The ideology of the movement was based on Confucian values derived from classical tractates on social hierarchy and the idea of “the virtuous man” who is faithful to his monarch. The main goal of the movement was to expel the French and to restore an anti-French monarch. This movement was dead by the turn
of the century, but it inspired the activities of Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), who represents a second generation of thought about armed struggle as the only valid response to French colonialism.

Phan Bội Châu and his followers stood for the importance of the classical heritage. His program, begun in 1900, was to gather the remnants of the Cần Vương movement and to organize armed groups to fight against the French under the leadership of a member of the imperial family. Because the French regime was so firmly entrenched, he went to China and Japan to obtain help. In 1904 he set up an organization to carry forward his plans. After the victory of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War, the members of his movement concentrated their attention on Japan, hoping that it would help Vietnam to expel the white colonizers. For a few years, from 1905, he sent young Vietnamese men to study in Japan in order to gain a modern but non-European education.

Despite his familiarity with and affection for Vietnamese folklore, Phan Bội Châu advocated the necessity of Confucian learning. His followers frequently said: “If Classical studies are not mobilized, it will not be sufficient to save the Southern Kingdom [i.e., Vietnam]” (Bài chăm Hán học, bài tạc đi cứu Nam Quốc). Nevertheless, Phan Bội Châu and his followers gradually came to acknowledge the necessity of education that incorporated the “new teachings,” even at the expense of the classical examination system. Yet, in the words of David Marr, “they still insisted that only Chinese studies could stimulate the Vietnamese people to patriotic sacrifice and bravery.” In other words, new learning was valuable for obtaining technical skills, but the old learning was still necessary for a moral foundation. This apparent contradiction between old and new learning reveals a breakdown in syncretic habits under the pressure of having been conquered by an alien people.

Another pattern of thought in the intellectual climate of Kiều Quan Mậu’s time was that of Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926). His vision for developing the country was a nonviolent engagement with the French colonial power. He believed in the possibility of social reforms and of the French and Vietnamese collaborating to bring Vietnam into the modern world. Even though Phan Chu Trinh had successfully passed the metropolitan examinations, in 1900 he considered the “new teachings” indispensable for the future of his country; furthermore, he believed it was equally indispensable to break completely with classical studies and to use the French-sponsored alphabet in education. Phan Chu Trinh once gave a lecture in which he countered the statement of Phan Bội Châu
above with "If Classical characters are not abandoned, it will not be sufficient to save the country" (Bài phê Hán tự, bài thiếu đi cứu Nam Quốc). A loner, he never founded a movement but indefatigably propagated his views in the provinces.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a number of writers wrote in Nôm to display their antagonism toward the colonial power. Prominent examples are Nguyễn Khuyên (1835–1909), Trần Thế Xương (1870–1907), Nguyễn Quyền (1869–1941), and the group of scholars who, in 1907, founded the Đồng Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School) in Hanoi. Even though this movement for popular education existed for less than a year before being shut down by the French authorities, it exerted a huge influence on Vietnamese intellectuals. The school published several vernacular works that denounced the French and advocated a struggle for independence. Kiều Oanh Mậu was certainly aware of this school and the activities of its organizers. His own view, as expressed in his work on Liễu Hạnh, was surely stimulated by this school. Like Phan Bội Châu, he endeavored to mobilize classical studies, but he did this through vernacularization, as advocated by Phan Chu Trinh. He presents a pattern that is different from both Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh, a pattern that can be associated with romantic nationalism.

Romanticism as a philosophical current was well established by Kiều Oanh Mậu’s time. It had arisen in Europe in reaction to Bacon’s scientific revolution in the seventeenth century and to Voltaire’s rationalism in the eighteenth century. Germane to our discussion is its proposal that each people had its own spirit or genius that was the secret of its survival from generation to generation. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), in his book The New Science (published in 1725 and 1744), suggested that the “poetic wisdom” or mythology of the ancients could be interpreted as a clue to the origins of civilization. He stated that civil order is based on inherited custom. “If religion is lost among the peoples, they have nothing left to enable them to live in society: no shield of defense, nor means of counsel, nor basis of support, not even a form by which they may exist in the world at all.” Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), in Ideas for a Philosophy of History of Mankind (1784–1791), argued that the spirit of each nation is expressed in its inherited myths and traditions. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), in his On the Different Methods of Translation (1800), wrote: “Just as a man must decide to belong to one country, he must adhere to one language, or he will float without any bearings above an unpleasant middle ground.” In his writings G. W. F. Hegel (1770–
1831) rationalized the determinative power of the past as “the cunning” of reason, understood as the unfolding of the idea or spirit inherent in a historical process. Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), inspired by Vico, affirmed the continuity of discreet continuous historical identities.

Kiều Anh Mậu expressed a view very similar to these in his preface. His views also have something in common with those of his younger contemporary Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), who, influenced by Tolstoy and Hindu tradition, propagated a doctrine of nonviolence and civil disobedience. In 1909 Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*:

> We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times and our indigenous education remains the same as before. . . . It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. . . . They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them. . . . They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages.

> And where this cursed modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before. . . . I would certainly advise you and those like you who love the motherland to go into the interior that has yet been not polluted by the railways and to live there for six months; you might then be patriotic and speak of Home Rule. ⁴⁹

In his preface, Kiều Anh Mậu debates the question of modernity with sentiments very similar to these of Gandhi. He is impatient with those who are ready to throw away all the old verities and to rush after the newfangled modernities. He argues that it is best to go back to a simple and rustic source of morality that will sustain the people during the confusions of rapid change.

Kiều Anh Mậu’s position is distinct from both the armed resistance of Phan Bội Châu and the modernist reformism of Phan Châu Trinh. His point of view is a kind of romantic utopism. He mobilizes materials about Liễu Hạnh in an eclectic spirit, but his political intent is very focused. He romanticizes politics by averting it from the hubbub of colonial modernity toward a vernacular cult that upholds what he views as traditional morality and social order. For him, this moral order is defined by the “three religions” of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism.
Kiều Ánh Mậu’s Tiền Phả Dịch Lực is the most complete work on Liễu Hạnh. In addition to Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story it also includes a description of the Sùng Sơn battle, in which Liễu Hạnh is defeated by the magicians of the School of the Inner Religion and forced to accept Buddhism. This episode is seldom found in narratives of Liễu Hạnh. Even in stories of Liễu Hạnh recorded by temples and villages that did incorporate Liễu Hạnh’s struggle with the School of the Inner Religion, the episode stands apart as an addition to the main canvas of Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story. Kiều Ánh Mậu inserted the Sùng Sơn episode into his narration with a twofold purpose: to affirm the decisive moral role of Buddhism (even Liễu Hạnh, a goddess, accepted it) and of Confucianism (a woman could not be allowed to get wild). The former is apparently an indication of Kiều Ánh Mậu’s own Buddhist inclinations, and the latter is the ideology of his class, the classically educated literati.

In Tiền Phả Dịch Lực, Liễu Hạnh’s story is reminiscent of the Tale of Kiều, on which, as mentioned above, Kiều Ánh Mậu had worked shortly before compiling Tiền Phả Dịch Lực. The stories of both Kiều and Liễu Hạnh describe a tale of virtue lost and found, both offer Buddhism as a source of personal moral strength, and both are crowned with the victory of Confucian values as a higher authority for ordering social relations. As Kiều Ánh Mậu writes in his introduction: “The Fairy Princess, from the moment of her descent to earth, was immediately aware of Confucianism: her treatment of the family was filled with filial piety to the highest degree. That is why she became one of the Four Immortals.” Mention of “the Four Immortals” furthermore signals the realm of Daoist worship. Kiều Ánh Mậu’s interest in both Kiều and Liễu Hạnh suggests a way in which women are thought to accumulate potency. While men typically return to the village to tap the source of their identity as members of a particular clan, women gain their individuality by wandering and avoiding the suffocating net of family and social obligations. However, both Nguyễn Á Diệu’s Kiều and Kiều Ánh Mậu’s version of Liễu Hạnh, after their wanderings, must finally be “brought home” under the discipline of men or of patriarchal moral systems. Aside from such affirmations of tradition, however, Kiều Ánh Mậu’s text on Liễu Hạnh is also entangled with looming modern obsessions.

Seeing Kiều Ánh Mậu as a political romantic offers useful comparisons with thinkers in other times and places who took a comparable attitude toward similar circumstances. Such thinkers had inklings of the modern nation as a political concept but could not accept the cultural
change produced by modernity. They looked to the past to authorize a moral and spiritual trajectory for their societies into the confusion and uncertainty of an impending modernity. Viewed in this way, Kiều Oanh Mẫu was prophetic in a way that Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh were not. Phan Bội Châu was so engrossed in the experience of his struggle with the French regime that he gave the future very little thought and simply intoned the classical maxims of his youth. Phan Chu Trinh was so enamored with the vision of modernity provided by France that he simply assumed the inevitability of progress toward it. Kiều Oanh Mẫu, however, was not so convinced of classical truths as was Phan Bội Châu, nor was he so ready to leap aboard the train of modern progress as was Phan Chu Trinh. He foreshadowed the eventual curling back of revolutionary ideology to nestle amongst the comfortable resting places afforded by popular culture, which we will consider in the next chapter. He instinctively understood that a nation had to have a vernacular foundation, and he also understood that modern progress was a false god.

Kiều Oanh Mẫu and his work on Liễu Hạnh received virtually no attention from his contemporaries or from following generations. Curiously enough, even the French apparently did not take his work seriously as potentially undermining their colonial role. An indication of this is the permission to publish granted to Kiều Oanh Mẫu by the French on August 11, 1910, only a few weeks after the completion of his work. Taking into consideration that he was in disgrace and stripped of his official post, this permission may appear rather remarkable. To assume that the colonial authorities overlooked the hidden motives of Tiễn Phát Dịch Lạc would underestimate the attention that literati received from the French at this time in the aftermath of the 1908 uprisings. We can assume that while the French took popular religion seriously, they did not consider Kiều Oanh Mẫu’s version of it to be of much concern.

This period indeed was marked by relative indulgence toward the literati who had not been implicated in the 1908 affair. The French wished to mitigate the consequences of their brutal suppression of the uprisings and wanted to demonstrate a certain measure of leniency toward the indigenous population and the loyal mandarinate. But, even in this situation, works aimed against their policy were very difficult to publish. Hence, it seems that they did not see any potential threat in a work romanticizing a popular cult. It can only be conjectured whether the French believed that Vietnamese were sure to find the new Western civilization more attractive than an old local goddess or whether they did not consider
Kiều Oánh Mẫu a worthy opponent. But, in any case, they apparently did not miscalculate, as neither the work nor its author enjoyed any discernible popularity. In general, this was a time when many literati tried to get rid of cults like that of Liễu Hạnh, along with traditional customs, and to get closer to the alluring new civilization of France. Like most romantics, Kiều Oánh Mẫu remained a loner, not creating a school, a movement, or even a significant group of confederates.

Strangely, the work of Kiều Oánh Mẫu that did receive recognition from later generations was his study of nineteenth-century rebellions, Bản Triều Ban Nghịch Liệt Truyện, translated into quóc ngữ in Saigon in 1963. Trương Bửu Lâm, editor and annotator, wrote in his introduction as follows: “Despite the limitations of the perspective and methods of Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s work, we see in it a certain level of historical scholarship in our country at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century. And this level, in my opinion, is not anything we should be ashamed of today.”50 The work was apparently interesting to scholars in the 1960s as a source of information about political events in the nineteenth century.

Tiến Phát Địch Lục, in contrast, fell into oblivion after the death of its author. Even in recent years, with the renewal of interest in popular cults in general and in the cult of Liễu Hạnh in particular, Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s work has remained in the shadows. In the article “Thờ Mẫu Liễu ở Phú Giầy” (The Worship of Mother Liễu at Phú Giầy) by Phạm Quỳnh Phương, it is merely mentioned in a list of works about the goddess.51 The only person in Vietnam who has taken some interest in Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s work is Nguyễn Xuân Diện, who translated parts of the manuscript in his master’s thesis, but he did not accompany his translation with any analysis of the work.52 This neglect may be due to Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s idiosyncratic treatment of Liễu Hạnh, which was not as usable by people interested in the cult as were the mainstream stories based more firmly on the version of Đoàn Thị Điểm.

Liễu Hạnh, as portrayed in Kiều Oánh Mẫu’s work, is an original. He shows her as something different from what she was in previous accounts. By combining Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story with the annals of the School of the Inner Religion, he juxtaposes the liminality of her personality with religious conversion. The idea of “liminality,” as proposed by Arnold van Gennep53 and developed by Victor Turner,54 implies a suspension of rules and roles that transcends the boundaries of accepted norms while drawing attention to those trespassed norms. Liễu Hạnh’s compliance with Bud-
dhism is a conversion that reinstates the norms that she has violated. But, at the same time, with Liễu Hạnh’s conversion, her cult ceases to exist as a separate entity and enters the domain of Buddhism. However, while Kiều Oánh Mâu nominally ascertains her cult as a part of Buddhism, at the same time this merging of cult and religion reflects the complex composition and character of Vietnamese Buddhism, presumed as the indigenous religion.

Even as Kiều Oánh Mậu’s work was neglected, so was his search for a way to develop and liberate his country. He is not mentioned in any Western or Vietnamese study as a part of Vietnamese intellectual history, let alone as a thinker in the Vietnamese anticOLONIAL context. He does not fit into the dominant narrative of modern Vietnamese history constructed by communists and nationalists. However, the current revitalization of traditional cults, and in particular of Liễu Hạnh’s cult, is an indication of Kiều Oánh Mậu’s value as a prophet.

Kiều Oánh Mậu’s search for national strength in a religious cult that he believed was not tainted by foreign ideology or morality suggests a comparison with a current of thought that started to develop in Japan a century and a half before his time. I refer to kokugaku, the “School of National Learning,” or “nativism,” as H. Harootunian prefers to call it. Kokugaku started as predominantly an elite intellectual movement. At its source were Kado no Azumamaro (1669–1739), Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769), and Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). The nativists were concerned with the Chinese influence discernible in all domains of Japanese cultural life. In order to deliver their country from it, they turned their attention to the Japanese peasantry, the people, who, as Marx put it, “cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.” Proclaiming peasants to be the bearers of real Japaneseness, the kokugaku movement preached the necessity of returning to the values that could be found among the peasantry. Nativist texts in the second half of the eighteenth century were mobilized to promote agricultural work and to valorize its practice as an application of the “ancient Way.”

But what is most relevant in comparison with Liễu Hạnh is the elevation of Shinto, the worship of indigenous spirits, as a counterweight to Buddhism, which had been imported from China. Shinto was supposed to regulate religious life on the basis of agricultural work and to serve as a moral guide for everyday life. The valorization of physical work, as opposed to the domination of intellectual values thought to typify the imported culture of China, was mobilized to assert the uniqueness of Japa-
inese society and to specify the true Japanese spirit. Kiều Oánh Mậu’s citation of Lạc Hồng at the end of his work as the place where Liễu Hạnh’s cult and the national space intersect is exactly in this mode of thought. Lạc Hồng is historiographical shorthand for the mythical era before Chinese influence appeared among the ancestors of the Vietnamese.

In Japan, language played a very important role in this nativist discourse. Historical annals, with their classical trappings inspired by Chinese dynastic histories, were rejected. Instead, these thinkers went back to what they imagined to be the pre-Chinese Japanese language as found in oral history, songs, mythology, and, especially, in collections of poetry, such as the Man’yōshū, and in narrative accounts from the Kojiki and Nihonshoki. They believed these to be the only reliable sources for their history. In Motoori’s view, “poetry came closest to the content of the Way, which could not be taught as if it was ‘this or that.’ For poetry was an activity that must be pursued personally in the actual exercise of composition and recitation.”

In the 1860s, sought to reestablish the poetic tradition of Kamo no Mabuchi and Motoori, for “he believed that poetic knowledge alone revealed the true meaning of Shinto and its method would thoroughly ‘cleanse and purify the heart.”

The interests of nearly all social groups, both common and elite, were assimilated into the knowledge claims of nativist discourse. This discourse illuminated Shinto as the indigenous religion and pushed it up to prominence. During the early period of the Meiji restoration (1868–1880), the state dropped its patronage of Buddhism to favor Shinto. While state support waned during the period of 1880 to 1905, the following period, up until 1945, saw a steady increase in Shinto’s role and importance. It appears that the rise of Shinto after 1905 influenced Kiều Oánh Mậu and inspired his effort to transplant the Japanese experience onto Vietnamese soil with Liễu Hạnh. Educated Vietnamese were keenly interested in all aspects of Japan after Japan’s astonishing defeat of Russia in 1905.

Similarities can easily be seen between the kokugaku movement and Kiều Oánh Mậu: detachment from Confucianism, recognition of poetry as reaching the ‘soul’ of people, search for roots in indigenous cults, preference for “folk culture” over “elite culture.” They both appeared as a reaction to foreign penetration: in Japan it was the ascendance of Confucianism that spurred the appearance of kokugaku, whereas in Vietnam Kiều Oánh Mậu wrote in response to the modernism of the French colonial regime.

Why did kokugaku become influential in Japan, while Kiều Oánh
Mâu’s voice did not find an audience? An important difference was that the Meiji modernization and Japan’s victory over Russia created the triumphal conditions in which a nativist religion could thrive, but “national defeat” and forced modernization to serve the interests of French colonialism created conditions in which a nativist cult was not a plausible source of potency. Furthermore, Kiêu Qúôc Mậu failed to create a viable doctrine. His opposition to foreign influence is eclectic and not systematic: in fact, overall, he opposes French colonization as if it comprised nothing more than European novelties that one could choose to accept or not. His treatment of Confucianism is both similar to and different from that of the kokugaku movement. Unlike the Japanese nativists, he condemns not so much Confucianism itself but rather Confucian scholars for their inability to use their knowledge in the struggle against colonization. The question of the foreign origins of Confucianism does not seem to be on his agenda at all. Thus, whereas Confucianism in the eyes of the Japanese nativists was the agent of colonization, in the eyes of the Vietnamese nativist Kiêu Qúôc Mậu, it was an unsuccessful agent of anticolonization.

The gap between kokugaku and Kiêu Qúôc Mậu widens when it comes to Buddhism. Again, for most of kokugaku’s representatives Buddhism was an anathema that enslaved the spiritual life of the Japanese; for Kiêu Qúôc Mậu, it was an integral part of indigenous religious life, hardly differing from other religious cults. We do not find even the slightest hint of alienating Buddhism as something foreign. On the contrary, it is Buddhism that transformed the indigenous cult of a powerful but wild and evil spirit into a channel of benevolence and patriotism.

Japan was never under direct Chinese occupation and did not border China. Hence, for some Japanese, the Chinese influence penetrating all the spheres of their life mainly through Confucianism and Buddhism was perceived as an alien phenomenon subjugating their own culture. Thus, they had a passionate desire for a totally indigenous national religion. For Vietnamese, in contrast, things from China were important for developing their own culture, into which Chinese elements were integrated as immanent constituents, as I have argued elsewhere. Thus, the mixture of Buddhism and a popular cult was not objectionable to Kiêu Qúôc Mậu or to his potential audience; indeed, it could be considered an indigenous tradition. What Kiêu Qúôc Mậu’s nativism lacked was any suggestion about what to do with the moral strength derived from indigenous culture. He did not understand that times had changed and that one could not go with a spear against cannons.
Outright rejection of Western knowledge doomed Kiêu Oánh Mầu’s argument. His proposal could not count on and did not get state support, as did Shinto, especially after 1905, when Japan was victorious in the Russo-Japanese War, and Shinto was elevated to the status of state religion to nurture and strengthen national pride and identity. At that time, Vietnam could only vicariously dream in the reflected light radiated by Japan. Unlike Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh, who watched the Russo-Japanese War and learned the necessity to master modern knowledge to fight their enemy with its own weapons, Kiêu Oánh Mầu believed Japanese strength lay not in the ability to adjust to novelties but rather in the determination to stick to the old. He did not realize that it was the willingness of Japan to accommodate to the changing world that created the possibility of elevating Shinto and using it for the further advancement and strengthening of the country.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has raised two examples of vernacularizing the cult of Liễu Hạnh. In the case of Nguyễn Công Trọng, we see an example of the sublime vernacularized as a divine existential subjectivity with regard to which human beings, human society, human politics, and human intellectual prowess are irrelevant. In the case of Kiều Oánh Mầu, we see an example of the sublime vernacularized as a divine potency that has been humanized to conform to norms of moral behavior and political authority; the sublime is tamed to serve an intimation of the nation state.

A comparison of the ups and downs in the official careers of Nguyễn Công Trọng and Kiều Oánh Mầu illustrates the difference between these two cases. Both repeatedly encountered roadblocks in their careers and suffered demotion, and both repeatedly found a way to climb back into officialdom. Experiencing ups and downs in one’s career was a common fate for those who did not carefully follow the conformist path. It is plausible to think that both of these men were relatively independent thinkers who did not conform to conventional expectations and earned enemies among colleagues prepared to denounce them. Yet there is a significant difference. Nguyễn Công Trọng eventually rose to a high position, governor of the province in which the imperial court was located, and retired with honors, while Kiều Oánh Mầu died in obscurity after a scandal that forced him into retirement. Nguyễn Công Trọng gained eventual success serving
an “independent” Vietnamese monarch; Kiều Oanh Mậu was shunted aside by a French colonial regime.

Nguyễn Công Trứ lived in precolonial and prenational times; his was a world in which the divine and the human were intermingled, a world of gods and kings, of a kingdom but not a nation; there was no secularizing colonial lid pressing down upon his world with alien profanity. As an existential personality, he looked up and saw not an oppressive foreign regime but the heavens where the Jade Emperor and his court of immortals took a direct but incalculable interest in human affairs. Nothing was inevitable; anything was possible. His sense of self was not under threat. He was free to choose what god he would worship.

In contrast, Kiều Oanh Mậu lived under an alien colonial regime and assumed a pose of resistance to the profane knowledge flooding into his world. He understood that the old kingdom of his ancestors had been swept away and that the only way to think beyond the colonial state was in terms of something new called a national state or nation. He entertained a romanticized vision of the nation as an extension of the sublime and tried to imagine how to nationalize the sublime by calling down deities into the political affairs of men. His world was under threat; he lived at a minimal level of survival for what he imagined to be his identity as a civilized person. He did not have the luxury of worshiping deities. In desperation he invoked them as saviors.

Hans Blumenberg’s ideas about European intellectual history offer another context in which to think about this. He proposed that, with secularization, “positions” (whether understood as intellectual, philosophical, or theological) that had been occupied by medieval Christian thought were abandoned. As abandoned positions, they continued to pose a challenge as if rational thought was incapable of addressing them; consequently, these positions had to be reoccupied by secular thought. 62 I see the cult of Liễu Hạnh as a form of popular religion with an infrastructure of temples and shrines; a cohort of priests and worshipers; a calendar of holy days, special observances, and annual festivals; and techniques of veneration, oracular inquiry, and mediumship. When educated people thought and wrote about Liễu Hạnh, they filled this cultic form with contents related to their own concerns. They reoccupied the form of the cult with their own agendas.

Blumenberg distinguished two modes in which a position might be reoccupied. He used the terms “self-assertion” and “self-preservation.” In the case of self-assertion, the absence of threat enables one to reoccupy a
position as a means to express or to assert oneself as an existential being with freedom of action. In the case of self-preservation, one is under threat and reoccupies a position in order to mobilize it for the sake of survival, as a way to avoid one’s own extinction.

Đoàn Thị Diễm and Nguyễn Công Trứ are cases of self-assertion. They were not under an alien threat that pushed them to reoccupy the cult of Liễu Hạnh to preserve their culture or their sense of individual or group identity. We have seen in the previous chapter how Đoàn Thị Diễm reoccupied the cult with her agenda of female emancipation. In this chapter we have seen how Nguyễn Công Trứ reoccupied the cult to express what appears to us as an existentialist philosophy in which life is lived without the net (whether understood as a snare or a safety net) of rationalization. In his account of Liễu Hạnh, he describes a subjectivity with the luxury of constantly entertaining options and with the freedom to choose without the necessity to provide an explanation. Perhaps this is how a talented man learned to live his life amidst opportunities and the slanders of the envious.

Kiều Oanh Mậu is an example of self-preservation. In his lifetime, he witnessed the disappearance of the old order, rudely pushed aside by the modern colonial state. He was oppressed by the threat of colonial modernity, which he saw as a catastrophe in which he and his countrymen would lose not only their freedom, but also their identity. This led him to the seemingly quixotic moment of public spectacle with his notorious 1908 New Year’s Day speech in Bắc Giang, after which he turned to write about deities. This writing was an absurd waste of time in the view of his modernist critics, but for him it was a reoccupation of a position firmly grounded in popular culture from which to issue an appeal to his countrymen to awaken to imminent danger. His return to a preexisting and well-established position in the “old tradition” of popular culture was a matter of self-preservation in a time of dire threat. It was an effort to think through the rapid and demoralizing changes he had experienced in his lifetime and to imagine how to survive into a better age. He had intimations of the irrevocability of change and had begun to think in terms of “people” and “nation” rather than in terms of “subject” and “king.” He wanted to find a way to pull something out of this new secular thought with which to redeem an older version of humanity. His was a voice crying in the wilderness. He was not representative of a group, of his class, or of his society; he was a loner struggling with the inexorable whirlwind of modernity, reoccupying a position seemingly overwhelmed by moder-
nity and far from the place of battle. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, after the whirlwind has passed, Vietnamese today are picking amidst the debris of that battle to reoccupy the cult of Liêu Hạnh with the same intent that inspired Kiều Oanh Mầu, to mobilize popular religion to buttress the nation.

Another way to frame the difference between the two cases of vernacularizing the sublime discussed in this chapter is in reference to Naoki Sakai’s book *Translation and Subjectivity*, in which two forms of subjectivity are contrasted. *Shutai* is an ontologic subjectivity that exists in the time of diachronic experience and the anxiety of social relations. *Shukan* is a bounded epistemic subjectivity that exists in the space of synchronic knowledge and the certainty of authority. Sakai uses *shukan* to address how Asian Studies is constituted as a field of knowledge in the modern academy. A *shukan* subjectivity relies on the authority of “knowers” who constitute “knowledge” about an epistemic subject from a position displaced from their real existence as social beings in time. The logic of *shukan* sustains the nation state. Sakai uses *shutai* to suggest the practical experience of social relations and the anxiety of being with others in time as a basis for negating the spatial verities that sustain categories of national identity that authorize academic knowledge about “Asia.”

In these terms, Nguyễn Công Trứ’s portrayal of Liêu Hạnh is an example of *shutai*, a subjectivity that is free to move in time without being captured by a bounded construction of knowledge. Liêu Hạnh is in motion as an existential self, constantly making choices and subject to no human authority. There is no nation to lay claims upon her. In contrast, Kiều Oanh Mầu’s portrayal of Liêu Hạnh is an example of *shukan*, a subjectivity subordinated to an epistemic field constituted by the needs of human politics and morality and spatially harnessed to a vision of national identity. Nguyễn Công Trứ, having prevailed against his bureaucratic enemies, admired a goddess who acts out her sublime nature unembarrassed by human agendas. Kiều Oanh Mầu, in dismay at serving a foreign conqueror, endeavored to enmesh a spatially defined goddess in human morality and politics in order to borrow her sublime nature and lend it to the nation.

A comparison of the first sixteen lines of each writer demonstrates these points. Nguyễn Công Trứ’s first four quatrains are as follows:

Now, just on the spring festival, a happy scene;
Making offerings at an altar to communicate with the heavens;
Praying with belief and sincerity to invoke instruction;
The smoke of incense spirals up to reach the highest tower.

Above in the upper realm, just on the day of great rejoicing;
In the hall of deities, all were free and unfettered, the imperial carriage
was at leisure;
The Jade Emperor was stately seated on his throne in the heavenly
palace;
The hundred officials attended upon the imperial dais.

In the heavenly tower, just at the time of strings and bamboo [music],
When all from the six pavilions sang songs to the sovereign,
There appeared a lady fairy entering to attend,
Her feet stepping without hurry, to salute at the side of the throne.

The maiden’s hand dropped the jade cup.
The Supreme Emperor responded without favoritism to the advice of
the judicial officers,
Placed [her] to be a child of the family Trần,
In the land of Thiên Bản, the people of Phú Giày.65

These lines are marked by their temporal orientation in an unfolding
situation. The first lines of the first three quatrains all use the same word
(vật, “just then”) to emphasize an exact sense of time in a great bustling
scene that extends from human worshipers on earth to divine inhabitants
of the heavenly realm. Here the sublime is put in motion through time,
lending drama to the entrance of the fairy and the moment of her fateful
fumble and the judgment that banished her to be born among mortals.
These lines mark a sense of freedom and possibility, giving piquancy
to the fairy’s error as an unintentional act with inevitable consequences.
The expressions “free and unfettered,” “at leisure,” and “without hurry”
imply emancipation from constraints and the luxury of entertaining op-
tions. There is no mention of morality or the nation. The only marks of
orientation in terms of human society are in the last couplet with the sur-
name of the fairy’s human family and place-names for the two main cultic
centers where major temples to the fairy are located. In these lines, Liễu
Hạnh is described in accordance with Naoki Sakai’s use of the term shutai.
She bears the consequences of her actions in a situation of social relations
with others.
In contrast to this, the first sixteen lines of Kiều Quan Mẫu, which form the first section of his work, emphasize spatial orientation, morality, and national identity. Here we see an example of Naoki Sakai’s use of the term shukan. Kiều Hạnh is harnessed to the spatial and identity-affirming marks of human culture, morality, and politics.

The Southern Heaven unites beauty and wonder;
In addition to the Four Immortals is the Fairy Lady.
The Phú Đặng deity and the Tân Viện saint
Attacked Ẩn and pacified Thực, gaining merit for giving peace to the country.

The story of Chù Động Tử is in our books;
The true prince of Lâm Sơn appeared to lead the people.
Nguyễn Minh Khôn, in the Buddha Tower,
Had magic and the “six wisdoms,” foreign countries knew his name.

Now a fairy of the second-rank palace,
Refined as pearls, a fair flower above in the Heavenly Court.
With a brilliance that clearly illuminates good and evil,
In the place of heaven administers blights and blessings for one region.

Here and there are clearly manifested [her] traces;
Do not use the eyes of a demon to disdain a fairy.
The village of Tiến Hương in Thiên [Bản] district,
Sơn Nam province, beside Mount Gòi.66

Here we are struck by the spatial orientation and the lack of temporality. The “Southern Heaven,” “the country,” “foreign countries,” and “one region” all focus attention on a particular place distinguished from other places. The final couplet produces the clichéd administrative formula of citing village, district, and province, and it anchors this place in reference to terrain with the name of a mountain.

The first four couplets provide a list of heroic or magical beings plucked from the legendary and historical records of the precolonial kingdom. The Four Immortals in the first couplet are chief figures in the Daoist pantheon of potent local spirits. Kiều Hạnh is identified as someone who can be added to this august company. She does not have her own identity but obtains her signification by association with other seemingly
similar beings. In the second couplet are mentioned spirits that appear in stories about defeating enemies in ancient times. In Kiều Oánh Mâu’s time, Phủ Đồng, mentioned in Chapter 1, was thought to be a magical being who defeated an invasion by the Shang (Ân) dynasty of ancient Chinese history. Tấn Viên, a prominent mountain spirit in Vietnamese mythology, is portrayed in some stories as having helped an ancient king deal with a conqueror from Thục (modern Sichuan). In the third couplet, the reference to Chữ Đồng Tử is to a mythical figure who gave magical powers to a local hero who resisted a northern dynasty in the sixth century C.E. The true prince of Lam Sơn is a reference to Lê Lợi, who fought Ming invaders and established a dynasty in the fifteenth century. In this couplet, reference to “our books” and “to lead the people” implies some kind of cultural and political identity. In the fourth couplet, Nguyễn Minh Không was a twelfth-century Buddhist monk and magician who was famous for healing a king. Here the idea that his name was known in “foreign countries” makes a clear assertion about a country that is “not foreign.”

Liễu Hạnh makes her entrance in the fifth and sixth couplets not in terms of a sublime being beyond human understanding but as one who fulfills human expectations. First, she is identified as of “the second-rank palace,” so we know she is in a hierarchy and under the supervision of higher-rank beings. Second, she is portrayed in hackneyed phrases describing female beauty (“refined as pearls”; “a fair flower”) that make of her a primarily decorative being. Third, her sublime nature is subordinated to the task of moral indoctrination (“to illuminate good and evil”). This task assumes concrete form in her assignment to serve as the emissary of heaven administering justice in “one region.” We can read this as Kiều Oánh Mâu’s way of connecting Liễu Hạnh’s sublime nature with the political vicissitudes of his country.

In the seventh couplet Kiều Oánh Mâu characteristically implies that his argument will provoke disagreement and that he must make his case amidst doubters. He appeals to his antagonists first by citing external evidence, Liễu Hạnh’s “traces” that can be seen in various places, and second by challenging their inner qualities that may or may not allow them to recognize these “traces.” If they disdain Liễu Hạnh, it will mean that they are looking at the world through demon’s eyes. Their response to Liễu Hạnh will itself be evidence of their moral nature. Thus, Liễu Hạnh has been completely absorbed into Kiều Oánh Mâu’s argument, and her
sublime nature has no purpose other than to rebuke those who disagree with him.

By looking closely and comparatively at passages from Nguyễn Công Trừ and Kiều Oánh Mậu, we can see how differently they vernacularized Đoàn Thị Điểm’s Liễu Hạnh. In fact, Kiều Oánh Mậu was not as successful as Nguyễn Công Trừ in achieving vernacularization. He fills his lines with allusions to beings and events that assume a certain level of cultural indoctrination, if not erudition. His Liễu Hạnh is not free to be herself, as she is for Nguyễn Công Trừ. And Kiều Oánh Mậu’s readers and listeners are not free to be themselves either. His teacherly voice constantly reminds that he is not just writing about Liễu Hạnh and her untrammeled divine nature. Rather, he is writing about the place corresponding to the “Southern Heaven,” a place with its own books, that “one region” where his list of heroic beings “lead the people” and “bring peace to the country,” where the “blights and blessings” that recompense “good and evil” are administered. He is trying to define something like the modern nation with the cultural assets most comfortable to him. He is writing as an embattled polemicist seeking the self-preservation of what he believes to be his civilization and his own identity as a member of it. His Liễu Hạnh is a shukan subjectivity; he claims a realm of knowledge about the nation that is clear for all to see save those with demon’s eyes. He romanticizes the nation with a deity.

In contrast, Nguyễn Công Trừ’s Liễu Hạnh is unencumbered by the demands of national identity. She is free to be a sublime being who acts in the context of social relations and bears the consequences of her actions rather than acting in accordance with the mechanical application of a moral imperative through her subordination to Buddhism. Nguyễn Công Trừ’s language, instead of describing a space, describes a situation of ongoing social relations in which Liễu Hạnh must act and be responsible for her actions. Rather than being an administrator of justice, as she is in Kiều Oánh Mậu’s text, she suffers the application of justice and must bear the consequences of her misdeed, which put her into a human family and into the temples of human worshipers. One thing leads to another. There is no static position where a national space can sprout. Liễu Hạnh exists as a shutai subjectivity, embedded in temporal experience, not ceasing to wander between heaven and earth. There are constantly new situations and new choices to make. Nguyễn Công Trừ’s Liễu Hạnh acts with the courage and the consequences of self-assertion.
From Superstition to Cultural Tradition

Bring into play good customs of traditional festivals,
Resolutely eradicate superstitions and outdated practices.

I saw this slogan in front of the building of the people’s committee of Vũ Bản district, Nam Định province, during the Phú Đẩy festival of Princess Liễu Hạnh: Phát huy thủ tục mỹ tục của lễ hội truyền thống, kiên quyết bãi trừ mê tín dị đoan và hậu tục (Bring into play good customs of traditional festivals, resolutely eradicate superstitions and outdated practices). Each year on the third day of the third lunar month, the anniversary of Liễu Hạnh’s death, tens of thousands of people visit Phú Đẩy. In 2001, so did I. It was not my first visit to the temple, but it was the first time that I saw the festival and the temples in all their glory. I was not alone. I came with a group of foreign scholars who had attended a conference on the Cults of the Mothers organized by the Institute of Folklore Studies in Hanoi, and the visit to the festival was organized as a field trip for the conference.

The group was welcomed by district officials with a formal reception at which speeches were made about the necessity of developing cultural traditions and of strengthening ties between peoples. To a former citizen of the Soviet Union who left that country in 1990, before the country abandoned its communist regime, this reception seemed painfully familiar, reminiscent of so many similar receptions in the Soviet Union and socialist Vietnam when I worked with Vietnamese and Soviet delegations. However, this time there was a difference. Most of my colleagues were Western scholars, and we came to watch a festival of a spirit that only a few years before was considered a superstition and was banned. The slogan displayed at the festival was a quintessential expression of the relationship between the state and popular religious cults, a dichotomy between perceiving the cults as superstition and perceiving them as cultural tradition.
This chapter examines shifts in these perceptions during the precolonial, the colonial, the socialist, and the postsocialist periods in Vietnamese history, as general tendencies and as applied to Liêu Hạnh’s cult in particular. What we see is a similarity in the official attitudes of the precolonial and socialist periods that have viewed popular religion as primarily superstition and a similarity in the official attitudes of the colonial and postsocialist periods in perceiving or presenting it as culture.

SUPERSTITION VERSUS CULTURE: PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL PERIODS

Regimes in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods habitually framed their critique of popular religion in terms of superstition. In socialist Vietnam the party and the state set in motion a relentless struggle against popular religion as a “superstitious vestige of feudalism” responsible for clogging people’s minds with superstitions instead of providing them with education.1 But should feudalism (chế độ phong kiến), the term Vietnamese communist historiography has usually applied to the precolonial Vietnamese state, be blamed for this? The policy proclaimed by the Communist Party closely resembles the policies of regimes in so-called feudal times. The conflict, which is perennial, can more helpfully be defined as a one between the center of authority and the margins of society.

In the fifteenth century the founder of the Lê dynasty issued a decree forbidding the activities of mediums, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers.2 The suppression of these manifestations was amplified in the Lê Code, which was developed starting in the fifteenth century and remained in force up to the end of the eighteenth century. This law code contained provisions against printers of books about Buddhism and Daoism, accusing them of preying upon the people to confuse them and to cheat them out of their money.3 It also contained provisions against female mediums4 and against powerful families who employ and protect “astrologers, fortune-tellers, mediums, sorcerers, as well as ruffians and vagrants.”5 An imperial edict in 1662 specified the prohibition against printing books on Buddhism and Daoism6 and against mediums and sorcerers.7 The Nguyễn Code, promulgated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, reiterated the prohibition of the practice of sorcery and spirit possession, which was one of the main features of several cults, among them that of Liêu Hạnh.8 An
edict in 1802 prohibited Buddhist festivals that last for ten days, and an edict twenty years later limited such festivals to one day and one night.\textsuperscript{9}

Insulating the royal court from popular religion was a new cultural element that first appeared in the fifteenth century. A 1463 decree forbade fortune-tellers and Buddhist or Daoist monks from talking to persons in the imperial palaces and in the women’s quarters there.\textsuperscript{10} The \textit{Li̇nh Nam Chich Quại}, discussed in Chapter 1, and the Lê Code are indications of a secularization of society in the fifteenth century, at least among educated people. In subsequent centuries, as we have seen in previous chapters, there were strong reactions against this elite bias, not only at the level of village cults but even from the throne. Recall the seventeenth-century king Lê Thân Tông, who supported Buddhist temples, traveled extensively on pilgrimages, and was faulted by historians for being “superstitious.”

Alexander Woodside has suggested that restrictions imposed on the village resulted from the Vietnamese court’s fear “that Vietnamese village communities embraced a host of Southeast Asian folk customs, which if allowed to flourish, would undermine the village pedagogue’s Chinese books. If that happened, education would go under, and so would bureaucratic recruitment.”\textsuperscript{11} I suspect that “upholding sinicization” was more a means than an end. Sinicization was a “by-product” of governmental policy in precolonial times. The main goal was to control the volatile space of Vietnamese village culture, and sinicization was simply the most plausible and convenient means to bracket this space in order to prevent it from splashing out of the framework of state regulation.

To be sure, many educated Vietnamese sincerely identified themselves with the “civilizing process” that we call sinicization, but such people were surely a small idealistic minority.\textsuperscript{12} Sinicization was used by Vietnamese rulers to police their society, which nevertheless kept a significant degree of its own integrity, being, in the words of Foucault, a “complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of reactions, its regulations as well as its possibilities of disturbance.” But as a society is not “completely penetrable by police,”\textsuperscript{13} sinicization, as a policy, was not successful in eradicating what was considered superstitious and excessive by the court. In any case, we do not have any evidence of how strictly, if at all, these laws were enforced on the ground.\textsuperscript{14}

Popular religious culture continued with its own momentum in the villages. In order to maintain good relations with villages, rulers in some cases patronized local cults by granting honorific titles to the deities. We have seen that, during the time of warfare between the Lê-Trình and the
Mač and then after the expulsion of the Mač and the reestablishment of
the Lê, the various rulers gave much attention to the spirits, considering
them as “communicators” between the government and the people.

The tension between the authorities and popular practice persisted
through the French colonial period. But colonization increased the num-
ber of agents concerned with popular religion, among them the Viet-
namese imperial court, the French colonial government, the Catholic
church, the literati, and the common people. All of these were engaged
with local cults to varying degrees.

On January 31, 1920, for example, a royal edict announced reforms to
cut down expenses of traditional village customs. It prohibited expensive
and lengthy rituals so as to spare the population from unnecessary ex-
penses. This edict, issued by the Vietnamese imperial court, demonstrated
continuity with precolonial government policy toward some aspects of
popular culture; it was also reinforced by changes in perspective encour-
aged by the colonizing experience and attempts by progressive Viet-
namese to Westernize or modernize the country. However, responses to
the decree from French administrators in different provinces were far
from unanimous in their approval of the decree and reveal the spectrum
of French attitudes and local policies toward popular culture.

Many representatives of the Vietnamese elite held views that were
akin to those of the royal court. They considered local cultural practices
to be an impediment on the path to modernity, which they understood
as a necessary break with popular traditions, as we have seen in Chapter
4 with the opponent of Kiều Ông Mậu described in the preface to his
work on Liễu Hạnh. It would be a mistake to assume that literati were
not interested in the preservation of Vietnamese traditional culture. But
their understanding of traditional culture, with exceptions such as Kiều
Ông Mậu, was elitist. Some of them saw the foundation of “Viet-
nameseness” in Confucianism, which, in their opinion, construed and
framed the essence of the Vietnamese people. Others were impressed
with ideas of “modernization” implanted in Vietnam by the French. But
the majority of the elite despised what they thought were the remnants
of the old, uncivilized world. Huy-Tam Ho Tai, discussing Vietnamese “na-
tivism,” observed that Vietnamese neotraditionalists were convinced that
“the village was the repository of antiquated and downright harmful cus-
toms and usages.”

Phan Kế Bính, a much-quoted scholar of the first third of the twen-
tieth century and himself a researcher of popular culture, argued against
worshipping spirits. He observed that whereas secularized and secularizing Europe flourished, Asia, worshipping its spirits, could not be equal to Europe in its wealth. "This one reason is enough to demonstrate," he wrote, "that our belief [in spirits] is unfounded." He continued: "In my opinion, shrines to loyal selfless subjects and shrines to great heroes and people of outstanding abilities are the only ones worthy of worship. But worshipping itself should be commemoration and not worshipping as praying for blessings." With this statement Phan Kế Bính demonstrated his desire to harness popular religion so as to affirm historical continuity for the nation. His popular cults are emasculated of religious belief to match what he took to be entirely secularized Europe. They were no longer a form of religion. Instead, they represented civic commemorative action.

Phan Kế Bính blamed the spirits for the backwardness of Asia in comparison with Europe, implying that the spirits were guilty of not delivering wealth. Rather than negating popular cults, however, he wanted to redirect them from working in the material mode of meeting everyday needs of ordinary people to the social mode of supporting history and nation. His position resembled that of Gu Jiegang, an influential Chinese literatus in the 1920s, who tried to reformat popular religion in particular and popular culture in general to use them as the foundation of the nation. Thus, as Prasenjit Duara has observed, "popular culture, as an alternative to the Confucian tradition, could be the foundation of the nation, but only when mediated through intelligentsia." The French, in the meantime, had different criteria defining their attitude toward religious cults. For them, the most important consideration was the position of a cult vis-à-vis the colonial government. Unless religious activities had an anticolonial connotation, the French were more lenient toward popular cults than the royal court and the Vietnamese literati. This can be seen in French reactions to the above-mentioned royal edict on popular customs. Some administrators, for example the official from Quảng Yên province, applauded the policy and considered that it could be implemented without difficulty because people were certain to appreciate the merit of such a rational view. Others, like the official from Bác Giang province, were more cautious and believed the policy would provoke popular discontent because of its intolerance of established custom and the opportunities it would open for abuse. A third viewpoint represented by the officials from Nam Định and Hà Nam provinces embraced the paternalistic mission civilisatrice of France toward the indige-
nous population and proposed that change should come from education rather than legislation.19

Inspired by the *mission civilisatrice*, there existed one more approach, of direct relevance to our topic: the study and promotion of popular culture. One of the most remarkable statements of a sympathetic, albeit paternalistic, colonial attitude toward Vietnamese culture comes from Pierre Pasquier (1877–1934), who arrived in the late nineteenth century as a young administrator and spent the rest of his life among the Vietnamese, eventually rising to be governor-general of Indochina. In 1906, he gave a series of lectures at the colonial exposition in Marseilles. His final lecture is a strong statement of appreciation for traditional Vietnamese culture as an important contribution to human civilization and of France’s responsibility to preserve it.20

Pasquier was neither a romantic interested in an exotic culture nor a cynic calculating a policy of using culture for political purposes. He was primarily concerned with knowing how the French colonial project would stand the test of time and be remembered. He anticipated that later historians would judge his generation of colonialists. But he also spoke as one who was personally interested in Vietnamese culture and who understood it as a valid and compelling version of human achievement, despite its need for guidance into the modern age.

Pasquier’s point of view resonated with elements of nationalist thought emerging at the time among some Vietnamese and is comparable to the ideas of Kiều Oánh Mẫu as well as to those of later nationalist thinkers. He affirmed the originality and unity of popular and elite cultures, and he believed that the “genius of the Annamite race” as revealed in “productions of the indigenous spirit” was a precious part of the riches of “humanity.” Pasquier’s idealized vision of local tradition (gentle poems, lotus ponds, songs sung by boys and girls on summer evenings, long beards, archaic and dazzling costumes) resembles that cultivated by later nationalists of many varieties, including “Uncle Ho.”

French colonialists and Vietnamese nationalists were co-builders of a so-called traditional Vietnamese national identity, which became the cultural basis both for French ideas about a modern colonial state and for Vietnamese ideas about a modern nation state. Many French administrators saw themselves as protectors of popular culture amidst the turmoil of colonial change and in the face of the disdain of the indigenous elite. They saw in popular culture and cults a possibility to demonstrate their
“fatherly” treatment of the Vietnamese. They promoted those elements that did not pose a threat to the colonial state and crushed those that they took to present a danger. Village cults, disconnected and apolitical, offered a glamorous showcase for French colonialism to demonstrate its benevolence.21

Much later, in 1937, Professor René Maunier reaffirmed this position, arguing that, for France to succeed in its colonies, it would be necessary first to study the indigenous customs and then to single out those that were immoral or harmful for the French administration and to launch a campaign to eradicate them, while preserving all other indigenous customs.22 The fact that he talked about this in 1937 shows that the measures undertaken by the French administration had not by then yielded the desired results. Nevertheless, much had already been done during the years of colonialism with regard to preservation of the indigenous culture in general and popular religious cults in particular.

This is evident in the creation in 1898 of the École française d’Extrême-Orient, which from its very beginning took the leading role in studying and preserving what the French understood as the Vietnamese cultural heritage.23 In addition, following the suggestion of the director of the École, in 1901 the Commission on Antiquities of Tonkin was established, and in 1906 a Permanent Commission for the Preservation of Objects of Art was organized. The École française d’Extrême-Orient also became instrumental in collecting data on religious life, as is evident from the surveys conducted all over Vietnam in the second half of the 1930s. While the results of these surveys are an invaluable source for the study of Vietnamese religious life, they also demonstrate the role the École played in forming the colonial authorities’ policy in Vietnam. In March 1938 the résident supérieur of Tonkin issued a circular to all the residents and governors of the provinces, military districts, and the cities of Hanoi and Hai Phong to collect data on spirit-protectors and forward it to the Office of the Résident Supérieur, as the École française d’Extrême-Orient considered it important for the history and ethnology of the country.24 The efforts of the École in restoration and preservation of Vietnamese culture and religion from the beginning of the twentieth century resulted, among other things, in the construction and restoration of numerous temples during the French period. The flourishing of religious life, in turn, resulted in the development of tourism to attract the French to Vietnam. This was not necessarily a goal of the École’s activity but rather a by-
product, a logical extension of the colonial exhibitions organized in the metropole to acquaint people with their colonies. Those exhibitions not only highlighted difference between colonizers and colonized, but also presented "the idyllic, phantasmatic Indochina often dreamt of in the metropole, considered a land of adventure, opportunity, and exoticism." To bring the French to Indochina for a firsthand experience was a natural next step in developing colonial presence.

In 1923 the French colonial government established a Central Committee of Official Tourism to promote tourism in the region. According to A. Gauthier, writing in 1933, "The organization of tourism in Indochina does not present only economic interest, it has also a political importance stressed by the Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut: 'a superior national interest demands that we will make known to the world the civilizing and pacifying actions of France.'" Presenting local festivals for tourists to view was a potent way to display a message of cultural well-being in the colony and good relations between colonized and colonizers.

However, the issue of loyalty to the colonial government was crucial, and the authorities put the cults under constant scrutiny. As early as 1908, French authorities issued instructions concerning the surveillance of bonzes, sorcerers, and geomancers, all thought to pose potential political danger. This was because, while some Vietnamese literati opposed popular cults as superstition, they used them as a "form," means, or vehicle to transmit their own messages as, for instance, is evident in the example of the cult of Tam Thánh (the Three Saints) that originated in Ngọc Sơn temple in Hanoi and spread to neighboring provinces. This cult incorporated séances during which the medium would foretell the future to the people attending. The medium would write down the signs transmitted to him or her by a spirit. Usually a literatus would take part in these séances and would later render these signs into poetic form. Later these verses would be disseminated among the villagers. The literati would also write their comments on the prophecies, and in these comments they would occasionally express anticolonial sentiments. Because of these commentaries and their dissemination, this cult was forbidden in 1910.

Precolonial and colonial administrations both tried to control popular religion, but while the former tended to see it as "superstition," the latter was inclined to promote it as a signifier of both indigenous culture and the benevolence of the French government. The revolutionary policies toward popular religion of the Vietnamese government proclaimed in 1945...
resonated more with the suspicion and hostility of precolonial regimes
than with the benevolence of the French, but they shared with the latter
the greater thoroughness of a modern bureaucracy.

SUPERSTITION VERSUS CULTURE: SOCIALIST AND RENOVATION
PERIODS

The postcolonial period can be divided into two phases: socialist and
postsocialist, or renovation, periods. There is a striking similarity between
precolonial state policies toward popular religion and the policies of the
communist revolutionary regime from the late 1940s until the late 1980s.
We also find similarities between the policies of the French colonial gov-
ernment and those of the Vietnamese state in the postrevolutionary reno-
vation era that began in the late 1980s.

The August Revolution in 1945 brought the communists to power
and disrupted the routine of religious life in the North. The ensuing First
and Second Indochina Wars brought public religious life practically to a
halt, at least in the North. This was ostensibly because of limits placed on
the number of people who were allowed to assemble in one place, but
more fundamentally it was a result of the ruling party’s policy to eradicate
what it called superstition.

There has never been a clear identification of what is implied under
the term “superstition” (mê tín). Perhaps the fullest list and the earliest
list of “depraved customs and superstitions” of the government of unified
Vietnam is found in the government’s 1975 “Instruction on the Imple-
mentation of New Ways of Life in Weddings, Funerals, Death Anniver-
saries, and Festivals.” This “Instruction,” very similarly to the edicts of
precolonial Vietnamese royal officials, proclaims the necessity to distin-
guish superstitions from freedom of belief (tự do tín ngưỡng). While the
state constitution guarantees freedom of belief, “it strictly forbids (nghiêm
cấm) the consulting of fortune-tellers, the reading of horoscopes, the prac-
tice of physiognomy, the conjuring up of a dead person’s soul, [the exer-
cise of] spirit possession, the casting of lots by fortune-tellers, the produc-
tion of amulets, the worshiping of ghosts, the burning of incense, the
buying and selling of joss-paper objects, and the use of magic to cure
diseases.”

Government policies toward popular religion emerged from a deeply
entrenched attitude of disapproval. After the August Revolution of 1945,
the new state strove to create a socialist culture and a new socialist people. The idea of “popular” culture was replaced by the idea of “mass” culture. While the former embraced peculiarities pertaining to different regions and strata of population, the latter was to eliminate these peculiarities, unifying the entire society under one cultural roof to form a uniform culture for the nation. The task of culture, in other words, was to fulfill the social agenda of the authorities.

But the authorities also understood that old cultural forms were ingrained in popular consciousness and might be used to communicate new content. Trường Chinh, the party ideologue, in one of his most famous essays, “The Resistance Will Win,” called for using forms of propaganda from the old culture that were familiar to the broad masses and would be effective for influencing the people; for example, various folk song styles could be given new contents and a new artistic spirit. Later he highlighted the dual character of popular culture as he saw it: “[Popular] culture depicts the struggle of working people (fieldworkers, craftsmen, merchants . . .), people’s dreams of a bright future and of their will to oppose the clique of wealth and rank; it ridicules outdated practices and superstitions or admonishes to carry out ‘good’ deeds and to avoid ‘cruel’ deeds.”

To help people to distinguish between “true national culture” and “outdated customs,” between “good” and “cruel,” the mass performing arts movement (phong trào văn nghệ quần chúng) was organized. Members were mobilized into small performance groups to present new socially uplifting songs and plays to replace traditional songs and dances, which had been an integral part of the festivals. These performances were intended to replace the negative cultural residue from the oppressive past with a new culture that would nurture a new kind of socialized human being.

I discussed this issue with Mr. Vũ Kỳ, who had been the personal secretary of Hồ Chí Minh. Listening to him, I thought that his words directly echoed the royal edicts of the precolonial Vietnamese imperial court and the disdain for popular culture expressed by some Vietnamese literati during the precolonial and colonial periods. According to Vũ Kỳ, neither Hồ Chí Minh nor he saw anything pernicious in popular religion or in festivals as one of its manifestations, but they both thought that the length of the festivals and the excessive consumption of alcohol kept people from a life of active labor in a time when the country had to fight for its freedom and to renovate itself. He denied opposing the festivals on the basis of a negation of religion, although at the time such a view was prominent in government pronouncements.
In accordance with this policy, the modern national state endeavored to display popular cults in the context of preserving vestiges of a heroic Vietnamese past. Proper objects of veneration were spirit personalities who took an active social role in improving the lives of the people or defending the country. This selection tended to replace ritual (as religious act) with ceremony (a secular social concept). However, instead of replacing one with the other, authorities settled on a conflation of the two. David Martin has argued that a “perfunctory” Marxist secularization is insufficient to quell the appeal of religion and that religions are “architectural structures” in society that secularization cannot overcome. Furthermore, using China’s example he has demonstrated the similarity between Confucianism and Chinese Marxism, which made the replacement of the former by the latter a fairly easy matter. In Vietnam communist cadres initially rejected any cults but gradually stepped into the social role that had been occupied by Confucian mandarins in prior generations as enforcers of the boundary between superstitions and approved religious practices. However, the communists took this process a step further by inserting their revolutionary heroes into the frame of popular religion.

An example, as Christoph Giebel demonstrated, is the elevation of Mãc Thị Bưởi (1927–1951), a martyr of the resistance to French colonialism, to the status of “hero” by the National Assembly in 1955, which marked the beginning of her cult in her home district. State authorities subsidized the construction of her memorial sites, including a memorial tomb, a six-meter-tall statue, and a memorial house for families of the war dead (nha tinh nghia). In September 1995 it was decided to create a “cultic space” (khuc viet tho), allotting equal parts of it to the memorial house of Mãc Thị Bưởi and to a shrine of Mãc Đình Chi, a fourteenth-century literatus who was a traditional spirit-protector of the village and also an ancestor of Mãc Thị Bưởi. This conflation of a tutelary genie with a hero of the anti-French resistance deployed a new attitude toward village cultic practices by party authorities in which they sought to display their own revolutionary “religion” through coalescence with a stable cultic practice that had existed among the population for centuries.

Another example of such conflation of secular commemoration with religious practice is the “museum-shrine” of Tôn Đức Thắng (1888–1980), the second president of Vietnam, which has assumed the guise of a popular cult. In fact, this coalescence of the political and the secular, on the one hand, and of the apolitical and the religious, on the other, reverses the situation discussed in Chapter 1, where we saw that villages,
in an attempt to legitimize their genies, would have recourse to schemes such as supplying them with new hagiographies or incorporating them into the entourage of a legitimized genie. The examples of Mặc Thị Buội and Tôn Đức Thắng testify to a reverse process. Nowadays, it is the turn of the authorities to smuggle their heroes into the framework of the masses.

These and other examples of the deification of revolutionary and wartime heroes demonstrate that Vietnamese leaders understood that they were not efficient enough to subdue religious cults completely. Instead, they chose to use the cultic “form” by filling it with their own content, creating a new pantheon of deities consisting of their heroes, who not only serve their propaganda needs but at the same time enter the country’s religious terrain, secularizing and making politically correct the “content” of popular religion.

In the period between 1945 and the mid-1980s, festivals did not completely cease to exist. However, they were transformed to meet the requirements of the “new, modern” society and to conform with the cultural policy of the party and the state. They were no longer, as in prerevolutionary Vietnam, under the control of local villages and temples or in a close relation with the peasants, who comprised the vast majority of the population both before and after 1945. In the new environment, festivals were to be freed from all superstitious elements and to be planned on the relatively arid basis of “good character, simplicity, thrift, and joy” (tinh, gián, kiêm, lạc). Their function was to be educational, to cultivate traditions of patriotism, freedom, and love for socialism, as these were espoused by the party. The festivals were organized around historical personalities acknowledged or promoted by the party.

The 1975 “Instruction on Implementation of New Ways of Life in Weddings, Funerals, Death Anniversaries, and Festivals” is perhaps the clearest indication of the authorities’ determination to intervene in popular ritual practice following the reunification of the country. The instruction prescribes that “cultural offices should give concrete guidance with regard to the content of festivals to [ensure that they] have a good effect to cultivate patriotism, to mobilize labor and production competition, to build socialism with industry and thriftiness, to strive to fulfill civic duties; to strengthen physical activity, progressive literature and art, and healthy entertainment . . . to abolish superstitious and outdated practices in the festivals.” For the government, festivals were an arena in which their powers to forbid and to educate were given full play.
Passive, anonymous, or obscure deities who could not be portrayed with a social conscience were considered unworthy of attention. Consequently, to justify a religious festival, it was important to argue that the festival would play a significant role at least at the regional level, if not at the national level, of society.

Some festivals were abolished even if the deity fit the national discourse. This was the case, for example, with the festival dedicated to Lý Phục Man, a sixth-century hero, in his native Gia village of Hà Tây province. There the festival was not held from 1944 until it was reorganized in 1990. In my opinion, the reason for not holding this festival during those years was that, according to Nguyễn Văn Huyên’s description of 1937, the festival lasted for seventeen days.

However, even though worshiping popular deities was seriously limited while the communist government in the north followed strong anti-religious policies, devout Vietnamese continued to observe rituals of some cults privately. This had also been true in precolonial times despite numerous restrictions imposed by royal courts, albeit fewer than in communist times. Worshipers detached the ritual from any connection to a particular temple because what mattered to them was their relationship with the deity and not the locality. When the temples were closed or turned into warehouses, people remembered their gods and established altars in their houses. Some séances even continued under the veil of secrecy.

In 1986 Vietnam launched the policy of Đổi Mới (Renovation), which signaled the new, postsocialist period. Postsocialism, as Arif Dirlik defines it, is when socialism no longer functions as a “meta-theory of politics” because of its vernacularization into different national contexts and because of the necessity to respond to the demands of a capitalist world order. Postsocialism in Vietnam has been marked by major economic and political changes. Perhaps the most important was the deterioration of ties with the Soviet Union, which left Vietnam without its major source of economic support but gave the country much more freedom. Without Soviet support and with the socialist camp crumbling all over the world, Vietnam had to undertake major changes in the economic and political spheres to incorporate itself into the world order. Up to now, as in China, the shift to a market economy has by far outpaced political reforms, which have been put on the back burner. To mask the discrepancy between economic and political reforms, the state has chosen a policy of building nationalist sentiment. The political agenda has shifted drastically from the “creation of a new socialist person” to “pursuing national traditions.”
Ironically, as I have suggested, this approach resembles the French colonial attitude toward popular culture. In both cases, policy was designed to serve as proof of the regime’s concern for its subjects. In both cases we can see the juxtaposition of local cultural identity with the nonlocal. The juxtaposition is a consequence of one culture’s need for a different culture that can act as its alter ego. If the French found their alter ego in the colonized cultures, the postsocialist Vietnamese government, when opening up to the rest of the world, found itself defenseless against global influences that threatened to inundate the country and to question its claim to continue exercising power. Accordingly, the government tried to create a Vietnamese person rooted in his or her own history and traditions rather than in the dying world of international communist culture or the capitalist global culture that was beyond the government’s control.

The minister of the interior, Mai Chí Thọ, interviewed in 1989, argued that “due to ‘subjective voluntarism’ in the ‘ideological and cultural revolution’ (excessive zeal in building the ‘new socialist person’ and ‘new socialist morality’), the nation’s ‘fine cultural and moral traditions’ had been neglected.”46 To diagnose the illness of the society was already a great achievement, but how was the government to cure the disease? One of the approaches undertaken was to formulate new trends in the government’s attitude toward popular culture in general and cultic practices in particular.

The process started very slowly and incorporated conflicting views, as can be seen in an article by Dinh Gia Khánh of the Institute of Social Studies in Hanoi, who expressed the ambivalence of the authorities toward the revival of traditional festivals. According to him, government officials disapproved of festivals because they could not condone “squandering time and money” and because festivals are “connected with superstitions.” But he goes on to argue that, while these concerns are valid, there are positive features of the festivals that should not be disregarded. The festivals create ties between the past and the present, and between people of the same village as well as of different communities; they contribute to the development of the market economy and of tourism. He suggests that festivals should be supported, while a distinction should be made between superstitions and traditional culture.47

A discussion surfaced along similar lines regarding whether popular religion is an integral part of popular culture (văn hóa dân gian). Until the 1990s popular culture was limited to a conflation of popular literature (văn học dân gian) and popular art (nghé thuật dân gian), hence forming a
new term “popular literature and art” (văn nghệ dân gian). Gradually the meaning of the term “popular culture” was expanded. In 1983, for example, Phạm Huy Thông argued against the term as simply “popular literature and art.” He believed this term should be understood more comprehensively, including, in addition to literature and art, “other things of the same kind, similar to literature and art.” In 1985 Đặng Nghĩa Văn suggested that popular culture included art, literature, architecture, and theater, after which he added a string of dots, which do not directly exclude religion from the list, but nor do they suggest its inclusion. His omission of popular religion in the domain of culture is quite remarkable because Đặng Nghĩa Văn would become the founding director of the Institute of Religious Studies.

Not until the 1990s had popular religion become an important part of popular culture. One of the most prominent people to be credited for this change is Professor Ngô Đức Thịnh, who was until recently director of the Institute of Folklore in Hanoi (renamed Institute of Studies of Culture in 2004) and editor in chief of the journal Văn Hóa Dân Gian (Folklore). He has put much effort into promoting popular religion in general and the Cult of Holy Mothers and of Princess Liễu Hạnh in particular; this includes an element of popular religion that the state has considered to be the most superstitious: spirit possession. In 1991 Ngô Đức Thịnh wrote that although spirit possession had in the past been connected to superstitions and outdated practices, it nevertheless has cultural and artistic aspects worthy of study, for example, in the context of ritual songs. Presenting aspects of popular religious cults as markers of indigenous culture, he and some of his colleagues and students undertook the task of locating the entire phenomenon of popular religion within the sphere of popular culture, thus legitimizing it for the government and reopening the door for people to follow the cults. By doing this, they rendered a great service not only to the followers of popular cults but also to the preservation of Vietnamese cultural heritage. Their efforts can be likened to those of the scholars of the École in the first half of the twentieth century.

Kristen Endres, examining the relationship between the state and Vietnamese culture, has recently argued that the gradual change of party and state attitude toward festivals was initiated and stimulated by “the new generation of Vietnamese anthropologists and historians.” This is an astute suggestion, and I entirely agree with it, but I think the relationship between the government/party and the population was equally, if not
more, significant. During the wars it was easy to explain restrictions imposed on the population by the necessities of wartime mobilization. After the wars, even though strong tendencies in the ruling party favored retaining these restrictions, they were increasingly at odds with popular expectations, public opinion, and the priorities of more pragmatically oriented leaders in the government. More than simply an extension of scholarly interest, this was a major shift in the overall perspective, priorities, and policies of the party and the government made necessary by the successive military, political, and economic crises that nearly discredited national leadership in the 1980s.

According to a survey published in 1988, the interest of people in festivals did not decline or declined only slightly during the years of communist pressure. One of the questions in the survey was “In your opinion, is the organization of village festivals necessary? And what is the reason for that?” One hundred percent of respondents answered positively to the first part of this question, including those who do not take part in the festivals on a regular basis. The suggested reasons were to maintain and bring into play traditional norms of personal moral behavior, to preserve belief in the tutelary genie, and to maintain communal solidarity.54

Despite the interest expressed in the festivals, it soon became evident that there was a nascent problem: while many of the cults persisted among individuals, in the previous four decades many of them had become lost for group celebrations, some owing to the nature of the deity (mismatch with communist ideology), some owing to the nature of celebrations themselves (length and elements of the festival). And so it happened that, by the time the state and party loosened restrictions, traditions passed on from one generation to another for centuries and even recognized by the French colonial authorities had fallen into oblivion. The situation was remedied to an extent through queries of old people and with the assistance of scholars, who studied earlier accounts and traveled to villages to help revitalize Vietnamese culture.

In the 1990s the revival of temple festivals, aside from rebuilding or refurbishing temples, was the clearest indication of the change in government policy from prohibition to controlled toleration of popular religion. The government officially allowed temple festivals beginning in the early 1990s, initially on a trial basis. Even today the organizing committee of a festival must ask permission of the government to hold the festival. The committee must also submit a detailed plan of the festival activities.
Many festivals, approved by the government, are now advertised not only among Vietnamese, but also to attract foreigners. Numerous colorful brochures have been published describing the festivals and can be found in hotels, travel agencies, and on Vietnam Airlines flights.

The revival of popular religion has not been without conflicts and setbacks. In 1996 an article titled “Beliefs, Religion, Superstition” appeared in Tạp Chí Cộng Sản (Communist Review), the party’s main ideological journal. This article defines superstition as beliefs that rely neither on scientific foundation nor on common sense: “Superstition was born from arbitrary deductions or inductions concerning weird things not existing in reality.” Furthermore, the article affirms that superstition is inseparable from religion: “religion and superstition are intimately intertwined and influence one another.”

Nhan Dan (People), the official party newspaper, in 1999 launched a vociferous attack against superstitions returning to the country that are popular not only among the rural population, but also among government officials and intellectuals. It suggested launching a campaign against making offerings to the spirits and especially against consulting mediums and astrologers, since, according to the article, some people had died while using their services instead of seeking medical help. According to the article, “to eliminate superstitions we should castigate those who take advantage of religious freedom to engage in this type of practice.” Party guidelines still see the role of popular cults as “to build and defend the Fatherland.”

What has enabled popular religion to continue to exist in Vietnam? First and foremost is the people’s undying interest in it. Second is the mediation between the people and the government of numerous scholars, especially from the Institute of Folklore Studies, who, in attempting to preserve the culture of their country, are doing their best to “legalize” popular religion and to present it as a cultural marker of Vietnamese society. Third, the economic reforms that are gradually leading Vietnam away from a socialist economy toward a more capitalist and global orientation have opened up the prospect of using popular cults to attract both domestic and foreign tourists. The state is coming to terms with this because it reaps economic and political benefits. First, all the festivals are heavily taxed. Second, the festivals showcase the richness and uniqueness of Vietnamese culture for the benefit of both the Vietnamese and the growing number of foreign tourists, thereby legitimizing the state’s role as protector of Vietnamese culture.
VICISSITUDES OF DEVELOPMENT: LIÊU HẠNH’S CULT IN THE PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL PERIODS

The development of Liễu Hạnh’s cult has mirrored historical processes occurring in Vietnam. We do not know much about the persecution of her cult in particular in precolonial times, but creation of official hagiographies and such rituals as kẹo chuở (pulling letters) testify to the attempt of the state to appropriate, intellectualize, and control the cult. At the same time, the authorities lavished Liễu Hạnh with honorific titles to maintain the loyalty of the villages striving for the recognition of their deity.

Under French domination, Liễu Hạnh, as Heavenly Mother responding to the immediate needs of individuals rather than a heroine rooted in Vietnamese history or a member of the literati or of officialdom, was for some educated Vietnamese a superstition. Kiều Oanh Mẫu took it upon himself to mediate between her cult and the intelligentsia, turning Liễu Hạnh into the Heavenly Mother of the nation to respond not only to individual needs, but also to a collective identity.

It is evident that indigenous officials still considered Liễu Hạnh an important link in maintaining their relationship with the villages, sending soldiers and contributing money for the renovation of temples. Undoubtedly, they were influenced by the French colonial administration, trying to apply both the stick and the carrot to control the population. In 1902 Mr. Lebulle, Resident of France in Hải Dương, addressed the Resident Superior of Tonkin to obtain certificates with honorific titles for the spirits worshiped in the province: “The population see extreme importance in this favor, which was not granted during [Empress] Thiệu Trị’s visit to Tonkin. It would be perhaps politically [wise] on our part to seize the occasion of big celebrations of Hanoi to get this custom revived.” However, the craved certificates, according to Resident Lebulle, were to be granted only to the villages that demonstrated “proof of their loyalty and their submission to our laws.”

Granting titles seemed to be a significant component in establishing and maintaining ties between the villages and authorities, as we see from the titles granted by different emperors to Liễu Hạnh and also from correspondence between the provincial and state authorities on the occasion of the accession to the throne of an emperor. Each new emperor could affirm his goodwill by granting new or additional titles to the spirits. Some temples, as, for example, the main temples in Vũ Bàn district of Nam Định province, had dozens of honorific titles con-
ferred on Liễu Hạnh, recognizing her as the spirit of the highest rank and distinguishing her with such titles as Dược Tổ Tiên Đinh Hạnh Tử Phương Phi Quyền Cai (Indra of Fairy Court with Accomplished Beauty and Fragrance of Flowers Ordained with Authority). This title was conferred upon the princess in the Cảnh Hưng reign period (1740–1768).

However, other temples had yet to apply for the first honorific title in the twentieth century. For example, in 1902, officials of Đồng Môn Phớ hamlet of Yên Thông canton, Yên Khánh district, Ninh Bình province, requested from the Ministry of Rites a royal certificate for Liễu Hạnh: “This spirit, very powerful in supplication for rain, has not yet been granted a royal certificate [with a honorific title].”60 In 1938 officials of Phùng Công village, Bổng Hải canton, of Ninh Bình province, reported that Liễu Hạnh, a spirit-protector of their place, had not received any honorific titles yet, as “they had been worshiping her for only a hundred years.”61

Unlike indigenous rulers and literati, the French colonial authorities appear to have been unconcerned about the extravagance and waste of festivals. They were not repelled by elements ingrained in the cult and festivals, such as spirit possession, that were considered superstitious by the Vietnamese authorities and elite. Alfred Meynard’s 1928 description of Liễu Hạnh’s annual festival at Phổ Cát, Thanh Hoa, celebrates the role of women in general and that of mediums in particular. He admonishes his readers to consider this and similar cults with all their rituals “with sympathy and not with condescension.”62

Although the authorities did not consider Liễu Hạnh’s cult to be a threat, her annual festivals and other observances were still a point of concern for them; festivals attended by large numbers of people could become a stage for disseminating ideas of nationalism and, later, communism. For example, in 1915, a Vietnamese security officer informed the French Resident of Ninh Bình province that the Liễu Hạnh festival took place without incident and that “this festival goes as it did in previous years without anything extraordinary, there is no movement in the political direction, but I placed two emissaries there and in the surroundings to see whether there will be anything important to report.”63

Liễu Hạnh’s cult played an important role in the development of tourism in the colonial period. In 1938 the Central Office of Indochinese Tourism issued a list of festivals of potential interest to tourists. Among thirty-four festivals mentioned, there are two entries for festivals devoted to Liễu Hạnh. These are described as attracting “thousands of pilgrims in
grand processions.” The next year, three places organizing festivals for Lê Hạnh were listed as potential tourist attractions.64

By that time the number of places connected with Lê Hạnh had multiplied. From the first two temples, in Văn Cát and Tiên Hương, which are the most prominent sites of the Phú Đây temple complex in Vũ Bàn district, of Nam Định province, mentioned in Chapter 2, during precolonial and colonial times Lê Hạnh’s cult spread all over the north. She became worshiped in hundreds of temples, sometimes as the main patron of the temple, sometimes as one of several deities.

Two sites for the worship of Lê Hạnh achieved high prominence: Phổ Cát and Đền Sông in Thanh Hoá province, the next province south of Nam Định province. Besides these two large temples, Thanh Hóa province boasts many others dedicated to Princess Lê Hạnh. Sometimes, Lê Hạnh is even referred to as “a goddess from Thanh Hóa.”65 We can trace the “Thanh Hóa origins” of the princess to the appropriation of the cult by the Lê dynasty and the Trịnh lords, as has been discussed in Chapter 3. Thanh Hóa was the home province of these two clans, and Phổ Cát is located near the headquarters of the Lê-Trịnh military forces during the wars with the Mạc in the sixteenth century.66 On a strategic route between this headquarters and the Mạc territories to the north, it was a key military and economic center during the years that Lê Hạnh’s cult likely began. The prominence of Thanh Hóa found its way into Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story, where Lê Hạnh is described manifesting her divinity and achieving recognition of her divine status at Phổ Cát, thus completing her several transformations. According to an inscription in Văn Cát, apparently referring to Lê Hạnh’s earthly life:

\[ \begin{align*}
  \text{Văn Cát} & \quad \text{thị thọy}, \\
  \text{Phổ Cát} & \quad \text{thị chung}.
\end{align*} \]

Văn Cát is the beginning, Phổ Cát is the end.

Đền Sông commemorates the famous battle of Sùng Sơn discussed in Chapter 3, when Lê Hạnh was “tamed” by Buddhist magicians. Đền Sông is located at Sùng Sơn not far from Phổ Cát, in Bình Sơn district of Thanh Hóa province, on the main route between Hanoi and the southern provinces. According to an inscription from the beginning of the nineteenth century, this temple appeared in 1652. Another source settles on
a later period, the reign of King Lê Hiền Tông (1740–1786). It is evident that Đền Sông was a prominent center for the worship of Liệu Hạnh during the colonial era. It was rebuilt and expanded in the 1930s. At that time, a box with a hagiography of Liệu Hạnh was found, translated, and published by Mr. Lagrèze, the French Resident in Thanh Hóa province, as discussed in Chapter 2. The inscription in French at Đền Sông celebrates the renovation of the temple in the 1940s. This inscription, now hardly legible, praises this French official for his virtues demonstrated not only in successfully carrying out his administrative duty, but also in taking care of religious matters to the satisfaction of all the inhabitants of the province, for example, by restoring the temple at Sùng Sơn. It is notable that, according to the inscription, the temple was restored not only to commemorate the appearance of Liệu Hạnh at Sùng Sơn, but also to draw visitors to “one of the most picturesque sites in the province attracting each year numerous visitors.” In French times Đền Sông rivaled Phú Dây as the center of the cult. For instance, reporting Liệu Hạnh as their deity to the École, the community of Dòng Thuần Street in Hải Dương City, Hải Dương province, noted that Liệu Hạnh’s hagiography (sự tích) was kept in Đền Sông. Phú Dây, despite its much closer proximity to Hải Dương, was not mentioned. Not only are the temples of Phú Dây and Đền Sông mentioned as rivals, but the festivals in the two places are also compared, as, for example, in a folk song (ca đao) that contains the following lines:

Nhất vui là hội Phú Dây
Vui là vui vậy, không Tây Sơn.

Most fun is the festival in Phú Dây,
So fun is fun, but not a match for Sùng [Sùng] Sơn.

However, the Văn Cát and Tiến Hương temples of Phú Dây have retained their position as main cultic centers. The former, despite being considered Liệu Hạnh’s birthplace, lost much of its glory to the latter in the rivalry between the two temples, which is a reflection of local administrative history. The two modern hamlets of Tiến Hương and Văn Cát were, until the nineteenth century, parts of one hamlet called Văn Cát of An Thái village, Thiên Bàn district, which later was renamed Vũ Bàn district. From the inscription in Văn Cát temple, we know that it was expanded in the Cảnh Thịnh reign period of Tây Sơn rule (1793–1802),
perhaps through the united efforts of the entire population. However, in 1806 a conflict among the villagers led to the breakup of this hamlet into Vạn Cát and Tiên Hương. An argument arose about which temple, and consequently which hamlet, held supremacy for Liêu Hạnh’s cult. Unfortunately for Vạn Cát temple, in the time of the emperor Tự Đức (1848–1883), the population of Vạn Cát hamlet declined to the extent that the **kêó chụp** ceremony of youths performing Hán characters, one of the key elements of the annual festival, could no longer be maintained there and had to be shifted from the temple in Vạn Cát to the temple in Tiên Hương. The Vạn Cát temple did try to regain its position. Around the same time, in 1879, and then later during the Thành Tái reign period (1889–1907), the temple was expanded and renovated, and in 1900 provincial authorities ordered soldiers to assist the people of Vạn Cát in restoring and expanding the temple in their hamlet. Despite all these efforts, Vạn Cát’s counterpart in Tiên Hương hamlet eventually prevailed.

Consequently, the designation of Phù Chính, or “Main Temple,” together with the right to organize the **kêó chụp** ceremony shifted from the temple in Vạn Cát to the temple in Tiên Hương. One of the inscriptions there dated 1838 commemorates bequests of land and money to the temple. Several others dated 1914 record contributions made to repair Tiên Hương temple, including contributions from the governors of the provinces of Nam Định, Nghệ An, Bắc Ninh, Ninh Bình, Hà Nam, and Thái Bình as well as other officials. Soldiers were sent to assist in the renovation as well. An inscription presented by the district chief of Vũ Bản in 1917 says: ***Hựu Tiên Tặc Đạnh*** (If there is a fairy, there will be fame). The fairy had indeed brought fame to Tiên Hương and Vạn Cát hamlets. Perhaps it was to reconcile the bitter rivals for the princess that a new entity appeared called Phủ Dầy. It united both temples and other shrines in the area under one roof. I have not seen any documentary mention of the name “Phủ Dầy” before the middle of the nineteenth century, when the princess would occasionally be referred to as Mother of Phủ Dầy. Neither the date of its appearance nor the composition of the complex at that time is known to us, but in the nineteenth century it became a signifier of Liêu Hạnh’s cult. Other hamlets had also expanded their temples.

Modern Phủ Dầy complex incorporates dozens of temples and shrines to a number of deities: two mountain spirits, Tả Sơn (“left-side mountain”) and Hữu Sơn (“right-side mountain”); Emperor Lý Bí (Lý Nam Đế), a sixth-century hero; and several others. But the central figure of the divine circle and the raison d’être of the complex is Princess or Mother
Liễu Hạnh. In addition to the two aforementioned temples, the complex includes several lesser shrines and Liễu Hạnh’s mausoleum.

The mausoleum is located between Văn Cát and Tiên Hương but now officially belongs to the latter (perhaps adding to the popularity of the Tiên Hương site). The mausoleum, built in 1938, is a stone construction consisting of several walls in rows surrounding Liễu Hạnh’s tomb, shaped as the eight diagrams.\(^75\) The tomb can hardly contain relics of Liễu Hạnh, at least if the story of her ascension back to heaven is to be taken seriously. It might conceivably have been a focus for the story of how her earthly family grieved at her untimely death and a place where those who claim her as an ancestress could maintain her cult. In fact, it does not appear to have these functions. Built hundreds of years after Liễu Hạnh’s deification, the mausoleum constitutes merely a part of the whole complex of temples and shrines surrounding it.

Some of the inscriptions are signed by the followers of Đạo Chi religious congregation from Hue, to whom Bùi Văn Tam, one of the scholars writing extensively on Liễu Hạnh, ascribes the initiative for the construction of the mausoleum.\(^76\) Other sources connect it to Emperor Bảo Đại and his wife giving thanks that their prayers for an heir were answered.\(^77\)

An inscription on the eastern gate of the mausoleum reads:

\[
\text{Từ ái nhất tâm nhân như núi}
\text{Hiếu trinh ngân thơ nũ ănh phong.}
\]

People long for a heart of love and compassion,
The eternal fame of the female hero of filial piety and chastity.

Another inscription upholds the same image in the following way:

\[
\text{Sinh báu suối la phên}
\text{Trình hiếu gắn giao truyền quân Bắc}
\text{Tình thần nầm rần lê}
\text{Anh linh bồng gió dưỡng thành Nam.}
\]

Three times incarnated as a human,
An example of chastity and filial piety in the North;
Spiritual power for some five hundred years,
A shining spirit illuminating the South.
These lines are in a mode of generic clichés we might expect from the Hue court in the 1930s, applying Buddhist and Confucian moral values (chastity and filial piety) to a potentially chaotic female deity and emphasizing the unity of the country (from north to south) at a time when a colonial regime had divided Vietnam into three separate jurisdictions.

VICTISSITUDES OF DEVELOPMENT: LIÊU HẠNH’S CULT IN THE SOCIALIST AND RENOVATION PERIODS

The August Revolution and ensuing wars and the unification of the country significantly changed the palette of Vietnamese religious life, especially in the North. According to an official of the Nam Định provincial people’s committee who worked in the Department of Culture for many years, temples were kept as historical monuments, not as places of worship. During the American War, ostensibly to avoid concentrations of people that would attract the U.S. Air Force, the Liêu Hạnh complex at Phú Dãy was forbidden to stage any activity. Spirit possession also fell under the category of outdated customs. In the somewhat contradictory view of the same official, spirit possession arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was not based on any real belief; rather, it was simply a way to remember historical personages, and it became a corrupt and uncontrolled waste of money for the people. He said that belief in Mothers, a form of venerating the maternal source of life, was local and authentic, while everything else, including the expensive rituals of spirit possession, was imported from outside and therefore not authentic. The official was trying without much success to reconcile in his own mind the competing interests of the state and local cults.

In 1975 the administrative committee of Kim Thái commune of Nam Định province reported the significance of the cult of Liêu Hạnh as not simply a local phenomenon, but one that drew interest from several provinces comprising most of the northern part of the country: “Previously Phú Dãy had a broad influence all over the country. Presently, during the festival or market days at Phú Dãy, each year people from the provinces of Hải Phòng, Hà Nội, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Hà Đông, Hà Nam, Ninh Bình, Thanh Hóa, and so on, also come here [to participate in] the ceremonies and festival in big numbers.”

The importance of this affirmation is apparent when we consider a
regulation issued on March 18, 1975, just before the final victory in the South, that states: "Village festivals that have not already been organized for a long time may not be revived." Nevertheless, this regulation specifically and disapprovingly mentions Phú.Day: "Festivals bearing a superstitious character, as the one in Phú.Day . . . should be abolished." The regulation is accompanied by an exhortation to organize festivals connected to national history and national heroes, such as Hùng Vương, the Trưng sisters, and Trần Hưng Đạo, and thus bearing educational value.80

Even though Liên Hành’s festival was abolished, at the same time a decree was issued granting state protection to Phú.Day as an object of cultural value.81 The decree considered tourism an antidote to superstition: "On the basis of architectural and sculptural value, of the famous landscape as well as of the sphere of influence of this vestige, we suggest that the Ministry of Culture classify the system of Phú.Day as a valuable vestige under the protection of the state. We consider it to be an architectural and picturesque vestige of Nam Đinh. It should be protected to serve the masses by transforming superstitious forms into tourist attractions."82 The protection, however, was to remain only on paper, as no actions were implemented on the ground. Phú.Day complex fell into decay owing to “natural and historical changes” (những biến động của thiên niên và lịch sử).83

Văn Cát temple was destroyed during the First Indochina War (1946–1954). In 1959 local people restored a small part of it, but until the beginning of the 1990s, it was hardly more than a shack. Tiên Hương temple was not destroyed, but it was nevertheless in extremely poor condition after the years of revolution and war, even after being recognized by the state in 1975 as a National Site of Historical and Cultural Significance (Di Tích Lịch Sử-Ngữ Thự). It shared the fate of the temple at Sùng Sơn, destroyed in 1972, and Phú Cát temple and numerous other religious sites that were destroyed, turned into warehouses, or left unattended to the mercy of nature.

The shrinking number of temples reflected the shrinking public activity of the followers of popular religious cults. But it did not eliminate such activity completely. Sometimes people visited the temples even if they were closed: in 1983, Quân Đội Nhân Dân, the official organ of the People’s Army, reported that thousands of people came to Phú.Day to worship Princess Liên Hành and denounced the observances as "smacking of superstition."84
The new currents of the Đổi Mới period brought latent spiritual needs and their manifestations to the surface. One of the most noticeable changes has been construction, reconstruction, or renovation of temples. It is no exaggeration to say that Phủ Dầy experienced a rebirth in the 1990s. This impressive feat has been achieved solely by the efforts of volunteers and donations from the cult’s followers and without any subsidies from the state. One can only admire the efforts of local people in recent years to develop both sites. Văn Cát temple still plays a somewhat secondary role to the temple in Tiên Hương, which has now become the main center of Liễu Hạnh’s worship. The Tiên Hương temple is more spacious, better attended, and even has a guest house where visitors, of whom I was one, can enjoy the warm hospitality of the guardian of the temple, Mr. Trần Việt Đức, and his family. According to him, Tiên Hương temple supersedes the Văn Cát temple because the most important place for a woman was considered to be where she resided with her husband. However, this might not be the most important factor in the advancement of the Tiên Hương temple. The current situation should also be attributed to the different policies of the guardians of the two temples. Mr. Trần Việt Đức strongly supports efforts to promote and develop the temple’s festivals and to attract people to the temple from afar. This effort will result in more donations and greater financial resources, which will enable the restoration of existing shrines and temples as well as the further development of the complex, and such improvements in turn will attract more people and more donations.

In contrast, those in charge of the Văn Cát temple, Mrs. Trần Thị Hạo and her husband, do not favor such activities, which in their view tend to remove control of the temples and the festivals from the hands of local people. They stand for what they call “restoring the places of worshipping the Mother following exactly what was left by our forefathers” (Trả lại những nơi thờ diệt Mẫu theo đúng di tích cua ông cha đã lại) and do not favor any expansion of facilities or activities. They argue that expansion commercializes religious activity, destroying its spiritual aspect. When I asked about the criteria for ascertaining the correct observances, they told me that everything should be done as people remember it from the past, without any further specification as to whose memories or which ones had priority.

The resurgence of the Mothers’ worship has resulted in downgrading or obliterating some of the other personalities previously worshiped in the
territory of the Phú Đài complex, as for example has happened with Lý Nam Đế, who proclaimed himself Emperor of Nam Việt in 544.87

The temples of Đền Sông and Phú Cát are bouncing back to their former glory and status, if more slowly than Phú Đài. Their slower renaissance is attributable to their more remote location from a provincial center well served by public transportation and the quality of the roads, factors that perhaps did not play such a significant role before the present time. The entrepreneurial spirit and skills of Mr. Trần Việt Đức have not found a match in either of these temples. But both temples are well attended, with their popularity constantly growing.

During the renovation period another temple, Phú Tây Hồ (West Lake Palace) in Hanoi, emerged to develop almost instantly into a beautiful complex eclipsing the fame and position of Đền Sông and Phú Cát. Phú Tây Hồ is located on the northern shore of West Lake, northwest of the city center. When I inquired about the origin of the temple, one of the followers of Liễu Hạnh’s cult in Hanoi, an old man in his eighties, told me with great conviction that the temple had been in existence since the sixteenth century. My question about who built it seemed irrelevant. The man explained that the temple was not a product of human will, adding that no one can claim merit for building it, for it simply appeared one morning and has been there ever since. A more intellectualized version associates the construction of the temple with the story in Đoàn Thị Diễm’s account of Liễu Hạnh’s encounter with Phùng Khắc Khoan and his two erudite friends on the shore of West Lake and dates it to 1598,88 which coincides with the time of Liễu Hạnh’s death as narrated by Đoàn Thị Diễm. Đoàn Thị Diễm’s story may in fact be the source of this “legend.” In the 1930s, when the École française d’Extreˆme-Orient conducted its survey of the deities worshiped in different localities, they ominously reported not having any written hagiography or stelae providing information on Liễu Hạnh.89 According to some materials, a shrine, not a temple, existed on this site until it was destroyed in 1947 during the French war.90 The present temple was built on the site in 1989.

These days, many come to the temple for reasons unrelated to religious belief. A group of students told me: “We come here because it’s a very quiet and beautiful place. We find solace here from the bustle of the city. It also has a spiritual atmosphere. We don’t know about whether Liễu Hạnh was a real person or not, we don’t know why she has become a goddess, but we do feel better after we come here. Sometimes we do not even enter the temple. It’s enough just to walk around it.”
Other visitors have more complicated, conflicted feelings about the temple. I approached one couple resting in the temple yard. The husband was a military officer and a Communist Party member. His wife was an office secretary and was pregnant. She hardly spoke to me, but her husband agreed to answer my questions. “I never believed in all these deities. Never! But for a long time we could not have a child. My wife started to attend temples where Mothers (Mẫu) were worshiped. I considered it a superstition and was strongly against it; believe me, we had several fights about it. But you know, she did conceive. I started to go to the temple with her, and now we go together. Something has changed in my view. No, I still would not admit to my colleagues that I go to these temples, but maybe some day when more people understand these powers, I will be able to share my feelings openly.”

A Ph.D. student who studies folk religion, after we had many academic discussions, admitted that she not only studies religion, but also believes in several deities, particularly Liễu Hạnh. “Each time before I have an especially difficult exam,” she said, “I go to her temple and ask her for assistance. It helps! It is so nice that now we can go to these temples openly, because, in fact, I always believed, since my mother worshiped her too. But, before, we could not go to the temples. Most of my friends at the university would laugh at me, they think it’s so silly!”

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a turning point in the history of the temple. They witnessed the construction of the present temple and the development of annual festival activities. With the economic reforms of that time, people began to have more money, and donations to the temple increased dramatically. For example, in 1993 people gave around 40 million dong (approximately US$3,000), but in 1994 contributions increased almost ten times, and in 1995 they reached 450 million dong (approximately US$35,000). The flourishing of Phú Tây Hồ is partly a factor of its location in Hanoi, easily accessible to shopkeepers and market sellers in the city who have benefited from the reforms and who are an important source of donations. It is also a pleasant, highly visible site where local culture can be showcased by a government seeking to display its benevolence to the world.

While Liễu Hạnh’s temples are officially recognized by the state, the state does not provide a subsidy to them or a salary to those who work there. In a response to my inquiry at the Ministry of Culture, I was told that these are successful temples that can exist on donations and do not need state funds. Indeed the temples are supposed to pay taxes to the
state. I obtained a glimpse into some of the financial arrangements at the Văn Cát temple, where the keepers of the temple as well as all other staff are supported from the temple’s income through private donations. This temple spent 40 million dong (US$4,000) to cover expenses during one festival period and 60 million dong (US$6,000) during the time that taxes were due to the village council.

In Phủ Dầy the festivals were officially resumed in 1995. For three years, from 1995 to 1997, they were organized on a trial basis (thụ nghĩa). In 1998 the people’s council of Vũ Bản district concluded that during the three years the festivals “met the requirements and [complied with] the content of the festival’s program,” which meant the festivals could continue on a permanent annual schedule.93

I attended the Phủ Dầy festival in 2001. When we left the people’s committee building, we were escorted to the center of the festivities. I was overwhelmed by the number of people who came to participate in the festival and by the profusion of colors. The combination of communist-style officials and the carnival-like celebration of a religious cult seemed surreal. After recovering from my shock, I pondered: wasn’t it just the usual state-staged socialist display simultaneously aimed at two goals, to provide people with “entertainment” and to demonstrate to the same people, and definitely to foreigners, the richness of a state-approved cultural inheritance? But the closer I looked, the clearer it was that the issues were more complicated. As much as I admired the beauty of the ceremonies, I could not escape the feeling that not only was the festival interesting and important for us, the scholars who came, but also that we were important to the festivals. We were always placed at the center of the celebration and carefully attended: whether observing the ceremonies in the temples, the kẹo chiê game, or spirit possession, we would always be given the best, and often separate, seating, allowing us conveniently to see everything and to be seen in turn.

A Vietnamese television crew approached me for an interview, seeking my opinion concerning whether I saw in the festival a superstition or a tradition. I willingly supported the festival’s traditional character and pondered why they wanted to hear my opinion on the issue. Was this Vietnamese hospitality, or was there genuine interest in seeking and demonstrating the approbation of foreign experts for the government’s policy of supporting the revival of popular religious traditions? In fact, we foreigners were not the only ones given priority as guests of honor. I noticed that Vietnamese scholars and officials from Hanoi were being given simi-
lar attention. At one point I found myself separated from the scholars with whom I had come to Phú Đài and was invited by a different group, Vietnamese this time, to join them, which I did. I was surprised to find in this group the president of the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam, Professor Nguyễn Duy Quý, with whom I rapidly and easily found common ground as he, like myself, had been educated in the Soviet Union. Together we continued our visit of the temples and then went to a séance (lên động) organized mainly for our group, a group of Vietnamese officials, and some other invited guests.

The person who performed the séance was the daughter of the Tiên Hương temple’s guardian. The séance seemed to be less an incarnation than an excellent theatrical performance incorporating music, dance, songs, changing of costumes, and dispensing lavish gifts to the spectators. The presence of officials from Hanoi and of foreign scholars was a testimony to its traditional, cultural character and that it was not merely an outdated custom. Since séances along with many popular festivals had been forbidden in Vietnam for a long time, I was curious to hear the opinion of the academy president about what we observed. He admitted that this was his first time attending such a festival and that he was the highest official who had ever done so. He alluded to the beauty of popular festivals, the importance of their revival, the necessity to demonstrate the high position of women in Vietnamese culture, and a desire to revive old traditions.

Asked about the séance, on the one hand, he praised it as an aesthetic, theatrical experience, in which form it should be supported, maintained, and even taken as cause for pride; on the other hand, a séance conducted to attempt a cure of illness or to resolve some other personal issue should still be condemned as superstition. This was the first official explanation of the difference between superstition and tradition that I heard in direct conversation. Many other officials with whom I later talked made similar distinctions. However, for the actual “performer,” was the séance theater or divine incarnation? The séance in Phú Đài was neither the first nor the last that I attended. Most of those I spoke to who conducted séances believed in what they were doing not as a performance but as a way to solve problems, be they health, business, or family issues.

Mediumship for the Mothers’ pantheon as practiced in modern times does not require professional mediums. On the contrary, any person interested in making contact with the spirits of the pantheon to solve family, business, or health problems is supposed to perform the séance herself
or himself. According to a Vietnamese scholar writing during the colonial era, “[Nowadays], anyone who wants can proclaim herself or himself a bà đồng (female medium) or ông đồng (male medium).”\textsuperscript{94} As noted in Chapter 2, the potentially “democratic,” “wild,” or “uncontrolled” potential of mediumship without any designated clergy or hierarchy of authority makes state officials eager to enmesh it within an aesthetic structure of performance.

We also witnessed another traditional element of the celebration, kéo chữ (‘‘pulling letters’’), which allegedly originated in the sixteenth century. Young people from the villages in the district came running in lines toward the Tiền Hương temple, bearing brightly decorated bamboo poles. When they reached the front of the temple, they arranged themselves into a phrase praising Princess Liêu Hạnh: Mẫu Nghĩa Thiên Hạ (Mother Sets the Example for the World). After the characters were arranged, one of the elders acquainted with Chinese characters went to check the precision and the beauty of the arrangement. His satisfaction was an indication of success for the young people. It is not known what drew young people before the revolution to participate in the kéo chữ ceremony, but now the participants say that they are paid. This appears to be a celebration of education, classical literacy, and the authority of teachers, all themes that nourish discipline and obedience to elders.

The cult of Liêu Hạnh has been enjoying a period of rejuvenation. From a superstitious survival of feudalism, it has been elevated to become a representative of indigenous culture. Liêu Hạnh has gained a firm place in Vietnamese scholarship. Within the last decade, dozens of books have been published about her cult, both for itself and in conjunction with other female cults. They can be found in urban bookstores, but they are mostly available at the temples. Most of these books have been published in five hundred to two thousand copies; altogether these editions number tens of thousands of copies. Who reads them? As I have mentioned, very few people, scholars aside, have any idea about, let alone interest in, the “personality” or historicity of Liêu Hạnh. So why are these books written? I believe a strong implicit intention behind these books is to intellectualize Liêu Hạnh the deity into Liêu Hạnh the icon of national culture, transforming a possibly superstitious cult into a national tradition. The process of transformation has begun, for I saw many people buying these books, presumably to satisfy their curiosity about Liêu Hạnh. How these books might change the popular perception of the cult and how extensive the circle of readers of these books will become remains to be seen. But it
is clear that the “superstitious” character of Liễu Hạnh’s cult is receding eventually to be forgotten or forgiven. Liễu Hạnh has even been listed among the most prominent figures of Vietnamese history and culture. For example, an article discussing the contribution of Vũ Ngọc Khánh to folklore studies states that he evaluated in a comparable manner personalities such as Nguyễn Du, nineteenth-century poet and the author of the Vietnamese classic Kinh Văn Kiều; Nguyễn Công Trứ, a nineteenth-century official and poet; Nguyễn Trai, a fifteenth-century statesman and poet; Tự Đức, a nineteenth-century emperor; and Princess Liễu Hạnh. It is pointed out that in Vũ Ngọc Khánh’s books personalities such as Nguyễn Công Trứ, Nguyễn Trai, Tự Đức, and Liễu Hạnh are portrayed not as historical personalities but as common people with characteristics pertaining to popular culture. Did the princess ever dream of sharing the same scholarly discourse with the most celebrated Vietnamese authors and even an emperor?

Liễu Hạnh’s festival is a major tourist attraction, publicized not only for Vietnamese but also for foreigners. I found dozens of English-language websites advertising it. Liễu Hạnh herself has transcended national borders. She was displayed as an example of Vietnam’s distinctive culture in the exhibition “Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit” at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 2003, organized in cooperation with the Museum of Ethnography in Hanoi.

As we have seen, this is not a new phenomenon in the history of the various transformations in the cult of Liễu Hạnh over the generations. During a critical time of change, as Vietnamese intellectuals struggled to orient themselves to the reality of the French colonial regime, in the era that produced the remarkable work on Liễu Hạnh by Kiều Oanh Mẫu discussed in Chapter 4, quite a number of apocryphal writings (giảng bút) attributed to Liễu Hạnh were published in Hán and Nôm. These writings exposed a typical effort of that time to strengthen a vision of Vietnamese statehood with Confucian morality; they are portrayed as Liễu Hạnh’s admonitions to women advocating virtuous behavior, the three submissions, and traditional values. These writings attributed to Liễu Hạnh were in no way unique. Many similar manuscripts appeared at the same time containing writings attributed to numerous other deities, such as the Trăng sisters, Trần Hưng Đạo, and Cao Sơn.

Why in recent years has Liễu Hạnh (as well as many other popular cults) emerged from suppression to represent the nation? Perhaps one way to answer this question is by considering nostalgia. There is the nostalgia
of people who follow the cult themselves or retain a memory of their parents’ having done so. There is also the nostalgia of those who yearn for something of their own that is not necessarily part of the “commonality” of the nation or of internationalism. These partake of the nostalgia of personal feeling. But there is also nostalgia of ideology. By this I refer to the intentions driving the authorities to allow, if not to bolster, the revival of cultic activities. This nostalgia is of a different kind: nostalgia for smooth relations with the people of their own country and with the outside world, a nostalgia for something that never existed.97

Today Vietnam is passing through another time of change, when educated people are co-opting and molding popular culture as they simultaneously seek in it the security of a stable national identity. Many writings have recently been translated and published in the vernacular alphabet, placing particular stress on nationalist themes to portray the words of “Vietnamese” deities as admonitions to remain true to an approved version of national culture. For example, in a recent publication, Liễu Hạnh associates herself with famous women of antiquity portrayed as leaders of national liberation movements and also as paragons of female virtues; she speaks the following lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
Chuyện bà Trưng xưa trái & \\
Gướng chi Trữ sau xưa & \\
Hỏi em đã hay chưa & \\
Biển trưng trình lĩnh lạy, & \\
Tiếng anh tiếng lĩnh lạy. & \\
\end{align*}
\]

The story of Lady Trưng in former times,
The later example of Sister Trữ in the past;
Ask me whether or not I yet know
Their vast resounding loyalty and chastity,
Their resounding heroic fame.98

Lady Trưng and Sister Trữ are positioned in Vietnamese historiography as heroines who led uprisings against foreign oppressors. Here we have another example of an empty form available to convey whatever message is thought by intellectuals to be needed for a particular time.

Just as the French in their day promoted festivals in part as evidence of the normalization of their power, the Vietnamese national state follows
a similar policy today. The cults were never a product of society as defined by the ruling party. Rather they were a challenge and an alternative to the ideology that the regime endeavored to impose on the people. To meet this challenge, communist rulers, unable to eradicate the cults, have tried to use them, as they did other elements of what was viewed as traditional culture, for their own goals. In prerevolutionary Vietnam village guardian spirits were selected by local communities themselves, which sought official recognition of their local practices. After the revolution, the party and the government made decisions about what personalities could be venerated. To some extent this is similar to the way the royal court in earlier times kept a register of approved local spirits and arranged them in a hierarchy, promoting and demoting the spirits in response to what was perceived as the loyalty or the usefulness of the communities that worshiped them.

The cults of Liễu Hạnh and others continue to exist because of the compromises that orthodox state culture must make with popular religious culture. Orthodox culture, the culture of the rulers, would eradicate popular religious culture if it could do so. Thwarted, it endeavors to absorb popular culture into academic epistemological fields such as philology, history, and archeology, while directing a barrage of ridicule toward superstition.99

Spokesmen for the party still dream of the moment when popular culture has become a glove on the party’s hand. In 1991 Phan Đăng Nhât, a scholar, wrote that “revolutionary popular culture” hardly differs from “traditional popular culture,” for “it also includes ideology, psychology, and the hopes of the people, reflects their life, uses popular means of creation and transmission. Authors are collective, and works have numerous variations. Even though initially the creators are revolutionary cadres or leaders, they should remain anonymous . . . to guarantee secrecy and that the work would be received by people as their own genuine production, later to be modified, preserved, and passed down in an orthodox way.”100

Today Liễu Hạnh is the object of a normalizing process, making her an official icon of Vietnamese national culture.

To my surprise and delight, the princess’ cult also has a personal dimension in its continuity. Mr. Trần Lê Văn, a retired doctor who now resides with his wife in Nam Định city, is said to be a descendant of Liễu Hạnh in the sixteenth generation. I was thrilled to hear of someone who claimed to be related to the princess and invested great effort to locate Dr.
Trần Lê Văn. His father, who was the keeper of a temple in Phú Đày before the communist takeover of the North, moved to Saigon in 1954. Dr. Trần Lê Văn keeps a number of documents about Liễu Hạnh, including a genealogy of the Lê and Trần families, Gia Phả Đồng Họ Trần Lê, apparently written in the second half of the nineteenth century, which he kindly shared with me.

According to this genealogy, Liễu Hạnh was born in 1556 and died in 1577. She had a brother and did not have children. The document does not mention her second marriage in Nghệ An province as, for example, Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story does. We talked about the princess and Dr. Trần Lê Văn’s understanding and perception of the cult. He did not provide me with a definite answer regarding whether he himself believes in Liễu Hạnh. He was much more inclined to talk about the cult in general, and he appears to consider himself a keeper of the “form” of the cult rather than its “content.” The question that puzzled me was how one can be Liễu Hạnh’s descendant if she did not have any children. However, this did not puzzle Dr. Trần Lê Văn, who explained to me that this was a question of “faith and tradition” (tin ngưỡng và truyền thống). He and his wife treasure this tradition.

The relationship between the state and popular religious cults is complex. There are positive and negative aspects for each side. For the state, the cults present a threat of subversion and at the same time a point of entry into popular sentiment. For the devotees of the cults, the state is a policing presence with the power to enforce prohibition while at the same time a source of support and legitimization enabling a particular cult to develop. The modern government first attempted to eradicate spirit cults as dangerous “superstition” but, failing itself to meet the needs satisfied by these cults, was constrained to acknowledge them while endeavoring to control them for its own purposes.

In prerevolutionary Vietnam, village guardian spirits were selected by local communities themselves, which sought official recognition of their local practices. After the revolution, the party and the government made decisions about what personalities could be venerated. In both cases the cults allowed and patronized were those considered to be “correct” and “useful” by the authorities. The colonial and postsocialist periods adopted a more flexible position of using the cult to present the regime in a favorable light to advance not only domestic governance but also international display.
CONCLUSION

Precolonial and socialist regimes in Vietnam have viewed popular religious cults as markers of political loyalty. Cults and any of their features that could not be appropriated by the authorities were considered by the state to be superstitions. To the extent that they could be redeemed for political purposes it was not necessary to eradicate them. Cults were not acknowledged as having a legitimate existence separate from state recognition. Traditional culture was understood as belonging to the state; the state alone had the right to define what traditional culture was.

In contrast, colonial and postsocialist regimes in Vietnam have viewed popular religious cults as markers of traditional culture. Cults were understood as having their own momentums and trajectories that are separate from the state, but the state still had to police them to keep them under the bonds of state control. Traditional culture belonged to "the people" as well as to the state, and the state had to come to terms with it as something not entirely within the realm of its ideology.

In each case the vulnerability of popular religion vis-à-vis state policy is the same, but the relation between the state and traditional culture is different. In the case of precolonial and socialist states, only the rulers have the right to speak on behalf of traditional culture. In the case of colonial and postsocialist states, rulers acknowledge traditional culture as an aspect of the landscape of governance; rulers endeavor to assert control over it, but traditional culture does not obtain its existence solely as an extension of state policy.

In precolonial times, the cult of Liễu Hạnh initially arose in a time of political division and civil war. Rival and successive state authorities placed their stamps of approval on it while at the same time proscribing aspects of it that were categorized as superstition. The cult developed and flourished during subsequent generations because of the protection afforded by state recognition of approved local cults, which labeled these cults as loyal to the state, and because of the relative weakness of precolonial regimes in their efforts to police village society and to eradicate superstition.

The French colonial state, while policing cults to ensure internal security, was conditioned to some extent by more democratic ideas about traditional culture and was relatively unconcerned about superstition. All evidence points to a great flourishing of Liễu Hạnh’s cult in colonial times,
with the building and rebuilding of temples and the promotion of cultic festivals for both domestic and foreign tourism.

This situation radically changed during the next four decades, in which the socialist state turned to policies similar to those of precolonial regimes but with the apparatus of a modern bureaucracy that could intervene in village affairs to a degree unimaginable in precolonial times. Liễu Hạnh’s cult, like many others, languished under the vicissitudes of revolution and war, and especially under the proscriptions of an ideology that was opposed to religion and that sought to create a new culture detached from what were considered to be irrational traditions.

In recent years, as we have seen, there has been a shift toward policies similar to those of colonial times, when the cults of Liễu Hạnh and other deities were allowed to flourish as markers of traditional culture. Today, we see these cults being promoted once again as symbols of national culture and as centers of interest for pilgrims and tourists. An aspect of this new situation is the role of intellectuals in interpreting and promoting Liễu Hạnh’s cult.

Liễu Hạnh’s cult is flourishing. Her temples are supported both by Vietnamese who live in the country and by émigrés who return to worship and to contribute money. Liễu Hạnh has attained an unprecedented level of national and international recognition as a representative Vietnamese deity. In times past, when the cult flourished, it attracted the attention of intellectuals, who used it for a variety of agendas. Today this is also the case.

In recent years intellectuals associated with the state’s academic establishment have been devoting research and writing to the worship of Mothers in general and to the worship of Liễu Hạnh, in particular, as representative of Mother worship. These efforts aim to upgrade Mother worship and the cult of Liễu Hạnh from the realm of belief (tin ngưỡng) to the realm of institutionalized religion (tôn giáo) on a par with Christianity and Buddhism.103 Posing the worship of Liễu Hạnh as a “religion” rather than a “cult” affirms its legitimacy and places it off-limits to the accusation of superstition.

Another shield to protect Liễu Hạnh’s cult is its presentation as a cult widespread all over the country. In fact, hers is basically a northern cult that has spread to some degree to central Vietnam and to a lesser extent to southern Vietnam as a result of devotees who have migrated south at various times. But this imprecision is overcome if Liễu Hạnh is put into the context of other Mothers in Vietnam. Together, Mothers are consid-
ferred to constitute a temporal and spatial continuity in Vietnamese history and a unity of the nation, thereby affirming that differences existing within the country are regional and not national. While this gives additional legitimacy to Mother worship, the state also benefits from it, as this is in full compliance with the current ideology.

What are the other benefits for the state in institutionalizing Mother worship? For one thing, it dilutes the claims of the so-called major religions to speak on behalf of religious freedom. Many intellectuals today mediate between the state and popular religion, raising the status of the latter in the national scheme of religious tradition. By doing so they are advancing and constructing protection for the culture of their ancestors. At the same time, popular religion, being relatively unorganized, does not pose the same potential threat to the state as, for example, the Buddhist monkhood or the Catholic priesthood. The state would much prefer that people scatter their religious practice among a plethora of disorganized cultic sites than that they focus their religious devotion on a church organized under a hierarchy of clerics.

Another benefit to the state is that the Mothers in general and Liêu Hạnh in particular can be cited as examples of the strong position of women in Vietnam, thereby giving some support to the lip service rendered to gender equality in modern Vietnam. In fact, although it is common to assert that the high status of Vietnamese women is “traditional,” in reality the worship of the Mothers and of Liêu Hạnh has given women an escape from their traditionally low status.

It is impossible to predict the future of Liêu Hạnh’s cult, but it is remarkable that it now enjoys a level of national approbation and international renown higher than ever in times past. It may be that this is primarily a factor of the current renovation era and that this prominent position will recede when the state is no longer controlled by a party in need of such cultural regalia. Nevertheless, the cult of Liêu Hạnh has revealed great resilience in adapting to a great variety of regimes during the past four hundred years, and there is no reason to suppose that it will not continue to do so for the foreseeable future.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION

5. The appellation “Vietnam” will be used very loosely in this book. It will be applied to the territory constituting modern Vietnam regardless of the changes in name that territory has undergone during its history. Exceptions will occur only when the country or its parts are referred to differently in the original sources.
7. Aihara Ichirosuke relates the first use of the term *shūkyō* to be a borrowing from German, while Suzuki Norihisa considers it to be a borrowing from English. See James E. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution*, p. 240, nn. 120–121.
9. I adopt the term “popular religion” or “popular cults” not to distinguish between “commoner” and “elite” religions but out of necessity to distinguish the tradition to which Liêu Hạnh’s cult belongs from major ecclesiastical traditions.
11. Under “ritual” I also imply here festivals, sacrifices, and séances, which repeated regularly have become a tradition.
13. The responses to this survey are kept at the Institute of Social Sciences and Information (Viện Thống Tin Khóa Học Xã Hội, hereafter VTTKHXH) in Hanoi in the series Thần Tích Thần Sắc (The Treasury of Hagiographies and Royal Deification Decrees). Hereafter this series is referred to as VTTKHXH—TTTS.
21. The University of Chicago historian of China Prasenjit Duara has discussed the Chinese God of War, Guandi, in somewhat similar terms (“Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War,” pp. 778–795). However, his analysis differs from mine in not distinguishing between ritual form and narrative content and in appealing to an abstract model of what he calls superscription in an apparent effort to avoid the denial of continuity when new versions of the deity appear. He considers general features of a popular cult, namely, the deification of a hero and the deity’s role as a guardian for humans against various kinds of problems, to give a cult continuity through time. I agree that these aspects are relatively stable, but I would consider them part of the fundamental ritual environment in which cults exist, aspects of the “form” of cultic practice and not a part of the narrative content of a cult that change dramatically from generation to generation and that Duara calls “symbols” or “versions.”
25. While there are innumerable such works, I will mention here only three works reproducing Liễu Hạnh’s story. One is Nguyễn Văn Huyễn, *Le culte des immortels en Annam*. Nguyễn Đồng Chi, *Kho Tạng Truyện Cổ Tích Việt Nam* (A Treasury of Vietnamese Legends), is a multivolume project republished eight times between 1972 and now. Her legend was also chosen to be incorporated into a collection of Vietnamese stories recently published in Russia: E. Knorozova, trans. and ed., *Mythy i predaniya Vietnam* (Myths and Legends of Vietnam), pp. 67–72.
27. Thien Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region*.
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2. Ibid., p. 35.
5. Lý Tế Xuyên, Việt Điện U Linh Tập, p. 43.
6. Ibid.
7. Cổ Châu Pháp Văn Phát Bàn Hàng Ngữ Lục, pp. 35, 42, 64.
8. Ibid., pp. 36–50.
12. See, for example, John K. Whitmore, “The Vietnamese Sense of the Past,” pp. 4–10, not to mention all Vietnamese official histories.
14. Ibid.
17. Lý Tế Xuyên, Việt Điện U Linh Tập, pp. 9, 229.
21. Lê Hữu Mục in his “Dân Nhập” (Introduction), p. 12, ascribes the authorship of Linh Nam Chích Quái to a Trần Thế Pháp, for whom he does not have any information except for a mention of him in Lê Quý Đôn’s work. Unlike Định Gia Khánh and Nguyễn Ngọc San, who, as is mentioned in the previous note, translated and published Linh Nam Chích Quái in Hanoi in 1960 with the names of Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú as authors, Lê Hữu Mục, in the same year in Saigon, translated and published Linh Nam Chích Quái under the authorship of Trần Thế Pháp. As will be seen below, Trần Thế Pháp was referred to as the author of Linh Nam Chích Quái in another manuscript, compiled in the sixteenth century, which was possibly the basis for Lê Quý Đôn’s later mention. While
the issue of authorship of Lính Nam Chích Quáï is very important, it remains beyond the scope of this project, and in my analysis I consider Vũ Quynthia and Kiều Phú to be editors of Lính Nam Chích Quáï and adopt in future references the version translated and published by Đinh Gia Khánh and Nguyễn Ngọc San. Refer to the bibliography for the edition of Lính Nam Chích Quáï with Trần Thế Pháp as author, translated by Lê Hữu Mục.


24. Even though there is no data on the number of books printed in the seventeenth century, the number that has survived clearly demonstrates that printing had spread by that time. In addition to literary works and official documents, we have numerous religious tractates published in different temples.


29. Charles O. Hucker, China’s Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture, p. 22.


32. A traditional Chinese dynasty in antiquity, commonly dated 1766–1121 B.C.E.

33. Similar stories exist in other cultures, for example, the Russian story of Ilya Muromets, who did not move for thirty-three years, until his prowess was needed to fight off evil powers.

34. Another fourteenth-century work, An Nam Chí Luộc (Annals of Annam), written by Lê Trắc in 1333, describes this spirit as a pacifier of rebellions but without specifying a historical period or the identity of the alleged rebels. This description is a transitional point in the historicizing and heroicizing of this spirit. See An Nam Chí Luộc, p. 46. My interpretation is similar to that developed in Trần Quốc Vương, “The Legend of Ông Đồng from the Text to the Field,” pp. 3–41.

35. Pham Trọng Diêm and Bùi Văn Nguyên, eds., Hồng Đức Quyền Âm Thi Tập (A Collection of Poetry in the National Language from the Hồng Đức Period), p. 264.


37. This work is available in several copies in the Institute of Sino-
Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi (Việt Hán Nôm, hereafter VHN), catalogued as Vhv.1506 and A.3193. The latter is titled *Thọ Ý Tần Sinh Vĩnh Sứ Thi Tập.*

38. This reign period was from 1516 to 1522.

39. VHN, Vhv.1506, pp. 1–2.


42. For an excellent discussion of the granting of titles in China, see Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China,* 1127–1276, pp. 79–104.


47. Ibid.


52. There is a very interesting discussion of the tutelary genies in Nguyễn Văn Kỳ,* *La société vietnamienne,* pp. 28–36; the cited passage is on p. 30.


56. VHN, ms. AE.a9/31. It describes the story of the Hùng kings and was submitted on behalf of Hi Cường commune, Xuân Lương canton, Sơn Vi district, of Phú Thọ province. Some other names also appear on hagiographies ascribed to the same period: four hagiographies from the same An Thọ canton, Tú Kỳ district, of Hải Dương province signed Nguyễn Trạch (one hagiography dated 1475), Nguyễn Kim Anh (two hagiographies dated 1472), and Nguyễn Bao (one hagiography dated 1472) appear in ms. AE.a6/26; also by Nguyễn Kim Anh and Nguyễn Bao, two more hagiographies dated 1472, ms. AE.a6/12; Lê Quý Đức or Lê Quang Đức, two hagiographies dated 1483, ms. AE.a5/58; Đào Cử, one hagiography dated 1476, ms. AE.a7/1; and Dương Tung, one hagiography dated 1471, ms. AE.a13/21.

57. VHN. Manuscript dated 1429 is AE.a11/1; those dated 1470 (twelve) are AE.a2/30, AE.a2/53, AE.a3/46, AE.a6/10, AE.a7/1 (two hagiographies), AE.a7/10, AE.a9/32, AE.a9/39, AE.a11/14, AE.a11/15, AE.a14/19; the two
dated 1471 are AE.a2/30 and AE.a13/21; the one dated 1472 is AE.a7/10; those dated 1510 (six) are AE.a2/43, AE.a5/37, AE.a12/12, AE.a12/21, AE.b1/6, AE.b1/9; the one dated 1573 is AE.a6/24.


59. VHN, ms. Vht.42.

60. VHN, ms. AE.a7/4, AE.b2/3 and AE.b2/7.

61. See Ngô Đức Thọ, *Các Nhà Khóa Bàng Việt Nam*.

62. In addition, there are two biographies also signed by Nguyễn Bình but dated in the first year of the Hùng Đức reign period (1470). They are kept in the VHN (mss. AE.a6/1 and AE.a7/10). As it is impossible to imagine that they were written by the same Nguyễn Bình, these manuscripts reinforce doubts about the originality of the other manuscripts ascribed to him. I assume that they were compiled later.


64. VHN files AE.a6/1 and AE.a7/10 are dated 1470; file AE.a2/35 is dated 1735. The first date might be explained by a mistake in one of the characters signifying the reign title, as the year 1470 belonged to the Hùng Đức reign while the year 1570 belonged to the Hùng Phúc reign. However, the second date cannot be related to an aberration of the brush. Even if my assumption about the first date is correct, this suggests later interpolations into the texts.

65. The only scholar with this name registered as having passed official examinations is a famous prodigy, Nguyễn Hiền (1235–?), who passed the exams at the age of thirteen.


73. Ibid., p. 106.

77. Ibid., p. 360.
78. Ibid., p. 257.
79. “Réclamation des habitants de Nga-Trai relative à brevet de Genie” (October 22, 1910), National Archives Center—1, Hanoi (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia—1; hereafter TTLTQG), RST 76.613, file 797 (1906–1911).

**CHAPTER 2: THE APPEARANCE OF LIÊU HÀNH’S CULT**

2. Nguyễn Quang Lê, “Thủ Tầm Hiếu Mối Quan Hệ giữa Lễ Hội với các Tín Nguong Dân Gian” (Toward Understanding the Connection between Festivals and Popular Beliefs), p. 53. The number of the domains, whether three or four, depends on each locality.
7. For example, Huong Đích commune, Hạnh Lợi canton, Hà Đông province (VTTKHXH—TTTS, file 631, p. 357), defined Liêu Hành as a human spirit, while Văn Điển village, Yên Dương district, Nam Định province, claimed her to be a heavenly spirit (VTTKHXH—TTTS, file 6783, p. 317). The most evident examples of the confusion are found in the accounts where Liêu Hành is first designated as a heavenly spirit, and then the word “heavenly” is corrected to “human” or vice versa. For an example of this, see the account from Kim Khê.
8. To facilitate my discussion, I assign a number to each of the stories under discussion and thereafter refer to it by number.


10. Ibid., pp. 70–81. However, the largest part of this story deals not with Liêu Hành but with her alleged son, Trạng Quình. The part describing Liêu Hành is found on pp. 72–81; it was also published in Nguyễn Đông Chí, *Kho Tàng Truyện Cổ Tích Việt Nam* (A Treasury of Vietnamese Legends), 2:1045–1048.

11. Hồ Trọng, Văn Hóa Dân Gian Cổ Truyện: Tục Lễ Thờ Địa Bà Trưng và Liêu Hành Thánh Mẫu (Old Vietnamese Culture: The Practice of Worshipping the Two Trưng Ladies and the Saint Mother Liêu Hành), pp. 34–36. He cites for this a manuscript found in An Trí hamlet, Nơi Thiên commune, Can Lộc district, of Nghệ An province.

12. In the Museum of Nam Định province there is an unpublished translation of this manuscript made by Dương Văn Vương in 1992. This legend is also found in A. Lagrèze, "Documents concernant le temple Đền Song au Thanh-Hoa," p. 3.


14. It is not clear what the translation of this phrase should be, as Landes did not provide either characters or translation. Bất bộ most plausibly means "eight officials." Kim cang means "precious and hard," the one who can injure but cannot be injured. By extension, this term was used to designate Buddhist temple guardian deities. Possibly here it is an abbreviation of Kim Cang Mật Tích (or Buddha Vajrapani), Kim Cang Ái Bồ Tähr, or Kim Cang Ba La Mật. Mathews also lists the expression kim cang as a component of the expression "the four guardians of Buddhist temples" (R. H. Mathews, *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*, p. 146, no. 1057/5), which suggests a translation as "eight officials—temple guardians." Later in the text Landes uses the compound kim cang in the expression "eight Kim cang Buddhhas," apparently referring to different Buddhas and/or bodhisattvas whose names include the element kim cang.


17. See, for example, Thánh Tích Áp Hành Lữ (Hagiography from Hành Lữ), VHN, AE.a.15/3.

18. See Nguyễn Diệu's *Truyện Ký Mạn Lực* (The Collection of Marvelous Stories), a sixteenth-century work that includes some stories with the idea of the Jade Emperor but without this terminology.

19. See Trần Quốc Vương, "Trạng Trình Nguyên Bính Khải môn Bội..."
20. Among those still extant are đình Tây Đặng in Tây Đặng commune, Ба Vì district, Hà Tây province, and đình Lỗ Hành in Đồng Lỗ commune, Hiệp Hòa district, Hà Bắc province. The latter one was built in 1576. Hữu Ngọc, ed., Từ Điển Văn Hóa Cổ Truyền Việt Nam (Dictionary of Ancient Vietnamese Traditional Culture), pp. 233–235.


26. Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Thờ Mẫu Liễu ở Phú Giáo” (Worshiping Mother Liễu in Phú Giáo), 1:110, for which is cited Lê Xuân Quang, Thần Tích Việt Nam (Vietnamese Hagiographies), 2:175. In my personal communication with him in April 2001, Lê Xuân Quang, an expert on Liễu Hạnh, said that his information on the existence of this inscription was based on what he heard from the local people, but no material evidence remains.


28. Manuscript Tiễn Tự Phã Kỳ (Record of the Tiễn Temple) contains a reference to an honorific title granted to Liễu Hạnh in 1729, but I did not find the certificate (VHN, ms. AE.a15/4).


31. VHN, ms. A.3181. The manuscript states that it was copied in the fifteenth year of Nguyễn Bảo Đại (1940) from the bronze book discovered during the work at Đền Sông (Văn Cất Lê Gia Ngã Phó, A.3181, p. 11).

32. For instance, the age of Liễu Hạnh’s grandfather at the time of the birth of his son, Liễu Hạnh’s father. While Lagrèze records thirty-four years (Lagrèze, “Documents,” p. 12), the manuscript in the Institute of Sino-Vietnamese studies records forty-four years (Văn Cất Lê Gia Ngã Phó, A.3181, p. 5). This can be attributed to typographical errors in Lagrèze’s article or in the process of copying the book. Other discrepancies can be seen in different spellings for the name of Liễu Hạnh’s father: Lagrèze spelled it Lê Tự Thông while Văn Cất Lê Gia Ngã Phó has it as Lê Tự Thông. Also the poem incorporated in the genealogy differs in these two versions. Aside from these relatively minor discrepancies, the two versions are very similar. Thus, hereafter, I will refer to both versions as one and the same Văn Cất Lê Gia Ngã Phó, providing reference to both editions and taking into account discrepancies as they arise.
33. This name also contributes to the doubts of the authenticity of the annals. I located only one Nguyễn Quốc Trinh who passed the examinations; his dates are 1625–1674; see Nguyễn Đức Thọ, Các nhà khoa bảng Việt Nam (Laureates in the Examination System in Vietnam), p. 570. While these dates do not exclude the possibility of Nguyễn Quốc Trinh’s participation in the compilation of the annals, it is hardly possible that in the year Mậu Dần (1638), at the age of thirteen, he could have succeeded in the special examination (ăn khoa) as the family records state.


36. I analyze his work in the introduction to the Opusculum, pp. 22–70.


38. Conspiring high treason (endangering the sovereign), insubordination (destruction of the imperial ancestral temples, mausoleums, and palaces), treason (turning against one’s country to serve the enemy), wicked insubordination (killing a senior relative), inhumanity (killing three persons in a family not condemned to death, killing and dismembering any person, putting a curse on others by means of witchcraft, and so forth), lèse majesté (stealing articles belonging to the imperial family or institutions), lack of filial piety (denouncing or disobeying one’s senior relatives), discord (killing or selling any relative), disloyalty (killing an official in active service), and incest (having sexual relations with any close relative). The list of these ten heinous crimes is found in article 2 of Quôc Triển Hình Luật (The Penal Code of the National Dynasty). See Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, Tạ Văn Tài, and Trần Văn Liêm, The Lê Code, Law in Traditional Vietnam: A Comparative Sino-Vietnamese Legal Study with Historical-Juridical Analysis and Annotations, 1:109–110.

39. Ibid., 2:323.


41. Nguyễn Ngọc Huy et al., The Lê Code, 1:186.

42. Ibid., 2:323–324. Trần Trọng Kim, Việt Nam Sử Lược (Brief History of Vietnam), pp. 294–295. Đào Duy Tự was born into a family of singers in Thanh Hóa province and was therefore banned from taking examinations and pursuing a career in officialdom. Frustrated in his ambition, he migrated south to the territories ruled by the Nguyễn, where his talents were appreciated and he achieved high position.


44. Landes, Contes, p. 72, n. 1.

45. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Người và Đại Việt (Deities, People, and Vietnamese Land), p. 204.


48. For more on the explanation and the origins of this phenomenon in China, see Toshihiko Yazawa, "Le culte des guishen en Chine et le catholicisme," pp. 39–43.

49. Tienie Phaérie, "Record of the Tien Temple," VHN, ms. AE.a15/4, p. 18.

50. Buôn Văn Tam, Phú Day và Tin Ngyông Mau Le Huêh (Phú Day and Belief in Mother Liêu Hạnh), p. 38. Phạm Đình Kinh was a scholar who passed provincial examinations in 1710.

51. Ibid., p. 39.

52. According to Marie-Luis Latsch, Chinese Traditional Festivals, p. 49, "Cold Food Day" is another name for the Qing Ming Festival. Russian scholars also ascertain that Qing Ming Festival and Cold Food Day are the same holiday; see R. Sh. Dzharlygasinova and M. V. Kriukov, eds., Kalendarmye obychai i obriadny narodov Vostochnoi Azii: Godovoi tsikl (Calendar Customs and Rites of East Asian People: Annual Cycle), pp. 36–37.

53. At the beginning of the cult, the second word was sometimes written with a different character with the same pronunciation meaning "luck." It is found, for example, in the decree granting Liêu Hạnh an honorific title during the Cân Hùng reign period (1740–1768).


55. Ta Chí Đại Trưởng, Thần, Ngoài và Đầu Việt, p. 205.

56. Ibid., p. 205. Triệu Quảng Phúc and Lý Phát Tư were two local heroes in sixth-century Vietnam. They began their careers as followers of Lý Bôn, a local warlord who proclaimed himself king in the 540s. Upon his death, Triệu Quảng Phúc and Lý Phát Tư contended for power. Their stories are found in Lý Thế Xuyên, Việt Điển U Linh Tập, pp. 52–58, and in Ngô Sĩ Liên, Đại Việt Sê Ký Tấn Thuat, nguyễn kỳ 4:14b–23a (1:178–186). For an analysis of these two figures see K. W. Taylor, Birth of Vietnam, pp. 151–158.

57. Cầu, in addition to the meaning "a door," also means an opening (of the river) or a harbor. The localities bearing this name are found on the shores of bodies of water.


59. This legend was recorded and translated by Trần Văn Phạm on April 29, 1962, in Nam Định province. It is found in the Archive of the Ministry of Culture, Hanoi, file "Phủ Dây," doc. 1.

60. A number of works have been written on this topic. See, for example, Maurice Durand, Technique et panthéon des médiums vietamiens; Pierre J. Simon and Ida Simon-Barouch, Häü Bông: Un culte vietnamien de possession transplanté en France; Ngô Đức Thịnh, Đạo Mẫu ở Việt Nam; Ngô Đức Thịnh, "Hất Văn Thức Häu Bông là Hiền Tượng Văn Hóa Dân Gian Tồng Thể" (Accompanying the Rite of Getting into Trance—Syncretic Folklore Phenomenon), pp. 56–63; Ngô Đức Thịnh, "Nhận Thức Về Đạo Mẫu và Một Số Hình Thức Shaman của..."

61. For more on the pantheon, see Nguyễn Đức Thịnh, “The Pantheon for the Cult of Holy Mothers,” pp. 20–34. The number of domains, whether three or four, varies from locality to locality.


63. It is evident, for example, from the account of the pantheon by Paul Giran, Magie et religion annamites, pp. 267–297.

64. In Chinese sources Nü Gua was the mythical sister or wife and successor of Fu Xi, who allegedly existed in the period 2953–2838 B.C.E. She appears for the first time in the Book of Liezi (fifth century B.C.E.). She is also mentioned in the Shiji (Historical Records). Eduard Chavannes, trans. and ed., Les mémoires historiques de Se-Ma T’ien, 1:9–12.


66. For descriptions of these, see ibid., pp. 26–31.


68. Giran, Magie et religion annamites, p. 272.

69. Đình Già Khánh, “Tục Thờ Mẫu và những Truyền Thống Văn Hóa Dân Gian ở Việt Nam” (Practice of Worshiping Mothers and Traditions of Popular Culture in Vietnam).

70. Durand, Technique et panthéon des médiums vietnamiens, p. 12.

71. Ibid., p. 7.


73. Ibid., p. 11. At the present time the term hà bông is almost out of circulation, and the women performing len dong are usually called hà做梦 regardless of the extent of their commitment to the spirit.


75. These are opinions cited by Phan Kế Bình in 1913, with which he does not seem to agree. Phan Kế Bình, Việt Nam Phong Tục (Vietnamese Customs), p. 304.

76. Dinh Quang et al., Le théâtre viêt-namien, p. 44.


79. Dinh Quang et al., Le théâtre viêt-namien, p. 43.

80. R. Deloustal, Recueil des principales ordonnances royales édictées depuis la promulgation du code annamite et en vigueur au Tonkin, p. 88. According to Alexander Woodside, the Nguyễn rulers “feared the village operas because of their marginal disloyalties and cultural heterodoxies. Minh Mạng even attempted to ban performance of the omnipresent village dramas in the neighborhood of Huế in the
spring of 1840. He remarked, ‘I hear that a stupendous number of males and females, old people and young people, watch these plays. This must definitely be an evil custom.’” A. B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 27.


83. The volume of works on Trần Hưng Đạo is truly significant, covering different aspects of his life and his cult. The latest work on his life and military career is Lê Đình Sĩ, ed., *Trần Hưng Đạo: Nhà Quản Sước Thiên Tài* (Trần Hưng Đạo: A Military Genius). For his cult, see, for example, Phạm Ngọc Khưu, ed., *Thần Tích Độc Thanh Trần* (Hagiography of Virtuous and Holy Trần), and Phạm Quyên Phương, “Tìm Hiểu Hiền Tướng Trần Ngọc Đức Thánh Trần” (Toward the Understanding of the Popular Belief Phenomenon of Virtuous and Holy Trần).


### CHAPTER 3: CONTENDING NARRATIVES IN CLASSICAL VOICES


6. The translation of this story is based on the original Hán version of Đoán Thì Diễm’s Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện in Yuen Hanwen xiaoshuo congkan (Collection romans et contes du VietNam écrits en Han), 2:24–41; also the Vietnamese translation Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện in Đoán Thì Diễm, Truyện Kỳ Tần Phả (The New Collection of Marvelous Stories), pp. 66–99.

7. This is based on my article “Đoán Thì Diễm’s Story of the Văn Cát Goddess as a Story of Emancipation,” pp. 63–76.

8. C. 1556–1557.

9. Phùng Khắc Khoan (1528–1613) was a prominent Vietnamese scholar, poet, and official, one of the most distinguished people of his time.

10. I speak here about the author’s ability and not Liễu Hạnh’s because Liễu Hạnh did not need a better pretext, since her husband did not know about her previous descent to earth, her punishment, and her return to heaven. For him the excuse she suggested sounded new and plausible.

11. The fact that Đoán Thì Diễm did not have children of her own might well have contributed to Liễu Hạnh’s negligence toward her children.


17. Hoàng Dao Thúy, Đại Nước Ta, p. 83.


21. The same is true not only for Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện but for all the stories of the collection. The structures of the stories, poetic insertion, even plots are very similar in all of them.

22. The manuscript Truyện Kỳ Tần Phả, which is considered a standard original for the translations of this work, includes six stories: Văn Cát Thần Nữ Truyện, An Ấp Liệt Nữ Truyện, Hải Khẩu Linh Tử (A Temple with a Propitious Deity in the Harbor), Bích Câu Kỳ Ngô (A Marvelous Encounter in Bích Câu), Long Hổ Đấu Kỵ (A Story of a Dragon and a Tiger), and Óng Bạch Thủy Thoai (A Legend of a Cypress and a Pine) (VHN, ms. A.48, ms. VhV 1487). However, one of the leading scholars of Vietnamese literature, Hoàng Xuân Hãn, argued in 1952 that only the first three stories were penned by Đoán Thì Diễm. Hoàng Xuân Hãn claimed the three last stories were written by Đặng Trần Côn (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, Chinh-Phú Ngâm Bi-Khăn, p. 42). No consensus has yet been reached.
on the authorship of these three stories. The published version of Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát translated by Ngô Lập Chi and Trần Văn Giáp in 1962 included all six of them (Đoàn Thị Diệm, Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát). However, the translation published thirty years later in 2001 by Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học includes the first four stories, as Trần Văn Giáp disagreed with Hoàng Xuân Hãn and insisted on Đoàn Thị Diệm’s authorship of the story Bích Câu Kỳ Ngữ. Hoàng Hữu Yến, “Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát,” in Đoàn Thị Diệm, Truyện Kỳ Tấn Phát (1962), p. 6.


24. I am intrigued by the question of whether the reasons of the authorities for building a shrine and worshiping the woman and those of the people were different. The authorities would want to commemorate the virtue of loyalty and to set a good example to other women whose husbands had been or would be sent on a mission. As for the people, perhaps their reason for worshiping her was the fact that she committed suicide and was childless, thus, invoking awe and apprehension as a wandering soul.

25. The dates of his life are taken from Hoàng Xuân Hãn, Chinh-Phụ Ngâm Bi-Khǎ, p. 14. These dates make Đoàn Trần Công and Đoàn Thị Diệm contemporaries.

26. Several translations of this work exist. One of them is considered a jewel of Vietnamese literature that far surpassed the original. Đoàn Thị Diệm’s authorship of this piece has been contested. Although I will give a brief overview of the controversy here, this argument is beyond the scope of this book and still awaits a researcher. I will only point out that no one has questioned whether she translated this book, only whether she is responsible for the version considered a masterpiece. Moreover, she appears to be its first translator. The best known translation of Chinh Phụ Ngâm was unanimously attributed to Đoàn Thị Diệm until 1926, when it was challenged by the descendants of Phan Huy Ích (1750–1822), who claimed that he was the author. Dozens of publications produced since then have sided with one side or the other on this question. For example, Hoàng Liên Sơn remained unconvinced by the claim for Phan Huy Ích and ascertained that Đoàn Thị Diệm was the author of the translation. See Đoàn Trần Công, Chinh-Phụ Ngâm, p. 3. Other publications have taken the same position: Nguyễn Huy, Chinh-Phụ Ngâm-Khǎ; Thuận Phong, “Chinh-Phụ Ngâm-Khǎ” Giảng-Laôt, pp. 15–28; Trần Củ Chẩn, Les grandes poétesses du Viet-Nam, p. 9. In 1953 Professor Hoàng Xuân Hãn published his detailed analysis leading to the statement that, while Đoàn Thị Diệm produced a very good translation of Chinh Phụ Ngâm, the translation that entered the annals of Vietnamese literature indeed belonged to Phan Huy Ích, not to Đoàn Thị Diệm (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, “Chinh-Phụ Ngâm” Bi-Khǎ, pp. 7, 25). Ле Thành Khôi and Huỳnh Sanh Trọng, for example, accepted his conclusion: see Đoàn Trần Công and Phan Huy Ích, Chant de la femme du combattant, p. 13, and Đoàn Trần Công and Phan Huy Ích, The Song of a Soldier’s Wife, p. viii, respectively. Others continue to credit the translation to Đoàn Thị Diệm: Đoàn Trần Công and Đoàn Thị Diệm, Chinh-Phụ Ngâm (Lamentation of a Soldier’s Wife); Đoàn Trần Công and Đoàn Thị Diệm,
Lament of the Soldier’s Wife. The latter is a second edition of a translation first published in 1950.


30. Nguyễn Thanh Mậu, Vaste recueil de legenes merveilleuses; and Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục (Collection of Marvelous Stories).


32. Dặng Trần Côn and Đoàn Thị Diễm, Lament of the Soldier’s Wife, p. 41.


35. Phan Kế Binh, Nam Hải Đị Nhạn (Extraordinary People of the South Sea).

36. Ibid., pp. 5–6, 154–158, 193–195, respectively. Phan Kế Binh refers to Đoàn Thị Diễm as Nguyễn Thị Diễm. Nguyễn Huy believed that this name appeared because Đoàn Thị Diễm married Nguyễn Kiều, and he mentions an unidentified work that mistakenly calls Đoàn Thị Diễm by the name Nguyễn Thị Diễm (Chinh-Phụ Ngâm-Khuê, p. 3). Nguyễn Thị Diễm, according to Phan Kế Binh, was a sister of Nguyễn Trực Luyện, a 1721 examination graduate whom he has mistaken for Đoàn Đạo Luyện, Đoàn Thị Diễm’s brother. Phan Kế Binh’s description of Nguyễn Thị Diễm leaves no doubt that he is in fact referring to Đoàn Thị Diễm, in particular his direct allusion to Nguyễn Thị Diễm as the author of Truyện Kỳ Tân Phả.

37. VHN, ms. A.926. Even though dated the third year of the Vịnh Thồ reign period (1660), the manuscript contains some information describing events that took place later, and thus we should consider the date of its “new edition,” the fifth year of the reign period of Gia Long (1807), as a time of revision and added information, if not the time of its creation. This manuscript contains, in addition to the history of the School of the Inner Religion, numerous prayers, official letters, and petitions to the kings. It is a wonderful source for the School of the Inner Religion; it seems that the work became a master text for all other texts on the school. Hereafter this manuscript will be referred to as Tam Thánh Bảo Lục. All accounts of the school cited in the text refer to this source, unless noted otherwise. Nguyễn Văn Huyền summarizes the history of this school in his book Le culte des immortels en Annam.

38. As the reign period is not identified, it is possible to assume that this year corresponds either to 1523 or to 1583.

39. Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Le culte des immortels en Annam, p. 139. As Tam Thánh Bảo Lục seems to be the most elaborated source of information on the
School of the Inner Religion, I will use the name of the patriarch of the school found there.

40. Nguyễn Văn Huyên states that his rejection of an official career was on the grounds of not being willing to serve the Mạc dynasty. The other texts do not make this connection. It is not clear whether hostility toward the Mạc was indeed of any significance to the founder of the School of the Inner Religion, but if this were the case, then his birthday should be 1523 (see note 38 above), as the Mạc court had been expelled from the capital by 1593. It is also possible that an anti-Mạc bias and a desire to highlight the school’s belonging to the Lê dynasty was a peculiar feature of the text with which Nguyễn Văn Huyên worked.

41. The full name is Desde Sự Lữ Li Quang Nhất Lai. He is famous for sharing twelve formulas for diagnosing causes of diseases and curing them.

42. According to the annals, the eldest son was born in the year Kỳ Mùi, which in the absence of a reign period would most plausibly be 1619; the next son was born in the year Tân Dậu, possibly corresponding to 1621, and the youngest son was born in the year Giáp Tý (1624).

43. The day of his death or transformation, the twenty-eighth day of the first lunar month, was proclaimed the holy day for the followers of the school, when the main festival takes place.

44. None of these names is known in any Buddhist school.


46. While the episode concerning Lý Thần Tông and Minh Khong is recorded in Ngô Sĩ Liên, Đại Việt Sử Kì Thuật, bản kỳ 3:39b, 1:308, the story about Lý Thần Tông’s miraculous deliverance from illness is not recorded in any historical annal. Moreover, there is no mention of any strange illness suffered by this king. This suggests that this story, based on the earlier story, was invented for the needs of the School of the Inner Religion.


48. Sự Sơn is located in Thanh Hóa province.

49. This phrase is the title of the two-volume book compiled by Carlyn Kohrs Campbell, Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric.

50. For example, see the following at the VHN: Liên Hạnh Công Chúa Tiên Phật Lý Thành Tịch Thôn Đồng Đục (The Heavenly Record of the Princess Liễu Hạnh: Hagiography from Đồng Đục Hamlet), ms. AE.b2/5; Liên Hạnh Công Chúa Ngọc Phật Cơ Lực Thành Tịch Thôn Văn Khê (The Jade Record of the Princess Liễu Hạnh: Hagiography from Văn Khê Hamlet), ms. AE.b2/3; and Tiền Tứ Phật Kỳ: Thần Tịch Áp Hoàng Lộ (The Record from Tiền Temple: Hagiography from Hoàng Lộ Hamlet), ms. AE.a15/3. See also the Hội Chân Biển (Collection of Genuine Records), a French translation of which is found in Trương Đình Hóc, trans., Les immortels vietnamiens d’après le “Hội Chân Biển,” pp. 94–98, 131–132, and in Nguyễn Văn Huyên, Le culte des immortels en Annam, pp. 133–201.
51. A descendant of one of the three brothers.
52. Trường Đình Hoê, Les immortels vietnamiens d’après le “Hội Chân Biên.” This edition includes the original characters and a French translation of the text.
53. VHN, ms. AB.484.
54. There are two exceptions: Princess Tiên Dung—according to tradition a daughter of a legendary Hùng king—famous as the consort of the Daoist patriarch Chủ Động Tự; and Ngã Hoa, the daughter of a peasant, who witnessed the ascension of Chủ Động Tự and Tiên Dung to heaven and, quitting her work in the rice field, followed them.
56. Ibid., p. 96.
57. Ibid., p. 114.

CHAPTER 4: VERDACULARIZATION OF THE SUBLIME

1. See, for example, Alexander Woodside, “Classical Primordialism and the Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism,” pp. 137–143; also his Vietnam and the Chinese Model, “Preface to the Paperback Edition” (no page numbers).
4. Nguyễn Công Trù, Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Điện Ám (Phonetic Transcription about Princess Liễu Hạnh), VHN, ms. AB.146. The transcription of Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Điện Ám into quốc ngữ made by Đỗ Minh Tâm is in Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Phạm Văn Tý, eds., Văn Cát Thần Nữ (The Goddess of Văn Cát), pp. 48–54.
5. On Nguyễn Công Trù see Nguyễn Hữu Trọng, Nguyễn-Công-Trù: Thành Tế và Tác Phẩm (Nguyễn-Công-Trù: Body and Works); Phạm Vũ Bá, Khí-Thuật: Nguyễn Công Trù (Research Essay: Nguyễn-Công-Trù); Vũ Kỳ, Đạo Lâm Người cau Nguyễn Công Trù (1778–1858) (Nguyễn Công Trù on the Way of Formation of People); Nguyễn Tường Huy, Giảng Luận Thí Văn Nguyễn Công Trù (Explanation of Nguyễn Công Trù’s Poetry); Vũ Tiến Quyên, Phê Bình Bình Lẫu Văn Học: Nguyễn Công Trù, Cao Ba Quất (Critical Literary Comments: Nguyễn Công Trù, Cao Ba Quất); Vũ Ngọc Khánh, Nguyễn Công Trù; and Hồ Sĩ Hiệp, Lâm Quê Phong, et al., Nguyễn Công Trù, Cao Ba Quất.
8. Nguyễn Công Trù, Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Điện Ám, p. 62.
9. Ibid., pp. 63–71. Line 158 (p. 69) is missing from the transcription in this publication; line 159 is erroneously numbered 158, and all lines are mis-numbered from 100 on. Only 203 lines are included in this transcription.
10. The only factual difference is that in Văn Cát Thôn Nő Truyện Liễu Hạnh was born in the Lê family and married into the Trần family, while in Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Diễm Âm her father belonged to the Trần clan and her mother to the Lê, an insignificant difference in my opinion.


21. His original name was Kiều Đức, but he apparently assumed the new name Kiều Quang Mẫu in 1883 upon the death of Emperor Tự Đức, whose posthumous name was Đức Tòng Anh. At this time the character Đức became taboo and was taken from circulation. The biography presented here is based on Kiều Quang Mẫu’s personal dossier (*Notice Individuel*) in the CAOM. Currently the file is located in the TTLTQG, RST, no. 35.150.

22. Tì Bá Quế Âm Tân Truyện (New Story of Pipa in National Transcription), VHN, ms. AB.272. This work was republished in Hanoi in 1930 by the publishing house Thụy Ký.

23. I have not found any reference to this journal outside of his personal dossier (*Notice Individuel*), cited above, which does not give the title of the journal but simply refers to it as a “journal en caractères.”

24. VHN, ms. A.218. The work has been published several times in Vietnamese translation.


27. Ibid., p. 224–225.


31. Circulaire of March 8, 1904, Dossier of Kiều Quang Mẫu, TTLTQG, RST, file 35.150.
32. According to the legend, Mieu Trang Vuong (Miao Zhuangwang), a ruler of Xinglin kingdom, had three daughters, the youngest of whom was Mieu Ten (Miaoshan). Thus was derived her name, Chua Ba (Third Princess). She refused to get married and retreated to a monastery. She is believed to have been reincarnated as Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. For analysis of the legend, see Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*.


34. On the impact of the demonstrations and of the measures undertaken by France to subdue them, see Phan Chu Trinh, *A Complete Account of the Peasants' Uprising in the Central Region* (Trung Ky Dan Bien Thy Mat Ky); also, Phan Boi Chau, *Overturned Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan-Boi-Chau*.


36. In his afterword Kieu Oanh Mau confirms the strong resemblance between the two works and dates Tien Tu Pha Ky to the end of the Le dynasty (Kieu Oanh Mau, *Tien Pha Dich Luc* [VHN, ms. AB.289, p. 112]).

37. Written in 1896, this text is a history of Vietnam to 1802. It also includes numerous biographies of statesmen, famous people, deities, and so forth. This text is found in the VHN. It is catalogued as A.12/1–2 and VHv.1588. The story of Lieu Hanh is presented there in a very schematic way and is apparently based on Doan Thi Diem’s work.


40. Ibid., line 692.

41. Ascending the throne in 1884, as a minor at the age of thirteen, he fled the capital in 1885. Ham Nghi was captured by the French in 1888 and exiled. He died in 1943.

42. R. 1885–1889.


45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.


51. Pham Quynh Phuong, “Tho Mao Lieu o Phu Giay” (Worshiping Mothers in Phu Giay). Kieu Oanh Mau’s work is not mentioned at all in other
works on Liễu Hạnh, such as Vũ Ngọc Khánh, ed., Văn Cát Thán Nghi, and Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh, eds., Tự Bái Tự.
52. The work has remained unpublished.
53. Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage.
55. See, for example, Adriano di St. Thecla’s Opusculum de sectis apud sinenses et tunkinenses, pp. 183–216, his chapter on Buddhism, which reveals a Buddhism seamlessly assembled from ideas, vocabulary, and practices from Daoism, Confucianism, and popular spirit worship.
56. I base my consideration of the kokugaku on Harry D. Harootunian, Things Seen and Unseen.
58. Harootunian, Things Seen, p. 90.
59. Ibid., p. 358.
60. See, for a discussion of the role and place of Shinto during different historical periods, Helene Hardacre, Shinto and the State, 1868–1988.
63. H. Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, p. 143.
64. Naoki Sakai, Translation and Subjectivity, pp. 117–152.
66. Kiều Oánh Mẫu, Tiện Phát Dịch Lục, VHN, ms. AB.289, lines 1–16.

CHAPTER 5: FROM SUPERSTITION TO CULTURAL TRADITION

4. Ibid., p. 189.
5. Ibid., pp. 189–190.
12. Liam C. Kelley, Beyond the Bronze Pillars.
16. Ibid., p. 49.
21. Shawn McHale demonstrated that Buddhism was considered favorably by the French as long as it was not concerned with political issues. See Shawn Frederick McHale, “Printing, Power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920–1945,” p. 63–64; and his *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, pp. 143–146.
24. CAOM, RST NF 02409.
27. TTLTQG, RST F90 72.145.
33. Interview with Vũ Kỳ in Hanoi, April 2001.
42. Ibid., p. 219.
43. I am applying here the approach suggested by Jonathan Smith for the consideration of ritual of the Judeo-Christian tradition inside and outside of Jerusalem. (Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, pp. 83–95.)
44. See, for example, the pictures of spirit possession taken in the 1950s and in 1972 in Ngô Duc Thịnh, "Len Dong: Spirits’ Journeys," pp. 252, 259, 265.
47. Đình Gia Khánh, "Hội Lễ Dân Gian Truyền Thống trong Thời Hiện Đại" (Popular Traditional Festivals in the Present Time), p. 9.
49. Đặng nghiệm Văn, "Suy Nghĩ Về Folklore" (Thoughts on Folklore), pp. 10–13.
50. Đặng nghiệm Văn’s treatment did not significantly change in later years. In 1998 he wrote: "Except for a number of monks, priests, and a few of the faithful who declare that they embrace only one religion, such as Buddhism or one of the traditional religious doctrines, the majority of Hanoi believers, although setting up Buddhist altars at home, still go to pagodas for worship, attend medium services, worship their ancestors, consult diviners, and simply, put faith in something friendly whispered in their ear… In reality, they could be seen as credulous people seeking satisfaction for a momentary spiritual need." Đặng nghiệm Văn, *Ethnological and Religious Problems in Vietnam*, p. 246.
52. In 2000 Nguyễn Đức Thịnh took over the journal *Văn Hóa Dân Gian*, and since then there have been significantly more articles on religious cults from an academic perspective and especially on festivals. See, for example, an article dis-


58. Wife of Emperor Thánh Thãi, r. 1889–1907.


60. TTLTQG, AMH, F90, file 3713, p. 2.

61. VTTKHXH-TTTS, file 16261, p. 427.


64. “Fêtes et manifestations au Tonkin en 1938, susceptible de présenter d’intérêt pour les touristes,” CAOM, FM, FOM, carton 251.

65. Inscription in Ngọc Hồ temple in Hanoi.


67. Đăng Anh, Đền Sông với Huyền Thoại Liên Hạnh Công Chúa (Sông Temple with Princess Lieu Hạnh’s Legends), p. 4.

68. VTTKHXH-TTTS, file 9540, p. 63.

69. Đăng Anh, Đền Sông với Huyền Thoại Liên Hạnh Công Chúa, p. 9. Sông is a variant of Sững.


71. Inscription in Văn Cát temple, dated 1921.

72. Inscription in Văn Cát temple.

73. Nguyễn Công Trúc, Liên Hạnh Công Chúa Diên Âm (Phonetic Transcription about Princess Liên Hạnh), VHN, ms. AB.146; also in Vư Ngọc Khánh, Văn Cát Thành Nữ, pp. 62–71.

The name Phù Giấy, with its homophonetic variant Phù Giấy, is not easily
deciphered. The first word of the compound Phú Dãy or Phú Giây is of Sino-Vietnamese origin, meaning “an official residence” or “realm,” here referring to the deity’s earthly seat or sphere of activity. The second word has, as we see, two alphabetic spellings with potentially different semantic fields, the former meaning “thick,” and the latter meaning “(a) shoe(s).” Both are vernacular Vietnamese words. They apparently were not homonyms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, Alexandre de Rhodes, in his dictionary, which displayed a new alphabetic representation of Vietnamese phonetics, distinguished these two words (Alexandre de Rhodes, Từ Điển Annam-Lusitan-Latinh (Annamite–Lusitian [Portuguese]–Latin Dictionary), col. 164, under dãy, and col. 274, under giây).

Furthermore, these words were represented by two different demotic characters in Nôm writing. Giây is variously written as 鎅, 革, or 革, and dãy is written 葎. Giây, meaning “shoe,” is seemingly connected to the following event in some versions of Liễu Hạnh’s story: when Liễu Hạnh descended to earth for the second time, she, “because of thinking so much of her mother, dropped her shoe” (“Bản Lược Kể Lý Lịch Di Tích Lịch Sử” [Selections from the Descriptions of Historical Vestiges], QD09VH/QD, from February 21, 1975, Bộ Văn Hóa, Ministry of Culture, Hanoi, file “Phủ Giây,” doc. 2, p. 1).

From the guardian of Liễu Hạnh’s temple in Hanoi, I also heard a different explanation of the origin of the same appellation: Once one of the Lê emperors, while traveling, stopped for a night in this locality. He was told about Liễu Hạnh’s potency. When he awoke in the morning, he found under his head a shoe, which he took as a sign of her divine appearance to him, and he ordered that the place be called Phú Giây (interview in April 2001).

The character commonly used for the appellation 葎 is currently spelled dãy, which means “thick.” Some modern scholars explain the name Phú Dãy as deriving from a vernacular name for the village where Liễu Hạnh appeared, Kê Dãy, that is, locality Dãy. Many localities, in addition to their official, or Sino-Vietnamese, toponym, had an alternative toponym in the vernacular. For this, see Thái Hoàng, “Bản vê Thiên Lạng Việt Nam” (Discussion on the Names of Vietnamese Villages), pp. 54–60; Nguyễn Kiên Trường, “Thủ Tầm Hiệu sự Bảo Luật Ten Nôm Lạng Xã đã Đưu Góc Đố Ngữ và Văn Hóa” (Toward an Understanding of the Choice of Demotic Names of Villages and Communes from the Grammatical and Cultural Points of View), pp. 50–59. The first word, kê, a vernacular term initially used to designate a group of people, was later extended to refer to any locality smaller than a district (huyện). The second word, dãy, as the late Trần Quốc Vương and some Vietnamese officials explained to me, reflected the thickness or fruitfulness of the soil in the area. This may be a plausible conjecture, but there is no evidence to indicate what, if any, village may have had Kê Dãy as a vernacular appellation. Stories or theories to explain the name, whether Phú Giây or Phú Dãy, lead in several contradictory directions; there is no decisive historical or linguistic evidence to sustain any single point of view.
74. For example, Kim Khe village, Nghi Loc district, of Nghe An province, in 1938 reported a significant expansion of cultic activities (VTTKHXH-TTTS, file 7422, p. 33).

75. An arrangement of single and divided lines used for divination.

76. Bu`iV a˘n Tam, Phú Đây và Tín Ngưỡng Mẫu Liệu Hành, p. 48.

77. Pham Quy’nh Phương, “Thủ Mẫu Liệu ở Phú Giấy,” 1:131; also Vũ Ngọc Khánh, Đôn Miếu Việt Nam, p. 384.

78. Interview in Nam Diín, April 2001.


81. Pham Quy’nh Ph§Æng, “Tìm Hiểu Hệ Quan Hệ Tình Trong Quán Thề Di Tích Phú Giấy” (Toward an Understanding of the Belief System in the Phú Giấy Complex), p. 58.


85. Interview with Mr. Trần Việt Đức, April 2001.

86. Interview with Mrs. Trần Thị Hà’s husband, April 2001.


89. VTTKHXH-TTTS, file 2312, p. 293.

90. Hà Đình Thành, “Phủ Tây Hồ và Sự Phùng Thủ Liệu Hạnh” (Tây Hồ Temple and the Worship of Liệu Hạnh), 1:163.

91. All the above information came from interviews at Tây Hồ Temple in March 2001.

92. Lê Thị Chiény, Mẫu Liệu Tây Hồ (Mother Liệu of the West Lake), p. 35.


96. For example, see Minh Thiên Quốc Âm Chân Kính (Genuine Book in National Pronunciation of Illustration of Virtues), compiled in 1900, Société asiatique, Paris, ms. PD.2343; and the following manuscripts in the VHN: Bách Hành Thiên Thất (Writings on a Hundred Practices of Good Deeds), compiled in 1889, ms. VHv.42; Vân Hương Lễ Hành Công Chúa Tam Cẩm Chân Kính (Genuine Book of the Moral Foundation of Princess Vân Hương Liễu Hạnh), compiled in 1904, ms. A.1249b/1; Tĩnh Mê Phủ (Waking up from Errors), compiled in 1905, ms. AB.644; Tam Bồ Quê Âm (Three Treasures in National Pronunciation), compiled in 1906, ms. VNv.529; Chí Đạo Quê Âm Chân Kính (Genuine Book in National Pronunciation on Determination and Virtue), compiled in 1908, ms. AB.260; Hội Xuân Bảo Tập (Return of Spring: Collection of Treasures), compiled in 1910, AB.257, Hán-Nôm Institute, Hanoi; Văn Đề Bách Hành Thiên Định Nghĩa (Essay Expanding a Hundred Virtues in a Popular Version), compiled in 1910, ms. VNv.166; Thiên Thư Kim Giám Chân Kính (Genuine Book of Heavenly Autumn: Golden Examples), compiled in 1911, ms. AB.250.


98. Vũ Ngọc Khánh, Văn Cát Thân Nũ, p. 96.

99. For example, see Vũ Ngọc Phan, Tục Ngữ Cả Đạo Dân Ca Việt Nam (Vietnamese Proverbs and Popular Songs); Nguyễn Đồng Chí, Kho Tàng Truyền Cổ Tích Việt Nam (Treasury of Ancient Vietnamese Legends); Cao Huy Định, Ngọt Anh Hưng Làng Đồng (The Hero of Đồng Village); and Định Gia Khánh and Chu Xuân Dien, Văn Học Dân Gian (Popular Literature).


101. The documents in Dr. Trần Lê Văn’s possession still have not been sufficiently studied, to his dismay. The only publication based on them has been a short but very interesting article by Dr. Đỗ Thị Thảo of the Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, “Về Bản Tiền Từ Phát Kỳ của Động hổ Trần Lê Vụa Tím Lai Đạt” (On the Recently Discovered Manuscript “Genealogy of a Fairy” of the Trần and Lê Families), pp. 37–39.

102. Interview with Dr. Trần Lê Văn, April 2001.

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ABBREVIATIONS FOR ARCHIVAL SOURCES USED

CAOM Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
FM Fond Ministrel
GGI Fond du Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine
RST Fond du Résident Supérieur du Tonkin

TTLTQG Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia—1 (National Archives Center—1), Hanoi
AMH Archive de la Mairie, Hanoi
RST Fond du Résident Supérieur du Tonkin

VHN Viện Hàn Nôm (Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), Hanoi
Manuscripts in classical Chinese (Hán) and demotic Vietnamese (Nôm)

VTTKHXH Viện Thông Tin Khoa Học Xã Hội (Institute of Social Sciences and Information), Hanoi
TTTS Thân Tích Thần Sắc (Treasury of Hagiographies and Royal Deification Decrees)

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