

DIALOGUE AND SYNTHESIS AMONG THE THREE TEACHINGS IN TRUYỀN KỲ MẠN LỤC: AN APPROACH FROM THE CONFUCIAN VALUE SYSTEM

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Abstract: *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* by Nguyễn Dữ has long been regarded as a representative work of medieval Vietnamese chuanqi fiction, while also reflecting the presence and interaction of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in the intellectual life of its time. However, most existing studies have largely stopped at affirming the synthesis of the Three Teachings without clarifying the internal mechanism through which this relationship operates within the work's intellectual structure. Approaching *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* from the perspectives of discourse and the Confucian value system, this article analyzes the roles of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in constructing the artistic world and orienting the work's meaning. The findings show that Confucianism functions as the primary frame of reference and the central value system in the organization and interpretation of the narratives, whereas Buddhism and Daoism are selectively received, both providing materials for constructing the supernatural world and being reinterpreted to serve didactic purposes and affirm moral values in the Confucian spirit. In this way, the article helps clarify the mechanism of dialogue and synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, while contributing an approach to the processes of intellectual adaptation and the localization of the Three Teachings in medieval Vietnamese literature.

Keywords: *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*; Nguyễn Dữ; Three Teachings; Confucian value system; dialogue and synthesis.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research overview

Nguyễn Dữ's *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (sixteenth century) has long been regarded as a pinnacle of medieval Vietnamese narrative prose and has attracted the attention of scholars both within and outside Vietnam. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as Trần Văn Giáp (1984, pp. 192-193), Nguyễn Quang Hồng (2001), Nguyễn Đăng Na (2007, pp. 199-216), and Bùi Duy Tân (2004, pp. 1123-1125)^a, among others, affirmed the work's important position in the development of Vietnamese literature, while also indicating that Nguyễn Dữ both inherited the Chinese traditions of *zhiguai* accounts and *chuanqi* tales and created distinctive features bearing the particular identity of Vietnamese literature.

From an intellectual perspective, particular attention has been paid to the relationship among the Three Teachings in the work. Earlier scholars such as Tạ Ngọc Liễn (2008, p. 173) and Bùi Duy Tân (2004, pp. 1123-1125) tended to argue that the work reflects the mindset of the sixteenth-century intellectual class, which received Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist elements while continuing to take Confucianism as its standard, and also reflects the process through which Confucian intellectuals adjusted their perceptions after the Early Lê period. In addition, several recent studies have approached the work from perspectives such as gender equality, Buddhist views of human life, culture, and intellectual history, thereby broadening the range of approaches to the work. Notable examples include Kim Ki Hyun (2017, pp. 17-21), Phạm Văn Hóa (2021a, pp. 56-63; 2021b, pp. 418-426), Nguyễn Đình Thu (2021, pp. 77-84), and Phạm Phi Na (2023, pp. 80-89), among others.

In general, these studies have primarily stopped at affirming the synthesis of the Three Teachings as an intellectual characteristic of the work, while the manner in which the relationship among the three systems of thought is organized and interpreted still lacks specific analysis. Whereas Chinese *chuanqi*

^a The entry on Nguyễn Dữ (and *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*) was written by Bùi Duy Tân in *Từ điển văn học (bộ mới)* [Dictionary of literature (new edition)], Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers.

tales often employ supernatural elements to enhance the appeal of their plots, in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, the supernatural world does not exist as an end in itself but is used to develop moral and social issues. The narratives, together with the commentaries at the end of the stories, form an interpretive whole in which Buddhist and Daoist elements are received and placed under a moral orientation. For this reason, the role of the end-of-story commentaries as a mechanism for guiding reception and interpreting the work's meaning remains a research gap that has not yet been specifically analyzed.

Starting from this gap, the article approaches *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* from the perspective of dialogue and synthesis among the Three Teachings, focusing on examining how Nguyễn Dữ adapts Buddhist and Daoist elements in relation to the Confucian value system. Through an examination of the work's twenty stories and their end-of-story commentaries, the article seeks to clarify the work's mechanism of discourse organization, thereby contributing to an explanation of the synthesis of the Three Teachings in medieval Vietnamese literature and the position of the Confucian value system in the construction of meaning in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*. This approach is not intended to deny the independent value of Buddhism and Daoism in the work, but rather to explain the mechanism of intellectual organization that creates the unity of the narrative whole.

1.2. Theoretical framework

In the study of medieval literature, the Three Teachings constitute an important value framework for explaining intellectual life and the development of many cultural and literary phenomena. From the Lý-Trần period to the Early Lê period, these three systems of thought coexisted, both complementing and competing with one another, thereby shaping the distinctive character of medieval Vietnamese culture. In this context, literature, particularly the *chuanqi* genre, became a space that vividly reflected the interaction among these systems of thought.

From the perspective of genre, *chuanqi* emerged and developed in Chinese literature during the Tang and Song dynasties, distinguished by the combination of supernatural elements and reality to reflect human destinies and convey social

ideas. When received in Vietnam, the genre developed and underwent a strong process of localization. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan et al. (2021, pp. 1-9) observe that, in addition to systems of strange events, the moral commentaries at the end of stories constitute an important artistic feature of the *chuanqi* genre and guide the interpretation of each story's meaning. This characteristic provides a basis for viewing *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* not merely as a collection of supernatural narratives but also as a discursive whole in which supernatural elements are used as narrative means to develop moral issues and social realities.

In this article, discourse is not understood simply as the author's statements or commentaries, but is approached through Michel Foucault's conception of discourse as a system of statements that constructs knowledge, establishes a value system, and governs ways of perceiving objects within particular contexts. Under this understanding, discourse does not merely reflect reality but also "plays a role in constructing a set of statements", thereby organizing and legitimizing a particular way of viewing the represented object (Trần Văn Toàn, 2025, p. 78). In *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, each story constitutes an independent unit of statement, while the work as a whole may be viewed as "a group of individualized statements" operating together within a unified structure of meaning to construct a way of understanding the Three Teachings and guide readers to receive the work from a particular value system (Trần Văn Toàn, 2015, p. 46).

On this basis, the article uses the concept of the Confucian value system to refer to the system of value norms, moral categories, and principles of evaluation derived from Confucian thought, such as loyalty and filial piety, chastity, moral obligation, self-cultivation, and regulation of the family. These concepts function as analytical tools for explaining how *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* organizes and interprets elements of the Three Teachings within a unified intellectual whole. Although the work frequently constructs supernatural spaces such as the celestial realm, hell, pagodas, and immortal grottoes, and mobilizes many Buddhist and Daoist elements, the ultimate meanings of the stories are brought back to the human world and evaluated through the Confucian moral value system. In analyzing Confucian ethical and moral doctrine, Minh Anh

(2004, p. 46) points out that “ethics and morality constitute the foremost issue in Confucianism. Confucian ethics and morality encompass the entirety of human life, from politics to cultural and social matters”. Accordingly, in this article, the Confucian value system is understood as the system of standards that guides the interpretation, evaluation, and construction of meaning in the narratives of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, rather than merely as the presence of Confucian elements in the work.

On this basis, the article combines textual analysis with approaches from intellectual history and cultural studies to examine the mechanism of synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*. This approach makes it possible to identify the relationship among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism not as a simple mixture, but as a process of receiving, selecting, and reorganizing intellectual elements within the work as a whole.

1.3. Research approach

The article approaches *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* from the perspective of dialogue and synthesis among the Three Teachings, focusing on clarifying how Nguyễn Dữ receives and organizes Buddhist and Daoist elements within the work’s intellectual whole.

Based on an examination of the twenty stories, the article proceeds in four directions:

First, it examines the role of Confucianism in orienting the work’s value system, particularly through the system of end-of-story commentaries.

Second, it analyzes how Nguyễn Dữ receives Buddhist elements such as karma, karmic retribution, images of monks, and temple spaces in order to expand the moral and spiritual depth of the narrative world.

Third, it clarifies the role of Daoist elements such as Daoist priests, the realm of immortals, magical arts, and supernatural spaces in expanding the narrative structure and expressing aspirations to transcend reality.

Finally, the article demonstrates that the synthesis of the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is not a random mixture of systems of thought, but a process of adjustment and reorganization within the work as a whole. In this process,

Confucianism serves as the principal value system for interpreting morality and social order, while Buddhism and Daoism contribute to expanding the work's intellectual and artistic space.

To accomplish this, the article constructs a survey table recording the presence of elements of the Three Teachings across all twenty stories in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*. The classification is based not only on the frequency with which Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist elements appear, but also on their intellectual roles and narrative functions in each story. The survey table provides the basis for the analyses and evaluations in the following sections.

Table 1. Survey of elements of the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*

N o.	Story title	Confucia nism	Buddhi sm	Daois m	Role in the story
1	The Story at the Temple of King Xiang	x		x	Confucianism expresses moral principles, while Daoism opens up a space for conversation.
2	The Story of the Righteous Woman in Khoái Châu	x	x		Confucianism provides moral guidance, while Buddhism creates a spiritual setting.
3	The Story of the Kapok Tree	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral principles, while Daoism opens up the space of the story.
4	The Story of the Reincarnation of the Tea Boy	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral righteousness, while Daoism opens up a supernatural space.

The order and titles of the stories are based on Trúc Khê's Vietnamese translation of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, published by Tân Việt Publishing Society in 1952.

N o.	Story title	Confucia nism	Buddhi sm	Daois m	Role in the story
5	The Story of the Strange Encounter at the Western Camp	x		x	Confucianism provides guidance concerning moral righteousness, while Daoism supplies strange elements.
6	The Story of the Lawsuit in the Dragon Palace	x		x	Confucianism provides guidance concerning rites and righteousness, while Daoism supplies strange materials.
7	The Story of Đào Thị's Unjust Karma	x	x	x	Confucianism provides moral guidance, while Buddhism and Daoism supply materials and a supernatural space.
8	The Story of the Judge at Tản Viên Temple	x	x	x	Confucianism plays the central role, while Buddhism and Daoism contribute to constructing the plot.
9	The Story of Từ Thức Marrying an Immortal Woman	x		x	Confucianism returns the story to reality, while Daoism opens up the narrative space.
10	The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting the Celestial Court	x		x	Confucianism provides guidance concerning moral righteousness, while Daoism supplies materials and a supernatural space.
11	The Story of the Demon in Xương Giang	x		x	Confucianism provides moral guidance, while Daoism supplies supernatural materials.

N o.	Story title	Confucia nism	Buddhi sm	Daois m	Role in the story
12	The Story of the Woodcutter's Dialogue on Mount Na	x		x	Daoism opens up the space in which the story unfolds.
13	The Story of the Abandoned Pagoda in Đông Triều District	x	x		Confucianism provides guidance concerning moral righteousness, while Buddhism opens up the space of the story.
14	The Story of Túy Tiêu	x		x	Confucianism provides moral guidance, while Daoism supplies supernatural materials.
15	The Story of the Night Banquet on the Đà River	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral principles, while Daoism supplies supernatural materials.
16	The Story of the Woman of Nam Xương	x	x	x	Confucianism establishes moral norms, while Buddhism and Daoism supply supernatural elements.
17	The Story of General Lý	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral principles, while Daoism supplies supernatural elements.
18	The Story of Lê Nương	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral righteousness, while Daoism opens up the space of the story.
19	The Poetry Conversation in Kim Hoa	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral principles, while Daoism opens up a supernatural space.

N o.	Story title	Confucianism	Buddhism	Daoism	Role in the story
20	The Story of the Yaksha General	x		x	Confucianism establishes moral principles, while Daoism supplies supernatural materials.

The survey table above shows that Buddhist and Daoist elements appear with considerable frequency in the construction of supernatural spaces, the development of characters, and the progression of plots. However, at the level of intellectual orientation, the Confucian value system is present almost throughout the work, particularly through the system of end-of-story commentaries and the reference of all events to ethical norms governing human relationships, such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. This indicates that the mechanism of synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is not an equal coexistence of the three systems of thought, but rather a process of selective reception in which Confucianism occupies the primary position, while Buddhism and Daoism primarily provide intellectual and artistic materials. The results of this survey provide the basis for the article's further analysis of the role of each system of thought in the following sections.

2. Confucianism as the primary frame of reference in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*

2.1. Confucian discourse through the commentaries: The voice of the interpreting subject

One of the prominent characteristics of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is that each story usually ends with a brief commentary by the author or by someone who shares the author's viewpoint. Từ điển văn học [Dictionary of Literature] states that "at the end of each story, there is usually a commentary by the author or by someone who shares the author's viewpoint" (Đỗ Đức Hiểu et al., 2004, p. 1124). In medieval literature, attributing remarks to "the guest writes" or "another says" was a familiar technique intended to enhance the apparent objectivity of the commentary, although it essentially continued to reflect the writer's intellectual position. Therefore, the system of commentaries in *Truyện*

kỳ mạn lục not only brings each story to a close but also guides the reception and interpretation of the meaning of the work as a whole.

While the narratives open up a narrative space in which Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist elements coexist through the system of characters and the supernatural world, the end-of-story commentaries are where the author directly expresses his evaluative position. It is precisely here that stories open to multiple possible interpretations are brought together within a relatively unified system of moral values. In other words, the commentaries become the place where the voice of the Confucian subject is expressed most clearly, serving to connect the supernatural world with the moral value system toward which Nguyễn Dữ directs the reader.

From a discourse-oriented perspective, the end-of-story commentaries are not merely places where Nguyễn Dữ directly expresses his views, but also operate as a mechanism for orienting and legitimizing the meaning of the stories. In Foucault's understanding, discourse does not merely reflect reality but participates in constructing what is accepted as truth within a particular historical and intellectual context. In *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, by repeatedly referring supernatural events to the categories of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness, the system of commentaries exercises discursive power by establishing the Confucian value system as the orthodox basis for interpreting phenomena, while highlighting the legitimacy of that reading in relation to other interpretive possibilities. For example, rather than allowing *The Story of Đào Thị's Unjust Karma* to be received primarily from the Buddhist perspective of karma and karmic retribution, its commentary directs readers toward preserving chastity and following the righteous path, thereby restructuring the story under the Confucian value system.

It can therefore be seen that Nguyễn Dữ's concern is not the supernatural world in itself, but the moral meaning that can be drawn from such stories. The commentaries thus become the place where the author's intellectual position is most directly revealed. Through his concluding observations, Nguyễn Dữ brings strange phenomena back to the moral plane, using the Confucian value system to evaluate individuals and social relationships. It is precisely this feature that

enables *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* to transcend the scope of a mere collection of *chuanqi* tales and become a body of didactic discourse rich in social significance. Trần Đình Sử (1997, p. 254) clearly identifies this characteristic: “It may be said that *chuanqi* tales focus on events rather than individuals, using events to represent and admonish people”.

Thus, the end-of-story commentaries may be regarded as discursive constructions that guide the understanding and evaluation of these phenomena according to a particular moral frame of reference. Nguyễn Đăng Na (2005, p. 194) also points out that “the author’s direct commentaries, or those of someone who shares the author’s viewpoint, at the end of each story constitute a voice defending Confucian moral views”, an observation that accurately reflects the role of this component within the structure of the work.

From this perspective, Nguyễn Dữ’s important contribution lies not only in his reception of Buddhist and Daoist motifs in constructing the supernatural world, but also in the way he organizes the system of commentaries as a mechanism for guiding interpretation. It is precisely through this mechanism that different intellectual elements do not exist separately but are brought together within a unified whole, thereby contributing to the affirmation of Confucianism as the principal frame of reference for interpreting morality and social order in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*.

2.2. Confucianism as a frame of reference for morality and social order

While the system of commentaries may be regarded as discourse expressing the author’s intellectual position, the narrative structure of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* reveals how he organizes the entire narrative world according to a moral frame of reference. Therefore, the supernatural elements in the work do not exist as ends in themselves, but are consistently directed toward issues concerning ethical norms, moral righteousness, and human responsibility toward the community.

This is demonstrated quite clearly in many stories in the collection. In *The Story of the Kapok Tree*, the story of ghosts and demons ultimately directs readers toward a lesson about sincerity and kindness and about conduct between human beings. Similarly, *The Story of the Woman of Nam Xương* employs the

elements of a wronged spirit and supernatural manifestation to highlight the tragedy caused by suspicion, thereby upholding the fundamental values of family morality, such as trust, marital affection, and the responsibility of the husband. In these stories, supernatural elements primarily serve to expand the narrative space, while the central focus remains the affirmation of society's moral norms.

Meanwhile, *The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting the Celestial Court* is a representative example of the mechanism of discourse construction used to uphold the teacher-student relationship. Thus, “whether or not the visit to the celestial court occurred, why is it necessary to investigate it to the very end?” The interpretive focus is thereby shifted from the divine world to the lesson concerning the teacher-student relationship and the moral character of the Confucian *junzi*. From a Foucauldian perspective, the commentary here does not merely explain the story but also guides the reader's perception and evaluation of the event, thereby placing all supernatural elements within the Confucian value system.

Through representative stories such as *The Story of the Kapok Tree*, *The Story of the Woman of Nam Xương*, and *The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting the Celestial Court*, it can be seen that Nguyễn Dữ consistently brings supernatural events back to the real world and to the values governing human relationships.

2.3. The Confucian scholar's mindset and the choice of the Confucian value system

Against the turbulent social background of the sixteenth century, many Confucian scholars found themselves “born at an inopportune time”, still upholding the Confucian ideal of active engagement in the world but no longer possessing the conditions necessary to realize their political aspirations. Nguyễn Dữ was a representative figure of this intellectual class. His withdrawal into seclusion, intended to preserve his own moral integrity, did not signify an abandonment of social responsibility but rather a choice to preserve moral principles through literature.

Accompanying this disposition was the enduring concern for ruler and country among reclusive Confucian scholars. In *The Poetry Conversation in Kim Hoa*, Ngô Chi Lan is constructed as a symbol of devotion to the country and concern for the ruler. When Lê Thánh Tông passed away, she composed a mourning poem containing the lines: “Tam thập dư niên cùng tử thần. Cửu châu tứ hải hựu đồng nhân. Đông tây địa thác dư đồ đại. Hoàng đế thiên khôi sự nghiệp tân” (For more than thirty years, he reigned upon the throne. The nine provinces and the four seas were all bathed in his benevolence. The territory expanded from east to west. Heaven’s imperial Way established a great achievement). By placing these words in the mouth of a woman, Nguyễn Dữ further highlights the widespread influence of the Confucian ideal. He also refers to Nguyễn Trãi as an exemplary model of the scholar whose heart was devoted to the country and concerned for the ruler, “surging day and night like the eastward-flowing tide”, and who “never forgot his ruler, even for the duration of a single meal”. Nguyễn Dữ’s repeated selection of figures imbued with the spirit of loyalty and righteousness, such as Ngô Chi Lan and Nguyễn Trãi, shows that even when contemporary reality did not permit the realization of the aspiration to “bring wise rule to the sovereign and benefits to the people”, he continued to place great faith in the core values of Confucianism.

This mindset shaped Nguyễn Dữ’s construction of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*. Rather than discussing contemporary affairs directly through political or historical argumentation, he borrowed the supernatural world to reflect reality and convey his anxieties over the deterioration of human morality and the fragmentation of social order. Stories such as *The Story of the Judge at Tản Viên Temple*, *The Story of the Kapok Tree*, *The Story of the Woman of Nam Xương*, and *The Story of Lệ Nương* all employ deities, wronged spirits, retribution, or supernatural worlds to expose injustices in human life. However, what Nguyễn Dữ seeks is not the supernatural world itself, but the restoration of benevolence and righteousness, loyalty and filial piety, and the ethical order that Confucianism regarded as the foundation of social order.

It is noteworthy that Nguyễn Dữ does not deny the value of Buddhism and Daoism. On the contrary, he flexibly receives motifs of karma, karmic

retribution, immortals, and magical arts in order to expand the narrative space and enhance the expressive power of the stories. Nevertheless, these elements do not alter the work's frame of values but primarily contribute to highlighting Confucian moral norms. It may be said that the synthesis of the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is not an evenly distributed blending of the three systems of thought, but a process of selective reception in which Confucianism continues to guide the evaluation of individuals and social relationships.

From this perspective, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is not merely a collection of *chuanqi* tales but also the self-expression of a Confucian intellectual in response to his times. The choice of literature as a form of “writing for posterity” when the path of “putting the Way into practice” was no longer feasible helps explain why Nguyễn Dữ consistently places the stories within a unified moral standard. This mindset laid the foundation for the mechanism of dialogue and synthesis among the Three Teachings analyzed in the following section.

3. Buddhism within the Confucian value framework

3.1. Buddhism as a source of materials for constructing the supernatural world

In *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, Buddhism is continuously present through a system of pagodas, monks, sutras and prayers, karma, rebirth, karmic retribution, and manifestations of the Buddhas. These elements contribute to the construction of a spiritual space familiar to medieval Vietnamese people, while also expanding the expressive possibilities of the *chuanqi* genre. By drawing upon Buddhism's rich body of symbols, Nguyễn Dữ constructed a world that was both closely connected to popular religious life and imbued with a supernatural quality, thereby creating conditions for the exploration of moral and social issues.

Many stories in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* use pagodas or Buddhist spaces as their settings, such as *The Story of the Abandoned Pagoda in Đông Triều District*, *The Story of the Righteous Woman in Khoái Châu*, and *The Story of Đào Thị's Unjust Karma*. In these stories, belief in karma, karmic retribution, and the intervention of the supernatural world not only adds appeal to the plot but also

expands the depth of spiritual life, allowing moral conflicts in reality to be represented in supernatural forms.

However, Buddhism in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* does not exist as an independent system of thought. Nguyễn Dữ receives Buddhist motifs and symbols primarily as artistic materials for organizing the narrative world. After constructing the supernatural space, he brings the events and characters back to the moral plane through the system of commentaries and the ways in which the stories conclude. Therefore, although Buddhist elements contribute to expanding the work's expressive space, they do not alter its frame of values, but primarily serve to address moral and social issues from the perspective of a Confucian intellectual.

3.2. The reception of Buddhism's values of moral improvement and education

A noteworthy aspect of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is that Nguyễn Dữ does not reject Buddhism as an ethical system. On the contrary, he receives Buddhism's positive values, particularly karma, karmic retribution, and the human capacity for moral improvement. However, these concepts are not presented as goals of liberation in the Buddhist sense, but are reinterpreted in accordance with the Confucian requirement of moral education.

This is demonstrated quite clearly in *The Story of Đào Thị's Unjust Karma*. The entire course of the story operates according to the law of karma: the loss of chastity leads to tragedy, acts of revenge continue to create a new karmic cycle, and ultimately every action is subject to karmic retribution. However, what Nguyễn Dữ emphasizes is not the supernatural power of Buddhism but the moral lesson for human beings. Therefore, the commentary at the end of the story does not direct readers toward mystical belief but emphasizes the preservation of moral integrity and the cultivation of the self in accordance with goodness.

It can be seen that, in receiving the Buddhist idea of karma, Nguyễn Dữ places it within a Confucian frame of reference. Karma and karmic retribution become means of supporting the encouragement of goodness, the admonishment of evil, and the reinforcement of moral norms. In other words, Buddhism is

received not as a path to individual liberation but as a moral resource contributing to the maintenance of social order.

3.3. Criticism of the decline of Buddhism and the rejection of superstition

While receiving the ethical values of Buddhism, Nguyễn Dữ simultaneously expresses a fairly strong critical attitude toward manifestations of the decline of contemporary Buddhism. The object of his criticism is not Buddhist doctrine, but the distortion of religious belief when Buddhism is exploited to foster superstition, conceal desire, or undermine social moral norms.

The Story of the Abandoned Pagoda in Đông Triều is a representative case of how Nguyễn Dữ constructs discourse on Buddhism. By opening the story with a setting in which “pagodas were found everywhere, and those who shaved their heads to become monks and nuns amounted to nearly half the number of ordinary people”, the author not only reflects the outward flourishing of Buddhism but also suggests the decline of a segment of the contemporary monastic community. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse does not merely describe reality but establishes ways of perceiving it; in this case, the image of the abandoned pagoda and the sequence of subsequent events guide readers to view the phenomenon as a moral and social problem. District magistrate Văn Tư Lập repeatedly performs rituals, yet all of them fail, whereas the person who eliminates the demon is an ordinary hunter. The commentary at the end of the story further legitimizes this interpretation by criticizing people who “ruined themselves by making offerings to pagodas” and expressing the wish that “hundreds of Hàn Xương Lê” might appear to eradicate superstitious practices. Thus, Nguyễn Dữ’s target is not Buddhist doctrine, but its exploitation and corruption in contemporary Buddhist life. The same discursive mechanism also appears in *The Story of Đào Thị’s Unjust Karma*, in which Vô Kỵ wears monastic robes but fails to observe the precepts, becoming a symbol of the decline of a segment of religious practitioners. Phạm Văn Hóa (2021a, p. 59) observes that Vô Kỵ had “sunk deeply into delusion through instinctive desire”.

The above cases show that Nguyễn Dữ receives Buddhism with a fairly clear distinction between doctrine and practice. He acknowledges Buddhism’s values of moral improvement while simultaneously criticizing the decline of a segment

of the monastic community and manifestations of superstition that damage social morality. This selective mode of reception contributes to the mechanism of synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*: receiving elements compatible with the objective of moral education while rejecting manifestations that he regarded as undermining the moral order.

4. Daoism within the Confucian value framework

4.1. Daoism as a source of materials for constructing the supernatural world

In *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, alongside the influence of Buddhism, Daoism also makes an important contribution to the construction of the work's supernatural world. Images of the realm of immortals, Daoist priests, immortal grottoes, magical arts, the celestial court, and communication between humans and immortals appear with considerable frequency, expanding the narrative space beyond the limits of real life. Through these elements, Nguyễn Dữ constructs a multilayered world in which the human realm, the underworld, and the realm of immortals are interconnected, creating conditions for addressing moral questions and issues of human life in the form of *chuanqi*. Lê Văn Tấn and Kim Ki Hyun (2017, p. 29) observe that these elements demonstrate “the fairly profound influence of Daoism on the writer’s thought”.

Stories such as *The Story of the Reincarnation of the Tea Boy*, *The Story of Từ Thức Marrying an Immortal Woman*, and *The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting the Celestial Court* all employ symbols characteristic of Daoism. The realm of immortals is no longer a completely separate space but becomes a place that reflects human values and aspirations. Motifs such as practitioners becoming immortals, immortals descending to the human world, or movement between different realms contribute to the appeal of the plots while also reflecting the cultural consciousness of medieval Vietnamese society, in which Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism coexisted and mutually influenced one another.

It is noteworthy that Nguyễn Dữ does not employ Daoism in order to affirm the ideal of cultivating immortality or achieving eternal life. He receives Daoist elements primarily as artistic materials for expanding the scope of the *chuanqi* world. After constructing the supernatural space, the author brings every

development back to the moral and human plane. Therefore, Daoism in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* primarily performs the function of constructing narrative space, while the ultimate meaning of the stories continues to be illuminated by the Confucian value system.

4.2. The reception of Daoism's spirit of freedom and aspiration for transcendence

While Nguyễn Dữ receives Buddhism primarily in terms of karma and moral improvement, he draws upon Daoism in relation to its spirit of freedom and aspiration to transcend the constraints of secular life. The figures of recluses, Daoist priests, and immortals in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* reflect a spiritual space distinct from the Confucian ideal of engagement in worldly affairs, in which human beings seek harmony with nature and pursue tranquillity and inner freedom.

The Story of Từ Thức Marrying an Immortal Woman is a representative case. After resigning from office, Từ Thức, with “a sail in the wind and a small bamboo boat, wandered freely across rivers and lakes, going wherever he pleased”, choosing a carefree life amid mountains and waters. This journey evokes Zhuangzi's ideal of “free and easy wandering”, in which human beings free themselves from the constraints of fame and profit in order to return to nature. When he enters the immortal grotto and meets Giáng Hương, Từ Thức feels “as though he had grown wings and flown to the realm of immortals”. This image becomes a symbol of the aspiration to liberate human beings from the limitations of real life.

However, Nguyễn Dữ does not allow the character to remain within the ideal of transcendence. After a period of living in the realm of immortals, Từ Thức still misses his homeland and decides to return to the human world. The ending, in which “the mountains and rivers had changed, and the people he once knew were no longer there”, shows that the realm of immortals is not a place where human beings can remain forever. The Daoist aspiration for freedom is therefore placed in dialogue with human life. Nguyễn Dữ acknowledges the value of the spirit of free and easy wandering while simultaneously affirming that human

beings cannot completely detach themselves from their community and moral relationships.

From this perspective, the Daoist spirit of “non-action”, “following nature”, and “free and easy wandering” is received by Nguyễn Dữ as a means of nourishing the intellectual’s spiritual life rather than as a path toward rejecting actual society. This is also an expression of the synthesis between Daoism and Confucianism in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*: Daoism opens up a space of inner freedom, while Confucianism continues to guide human values.

4.3. Daoism within the framework of Confucian morality

Nguyễn Dữ’s reception of Daoism does not imply unconditional approval. Although he draws upon many elements relating to immortals and magical arts, he consistently places them within the framework of Confucian morality. As with Buddhism, Nguyễn Dữ makes a fairly clear distinction between Daoism’s intellectual values and manifestations of superstition or detachment from practical life.

This is first demonstrated in *The Story of the Kapok Tree*. The figure of the Daoist practitioner who uses magical arts to eliminate demons and monsters contributes to resolving the story’s conflict, but the commentary at the end of the story remains cautious toward such magical practices. Nguyễn Dữ acknowledges the value of extraordinary phenomena when they serve human life, but does not encourage fascination with phenomena beyond reason. Therefore, elements relating to immortals are accepted only insofar as they support morality and do not become ends in themselves within the work.

The tendency to “Confucianize” Daoist space is also clearly expressed in *The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting the Celestial Court*. The celestial court is originally a Daoist image, but under Nguyễn Dữ’s pen it is organized as an administrative institution imbued with Confucian characteristics. Rewards and punishments there are not based on practices for attaining immortality but on moral standards such as sincerity and kindness, faithfulness toward teachers and friends, and the cultivation of personal character. Even place names such as the Gate of Accumulated Virtue, the Gate of Compliant Conduct, and the Gate of

Confucian Spirits show that Daoist space has been transformed into symbols of the Confucian moral order. What the work seeks to affirm is not the human capacity to become immortal, but the value of preserving ethical norms in life.

Even *The Story of Từ Thức Marrying an Immortal Woman*, which is often regarded as the story most clearly marked by Daoist elements, ends with a return to reality. This ending shows that the realm of immortals is only a space in which the aspiration for freedom is tested, whereas the human world is where people must fulfil their responsibilities and moral obligations. Through this, Nguyễn Dữ affirms that Daoist values become truly meaningful only when placed within concrete human life.

It can be seen that Nguyễn Dữ's mechanism for receiving Daoism is deliberate. He draws upon the realm of immortals, the spirit of freedom, and Daoism's rich imagination to expand the expressive possibilities of the *chuanqi* genre, while consistently bringing these elements back to the Confucian moral frame of reference. Therefore, Daoism does not become a system of thought competing with Confucianism, but rather a source of materials and inspiration that contributes to highlighting the ideal of human life pursued by Nguyễn Dữ.

5. The mechanism of dialogue and synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*

The analyses above show that *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* does not merely reflect the simultaneous presence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism within the same text, but also demonstrates a deliberate mechanism of intellectual dialogue and synthesis. Within this mechanism, the three systems of thought do not exist as independent or equal components, but are assigned different functions by Nguyễn Dữ within the narrative and interpretive structure. What matters is not simply the presence of the Three Teachings, but the manner in which they are selected, assigned roles, and restructured under a unified value system. This mechanism reflects a characteristic mode of intellectual adaptation among sixteenth-century Vietnamese Confucian scholars: openness in reception combined with consistency in the orientation of values.

5.1. Functional stratification among the three systems of thought

An examination of all twenty stories shows that Nguyễn Dữ does not place Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism on an equal plane, but creates a relatively clear stratified structure. Buddhism and Daoism primarily participate in constructing the artistic world through systems of spaces, such as the celestial court and the underworld; characters, such as immortals and demons; motifs; and supernatural elements. Confucianism, meanwhile, performs the function of organizing and orienting the meaning of the narratives as a whole.

As Nguyễn Đăng Na (2005, p. 187) observes, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* “borrows supernatural and fantastic elements to reflect reality”, while “the fantastic is an artistic technique rather than Nguyễn Dữ’s worldview”. From this perspective, Buddhist and Daoist elements may be regarded as narrative means, whereas Confucianism is the value system that determines the work’s ultimate meaning.

5.2. The mechanism of transformation from supernatural narrative to moral discourse

A prominent characteristic of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is that every story develops through a relatively consistent process of transformation. The narratives are usually set in supernatural spaces involving deities, demons, the realm of immortals, karmic retribution, and other such elements; at their conclusions, however, these elements return to questions of Confucian morality and human relationships.

In this process, the system of commentaries functions as a second interpretive layer of the text. While the narratives create open possibilities for interpretation, the commentaries perform the function of orienting, selecting, and establishing the meaning the author seeks to convey. The supernatural world therefore does not exist as the work’s ultimate end, but becomes a means of developing moral discourse. This mechanism also allows Buddhist and Daoist elements to be integrated into the Confucian value system without altering the work’s intellectual center.

5.3. *The synthesis of the Three Teachings as a mode of intellectual adaptation*

From the structure described above, it can be seen that the mechanism of synthesis among the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is built upon three interconnected operations: reception, transformation, and limitation.

First, Nguyễn Dữ actively receives Buddhist and Daoist elements capable of expanding the expressive space and increasing the persuasiveness of the narratives. However, reception does not stop at borrowing materials, but is always accompanied by the transformation of meaning through a Confucian moral frame of reference. At the same time, manifestations regarded as superstitious, extreme, or detrimental to the order of human relationships are subjected to criticism and limitation. Buddhism and Daoism are thereby both acknowledged as important cultural resources and reinterpreted to accord with the objectives of moral education and the construction of social order.

From this perspective, the synthesis of the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* is not an expression of parallel coexistence in which the three systems of thought are equal in terms of values, but reflects a deliberate mode of intellectual adaptation by sixteenth-century Vietnamese Confucian intellectuals. Nguyễn Dữ selected, adjusted, and restructured contemporary sources of thought into a unified whole, thereby both preserving the diversity of cultural life and affirming the guiding role of Confucian morality in interpreting human beings and society.

6. Conclusion

An examination of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* shows that the presence of the Three Teachings in the work does not reflect an equal reconciliation among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Although Buddhist and Daoist elements appear with considerable frequency, the organization, interpretation, and evaluation of the narratives' meanings continue to operate under the Confucian value system. Confucianism is therefore not merely an intellectual component of the work, but also the frame of reference governing the construction of meaning.

Within this mechanism, Buddhism and Daoism primarily perform the functions of expanding the *chuanqi* space, providing artistic materials, and

supplementing modes of expression such as karma, karmic retribution, immortals, and magical arts. However, these elements are all selectively received and reinterpreted through the Confucian value system. Through the end-of-story commentaries, narrative structure, and methods of character construction, Nguyễn Dữ transforms the supernatural world into a means of developing questions of ethical norms, moral righteousness, and social order.

From this perspective, the article regards the synthesis of the Three Teachings in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* as a mechanism of dialogue and intellectual restructuring, rather than merely as a manifestation of the common origin of the Three Teachings. What is noteworthy is not the simultaneous appearance of the Three Teachings in the work, but the manner in which Nguyễn Dữ selects, adjusts, and interprets these elements within a unified discursive structure in which the Confucian value system guides the process of constructing meaning.

Through this approach, the article contributes a new perspective to the study of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, shifting the focus from describing the phenomenon of the synthesis of the Three Teachings to analyzing the mechanism through which that synthesis operates within the structure of the work. The findings also help clarify the modes of adaptation and localization of the Three Teachings in medieval Vietnamese literature, thereby opening possibilities for applying discourse-oriented and value-system approaches to the study of the relationship between literature and intellectual history.

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