Thang Long Journal of Science
Vanhien and Heritage B4 (No.2) : 78 - 106 (2025)
p-ISSN: 3030-489X
e-ISSN: 3030-4903

CULTURE AND RELIGION

ESOTERIC BUDDHIST ELEMENTS IN VIETNAMESE PROTO-HISTORIC LEGENDS: THE CASE OF *LĨNH NAM CHÍCH QUÁI*

Hầu Lâm Phùng[a]
Ngô Hồ Anh Khôi[b]
Trần Thị Hạnh[c]

(Received 02 October 2025; revised 05 December 2025; accepted 25 December 2025)

Abstract

While the influence of Buddhism introduced from India in general during the proto-historic period of Vietnam in Giao Chỉ has long been affirmed, the impact of Esoteric Buddhism (Vajrayāna) remains an open question, only recently brought into scholarly discussion. *Lĩnh Nam chích quái (LNCQ)*, though compiled in the medieval period, is the earliest surviving work that preserves legends from Vietnam's proto-history. It thus constitutes a rare, if not unique, source for examining the transmission and development of Esoteric Buddhism from India into Giao Chỉ during that early stage. The study of Esoteric Buddhist elements in Vietnam's proto-historic legends, as presented in *LNCQ*, has been almost entirely neglected. To date, no comprehensive research has been conducted in this promising direction. This article seeks to shed light on certain latent Esoteric Buddhist elements embedded within the details of *LNCQ*. Although the limited scope of a single paper cannot present a comprehensive treatment, these preliminary analyses are expected to lay a foundation for deeper approaches in future research.

Keywords: Esoteric Buddhism, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, Vietnamese proto-historic legends, Indian Buddhism, Buddhism in Giao Chỉ

1. Introduction

Esoteric Buddhism (Mật tông) is a Buddhist school that emphasizes ritual practices involving the recitation of secret mantras in order to attain the truth of enlightenment. Also known as the Lamaism school, Esoteric Buddhism represents a synthesis of the disciplinary system of the Sarvāstivāda (Collett Cox et al., 1998) and the ritual practices of the Vajrayāna. A decisive step in these rituals is the consecration ceremony (Abhiṣeka) (Jeremy Hayward et al., 2008), in which a guru (or "lama") initiates the disciple into meditative concentration upon a particular Buddha. This is achieved through the chanting of mantras (Ryuichi Abe, 1999), contemplation of the

[a] M.A. (Graduate Program), Center for the Study of Philosophy of Religion and Belief
[b] Ph.D, UNESCO Center for Humanities and Community Sciences
[c] Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

mandala, and performance of ritual gestures (mudrā), with the aim of transcending and eliminating dualistic thought, thereby entering into tathatā (suchness) and realizing emptiness. This state is symbolized by the vajra. To master the ritual practices of Esoteric Buddhism (Reginald A. Ray, 2001) (also called Vajrayāna), the prerequisite is a deep understanding of the Prajñāpāramitā doctrine (Fa Qing, 2001) of Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga. The Prajñāpāramitā is known as the "vehicle of cause" (hetuyāna), whereas the Vajrayāna is known as the "vehicle of result" (phalayāna). Esoteric Buddhism is traditionally believed to have been initiated by Mahāvairocana Buddha. Its two fundamental scriptures are the Mahāvairocana Sūtra (Dainichi-kyō) and the Vajraśekhara Sūtra (Kongōchō-kyō). The scholar Nguyễn Lang, in his *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận* [History of Vietnamese Buddhism], states that Esoteric Buddhism was the third stage in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in India-following the first stage of Prajñā and the second stage of Yogācāra. Esoteric Buddhism began in the fourth century, flourished in the early sixth century, and by the mid-eighth century was systematized into the Vajrayāna (Nguyễn Lang, 1993).

Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện [The Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes, hereafter abbreviated as *LNCQ*] is a collection of myths, legends, and folk tales of Vietnam, compiled in Classical Chinese and Nôm script around the Lý-Trần dynasties (11th-14th centuries). The extant version is the one compiled by Đoàn Vĩnh Phúc in 1554, based on Vũ Quỳnh's 1492 edition, catalogued as A.2914 and currently preserved at the Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies (Vietnam). The title *LNCQ* literally means "A Compilation of Strange Tales from the Lĩnh Nam Region". The structure of the work reflects the dynamic processes of integration and cultural development in Vietnam. It contains narratives portraying the cultural life of the ancient Vietnamese, such as "The Story of the Hồng Bàng Clan", "The Story of the Fish Spirit", "The Story of the Fox Spirit", "The Story of the Tree Spirit", and "The Story of Tây Qua". Other tales reflect the era of Chinese domination from a folk perspective, such as "The Story of the Việt Well" and "The Story of Nanzhao". Finally, narratives from the independent Lý-Trần period include accounts like "The Story of Từ Đạo Hạnh and Nguyễn Minh Không". The work is thus of great significance in shaping Vietnamese national and cultural consciousness. It embodies humanistic values and reflects the openness and freedom of medieval Vietnamese literature. Today, it is regarded as an important source for the study of Vietnamese folk culture and tradition.

As for its authorship, two major scholarly views exist. The first attributes the work to Trần Thế Pháp, a claim mentioned in Đặng Minh Khiêm's *Vịnh sử thi tập* [Collection of Poems on History] (Nguyễn Đăng Na, 2004), Lê Quý Đôn's *Kiến văn tiểu lục* [A Small Record of What Was Seen and Heard] (Kiến văn tiểu lục, 2013), and Phan Huy Chú's *Lịch triều hiến chương loại*

chí [Annals of the Dynasties] (Trần Văn Giáp, 2003, p.1102). The second view, represented by scholars such as Trần Văn Giáp (2003, p.1105) and Nguyễn Hữu Sơn (2022), suggests that *LNCQ* was the result of contributions, editing, and transmission by multiple figures, including Trần Thế Pháp, Vũ Quỳnh, Kiều Phú, Nguyễn Nam Kim (who was actually a copyist rather than a compiler), and Đoàn Vĩnh Phúc. Recently, Nguyễn Thị Oanh has published evidence indicating that the earliest extant edition of *LNCQ* is indeed the 1554 version compiled by Đoàn Vĩnh Phúc from Vũ Quỳnh's 1492 text. In this article, we employ the *LNCQ* manuscript catalogued as A.2914, preserved at the Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies, which was translated and published by researcher Nguyễn Thị Oanh in *LNCQ - Khảo luận, Dịch chú, Nguyên bản chữ Hán* [*LNCQ* - Commentary, Translation, and Original Sino Text] (Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2024).

The question of when Buddhism was first transmitted into Vietnam remains a matter of debate. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that it certainly predates the founding of the nation-state (9th century), and the majority also concur that it predates the period of Chinese domination (before the 1st century CE). The reason lies in the fact that although Buddhism originated from Indian civilization, it was localized and intertwined with the spiritual life of the Vietnamese, accompanying the nation throughout its processes of state-building and defense. In *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* [Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden] (ca. 1096), when Queen Mother Ỷ Lan inquired about this matter, National Preceptor Thông Biện cited the words of Master Đàm Thiên: "In the region of Giao Châu, which had direct routes to India, when the Dharma first arrived, Jiangdong did not yet have it, but Luy Lâu had already built more than twenty monasteries, ordained over 500 monks, and translated 15 scriptures. For this reason, it is said to have preceded them. At that time, there were such eminent figures as Khâu-ni-danh, Ma-ha-kỳ-vực, Khương Tăng Hội, Chi Cương Lương, and Mâu Bác residing there. Later, there was also the master Pháp Hiển, who received the Dharma from Tì-ni-đa-lưu-chi, transmitted the lineage of the three patriarchs, and lived in the Chúng Thiện Monastery to instruct disciples. In his assembly were not fewer than 300 students, no different from those in China. As Your Majesty is the compassionate father of the realm and wishes to bestow charity equally, it is sufficient only to dispatch envoys with relics there, for that land already has its own teachers and needs no further instruction." (Lê Mạnh Thát, 1999, pp.203-204). Esoxteric Buddhism (Mật Tông) must have entered Vietnam at a very early date, possibly at the same time as Buddhism itself, around the 3rd century BCE via maritime routes. By the beginning of the Common Era, the folktale of Chử Đồng Tử studying under an Indian monk endowed with magical powers already reflects the earliest traces of Esoteric Buddhism, introduced through cultural exchanges with India. During

this same period, Luy Lâu (present-day Bắc Ninh), the capital of Giao Chỉ district, had already become an important Buddhist center.

Although researchers long ago reached consensus that Buddhism had firmly taken root in Giao Châu by at least the 1st century CE, during the early stage of Chinese domination, the appearance of Esoteric Buddhism has rarely been systematically addressed. The archaeological approach can only point to stone columns dating from the reign of Đinh Tiên Hoàng (10th century), which display the earliest clear traces of Esoteric Buddhism, dating to the 9th century CE. The historiographical approach, meanwhile, can extend only as far back as the 2nd century CE, with evidence from Mâu Tử and Khương Tăng Hội indicating strong Esoteric Buddhist influence. It may therefore be affirmed that by this period, Esoteric Buddhist thought had already taken firm shape. To demonstrate the presence of Esoteric Buddhist elements before the 2nd century CE, the only feasible approach is cultural analysis, through the identification of latent Esoteric features within proto-historic legends-among which *LNCQ* stands as one of the most important sources. For example, the legends of Thạch Quang Buddha and Man Nương Buddha Mother, associated with the teachings of Khâu Đà La (Ksudra) around 168-189 CE, reveal a Buddhist foundation that gave rise to the cult of the Four Dharmas (Tứ Pháp), whose roots lie in Indian Esoteric Buddhism. Because Buddhism was transmitted directly from India, the term Buddha (the Enlightened One) was phonetically rendered as "Bụt," a term widely used in folktales. Vietnamese Buddhism at that time clearly bore the character of Esoteric Buddhism, with the image of Bụt as a miraculous figure-an influence that has persisted in popular belief to this day. Later, during the 4th-5th centuries, under the influence of Chinese Buddhism introduced through colonial rule, the word "Bụt" was gradually replaced by "Phật," a Sino-Vietnamese transliteration.

In summary, this study seeks to analyze the Esoteric Buddhist elements interspersed throughout the proto-historic legends of Vietnam as preserved in *LNCQ*, regarding this as a useful method to demonstrate the transmission and development of Esoteric Buddhism in Vietnam. Notably, nearly all of the tales in *LNCQ* to some extent reflect Esoteric features. However, within the limited scope of a conference paper, we shall focus our analysis on four representative stories in which the Esoteric Buddhist elements are most distinct and characteristic.

2. An analysis of certain tantric elements embedded in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*

2.1. The Tale of Nhất Dạ Trạch

The tale of Nhất Dạ Trạch recounts the legend of Princess Tiên Dung and Chử Đồng Tử. The story of Chử Đồng Tử, which can be considered the earliest within the Vietnamese corpus of mytho-history to contain Tantric elements, is recorded in the *LNCQ*.

The tale tells of Princess Tiên Dung, daughter of the third generation of the Hùng Kings. At the age of eighteen, she was exceptionally beautiful yet refused to marry. Instead, she delighted in traveling and wandering across the land. Out of affection, King Hùng did not restrain her. Each year, in the second and third lunar months, she prepared her boat to roam the seas, sometimes lingering long and reluctant to return. At that time, in Chử Xá village by the river, lived Chử Vi Vân and his son Chử Đồng Tử. They were benevolent and filial, yet their home had burned down, leaving them destitute, with only a single loincloth to share between them. When his elderly father fell ill, he instructed Đồng Tử to bury him unclothed so that the loincloth could be spared for his son's dignity. After his father's passing, Đồng Tử wrapped him in the cloth and buried him, leaving himself with nothing. In utter poverty and nakedness, he suffered from hunger and cold, living by frequenting merchant boats on the river, standing in the water to beg or fishing with a rod for sustenance. By chance, Princess Tiên Dung's boat docked at that very sandbank. Hearing the resounding drums, gongs, and festive music, and seeing the grand procession, Đồng Tử panicked, having no place to hide. He noticed a sparse cluster of reeds on the sandy bank, dug a shallow pit, and concealed himself beneath the sand. Soon after, Princess Tiên Dung's boat anchored there. She went ashore, ordering her attendants to set up a curtain near the reeds so she could bathe. As she poured water over herself inside, the sand gave way, revealing the hidden figure of Đồng Tử. Startled, Tiên Dung examined him carefully and realized who he was. She remarked that although she had never wished to marry, this fateful encounter, with both of them exposed, must have been arranged by Heaven. She bade Đồng Tử rise, bathe with her, and gave him garments to wear. Bringing him aboard her boat, she feasted with him. All the attendants considered the encounter auspicious and unprecedented. Only then did Đồng Tử recount his plight. Tiên Dung sympathized and resolved to marry him. Though Đồng Tử initially refused out of fear, Tiên Dung insisted that such a Heaven-sent opportunity could not be denied. Their attendants hurried back to inform King Hùng, who grew angry, declaring that his daughter had disgraced herself by lowering her station to wed a pauper while abroad. He proclaimed that since this was Heaven's doing, she must never return to court. Obeying this decree, Tiên Dung and Đồng Tử established a marketplace and settlement (later known as Hà Thám market). Merchants revered them as lords. One day, a trader offered Tiên Dung a dật of gold. Rejoicing, she told her husband that their union and sustenance were Heaven's gifts. She gave the gold to Đồng Tử, urging him to join the merchant's overseas trade. During his travels, Đồng Tử encountered Mount Quỳnh Viên, where a small hermitage stood. There he met a novice monk named Phật Quang, who imparted Buddhist teachings to him. Đồng Tử stayed to study, entrusting the gold to the merchant with a promise to return. Before his departure, the monk bestowed upon him a staff and a conical hat imbued with spiritual power.

Returning home, Đồng Tử recounted his experience and preached the Dharma to Tiên Dung, who attained sudden awakening. The couple abandoned their settlement, wandering in search of masters and the Way. One evening, as darkness fell and no village was in sight, they planted the staff in the ground and covered it with the hat for shelter. At midnight, a magnificent citadel miraculously manifested-palaces, halls, pavilions, treasuries, and shrines, filled with treasures, attendants, soldiers, and courtiers. Astonished villagers gathered with offerings, pledging service, forming a sovereign realm. Hùng King, hearing of this, accused his daughter of rebellion and marched an army against them. As the king's troops encamped across the river at Tự Nhiên, a storm arose at midnight: winds uprooted trees, sands whirled, and rain poured down. In the chaos, the entire citadel-Tiên Dung, Đồng Tử, their court, soldiers, and people-was swept heavenward, vanishing. The land became a vast marsh. The people built a shrine there and worshipped in seasonal rites. This place was thereafter called Nhất Dạ Trạch [The Lake of One Night]. The site became known as *Tự Nhiên* [Nature] sands, also called *Màn Trù* [The Curtained Bank]. The market founded by Tiên Dung and Đồng Tử was remembered as Hà Thám Market (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.410).

The Tale of Chử Đồng Tử provides us with certain insights into early forms of Tantrism. The narrative explicitly recounts that Chử Đồng Tử crossed the sea for trade and encountered the monk Phật Quang. One may assume that this monk resided outside the Vietnamese domain, perhaps in Champa or India. Chử Đồng Tử's overseas trading activities may be linked to the establishment of maritime trade routes stretching from India to China, passing through Funan and Jiaozhou. According to Lynda Norene Shaffer (1996), this route originated from ports near the mouth of the Ganges River, followed along the coasts of the Bay of Bengal until reaching the Malay Peninsula, and then traversed across the Gulf of Thailand toward the region of Funan. On this passage from India to China, merchant ships had to stop at Southeast Asian ports for about half a year, both to replenish provisions and to await favorable monsoon winds from inland before resuming their voyage.

The very name Chử Đồng Tử raises questions. The term *đồng tử* ("youth" or "acolyte") frequently appears in religious contexts, particularly in Daoism and Buddhism-for example, Sudhana (Shàncái tóngzǐ) in the Avataṃsaka Sūtra (Tony Prince, 2014) - yet is rare in Confucian naming traditions. Notably, *đồng tử* occurs with high frequency within Tantric culture. As for Tiên Dung, the name of the figure regarded as a princess (Mỵ Nương) of King Hùng, it inevitably recalls the Buddhist notion of celestial maidens (apsaras), one category within the Six Realms of Rebirth (Robert E. Buswell Jr. et al., 2013) (Gods, Humans, Asuras, Animals, Hungry Ghosts, and Hell-beings), or the Eight Legions of Non-human Beings (Devas, Nāgas, Yakṣas, Asuras, Garuḍas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, and Mahoragas) in Buddhist cosmology. The image of

Tiên Dung preparing a place for bathing directly on the sandy riverbank is not a cultural motif familiar in either Vietnamese or Chinese traditions. Scholar Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng is not unfounded in suggesting that this may represent a ritual of *sādhana* within Tantric practice (Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, 2020). Examining the plot detail in which Tiên Dung meets Chử Đồng Tử on the sandbank and then becomes his wife, we find no resonance with Confucian propriety, nor with native Vietnamese cultural patterns, but rather with Indian cultural elements. The ritual of *sādhana*, that is, the bathing rite in preparation for retreat and for recitation of dhāraṇī, is emphasized in Tantric Buddhism. For example, the Cundī Dhāraṇī Sūtra instructs: *"Bathe three times a day and wear the three robes* (…) If one does not perform purification in the proper manner, then no efficacy will arise" (Cundī Dhāraṇī Sūtra, 3, pp. 42-43). The choice of a sandy, clean riverbank as the site for this ritual was likely not accidental. The selection of pure and auspicious ground for establishing a *sādhana* is explicitly mentioned in texts such as the Dhāraṇī for Protecting the Nation and the King's Precepts, which states:

> *"Good man, when you wish to establish a maṇḍala, first select the land: whether upon a mountain, or an open plain, where there are trees and fruits, many fragrant flowers, and level ground. Or at a pure pond, a calm pool, or a flowing stream abundant with water-there a maṇḍala-hall may be built, praised by all Buddhas. Or beside a great river, a forest pond adorned with lotuses-utpala, padma, kumuda, pundarīka-amidst flocks of geese, ducks, swans, peacocks, parrots, śārikā birds, and cuckoos, creating an atmosphere of wondrous adornment. These are the places where Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, and Śrāvakas often abide, praising them as pure" (Dhāraṇī for Protecting the Nation and the King's Precepts, pp. 254-255).*

Clearly, the sandy riverbank constituted an appropriate site for the establishment of a maṇḍala-hall. According to Tantric regulations, in such special places it is unnecessary to dig the soil to remove impurities (such as hair, bones, insects, ants, etc.) in order to prepare purified earth for constructing the altar. The toponym preserved at this site, Bãi *Mạn Trù* [Curtain Beach] at Nhất Dạ marsh, may in fact be a variant pronunciation of *Man Tra*, that is, mantra, following the original Indic phonetic form (Stephen Beyer, 1978).

Another noteworthy detail is that Chử Đồng Tử crossed the sea for trade and encountered the monk Phật Quang (or Ngưỡng Quang). Regarding the name Phật Quang, Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng (2020) suggests that this signifies Mahāvairocana, the central Buddha of Tantric Buddhism and the principal deity of both the Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu maṇḍalas, the two central cosmic diagrams of Tantrism. Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng further cites the detail in the Thần tích of Đa Hòa village mentioning that Chử Đồng Tử was bestowed with "*a conical hat, a staff, and a sacred*

spell" thereby interpreting his practice as belonging to the Mantrayāna school of Tantric Buddhism, with Vairocana as his tutelary deity. Yet, if one compares the temporal framework - "*the reign of the third Hùng King*" in *LNCQ* - with the actual emergence and flourishing of Tantrism in India (5th-7th centuries CE), the chronological gap is significant. For this reason, we argue that the image of Phật Quang may be more plausibly connected with Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, of Indian origin, reflecting a synthesis of Mahāyāna and early Tantric elements that had reached Vietnam from a very early period. Concerning the theme of light (quang minh), Buddhist scriptures often emphasize luminosity as a meditative quality. For example, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sūtra in the Madhyama Āgama states: *"Furthermore, a bhikṣu contemplates the body as the body; he is a monk who cultivates the perception of light, skillfully receives and upholds it, remembers it clearly; as in front, so in back; as by day, so by night; as below, so above, as above, so below. Thus his mind is without delusion, unbound, naturally luminous, never obscured by shadow."* (Tuệ Sỹ, 2002). This may be considered a precursor to the later cult of Amitābha as the Buddha of Infinite Light. Another rarely addressed detail is that Chử Đồng Tử and Tiên Dung manifested supernatural powers: by planting the staff and covering it with the hat, they conjured forth a magnificent city of golden palaces and jade halls, which later vanished without a trace. This imagery closely parallels the "Parable of the Illusory City" (Hōben, chapter 7) in the Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra), wherein a teacher conjures up a city to allow his disciples to rest, only later to reveal that it was illusory, urging them onward toward Buddhahood. In this chapter, Śākyamuni relates how, in the distant past, the Buddha Mahābhijñājñānābhibhū preached the Lotus Sūtra to sixteen novice monks, who later attained Buddhahood as Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, Akṣobhya in Abhirati, Śākyamuni in the Sahā world, among others-three of whom belong to the Five Wisdom Tathāgatas of Tantric Buddhism. The Lotus Sūtra itself is known to have undergone a long process of compilation; chapters 1-9 and 17 (verse) are generally dated to the first century BCE (Michael Pye & Skilful Means, 2003). In Jiaozhou, Indian monks such as Kalasivi *(Chi Cương Lương)* of the Kushan realm arrived in the 3rd century CE (under Emperor Wu of the Jin, 265-290), collaborating with the Vietnamese monk Đạo Thanh to translate the Saddharmasamadhi Sūtra (Lotus Samādhi Sūtra). Earlier still, Khương Tăng Hội had translated the "Parable of the Three Carts" *(Phật Thuyết Tam Xa Dụ Kinh)* from the Lotus Sūtra.

We also note Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng's interpretation of the imagery of the hat placed upon the staff as the "white parasol" (*sitātapatra uṣṇīṣa*), symbolizing the great compassion (mahākaruṇā) of the Buddha, representing the supreme attainment achieved through practice, and the flourishing of all virtues. *The Buddha Usnisa Deity (Usnisa Rājan) is described in the Ekākṣara Uṣṇīṣa Cakravartin Sūtra as manifesting beneath the white canopy that covers the entire three-*

thousandfold great-thousand world system. On another level, the conjoining of staff and hat may also be understood symbolically as the union of male and female, with clear phallic and fertility connotations inherited from Indian religious symbolism. Later, within the doctrinal framework of Tantrism, this union came to represent enlightenment itself-intelligible only in a Tantric context. This motif will be analyzed further in the story of Man Nương. Generally, the image represents *Samantabhadra* (Universal Worthy Buddha) and his consort *Samantabhadrī* before renunciation, symbolizing the union of wisdom (male principle) and great compassion (female principle) in Tantric Buddhism. Additionally, the name Chử Đồng Tử (渚童子) itself deserves attention, for many Bodhisattvas before attaining Buddhahood bore the title tóngzǐ (child, youth). A striking example is *Mañjuśrīkumārabhūta* (Paul M. Harrison, 2000), literally "the youth *Mañjuśrī*," with *kumāra* meaning boy/child and bhūta meaning to become. Thus *kumārabhūta* designates the "Youthful Bodhisattva," or "Child of the Buddha"-a title for one approaching the highest stages of realization (Har Dayal, 1970). This may explain why Chử Đồng Tử was elevated to the status of a saint within Vietnamese folk culture. Finally, Chử Đồng Tử's miraculous powers were closely associated with material wealth, a feature deeply marked by Tantric symbolism. This reflects the popular tendency to turn to Tantric elements primarily for the pursuit of prosperity and fortune. Such elements facilitated the penetration of Tantrism into the masses and the embedding of Buddhism within folk culture; but conversely, they also generated enduring patterns of superstition among the inhabitants of Jiaozhou. Beyond these popular layers, however, lies a deeper message: when Chử Đồng Tử and Tiên Dung conjured a great city only to abandon it under suspicion from the king, choosing instead to vanish with it into Nhất Dạ marsh, the act simultaneously demonstrated miraculous power to inspire faith, and renunciation of that very power to transcend suffering. This reflects the realization of the wisdom attained by a Great Sage (mahāprajñā).

2.2. The Tale of Man Nương: The Legend of the Buddha Mother Man Nương

The story of the Stone-Luminous Buddha (Thạch Quang Phật) and the Buddha Mother Man Nương (Phật Mẫu Man Nương) is first recorded in *LNCQ* and represents the narrative most imbued with Tantric Buddhist characteristics. The story begins at the Phật Pagoda in Đại Tự commune, Siêu Loại district. This pagoda stood along the Bình Giang River (present-day Thiên Đức River). During the reign of Emperor Ming of the Han, the Administrator Sĩ built a fortress there. At this pagoda resided a monk who had come from the West, named Già La Đồ Lê, revered by the people as the Venerable Master (Tôn sư). There was a girl named Man Nương. Orphaned and impoverished, she earnestly sought to pursue the Way. Although she spoke slowly, she could assist the monks in chanting scriptures. She took responsibility for kitchen duties-washing vegetables, rinsing rice, cooking porridge-and personally prepared offerings for the

monks and for those from afar who came to study the Dharma. One night in the fifth month, while the monks continued their recitations until dawn, Man Nương had already finished cooking porridge but, overcome by drowsiness, fell asleep in her room, forgetting both hunger and fatigue. When the chanting ended, the monks returned to their quarters. Unaware that Man Nương was asleep inside, Master Già La stepped over her body. Man Nương suddenly felt a stirring in her heart and conceived. After three or four months, ashamed, she withdrew; Master Đồ Lê, also feeling disgraced, resolved to depart. Man Nương went to a pagoda upstream at the confluence of three rivers and stayed there. After her term, she gave birth to a baby girl and sought out Master Đồ Lê to return the child. At midnight, Master Đồ Lê brought the infant to the riverside, where a great banyan tree grew luxuriantly. He entrusted the child to the tree, saying: "I leave this Buddha-child in your care; in time, she will enter the Buddhist path." Thereafter, Đồ Lê and Man Nương parted. Before leaving, Đồ Lê gave her a staff, instructing that if ever there came a time of great drought, she should plant it into the ground to draw forth water for the people's relief. Man Nương returned to her old pagoda. Whenever severe droughts came, she would strike the ground with the staff, and clear springs would gush forth, saving countless lives. When she was over ninety, the ancient banyan fell and drifted to the riverbank before the pagoda. Monks attempted to haul it ashore for use as a bridge, but it spun in the current and could not be moved. Villagers tried to chop it for firewood, but their axes shattered. More than three hundred strong men gathered to drag it ashore, yet it remained immovable. One day, when Man Nương came to wash her feet at the river, she touched the banyan, and it stirred, even bleeding. Astonished, the monks and villagers urged her to draw it to shore. Craftsmen were summoned to carve four Buddha statues from its wood. When they reached the place where the infant had once been placed, it had transformed into a block of stone harder than iron, breaking all their tools. They cast the stone into the river, where it shone with light before sinking. The craftsmen suddenly died. The people then invited Man Nương to conduct a ritual. She hired fishermen to dive into the water and retrieve the stone. She later carved it into a Buddha image and enshrined it in the pagoda. Master Đồ Lê conferred Dharma names upon the four statues: Pháp Vân (Cloud Dharma), Pháp Vũ (Rain Dharma), Pháp Lôi (Thunder Dharma), and Pháp Điện (Lightning Dharma). Wherever people prayed for rain, their petitions were answered. From then on, all revered Man Nương as the Buddha Mother. On the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, a "sacred relic" (linh xác) miraculously appeared and was enshrined within the pagoda. The people took that day as the Buddha's birthday. Each year, men and women, young and old, gathered for festivities-singing, dancing, and performing acrobatics-in what became known as the Buddha Festival (Hội Phật). Remarkably, this festival continues to this day (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.482).

This tale contains several Tantric features that merit analysis. First, the motif of Man Nương's miraculous conception is closely connected with Tantric studies and practices concerning the Intermediate State (Bardo) and near-death karma (cận tử nghiệp), as found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Venerable Lama Lodo, 1987). These practices aim at controlling rebirth. The image of miraculous conception also appears in the legend of Master Từ Đạo Hạnh (to be discussed later), and in a more cryptic manner, in ancient Vietnamese myths such as those of Thánh Gióng or Sọ Dừa. The Tibetan Book of the Dead-literally *Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*-is attributed to Guru Padmasambhava (Ngawang Zangpo, 2002), the founder of Tibetan Tantrism. It consists of instructions given to the dying. It divides death into three stages, each associated with the Trikāya (Three Bodies of the Buddha): in the first stage immediately after death, the Dharmakāya manifests as a pure radiant light; in the second stage, the Sambhogakāya appears in the form of the Five Tathāgatas, each with distinct attributes and colors; in the final stage, the Nirmāṇakāya emerges in the six realms of rebirth through various divine forms and hues. In all three stages, liberation may be attained by recognizing that all visions are mere projections of one's own mind-through which one realizes Nirvāṇa. This is a Tantric achievement-practice for meditating upon death, later developed into teachings on consciously choosing the circumstances of rebirth. Such concepts are reflected in the narratives of Man Nương and Từ Đạo Hạnh.

Second, the appearance of Meditation Master Khâu-đà-la (Dradara), an Indian monk of noble Brahmin lineage, who came to Giao Châu during the reign of Emperor Ling of Han (169-187 CE) under Governor Sĩ Nhiếp, shows the spread of Tantric practices. The fact that he employed Tantric methods and was accepted by the populace suggests that Indian masters performing supernatural acts for religious instruction were not uncommon in the region. Third, the participation of Governor Sĩ Nhiếp, a Confucian literatus, in venerating and constructing Buddhist temples, demonstrates that Buddhism in Luy Lâu was not only widespread among the common people but also revered by the ruling elite. Besides *LNCQ*, another variant of the Man Nương story appears in the Phật Pháp Vân section of the Cổ Châu Lục (MS A.818), which notes that, in addition to Master Khâu-đà-la, there was also Master Kỳ Vực, both received by Governor Sĩ Nhiếp.

The union between Man Nương and Khâu-đà-la raises interpretive challenges but can be understood through the perspective of Tantric symbolism. It parallels the union of Tiên Dung and Chử Đồng Tử, which should be considered a form of dual cultivation (song tu). Notably, Man Nương's father prayed: *"May I receive a word or half a verse to purify myself."* To which Khâu-đà-la replied: *"The husk separates from the grain; night and day, the four directions change places because of delusion! Deluded, one falls into the profane, estranged from the*

sacred. But though A Man (Man Nương) is a woman, she has the heart of the Way; if she meets a man, she will become a great Dharma vessel." The assertion that a woman can only become a great Dharma vessel through union with a man must be interpreted in the framework of Tantric doctrine (Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, 2007, pp.4-47]. The imagery of Khâu-đà-la striking the banyan tree with his staff, causing it to split open for the child's concealment, has been compared by scholars to Indian fertility cults, which survive in Vietnamese folk practices: the "Linh tinh tình phộc" rite in the Trò Trám Festival (Duy Thái, 2023), the face-smearing ritual in the Ná Nhèm Festival, the "Ông Đùng-Bà Đà" dances at the Chúa Muối Temple Festival, and the phallic procession at the Đồng Kỵ Village Festival in Bắc Ninh, among many others in northern Vietnam. These festivals, rooted in indigenous fertility worship and Indian cultural influences, show that sexual union in archaic ritual contexts was sacralized and should not be interpreted in a purely carnal sense. Similarly, Khâu-đà-la's contact with Man Nương resulting in the birth of a sacred being should be read symbolically and ritually, not literally. This symbolic union also parallels the Tiên Dung-Chử Đồng Tử narrative, where their meeting occurs at a riverside altar, as analyzed earlier. Finally, the emergence of a Buddha Mother (Phật Mẫu) is not part of early Buddhism but suggests Tantric influence.

2.3. The Legend of Sĩ Vương - Lĩnh Nam chích quái

Sĩ Nhiếp, later venerated as Sĩ Vương or the "Patriarch of Southern Learning" (Nam Giao Học Tổ), made significant contributions to the development of Luy Lâu as a socio-economic, cultural, and Buddhist academic center of his time. The legend recounts that the Immortalized Sĩ Vương had a temple dedicated to him in Tam Á village, Siêu Loại district. His personal name was Sĩ Nhiếp, a native of Thương Ngô commandery, Quảng Đức county. His ancestors originally came from the state of Lỗ but during a time of turmoil, migrated to this region. His father, Sĩ Tứ, served as Prefect of Nhật Nam under Emperor Huán of the Han. As a youth, Sĩ Nhiếp studied in the Han capital, specializing in the Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (Tả thị Xuân Thu). He passed the Filial and Incorrupt examination, serving as Langzhong in the Ministry of Personnel, but was later dismissed. Subsequently, he succeeded in the Mao Cai and Xian Liang examinations, was pardoned, and appointed magistrate in Hợp Dương. During the reign of Emperor Xiàn of the Han, he was promoted to Prefect of Jiaozhou (Giao Châu). Toward the end of the Three Kingdoms period, Sĩ Vương established his authority at Tùy Thành, later known as Luy Lâu in Long Biên. Emperor Xiàn, upon hearing of him, issued an edict bestowing him with a seal of kingship, entrusting him with the governance of seven commanderies and the administration of Jiaozhou-thus marking the beginning of his tenure as Prefect of Jiaozhou. He dispatched his envoy Trương Mân to the Han capital to oversee tribute missions. The Han emperor subsequently conferred upon him the title of General Who Pacifies the Distant Lands

(An viễn tướng quân), along with the marquisate of Long Độ. Under Sun Quan, King of Wu, he was further elevated to Left General (Tả tướng quân), while his three sons were granted the title of Langzhong. He offered aromatic herbs and incense to Sun Quan, who, impressed by his integrity, held him in high regard and bestowed upon him generous gifts. His brothers were also granted high positions: *"Vi"* as Prefect of Hợp Phố (present-day Hoan Châu), *"Vị"* as Prefect of Cửu Chân (present-day Thanh Hóa), and *"Vũ"* as Prefect of Nam Hải (present-day Liêm Châu). Sĩ Vương was known for his magnanimous and benevolent demeanor, modesty, and respect for others. Many Han scholars, fleeing turmoil, sought refuge with him. The local people revered him as a "Lord" (Chúa), likening him to Yuan Hui. Observers remarked that in Jiaozhou, Sĩ Nhiếp was not only deeply learned but also politically astute. Amidst widespread disorder, he maintained peace in the region for over thirty years, ensuring stability and livelihood for the people. Some even compared him favorably to Dou Rong, Prefect of Hà Tây, asserting that Sĩ Vương surpassed him. His prestige and authority resonated across the hundred tribes, even exceeding that of Zhao Tuo. He ruled for more than forty years, skillfully "regulating the vital energies" in governance and cultivating talent through education. Upon his death, he was buried according to Legalist rites. During the late Jin dynasty, about 160 years later, the Lâm Ấp invaders desecrated his tomb. When they opened it, his body remained intact, his complexion lifelike, which terrified them, and they hastily reinterred him. Tradition held that Sĩ Vương had followed the Way of the Immortals, leading the people to establish a temple in his honor. In the 13th year of Hàm Thông (872 CE) under the Tang, Gao Pian, while suppressing the Nánzhào rebellion, passed by his shrine. There, he encountered an extraordinary figure of refined countenance, dressed in dignified attire, who greeted him with a parasol. Gao Pian, delighted, invited him into his tent to discuss the Three Kingdoms period. The figure entered and departed with proper courtesy but then vanished suddenly. Upon inquiry, Gao Pian learned from the villagers that it was the tomb of the Immortalized Sĩ Vương. Struck with awe, he composed a poem in praise. Thereafter, supplications at Sĩ Vương's shrine were believed to be answered with efficacy. By the Trần dynasty, he was posthumously ennobled as "The Great King of Virtuous Wisdom, Majestic Family, and Miraculous Efficacy" (Thiện Huệ Uy Gia Linh Ứng Đại vương), and he continues to be venerated as a tutelary deity to this day (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.589).

Based on the Cổ Châu Pháp Vân Phật Bản Hạnh, preserved at Dâu Pagoda, we can see that by the 2nd-3rd centuries, Luy Lâu had already become a major Buddhist center, with large-scale monasteries and pagodas constructed. Traces of monks from various regions who came here to study, translate scriptures, and then disseminate the teachings elsewhere remain to this day. It is said that hundreds of scriptures were once kept here. Luy Lâu thus became the earliest Buddhist academic center in Jiaozhou (Giao Châu), predating even the prominent centers of Pengcheng

(Bành Thành) and Luoyang (Lạc Dương). By the 2nd century, Buddhism entered a new stage, with the formation of the sangha and the beginnings of translations of major scriptures such as the Sūtra of Forty-Two Sections (Tứ Thập Nhị Chương Kinh), the Lotus Samādhi Sūtra (Pháp Hoa Tam Muội Kinh), and the Prajñāpāramitā in Eight Thousand Verses (Bát Nhã Bát Thiên Tụng). Luy Lâu became a transit hub for monks from the north who came to study Buddhism, such as Mâu Tử. At the same time, it served as a place where Indian and Central Asian monks could stay, translate scriptures, and learn Chinese before traveling further north (Nguyễn Tài Thư, 1991). The presence of Tantric (Esoteric) Buddhist notions (Mật Tông) may have taken root even earlier, from the time of Mâu Tử and Khương Tăng Hội. First, regarding Mâu Tử (Nguyễn Đăng Thục, p.1992)-whose personal name was Mâu Bác-he was born around 165-170 in Thương Ngô commandery (present-day Ngô Châu, along the West River in Guangxi, China). He studied and cultivated in Jiaozhi (Giao Chỉ), where he accomplished his learning and composed the *Lý hoặc luận* [Treatise on the Resolution of Doubts], the first known Buddhist work in Chinese. An indication of Esoteric Buddhist influence is found in the *Lý hoặc luận* [(Thích Minh Tuệ, 1993), which describes the ideal adept after practicing meditative methods: *"With a pure mind, one attains the four dhyānas; moving freely according to thought, lightly soaring in flight, walking upon water, multiplying one's body, transforming into myriad forms, passing in and out without hindrance, appearing and vanishing at will, touching sun and moon, shaking heaven and earth, seeing and hearing all without obstruction, with a purified and illuminated mind, attaining omniscience."* This passage suggests that for Mâu Tử, supernatural powers (thần thông) were self-evident and the highest attainment of an enlightened adept-a conception very different from earlier Mahāyāna understandings and distinct as well from the Chan (Zen) views of later times-clearly reflecting Esoteric Buddhist influence. Similarly, Mâu Tử's description of the qualities of a Buddha in *Lý hoặc luận* (Disputation II) also bears strong Tantric characteristics: *"To speak of Buddha means Enlightenment: swiftly transforming, multiplying into countless bodies, appearing and vanishing, able to be small or vast, round or square, old or young, visible or hidden, walking on fire without being burned, treading on blades without injury, remaining undefiled amid filth, unharmed amidst calamity; if desiring to go, one flies; when seated, one shines forth with radiance. Therefore, he is called Buddha."* This conception-that supernatural powers are a necessary attribute of a Buddha-reveals the profound influence of Esoteric Buddhism within the sangha of Jiaozhi at that time.

On the other hand, although Sĩ Nhiếp openly propagated Confucianism, he may have secretly supported Buddhism. The reason is that if Sĩ Nhiếp had not given covert support, the development and activities of the monastic community would have encountered great difficulties and could hardly have advanced, let alone had the time to devote themselves to the translation of

scriptures. Moreover, we should regard Sĩ Nhiếp as a shrewd politician, and it may have been precisely this discreet support that stimulated debates between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as reflected in the Lý hoặc luận. This could also have been a balancing strategy against Confucian literati from the North, who might have opposed Sĩ Nhiếp since his interpretation of Confucian thought differed from theirs. Thus, the subtle method of diverting potential opposition was to raise another issue for them to dispute. Of course, this remains a hypothesis, yet in any case, it is evident that Sĩ Nhiếp must have been exposed to and studied Buddhist teachings. At the same time, his political strategies also encouraged and created space for monks and lay Buddhists to disseminate their doctrines in dialogue with followers of Confucianism and Daoism. His affinity with the Hu people (Indians, Central Asians) is mentioned in the letter that Yuan Hui sent to Xun Yu: *"Your brothers hold official posts governing prefectures, being lords of an entire region, dwelling far away at the edge of ten thousand miles, yet your prestige surpasses all. When entering or leaving, bells and chimes are struck, all ceremonial proprieties are fulfilled; flutes and pipes resound, carriages and horses fill the roads, and the Hu people follow closely beside the wheels to burn incense, often numbering several tens. His principal wife and concubines ride in covered carriages; sons and younger relatives ride horses, leading troops in attendance. All contemporaries respected them, the barbarians all feared and submitted; even Zhao Tuo was not superior."* (Ngô Sĩ Liên, 2006). In *LNCQ*, the tale "*Sĩ Vương tiên truyện"* [The Tale of the Immortal Sĩ Vương] is included in the supplementary section compiled by Đoàn Vĩnh Phúc under the Mạc dynasty, who excerpted it from the *Việt điện u linh tập* [Records of Vietnamese spiritual customs] (Ngọc Hồ, 1992). The account of Sĩ Nhiếp's miraculous qualities in Lí Tế Xuyên's *Việt điện u linh tập* (Trần dynasty), in the section *"Gia Ứng Thiện Cảm Linh Vũ Đại Vương"* (嘉應善感靈武大王) [The Great King of Auspicious Response, Benevolent Influence, and Numinous Martiality], in turn cites the *"Báo Cực Truyện"* (報極傳) [Records of Ultimate Retribution]: *"Sĩ Vương excelled in the arts of self-cultivation. After his death and burial, by the end of the Jin dynasty, more than 160 years later, when the people of Lâm Ấp invaded and plundered, they dug up his tomb at Tam Á village in Gia Định district. They saw that his body had not decayed, his appearance was exactly as when alive. Frightened by this miraculous sight, they hastily reburied him. The local people spread the story, believed him to be a spirit, erected a shrine in his honor, and called him 'Immortal Sĩ Vương' (Sĩ Vương tiên)."* According to Liam Kelley, the *"Báo Cực Truyện"* is a Buddhist-oriented text: *"If it is indeed a Buddhist collection of legends, then it likely also emphasized the presence of Buddhism in this region during Sĩ Nhiếp's era. This seems plausible since the Báo Cực Truyện is also cited in a medieval Buddhist work (Cổ Châu Pháp Vân bản hạnh ngữ lục), where it provides detailed information about the Buddhist community in the Red River Delta during Sĩ Nhiếp's*

time." (Liam Kelley, 2014). He argues that the legend of Sĩ Nhiếp's incorrupt body may have been interpreted as a karmic sign of his support for Buddhism. A noteworthy miraculous detail is the "incorrupt body" (nhục thân bất hoại), described as follows: *"When the people of Lâm Ấp invaded and dug up his tomb at Tam Á village in Gia Định district, they saw that his body had not decayed, his countenance remained as in life. Overcome with fear, they reburied it."* This corresponds to phenomena associated with Buddhist meditation masters who, upon attaining deep meditative absorption, leave behind incorrupt relic bodies (nhục thân), as seen in China with the Sixth Patriarch, or in Vietnam with Master Từ Đạo Hạnh (Trần Mỹ Hiền, 2019). This detail suggests that Sĩ Nhiếp may have practiced both Daoist nurturing arts (thuật nhiếp dưỡng) and Buddhist meditation. If he indeed practiced meditation, he might have attained Dharma transmission from the monk Khâu Đà La. The motif of the "abode of the Buddha" (vực Phật ở) and Sĩ Nhiếp's installation of the Four Dharma statues in the tale of Man Nương further indicate his support and closeness to Buddhism. Concerning this, *the An Nam chí lược* [Abbreviated Records of Annam]*: "At Cổ Châu, in springtime when torrential rains caused great floods pouring from the mountains into the central plains, the waters gathered in one spot. The people went out to observe and saw within the water a stone resembling a Buddha. When the people prayed for rain, the deity responded. They then carved a wooden image of the Buddha for worship; whenever a great drought occurred, upon prayer, rain would come. Thus, people said it was 'pháp vân pháp võ,' meaning 'the clouds and rains of the Buddha's Dharma'."* (Lê Tắc, 1961). This reference to *"pháp vân pháp võ"* (the clouds and rains of the Dharma) clearly demonstrates the connection between the Four Dharma cult and Buddhism, rather than Brahmanical influences. According to the Cổ Châu Pháp Vân Phật bản hạnh ngữ lục, the detail of the "abode of the Buddha" linked to the sacred stone (Thạch Quang Vương Phật) suggests an esoteric element rare in this early period, namely the Mandala. The "abode of the Buddha" may refer to the Garbhadhātu Mandala (Thai Tạng Mạn Đà La) of Esoteric Buddhism. The patriarchal temple of the Tỳ-ni-đa-lưu-chi lineage-Dâu Pagoda (Cổ Châu Temple)-was constructed with a special architectural design: a central stupa surrounded by temples, forming a structure akin to a Mandala.

2.4. Tây qua truyện: The Story of the Watermelon recounts the legend of how the watermelon was introduced into Vietnam.

The tale *"Tây qua cổ truyện"* [Ancient Story of the Watermelon] in *LNCQ* narrates the story of Mai An Tiêm, who lived during the reign of the Hùng Kings. An Tiêm was originally a foreigner; at the age of seven or eight, he was sold by a trading ship to the king as a servant. As he grew up, An Tiêm was handsome and knowledgeable in many matters. The king bestowed upon him the surname Mai, the given name Yển, the courtesy title An Tiêm, and even granted

him a wife, with whom he had a son. The king placed great trust in An Tiêm, entrusting him with many tasks, which enabled him gradually to become wealthy. Because of his wealth and the respect he commanded, An Tiêm developed an arrogant disposition. He often said that all he possessed came from his previous life, not from the king's favor. When the king heard this, he became furious, remarking that a subject who failed to acknowledge his ruler's grace and attributed everything to himself was intolerable. The king decided to exile An Tiêm to the deserted Sa Châu sandbank, outside the Nham Thạch estuary, a place devoid of human footprints. He left An Tiêm provisions sufficient for four or five months, declaring that once he consumed them, he would die, and then it would be seen whether his possessions truly came from a previous life. An Tiêm's wife remained in the capital, lamenting that he would surely perish in the wilderness. However, Mai An Tiêm remained optimistic, believing that life and death were ordained by Heaven, and thus he did not despair. One day, he saw a white bird flying from the northwest, alighting on the mountain peak, calling five times, then dropping six or seven watermelon seeds onto the sandy ground. These sprouted, spreading with lush green vines and bearing fruit in the autumn, rolling about everywhere. Delighted, An Tiêm considered the fruit a divine gift meant to sustain him. Cutting one open, he found its taste sweet and fragrant; eating it gave strength and clarity of mind. He planted the seeds and, in time, used the fruit to barter for rice and grain from fishermen and traders who passed by the sandbank. He saved the seeds for future cultivation, thus establishing a livelihood. At first, the fruit had no name. Because the white bird had brought the seeds from the west and dropped them onto the sand, the people named it dưa (melon). Traders passing through Sa Châu who tasted the fruit found it delicious and greatly favored it. Word spread far and wide, and soon people came to purchase it, bringing seeds back to plant according to the seasons, thereby propagating it across the land. The people revered An Tiêm as the Father of the Western Melon (Tây qua phụ mẫu). To this day, the fruit is still called An Tiêm's western melon (An Tiêm tây qua), and the custom of offering watermelon as a ritual tribute may have originated with him. King Hùng eventually recalled An Tiêm and sent envoys to discover whether he had survived. When they arrived, they found An Tiêm prosperous, with spacious dwellings, and reported back to the king. Sighing, the king admitted that An Tiêm's words-that his possessions came from a previous life-had not been in vain. The king summoned him back to the capital. An Tiêm presented the fruit to the king and declared it was watermelon. The king restored his former position, returned his wife, servants, and lands. Thereafter, Sa Châu was renamed An Tiêm Prefecture, and the village where he had lived was called Mai Village. Today, this land is known as An Tiêm, in Nga Sơn district, Thanh Hóa province (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.436).

In the *Tây qua cổ truyện*, once again, the motif of overseas trade via the maritime Silk Road from India to Giao Châu is evident, particularly through the detail that Mai An Tiêm was originally a foreigner, purchased from a trading vessel by the Hùng King. The influence of Indian culture and Buddhism appears in An Tiêm's notion of karmic retribution and merit in the story, as in his words: "*All that I possess comes from my past lives, not from my lord's grace*." In manuscript A 2914, an additional phrase appears: "*He also said that his wealth was from his past life.*" This detail affirms the presence of the Buddhist doctrine of karmic rebirth at a very early period. However, the narrative revolves around two contrasting viewpoints: Mai An Tiêm's belief in karmic retribution and rebirth, and the Hùng King's view that success results from present deeds-specifically, that An Tiêm's achievements were due to the king's rewards. The tale then proceeds with the king's test and their eventual reconciliation, representing a form of synthesis between these two perspectives. This detail illustrates the reception and adaptation of Buddhist thought in interaction with the indigenous culture of the ancient Vietnamese.

Researcher Trần Hậu Yên Thế (Trần Hậu Yên Thế, n.d.) hypothesizes a connection between the legend of Mai An Tiêm and the influence of Central Asian peoples on late Đông Sơn culture through the artifact The Lamp in the Shape of a Human discovered at Lạch Trường. According to him, the term Tây qua was a Sinicized written expression, while the Vietnamese people themselves simply called it dưa hấu (watermelon). This native Vietnamese name has been preserved to the present day. He further argues that dưa hấu may in fact mean "melon of the Hồ people," since Hấu might represent an archaic form of hú, which in turn was a term in Chinese referring to the Hồ (Central Asians). Meanwhile, researcher Liam Kelley (Liam Kelley, 2014), in his essay *"Watermelons, Birds, Buddhists and a Vietnamese Legend"*, identifies Buddhist elements in the tale of the watermelon and the white pheasant. He points out parallels with Buddhist scriptures along the southern coastal regions of China, particularly those belonging to the Precious Scrolls (寶卷, baojuan) tradition-didactic moral tales often involving bodhisattvas such as Guanyin. Among them is the Tây qua baojuan (西瓜寶卷, Precious Scroll of the Watermelon), which recounts how the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara appeared in the guise of a physician and rewarded a virtuous deed by bestowing watermelon seeds, through which the recipient became prosperous (Chün-fang Yü & Kuan-Yin, 2000). As for the motif of the white bird or white pheasant, Kelley notes its association with the Southern Sea Guanyin (南海觀音), often depicted accompanied by a white parrot, sometimes shown holding seeds or fruit in its beak (Marsha Wiedner et al., 1994). This imagery also appears in the Vietnamese verse narrative *Quan Âm Thị Kính* (Dương Quảng Hàm, 1919), where the character Thiện Sĩ, after *vindication and becoming a Buddha*, transforms into a parrot standing by her side: "*Kìa như Thiện Sĩ lờ đờ/*

Cho làm chim vẹt đứng nhờ một bên." The motif of the white bird or pheasant also surfaces in the Maitreya Bodhisattva's Questions about His Original Vows (Tam Tạng Trúc Pháp Hộ, n.d.), where the pheasant is used as a metaphor for the Buddha himself, as described by Maitreya: "*The World-Honored One gave away (Dāna)/Wife and child, food and drink/Head and eyes without regret,/His Buddha-virtues beyond measure./ Observing the precepts without transgression,/Like the pheasant cherishing its feathers./ None could equal his Śīla,/ His merits were immeasurable*." In this text, the path led by the Buddha is referred to as the Path of Radiant Light (光明道), suggesting that the whiteness of the bird may allude to this luminous way. Thus, the image of the white pheasant symbolizes both the Buddha and his salvific path.

We also note the etymological question of the term *"hấu"* in *"dưa hấu"*. Researchers Trần Hậu Yên Thế and An Chi argue that hấu derives from hú (煦). The Hán-Nôm Dictionary (Từ điển Hán Nôm, n.d.) explains hú with several semantic fields, such as breathing or exhaling, as well as sounds like roaring (hống 吼). In antiquity, hú was sometimes used interchangeably with hống, and could even refer to the cry of the pheasant (câu). On the other hand, hú was also interpreted as denoting the color red, as noted in Xu Shen's Shuowen Jiezi and the Hanyu Da Cidian (Luo Zhufeng). Likewise, Séraphin Couvreur, in his Dictionnaire classique de la langue chinoise, records hú as referring to "red" or "the rays of the sun." The miraculous aspect is highlighted in the *LNCQ* version translated by Nguyễn Hữu Vinh (Nguyễn Hữu Vinh, 1992) from the Sino-Vietnamese text included in Việt Nam Hán Văn Tiểu Thuyết Tùng San: "*Suddenly a white bird came flying from the West, alighted on the mountain peak, cried three or four times, and spat out six or seven watermelon seeds onto the sand. These sprouted into vines, grew lush, and bore abundant fruit.*" The white bird, flying from the West, cries out before releasing the seeds, which immediately germinate and flourish. In Buddhist doctrine, seeds symbolize the bīja (種子, "seeds of existence"), directly tied to the principle of karma and cause-and-effect. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, bīja refers specifically to seed-syllables (bījamantra). If the white bird is indeed linked with a bodhisattva or the Buddha, its act of crying out before releasing the seeds can be interpreted as a metaphor for the process of *"abhiṣeka"* (ritual consecration), whereby a tantric disciple receives the seed-syllable from a master.

The term *"hấu"* appears to have a connection with the seed syllable Hūṃ, often referred to in Sino-Vietnamese as Hống (吽). This syllable is typically the concluding sound in mantras or dhāraṇī, and is associated with deities such as Akṣobhya, Vajrapāṇi, and Vajrasattva. The motif of seeds touching the earth and sprouting may be linked to the Bhūmisparśa (earth-touching gesture) of Akṣobhya. In the treatises of Kūkai (空海), particularly The Meanings of "Hūṃ", the sacred syllable Hūṃ (吽字) is interpreted as a composite of the phonetic elements H, A, Ū, and

M. Specifically, the letter H signifies hetu (因), or the causal essence of dharmas, representing the Dharmakāya (法身) of the Tathāgata. The letter A denotes the origin of sound, or the "mother of all sounds" (衆聲之母), corresponding to the Saṃbhogakāya (報身). The letter U or Ūna symbolizes diminution or cessation (損減), representing the Nirmāṇakāya (應身). Finally, the letter M stands for ātman (我), interpreted as the Transformation Body (化身). This understanding of the sacred syllable also appears in the Li qu shi (理趣釋, Explanation of the Profound Meaning) by Amoghavajra (Bất Không). In the Ṣaḍakṣarī Mantra of Avalokiteśvara-Om Mani Padme Hūṃ (ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ)-the Vietnamese traditionally read it as Úm ma ni bát ni hồng (唵嘛呢叭嚩吽) or Án ma ni bát mê hồng. The syllable Hồng (吽) is also found in other mantras, such as in the Hóng Jiā Tuó Yě Yí Guǐ (吽迦陀野儀軌) translated by Vajrabodhi (Kim Cang Trí), including the Purification Dhāraṇī, and in the Niyama Ritual of the Great Wrathful Ucchuṣma (大威怒烏蘇什摩儀軌經) translated by Amoghavajra, where the Great Heart Mantra reads: "*Om. Vajra Krodha Mahā Bala Hana Daha Paca Vidhvaṃsaya Ucchuṣma Krodha Hūṃ Phat. Svāhā.*" Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that the Vietnamese term Hấu is an archaic pronunciation of the seed syllable Hūṃ, which in later tradition came to be read as Hồng.

2.5. The Tale of Đồng Thiên Vương: The Legend of Thánh Gióng

The "Tale of Phù Đổng Thiên Vương" recounts the origin of the temple dedicated to Sóc Thiên Vương at Vệ Linh village, Kim Hoa district, and another temple at Tây Hồ, Tảo Châu village, Từ Liêm district. During the reign of Emperor Lê Đại Hành, the Great Master Khuông Việt of the Ngô clan, while traveling on Mount Vệ Linh in Xa Duệ prefecture, built a small hermitage. One night, he dreamed of a divine being clad in golden armor, holding a golden spear and a stūpa, followed by ten fierce-looking attendants. The divine being identified himself as Vaiśravaṇa (Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương) and declared that, by order of the Heavenly Emperor, he and his retinue had come to eliminate the invaders from the southeast of the Northern Kingdom. Because of his karmic affinity with Khuông Việt, he had come to offer aid. Startled awake, the master heard terrifying shouts echoing through the mountains. The next morning, he entered the forest and saw a massive ancient tree, its branches flourishing and auspicious clouds hovering above. He ordered craftsmen to fell the tree, carve an image of the deity as seen in his dream, and erected a temple for worship. In the first year of the Thiên Phúc reign (980), when the Song army invaded, Emperor Lê Đại Hành, aware of the story, sent Master Khuông Việt to perform rites of supplication. While the Song troops encamped at Kết village and both armies held their positions, the enemy suddenly witnessed a gigantic figure rising above the waves, more than ten trượng tall, with bristling hair, glaring eyes, and a radiant aura. Terrified, the Song forces withdrew toward

the Kỳ Sơn river at Bảo Lộc, where they were struck by violent waves and attacked by monstrous creatures such as crocodiles and turtles. In panic, the Song troops fled in disarray, forcing their general Quách Quỳ to retreat. Emperor Lê Đại Hành praised the deity's numinous intervention and ordered additional temples to be constructed in his honor. Some claimed that this deity was none other than Đồng Thiên Vương, who had once defeated the Yin invaders, ascended to heaven on his iron horse from Mount Linh Sơn, and left his robe hanging on a banyan tree. That tree has since been called the "Tree of the Robe Exchange" (Dịch phục dung thụ). Worship of the deity required only offerings of tea and water with vegetarian purity (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024, p.596).

During the Lý dynasty, for the convenience of state rituals, the court established a temple at Tây Hồ, Châu Tảo, under the title of "Temple of the Celestial King." This tradition is still recorded in local chronicles.

Connected with the "Tale of Phù Đổng Thiên Vương" (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2024), the later additions (tục biên) of the *LNCQ* also contain two related stories-Sóc Thiên Vương and Xung Thiên Chiêu Ứng Thần Vương-both of which are associated with the Buddhist guardian deity Vaiśravaṇa (Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương). The "Tale of Sóc Thiên Vương" tells of a master surnamed Ngô who lived during the reign of Lê Đại Hành in Đại Việt. Journeying to Mount Vệ Linh and enchanted by its serenity, he built a hermitage there. One night, he dreamed of a fearsome divine being who declared himself Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương and revealed that he had been sent to protect the people, accompanied by a host of yakṣas (Dạ Xoa). Upon awakening, the master still heard cries from the mountain. The next morning, he entered the forest and found a great tree, which he had carved into an image of the deity for worship. When the Song army later invaded Đại Việt, the king, having heard of this vision, came to the temple to offer prayers. The enemy then saw a colossal figure upon the waves, ten trượng tall, with blazing eyes, and in terror retreated. Struck by storms and monstrous waves, they fled in chaos back to China. Because of the deity's miraculous intervention, the king ordered temples to be built. Some claimed that this divine being was Đồng Thiên Vương, the same hero who had once defeated the Yin invaders and ascended on his iron horse at Mount Vệ Linh. Thereafter, rituals of supplication required only offerings of tea, cakes, fruit, and vegetarian fare. By the Lý dynasty, the king had established a temple east of Tây Hồ and conferred upon the deity the title "Great King of Auspicious Protection" (Phúc Thần Đại Vương). A record in manuscript VHV 1473 states: *"After defeating the Yin invaders, Đồng Thiên Vương rode his iron horse to Mount Vệ Linh, ascended into heaven from the banyan tree, and left his robe beneath it. To this day, the people call it the 'Tree of the Robe Exchange.' Whenever prayers are needed, offerings of tea, cakes, fruit, and vegetarian food suffice."*

This account explicitly cites its source as the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, identifying the master surnamed Ngô as Ngô Chân Lưu (吳真流), known by his Dharma name Khuông Việt (匡越). He belonged to the fourth generation of the Vô Ngôn Thông lineage (933-1011) and was the first Sangha Leader (Tăng Thống) of Vietnamese Buddhism. The tale describes his dream as follows: *"Khuông Việt often traveled to Mount Vệ Linh in Bình Lỗ district and loved its sublime scenery. He decided to build a hermitage there. One night he dreamed of a divine being in golden armor, holding a golden spear in his right hand and a stūpa in his left. He was accompanied by more than ten fierce attendants. The divine being said: 'I am Vaiśravaṇa (Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương), and my attendants are yakṣas. The Heavenly Emperor has commanded me to come to this land to guard its borders and to ensure the flourishing of the Dharma. Because of our karmic affinity, I entrust this matter to you.' Khuông Việt awoke in terror, hearing cries echoing in the mountains. The next morning, he entered the forest and saw a great tree more than ten trượng tall, lush with branches and covered by auspicious clouds. He ordered it felled and carved into an image of the deity he had seen in his dream, and a temple was erected. In the first year of Thiên Phúc (981), when the Song army invaded, Emperor Lê Đại Hành heard of this account and sent Khuông Việt to the temple to offer prayers. The Song army, terrified by storms and monstrous floods, was utterly routed."* Thus, the Mount Vệ Linh where Master Khuông Việt encountered Vaiśravaṇa in his vision, and where he built the temple, is the very mountain known today as Sóc Sơn.

"The Tale of Xung Thiên Chiêu Ứng Thần Vương" in the Later Compilation recounts the story of the monk Đa Bảo and the tutelary deity known as Xung Thiên Thần Vương as follows: The deity was originally the earth god of Kiến Sơ Temple. Villagers of Phù Đổng erected a shrine to the local earth spirit on the rocks at the temple gate. Later, however, the monks moved the shrine elsewhere to perform chanting, and the original shrine was lost. The villagers believed that the spirit had been transformed into a divine being and thus continued their worship according to custom. When the monk Đa Bảo saw that Kiến Sơ Temple was not properly maintained and unsuitable for propagating the Dharma, he decided to relocate the temple. One day, he saw a verse written by the deity appear on a tree within the temple grounds, followed later by eight additional verses. Recognizing the supernatural nature of the event, Đa Bảo erected a platform for ordination and held vegetarian offerings to the deity. Before ascending the throne, King Lý Thái Tổ often visited monk Đa Bảo. After becoming emperor, he continued this practice. When Đa Bảo went out to greet the imperial carriage, he asked the deity whether he knew how to congratulate the sovereign: *"The disciples of the Buddha come forth to welcome the Emperor's carriage, does the deity also know how to offer congratulations to the Son of Heaven?"* The deity replied with four verses inscribed upon a tree trunk. The king read them and bestowed upon the deity the title "Xung Thiên Thần Vương" ("Divine King Soaring to Heaven"). Monk Đa Bảo

was a disciple of the eminent monk Khuông Việt, and Phù Đổng village itself was the legendary home of Phù Đổng Thiên Vương. Another account concerning Xung Thiên Thần Vương and the Xung Thiên Temple is found in *An Nam chí lược* by Lê Tắc: *"Formerly, there was civil unrest in this region. Suddenly, a man of great virtue appeared, and the people all followed him. He led them in suppressing the turmoil. After completing this task, he ascended to the heavens and disappeared. He was named Xung Thiên Thần Vương. The people then built a shrine and offered him worship."* (昔境內亂，忽見一人有威德，民皆歸之，遂領眾平其亂，已而騰空去。號為沖天王，民乃立祠禮祀之). According to Việt điện u linh tập, in the account Xung Thiên uy tín đại vương tập (folio 35), it is written: "*The King was originally an earth deity. In earlier times, the monk Chí Thành founded a temple in Phù Đổng village and established a shrine for the local earth spirit to the right of the temple*." Master Chí Thành, also known as Cảm Thành, was the second-generation disciple in the Vô Ngôn Thông lineage.

Regarding Vaiśravaṇa (毘沙門天, Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương), he is also known by various names such as Piśamona (鞞沙門), Vaiśramaṇa (毘舍羅門), Phệ Thất La Ma Noa (吠室羅摩拏), and Pǔwén Tiān (普聞天, "Universal Listener"). When incorporated into Indian Buddhism, Vaiśravaṇa became one of the Lokapālas, worldly guardian deities. In China, he was called Duōwén Tiānwáng (多聞天王, "Heavenly King Who Hears Much"), for he was believed to frequently appear at Dharma assemblies to listen and protect the teachings. In Japan, he is known as Tamon-ten (多聞天) or Bishamon-ten (毘沙門天), while in Korea he is referred to as Damun-cheonwang (多聞天王). He is one of the Four Heavenly Kings (Caturmahārāja) and also among the Twelve Devas, usually serving as the northern guardian of Jambudvīpa. He is said to reside in the northern quarter of Mount Sumeru's fourth tier, commanding yakṣas and rākṣasas, and protecting three continents besides. His common iconography depicts him standing on two demons, holding a stupa in his left hand and a precious staff in his right. According to the Ritual Manual for Reciting and Offering the Sutra of the Seven Buddhas of the Medicine Master Lapis Lazuli Light Tathāgata (Yaoshi Liuli Guangwang Qifo Benyuan Gongde Jing Niansong Yigui Gongyang Fa, Taishō), Vaiśravaṇa-referred to as the Great Heavenly King of the North-appears with a green body, wielding a precious trident, and guarding the northern gates of the Eight Buddhas (北方多聞大天王、其身綠色執寶叉、守護八佛北方門). In the Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī Sūtra (Fómǔ Dà Kǒngquè Míngwáng Jīng, 佛母大孔雀明王經), he is mentioned as the Great Heavenly King of the West, named Duōwén, leader of the yakṣas, with countless yakṣas as his retinue, protecting the northern direction (北方有大天王、名曰多聞、是藥叉主、以無量百千藥叉而爲眷屬、守護北方). The cult of Vaiśravaṇa flourished in Khotan (于闐), as

recorded in The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions (大唐西域記). With the influence of Esoteric Buddhism, this cult also became prominent in Tang China, due largely to the works of Amoghavajra (Bất Không). In his translated text *"Ritual Manual for the Northern Vaiśravaṇa Protecting the Army"*, he recounts the story of when the city of Anxi was besieged by Tibetan forces: Vaiśravaṇa appeared in a blaze of radiant light at the northern gate of the city, golden mice gnawed through the enemy's bowstrings, and divine soldiers in armor beat drums that shook heaven and earth, causing the Tibetan forces to scatter. The people of Anxi submitted a memorial, and Emperor Xuanzong (Tang Minghuang) decreed that *statues of Vaiśravaṇa be erected at the northwest gates of prefectures, garrisons, and fortresses throughout the realm* (Nguyễn Thanh Tùng, 2012). In the *"Dhāraṇī of the Northern Vaiśravaṇa Protecting the Army",* the Buddha Śākyamuni himself is said to have declared: "If you, commanding heavenly armies, safeguard the frontiers and protect the nation's land, then you may also guard my Dharma." During the Song dynasty, the cult of Vaiśravaṇa remained widespread, as recorded in works such as Song gaoseng zhuan (宋高僧傳). His worship was especially popular among military garrisons, where "Heavenly King Halls" were erected for ritual purposes. Wang Shizhen's Xiangzu Biji notes: "*According to Song ritual custom, every military encampment had a Heavenly King Hall"* (Nguyễn Thanh Tùng, 2012). In Xu Dong's Huojian jing (Hổ Kiềm Kinh), there is even a liturgical text entitled "*Ritual Offering to Vaiśravaṇa Heavenly King*" (Nguyễn Thanh Tùng, 2012). When Esoteric Buddhism was transmitted to Japan, the cult of Vaiśravaṇa was also venerated independently. At Kurama-dera (鞍馬寺) in Kyoto, the statue of Tōba Bishamon (兜跋毘沙門) is enshrined, while at Tō-ji (東寺) and Kyōō Gokoku-ji (教王護国寺), statues of Vaiśravaṇa are installed on the upper floor of the Rajōmon gate.

The details concerning Kiến Sơ Temple, from Master Cảm Thành to Master Khuông Việt and later Master Đa Bảo, demonstrate the process of construction and transformation within Vietnamese Buddhism, in which an image deeply rooted in Indian Esoteric Buddhism was adapted into a guardian deity, merging Esoteric elements with Vietnamese folk beliefs. Another noteworthy point is that both Master Khuông Việt and Master Đa Bảo were associated with Vaiśravaṇa (Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương). This opens the hypothesis that Esoteric Buddhist elements were connected to their religious practices. The original form of Vaiśravaṇa was Kuvera, a protective deity and god of wealth, who was believed to preside over the celestial chariot Puṣpaka, symbolizing prosperity. Because this deity was often associated with abundance and treasures, or "many jewels" (đa bảo), in early Buddhist contexts Kuvera was venerated both as a guardian and a deity of wealth. It was only when his cult spread to Khotan that he assumed the additional role of protector of royalty and the Dharma, under the name Vaiśravaṇa. This

raises the question: could the Dharma name Đa Bảo of this monk be connected to practices relating to the aspect of Vaiśravaṇa as a deity of wealth? In Esoteric Buddhism, Vaiśravaṇa is often regarded as a god of fortune whose appearance brings prosperity, peace, and protection from danger. The method of practice involves venerating Vaiśravaṇa's image while chanting scriptures such as the Vaiśravaṇa Sutra and the Golden Light Sutra (Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra). In the *Dhāraṇī of the Northern Vaiśravaṇa Protecting the Army (Bắc phương Tỳ Sa Môn Thiên Vương tùy quân hộ pháp chân ngôn),* there is a teaching on subjugating enemy forces: *"There is also a Dharma: If one wishes to subdue the armies of hostile nations, one should depict the Heavenly King clad in armor of true purple-gold. In a secluded chamber, one burns all varieties of incense-milk incense, aloe incense, floral incense, and colorful offerings of food and drink. With single-minded intention, one recites the mantra of the Heavenly King one hundred thousand times. Then the Heavenly King, commanding celestial armies, will come to assist, causing the enemy forces of that nation to disperse of themselves. If one can continue chanting day and night without interruption, the Heavenly King will send his son, Prince Tokken, to lead a thousand heavenly soldiers who will never leave one's side. All aspirations will be fulfilled, and all prayers will be accomplished in accordance with one's heart." The mantra is as follows: Namo Ratna-Trayāya/ Athakoru Bhūta-Raya - Dhiḥ Śāya Vaiśravaṇāya/ Mahārājāya Yakṣādhipata Stuta Śāstra Pravahadasya - He/ Madaṭaṭani Praṣayāmi/ Tadyathā: Kuśomi Duśomi Kuśa - Vaiśravaṇāya Mahārājāja - Evaṃ Dhaka Netram Akṣa Tu Mama (...)/ Daśa Sata Yasa./ Namo Bhagavate Siddhiyantu Mantra-Pāda Me - Svāhā. Another practice states: "There is also a Dharma: If one wishes to subdue enemy forces beforehand, one should keep purity in retreat, depict the Heavenly King in armor of true purple-gold, and hang the image upon a bamboo pole two zhang high. Facing an enemy army of fifty units, one points it in their direction, and the hostile army will be unable to cause harm."* Details such as the armor and the two-zhang bamboo pole evoke the imagery of Phù Đổng Thiên Vương. In the *LNCQ,* there is the detail: "The child rose and said to the envoy: 'Go quickly and tell the king to forge an iron horse eighteen feet high, an iron sword seven feet long, and an iron helmet. I will ride the horse and don the helmet to go forth and fight; the enemy will surely be terrified and scatter. The king need have no further concern." (*LNCQ*, 2024, p.429). The detail of the seven-foot iron sword, with the symbolic number seven, may relate to the instruction in the *Dhāraṇī of the Northern Vaiśravaṇa Protecting the Army*, which states: "*If the practitioner recites the mantra seven times, and the knot is tied, then the ritual is accomplished. One must not harbor doubt.*" Furthermore, the villagers' practice of making offerings of cakes and vegetarian foods may be seen as a transformation of the cultic practices devoted to Vaiśravaṇa into the worship of Đổng Thiên Vương. Thus, through these three accounts and related details, we encounter figures such as Phù

Đổng Thiên Vương, Sóc Thiên Vương/Vaiśravaṇa, and Xung Thiên Thần Vương, all tied to the loci of Vệ Linh Mountain (Sóc Sơn), Phù Đổng village, and Kiến Sơ Temple. The question then arises: what is the relationship among these figures, and what transformations or identifications took place over the course of their transmission? From the details concerning Xung Thiên Thần Vương, we discern traces of a local earth deity later conflated with a human hero, as mentioned in the *An Nam chí lược*, and subsequently transformed into a Buddhist guardian deity at Kiến Sơ Temple through the process of syncretism with the image of Vaiśravaṇa.

3. Conclusion

In summary, this study aims to analyze the Tantric (Esoteric Buddhist) elements interwoven throughout the early legendary narratives of Vietnam as recorded in *LNCQ*. This approach is considered a useful method for demonstrating the introduction and development of Esoteric Buddhism in Vietnam. The research is fortunate to have found that nearly all the stories in *LNCQ* contain, to varying degrees, Tantric elements; however, within the limited scope of this conference paper, the analysis focuses on four narratives that most clearly and prominently reflect Tantric features. Although there has been an early consensus among scholars that Buddhism had penetrated the region of Giao Châu at least since the 1st century CE, during the period of Northern Domination, the study of Esoteric Buddhism has received little specific and systematic attention. Archaeological methods have so far been limited to stone inscriptions dating from the reign of King Đinh Tiên Hoàng, with the clearest traces of Tantrism from the 9th century CE. Historical textual approaches stop at the 2nd century CE, with evidence from Mâu Tử and Khương Tăng Hội, both of which exhibit strong Tantric characteristics, providing reasonable certainty that Tantric perspectives had become established by the 2nd century. To demonstrate Tantric elements prior to the 2nd century CE, the only viable approach is through cultural analysis of early legends. In this regard, *LNCQ* stands out as one of the most crucial sources of evidence.

(*) **Acknowledgement**: The research team extends its gratitude to Mr. Nguyễn Anh Phong for his assistance in translating Chinese and Japanese texts, which greatly contributed to the completion of this study.

(**) **Note**: This paper has been revised and supplemented following its presentation at the International Scientific Conference held on July 23, 2023, at Thang Long University.

References

Abe, R. (1999). *The weaving of mantra: Kukai and the construction of esoteric Buddhist discourse*. Columbia University Press.

Beyer, S. (1978). *The cult of Tara: Magic and ritual in Tibet. University of California Press.*

Cổ Châu Pháp Vân Phật bản hạnh ngữ lục. (2019). (Kí hiệu A.818). Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm.

Cox, C., Dessein, B., & Willemen, C. (1998). *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist scholasticism*. Brill.

Dalai Lama. (n.d.). *Ý nghĩa pháp khí Mật tông Tây Tạng* [The meaning of Vajrayana ritual implements] (Hồng Như, Trans.). Phatgiao.org.vn. https://phatgiao.org.vn

Dayal, H. (1970). *The Bodhisattva doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit literature*. Motilal Banarsidass.

Dương Quảng Hàm. (1919). *Việt Nam thi văn hợp tuyển: Quan Âm Thị Kính* [Anthology of Vietnamese poetry: Quan Am Thi Kinh]. Trung tâm học liệu xuất bản.

Duy Thái. (2023, February). *Đội mưa xem rước sinh thực khí ở lễ hội Ná Nhèm* [Watching the procession of fertility symbols in the Na Nhem Festival under the rain]. Giáo dục Thủ đô. https://giaoducthudo.giaoducthoidai.vn

Fa Qing. (2001). *The development of Prajna in Buddhism from early Buddhism to the Prajnaparamita system: With special reference to the Sarvastivada tradition* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary].

Hayward, J. (2008). *Warrior-King of Shambhala: Remembering Chögyam Trungpa*. Wisdom.

Harrison, P. M. (2000). Mañjuśrī and the cult of the celestial Bodhisattvas. Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal, 13.

Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng. (2007). Đọc lại truyện Man Nương [Rereading the tale of Man Nuong]. *Báo Văn hóa Phật giáo*, 3.

Kelley, L. (2014). *The "Báo cực truyện" as a collection of Buddhist miracle tales*. Le Minh Khai's SEAsian History Blog. https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com

Kelley, L. (2014). *Watermelons, birds, Buddhists and a Vietnamese legend*. Le Minh Khai's SEAsian History Blog. https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com

Kinh Thủ Hộ quốc giới chủ [Sutra of the guardian of the nation's borders]. (n.d.). (Thích Thông Đức, Trans.).

Lê Mạnh Thát. (1999). *Thiền uyển tập anh* [Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden]. Nxb. TP. Hồ Chí Minh.

Lê Quý Đôn. (2013). *Kiến văn tiểu lục* [A small record of what was seen and heard] (Nguyễn Trọng Điềm, Trans.). Nxb. Trẻ.

Lê Tắc. (1961). *An Nam chí lược* [Abbreviated records of Annam]. Ủy ban Phiên dịch Sử liệu Việt Nam.

Lễ hội ông Đùng, bà Đà [The festival of Mr. Dung and Mrs. Da]. (2014). Cổng thông tin điện tử Thái Bình. https://sovhttdl.thaibinh.gov.vn

Lịch sử Kinh Pháp Hoa [History of the Lotus Sutra]. (n.d.). Giác Ngộ Online. https://giacngo.vn

Luo, Z. (Ed.). (1986–1993). *Hanyu da cidian* [Comprehensive dictionary of Chinese]. Cishu Chubanshe.

Ngawang Zangpo. (2002). *Guru Rinpoché: His life and times*. Snow Lion Publications.

Ngọc Hồ. (1992). *Việt điệu u linh tập tục toàn biên* [Complete records of Vietnamese spiritual customs]. Nxb. Cửu Long.

Ngô Sĩ Liên. (2006). *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete annals of Dai Viet] (Vol. 1; Cao Huy Giu, Trans.). Nxb. Văn hóa Thông tin.

Nguyễn Đăng Na. (2004). *Văn học thế kỷ X–XIV* [Vietnamese literature from the 10th to 14th centuries]. Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội.

Nguyễn Đăng Thục. (1992). *Lịch sử tư tưởng Việt Nam* [History of Vietnamese thought]. Nxb. TP. Hồ Chí Minh.

Nguyễn Hữu Sơn. (2022). Kiểu "tác giả truyền thừa" trong văn học thời Lý – Trần [The 'inherited author' model in Ly–Tran period literature]. *Tạp chí Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 8.*

Nguyễn Lang. (1993). *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận* [A study of the history of Vietnamese Buddhism]. Nxb. Văn học.

Nguyễn Tài Thư (Ed.). (1991). *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt Nam* [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]. Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội.

Nguyễn Thanh Tùng. (2012). Giấc mơ Khuông Việt nhìn từ giác độ lịch sử – văn hóa [The dream of Khuong Viet from a historical and cultural perspective]. *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu và Phát triển*, 1.

Nguyễn Thị Oanh. (2024). *Lĩnh Nam chích quái – Khảo luận, dịch chú, nguyên bản chữ Hán* [Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam – Commentary, translation, and original Sino text]. Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội.

Prince, T. (2014*). Universal enlightenment: An introduction to the teachings and practices of Huayen Buddhism*. Kongting Publishing Company.

Pye, M. (2003). *Skilful means: A concept in Mahayana Buddhism. Routledge.*

Ray, R. A. (2001). *Secret of the Vajra world: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*. Shambhala Publications.

Buswell, R. E., Jr., & Lopez, D. S., Jr. (2013). *The Princeton dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press.

Couvreur, S. (1911). *Dictionnaire classique de la langue chinoise* [Classical dictionary of the Chinese language]. La Mission Catholique.

Tam Tạng Trúc Pháp Hộ. (n.d.). *Kinh Bồ Tát Di Lặc thưa hỏi về bản nguyện* [The sutra of Maitreya Bodhisattva's inquiry into his vows] (Huyền Thanh, Trans.). (Đại Tạng Kinh, Vol. 12, No. 349).

Thích Minh Tuệ. (1993). *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt Nam* [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]. Thành hội Phật giáo Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh.

Trần Hậu Yên Thế. (n.d.). *Quý ông Lạch Trường và huyền tích Mai An Tiêm* [Mr. Lach Truong and the legend of Mai An Tiem]. Tạp chí Mỹ thuật. http://tapchimythuat.vn

Trần Mỹ Hiền. (2019, May). *Thêm lý giải về nhục thân của thiền sư chùa Đậu* [Further interpretation of the mummified body of the monk at Dau Pagoda]. Báo Công an Nhân dân. https://cand.com.vn

Trần Văn Giáp. (2003). *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm* [Exploring the Han–Nom text collection]. Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội.

Tuệ Sỹ. (2002). *Trung A Hàm: Kinh Niệm Xứ* [Middle-length discourses: Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta]. Nxb. Hồng Đức.

Từ điển Hán Nôm. (n.d.). https://hvdic.thivien.net

Venerable Lama Lodo. (1987). *Bardo teachings: The way of death and rebirth*. Snow Lion Publications.

Vũ Quỳnh, & Kiều Phú. (1960). *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* [Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam] (Đ. G. Khánh & N. N. San, Trans.). Nxb. Văn học.

Vũ Tuân. (2019). *Độc đáo Lễ hội Trò Trám* [The unique Tro Tram Festival]. Cổng thông tin điện tử Phú Thọ. https://phutho.gov.vn

Wiedner, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Latter days of the law: Images of Chinese Buddhism*, 850-1850. University of Hawaii Press.

Yü, C.-F. (2000). *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese transformation of Avalokitesvara*. Columbia University Press.