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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vietnamese religion, folklore and literature: Archetypal journeys from folktales to medieval fantasy short stories

Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan^{1*}

Abstract: Basing on an analysis of social, cultural and historical contexts with bloody war and conflicts in Vietnamese medieval times in the 15th and 16th centuries, this study focuses on the discussion of the compromise as well as the implicit conflict between indigenous folklore and imported religions from China manifested from folktales to fantasy medieval literature. At the same time, we pointed out that with strong nationalism and Buddhist-Taoist colors of thought, Vietnamese Confucian writers adapted to the traditional folktales, reconciled it with the values and the aspirations of their own culture, and created a unique “anti-Confucianism” discourse in literature. The dynamics of fantasy genre and the complex textual intersection between traditional narratives and literature will be analyzed through the special regenerated process of the archetypal journey from folktales to Vietnamese medieval fantasy short stories.

Subjects: Classical Studies; Religion; Chinese & Japanese Religions; Cultural Studies; Subcultures

Keywords: archetypal journey; Buddhism; confucianism; fantasy literature; folktales; Taoism



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Introduced by the medieval Vietnamese fantasy short story as the crystallization of folktales, historical prose and religious thought, the article discusses about this genre with the aim of revealing the harmony and conflict between indigenous folklore and religion imported from China. The medieval authors collected and recreated fantastic stories in the folk tradition as a way to challenge the Confucian forces. It is also here, a unique union of indigenous folklore that contains the spirit of liberation, the desire for innocent freedom, and the innate metaphysical wisdom in folktales with Taoism and Buddhism have been formed. By discussing the archetypal journey is grounded in specific contexts, this article concludes that the medieval fantasy short stories successfully built unique metaphysical experiences and created a breakthrough development in art by collecting

Reaching the peak of the genre in the 15th century, the medieval Vietnamese fantasy short story is the crystallization of folktales, historical prose and religious thought. This category simultaneously revealed the harmony and conflict between indigenous folklore and religion imported from China. Although written in Chinese character by Confucian writers, the tradition of medieval fantasy short stories was originally an expression of resistance. The authors practice collecting, telling, and rewriting fantastic stories in the folk tradition on the periphery as a way to challenge the Confucian political and cultural forces at the center. With the support of the Buddhist senses, especially Taoism in connection with the polytheistic worldview and the animism of folktales, the medieval fantasy short stories of Vietnam have contributed to creating a spirit of anti-Confucianism, a unique escape from Confucianism. In this study, along with “seeking possible cognate phenomena in adjacent or historically related cultures” (Dundes, 1986, p. 138), the comparative method and sociohistorical approaches are used to discuss the metaphorical relationship between Vietnamese religions, folklore, and literature through the process of regenerating the archetype journey to heaven and hell from folktales to fantasy short stories. With sociohistorical approaches, this essay examines such issues through the documented Vietnamese folktales and famous collections of fantasy in the medieval period such as “Collection of Draft Left from The Time of Thanh Tong King” (*Thánh Tông Di Thảo*, 15th century) by the King Lê Thánh Tông and “Collection of Excursive Notes on Weird Stories” (*Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, 16th century) by Nguyễn Dữ.

1. Introduction: Vietnamese religions, folklore, and literature in context

Léopold Michel Cadière, a pastor who followed the footsteps of French authorities to Vietnam at the end of the 19th century, devoted much of his research career to the strange spiritual and religious paintings of Vietnamese people. He emphasized that Vietnamese beliefs and religions are like a tropical forest, “if we believe that religion is a belief and practice affects the right behavior to life and to a supernatural world, we have to realize that Vietnamese people have such a high level of virtue” (Cadière, 2015, p. 14). As a typical tropical country, the sky is full of dazzling sunshine with the contours of things and phenomena always sharp, in the prolonged hot and humid atmosphere, Vietnamese people with permanent hallucinations which are created under the heat of the sun always need to return to a theological state. They think about the world with their gifted imagination and metaphysical experience (see Cadière, 2015; Ngan, 2017). Along with creating a brilliant agricultural civilization for 4000 years, the Vietnamese have created folklore with a belief system, customs and a spiritual structure with a distinctive identity. The polytheistic people of traditional society here often find it difficult to accept a monotheistic god. They are easily receptive and bring the gods of many religions whose tenets are even contrary to each other into their traditional beliefs. Therefore, they have no difficulty in simultaneously participating in the practice of different religions. With a geographic location considered to be the “center of the center” in Southeast Asia where connecting many arterial roads on land and at sea, Vietnam quickly imported major cultural currents from India, especially from China including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. However, these religions are not accepted by the Vietnamese people in the whole system, but in the fundamental element and transform many factors according to the motto of simplification and neutralization. According to Trần Đình Hượu:

For a long time, estimated from the second century AD to the beginning of this century, Vietnam had the parallel existence of three religions imported from China. Depending on the times of prosperity or decline, these foreign religions have taken turns taking the leading role and strongly influencing the universe, the worldview, the cultural practices in life, and the essential thinking of Vietnamese people. (Hượu, 2007, p. 184)

By sea, Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam before Christ in the footsteps of monks on merchant ships from India and then Buddhism from China around the 4th, 5th century. Vietnamese Buddhism has created a separate history with a mindset bearing a strong agricultural spirit in the South including close integration with indigenous beliefs (Thêm, 2006, p. 435). Vietnamese Buddhism, in addition, is also synthesized when at the same time uniting many different sects. More

importantly, a system of Buddhist goddesses of indigenous origin (see Khánh & Thịnh, 1990) was formed and dominated the divine power system when Buddhism was introduced and adapted to the wet rice agriculture culture which has a negative nature of female principle like Vietnam.

Due to peacefully penetrating right from the “Chinese domination period” (179 AC—938 BC), Buddhism was popularized in Vietnam and reached a state of extreme prosperity in the Lý (1009–1225) and Trần (1225–1400) Dynasty. When holding an important position in society and court, the monks shifted from the nature of “xuất thế” (liberation from worldly constraints and towards Nirvana) into the “nhập thế” (integration into life). Many aristocrats ordained and many feudal kings in history were also the leader of Vietnamese Buddhist school (such as Trần Nhân Tông King with *Trúc Lâm Yên Tử*). At the early time of the Lê Dynasty (1428–1789), Buddhism entered the recession period, giving way to the influence and comprehensive domination of Confucianism in the 15th century.

Originated from the doctrine of Confucius and spread to many other fields, Confucianism followed the government officials who invaded Vietnam during the Chinese domination period, but in this first period, Confucianism did not have a place in society. In 1070, when the Lý Dynasty established a temple in Thăng Long capital to worship Confucius, Confucianism was officially accepted in Vietnam and began to compete with Buddhism which was the national religion at that time. From the perspective of the feudal court, this religion was a perfect tool of government, perfectly adapted to the government in creating a nation whose dominant model was self-contained. This religion has especially flourished in Vietnam during the independent feudal times since the early Lê dynasty. This was a period when the Vietnamese government had an urgent need to organize and manage the country in a coherent model, using Confucianism because of its “national rule” strength in its doctrine. This was seen as a key hinge in Vietnamese history when the feudal state wanted to build a centralized state, controlled villages and ensured the consensus of individuals in the community by creating a familial political model (see Papin, 2001). Confucianism in Vietnam has experienced many ups and downs, flourished in accordance with the rapid change of feudal dynasties.

While Buddhism and Confucian took turns taking important positions in the political arena at the time of the independent feudal state, Taoism quietly entered into Vietnamese life, becoming the spiritual choice of the popular people and those who yearned for the free and unrestrained life. The year 732 was considered to be the first year of an official Taoist temple in the state of Vietnam for Taoist clergy, but importantly historical bibliographies of Vietnam have noted that the popularity of Taoism existed centuries ago (Thục, 1992, p. 172). The system of Taoist gods naturally seized their dominance in the community and gathered around the sacred mountains in Giao Châu (ancient name of Northern Vietnam). “For the indigenous people, Taoism is just a kind of theology accepted by voluntary or obligatory, people can bring gods in their folk beliefs” (Trường, 2006, p. 97). The reason for such an easy relationship with drift compatibility is because, as said, Chinese Taoism from the beginning brought with it a number of popular thoughts easily shared by other peoples, especially by tributaries like Vietnam where already had an assimilation factor due to its long and complex diplomatic relations with China.

The main difference in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism when it came to Vietnam was that: While Confucianism did not have any social base here, Buddhism, especially Taoism, immediately found similar beliefs and blended with traditional beliefs to the point of no boundaries.

From immemorial time, Vietnamese people from the mountains to the plains have been adoring magic, they believe that talismans, spells can heal, cure evil spirits, increase strength. Monks in the mountains know invisible magic, can weave grass into people, train beans into soldiers ... Even monks have to learn the magic of avoiding evil in order to bring Buddhism to penetrate deep into people who have faith in magic.. (Trường, 2006, p. 512)

Throughout medieval times, the three imported religions in the overlapping and complex relationship with the indigenous culture have really shaped and comprehensively impacted the spiritual structure and social life of Vietnam in many different ways including the literature. Especially from the 15th century, Vietnamese history took place in many wars among feudal corporations mixed with wars of aggression. After the brilliant glory of the reign of King Lê Thánh Tông, the Lê Dynasty fell into turmoil when the six Lê kings succeeded in succession or were killed, overthrown and incapable of saving the throne. Inside, the generals in the court also disunited and fought mutually, some generals formed another king to secede the court, formed the independent forces with the government that led to the war between the “South and North dynasties”, the Lê Dynasty and the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1592). Outside, the ruling class fought for political power and conflict with the people, this led to the outbreak of peasant revolts. All these stormy events caused the society to live in fierce political conflicts, disrupting the stability and prosperity of the Lê Dynasty for many years. The urgent political atmosphere and the serious decline in the lives of the people have made the mood of classes from Confucian scholars to peasants plowing all year round feel distressed.

On the other hand, it was at this time that medieval literature after a long time absorbed the quintessential values of folktales, historical prose, and the fantasy of China through the use of Chinese characters as the orthodox writing flourished (Khánh, 2005, p. 145). In the earlier prerequisite period in the 13th and 14th centuries, Confucianists carried out the textualization of folk narratives, used the plot and motif of the folktales which were transmitted in folk to organize and arrange them into stories according to the style of each author’s way. Collection of Stories about Vietnamese Spiritual Realms (*Việt Điện U Linh*, 1329) of Lý Tế Xuyên and Weird Stories in Linh Nam Realm (*Linh Nam Chích Quái*, 14th century) of Trần Thế Pháp were the first works of textualization in the medieval times was recognized as the writer’s earliest treatment of folktales (An, 2014, p. 216; Na, 2000, p. 144). These collections were formed as an extension of the ancient folktale tradition which recorded strange things from the periphery, and from the ancient folklore traditions telling about the Gods. Vũ Quỳnh (1452–1516), a famous scholar of Lê Dynasty, emphasized the process of textualization in the preface of “Weird Stories in Linh Nam Realm” that:

From the ancient to the Spring and Autumn period, Vietnamese custom was simple. There was no historical book to record the traditions and many folktales were lost. The story which fortunately still existed was thanks to the oral transmission of the folk. Hereafter, I would like to collect and rewrite fully these stories as well as present the thought of community. Afterward, all other things such as correcting complete stories, making quintessential and erudite literature, and presenting deep thought will be looking forward to the honor of talented men who love the traditional values of folklore to be in charge of doing.. (Xuyen, 1961, p. 3)

But while wanting to record the folktales about the gods in folk beliefs, the authors who are Confucian historians serving the feudal court have influenced the appearance of a collection of stories. By adding a collection of folktales about the heroes who built and defended the country, representing the power of the contemporary orthodox dynasty, we can realize the purpose and intention of establishing the integration among folk beliefs, kingship and theocracy by Confucian officials.

The period of development to the peak of the fantasy short story lasted from the 15th to 17th century. This was also the period marking the perfection in the form of genre and the maturity of narrative art of the fantasy in which taking place the process of using elements of folklore such as the plot, motif, themes, characters, metaphysical ideas of folk to create fully artistic stories by the Confucians. The fantasy short story at this time also known as the “*Truyện truyền kì*” contained many intertwined genres such as prose, poetry, and poetry with metaphorical language which was extremely beautiful and elegant. The main content of the story typically focused on strange

meetings with fairies, ghosts, gods and supernatural things. The conclusion highlighted the reasons for retelling the story and the author's own contemplative commentary on the life and the human that a moral or spiritual truth was drawn. Although influenced by the art form of Chinese fantasy:

Fantasy short stories are based on the tradition of Vietnamese folktales and exploited motifs, characters, plots of folktales. Therefore, in order to find the characteristics or compare the influence of fantasy stories among nations in the region of the same language, mandatory principle must be derived from the folktale treasure of that nation. The fantastic element is used as a way of expressing the content, but the nature of the fantastic element depends on the aesthetic and religious traditions of that nation. (Na, 2000, p. 244)

However, the major questions are how, why and for what purposes these authors in this period prefer to absorb, convert and regenerate a diverse range of traditional narrative patterns of folktales in which they try to interweave the socio-cultural context of the age for their literary stories and reconfiguring archetype of folktales.

2. Archetypal journeys from folktales to Vietnamese fantasy short stories

2.1. Archetypal journeys to upper world

In folklore and medieval literature, motifs that depict the images of people from time immemorial about the upper world are abundant. Characters travel to the upper world for many different purposes. They go to meet the god (F12), find a mother who lives in heaven (F15.1), or a person who is taken to heaven to see his future. These trips are sometimes tinged with religious colors such as: (F12.4) Go to heaven to meet the Buddha (F12.3) about someone who was taken by Brahma to meet with god Silva to pray for something ... They can cross the galaxy with a bridge woven from animals by climbing a tall tree and magic arrows, by crossing the sea or rivers, following the dead relatives on a bright carriage, and are lost to the melodious music leading to the mountain (Thompson, 1958).

However, "folktales mirror the stages of socialization of one specific group of people, and each version is representative of its own cultural context" (Haase, 2008, p. 887). In Vietnamese folktales and medieval fantasy short stories, the journey to heaven or to the strange kingdoms in the upper world is associated with the character's arrival on a high mountain and strange encounters inside that mountain. The position of another world in *Từ Thức Story (Truyện Từ Thức)* is a good example of a motif "Heaven on the mountains".

It is said that *Từ Thức* was a character who lived under the Trần dynasty, dated Quang Thái (1388–1398) in the 14th century, as an official in Tiên Du district, Bắc Ninh province. He was famous for being intelligent, eager to learn and always had compassion for the people, often dedicating his salary to buy rice to distribute to the people during the famine of the season. *Từ Thức* likes traveling in the mountains, enjoying the scenery and writing poems. During one of the flower viewing festivals, he came across a beauty who accidentally broke a peony and was punished by the villagers. With the compassion, he immediately took off the precious brocade shirt to help the beautiful girl atone for the sin.

Afterward, *Từ Thức* resigned, left the imperial court and sailed the seven seas. One day when traveling to the endlessly repeating mountains of Tam Điệp with the majestic beauty, looking out at the Thần Phù Open Ocean, there was a cloud of iridescent, lotus-shaped color, then sailing on that side. The higher he wandered, the more the road was expanded, then he got to the top of the mountain, the air was cloudless, the light was bright and there was a palace hidden heavenly by the emerald-green trees. *Từ Thức* continuously followed a big road to a castle. Suddenly, two fairies in green cloaks rushed out to tell each other, "Our groom has come over there!" Then, they rushed into a magnificent castle. *Từ Thức* followed the two fairies and saw the vivid and luxurious

place that he hadn't seen before. On some doors, there were the titles: The Delusional Temple (*Điện Quỳnh Hu*), The Integrative Light Castle (*Gác Giao Quang*). He continuously followed the two fairies upstairs to see a lady wearing a white silk clothes and sitting on a magnificent couch. Lady invites Từ Thức to have a seat and said:

What nonsense that you knew about my land! This is the sixth cave in the thirty-six cave of Phi Lai mountains. I am the Nguy's Lord and the God of Nam Nhạc mountain. Because I recognize your righteousness, I would like to invite you to have a visit. (Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, 2004, p. 805)

The journey was both accidentally and intentionally ended up tinged with the color of an adventure to find love. In the world of immortals, Từ Thức was paired and lived happily with a fairy, Giáng Hương, the spectacular beauty who broke the peony branch that he had helped in the old year flower festival. One year in the fairyland, Từ Thức felt sad with the Elysium and wanted to return to his homeland. He was brought to the world by his wife in a mythical bird car. However, when returning to the former homelands, only great stone mountains stay unchanged and all things have changed. So when he asked the old about his elderly family name, he saw someone saying: "When I was a kid, I heard that my great-grandfather who had the same surname as you went to the mountains over one hundred years ago". Từ Thức opened the envelope of Giáng Hương to see, only saw a few lines: "In the fairyland together to make friends, now the old karma has ended, no longer expected to reunite". Helplessly, he wore a light lambskin, wore a short conical hat, entered Hoàng Sơn great mountain, and disappeared forever.

Từ Thức's journey to the high mountain and time-traveling through inhomogeneous worlds were full color of Taoism when the story talked about the character who breaks away from mortality, ignored interest in the prosperity and decline of dynasties, and it also expressed his desire to pursue freedom, happiness and passionate love. The mountain cave where Từ Thức strayed into a scene of immortality was later named Từ Thức Cave by the people. The cave is located more than 40 km from Thanh Hóa province, is famous for its magnificent beauty with majestic mountains and stalactite system dyed in time. Up to now, there are still two poems written by Chinese characters engraved on the cliffs of Từ Thức cave with the content praising the graceful and melancholy love of Từ Thức and Giáng Hương. One poem of Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1784), the most famous scientist in Vietnamese history in 17th century, was carved by the posterior person behind the cave gate in 1905, and another poem was written by Trịnh Sâm (1739–1782), one of the Lords of Trịnh's respected family who had the merit extending the nation's borders to the South, engraved on the cliff of the cave in 1771.

The archetypal journey to the upper world in Từ Thức story highlighted the metaphysical feeling about the participation of illusory elements in daily life and also highlighted the opposition, overlap, and intertwinement between the fairyland and earthly space, the time-traveling and the real-time. From there, forming the fragile, illusory feeling of magical living spaces coexisting together that humans never seem to perceive and capture. Like Linda Dégh interpreted in her research:

That world history and the history of the Marchen cannot be separated from each other, because the tale is everywhere, indisputably and ineradicably accompanying and influencing practical reality. This world arches between the two extremes of the technical and logical reality of practical life to the reality of intellectual life, religion, and the arts. The tale-world takes multiple and ambiguous turns. Potentially anything is possible without limitations.. (Dégh, 1994, p. 248)

Another famous and widely circulated folktale by people is Chử Đồng Tử Story (*Truyện Chử Đồng Tử*), the story tells about one of the four immortal gods in Vietnamese folk consciousness. The gods in this belief include: Tản Viên Sơn Thánh is the saint representing the ability to fight flood disaster to protect crops and keep places of gathering for the people; Phù Đổng Thiên Vương is a god

symbolizing the solidarity of the people in fighting foreign invaders; Princess Liễu Hạnh is a god symbolizing justice, social stability and is also the most important god in “Đạo mẫu” (the Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship) (see Khánh & Thịnh, 1990). Finally, Chử Đồng Tử is considered the first Taoist saint and head of the immortal Taoist sect in Vietnam.

According to *Weird Stories in Linh Nam Realm* which is one of the collected folktales in 13th century of Trần Thế Pháp, Chử Đồng Tử was born at the beginning of the 18th Hùng King (408–258 BC) of Văn Lang state (the precursor of today’s Vietnam). From a poor background, he was often immersed in the river because the only loincloth he owned had been buried by his deceased father. One day, the dragon boat carrying Princess Tiên Dung passed by this river, she saw the scenery of the delicate river, the princess sent the servant to put the curtain of dust along the river to bathe right at the place of Chử Đồng Tử lying under the sand. Despite the king’s protests, Tiên Dung thought that this meeting was a predestined relationship and left the royal court to marry Chử Đồng Tử. Together they formed an inheritance, turned the entire vast land around the Red River in Northern Vietnam into a bustling and rich emirate. After the attack of the Hùng King, Chử Đồng Tử—Tiên Dung spiritualized Gods, flew back to the sky, and but in this night, the whole magic realm and palace disappeared.

In addition to praising the mission of cultural hero in the expanding the inhabited area and transforming the entire wetlands along the river into a rich land and developing business, the story focuses on the journey of Chử Đồng Tử to high mountains and then he was given miracle magic by a fairy hermit named Đạo Quang. After a long time of cultivation on the mountain, Chử Đồng Tử became the first saint of Vietnamese Taoism. Chử Đồng Tử and his wife are also worshiped in many places in Hưng Yên province such as Đa Hòa, Đa Trạch, and the Chử Đồng Tử festival at Hòa Đa Trạch Temple which is still considered one of the biggest folk festivals in the region in the North of Vietnam (annually taken place from February 10 to 12 (lunar calendar). Some bibliographic documents such as *The Encyclopedia of National History of Vietnam (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, 1697)* of Ngô Sĩ Liên and *Ancient Geography of Nghe An Area (Nghệ An Ký)* by Bùi Dương Lịch (1757–1828), also added that the spirit of Chử Đồng Tử had many epiphanies at important moments later to help the generals fighting foreign invaders, including glorious victories to help General Triệu Quang Phục defeat the invaders from Liang dynasty of China in 556 (Liên, 2009, p. 37).

Thus, the mountain in Vietnamese culture is also considered a place of the gods reaching the peak of the way in belief and religion. Both journeys to the upper world on the mountain of Từ Thức and Chử Đồng Tử showed the intimate and complex relationship between Vietnamese folklore and Taoism. The spirit of escaping social life, denying fame and leaving the court hiding life in these stories revealed that Taoism, especially the fairy Taoism, early merged into vernacular beliefs and the spiritual life having the metaphysical colors of the Vietnamese.

In hundreds of stories with plentiful versions of Vietnamese folktales, some stories have become the favorite topic and a great source of material for medieval fantasy writers to absorb and transform into a literary plot. One of the most famous Confucian writers of medieval Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Dữ (unknown year of birth) lived in the times known as the “Southern and Northern dynasties” (1533–1592) when the country of Vietnam was divided by the two political forces of the Lê and Mạc families. The Mạc government only had real power from the North, and the South was governed by the prince in the name of rebuilding the Lê dynasty that had been conquered by Mạc families. He worked as a mandarin in the Mạc dynasty, later returning to the Lê dynasty. But only a year, because of dissatisfaction with the time of disturbance, Nguyễn Dữ resigned from the government and completely reclused.

Collection of *Excursive Notes on Weird Stories* of Nguyễn Dữ is considered to be the best collection of fantasy short stories in Vietnamese medieval literature. This work is written in Chinese characters only by Nguyễn Dữ. The work consists of 4 books, 20 stories, the title of each

story carries the word “kỳ”, “truyện”, or “lục”. These words have the same meaning as “scattered notes from the folk”. Derived from one of the most important artistic principles of Vietnamese medieval literature “thuật nhi bất tác, tín nhi hiếu cổ” (believe and record in the creative patterns of the traditions), the title of this work is meant to reflect the humility of the author who considers his work to be only a record of stories originating from the folktales (Khánh, 2005, p. 118).

Many characters in the series are gods in folk beliefs that the temple is still in Vietnam (Vũ Thị Thiết temple in Hà Nam, Nhị Khanh temple in Hưng Yên and Văn Dì Thành temple in Gối village, Hà Nội). According to the title of Hà Thiện Hán (Confucianist of the same time) written in 1547, Nguyễn Dữ made the book *Collection of Excursive Notes on Weird Stories* in the time he dissented and left the feudal court, took the excuse to go back to his hometown to take care of his aging parents, then retreated in Thanh Hóa mountain forest. From that time, Nguyễn Dữ never set foot in the city, and his work *Collection of Excursive Notes on Weird Stories* was described by later generations as a masterpiece of medieval prose and a result of the great indignation to write the book.

Like many other stories in *Collection of Excursive Notes on Weird Stories*, The story of the Woodcutter of Nua Mountain (*Na Sơn tiều đốn lục*) was written in the genre of prose mixed with literature and poetry, and with the author’s commentary at the end. Nguyễn Dữ borrowed a character that was reclaimed and handed down in traditional narratives and then reorganized the structure, rebuilt the character, added more details, cultivated the words to create a new story. Based on the temple and the Am Tiên relic worshipping a Taoist who remained in the mountains of Ngàn Nưa, researchers such as Nguyễn Đăng Thực considered the old Nua mountain character to be a real and admired like a god by people. His last name is Trần, art-name is Hoàng Mi but common name known as Tú Nưa uncle in that time, because of the Trần dynasty’s disturbances, he went there to build up a thatched hut for retreat. This detail in the story reminds of the historical events that took place in reality. Trần Dynasty was the most famous feudal dynasty in Vietnam history (1225–1400) with brilliant military victories that were three times destroying the invasion of the Mongolian Empire. The Trần dynasty fell into a period of decline and crisis after the death of Duệ Tông Emperor who was later usurped by the force of Hồ Quý Ly, overthrown and replaced the Trần dynasty by Hồ dynasty.

In the book of *Contributing to Vietnamese Cultural Studies (Góp phần nghiên cứu văn hóa Việt Nam)*, written by Nguyễn Văn Huyền, there is also a comment: “Following the path of *Từ Thức* predecessor, some successful people like an old man named Tu Na became a religious monk under Xương Phù (1377–1388) of the Trần Dynasty, and retired to Na Sơn mountain in Thanh Hóa. Under the Lê Dynasty (1428–1789), it seemed that many people met him every 10 or 20 years” (Huyền, 1995, p.229). *Hội Chân Biên*, the book that was compiled in 1897 and carved on wood at Ngọc Sơn Temple, Hanoi in 1910 by Thanh Hóa under Nguyễn Dynasty, collected the folktales of 27 gods and goddess and also wrote that: “In Trần and Hồ dynasties, there is a Taoist who become a God at Nưa mountain (Nông Cống, Thanh Hóa) called Hoàng Mi. He had correctly predicted the Hồ and their son’s futurity, and people still met him in the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties later” (Thêm, 2006, p. 517). Borrowing from the plot and archetypal journey of these folktales, Nguyễn Dữ composed the story of a hermit on a high mountain with conflicting conversational discourse between Confucianism and Taoism, reality and supernaturalism in which it had hidden the author’s manifesto and political attitude.

Hồ Hán Thương (heir to Hồ Quý Ly and also the last king of the Hồ Dynasty) who was on a hunting trip with his entourage, lost his way in Nưa mountain and met a stranger who is a hermit. Then Hồ Hán Thương heard from this hermit three poems which have various implications and interests. The first poem is about the thought of living out of the canonical law of the social community to connect people together and the expectation to live definitely in conformity with the natural law. The second one is named *Like Sleeping* and the third one is *Like Chess* on the wall of the hermit implies two dialectical contrasts of Living as “static, negative, female principle” in *Like Sleeping* and as “dynamic, positive, male principle” in *Like Chess*.

Trương Công, an officer in Hồ Hán Thương's entourage, was asked to follow the hermit to invite him to meet Hồ Hán Thương, but "Truong followed him nearly and saw him walking into the cave. He hurriedly called and didn't answer, just saw him riding a white cloud, escaping in the spruce of bamboo". Following the vague footprints of the hermit, Trương Công went into magical space and time on high mountains. During the night in the little temple there, Trương Công was conversed, listened to the national, political discussion and the fortune prediction about Hồ dynasty of Tú Nưa. Although the strange hermit understood the peril of the dynasties and explained the future of country with the scholarly viewpoint and knowledge of a Confucian scholar, finally he said that:

I am a recluse who escapes from life, an old man shunned the dust, sent fate in a hut of grass. My friends are deer, fish and shrimp. I am attached side by side to the windy moon and flowers, lie on the clouds and sleep in smoke. If I am still greedy for those things outside of my fate and weaving into the path of fame in the court, then I am not only shameful to the predecessor, but also ungrateful to the birds and beasts in the mountains.. (Nghĩa, 1997a, p. 262)

Not long after, officer Trương Công returned to the cloudy temple in the old mountains and wished to bring the richness of glory to invite the strange hermit to help Hồ Dynasty (1400–1407), he only saw: "moss covered the cave entrance, thorny full of mountains, vines, bushes have filled the path". However, there are only traces left in the two verses written in sap on the cliff: "Kỳ La waterfront is where the soul will be broken/Cao Vọng mountain is where traveler's heart gets sad" (Nghĩa, 1997a, p. 264). The content of these two verses is the prediction of the collapse of the Hồ Dynasty shortly thereafter. Hồ Hán Thương became extremely angry and ordered to burn the mountain when he heard this predicted poem. The mountain was burned out, only a black crane flew in the air. Later, the Hồ Dynasty met with calamity, just as the poetry had predicted. The King Hồ Quý Ly was captured by the Minh forces of China at the seaport of Kỳ La, while the Cao Vọng mountain is where Hồ Hán Thương was captured and ended the Hồ Dynasty.

By acquiring the story of a half-fictional Taoist character widely propagated from the folk, the story of The Consevating with the Strange Woodcutter of Nua Mountain of Nguyễn Dữ created a typical parable plot of the medieval literature that clearly showed the tendency to love the occultism and the influence of Vietnamese Taoism. The general tendency of the thought of reclusive Confucianists is to go from Confucian to Taoism. In every Confucian, there is often the ideological struggle between Confucianist and Taoist. "Confucian's life is half of Taoist. When feeling unsatisfied or wanting to have nobility, they looked to Taoism. When feeling unwilling or obscene, they also took theory from Taoism. Reclusive Confucian was influenced by Taoism with various reasons such as the fascination with freedom and liberation. Sometimes, it leads them to nobility or anti-feudality negatively" (Hạ, 2007, p. 135)

Like most secluded Confucianists, the Nguyễn Dữ's conversion from Confucianism to Taoism was, first of all, because of the confusing social context in which he was the witness. The weakening and crisis of the Lê dynasty were replaced by the Mạc dynasty led by Mạc Đăng Dung. Trịnh family in the name of assisting the Lê dynasty to defeat the Mạc family, they overwhelmed their power and turned King Lê into a puppet ruler, internal conflict and war between feudal corporations made the society disordered and also made people become insecure. All these historical upheavals ultimately revealed the utopian nature of Confucian philosophies and the principles of Confucian morality were rubbed. The Confucianist in that context became disillusioned, changed in the concept of values and had been flexible in behavior. Literature has also gradually shifted towards the trend of stepping out of the political realm towards the mortal man with personal and instinctive issues. This spirit reflected the fact that although Confucian writers in the medieval times were all the products of Confucian training, most of them chose the liberal spirit of Taoism during the time of chaos.

The discourse “escaping from Confucianism” is also clearly expressed through the desire to deny the mundane life, break away from mortality, ignoring the prosperity and decline of the world affairs in fantasy stories written in Chinese characters of King Lê Thánh Tông. Collection of Draft Left from The Time of Thanh Tong King consists of 19 stories and the unknown year of creation is considered to be the work of King Lê Thánh Tông who is called the best king in feudal state history of Vietnam and made the splendid dynasty of the Lê Dynasty from 1504 to 1527. Although the language of the collection expresses the style and language of the king, and the content reflects the history and prosperity of the early Lê dynasty, in the story of Strange Meeting with the God in Lãng Bạc (*Gặp tiên ở hồ Lãng Bạc*) through the regeneration of the archetypal journey and the motif of the man encountering with the God on the mountain, the story depicted a strange political discussion between the King and the Taoist. The main character is also a metaphor for the king Lê Thánh Tông himself, talking about his beautiful dream with the journey to upper world:

Clean soil and pure water are where I shelter; all places where the fruitful fields, green mountains as pearl under the sky have traces of my footsteps. Lotus leaves used to make clothes, areca leaves used for hats, shirts are sewn by wonderful stitches; reciting thousands of poems, sheltering in deep wood without worrying about wild tigers and lions; drinking fully wine, crossing vast sea without fear; reciting poem under the moon and singing in the wind; the spirit of king myself is no “pain of heart”; time passing by, this place where I live over years is heaven. (Nghĩa, 1997b, pp. 595-596)

In the context of losing their monopoly position, breaking social status, and being excluded from the official discourse at the center, most of the secluded Confucian writers outward proved to be alienated from the world, but inward showed discreteness, revealed the noncooperation and resisted against social reality. Due to the state of both wanting to rebel to live a life of freedom and being suppressed by the “righteous” theory, Confucian anti-rebellion and anti-blaspheme made literature a tool to liberate the contradictory spiritual mass of the authors. Therefore, the archetypal journey to the upper world inherited from folktales had become a symbol of the journey to leave stifling and restrained reality to different fantasy worlds on high mountains. That journey also represented the “escaping Confucianism” discourse where the tensions between Confucianism and Taoism were revealed and created a unique impetus in the literary arts of medieval writers.

2.2. Archetypal journeys to the lower world

In contrast to the journey to upper world filled with lots of light and beautiful scenery, the archetype of the journey to the lower world, in its basic form, the descent to the underworld serves merely as a means of describing an exotic world not known directly by the living, or as a test of the hero's mettle (Garry & Hasan, 2005, p. 193). The journey to the underworld thus developed very early and was the basis of metaphysical thoughts of folklore and the early religions. Also from that archetype, hundreds of different narrative versions were born to describe the adventure journey and the miraculous feats of the hero in the hell world.

Through a Vietnamese folktale titled The Story of Thủ Huồn (*Thủ Huồn*), there existed a common motif of “The journey of the living people go to the hell world to visit their deceased relatives” (Thompson, 1958), which is also unique in most other folktales. When Thủ Huồn was young, he was a mandarin who caused a lot of injustice to the poor people and collected wealth for personal gain. When he got old and had no children on his own, he decided to go to *yin-yang* market. It's a strange market that only happens once a year, and it is described as a place where the living and the dead trade together and in a few special moments of *yin* and *yang* reconciliation and he met his dead wife there.

There is a hell world with nine layers that are revealed with countless small rooms where the cruel people on earth will be cruelly detained and punished when they die. All of these scenes were witnessed by Thủ Huồn while, at the *yin-yang* market, he was led to the hell world by his deceased wife. Thủ Huồn was fearful and awakened, he hurriedly returned to the earthly world and began giving alms of all his possessions and from then until the end of his life, he just did volunteer work.

People have been told that he was the one who made boats, provided rice and money for poor people who stopped waiting for the tide to rise at the junction of Gia Định river, Đồng Nai province.

On the one hand, Thủ Huồn story is one of the typical examples of the archetypal journey from earthly space to negative space. A special detail in this story is that the motif of the gateway to hell is *yin-yang* market. Vietnamese from ancient times on the basis of the thinking of agricultural culture have produced the concepts of mutual relationship between negative/*yin* (female principle of the universe) and positive/*yan* (male principle of the universe) as the dialectics of the universe. This story with the journey to the hell world was one of the typical traditional stories of Vietnamese people expressing the ideas of *yin* and *yang* in folklore.

On the other hand, Thủ Huồn story revolved around the issue of karma or the law of cause and effect, the philosophy was considered to be the most essential of Buddhism. Vietnamese folk along with a strong belief in the world after the death in traditional beliefs combined with the influence of Buddhism also believe that the law of cause and effect is “law of all things”. With the notion that the law of cause and effect exists in all three times: the past, the present, and the future, people believe that death is not the end of karma. Life after death is better or worse depending on the karma that people have caused in previous lives. These concepts also fully apply to the story of life as well as the journey of the character Thủ Huồn on the journey to the underworld.

In Vietnamese folktales, the lower world also tends to be a dim place, it is somewhere under the ground where there are always abnormal residents living and it is not always a terrifying land of death. One of them is portraying hell as a world deep in the well. In Vietnamese culture, the well is a symbol of the *yin*, the abyss, and the lower world. This cultural element often exists in folktales with other world motifs “hell at the bottom of the wells”. The story of The Golden Pumpkin (*Quả bí vàng*) tells about a stepdaughter named Trang who was abandoned by her stepmother and younger sister. They plotted to push the poor girl to the bottom of the well and covered the well with big rocks and stones. However, the journey down the well has brought Trang to hell where there is no sunlight, the long and narrow street and the magnificent house of a godless witch. Trang worked hard and freed an eagle that was imprisoned by a witch. Later, she is saved and taken by the eagle from hell in the well to go to a new land. This can be regarded as a reduced version of the archetypal hell.

In the concept of the Vietnamese from ancient times, the village well is “the eye” of the land. In the imagination and visualization of the folk, the well is also a place where contains sacred and mystical things. The residential life of wet rice culture has turned a well with banyan trees and communal yards into a center of activities of the village’s spirit and religion. The circular architecture itself is *yin*. The depth of the well penetrating the ground is also *yin* direction. The sweet taste and the coolness of well water rarely exposed to sunlight are also *yin* manifestations. Fundamentally, the archetypal journeys in folktales focus on expressing the desire to overcome the ruin of life and conquer the limits of human existence.

While the records of folktales are quite limited, on the contrary, the journey to the lower world thrives in medieval fantasy short stories. The archetype of hell is revived with entirely new metaphysical colors to foster unique metaphysical experiences, emphasize the discourse “spiritual awakening” and show the spirit against stereotyping and oppression of the rational Confucian worldview of writers. The Story of Senior Clerk in Tan Vien Temple (*Truyện Chức Phán Sự Đền Tân Viên*) or The Story of Ly General (*Truyện Lý Tướng quân*) in Collection of Excursive Notes on Weird Stories of Nguyễn Dữ are examples.

In The Story of Senior Clerk in Tan Vien Temple, Ngô Tử Văn character was inherently a hard-headed and honorable scholar, the people of the north often told each other that he was a man of determination, and could not accept injustice. He saw a sacred temple handed down by the ancient people in the village which was devastated and controlled by a ghost. He was angry,

constantly washed clearly, prayed to Gods and then burned the temple. This action of him made people horrified because violating the sacred temples was the great taboo. Soon after this “extra-vagant” action, a sudden illness came up and Vãn was taken to the underworld by devils:

At night, his illness worsened, and then he saw the two demons coming to arrest very quickly, pulling him out the east of the city. After half of day walking to a large palace where the iron wall is around several knobsticks of height, the two demons said to the gatekeeper, the gate guard came in a moment and then just said: - the crime was too heavy, not allowed to reduce the crime. He said and then handed out to the north a large river with a thousand steps long’s bridge, gray wind and waves, and the thrilling cold. On two sides of the bridge, there were thousands of demons with blue eyes, red hair, and evil shape. (Nghĩa, 1997b, p. 240)

In the night of the Justice Palace, Ngô Tử Vãn clarified the truth that the devil of defeated Chinese general whose soul was lonely and wander in Vietnam appropriated the temple and forged a blessed god. So, he was revived after the near-death experience peacefully by the god of Hell. About half a month later, there was an old god coming to report:

I returned to my own temple and did not know what to pay your debt of gratitude. I know that Tan Vien Temple missed a senior clerk and strongly recommended you. God had agreed. So, you were taken it by my favor, please. There wasn’t a living where people live endlessly, but when we died away, we still had the backward blessings.. (Nghĩa, 1997b, p. 242)

In the end of the story, there was a detail that Ngô Tử Vãn returned the mortal from the hell, arranged housework and a few days later, he didn’t get sick but died away. Behind this, seemingly mysterious death was the journey following the call of the Gods who invited him to perform some noble missions of otherworld, as a reward for the redeeming missions in his terrestrial life. Thereby, it can be seen that with seemingly sudden death, the journey to go to hell, to relive after a near-death experience and then to reincarnated to become the God of Ngô Tử Vãn was the pattern of the story inheriting from the archetypal journey of the hero in folktales. Instead, this archetype was reconfigured to add the medieval culture and history element with the thought of the metaphysical world after death that was the blind topic of Confucianism but strongly existed in Taoism, Buddhism, and folktales.

In another story titled The story of Lý General, the story describes the reunion between the Lý General’s son named Thúc Khoản and his old friend’s spirit. The spirit of the deceased is now an official responsible for administering the happiness and unhappiness of life, and has informed Thúc Khoản of the impending punishment on his atrocious father in the lower world as well as has agreed to take Thúc Khoản to hell. Thúc Khoản witnessed the scene of the trial of his cruel father with horrific punishments in the nine floors of hell (*cửu u*) and the pronouncements of the gods about his father’s fate that permanently unable escape from the hell. Then, his mouth was covered by a devil’s hands and escorted to the world:

He woke up and saw his family members sitting around crying, saying that he had been dead for two days, just because they felt his chest was still hot, so they didn’t dare bury him.. (Nghĩa, 1997a, p. 299)

Thúc Khoản revived and completely concealed his journey to hell. He quickly abandons his wife and children, brings his belongings to the poor and burns the loan documents, “goes into the forest to pick up immortality drugs and retreats”. However, what happened in his near-death experience had no meaning at all to overcome challenges and was reborn to become a god as in folktales. On the contrary, what he gained was the fear of creepy karmic consequences in the afterlife and the “spiritual awakening”.

Thus, by allowing the characters to go to the hell and to experience the presence and existence of the gods, metaphysical blind fates, the dead souls, the supernatural forces behind the stage of life, the authors built journeys to the lower world as the near-death experience and the spiritual awakening to describe the deep conflicts between good and evil, between order and disorder in the human mind. The art world of the fantasy at this time was full of delusions about strange realms, places of imagination and sublimation illusions but ultimately led to a deeper understanding of the truth of life. On the one hand, the metaphysical experience of the journeys gave the characters the opportunity to correct mistakes, restore order and find ways to reconcile with life. But on the other hand, this journey was the most obvious revelation of pessimism, loss, and failure to deal with reality and, as well as the journey to leave the rationalism of Confucianism to find the philosophy of Buddhism and Taoism.

3. Conclusion: Interdiscursivity and genre dynamics

Through the archetypal journey to the upper and lower worlds, the medieval fantasy short stories successfully built unique metaphysical experiences and created a breakthrough development in art by collecting religious thoughts and exploiting the material of folktales. These stories, therefore, are the product of a personal voice that expresses the religious-colored worldview of an insider on specific social and historical issues, while on the other hand still expressing strongly the universe of traditional narratives which contains the constant cultural reactions of the Vietnamese people.

Besides, the relationship between the Vietnamese folktales and medieval fantasy short stories is similar to the explanation of Maria Nikolajeva in *Fairytales and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern*:

Fantasy literature is a conscious creation, where authors choose the form that suits them best for their particular purposes. The purposes may be instructive, religious, philosophical, social, satirical, parodical, or entertaining; however, fantasy has distinctly lost the initial sacral purpose of traditional fairy tales.. (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 139)

The fantasy is written by writers who grew up in traditional villages and in an agricultural culture surrounded by polytheism, folktales and strong faith in the metaphysical world. But they became mandarin of feudal court by becoming a disciple of Confucianism. However, the disruption of the political system and the continuous replacement of the ruling dynasties during the bloody war after the Trần dynasty, the Confucianist displayed powerlessness before the collapse of the political situation, the violent confusion of society and the loss of the community's confidence. The Confucianist at that time had to seek and expand the ideological system himself as the necessary adjustment to compromise reality. In the context of Confucian theory losing its validity, other religions such as Buddhism and Taoism have the opportunity to recover and thrive. In particular, Taoist doctrine with the principle of taking the free individual as a starting point removed the imprisonment of people, encouraged the writers to become liberal, and immersed in the infinite, endless nature. This tendency of Vietnamese Taoism clearly softens and facilitates the creation of medieval art and literature with the opportunity to go beyond the official normative formal literature.

Most importantly, while trying to establish a distinct identity, showing “nationalism”, and cutting themselves off “Sinocentrism” with the notion that Vietnam is the “satellite” of China, Vietnamese feudal intellectuals who have never left their root of cultural village, agricultural culture of rice and strong folklore background has made the spirit of reviving the values of indigenous culture into a strong literary movement. Therefore, the tradition of medieval fantasy short stories from the very beginning was an expression of resistance. The authors practice collecting, writing, and telling miracles in the periphery of the folk as a way to challenge the Confucian political and cultural forces at the center. As such, they can discreetly express an attitude to the community that can both cover and disguise voices of dissent, and other sensitive issues. From there, they created a national literature expressing political consciousness through discourse from the marginal area of folktales.

“Literary and narrative influences flowed both westward and eastward across linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries” (Bottigheimer, 2009, p. 324), the interaction between Vietnamese folktales and the fantasy also helps us to look into the fact that Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism in medieval Vietnam did not combine harmoniously to create “Three Teachings Are One” (*Tam giáo đồng nguyên*) in literature. These religions themselves with the contrary system of doctrine are difficult to compromise when they always seem to exist in conflict and divide the domination of Vietnamese spiritual life. On the first hand, it is the conflict between Confucianism which is gaining the upper hand and Buddhism which has fallen into recession and disgrace in the political arena. On the second hand, Confucianism represented the rational, authoritative and oppressive orthodox discourse of the ruling dynasty and Taoist symbolizing the aspiration of freedom, transcending social constraints in order to liberate instinctive emotions and transcendent connection between man and the power of nature of recluse intellectuals. It is also here, a unique union of indigenous folklore that contains the spirit of liberation, the desire for innocent freedom, the innate metaphysical wisdom in folktales with Taoism and Buddha has formed.

Thus, with the Buddhist senses, especially the Taoist in the fantasy short story, when it regenerated and co-existed with the polytheistic worldview and the animism of Vietnamese folktales, it contributed to the creation of a unique anti-Confucian spirit. That intense sense overshadowed the Confucian statements on the surface of the text and the disguised voice in the author’s last commentary and formed a compassionate artistic voice. As a communiqué crystallizing mysteries about life, medieval fantasy short stories expressed their aspiration to the most humane, free and liberal values in the darkest and bloodiest times in Vietnam history. And, the archetype journey to heaven and to hell makes the medieval fantasy short stories as a bridge through the wall of prejudice dividing status and class, and it is also one of the ways to make shadow folktales adventure spread through space and time.

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