

LITERATURE, CULTURE AND RELIGION

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VIETNAMESE TALE LITERATURE IN SINITIC (漢文說話)  
AS SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EAST ASIAN  
SINOGRAPHIC SPHERE

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**Abstract**

This article takes comparative tale literature as one facet of the study of the Sinographic sphere in East Asia and reads the various works included in *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* not as 'Sinitic fictional literature', as suggested by the title of the collection, but as 'Sinitic tale literature'. Focusing on important collections of tale literature such as the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, the late 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, the mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century *Công dư tiếp ký* and the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Kiến văn lục*, I have selected some particularly interesting tales and here offer analyses of them. Behind these collections of tale literature were literati officials who were deeply involved in the formation of state identity and ideology. These were living collections which were revised and rearranged generation after generation. The contents changed with the times, too, moving gradually from mythic tales narrating the origins of the world to everyday topics, popular legends, Buddhist tales and other tales. I argue that Vietnamese tale literature, which has hitherto not been well known, has a significance which requires its position in the East Asian Sinographic sphere to be rethought and I suggest that more collaborative research is needed.

**Keywords:** *East Asia; Sinographic sphere; Sinitic tale literature; Việt điện u linh tập lục; Lĩnh Nam chích quái; Công dư tiếp ký; Kiến văn lục*

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**1. From Sinitic fictional literature to Sinitic tale literature**

In recent years, scholars in China, Korea and Japan have given a lot of attention to the concept of the Sinographic sphere. An inevitable result of the global age in which we live is that inward-looking studies which focus only upon our own countries are no longer appropriate and literary studies are no exception to this. Premodern East Asia in particular formed a common cultural

sphere in which Chinese characters were used and Sinitic (literary Chinese) was the main written language. East Asia can thus be seen as a cultural sphere based on Sinitic but there was a constant tension between Sinicization and de-Sinicization. By de-Sinicization I mean the rejection of Chinese characters, the development of an independent script and its diffusion – *kana* in Japan, *han'gŭl* in Korea and *nôm* in Vietnam. Thus Vietnam, too, was part of the premodern

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Sinitic Cultural Sphere. Vietnam in fact marked the southern limit of the Sinitic cultural sphere and literary life thrived there for many centuries. It is surely essential that we bring to light the forgotten literary heritage of Vietnam, bring it back to life as part of the common culture of East Asia and explore the mutual connections with other literatures.

When it comes to the classic texts written in Sinitic in Vietnam, fortunately we can now have a good conspectus based on the 20 volumes of *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成, part of the series *Yuwai hanwen xiaoshuo daxi* 域外漢文小說大系 published by Shanghai guji chubanshe, and the earlier *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo congkan* 越南漢文小說叢刊 published by Taiwan xuesheng shuju. The former is based on a structure of five divisions – myths, legends, historical novels, miscellanies and modern novels – and places particular emphasis on the connections between myths and popular beliefs. Yet some doubts remain about the lumping together of all these works as ‘novels’ or ‘fiction’. After all, more than half of the titles include traditional genre terms such as ‘record’ 錄, ‘story’ 傳, ‘collection’ 集, ‘history’ 志, ‘account’ 記 and ‘tale’ 話.

I began my career with studies of Japanese tale literature as exemplified by *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 and thereafter have gradually turned my attention to China, the Korean peninsula and Vietnam, pursuing studies of the Sinitic cultural sphere through the comparative study of tale literature. I have come to consider that some Chinese *leishu* (encyclopedias) such as *Fayuan Zhulin* 法苑珠林, *Jinglu yixiang* 經律異相, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, and *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志, and some Korean *yadam* collections such as *Silla suijōn* 新羅殊異伝, *Ōu yadam* 於于野談 and *Ch'ōnggu yadam* 青丘野談 can also be considered to be tale collections.

Needless to say, the concept of ‘tale literature’ is imprecise and is used by different people in different ways, but the term *shuohua* 說

話, which is now used to refer to ‘tale literature’ originally referred to the oral arts of the Tang and Song dynasties and specialist narrators were known as *shuohuaren* 說話人. In Japan, the term *monogatari* 物語 is used in more or less the same sense but ‘tale literature’ (*setsuwa* in Japanese) is felt to carry connotations of oral language. While *monogatari* continue to be much appreciated in Japan and are written in a form of Japanese used for literary writing from the *Man'yōshū* onwards, *setsuwa* contain imported Chinese words and are less well known and the genre has nuances of unapproachability. On the other hand, examples of ‘tale literature’ can be found not only in Japan and China but also in Korea and Vietnam and the term can be considered to be part of the common inheritance of the Sinographic sphere and the Sinitic cultural sphere. Indeed, in *Công dư tiếp ký* there is a reference to *thuyết thoại* (說話, i.e., tale literature) using this same term [19] (vol. 9, p. 99).

Tale literature is a primitive form of literature which lies at the point where narrated oral language and recorded written language intersect: they are in balance and act upon each other. It is, therefore, the perfect subject for an investigation into literary forms that are common throughout East Asia. Reflecting their origins in speech, they retain speech features such as a clear structure of beginning, middle and end and relatively short scale and they incorporate some kind of message, such as allegories or Buddhist parables. The gathering of tales for some particular motive or purpose into larger works is found not only in East Asia but also in other parts of the world too (*Aesop's Fables* is the classic example) and these can be considered together as collections of tale literature. By understanding them not as fiction but as collections consisting of tales gathered together, in accordance with some kind of editorial consciousness, we can see that the common area they inhabit is much larger [3].

The term *xiaoshuo* 小說 (novel, fiction) is not

in fact a modern term, for it can be used of classical literature as well, as in the case of Tang-Dynasty *xiaoshuo*, but it is inescapably linked to the idea of creative work by an individual author. The collection *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* gives pride of place to myths and legends and it is hard to escape the feeling that these fit uncomfortably in a collection supposedly devoted to *xiaoshuo*. Of course, a work such as *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* 傳奇漫錄, which is regarded as an adaptation of the Chinese collection *Jiandeng Xinhua* 剪燈新話, contains features such as polished diction that suggest it reaches the domain of fictional literature, while works of historical fiction such as *Hoàng Việt xuân thu* 皇越春秋 and *Việt Nam khai quốc chí truyện* 越南開國志傳 betray their origins in oral tale narratives. In Japan, war-tales such as *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 and *Taiheiki* 太平記 have close connections with tale literature and in the same way historical narratives in the broadest sense are in my opinion open to being considered as tale literature too. The concept of *xiaoshuo* is clearly inadequate to encompass all these works [5].

When we consider the case of Japan, there are a number of works that can be termed tale literature collections. Even if they are not fully-fledged collections, it is undeniable that a considerable proportion of the contents is closely connected to tale literature. By taking studies of tale literature in Japan as a starting point, the significance of similar works in Vietnam can, I think, be more clearly understood. In this sense, I shall here focus on examples taken from the collection *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* that can be considered to be Vietnamese tale literature collections belonging to the East Asian Sinitic cultural sphere.

## 2. The creation of *Việt điện u linh tập lục* 粵甸幽靈集錄

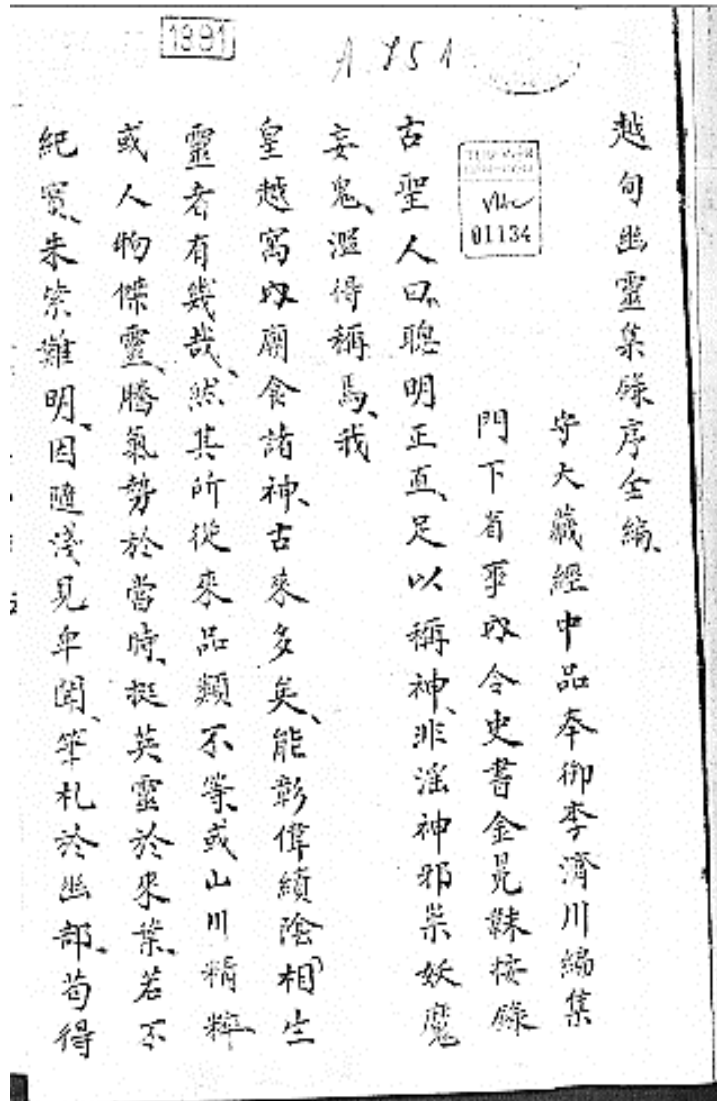
Tale literature circulated as an oral art form and was transmitted by word of mouth, but once it is committed to writing it passes into a different stage of existence: it can be read in later ages, it

is given new meanings, it undergoes revisions and is constantly given new life. The nature of the relationship between oral telling and the written record is key. With regard to writing, one aspect of the Sinographic sphere is that it is only when bureaucratic structures come into being and there emerge people who have a good command of Sinitic that literary activity can be sustained, and for that purpose an appropriate kind of state structure was indispensable. Buddhist temples also constituted an important supportive structure. In Vietnam, as elsewhere in East Asia, Buddhism had a significant role of keeping the state tranquil, and from the Lý Dynasty onwards temples were constructed and repaired, while the sanga (monastic community) was institutionalized [20].

As in other East Asian societies, the creators of Vietnamese classical literature were literati and Buddhist monks and it was the emergence of such people that gave rise to the creation of literature. It was under the Lý Dynasty in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century that Vietnam first had a long-lasting state system, but even before that, since the period of Chinese rule from the Han to the Tang, through the dynasties of Ngô, Đinh and Former Lê in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese characters and Sinitic culture permeated Vietnamese society in many forms, including that immigrants from China brought with them their own culture.

State formation goes hand in hand with the development of cities and their cultures. Cities by their nature foster trading relationships with local villages communities and give rise to the movement of people, goods and many other things. Tales were without doubt an important mechanism for cultural exchange. They take many forms beginning with oral transmission within all classes of society and including oral performances at festivals and religious gatherings. Tales were told of local history and legends and of everyday matters: they were also performed and gradually grew in quantity and variety.

*Việt điện u linh tập lục* [21]



The oldest collections put together in Vietnam that are extant today are *Việt điện u linh tập lục* 粵甸幽靈集錄 [19] (vol. 2) and *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* 嶺南摭怪列傳 [19] (vol. 1). As explained above, these were not written works of literature created at a particular point in time but rather the result of accumulation over many years, and even after they had come into existence they were frequently revised and recopied: they were fluid creations, in other words. The first of them, *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, was compiled in 1329 during the Trần Dynasty by Lý Tế Xuyên 李濟川. It tells the stories of the

gods worshipped in the various temples around Vietnam and the miracles they have worked and includes also stories about the emperors, military generals, folk heroes and the spirits of mountains and rivers. It is quoted in the dynastic history *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 of 1479 (the original version of which does not survive; the oldest version available today is the revised and enlarged version printed in 1697) in order to supplement the official record, so it must have been compiled before that date. The dates of the author, Lý Tế Xuyên, are unknown, but according to the preface he had an official

position described as a chief of the State archives with the official rank of middle-level attendant 守藏書正職掌中品, and at the same time a local official responsible for transportation of goods in the circuit of An Tiêm 安暹路轉運使 [17].

*Việt điện u linh tập lục* seems to have been widely read and used in later years and there are many variant manuscripts: as many as five of them are reprinted in *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* and the differences between them are substantial. A version entitled *Tân đính hiệu bình Việt điện u linh tập* 新訂較評越甸幽靈集, which was compiled during the Cảnh Hưng 景興 era (1740–1786) in the Later Lê Dynasty, consists of 41 tales and has the largest number of stories. According to the preface, *Việt điện u linh tập lục* dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the stories contain quotations from *Tam quốc chí* 三国志, *Giao Châu ký* 交州記, *Giao Chỉ ký* 交趾記, *Sử ký* 史記, *Nam hải ký* 南海記, *Báo cực truyện* 報極傳, *Đại Việt ngoại sử* 大越外史 and other lost works so it also constitutes a repository of fragments of older works. It needs to be kept in mind that this is a work which has been constantly retold over a long period of time and then written down and rewritten: it is a work of many layers. The standard version of the text consists of 32 tales, 7 on rulers, 11 on ministers, 10 on heroes and 4 in a sequel. A version entitled *Việt điện u linh tập lục toàn biên* 越甸幽靈集錄全編 includes the comments of later narrators, which are rarely found in other copies. Here, as an example, let me retell one story, the story of ‘Trinh Liệt phu nhân 貞烈夫人’, which is the last one in the section on rulers.

Trinh Liệt was the royal consort of Sạ Đẩu 乍斗 (Jaya Sinhavarman II), the king of Champa, a polity located to the south of Đại Việt. Because Sạ Đẩu did not submit to the Lý king Thái Tông 太宗, the latter launched an expedition and attacked them. King Sạ Đẩu was killed. Trinh Liệt was summoned by Thái Tông but she spurned

the summons, wrapped herself in white felt and threw herself into a river. Night after night grief-stricken cries came up from the river so the local people, feeling it pitiful, erected a shrine to her. One day, when Thái Tông was travelling around his kingdom, he came across the shrine and heard the story. He called out to her spirit and she appeared to him in a dream and told him her name. He subsequently named her Hiệp Chính 協正: the local people worshipped her as a goddess of good fortune and the miracles she worked were remarkable. In the first year of the Trùng Hưng 重興 era, 1285, she was named Hiệp Chính Hựu Thiện phu nhân 協正佑善夫人 and in 1288 she further acquired the name Trinh Liệt 貞烈 and in 1313 she was given the sobriquet Chân Mãnh 真猛 [22] (p. 14).

This story tells the tragic story of a queen who takes her own life in time of war and is then deified. It thus explains the origins of her deification and of the worship shown to her. At the end we are told that during the Trần Dynasty her names and titles were increased. The story, as told in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, recalls the Lý Dynasty invasion of Champa, and on the occasion of these posthumous additions to her names and titles it doubtless gained new meanings.

The narration and content vary in the many extant manuscripts. In the version titled ‘Hiệp Chính Hựu Thiện Trinh Liệt Chân Mãnh Phu nhân’ 協正祐善貞烈真猛夫人 in *Việt điện u linh tập lục toàn biên* 越甸幽靈集錄全編, the narrative is more than double the length of other versions. Here the queen, who has been summoned by King Thái Tông, is appalled by her own situation of ‘foreign concubine and vulgar woman, poor clothing and poor apparel, rough language,’ which cannot match the king’s wives and concubines, and, saying she is unable to bear her situation, throws herself into the river. That scene is described as ‘with a surging sound the beautiful woman is lost to sight’ 澎湃一声、已

失美人蹤影 and the scene when her cries are heard is said to be ‘a peaceful night with clear moon and bright stars’ 是處夜靜波澄、月明星朗. When she appears in Thái Tông’s dream, ‘it was the dead of night, there was a fragrant breeze but cold and oppressive’ 是夜三更將晚、偶見香風一陣、冷氣逼人; she says, ‘I hear that the right behaviour for a women is to follow (her husband) to the end’ 妾聞婦人之道、從一而終 and ‘sadly my country has been destroyed and my lord has perished, so I am heartbroken day and night and can only think of how I can repay his kindness to me’ 不幸而國破君亡、妾日夜悽愴、只思圖報. None of these expressions are to be found in the version in *Việt điện u linh tập lục*. It is possible that they were cut from earlier versions, but it is more likely that additions were made over time and the story gradually grew longer as storytelling techniques matured.

This story also appears in volume 3 of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, which I will be taking up next, but the version there is closest not to that in *Việt điện u linh tập lục* but rather to that in another manuscript entitled *Việt điện u linh* 粵甸幽靈. There is quite a bit of overlap between *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* and *Việt điện u linh tập lục* in the stories they contain, but this is probably due to elaboration and expansion of the texts over time. It is obviously essential to establish the differences and similarities between the versions in different manuscripts.

### 3. The making of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* 嶺南摭怪

The proper title of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* is *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* 嶺南摭怪列傳, and as the characters *liệt truyện* 列傳 suggest, this is a work that can be described as a collection of biographies or of old tales. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Vũ Quỳnh 武瓊 (1452-1516), who was an Imperial Censor 監察御史 for the Kinh Bắc 京北 region and also the author of *Việt giám*

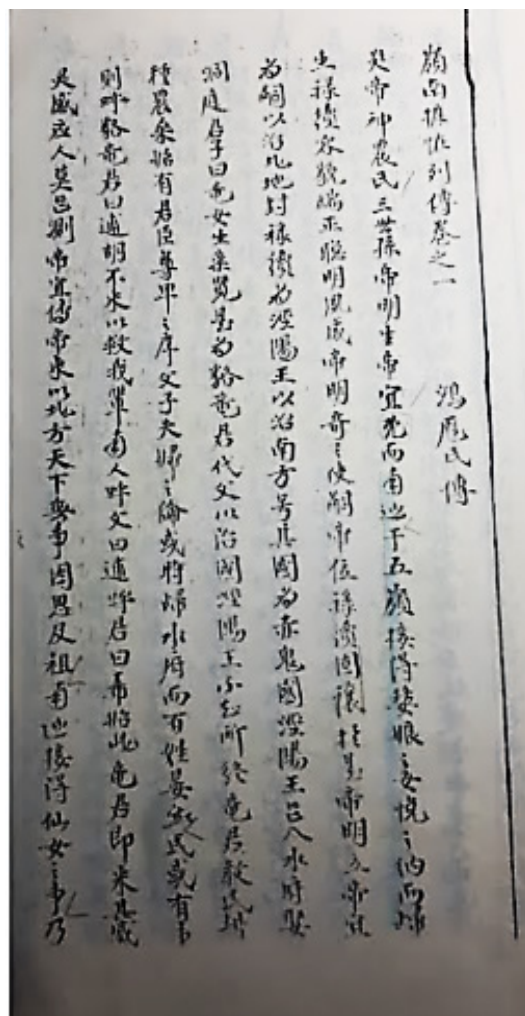
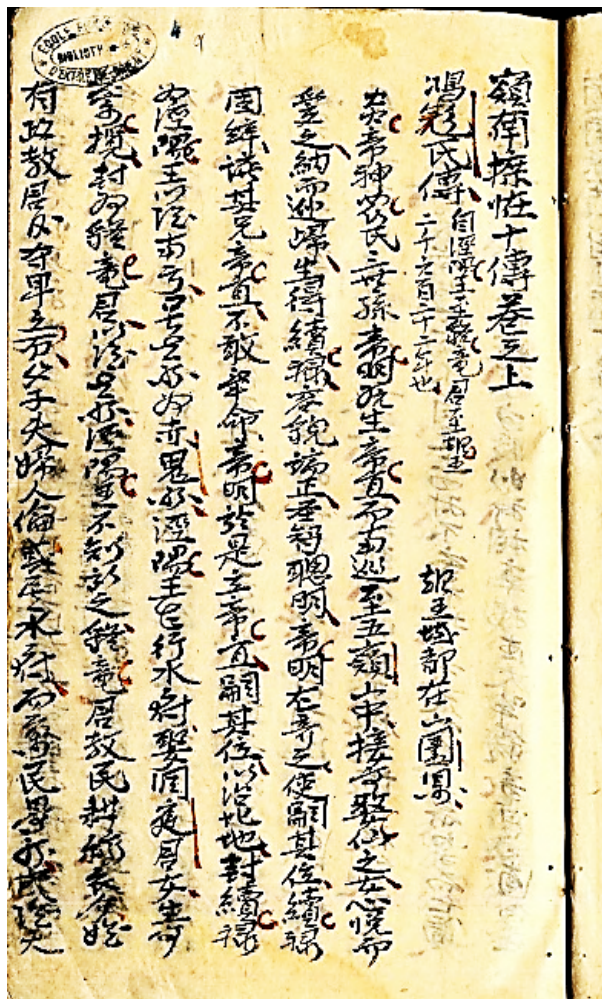
*thông khảo* 越鑑通考, edited and augmented a collection of tales assembled by Trần Thế Pháp 陳世法 in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The many manuscripts that survive of this text include a preface by Vũ Quỳnh dated 1492 and another by Kiều Phú 喬富 dated 1493 and contain 42 tales (10 in vol. 1, 12 in vol. 2, 17 in vol. 3 and 3 in the supplement). Like *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, this work only circulated in manuscript and there are many variants; at first it seems to have consisted of two volumes but was later expanded and there are many overlaps between the expanded version and *Việt điện u linh tập lục*. *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* reprints three versions but takes one of them (VHv.1473) as the standard; according to the research of Professor Nguyễn Thị Oanh, the version in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm (A.2914), which is not included in *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng*, represents the oldest extant form of the text [12].

Like *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, the text of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* contains a number of quotations from lost works such as *Sử ký* 史記 and *Giao Châu ký* 交州記, so there can be no doubt that it relies on premodern sources which are not available to us.

According to the preface, there are strange events in the mountains and rivers, spirits in the land, heroes among the people and extraordinary things but there is not yet a national history, and even if one were to try and write one, much has been lost and forgotten. What fortunately survives are the oral traditions of the people, the preface points out. The author of the text is unknown, the writer of the preface notes, but it was probably a scholar of the Lý or Trần Dynasty and although it is somewhat preposterous nevertheless it is in places reliable and is the equal of the Chinese works *Soushen jì* 搜神記 and *Youguailu* 幽怪錄.

Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện A.2914 [10]

Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện VHv.1473 [11]



In some respects, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* resembles the kind of collection of supernatural tales found in *Soushen ji*, but there is also a significant component of myths and legends telling of the earliest times and the first story, ‘Hồng Bàng thị truyện’ 鴻龐氏傳, can be described as a Vietnamese foundation myth. The story centres on the conflict between the mountain fairy Âu Cơ 嫫婁 and King Lạc Long Quân 貉龍君. The latter was the child born to King Dương Vương 涇陽王, descendant of the legendary Emperor of Fire of the Shennong Clan 炎帝神農氏, who married a dragon lady, the

daughter of the lord of Động Đình 洞庭君子. The child of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, namely King Hùng Vương 雄王, becomes the founder of the kingdom of Văn Lang. According to the legend of Âu Cơ, she gives birth to 100 eggs which become princes, half of whom remain on land and the remainder settling in the sea. This story is connected with others in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* such as the Tale of Mount. Tản Viên 傘圓山傳 and the Tale of Golden Turtle 金龜傳. They deal with the conflict between the spirits of the water and the land and it is this conflict which forms the basic structure of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* [14].

Several of the stories from *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* were quoted in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the dynastic history completed in 1479 which was mentioned earlier. This work, which originally consisted of the first five volumes constituting the *Ngoại Kỷ 外紀* (covering the period from the Hồng Bàng 鴻龐 Dynasty to the end of the period of Chinese dominance in the 10<sup>th</sup> century), volumes 6 to 14 which constituted the *Bản Kỷ 本紀* (covering the Lý and Trần dynasties, 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Ming domination in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), and the final volume dealing with the foundation of the Lê Dynasty. For the ancient age of the myths, which is without any documentary record, the compiler made use of stories contained in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* and *Việt điện u linh tập lục*.

After 'Hồng Bàng thị truyện' 鴻龐氏傳 come various other stories: 'Đổng Thiên Vương truyện' 董天王傳, in which, during the reign of King Hùng Vương 雄王, an invasion by the Chinese Shang Dynasty is repelled by a boy using an iron sword and riding an iron horse; 'Bạch trĩ truyện' 白雉傳, in which during the Zhou Dynasty a pheasant is offered to China; 'Tản viên sơn truyện' 傘圓山傳, in which the mountain spirit Sơn Tinh 山精 is in dispute with the water spirit Thủy Tinh 水精 over the daughter of King Hùng Vương and which explains the origins of floods; 'Kim Qui truyện' 金龜傳 which tells how, in the kingdom of king An Dương 安陽, the Chinese general Zhao Tuo 趙陀 used trickery to have An Dương's daughter My Châu 媚珠 marry his son Zhong Shi 仲水 and then defeated An Dương by disabling his sacred bow, and then how An Dương, learning from the turtle Kim Qui that his daughter had betrayed him, killed her and her blood became a pearl; and 'Lý Ông Trọng truyện' 李翁仲傳, in which the imposing figure of Lý Ông Trọng goes to the Chinese state of Qin and defeats the nomadic Xiongnu people and then, even after his death, continues to dominate

in the form of a bronze statue. As these various stories show, while *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* as a historical chronicle eschews elements related to fiction or storytelling, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, by contrast, is rich in those very elements.

In order to demonstrate the variety found in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, I shall now take up the story 'Tây qua truyện' 西瓜傳, or the 'Tale of the watermelon'. As the preface of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* says, 'There is nothing that the Chinese state of Xia values more in Nam Việt (modern Vietnam) than the watermelon'.

During the reign of King Hùng Vương, one of his followers was a man called Mai An Tiêm 枚安暹. He was originally a foreigner who had arrived on a merchant vessel and had been made a slave by the king. However, since he had an honest face and was very knowledgeable, the king gave him this name and also provided him with a wife and in time he became wealthy and proud. This angered the king, who banished him to a remote island. There, since their food was running out his wife was unhappy but An Tiêm was relaxed, saying that life and death were in the hands of heaven. Then some white birds flew up with half a dozen melon seeds and dropped them onto the desert sands. Vines sprouted from them, they flowered and melons formed: they were sweet and tasty to eat. This went on year after year and they exchanged the melons for grains and with traders for fish, and people near and far competed to buy the seeds to grow melons themselves and they grew over a wider and wider area. Since the birds had flown from the west, they called them 'western melons' (which is the name for watermelons). Eventually the king forgave An Tiêm, summoned him back and restored him to his official post and he named the island An Tiêm island. Clearly this story tells both the origin of watermelons and the origin of the name of An Tiêm island, but it also deals with trade and the exchange of goods. An exile



flourishes in his place of exile and creates a life and culture of his own.

*Lĩnh Nam chích quái* is set in the earliest period of Vietnamese history: it begins with creation myths but the stories it contains exhibit great variety. The legends it includes are of great interest and it is the most important of the Vietnamese collections of tale literature. Although it is written in literary Chinese, it is thought that it has come down to us after the stories were over many generations transmitted orally, narrated at festivals and religious events or even performed in public. From the Lý Dynasty onwards, as the state ideology was reinforced, litterati wrote the tales down, added literary embellishment and doubtless altered them in various ways. It is therefore a multi-layered work, with elements owing to successive oral narrations and written versions.

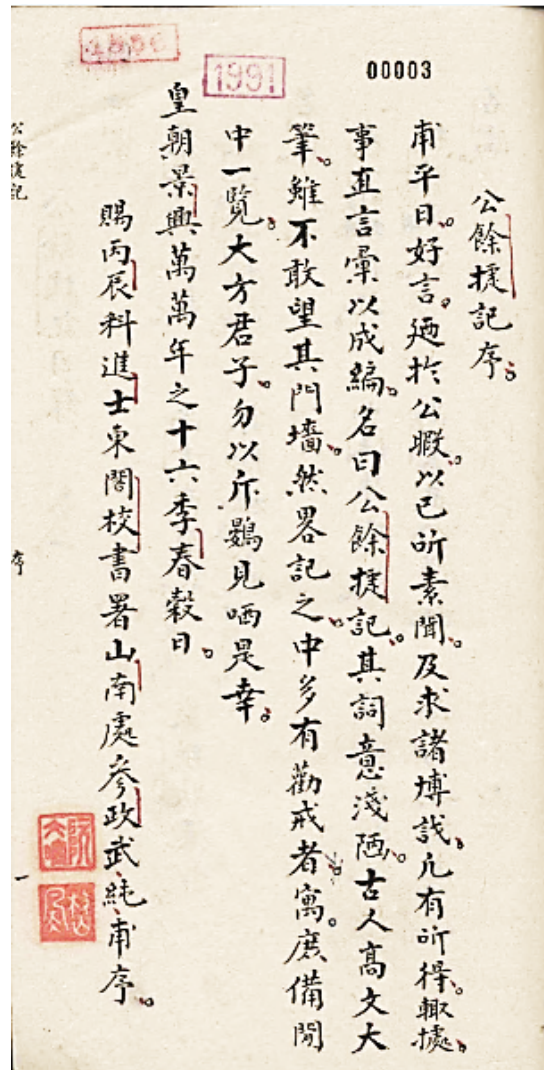
*Lĩnh Nam chích quái* is in this sense a work which betrays the active engagement of Vietnamese with these tales over many generations and a work which bears the imprint of Vietnamese identity and nationalism as Vietnam emerged from friction with China and began to rid itself of ‘Chineseness’. It is clear from the incorporation of some of the stories into children’s picture-books that the myths and legends of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* continue to live in the memory of Vietnamese people. While it is reasonable to describe it as part of Vietnamese national literature, at the same time it needs to be placed in the context of the Sinographic sphere and the Sinitic cultural sphere and our task is to read it as a work of East Asian literature. In 2013, a group devoted to reading Vietnamese classical literature was formed in Tokyo and since then it has been working to produce translations and commentaries, some of which it is planned to publish. Also, in 2020, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* was for the first time the subject of a symposium at a meeting of the

Setsuwa Bungaku Kai (Association for the Study of Tale Literature in Japan) and the papers are to be published in 2022 in the Association’s journal, *Setsuwa Bungaku Kenkyū* 説話文学研究. Thus, Vietnamese Sinitic tale literature has recently been taken up by Japanese scholars as a promising field of study.

#### 4. The world of *Công dư tiếp ký* 公餘捷記

Next, I should like to turn to two works of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Công dư tiếp ký* 公餘捷記 and *Kiến văn lục* 見聞録 [19] (volumes 9 and 15, respectively). The former was completed in 1755 by Vũ Phương Đề 武方提 (1698-1761, his pseudonym was Thuần Phủ 純甫), who held high offices of state as the curator of the Eastern Pavilion 東閣校書 and the vice governor of Sơn Nam Province 山南處參政. This work is in the broad sense a collection of tale literature, for Vũ gathered together accounts and records from the 15<sup>th</sup> century up to his own time. In the preface, he states that when his official duties allowed, he wrote down reliable knowledge and information that he came across. It consists of two parts and a supplement. The first part consists of 44 stories in the following categories: households (5 narratives), ministers of state (6), Confucian scholars (9), righteousness (2), bravery (1), punishment for bad deeds (1), virtuous women (1), women singers (1), the supernatural (10), good tombs and housing (from the viewpoint of geomancy), (5), scenic spots (1) and animals (2). The second part consists of 62 stories in the following categories: ministers of state (32), lewd beliefs (1), dreams (21), clever women (1), Buddhist recluses (1), worship (2) and mountains and rivers (4). The supplement contains a further 9 narratives and is probably a later addition to the work. *Công dư tiếp ký* was very influential in later ages, and there are many revised editions and digests.

Công dư tiếp ký [1], VHv.1324



Here let us look at some concrete examples. In *Lĩnh Nam chíc quái* there is the story ‘*Đổng Thiên vương truyện*’ 董天王傳 in which a child hero prevents a Chinese invasion, and in *Công dư tiếp ký*, too, there is similarly the story of the mausoleum where Phù Đổng Thiên vương was worshipped [1] (Part 1, ‘*Bộ Đầu linh từ ký*’ 步頭靈祠記).

In the village Bộ đầu xã 步頭社 there was a mausoleum where the people worshipped, considering it to commemorate Huyền Thiên Đại Thánh Đổng Sóc Thiên vương Đại tướng 玄天大聖董朔天王大將. According to tradition, when this deity’s mother was collecting water from the river she was taken by two serpent

deities and was taken down as far as Bộ đầu xã river in Thượng Phúc 上福 district. When she begged for help from her son, he came down from heaven, seized the serpents, let his mother return home, and trampled the serpents to death. His footprints, the narrator says, can still be seen today and according to measurements taken by the villagers they are 2 feet 1 inch in length and 1 foot 1 inch in width. They erected a mausoleum to these remarkable relics and that is how the village came by its name, which means ‘pace head village’.

Later, at the time of Lord Trịnh Tùng’s 鄭松 ‘expedition to the east’ (Đông chinh thủy khấu 東征水寇, the punitive expedition in 1592 to the

Eastern Rebels, namely the Mạc Dynasty), his ships were unable to pass a wayside shrine and had to withdraw so he decided to enhance the shrine. Afterwards he forgot about this and in a dream he was visited by a giant accompanied by 8 generals who accused him of having failed to complete the shrine, so he hurriedly got a statue and constructed shrine buildings. He didn't have enough wood to do this but made good the shortage with timber from a capsized warship. The planks are visible to this day, claims the narrator. The statue is 21 feet high and his feet are trampling upon serpents, while the 8 generals are placed around him. Every year on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September, the anniversary of his death, lots of people gather there, so much of the ground has been worn away but the shrine still stands.

What is particularly interesting is the commentary that follows this story:

In the Giáp Tuất 甲戌 year [1754] when I repaired the embankment at Y village, I visited a road-side shrine. The image stood there impressively. But when I came to think about it, I considered it unlikely that the mother of Phù Đổng Thiên vương, who went up to heaven in the form of an iron horse and then had his intimidating voice reverberate in the mountains, could really have been taken by the serpent gods. Probably this relates to a different deity whose image is similar to that of Phù Đổng Thiên vương and whose name became attached to this shrine. I just record this here and await the opinion of wiser heads.

Thus it is clear that the author doubts whether the deity worshipped at the shrine is really Phù Đổng Thiên vương who protected the state. These doubts seem to reflect the rationalism of a Confucian scholar.

On the other hand, there is also a story in which a human being was deified and this picks up elements from *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, which I have discussed above. In Hạ Bì 下邳 village, Gia Phúc 嘉福 district, there lived a stranger who made a living by selling clams. One day when he

went to the seashore, he saw two cows fighting there and they fell into the sea. Later their hair fell out and thinking this miraculous he swallowed the hair and felt his strength magnify: he could now walk across water as if it were land so he could gather fish from the sea easily. In time, enemies arrived from the north with several hundred ships so the people trembled with fear. Since there were rewards for anybody who faced up to the enemy, the stranger volunteered: he entered the sea, went under the ships and made them sink by making holes in their hulls with an iron tool. The enemy were startled and when they saw through a glass tube that a man was making holes in their boats, they put down a net, captured him and then interrogated him. The stranger tricked them by saying that there are lots of people like him here so he would guide them; so saying, he threw himself into the sea and escaped. When the stranger died he was given the posthumous honour of Đại Vương 大王 and, the narrator adds, he is worshipped to this day as a god of good fortune [1] (Part 1, 'Hạ Bì dị nhân ký' 下邳異人記).

The idea that when there was an invasion from China a man swallowed cow hair and gained supernatural strength is very interesting and it is natural that he should have been seen as a hero when he forced the enemy to retreat. It is probably the kind of story about strangers that circulated among seashore communities.

The idea of a symbiosis between mountains and the sea is common to Japan and Vietnam. The next story focuses on this symbiosis. According to an old legend, in Nam Mẫu 南畝 village among the people gathered for charitable meeting there was an old woman with scabies; a mother and her child felt sorry for her and shared their food with her. The following day she went to their house and asked for a night's accommodation, so they put her up for the night. During the night there were loud sounds like thunder and to their astonishment they saw a dragon lying there, but the next morning it was just the old

woman again. From this they knew that this was no ordinary woman. The woman said, 'I saw the quarrels at the meeting and this will surely lead to the torment of drowning but I will save you for you both showed that you have merciful hearts, so leave your house and flee to a high place', and then she disappeared. Suddenly water welled up from the ground, at first in small quantities but then it became a flood and finally a sea. The mother and her child had fled to a high mountain but the other people did not manage to get away. Later, the narrator says, more children were born to them and soon there was a village which is thriving to this day. At the end the author lavishes praise on the beauty of the mountain as the world best 'another world 壺天' comparable with China's picturesque scenery of 瀟湘八景 [1] (Part 1, 'Côn Luân/Lôn tam hải ký' 崑崙三海記):

In my consideration, in the Kunlun chain of mountains 崑崙山 from Tuyên Quang 宣光 to Thái Nguyên 太原, sheer rock faces stand side by side scraping the sky. Among the untrodden rocks, there is a cave three *trượng* 丈 in height and more than ten *trượng* deep, in which pieces of limestone hang down. It is a superb view like a picture painted in five colours, looking like a creature of god or demon.

In this mythical story, which was probably narrated in village meetings like the one mentioned at the beginning of the story, the old woman is an incarnation of a dragon and in the disaster that follows only the merciful are saved. This story is similar to the pattern of Somin Shorai 蘇民将来 stories that circulated in Japan about people who treat visitors kindly being protected during an epidemic and it also has points in common with flood myths that are common throughout the world.

In the background of this story can clearly be seen the Daoist idea of sacred places 洞天福地. There are many Vietnamese tales that reflect this idea, such as the stories 'Tản viên sơn truyện' 傘圓山傳, 'Việt tỉnh truyện' 越井傳 and 'Từ Đạo

Hạnh' 徐道行 in *Lĩnh Nam chí quái*, while the story 'Cường Bạo Đại vương' 強暴大王記 is linked to flood myths [3]. Some of the stories in this book conclude with the author's comments marked as such and this last story has the longest of these comments which mention the origin of the scenic spot in Bạch Thông sub-prefecture 白通州, in describing its topography and scenery, so it appears that the subject matter was of the greatest interest to him.

Another point of interest is the inclusion in some stories of the Buddhist belief in the law of cause and effect. The following story is an example. A young man who lived in Thất district 七景, Hải Dương 海陽 province was an extreme spendthrift. When he had a valuable chicken and a man wanted to buy it from him for a high price he would not sell it. One day when he was out, his wife was winnowing rice and accidentally killed the chicken that was beside her. She went crying to her mother, who said that she would take her place. When the man came home she said that she had killed the chicken. The man took her to the cemetery, dug a hole and was about to bury her when he accidentally knocked himself into the hole. The narrator comments that the ways of heaven are not far to see and wonders what punishment the man got in the underworld [1] (Part 1, 'Ái kê ký' 愛雞記).

It is a story of cause and effect similar to some found in Japan's oldest collection of tales, *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記. Similarly, the story of the Go master Trương Ba 張巴 who dies and is reborn as a butcher and whose two wives go to court in their dispute over him to find the soul of Trương Ba in the body of the butcher [1] (Part 1, 'Đế Thích ký' 帝釋記) is very much like the story of the woman in Sanuki province in *Nihon ryōiki* (vol. 2, #25) [3]. It should be mentioned here that the story of the god Đế Thích and the game of Go in the first part of this story can be traced back to the story 'Đế Thích điện ký' 帝釋殿記 which was engraved on stone in 1605, but the rest of the story regarding the mis-

transposition of the soul and the body does not appear to predate its appearance in *Công dư tiệp ký* [16]. The conclusion of the story stating that, “the hands and feet of the son grew cold”, is also very similar to the story in *Nihon ryōiki* (vol. 2, #3) of Kishi Himaro 吉志火麻呂 who tried to kill his mother but himself fell into hell. These show an established framework of karmic retribution advocated by Buddhism.

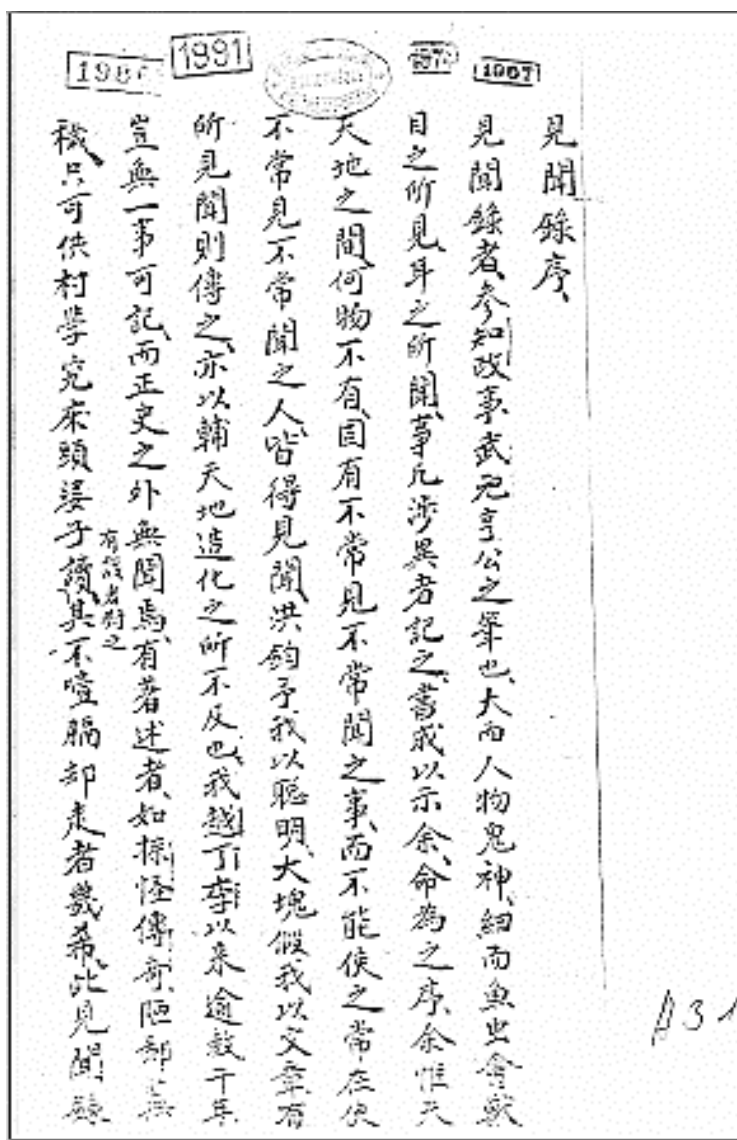
There are many other stories worth mentioning, for instance, the two stories in the part on animals both deal with tigers. One is a

story of a grateful tiger ‘Tống Sơn hổ ông ký’ 宋山虎翁記, while the other is a horror story of a big tree and a tiger ‘Hổ lão nhân ký’ 虎老人記. Both are of interest, but owing to lack of space, they cannot be examined here. I shall deal with these in another paper.

### 5. The world of *Kiến văn lục* 見聞錄

The next tale collection I want to consider is the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Kiến văn lục* 見聞錄, of which the full title is *Lan Trì Kiến văn lục* 蘭池見聞錄.

#### *Kiến văn lục* [2]



It was compiled by Vũ Trinh 武貞 who died in 1828 and it is thought to have been compiled in the period 1790-1802. It consists of two volumes with 35 tales and a supplementary volume with a further 6 tales, so it is a short compilation, as are many other Vietnamese tale collections. As the title suggests, it is a collection of tales that the compiler heard locally and then wrote down. It contains four prefaces, and in the first the compiler states that it is a sort of Vietnamese equivalent of *Soushen ji* 搜神記. Some of the stories have comments by the author (he calls himself the fisherman of Lan Trì 蘭池漁者) added at the end and in some cases these are longer than the actual stories as in the case of 'Thạch Thán tiết phụ' 石炭節婦.

Here, too, let me give a few examples. 'Nghĩa Hổ' 義虎 consists of two parallel stories in which tigers return favours. A woman of Đông Hồ 東湖 district hears her door being pounded at night so she opens the door but she is snatched by a tiger and taken deep into the mountains. She barely feels alive, but when the male tiger shows her his mate and weeps, she notices that the tiger is about to give birth. She takes out of her clothing some medicine and when the tiger takes the medicine she is safely delivered of her cubs. Her mate digs out a lump of silver and gives it to the woman before taking her back home. She exchanges it for 10 *lượng* (taels) of gold and so does not suffer during the famine that year. In the second story, when a woodcutter from Lạng Giang goes into the mountains to chop wood, he finds a tiger thrashing about with pain because a bone is caught in its throat. From up a tree the woodcutter says, 'If you don't catch me then I will take the bone out for you'. He descends from the tree and takes the bone out with his hand – it is a bone from a cow as big as an elbow of human. He tells the tiger where he lives and during the night he hears a noise. The next morning he finds a dead deer in front of his door. When the woodcutter dies more than ten years later a tiger appears at the burial, puts his head in the coffin and howls before departing. Thereafter, every year upon the

anniversary of the woodcutter's death, there is always a dead sheep or boar in front of the door. This is a classic example of 'grateful tiger' stories and there is another example (of a 'benevolent tiger' 仁虎) in this collection, too. These suggest that tigers and humans used to inhabit the same areas to the extent that the premise to the stories that tigers can understand human language was created. There are also stories involving other animals, such as snakes, monkeys and fish.

Next let us consider a story involving a huge tree and a spirit. Đỗ Uổng 杜汪 was a bold man from Gia Lộc 嘉祿 district. Near where he lived there was a banyan tree where a female demon used to appear time and time again in various guises, so people avoided it. One dark night when it was drizzling, Đỗ Uổng's friend said, 'If someone goes to that banyan tree and brings back the bowl placed there as an offering I will give him 300 sheets of paper', so Đỗ Uổng said, 'Leave it to me' and bravely set off. Beneath the tree he found a woman beckoning him. He embraced her from behind and exchanged words with her. When he asked her to tell him his future, she said, 'At the age of 34 you will come second in the palace examination and you will rise to the highest official rank', adding a warning, 'I have casually let you know the secrets of Heaven, so don't forget that both of us are sure to be punished.' Đỗ Uổng went back but did not say exactly what had happened. Half a month later the banyan tree fell down in a storm and the demon died. Đỗ Uổng came second in the examinations so he made a shrine at the spot where the banyan tree had been and worshipped the woman there. Later he rose to high rank but in the Hoảng Định 弘定 era (1600-1619) he is said to have been killed by military officers because during the rebellion of Ngô Đình Nga 吳廷峨 (which actually occurred in the first year of the era Thận Đức 慎德 (1600)) he did not follow a remonstrance [2] ('Đỗ Thượng thư' 杜尚書, p. 52).

The female demon in this story was an evil spirit attached to the banyan tree and the

tree itself had been bewitched, it seems. There is a similar story (‘Thụ yêu’ 樹妖) in the last part of supplementary volume, too, in which the woman refers to herself as the ‘deity of the banyan tree’. This second story is about the encounter between the demon and the queen: the queen is very ill but she insults the demon who has brought her medicine and cures herself. The story of Đổ Uổng is instead one of testing his courage and combines that with a story of having one’s future predicted. Other stories involving a large tree and a spirit include ‘Mộc tinh truyện’ 木精傳 in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*: here a chinaberry tree takes the form of a mad deity who causes a pestilence to spread and then uses magic to make it die down [7].

*Kiến văn lục* includes not only these stories about female demons but also many others featuring women, such as ‘Sản dị’ 產異, ‘Tái sinh’ 再生, ‘Nữ hóa vi nam’ 女化為男, ‘Nguyễn ca kỹ’ 阮歌妓, ‘Lan Quận công phu nhân’ 蘭郡公夫人, ‘Thạch Thán tiết phụ’ 石炭節婦 and ‘Liên Hồ Quận quân’ 蓮湖郡君. No explanation for this phenomenon has yet been found.

Next I will take up the story ‘Ký tam sinh’ 記三生 [2] (p. 58). We have already seen that there are stories featuring the Buddhist notion of cause and effect in the collection *Công dư tiếp ký*, but here in *Kiến văn lục* we find stories about rebirth. In one, Trần Thượng Thư 陳尚書, the Inspector of Examinations, is from Bảo Triện 宝篆 village but one day a man comes and his past, present and future are revealed. In his former life he was a man and his family was well off but because he was a wicked man and died and went to hell, where he endured the kind of tortures mentioned in the Classics, such as the mountain of swords and boiling oil. The decision of Emma, the king of hell, is that he be reborn a chicken. He is handed over to the servants of the king of hell, grows feathers and becomes a chicken. As he grows, he becomes strong and is used by his master as a fighting cock, but he wants to die so he attacks his master’s children. His master is angry and kills him and his soul

comes before Emma: because he disobeyed his master the decision is that he be reborn as a boar. He is handed over to the servants of the king of hell and finds that he is now a young boar. As the months pass the other young boars are sold but he remains unsold and is constantly wishing he were dead. Eventually he is sold to a new master and is sacrificed at a shrine. His soul comes before Emma who takes pity on him and allows him to become a man again.

This story is interesting in that the cycle of reincarnation is the theme while his soul remains unchanged. Thus, when he is an animal, he just wishes bad retribution for death and subsequent rebirth. The description of the servants of the king of hell pushing him to another world is ingenious. This story seems to be connected with a mention of Buddhist sermons (“Braced on the hall Đại Hùng 大雄殿 I listened to the sermon of a venerable priest”) in the second preface and it may be that this kind of story was a feature of contemporary sermons.

## 6. Future research

In this article I have considered various Vietnamese Sinitic tale collections focusing on *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, *Công dư tiếp ký* and *Kiến văn lục*. From myths and legends their attention gradually shifts to the everyday world and Buddhist topics; they cover a huge range of subjects and are endlessly fascinating. Henceforward it will be necessary to consider the individual stories carefully one by one. There are other tale collections that deserve to be studied too, such as *Tang thương ngẫu lục* 桑滄偶錄, *Thính văn dị lục* 聽聞異錄 and *Nam Ông mộng lục* 南翁夢錄, and there are even tale collections related to Christianity such as *Tây dương Gia tô bí lục* 西洋耶蘇秘錄. Also, there are collections not included in *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng*, such as the collection of Zen biographies *Thiền uyển tập anh* 禪苑集英 and the illustrated life of the Buddha *Như Lai ứng hiện đồ* 如來應現圖, which has recently come to light [13]. In this paper, I have only considered a small

part of Vietnamese tale literature, but I should like to emphasize just how many tale collections there are in Vietnam, how varied they are and how important they are to a consideration of the world of tale literature in East Asia as a whole.

The key to the study of the East Asian Sinitic culture sphere is the phenomenon of ‘vernacular reading’ (termed *kundoku* 訓読 in Japanese). In early modern Japan many Sinitic texts and Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras were printed but most of them are Japanese editions which were to be read by means of ‘vernacular reading’ and which formed the foundations of intellectual culture in Japan. In the same way, it is possible to adopt the perspectives of the study of tale literature in Japan by considering how much the translation technique of ‘vernacular reading’ was applied in Vietnam.

Hitherto, comparative study in the academic circles of Japan and China has focused on Japan and China and on how Japan was affected and these studies were thus unavoidably limited by the perception of Japan as a receiver in a one-way process. However, what is surely needed is an approach that examines Japanese literature in the context of the common literary heritage of East Asia. We should not be considering the literature of other countries as an external factor but adopt an explanatory framework based on the shared world of tale literature that is common to the whole of East Asia [8] [9].

As mentioned earlier, it is only recently that Vietnamese tale literature in Sinitic has been taken up by Japanese scholars as a topic for a symposium, and it is not the case in Japan yet that there is a great deal of scholarly interest in Vietnamese tale literature. The number of interested scholars is small and we need to gradually expand their circle. We need to publish editions in Japanese with explanatory notes that anybody can read, relying on the technique of ‘vernacular reading’ to translate Vietnamese Sinitic texts into Japanese and we are making gradual progress with this. Although we are few in number, we bring together specialists working

on Vietnamese history, Vietnamese literature, the Chinese Classics, the Korean Classics and Japanese classical literature and together we cover the whole of East Asia. We want to enhance our strengths by collaborating more with Vietnamese scholars such as Professor Nguyễn Thị Oanh and we also hope to expand our network by linking up with scholars in China and Korea who work on Vietnamese classical literature and tale literature. We are, however, still at the beginning of our efforts to reappraise Vietnamese Sinitic tale literature as a part of the East Asian literary sphere.

Translated by Peter Kornicki.

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