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Vietnamese lived religion, Confucianism and women: *goddess spirituality* in Nguyễn Dữ's *the young woman from Nam Xuong*

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Vietnam as a nation is deeply rooted in the wet-rice agricultural civilization, which is characterized by the *Yin* (female) principle and the religion worshipping Mother Goddess. However, Chinese Confucianism significantly influenced Vietnam throughout the feudal dynasties (10–19th centuries). Confucian kingship propagates symbols of *virtuous women* to establish the moral order of a male-dominated society. In contrast, by practicing *lived religion* and spreading folk narratives, Vietnamese people turn *virtuous women* into Mother Goddess with a liberal, creative and patronage identity. This study, thus, examines the position of women in Confucian Nguyễn Dữ's *The Young Woman from Nam Xuong*, a canonical story reconstructed from legend. It is important to address the main concern about metaphors of a duality culture and a conflict discourse of Confucian politics and Vietnamese lived religion through the issue of *Goddess spirituality*. This article uses an interdisciplinary approach to demonstrate that resistance to Chinese Dominance and anti-Sinicization were significant issues of Vietnamese medieval literature and culture.

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Vietnamese Goddess Spirituality in Lived Religion and Confucian-based Society: An Introduction

With its geographical location at the crossroads of “civilizations”¹, Vietnam has been significantly influenced by cultural interactions throughout Southeast Asia (Thăng, 1992, p. 12–20). Based on the achievements of the *wet-rice agricultural civilization* of the *Van Lang-Au Lac* period (2879 BCE - 258 BCE) focusing on the *yin*² (female) principle, the indigenous culture containing diverse religions established a strong foundation during both the “Northern Domination” (Chinese domination: 111 BCE- 938) and Vietnam’s independent feudal dynasties (10–19th centuries) (Thêm, 2006; Ngan, 2021a). Vietnamese vernacular religions concentrate on worshiping ancestors, village patrons, and the Mother Goddess. It is the main reason that the most prominent feature of Vietnamese Confucian-based society had the simultaneous existence of two opposing trends: Sinicization and anti-Sinicization.

Mother Goddess religion contains elements of an ancient cosmological system and classifies the universe into four regions ruled by an incarnation of Mother Goddesses. These are the sky Goddess (Mẫu Thiên), the land Goddess (mẫu Địa), the water Goddess (Mẫu Thoải), and the mountains and forests Goddess (Mẫu thượng ngàn). In *Vietnamese Mother Goddess*, Ngô Đức Thịnh observes that:

“Vietnamese people are originally rice-growing agricultural residents in the tropical monsoon region, so from their concepts and thinking to their basic lifestyle, they are all agricultural in nature for thousands of years. In their concept, worshiping the Spirits of *Earth, Water, Mountain, Fire, and Rice* are identical with *Yin* (negative) and transformed into Mother Goddess. Vietnamese people also attribute cosmic and natural phenomena to femininity with attributes of protection, fertility, and creativity. Beyond those practical and metaphysical factors, there is always the obvious reality of the great role and position of women in the nation’s history of building and defending the country (Thịnh, 2009, p.27).”

Vietnamese traditional rural communities and farmers claiming to have personal mystical experiences linked to specific cultural contexts are the subjects of lived beliefs about the Goddess’ spirituality. They “ignore the official interpretive frameworks of institutional religion and sacred religious texts” (Primiano, 1995, p.44; Bowman, Valk (2012)) and practice Goddess spirituality anywhere. They participate in lived religion in their own family compound, in private temples hidden behind fields, in small huts by the river, next to trees and outside the official worship centers in daily life.

However, Vietnamese traditional society entered an important conversion period after the ending of the Lý Dynasty (1009–1225), the first independent feudal government in which Buddhism was recognized as the institutional religion. Since then, Confucianism became prevalent and started competing with Taoism, Buddhism, and vernacular religions (Papin, 1999, Thanh, 2020). During the Lê Dynasty (1504–1527), Confucianism grew immensely prosperous and dominated the entire social structure. From the point of view of the feudal court, this religion was the perfect tool for the government and effectively adapted to the government’s goal of establishing a nation whose dominant framework was self-contained (Ngan, 2021b). Since the movement of *Sinicization* (Chinese cultural adoption) became mainstream in Vietnamese thought, the *Yang* principle (positive, rigid, monolithic) of Chinese Northern nomadic culture has increasingly infiltrated Vietnamese culture (Thêm, 2006). The authorities declared Confucianism to be the *institutional religion*, imitated the legislation modeled after China, and subjected both urban and rural regions to the regiment of feudatory ceremonies (Anh, 1938; Thêm, 2006; Kim, 2009). Since then, Vietnamese culture has been

shaped by the dialectical relationship between indigenous culture and Confucian ideals through adapting, absorbing, conflicting, and reconciling between Confucianism and lived religion, particularly concerning the issue of Goddess spirituality.

“Confucianism, at various times and places, was a primordial religious sensibility and praxis; a philosophic exploration of the cosmos; an ethical system; an educational program; a complex of family and community rituals; dedication to government service; aesthetic criticism; a philosophy of history; the debates of economic reformers; the intellectual background for poets and painters; and much more.” (John and Evelyn, 2004, p.2). In other words, Confucianism is an ideology and a political model and has widespread influence in all fields. And, the main concerns of Confucianism were “the family and the state” (Dorothy, Hoobler (2009), p.60).

In Vietnam, Confucianism reached its peak in the 15th century when it was used by the Lê Dynasty as the sole doctrine in the royal court and strongly applied to the organization of social life. From the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (1460–1497), the feudal court separated politics from religion and officially became a Confucian monarchy. The choice of Confucian political doctrine, the establishment of the Confucian monarchy, and the implementation of social transformation to accept Confucianism have brought the Vietnamese nation-state into a new trajectory “going deeper into the shadow of Chinese political and cultural stereotypes.” (Thanh, 2020, p.32). This political choice creates the gaps between official ideology and traditional culture, between government and society. The outstanding result is that the “social space” with typical relationship systems was divided into many areas. “From the perspective of Vietnamese elite or intellectual culture, popular religiosity has been marginalized or suppressed” (Taylor, 2004, p.9). Thus, the popular community not only absorbed the “Confucian Classic of Rites” but also transformed the way of expression of vernacular religious practices. While Goddess spirituality exists diversely and powerfully in Vietnam from pre-Confucian society, this lived religion is only implicitly maintained in the villages’ frame when Confucianism dominates the government and social structure. It is also from this time, the transformation of concepts about gender and the position of women in society became prominent.

By constructing a personality model of virtuous women, Confucianism transforms women into a standard model of *passivity* and requires unconditional obedience on the part of women to males in the family. In *Vietnamese Medieval Literature from 10th to 19th Century*, Trần Nho Thìn stated that “feudal rites encompass two dimensions: class oppression and gender oppression” (Thìn, 2012, p.350), which expresses itself in women’s inferior and despised status in patriarchal families. He believed this was the consequence of a complex process of thought transformation, in which Confucianism interpreted the difference between women and men in a male-dominated society through the lens of two poles, *Yin* and *Yang*. (Thìn, 2012, p.351). This Confucian institution restricts women’s freedom by forcing them to depend entirely on their family, clan, and parents. The virtues of a young woman were defined in “Five Constant Virtues” of Confucianism as filial piety to her parents and in-laws, submission to her husband, instruction of children, and the preservation of the marital bond through “Decorum” and “Uprightness” (Lê, 1996). Even “the post-Song period was also governed by the philosophic opinion that a woman should not remarry; all too many young women were relegated to widowhood at an early age because of the new theory about female virtue” (John and Evelyn, 2004, p.74). In another extreme example, a woman was encouraged to commit suicide by her parents after the death of her husband (Kính, 2001, p.308). As a result, based on the unequal framework of *five moral obligations*³,

this theory made women into the standard model of passivity. It demanded the loyalty and absolute obedience of women in male-dominated society by building a *virtuous woman* model.

A virtuous woman is defined as “a lady who refuses to lose her virginity” (Anh, 1938a), “a woman with a strong temperament” (Thin, 2012), or simply “a woman who underestimates her own life.” “The primary attribute of a virtuous woman is her complete submission to her husband blindly” (Hung, 2016). Influenced by Chinese Confucianism, this personality type had parallel formation and development with the fate of Confucian intellectuals in East Asia culture, in which virtuous women characters were shoulder to shoulder with “honor men”. Supporting this thought, Ngô Sĩ Liên, a Confucian historian of the Lê dynasty, encourages in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Comprehensive History of The Great Việt) in 1697 that:

“When Princess Thiệu Dương heard of Thái Tông King’s death, she immediately cried out and committed suicide; when Lê Thị learned the news of her husband’s death, immediately she was hunger strike to die. Ngô Miên’s wife, virtuous lady resolutely refused to worship two husbands, and thus committed suicide by jumping into the river. Indeed, there are a few people in real life who are virtuous, filial, loyal, and chaste. It’s truly commendable for current Kings to praise them to encourage the future generation.” (Liên et al., 2009, p. 458).

In other words, canonizing virtuous women, making decrees to commend, and rewarding those who were visible chastity were the effective ways that the court took advantage of the painful death of women to establish order and social dignity. “Because loyalty and virginity are great values that Confucian politicians pursue” (Thin, 2012, p.363). It intends to orient a value, a model of behavior for women and subtly establishes the moral order of a male-dominated society⁴.

Although such orthodox views on gender documented in historical records clearly demonstrate Confucian monarchy’s policy, the influence of Chinese Confucianism on Vietnam is mainly concentrated in the court and elites. The essential properties of gender culture in Vietnam were indeed adjusted at depths by *yin* principle and Goddess spirituality. Cao Tự Thanh points in his essay *Vietnamese History in Official Chinese History* the fact that: “Despite being voluntary, the feudal state’s ideological dependency on Confucianism from the Lê dynasty limited the development of a political culture deeply rooted in national traditions and frequently unaccompanied with social activity” (Thanh, 2020, p.34).

This political choice greatly affected Vietnamese traditional culture in general and created a conflicting situation and compromise between the institutional religion and the lived religion. On the one hand, the women have a defective position outside society as the Confucian monarchy’s orthodox viewpoint. On the other hand, peasants continue living according to thousands of years-old traditions respecting the *yin* and women inside autonomous villages. The famous proverb “Phép vua thua lệ làng” (King law is not equal to village rule) highlights a distinctive aspect of Vietnamese folk behavior, particularly in the concept of women’s roles.

Being gendered with the face of the mother, the lived religion of worshipping the mother god is where Vietnamese women show their essential position in the wet rice agricultural civilization and entrust their desire to liberate themselves from the prejudices and constraints of Confucian society. In which, traditional rural communities and farmers with personal mystical experiences linked to specific cultural contexts are the subjects of lived religion. They “ignore the official interpretive frameworks of institutional religion and sacred religious texts” (Primiano, 1995:44; Bowman and Valk, 2012) and practice “everyday religion” (Nancy, 2007; Meredith, 2008) everywhere, in their family

compound, in private temples hidden behind fields, in small huts by the river, next to trees and anywhere outside the official worship centers. However, the patriarchy still covers all aspects of the law, behavior and lifestyle of Confucianists and the feudal class. In the villages, farmers still live according to the folklife. The tradition of respecting women and worshipping the goddess is still silently present and governs family relationships. The wife still plays the leading role in organizing and managing the family, especially in economics. “It indicates a mixture or more accurately a merger, a situation where the unique traditional values of the race exist simultaneously with systems or values that are either imported or imposed” (Cadière, 2018, p.142). Therefore, Confucian Nguyễn Dữ’s *The Young Woman from Nam Xuong* story, which is a classic work about the status of women in Vietnamese feudal society, is analyzed to clarify the metaphors of dialectical relationship and a conflict discourse of Confucian politics and Vietnamese lived religion.

Nguyễn Dữ’s Legend of Young Woman from Nam Xuong

Confucian’s Nguyễn Dữ lived in the Lê (1428–1527) and Mạc (1527–1592) dynasties. However, his Han character collection *Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục* (Excursive Notes on Weird Stories) (Dữ, 1963), including Legend of *Young Woman from Nam Xuong* was based on traditional narratives having context in the dynasties of Lý (1009–1225), Trần (1225–1414) and the early period of the Lê (1428–1527). Like other Confucianists following the classical spirit “ôn cố tri tân” (To revise the old in order to know the new), the author implicitly expressed his nostalgia for the good values of the old dynasty of Lê Thánh Tông King, who worked hard to cultivate the originally indigenous cultural values and attempted to develop national identities different from China. Thus, Nguyễn Dữ wanted to recreate folk narratives relating to previous dynasties to express hidden political messages to the current dynasty. *Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục* of Nguyễn Dữ including 20 fantasy short stories, has become classical work in Vietnamese medieval literature by praising the most human values of human beings, respecting and protecting women through rebellious discourse against feudalism and Confucianism. This collection became a great work when the center of fantasy short stories contained the spirit of praising and protecting women, a rare omen in the male-dominated society at that time. In this collection, reconstructing *Truong’s Wife Legend* widely known in the 14th century (that was penned on an antique stele at the Vũ Nương temple’s cluster of relics) (Huỳnh, 2005), Nguyễn Dữ wrote a tragic, humane story and deep sympathy for the status of women who are victims of male-dominated ideology under the new title *Legend of Young Woman from Nam Xuong*.

In this story, Nguyễn Du described that: “Vũ Thị Thiết is a young woman from Nam Xuong. She has great virtue and a good appearance. In the village, Mr. Trương Sinh, who is loving for her virtue, petitions his mother for permission to marry Vũ Thị Thiết at a bride price of one hundred taels of gold” (Dữ, 1963, p.125). “However, “Trương Sinh is jealous and excessively cautious with his wife”. Originating from a “poor girl dependent on the wealthy family”, Vũ Thị had a momentary but happy time as the wife of Trương Sinh. However, the country’s peacetime was not long before the war happened. Although he was the son of a respected family, Trương Sinh had to join the army in the first campaign because of little education” (Dữ, 1963, p.125).

With a few short introductions forming a vast background for the entire story: “The government has a fight with the Champa Kingdom”, Nguyễn Dữ mentioned the seeds of tragedy when the characters seem accustomed to living together for a long time with social unrest and war. Vũ Nương was portrayed a pattern of women living within Confucian rituals and standards. When

saying goodbye to her husband to join the army, she only wished for her husband's return to peace, not for the glory of the general and royal perks. Trương Sinh's mother acknowledged the merit and dignity of his daughter-in-law respectfully. Just prior to passing away, she said that:

"Long or short life is due to fate; good or bad fate is because of God. Nightfall and my fate come to an end! My withered body has reflected you a lot. Your husband is far away so that when I die, he cannot return to repay and worship in time. Gods will help honest people, bestow blessings with good seeds, and a large number of children and grandchildren. I hope that Gods will not betray you just as you have the heart to help me." (Dũ, 1963, p.127-8)."

The critical detail of the story is that while the husband enlisted in the army to fight, the young wife at home used her own shadow reflecting the wall to comfort her son. She told her son that her shadow was "the father". Like the soul's reflection, the shadow created a two-sided situation arising from its "nothingness" identity. Vũ Nương's shadow became a spiritual supporter for mother and child in the critical time of war. The shadow brings the man's illusion to support the woman when her husband is away from home. The reflection of the shadow on the wall is a complex of loneliness, insecurity, and nostalgia for her husband on the battlefield. The shadow emerged from the association about an entirely distant world of insecurity in the soul of women. Moreover, the shadow awakens closeness and creates a transcendent spiritual connection between the son and his absent father. On the other side, the shadow arises a dark tragedy.

"By the following year, the Champa enemy surrendered, and the army returned to the country. When Trương Sinh came to the house, his mother had passed away, and his son, Đản, was only beginning to learn to speak. He visited his mother's grave and brought along his son. When he went to the field, he saw Đản crying, Truong Sinh comforted him saying, "I have just returned, your grandmother had passed away before. This broke my heart!. Please don't cry.

The innocent child said: "Oh, really? So, you are also my father, right? You even could talk to me, not like my father before. He just kept silent."

Trương Sinh asked surprisingly.

His son said: "When you are not here, there is usually a man who comes our home in every night, mom comes he comes, mom goes he goes also, mom sits he sits also, but he never holds me" (Dũ, 1963, p.128-29).

The child's words caused pain and suspicion in Truong Sinh's heart. Trương Sinh was fortunate to survive the war. The fierce, bloody, and deadly events on the battlefield but the psychological trauma of the war in this man's heart did not disappear. The war injuries multiplied when he faced his mother's death as he returned. These traumatic events firmly raised the voice of negative shadow and energy in the man's mind with a jealous personality. In the meantime, his son brought a "death puzzle". "When he heard his son saying that, he certainly thought that his corrupt wife had adultery and no way to educate. When he got home, he insulted his wife to satisfy his anger. Neighbors tried to support and defend Vũ Nương, but they were unsuccessful" (Dũ, 1963, p.129).

It was impossible to explain injustice, Vũ Nương bathed, purified, and went to Hoàng Giang River to commit suicide to show faithfulness. After Vũ Nương's death, the "death puzzle" that the son sent to Trương Sinh had accidentally received an answer at midnight.

"That's great! My father is here again, the son said.

Trương Sinh asked his son where the man was. He points at Trương Sinh's shadow on the wall: "Here my father is" (Dũ, 1963, p.131).

It can be seen that Trương Sinh's harsh judgment of his wife is a metaphor for the giant shadow of a male-dominated society covering a woman's life. Vũ Nương is a typical character who lives in a Confucianism-dominated and -controlled society. Despite lamenting about her injustice when she was accused and abandoned, she never forgot to express her gratitude and kinship to her husband: "I am originally from a poor family to enter the wealthy family. Unexpectedly! love is like autumn leaves, detractors are like mountains". When accused and abandoned, she had only the way to sacrifice life with the desire that "the sacred river Gods witness" (Dũ, 1963, p.132). This woman obeyed and self-sacrificed despite being beaten and driven away mercilessly. She said to Phan Lang, who lived in the same village when they had strange encounters in the underworld of the river: "My husband abandoned me. I would rather be old in a "water realm" but have no position to meet my husband!" (Dũ, 1963, p.134). The death for the sake of virginity of Vũ Nương shows that she is an actual model of Confucius's virtuous woman.

However, one of the critical transitions in the story takes place soon after Vũ Nương's death. After Trương Sinh was told about the conversation with Vũ Nương's spirit by Phan Lang, Truong Sinh built a three-day and three-night sacrifice ceremony on the riverside Hoàng Giang to exonerate his wife's soul. In that sacred moment, Vũ Nương's spirit shadow appeared brilliantly in the clouds. "He saw Vũ Nương's shadow sitting on a gold palanquin in the middle of the river, she was being followed by more than fifty servants, flower flags and shining brightly full of the river. Her shadow was sometimes hiding and appearing. Momentarily, those phenomena disappeared suddenly" (Dũ, 1963, p.136). After that supernatural event, people in the village built Vũ Lady Temple and called her "Mother Goddess Hường Nương". Vũ Nương's victim shadow has now become a "holy shadow" which is "Water Goddess" (Mẫu Thoải) in Vietnamese lived religion.

The spiritual transformation from virtuous woman to Mother Goddess

With various hidden nuances and dualistic nature, the human fate through shadow in this story exists in dialectical and conflict relationships between politics and folklore, in which there are contrary conceptions between women's low status in Confucian cosmology and their significant role in indigenous beliefs. The more tragedies of women's dependence on the Confucian society were created, the more the high position of women in Vietnamese indigenous beliefs was glorified. Therefore, to understand the true gender discourse, it is necessary to place this story in the broader context of the older folkloric foundations for which this legend was created.

As an Indochinese high-ranking civil servant who had the opportunity to have extensive contact with the Annamites in the 19th century, Paul Giran admitted in his essay *Annam Witchcraft and Beliefs* (1912) that: "Annam, the realm of the dream, where the spirit of science has never been free to develop, the ancient folk narratives have survived to this day. Furthermore, it takes place not because of a deep sense of reverence for all that touches the past, but rather because of the absolute belief in myths, legends, and the true meaning that people continue to assign to them" (Giran, 2021, p.6). It can be seen that Confucian's Nguyễn Dũ completed this work in the 16th century. The majority of the stories in *Excursive Notes on Weird Stories* were reconstructed from folk narratives and significant historical events in the 14th and 15th centuries. Most of the characters in these stories were related to Vũ Lady Temple constructed before the composition of *Legend of Young Woman from Nam Xương*. Vũ Nương was crowned as "Mother Goddess" following the custom of "canonizing and empowering the Gods" for heroes and virtuous

women after their death (An, 2015). So, the name Vũ Nương was widely known in the vernacular religion and legend with the respectful name “Mother Goddess Hương Nương” before being famous for Nguyễn Dữ’s gorgeous and tragic literary.

According to historical records, the Vũ Lady Temple was built in the 15th century when the Lê dynasty ordained Vũ Nương as a virtuous woman (Hường, 2005, p.32). She also was ordained several times in 1909, 1911, and 1924 by the Nguyễn dynasty (Institute of Social Science Information, 1995). However, the initial place of Vũ Nương’s worship was a small temple on the riverbank in Chân Lý (Lý Nhân, Hà Nam), villagers moved temple into the dike and rebuilt to be more spacious and superficial then. The temple is still located next to the Red River, an important river of Vietnam’s wet-rice culture. This location is intersection of many historical and cultural values, architectural art, mother worship beliefs, and strong connection with the relics of ancient wet-rice civilization.

Being located in the group of historical monuments of Vũ Nương’s Mother Goddess temple, there are also Báo Ân pagoda and Vũ Điện communal houses overlooking the Red River. The other version of Vũ Nương narrative in the Han bibliography records that on the Red River bank former and under the bombax ceiba tree, there was a shrine to worship Quan Âm Nam Hải (East Sea Guan Yin), a bodhisattva who governs the river. Vũ Nương came here to express her grievances with the hope that Gods would witness and then throw herself into the river. However, she was saved by Guan Yin, adopted by the Dragon King, stayed at the Aquarium Palace, and was named “Hương Nương Princess” to govern this river section. The riverbank was later eroded, and the villagers moved the temple to its present location, built the new pagoda right where the absolution ceremony was practiced in the past, and named it “Báo Ân Pagoda” to remember the gratitude of East Sea Guan Yin and Vũ Nương. The strange thing is that more than five centuries have passed, and the devastating flood rises to the temple area every year. However, floods then turn to the north and never wash away this group of historic monuments.

There would not have so many problems to discuss if Vũ Lady temple merely worshiped a Confucian virtuous woman. More importantly, Vũ Nương temple is associated with the unique agricultural terrain, the supernatural place and the people’s consciousness of worshipping the *Water Goddess* (Mẫu Thoải). Located in ancient land next to the *Red River*, this temple has not only inherited the incentives from the fertile alluvium of the river but also suffered tremendous annual floods in the Northern Delta. In order to vividly reflect the hard struggle of the wet rice residents with the wrath of nature to cultivate and preserve this land, the people have homogenized virtuous Vũ Nương, who is worshiped in this temple with the Water Goddess. Moreover, when the Red River turned into a commercial center with busy markets, Vũ Nương continued to transform the Mother goddess of fishermen and merchant ships. Since then, “Vũ Nương temple has been regarded as a significant center of merchants’ religious activities” (Hoàng and Vạ, 2008, p.35).

Additionally, the fame of Vũ Nương Mother Goddess temple is also closely related to the resounding victory of defeating the Champa army of the King who brought the brilliant achievement of the Vietnamese feudal dynasties in history. The first year of Hồng Đức (1470), the country’s situation seemed stable and peaceful. Lê Thánh Tông King was interested in both strengthening the southern border of Hóa Châu District and defending the northern border. Taking the opportunity of Champa’s Bàn La Trà King to defeat Hóa Châu with more than 100,000 marines in August 1470, Lê Thánh Tông decided to carry out a large-scale campaign, opened a contemplation to solve the security problem thoroughly for the southern border (Liên, 2009 et al., p.464-70). This historical event was recorded in Lê Thánh Tông King’s book

titled *Strategy to Fight Chăm* and widely disseminated in the army. Lê Thánh Tông directly brought 70,000 soldiers and more than 1000 large boats to Tân Ấp and Cửu Tô sea gates and moved to Thị Nại sea gate to surround and attack the Trà Bàn’s capital—especially, this famous battle in Vietnamese history associated with a story about Goddess spirituality at Vũ Lady temple.

In this legend, Lê Thánh Tông King, on the journey leading his army to quell the rebellion, passed by the Hoàng Giang River, where Vũ Lady temple is located. He had to stop the warship in front of the temple due to the tremendous waves and the mysterious turtle blocking the ship’s bow. At that time, King had the chance to hear about Vũ Nương’s tragic story. Emotionally, King personally went to the temple to burn incense and composed one of the famous poems titled “The temple of Truong’s Wife” (Tông, 1962). The Hương Nương Water Goddess patronized Lê Thánh Tông’s army which had a resounding victory in that battle. When returning, the King gave the villagers gold to repair the temple and provided more land for incense to worship.

After all, the temple of Trương Sinh’s wife and related monuments have gone beyond the space of mere virginity. The sacredness of “Hương Nương Goddess” in the inhabitants’ consciousness of this land reveals that what was recorded in historical and literary bibliographies was just the “prologue” of the “extremely vivid lived religion and folklife.” It shows that from Vũ Nương in the legend to literature, from Princess Vũ Nương in the ordination of the dynasty to Hương Nương Mother Goddess in live religion who is the patron god of rivers are a process of “creating gods” and “transforming spirits” creatively of Vietnamese culture.

Anti-Confucianism discourse through transformation of Goddess spirituality

Based on Southeast Asian cultural elements, Vietnamese culture refracted and neutralized the influences of Chinese culture. The most typical of these is the transformation of Goddess spirituality in lived religion of the nation that was considered the “realm of the matriarchal” (Thêm, 2006). In “Chinese domination”, with the goal of spreading Han culture, customs, and religions, many policies of cultural assimilation that China applied to Vietnamese politico, culture and society were very fierce (Liên et al., 2009, p. 321). However, from the perspective of political institutions and social structure, the nature of “losing the country but not losing the village” (Anh, 1957b; Huyền (1995); Vượng, 2003) made Vietnam experienced an assimilation period that changed its external appearance but retained its internal structure. In parallel with the assimilation policy of the Northern feudal dynasties, the struggle against the assimilation of the Vietnamese people took place in all fields.

It is no coincidence that the initial war for the movement against the invaders during the Northern domination period was led by two talented and strategic female generals, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị (30-40. 1st), and then the revolution was headed by female general Triệu Thị Trinh (246) (Liên 2009 et al., p.22). In the official historical document, *Comprehensive History of The Great Việt* (14-16th), Lê Văn Hưu emphasized that: “Although Mrs. Trưng Trắc and Mrs. Trưng Nhị were women, when they called for an uprising, the districts of Cửu Chân, Nhật Nam, Hợp Phố and 65 areas in Lĩnh Ngoại all responded. Building the country and declaring themselves kings by these two female Generals seemed to be as easy as turning a hand” (Liên et al., 2009, p. 22). In the ancient bibliography *Hội chân biên* of Thanh Hòa Tử, engraved on wood in 1847 (during the reign of Thiệu Trị King), it is recorded that out of 27 fairies of Vietnamese origin, 17 are all Goddesses (Thanh, 2021). This essential historical evidence written by Confucian scholars showed the vital role of women in indigenous culture. The Chinese historical documents such as *Thủy Kinh Chú* (Ancient Chinese River System) of Lịch Đạo Nguyên analyze that the brave “female

bandits” as Trưng Trắc, Trưng Nhị who made the Chinese generals surrender (Nguyễn, 2005, p. 143). In the ideological world of “respecting men and despised women” of the ancient Han empire, the battle of these women generals became a symbol of the fierce confrontation in culture, lifestyle, and mindset of the South-North, Vietnam-China.

However, Vietnam’s history is characterized by brutal and bloody wars interwoven with brief periods of prosperity, in which the 16th century of Nguyễn Dữ should be emphasized as the most turbulent and brutal period in feudal dynasties. After the brilliant peak of Lê Thánh Tông’s reign in less than 100 years, the society became in crisis, the economy deteriorated, and the civil war between the two feudal Lê and Mạc corporations made the people fall into misery (Anh, 1957b; Thục, 1992). During the 16th and 17th centuries, feudal factions rushed to compete for rights, which caused fierce wars. The people became miserable, social conflicts became acute, and political disorder became widespread. In this fierce historical period, the Confucian doctrine that the Vietnamese received from China exposed the blind points, the lack of metaphysical vision, and the utopia of the moral model (Ngan, 2021a). The primary choice of Confucians like Nguyễn Dữ chose to resign from title mandarins and return to live in seclusion in the village. He hid in the mountains of Thanh Hóa with his mother and immersed himself in the folklife. The reclusive Confucian like Nguyễn Dữ presented a different identity of Vietnamese intellectuals who originated from wet-rice civilization.

Against the tradition of Confucianism in strictly controlling emotions and moralizing all natural phenomena, Nguyễn Dữ collected folk narratives that were widely circulated in the folklife and reconstructed them into fantasy stories. His famous collection created conflicting political and cultural discourses written from the margins, which expressed the non-orthodox cultural background, masked and disguised political consciousness against the dynasty, and integrated into the mainstream of authentic national intellectuals by promoting the ancient cultural values.

With this creative art, Vũ Nương’s death reveals the harsh Confucian concept of the fate and secondary status of women in feudal society, meanwhile, the “holy shadow” of “Mother Goddess Hường Nương” on the epiphany cloud layer after her death reflects the local culture worshiping mother goddess and respects for women. However, the practice of Confucianism lacks rigor in Vietnam, as complained by Cao Kim Lan, “has led to an easy reconciliation of Confucianism and feminism. However, the latter was not really able to completely shatter the ceiling, so-called, as women still continue to be oppressed.” (Lan (2019) p.199). Undoubtedly, Vũ Nương’s tragedy cannot be ruled out; just as it cannot cancel the vast presence of Confucianism in Vietnam history, transforming Vũ Nương into Goddess spirituality in lived religion is a fundamental solution. It also shows a common behavioral tendency that Vietnamese Confucian writers, on the one hand, obey feudal rites and etiquette and, on the other hand, always react to cultural defense by entrusting their spirit into the mystical world of the Gods in folk belief. This intense mystical world offers justice in their dreams and alleviates resentments ranging from personal and social tragedy. Simultaneously, it reveals the ideal existence of writers in opposition to the harshness of reason and mediocrity in the daily life of a Confucian. This demonstrates that the Vietnamese have created a sophisticated spiritual mechanism for balancing the state of culture with religion and belief having opposite colors from the depth of cultural consciousness.

Finally, the transformation of Goddess spirituality in *Legend of Young Women from Nam Xương* is one of the living examples of the cross-cultural scenarios of goddess spirituality. On the one hand, while this phenomenon has the unique traditional cultural identity of the Vietnamese people, on the other hand, it is possible to find many common denominators with the phenomena of

goddess spiritual transformation that take place vividly in the world. In *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, Carol Christ studies the transformation of Goddess spirituality in the West in the modern period, emphasizing that: “One of the most unexpected developments of the late twentieth century is the rebirth of the religion of the Goddess in western cultures”. Carol Christ questions whether: “Is she a creation of female fantasy? Or male fear? Does She herald a return to primitive superstition?”. Meanwhile, an expert in contemporary Vietnamese religious studies in the work *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam*, Philip Taylor, observes that: “the pilgrimage to this goddess is an example of the phenomenal growth of interest in recent years in feminine spirits” and “opens a window onto the effervescence, creativity, social complexity, and interpretive ferment of popular religiosity in present-day Vietnam” (Taylor, 2004, p.vii). Both Carol Christ and Philip Taylor agree that the similarity in the phenomenon of this goddess’s spiritual transformation takes place when the dominance and dominant power of men causes the social balance to become unbalanced, political and economic conflicts arise causing war frequently. This has made people’s minds insecure, and community bonds and moral standards broken. From there, there seems to be a general spiritual scenario for the strong rise of goddesses from traditional beliefs. However, the rise of the goddess in the West focuses on the aspect that goddess’s presence serves to ensure “moral principles” and create “a more just, peaceful, and harmonious world” (Carol (1997), p.5). The transformation of Goddess spirituality in Vietnam always emphasizes the connection between humans and the mystical world, and promotes the community connection of the long-standing wet rice agricultural civilization.

Conclusion

In the institution of a male-dominated society with the centrality of ancestor worship in Confucian cosmology, the low position of Vietnamese women in the patriarchal family was very noticeable. In the history of Vietnamese literature from the 10th to the following century, although many examples of virtuous women appeared in history due to the purposeful promotion of feudal court, the widespread circulation of the legends, beliefs and fantasy genre had shown that Vietnamese culture was not only to promote a personality model but also confirmed the failure, tragedy of this one personality pattern. At the same time, the people and writers provided a solution to solve the conflict by bringing women back to the position of worship in the lived religion. Hence, Nguyễn Dữ’s classical work hid the nostalgic spirit of glorious achievements and the spirit of protecting women that the Early Lê feudal regime had previously established. Influenced by folk narratives, political achievements, laws, and the intense spirituality Goddess, Nguyễn Dữ powdered the sensory perceptions and attitude of a national intellectual when writing about the unique status of Vietnamese women in Confucian-based society. The complex nature of women’s status expressed through the character Vũ Nương in folk narratives, vernacular beliefs, and the story of Nam Xương women shows the complicated reconciliation between folklore and the reigning dynasty at the surface of society. It also shows the cultural resistance at the cultural depth between Confucianism and indigenous beliefs.

From Vũ Nương of legend, the Confucian virtuous woman of feudal dynasties to Water Goddess of agricultural residents, this reflects the transformation of the unique goddess spirituality. In which the figure of a Confucian virtuous woman is only a rational excuse to anchor the memory but not the central reason for worship activities. Inheriting the spirit of mother worship through thousands of years in the guise of a chaste mirror, the magical short

story of the Confucian Nguyễn Dữ with the guise of a gorgeous language wants to through the issue of women's status to convey metaphorical political messages to the court, emperor and posterity. Therefore, The Legend of Young Woman from Nam Xuong, with the tragedy of shadow, has become the anchorage and connection of historical and cultural events that seem far apart but reflect a Vietnamese cultural constant. At the same time, this story paved the way for the anti-Confucian discourse and the tendency to promote the human positivity of the indigenous culture in the context of Vietnamese politics being oppressed by a doctrine that proved powerless in the period of chaotic history. Most of all, from legends, religion, historical events or literary works, stories about the female paralytic character Vũ Nương contribute to explaining an essential socio-political phenomenon that throughout the Chinese domination and the Confucian feudal dynasties with many policies of Chinese assimilation, the Vietnamese people still maintain their integrity and an independent cultural whole with distinct language, custom, belief and lived religion.

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Notes

- 1 Based on the point of view of anthropologists and archaeologists, the term "civilization" in this study refers to "cultural systems" that are formed by "interacting elements or subsystems" (Flannery, 1972; Williams and Callaghan, 2020) and "culture is everything about a human community, its knowledge, beliefs, and practices; civilizations are a particular kind of culture" (Brown, 2009). Besides, the term "civilization" does not imply "bring civilization to the backward locals" and "remote regions" (Duncan, 2004, p.13).
- 2 Following *Yin yang* doctrine, *yin* is the passive female principle of the universe. On the other hand, *yang* is the positive male principle.
- 3 *Five moral obligations* include King and servants, father and child, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, and friends.
- 4 Another famous legend of the Chinese Domination period that can contribute to this point is called the *My Châu - Trọng Thủy*. This is considered one of the earliest and most forming legends appearing in all the important historical documents such as *Linh Nam Chích Quái* (14th), An Dương Vương King, who merged Tây Âu and Lạc Việt into a strong Âu Lạc country, built Cổ Loa's great citadel to prevent peril from foreign invasions. Experiencing many difficulties, but receiving the support of God to destroy the demon, the citadel's construction was completed, and God also gave the claws to An Dương Vương as a weapon against the enemy. Cổ Loa became a major political, military and economic center of Âu Lạc country during An Duong Vuong's reign and the divine claw was used to make a weapon of mass destruction named Liên Châu Crossbow. It is critical to note that all legends in the series of dehydrating events or related versions said that My Châu was entrusted with the protection of the magical crossbow. (Xuyên, 1961; Pháp, 2017). According to Tạ Chí Đại Trướng, Trần Quốc Vương: "My Châu is not the private name of the princess daughter of An Dương Vương, but it is the common name of the princesses. Because historical documents had been written through the patriarchal perspective, we no longer see the importance of this issue. However, by returning to past periods and observing the nature of maternal lineage inheritance and the prominent position of women in ancient culture (17), we understand that the woman carrying the crossbow signifies that they maintained the custom." (Trướng, 2006, p.26).

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