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## The Karma of Love: Buddhist Karmic Discourses in Confucian and Daoist Voices in Vietnamese Tales of the Marvelous and Uncanny

Scholars of Vietnam have long known about a mass of texts, dating from about the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which contains stories about phenomena deemed “marvelous” [*kỳ, qí* 奇], “uncanny” [*quái, guai* 怪], “strange” [*dị, yì* 異], or “numinous” [*linh, ling* 靈].<sup>1</sup> Composed in Literary Sinitic by Vietnamese authors, the narrative compilations have been categorized into a variety of genres, including “transmissions of marvels” [*truyền kỳ, chuanqi* 傳奇], “records of anomaly” [*chí quái, zhiguai* 志怪], “arrayed biographies” [*liệt truyện, liezhuan* 列傳, or more literally “arrayed traditions”], “brush notes” [*bút ký, biji* 筆記], and “local gazetteer” [*địa phương chí, difangzhi* 地方誌].

With regard to content, some narratives from these compilations have lengthy and multi-threaded plots, while others are more akin to short notes about local lore. The topics and themes of the stories are many and varied. For example, they include but are not limited to accounts of the lives and deeds of gods and goddesses; the apotheosis of courageous warriors, virtuous scholars, chaste wives, and loyal ministers; stories of the celestial descent and incarnation of transcendents [*tiên* 仙] and their adventures and love trysts in the human world below;<sup>2</sup> tales of the hauntings of restless

ghosts, some having been murdered, some having perished in war, some having died by accidental drowning, and others having committed suicide; narratives about the devastation wreaked by ghostly hoards after wars, famine, or plagues and the spirit battles that Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, and Confucian scholars engage in to quell and exorcise them; return-from-death accounts of journeys into the underworld and encounters with netherworld judges, tribunals, and spirits of the deceased; stories about the spirits of lakes and rivers, divine turtles, and dragon kings, some of whom abduct the wives of humans or wreak havoc through floods and drownings; and accounts of encounters with animal spirits or nature essences [*trinh* 精], some of whom transform into wandering strangers or seductive maidens.<sup>3</sup>

The discourses in these texts presume a minimally shared assumption about the basic structures of reality. There are plural dimensions and realms, which though distinct, are parallel, such as the visible world populated by the living [*đương gian* 陽間]; the invisible world [*âm phủ* 陰府, *minh phủ* 冥府, etc.] populated by spirits, ancestors [*tổ tiên*], and the general dead; and the visible but distant world of the heavens populated by celestial deities [*thần* 神], saints/sages [*thánh* 聖], and transcendents [*tiên*]. Between such dimensions, some beings can cross, for many and various reasons, at certain sacred places or ritualized areas.<sup>4</sup> And such breakthrough- or crossover-events are referred to generally as examples of *kỳ* [marvels] or *quái* [uncanny, or strange]. Or, if such events are deemed to have been initiated by deities as responses to human propitiation, human moral excellence, or even as punishment for human evil, then they are referred to as instances of “stimulus response” [*cảm ứng* 感應] or “numinous response” [*linh ứng* 靈應].<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I focus on the theme of karmic connection [*duyên* 緣], an idea that pervades these stories but often is not of central concern in the narratives. Surely the narrators and characters in these stories invoke words such as “karma” [*ngiệp báo* 業報, *quả báo* 果報, *nhân quả* 因果], “karmic connection” [*duyên*], “fate” [*mệnh* 命], “past-life karmic connection” [*túc duyên* 夙緣], “former connection” [*tiền duyên* 先緣], “binding karmic connections” [*kết duyên* 結緣], and so on. Nevertheless, even when karmic rebirth or karmic connection is a part of the plot, it is often not the central

point of the story. That is, most of the stories do not have an overt Buddhist agenda. I argue that the pervasiveness of the theme of karma in these stories—though it is often not deliberately foregrounded—shows how the discourse of karma served as a culturally shared moral metaphysics, a conception of enduring human moral entanglements, which was more often held implicitly and only sometimes invoked explicitly. I do not dispute that this karma discourse is historically rooted in the religious tradition scholars now call “Buddhism.” Rather, I hope to show that what is of greater importance for scholars of religion is the question, Who is invoking this shared discourse and for what particular purpose? I will show that the karma discourse was not the exclusive possession of self-avowed “disciples” [đệ tử 弟子] of the Buddha, lay or monastic. On the contrary, depending on the larger discursive frame in which the karma discourse was embedded, different literary voices could appropriate the idea of karma for various agendas, sometimes narrative, ideological, religious, or even political. In this sense, the discourse of karma, here defined as a general metaphysics of moral retribution, was a part of the shared cultural repertoire of traditional Vietnam rather than specific to the Buddhist institution.

I begin with some methodological considerations pertaining to reading premodern tale literature to reconstruct religious cultures of the past. Then I provide some reflections on the theme of social karma, focusing on one sub-type, namely, karma that binds lovers through lifetimes and across the boundaries of life and death, heaven and earth. My analysis consists of close readings of four narratives that use the discourse of love karma: two that embed it within a Confucian framework, and two that embed it within a Daoist framework. The two stories composed in the Confucian voice are the account of the marriage of Thiên Tích and Hàn Than found in Nguyễn Dữ’s 阮嶼 (fl. sixteenth century) *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*, and the tale of the official Hoàng Bình Chính who is haunted by his spirit wife from a past life, found in Phạm Đình Hồ’s 范廷琥 (1768–1839) *Jottings amid the Rain*. The two stories composed in the Daoist voice are the account of the marriage of the Confucian student Tú Uyên with the female transcendent Giáng Kiều found in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s 段氏點 (1705–1748) masterful short story “The Marvelous Encounter at Jasper Creek,” and the tragic tale of Từ Thúc’s ill-fated marriage with the female

transcendent *Giáng Hương*, also found in Nguyễn Dữ's compilation.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in the conclusion I explore the implications for future research, focusing particularly on the problem of how religious discourses embedded in premodern tale literature may correlate to historical traces of actual social and cultural practices. By emphasizing the fluid circulation of culturally shared discourses across multiple and diverse voices, we are better equipped to theorize how religions in premodern Vietnam may have consisted of not essentialized, reified, and unified wholes, but rather shifting repertoires of discourses and practices variously clustered at different social sites, assembled by individuals and communities for different purposes, and appealing to variable and sometimes competing sources of transcendent authority.

### Reconstructing the Religious Context of Discourses on Marvels and the Uncanny

While *truyện kỳ* narratives have received attention from historians of Vietnam, they have not been substantively examined by scholars of religion.<sup>7</sup> Thus, methodological questions regarding how to analyze and interpret these kinds of narratives for the study of Vietnamese religions have not been raised. First, I argue that we must resist asking whether these tales should be read as fiction or nonfiction. Strictly speaking, these narratives are neither. Indeed, the question is based on certain genre distinctions rooted in the modern West, as many China scholars have noted.<sup>8</sup> These Vietnamese narratives written in Literary Sinitic are not forms of history writing, especially in the classical sense, for historiography has long been known in Vietnam, and these tale collections, as in China more broadly, have generally been seen as lying outside official history. Nevertheless, here we can take our cue from Sinology. Similar to the Vietnamese case, Chinese narratives about the marvelous and uncanny do not constitute traditional Chinese historiography, but they have been analyzed by scholars interested in topics such as the history of the Chinese social construction and representation of gender and sexuality; the history of various religious phenomena, such as the deity cults of Buddhist, Daoist, and popular religious communities; and the history of exorcism, spirit mediumship, and sectarian movements.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly for this essay, I approach these tales of the marvelous and uncanny as neither historiography nor as fiction, but as textual expressions of culturally shared written and oral discourses on the extraordinary.<sup>10</sup> Here I refer to a presumed general religious culture of the marvelous, the uncanny, and the numinous [*linh*], which the stories, composed by a literate elite, only partially reflect. This cultural discourse on the extraordinary, I argue, constituted a common language that was shared by both literate and non-literate and by the institutional religions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, as well as popular local religious traditions. Thus, though some story collections, such as those composed in Literary Sinitic by Nguyễn Dữ and Đoàn Thị Điểm, for example, seem to have been written at least partly to brandish literary skill and poetic artistry—and are thus filled with embellishment and invention—their basic narrative logic, plots, themes, metaphors, character types, and tropes were not invented whole cloth by the writers. Rather, the stories reflect, I argue, the repertoire of discourses on *kỳ*, *quái*, and *linh* that was shared across multiple and disparate compilations, each composed by different authors, and some containing narratives based on stories told by local informants. Indeed, some of these stories eventually resonated so broadly beyond the confines of the elite that they generated vernacular retellings, folk opera, and local cultic traditions. Moreover, other story compilations also composed in Literary Sinitic, such as those by Phạm Đình Hổ, seem to more directly reflect popular discourses on the extraordinary, such as gossip or anecdote. In short, just as it is unwarranted to assume that the elite wrote in a vacuum only for each other, it is also imprudent to assume that they did not share common religious concerns, assumptions, discourses, and practices with non-elites. The cultural differences between elite and non-elite, literate and non-literate, may not be as absolute in all areas of life, particularly in religious life, as we might assume.

Though tales of the extraordinary can reveal much about premodern Vietnamese religions, they should not be read naively as first-hand reportage, as historical artifacts of “what actually happened.” Agreeing with Robert F. Campany’s insight with regard to Chinese “anomaly” tales in general, I argue that the Vietnamese tales also reflect the “crystallizations of social memory and collective representations.”<sup>11</sup> Campany argues that

such tales “do not permit us to recover ‘what really happened’ in *this or that particular case*” (emphasis in original) but they can “bear witness to, because they participated in and were produced by, the social processes by which stories of miraculous events were formed, shared, and preserved.”<sup>12</sup> This leads me to a final methodological issue, the question of the extent to which religious discourses extracted and reconstructed from the tales can be said to reflect historical social reality. This is a critical issue, but too complex to discuss within the limits of this study. In the conclusion I raise questions that can guide future research on the practice context and social reality of the religious discourses found in narratives of the extraordinary.

### Social Karma, Family Karma, Love Karma

Karma is typically understood in individualistic terms. The orthodox Buddhist traditions generally have conducted ethical thinking primarily in terms of the consequences and continuity of the individual’s moral thought, speech, and action through time, across lifetimes and through endless births and deaths. Yet in many traditional Asian contexts, the discourse of karma not only encompasses ways of thinking about individual moral agency, but it has also been used to talk about the karmic consequences and continuity connecting individuals to other sentient beings, whether human, divine, ghostly, demonic, or yet to be born. Richard von Glahn has noted, “In China, karmic destiny, and especially retribution for sin, was seen as shared by the family (living and dead) as a whole. Fate was collective, not individual: the living inherited the burden of the accumulated sins of the ancestors, while the wicked deeds of the living were likewise projected onto dead ancestors.”<sup>13</sup> The same, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said of traditional Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

In this essay I focus on discourses of what I call “social karma” to examine how the idea of karma has been used to explain and interpret different types of social bonds and interactions and the moral implications therein. The social relationships that can be described in terms of karmic bonds include friends, lovers, enemies, teachers and disciples, and family members, such as between parents and children and between siblings. This karma discourse is often used to explain why people are born to certain

families of wealth or poverty, why certain people have strong friendships, why some feel drawn to others with strong and overwhelming feelings of love and lust, and why some seem destined to hate others and want to do them harm.

In these texts, the most prevalent word for karmic connection is *duyên*, which can also mean by extension karmic affinity, or latent karmic bond. The discourse of *duyên* comprises a host of related terms, such as the compounds *nhân duyên* 因緣 [causal affinity or causal connection], *âm duyên* 陰緣 [netherworld connection], *kết duyên* 結緣 [to tie-up karmic connections], *cầu duyên* 求緣 [to pray for karmic connection], and so forth. These terms invoke a metaphor or image of karmic connections as the cosmic bonds, threads, or ropes that bind beings to one another across time and space, across dimensions of the invisible and visible. The terms also invoke an image of the complex reticulations of a web or net that is all-encompassing and inescapable. An abiding love forces two beings to seek each other in life after life. Hate that originated generations ago manifests suddenly as ineluctable enmity between strangers. Such phenomena can be imagined as the mysterious results of innumerable rebirths in the karmic web of *samsara*. Indeed, the theme of predestined marriage is a very old Tang *chuanqi* motif and a prevalent theme in Ming-Qing literature.<sup>15</sup> While more research is required to determine when the idea of love karma first became widely used by Vietnamese writers, it is clearly present in the stories I examine in this essay.

## A Marriage Made by Fathers

I begin with the account of the young man Thiên Tích, taken from the compilation *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*. Little is known about the author, Nguyễn Dữ, besides that he was born in present-day Hải Dương Province and lived during the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup> After an analysis of the story, I will return to the issue of Nguyễn Dữ's historical context, of which much more is known.

The tale of Thiên Tích is a complex narrative featuring many standard themes and stock characters from the genre, such as a return-from-death narrative, the theme of transcendentals exiled from heaven, and a religious specialist doing spirit war with rogue demons. Nguyễn Dữ begins the tale

with a historical marker that locates the narrative in the thirteenth century. During the reign of Lý Huệ Tông (r. 1211–1224), Dương Đức Công served as an official of penal administration and was widely known for being just and fair in all cases brought before him. Unfortunately, at age fifty, still lacking an heir, he suddenly became ill and died. Yet after some time he returned to life and told of his experiences in the underworld. He said that some netherworld officials appeared and announced,

In the world above there is no person like him [Dương Đức Công]. He saved many lives. It is a pity that his lifespan is not extensive and he has no heir. If we do not send a memorial about this person then how can doing good [*vi thiện* 為善] be encouraged?<sup>17</sup>

陽間無此等人物，全活甚衆，所恨者享齡不遐，箕裘無繼，不表斯人為善何勸。

Forthwith, the officials informed the Thearch on High [Thượng Đế, *shang-di* 上帝] and ordered Dương Đức Công to rest at the east pavillion. After about half a day, they ordered Dương Đức Công to come in and they said to him,

For your entire life in the world you have been known for goodness [*thiện* 善]. The Thearch on High blesses you and grants you an extraordinary son, and your life will be extended by twenty-four years. You shall soon be able to return. Labor diligently in hidden virtue [*âm công*]. Do not say that the hidden underworld is unaware.<sup>18</sup>

子平生在世，素以善聞，上帝嘉汝，畀以奇男，延壽二紀，可早歸來，努力陰功，勿謂冥冥無知也。

He was then taken to be returned, and as he was leaving the gates he asked, “What ministry is this, who is the official, and what duties are discharged here?” The official said to him, “This is another office of Phong Đô 豐都,<sup>19</sup> one of twenty-four bureaus. People who have just died must pass through here. If they are in the Vermillion Register [*chu lục* 朱錄] then they can return to life, but if they have fallen into the Black Book [*mặc tịch* 墨籍] then they absolutely cannot leave. If you had not been so sincere in your enjoyment of goodness, then I’m afraid you would not be able to escape.”<sup>20</sup> Dương Đức Công clasped his hands and took leave. Then he awoke as if



from a dream. His wife said that at the end of the first watch of the night, she dreamed that a small star had descended into her womb, and she had felt a slight tremor.

Dương Đức Công's wife gave birth to a boy, and they named him Thiên Tích. He was by nature extremely fond of tea and prodigious in learning. However, after twenty-four years, without any signs of illness, Dương Đức Công died. After completing the required mourning rites for his father, Thiên Tích returned to his studies with diligence. But he remained destitute, and villagers looked down on him for his poverty. One day he lamented to himself, "My father could save the lives of thousands of people, but he could not rescue his one son from poverty. What is the benefit of doing good [*vi thiện* 為善] after all?"<sup>21</sup> Before Thiên Tích could finish uttering these words, a person wearing majestic robes and a cap appeared to him, calling himself Thạch Đại Phu. The stranger said that he had once been the beneficiary of the kindness of his father Dương Đức Công and that he has nothing for repayment, except his daughter, Hàn Than, who would be given to Thiên Tích in marriage. Then the mysterious person, just as suddenly, disappeared.

Soon after, a wealthy family surnamed Hoàng offered their daughter in marriage, and Thiên Tích was overjoyed. Yet Thiên Tích's newly wedded wife noticed that he would frequently sit and sigh over his books. So she inquired into his seeming despair, and he told her about the prediction he had received some time ago from the stranger surnamed Thạch: According to the stranger, Thiên Tích was destined to marry a young woman named Hàn Than surnamed Thạch, and he would eventually succeed in the exams. Yet, since he in fact had just married into the Hoàng family and his wife is not named Hàn Than, he certainly would not attain success in the exams. The prediction was not correct, he explained. Then Thiên Tích's wife told him that in the past her birth father, surnamed Thạch, was falsely accused of a crime and her entire family was executed, except for her, through the mercy of a man named Dương Đức Công. She was then adopted and raised by the Hoàng family. She revealed that her real name is Hàn Than, surnamed Thạch. Thiên Tích replied in astonishment, "I am indeed Dương Đức Công's son! Since ancient days, of husbands and wives, none were not [bound] by previous karmic affinity. Who says that the 'red thread' and 'red maple leaf' are mere empty words!"<sup>22</sup>

Though the full story continues with more fascinating twists and turns, I will stop here to examine the underlying themes of family karma. Throughout the narrative, the paths of the lives of Thiên Tích and Hàn Than were driven by forces and decisions outside their control. For Thiên Tích, it was Dương Đức Công's "hidden merit" that led to Thiên Tích's birth, and this very merit running out that led to the misfortune of Thiên Tích's poverty and orphaning. But it was also Dương Đức Công's merit that brought about Thiên Tích's fortune of being taken in by the wealthy Hoàng family. And ultimately, again, it was Dương Đức Công's merit that resulted in his son's happy marriage because the betrothal was recompense from Thạch Đại Phu for Dương Đức Công's virtue. When Thiên Tích and Hàn Than met, they were both orphans. Both their families had suffered great misfortune. The marriage was determined before they had even met. Their family bonds were tied by their fathers: Dương Đức Công in saving one innocent girl and Thạch Đại Phu's response in promising the betrothal of his daughter. This is an example of the idea that people can be tied by a prior karmic connection [*duyên*], symbolized by the red thread of matrimony. Indeed, the images of the red thread and red maple leaf that Thiên Tích invoked at his astonishment when he discovered the true identity of his wife brings a Confucian slant to *duyên*: the web of karmic connections that bound their destinies had been woven by their fathers.

There are two clear messages in the Thiên Tích story. First, the author is keen to affirm that there is indeed retribution for individual moral actions and this recompense impacts not just the individual but also his or her family and descendants. Second, heaven rewards good actions in the visible world to serve as moral instruction. Both messages are core elements of the Neo-Confucian ethos: the inextricability of the individual and the family lineage, and the idea that one's individual virtue leaves a legacy that can instruct and transform [*giáo hóa* 教化] descendants.<sup>23</sup> This Neo-Confucian moral paradigm serves as a narrative framework that affirms, but also subordinates, the Buddhist discourse of love karma. Put another way, Nguyễn Dữ conveys a Buddhist karma discourse using a distinctly Neo-Confucian voice.

### Nguyễn Dữ's Neo-Confucian Voice

I use the term "Neo-Confucian voice" to refer to the underlying discursive frame that structures the plot of the Thiên Tích tale and many other *truyện*

*kỳ* stories.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, Thiên Tích's marvelous *duyên*-connection to Hàn Than is but one of many eruptions of the extraordinary distributed throughout the narrative. The story, ultimately, charts the twists and turns of Thiên Tích's circuitous journey toward an understanding of heaven's justice, an insight which is made possible by encountering different marvels at key moments in the narrative. Thus, the story itself rests on distinctly Neo-Confucian cosmological, metaphysical, and moral assumptions, which allow for representing eruptions of the extraordinary as signs of heaven's active role in the Neo-Confucian social project.<sup>25</sup> Within this framework, heaven, earth, and humanity are the fundamental components of reality (cosmological structure), and they all come from *Đạo* [metaphysical origin] and should dwell in harmony, according to *lí* [universal principle]. When humans act with virtue [*đức* 德] or goodness [*thiện* 善], or with in-humaneness [*bất nhân* 不仁], heaven and earth respond [*cảm ứng* 感應] with blessings or disaster [*tai họa* 災禍].<sup>26</sup>

At the heart of this moral cosmos assumed by the Neo-Confucian discursive frame is a basic structural tension between goodness [*thiện*] and recompense [*báo* 報]. This tension is not meant to be resolved nor overcome. Rather, it is an axiomatic expression of a fundamental structure of reality, the correlative interaction between humans below and heaven above. This tension built into the Confucian cosmos reaches its breaking point when goodness is not overtly rewarded, indeed, when good meets with inexplicable misfortune while evil escapes punishment and attains fortune and blessing. Such a situation of "theodicy" could potentially undermine heaven's authority. This is precisely the issue that Thiên Tích raised at several points in the narrative. Finding himself orphaned and impoverished, in desperation he exclaimed, "My father could save the lives of thousands of people, but he could not rescue his one son from poverty. What is the benefit of doing good after all?"

This structural tension between human goodness and heaven's reward is deferred (not resolved) with the idea of hidden merit [*âm đức*], a term that is pervasive in *truyện kỳ* stories. In Nguyễn Dữ's tales, the concept of hidden merit has two meanings. First, it refers to merit derived from deeds done secretly, without expectation of reward nor social approbation. And second, it refers to merit that has not yet been rewarded, which accumulates

over time, almost imperceptibly. Hence, the idea of hidden merit ameliorates the uncertainty in the cosmic link between human goodness and heaven's recompense. It gives comfort when the harmony of the moral cosmos seems to approach collapse: reward is latent but will surely manifest, eventually, to the benefit of descendants. The recurring references to goodness [*thiện*] and hidden merit [*âm đức*] in *truyện kỳ* tales make sense within the Confucian discursive frame because they are essential components of a fundamentally Neo-Confucian cosmology, metaphysics, and moral calculus. This discursive framework constitutes what I call the Neo-Confucian voice. The Neo-Confucian voice may deploy Buddhist, Daoist, or any other type of discourse, metaphor, trope, imagery, or theme, but when such language is subordinated to the larger discursive frame, the voice remains Neo-Confucian.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is this Neo-Confucian voice that Nguyễn Dữ uses to deploy the Buddhist discourse of love karma in the *truyện kỳ* tales.

This Neo-Confucian voice is found not only in the stories of Nguyễn Dữ's *Transmissions of Marvels*, but also in the text's commentarial notes.<sup>28</sup> For example, in the story of Tù Thúc from the same compilation, a Confucian scholar married a female transcendent, returned to the human world for a brief visit, but tragically and unknowingly forfeited his home in paradise.<sup>29</sup> Appended to this tale is a brief note in which the commentator minimizes the story's extraordinary elements and emphasizes its moral lessons. He writes:

Though the merit is hidden [*âm đức*], the recompense certainly will be manifest [*dương báo*]. [This] is the constancy of principle. If later a gentleman were to look at [this story], then jot it down and edit it, while expunging the uncanny and retaining the ordinary, what would be the harm?

但有陰德者，必有陽報，亦理之常。後之君子倘目焉筆之削之捨其怪而取其常何害。<sup>30</sup>

The commentator takes an extraordinary story about a man marrying a female transcendent and transforms it into a didactic tale about hidden merit [*âm đức*] and manifest recompense [*dương báo*], a story about the “constancy of principle” [*lí chi thường* 理之常], which even a gentleman [*quân tử* 君子] could enjoy without harm. In making such an argument,

the commentator invokes the distinct discursive framework of the Neo-Confucian voice.

What are the historical roots of this Neo-Confucian voice found in sixteenth-century Vietnam when Nguyễn Dữ was writing? Indeed, why did he assume that his audience could understand it? Through what media did it spread and how pervasive was it among the literate class? Who invoked it and for what rhetorical, political, narrative, or polemical purposes? Did it ever impact non-literate, vernacular popular culture? These are all important questions, but space constraints prevent me from pursuing them here. For my purposes, it will suffice to briefly hint at the historical background of Nguyễn Dữ's Neo-Confucian voice found in *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*.

Over a hundred years before Nguyễn Dữ's *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*, the Ming had occupied Đại Việt for about twenty years, from 1407 to 1427. As a part of the Ming project of transforming the conquered population, several texts in Literary Sinitic were imported and distributed, including a book in ten volumes [*juan* 卷] called *Hidden Blessings of Doing Good* [*Vi Thiện Âm Chát, Weishan yinzhi* 為善陰鷲].<sup>31</sup> Composed by the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424), the book consists of 165 accounts of people he deemed virtuous and worthy of emulating. The book was distributed widely, in the tens of thousands within China as well as Korea.<sup>32</sup> The book was styled after the so-called morality books [*shanshu* 善書], which had first appeared in China in the eleventh and twelfth centuries among Buddhists and Daoists.<sup>33</sup> In the Emperor's hortatory preface, the Neo-Confucian voice resonates strongly with the discourse of hidden merit and heaven's recompense:

I consider heaven and humanity as [forming] one principle. *Classic of Documents* states, "Heaven furtively regulates the people below."<sup>34</sup> It is called "heaven's silent benefit" because it is done in the midst of hiddenness. When people are able to enjoy their gains and not know it to be thus [i.e., due to heaven], this is heaven's hidden blessings [*âm chát*].<sup>35</sup> When people treat each other with virtue and kindness, and neither wanting to be known nor having a blame-seeking mind, then this is also hidden blessings [*âm chát*]. Though certainly people's hidden blessings from heaven cannot be predicted, heaven's recompense is as responsive as an echo. Thus, I have widely

surveyed the people of antiquity, how they have commonly brought renown and eminence to themselves, how their glory flows to their descendants, and how the fragrant renown of their great achievements is passed down through the innumerable ages. Of those things that endure as long as heaven and earth, there is nothing that is not due to being brought about by hidden blessings [*âm chát*].

朕惟天人理一而已矣。書曰惟天陰騭下民。蓋謂天之所以默相保佑之於冥冥之中。俾得以享其利益有莫知其然此天之陰騭也。人之敷德施惠于人，不求其知而又責報之心者，亦曰陰騭。且人之陰騭固無預于天，而天之所以報之者，其應如響。嘗博觀古人，往往身致顯榮，慶流後裔，芳聲偉烈，傳之千萬世，與天地相為悠久者，未有不由乎陰騭之所致也。<sup>36</sup>

Several decades later, long after the expulsion of the Ming and the establishment of the Lê Dynasty, we can hear the Chinese emperor's Neo-Confucian voice echoing in a preface to the Vietnamese book *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* [*Lĩnh nam chích quái* 嶺南摭怪].<sup>37</sup> Vũ Quỳnh's preface, dated 1492, echoes the Yongle emperor's preface.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Vũ Quỳnh directly embeds the title of Yongle's book into a sentence in which he explains how the accounts of the uncanny [*quái*] in *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* can serve as model cases for moral instruction, thus equating *Gleanings* to a kind of morality book.

[The stories of] Chủ Đồng Tử's chance meeting with Mị Nương and Thôi Vỹ's encounter with his transcendent consort can be seen as [tales] of the hidden blessings of doing good [*vi thiện âm chát* 為善陰騭]... the affairs though marvelous do not go so far as to be fallacious. Though the writings are weird, they do not go so far as to be bewitching. Though they wander into the absurd they do not go straight into the preposterous. Moreover, there is evidence [traces] that seems reliable. [The stories are for] nothing but to encourage goodness [*thiện* 善] and to chastise evil [*ác* 惡],<sup>39</sup> to discard the fraudulent and maintain the authentic, and to stimulate habits and customs.

褚童子之邂逅媚娘，崔偉之遭逢仙偶，為善陰騭可見矣... 則事雖怪而不至於誕。文雖異而不至於妖。雖涉於荒唐不經，而踪跡猶有可據，無非勸善懲惡，去偽就真，以激勵風俗也。<sup>40</sup>

Thus, about seventy years after the Ming occupation, the Ming emperor's Neo-Confucian voice echoes, almost verbatim, a Vietnamese scholar in

a preface to a book focusing on tales of the spirits of the southern land, using again the Neo-Confucian moral discourse of goodness [*thiện*] and hidden blessings [*âm chát*]. Moreover, in this preface, Vũ Quỳnh is advancing the view that the accounts of Chử Đồng Tử marrying Tiên Dung [Mị Nương] and Thôi Vỹ receiving a wife from the transcendent Ma Cô (both events recorded in their respective stories in *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks*) should be seen as examples of heaven's recompense for virtue.<sup>41</sup> This is not an unreasonable interpretation on the part of Vũ Quỳnh, but this moral lesson is not directly indicated in the text of the stories.<sup>42</sup> Rather, the preface shows Vũ Quỳnh's agenda of depicting some of the stories in *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* as morality tales.

Nguyễn Dữ's Neo-Confucian voice is also shared by some of his literati contemporaries, as seen in the language of commemorative stele inscriptions. The extant stele inscriptions from sixteenth-century northern Vietnam indicate that many Buddhist and Daoist temples were repaired or constructed under the Mạc Dynasty. Moreover, Nam Nguyen notes that of the 148 extant stele inscriptions dating from the Mạc, all were composed by officials or village teachers.<sup>43</sup> In an excellent study of a small sample of these inscriptions, Nam Nguyen shows how the officials and local literati were often keen to assert their "Confucian" identities even as they composed celebratory inscriptions for Buddhist and Daoist temple constructions and repairs. Indeed, the recurring term "goodness" seen in the Mạc Dynasty inscriptions is a marker of the Neo-Confucian voice. For example, Nam Nguyen cites the stele inscription on the Statues of the Three Teachings composed between 1578 and 1585 by the famed literatus Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491–1585).<sup>44</sup> Here Nguyễn Bình Khiêm writes as an avowed "Confucian" [*nho* 儒] who, on this occasion of celebrating the Three Teachings, wants to accommodate Buddhism and Daoism by noting not only their differences but also their core similarity. It is this core similarity that he cites to justify his inscription. According to Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, Buddhists differ by their teachings on karmic retribution and Daoists differ by their teachings on "concentrating on pneuma."<sup>45</sup> All three, however, teach "goodness," their core similarity. In fact, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm engages in word play to highlight this central commonality of goodness [*thiện*]. He

invokes the second character of the name of the Bodhisattva Diệu Thiện, which is precisely *thiện*. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm writes,

Diệu Thiện got her name through nothing other than that which her mind and nature resided in.<sup>46</sup> The various Good Scholars actually can expand upon it and illuminate it. They uphold the Way of Goodness. Reverencing, maintaining, and upholding are explained through reading.<sup>47</sup> The root of the Teaching of Goodness is within the self and it is made evident among the people.<sup>48</sup> Thus, [its] merits and blessings flow without limit, and its karmic merit [*công đức*] is unfathomable.

夫妙善以得名無非心性中所寓，諸善士果能擴亮此，舉善道，遵守舉被解讀，善教本諸身以徵於人，則福慶流於無窮，其功德不可思議。<sup>49</sup>

In Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's view, though goodness is the core commonality among the three traditions, and though it can be found in the very "mind and nature" [*tâm tính* 心性] of the Bodhisattva Diệu Thiện, it is actually 果 found in the Good Scholars [*thiện sĩ* 善士], in the Teaching of Goodness [*thiện giáo* 善教], and ultimately in oneself. These consecutive allusions to Mencius emphasize the point that though goodness [*thiện*] is found in both the teachings of Buddha and Laozi, it is really the tradition of the Confucians [*nho* 儒] wherein one finds people who know how to expand, illuminate, teach, and explain goodness. Thus, an inscription that begins on a quasi-accommodationist tone ends with a strong Neo-Confucian voice that is articulated by means of the discursive framework of goodness [*thiện*] and its recompense.

Another example of a Neo-Confucian voice engaging in the discourse of goodness and Heaven's recompense is found in the stele inscription of Cam Lộ Temple 甘露寺碑, dated 1589, and composed by the literatus Dương Chuân.<sup>50</sup> He writes,

A family with accumulated goodness [*tích thiện* 積善] will certainly have an abundance of blessings.<sup>51</sup> As for a person with hidden merit [*âm công*], Heaven will certainly openly recompense [*dương báo*] him personally, his sons, and his grandsons. They will often receive official posts, high salaries, and status. As for the trustworthy and the baseless, being a Confucian [*nho* 儒], how can I discern it? Nevertheless, the gentleman [*quân tử*] takes joy in speaking of goodness and does not have the temerity to decline so clumsily. Thus, I inscribe this in stone for posterity.<sup>52</sup>



積善之家，必有餘慶。人有陰功，天必陽報于其身，于其子，于其孫。常逢官高祿位，信及其誣已。余儒也。焉能釋。然君子樂道善，不敢以淺拙辭，遂銘以壽于石。

In this inscription the literatus Dương Chuân advocates doing good because the resulting accumulated goodness [*tích thiện*] will eventually be recompensed in the world [*đương báo*] in the form of wealth and success for oneself and one's descendants. He expresses (feigns?) skepticism toward the veracity of extraordinary recompense,<sup>53</sup> but he rationalizes that such a view encourages goodness. Thus, the inscription itself becomes an artifact of Dương Chuân's goodness in so far as it may inspire others to goodness. If Dương Chuân's inscription sounds like the voice of Nguyễn Dữ when he told the story of Thiên Tích, or the voice of the Chinese Yongle emperor in his preface to the morality book, or the voice of Vũ Quỳnh in his preface to *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks*, or the voice of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's inscription, this is because, though these writers spanned the early fifteenth to the late sixteenth centuries, they all invoked a shared discursive frame in the repertoire of Neo-Confucian voices.<sup>54</sup> Nguyễn Dữ used the same Neo-Confucian voice to narrate the Buddhist discourse of karmic love connection, but in affirming karma he also subordinated it to the Confucian moral framework.

### A Spirit Wife Makes Claims on Her Human Husband

The story of the premature death of the official Hoàng Bình Chính is by the scholar-official Phạm Đình Hổ.<sup>55</sup> Phạm Đình Hổ was a prolific literatus who worked during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time of great political and social turmoil, including the tumultuous Tây Sơn uprising.<sup>56</sup> Phạm Đình Hổ was born in Hải Dương Province into a family of scholars, studied for the civil service exams, and attained the rank of *sinh đồ*.<sup>57</sup> He served briefly in an official capacity, but spent most of his life writing, collecting, and teaching.<sup>58</sup> Of the over twenty works attributed to Phạm Đình Hổ, two are of special importance for this investigation, *Jottings amid the Rain* and *Random Records of Great Upheavals*, both of which are compilations of local lore and legend, and written in the style of the "brush notes" [*bút kí, biji* 筆記].<sup>59</sup> One of the erudite scholars of his time, Phạm Đình Hổ collected stories about provincial notables and

accounts of local oddities, marvels, customs, and rites. He wrote with a distinct Confucian perspective, which we see in this particular tale about the early death of Hoàng Bình Chính.<sup>60</sup>

Phạm Đình Hồ writes that when Hoàng Bình Chính was at Hà Khẩu,<sup>61</sup> a beautiful woman [*mỹ nhân* 美人] often appeared in his dreams. He and she would comport themselves like husband and wife. Hoàng Bình Chính thought it was a demonic infestation but he experienced no illness, so he thought nothing of it. However, Hoàng Bình Chính's wife started getting sick, then recovering, repeatedly, without any apparent reason. He ordered a servant to go to a temple dedicated to Trần Hưng Đạo, make prayers, and take the temple's reed mat back so that his wife could lie on it.<sup>62</sup> Her illness improved slightly, but then worsened. That night the beautiful woman returned to Hoàng Bình Chính's dreams and said, "I am not a human specter [*nhân trụy* 人祟]. Who is Monarch Hưng Đạo to me? The reason [your wife's] illness subsided a little was because of [Hưng Đạo's] regal demeanor. Nevertheless, your wife will soon recover. Next month you will be called to serve in Hải Dương, and I request to accompany you to serve as your spouse."<sup>63</sup> The next day Hoàng Bình Chính's wife told her eldest son about her own dream of the beautiful woman, after which she asked for some rice porridge and recovered.

In the year Quý Mão (1783) Hoàng Bình Chính was ordered to serve as envoy to the Qing court. The night before his departure, his wife had a dream in which she saw the beautiful lady leaving her abode. The beautiful lady mounted a carriage and told her servant, "On this journey he will stay with me in the north and will not return to the south." That evening, Hoàng Bình Chính became extremely ill, losing consciousness for three nights. After he awoke, he described how the lady came into his dream, explaining his past life connection to her:

"In a past life you were a deity of Túc Duyên Shrine on Mount Biên at Động Đình Lake, and you still have a former karmic bond [*túc duyên* 宿緣] with me. After you descended into the world, I was very lonely and there was no one to support me. I even had to ask the servant girl to sell flowers to make funds for rouge and powder. Now that the affairs of the state can no longer be done, and your term of exile has been completed, how can you not come back [to where you were before]?"

[Hoàng Bình Chính replied,] “Due to the affairs of the sovereign I decline and beg to be able to fulfill [my] imperial command.”

The beautiful lady replied, “In that case, you have one more year. Since you have said you wish to fulfill the imperial command, I will not dare compel you to return. Tomorrow morning a person will come to offer some birds. Make a meal of them and you will recover.”<sup>64</sup>

公前身為洞庭湖扁山夙緣祠神，與妾有夙緣，降世以後妾幽居 獨支用弗給至命侍婢賣花以供脂粉，今國事不可為矣，謫期已滿，公闔返其初乎。某以王事為辭，請得復命。美人曰，如是又一年矣。然公既必欲復命，妾亦何敢強邀，來朝將有餽鳥者食之當自愈。

Hoàng Bình Chính then explained to his brother that he probably would not be able to return to the capital and Hoàng Bình Chính asked him to arrange all his affairs for him. He told his son to make an offering and prayers at Túc Duyên Shrine. The next day some villagers came to make offerings of teal ducks and yellow sparrows. Hoàng Bình Chính had them cooked, ate the meal, then recovered immediately.

In the year Giáp Thìn (1784), Hoàng Bình Chính began his journey home and was just passing Mount Biền when suddenly waves arose, and a fierce wind blew. The boat could not anchor, and when a sudden, violent wind broke the sail post, the boat became stuck on the sands. Though it was dangerous, he was eventually able to cross. He changed boats and got as far as Lạng Sơn Citadel. That night the lady appeared in his dream to congratulate him, saying, “The affairs of the state are complete.” Hoàng Bình Chính recovered his strength and requested to fulfill the imperial charge. That night he became violently ill but then recovered. On the twenty-ninth day of the first lunar month in the year Ất Tỵ (1785) he arrived at the capital, but by early morning he was dead.<sup>65</sup>

In this narrative, as the plot proceeds through a series of inexplicable illnesses, strange dreams, and magical cures, it becomes increasingly clear that Hoàng Bình Chính is doomed, even as he negotiated with the spirit world for short, temporary reprieves that could only delay the inevitable. His early death was unavoidable because the prior karmic connection [*túc duyên*] that bound Hoàng Bình Chính to his former spirit wife remained strong and crossed over into this world, usurping the marriage bonds of

this life. His spirit wife could cause illnesses, manifest apparitions and miracles, enter uninvited into dreams, and foresee his official assignments, first to Hải Dương, then to the Qing court.

In this tale, the discourse of *duyên* is used to rehabilitate the reputation of a Confucian official. From one perspective, this is a simple tale of an official's sudden death upon returning home after a long journey as envoy to the Qing court. But such a simple tale would have done nothing for the reputation of the Hoàng family. On the other hand, the story as told by Phạm Đình Hổ, who reported that he heard it from Hoàng Bình Chính's eldest son, has a clear Confucian agenda. The narrative paints Hoàng as a faithful official who risked his life to complete his imperial command, a duty that was obstructed by an extraordinary power. The sudden and inexplicable illnesses, the strange dreams, and the storms and mishaps suffered on the journey were not mere bad luck, but they were the work of a spirit haunting. Thus, the discourse of *duyên* ties Hoàng Bình Chính to a spirit cult located at a renowned site in the northern dominion, Động Đình Lake, which by that time was well known in Chinese and Vietnamese mythic lore.<sup>66</sup> Phạm Đình Hổ concludes the story by commenting,

I once heard [this story] from the eldest son of Hoàng [Bình Chính]. Many from the former generations of our country were spirits of the inner land [*nội địa* 內地].<sup>67</sup> And many were residents of Động Đình, such as found in the account of Nguyễn Trọng Vỹ 阮仲瑋, which I have recorded in *Random Records of Great Upheavals*. And taken with [this] account of Hoàng [Bình Chính] and his prior life karmic connection, one sees that these are all very uncanny.<sup>68</sup>

## A Love Transcendent

In the story “The Marvelous Encounter at Jasper Creek” [*Bích cầu kỳ ngộ* 碧溝奇遇] by the renowned woman writer Đoàn Thị Điểm,<sup>69</sup> we see the concept of *duyên* embedded within a Daoist soteriological and cosmological framework.<sup>70</sup> In this story, *duyên* is still a kind of “social karma,” but the writer uses poetry to focus on the intense emotional pain felt when the *duyên* bond is disrupted by separation. Đoàn Thị Điểm analogizes the experience of unfulfilled *duyên*—that is, the yearning for the distant beloved—to the quest for Daoist transcendence, the search for ascension

into heaven and release from worldly bonds. Indeed, the stock theme of the marvelous encounter [*kỳ ngộ*], in which a man has a tryst with a female transcendent, turns into a tale in which the female protagonist has an assertive role in the narrative.<sup>71</sup>

In the story, the student Trần Tú Uyên was born into a successful family. His father “had an abundance of hidden merit” [*pha hữu âm đức* 頗有陰德], and Tú Uyên was born late in his father’s life. It was said that Tú Uyên had a divine nature, was very intelligent, and by one year of age already enjoyed reading. Thus, he was considered a prodigy [*kỳ đồng* 奇童]. At fifteen he became an orphan and impoverished, but his love of studying remained.

In the Giáp Thìn year (1484) a Buddhist nun organized a festival at Jade Flagon Temple.<sup>72</sup> Tú Uyên arrived dressed in scholarly garb. As he rested beneath the shade of a tree, a crimson leaf floated toward him.<sup>73</sup> He took it and noticed vermilion writing. Though the script was unclear, he could make out four lines:

The willows are verdant and the peach [blossoms] rosy in the third month.

The green phoenix soars and descends by the side of Brahma blossoms.

On Indigo Bridge and by the roads, people resemble ants.

Who knows whether divine transcedents may be right before your eyes?<sup>74</sup>

柳綠桃紅三月天 *Liễu lục đào hồng tam nguyệt thiên*

青鸞飛下梵花邊 *Thanh loan phi hạ phạm hoa biên*

藍橋路外人如蟻 *Lam kiều lộ ngoại nhân như nghĩ*

誰識神仙在眼前 *Thùy thức thần tiên tại nhãn tiền*

These couplets create a highly erotic and flirtatious air, particularly through the pairing of the colors green and red [*lục* 綠, *hồng* 紅], which resonates with the trope of the mating dance of the red-feathered male phoenix [*phượng/phụng* 鳳] and the green-feathered female phoenix [*thanh loan* 青鸞].<sup>75</sup> Đoàn Thị Điểm composed the couplets to create a visceral romantic picture: On the festival of the third day of the third month, masses of people (like ants) go on outings to scenic places. Young men mingle with

young maidens (who are like willows just turned verdant, peach blossoms just turned rosy). They have flirtatious encounters at places of romantic rendezvous, such as the Indigo Bridge of Tang *chuanqi* lore.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Đoàn Thị Điểm evokes suspense with the image of the green female phoenix descending amid the “Brahma blossoms,” here referring to the Buddhist nuns among the crowd. Then Đoàn Thị Điểm, in the voice of the hidden female transcendent seducing the young male student, asks in an urgent tone (“right before your eyes”): “Perhaps, today?” In response to this uncanny incident, Tú Uyên prayed, saying, “If the Buddha is efficacious then let him take command of this incident and turn this crimson leaf into a go-between.”<sup>77</sup>

Miraculously, at that very moment he noticed a perfume fragrance and saw a group of five or six people dressed in red robes leaving the temple. Among them was an extraordinarily beautiful maiden, age eighteen or nineteen. He spoke to her, and they traded flirtatious and poetic lines, a learned and Buddhist-flavored repartee. Yet suddenly she declared, “The form before your eyes is originally empty,”<sup>78</sup> and then disappeared. Immediately, Tú Uyên said to himself, “Was it a Buddha, a ghost, or perhaps a dream?” That night he was unable to sleep, so he lit a lamp and composed ten poems. The poems mixed images of fleeting time, impermanence, and lovelorn pining with the theme of karma. For example, in the fifth poem, Tú Uyên said, “How difficult it is to encounter a divine beauty in human life. How can one trade gold for a past-life karmic connection?”<sup>79</sup> In the seventh poem, Tú Uyên wrote, “If even in this floating life one can [satisfy] a past-life vow, then this oath of karmic connection will not be betrayed in this present life.”<sup>80</sup>

Tú Uyên then visited White Horse Temple, seeking an oracular dream.<sup>81</sup> In his dream that night, an old man told him to find a painter’s stall at Eastern Crossing [Đông Tân 東津] the next morning. When he arrived at Eastern Crossing, he did not see a painter’s stall, but instead encountered an old man who gave him a scroll, on which was painted a figure of a maiden that looked exactly like the person whom he had met earlier. He returned home and hung the scroll in his study. Every day, before taking his meal, he laid out two settings and prayed to the image in the painting.<sup>82</sup> Once he even reproached the maiden in the picture for abandoning him.

He composed many poems to express his lovesickness. Later, upon returning home from his studies, he found an array of fine food and rare delicacies. He could not explain this, as he had locked the door upon leaving in the morning and nothing was out of the ordinary in his home, except that in the picture, the maiden's hairpin was slightly askew. This happened every day thereafter; arriving home in the afternoon he found a meal prepared. Finally, one day he returned home earlier than usual and was astonished to see the maiden stepping out of the picture, dressed plainly, going to the kitchen.<sup>83</sup> He rushed in and confronted her. She revealed her true identity and said,

I am a transcendent maiden from the Southern Marchmount [Nam Nhạc],<sup>84</sup> and I am named Hà Giáng Kiều.<sup>85</sup> It is because of a former karmic cause [*nặng nhân* 曩因] that we have met each other. Now I have deigned to come to the world of dust to take up these former karmic bonds, to bind myself to you again, and to complete this unfinished debt.<sup>86</sup>

妾乃南嶽仙姝，號霞絳嬌是也。曩因相遇，屈致塵，事係夙緣，今復與君再結，以完未了之債。

She then explained that the Perfected Lord [Chân Quân 真君] of White Horse Temple (where he was granted the oracular dream) had worried that Tú Uyên would fall into worldly karmic bonds [*trần duyên* 塵緣] so the deity had urged Giáng Kiều to be reborn [*đầu thai* 投胎] as a human. But she resisted because she knew that she would have had to forfeit her divine nature ["jade substance," *ngọc chất* 玉質], and there would have been a vast age difference between them. Thus, she decided to manifest in the picture to keep her Perfected Body [*chân thân* 真身]. After explaining this, Giáng Kiều suggested they have a banquet to celebrate their union. A host of transcendents arrived, appearing resplendent and beautiful.

When the banquet ended, the transcendents returned to heaven, and the couple retired to their wedding chamber. Giáng Kiều said to Tú Uyên, "From this evening on, this karmic connection of five hundred years with you is settled."<sup>87</sup> They lived together happily, enjoying each other's company and composing poems. One day he encouraged her to compose a poem. She demurred at first, but then produced an extensive poem of sixty rhymes. She spoke of a heartfelt "fondness of three lifetimes" [*tam*

*sinh hoài* 三生懷], a “feeling so deep that even the deities are moved,” “a worldly vow that penetrates to heaven.” And she marveled at how even a “scroll painting can convey the crimson thread” that connects lovers through time and space.<sup>88</sup>

Three years passed quickly. Unfortunately, because of some prior karmic conditions, Tú Uyên became overly fond of alcohol. And though Giáng Kiêu pleaded and remonstrated, it was to no avail. On one occasion he returned home drunk and wanted to go out again. She tried to stop him, but he berated her and even beat her. Unable to abide his behavior, she finally announced that she would leave, saying, “I have served you for years, [but] our worldly karmic bonds have ended, so I must henceforth go back.”<sup>89</sup> Later, Tú Uyên awakened from his drunken stupor and slowly realized that his wife would never return. He became greatly aggrieved and regretful. His tears were like rain and he could neither eat nor sleep for a month. He gazed at the painting of the maiden, and it seemed to him that her visage had turned cold and indifferent.

After some time, a friend came to visit and encouraged Tú Uyên to go back to White Horse Temple to make an offering and pray for a numinous response [*linh ứng* 靈應] from the temple deity. He went and performed ritual supplication. Several days passed yet nothing happened. He became determined to die by suicide, thinking to himself, “How much sweeter it is to see each other in death than be separated in life.”<sup>90</sup> But at that very moment Giáng Kiêu appeared with her attendants and told him that she had only left to encourage him to change his ways. They reconciled with heartfelt verses.

After about a year she bore him a son. Tú Uyên continued to study diligently day and night. Giáng Kiêu began to lament human life, how fleeting it is and the vanity of seeking fame and fortune. She said,

A “fragrant reputation” may be heavily valued, but worldly ways are contemptible. Ultimately, a human life between heaven and earth is but a temporary aggregation of the four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Above there is no trunk and below there are no roots. Time races by, and life and death take their turns, [and they are as evanescent] as foam on water or dew on grass. They suddenly turn into nothing. Do you not see that since vast antiquity what kind of stability rivers and mountains have, what



kind of permanence riches and renown have? . . . A hundred springs and autumns of riches and renown in the world of dust is but one day and night of leisure in the realm of transcendents. People of the world do not know that the body is but a dream, that which is regarded as the “I” is but a lump of meat and a bag of skin . . . I wish that you would think well on it and [seek] release from this earthly prison.<sup>91</sup>

芳名雖重，塵俗可輕，大抵人生天地間，只是地水火風四大，假合而成，上不樹提下無根著，光陰催過，生復死還，音如水泡草露，倏忽便無。君不見萬古以來，江山有何常住 . . . 雖在塵世百春秋之富貴，乃仙鄉一晝夜之清閑。世人不知色身是夢，把肉塊皮袋認作是我 . . . 願君熟慮，以脫塵籠。

Tú Uyên then asked about the difficulty of seeking transcendence. Giáng Kiếu assured him that with her help it would not be overly difficult, and moreover, Tú Uyên’s name was already inscribed in the Register of Transcendents!<sup>92</sup> Tú Uyên then sought the arts of transcendence and received the “secret explications of perfection” [*chân bí quyết* 真秘訣]. After some time, he was able to “penetrate the mysteries and enter into the sublime, subdue dragons and quell tigers” [*thông huyền nhập diệu, hàng long phục hổ* 通玄入妙, 降龍伏虎]. One day a formation of coiled, marvelous clouds [*kỳ vân* 奇雲] appeared in the middle of the courtyard, out of which emerged a white crane with a book in its beak. Tú Uyên, Giáng Kiếu, and their son went astride and disappeared.<sup>93</sup>

The poetic repartee between Tú Uyên and Giáng Kiếu echoes the poetry exchanges characteristic of the scholar-beauty romance genre [*tài tử giai nhân* 才子佳人]. In Chinese literature, poetic repartee often represents an idealized and elite practice of social exchange between friends of corresponding class, learning, and temperament. Poetic repartee was romanticized as a way to discover a worthy friend or confidant, to form a bond with one “who knows me” [*tri kỷ* 知己]. In this story the would-be-lovers began their flirtations with erudite discourses on the impermanence of life, the nature of emptiness and form [*sắc không* 色空]. This however does not lead to renunciation and quietism, nor the recognition of the futility of love and desire. Rather, the talk of emptiness and evanescence enflamed their passions even more. Thus, while the images, tropes, and metaphors of the poetic language in this tale can be labeled “Buddhist,” Đoàn Thị Điểm’s

placement of them in the arc of this essentially Daoist narrative shows how she appropriated the language of *duyên* to portray a worldly love that can lead to transcendent love. In this story, *duyên* is a bond between lovers that can be transformed into a means of escaping the ordinary world of impermanence and ascending to the world of transcendents. This is not an orthodox Buddhist view of karmic connection.

Consider, for example, a line from Tú Uyên's poem written after the initial encounter at the Buddhist temple. He returned to his home and exclaimed in astonishment, "How difficult it is to encounter a divine beauty in human life! How can one trade gold for a past-life karmic connection!"<sup>94</sup> Whereas in the orthodox Buddhist context the flaw of the karmic connection is that it keeps one bound to the endless cycle of rebirth and re-dying [*samsāra*, *luân hồi*], in this story, the *duyên* of love is celebrated as more valuable and rarer than gold itself. Similarly, whereas in orthodox Buddhist soteriology (especially of the Mahāyāna variety) the vow [*nguyện* 願] is a critical practice that is said to generate the bodhicitta [*bồ đề tâm* 菩提心], which propels the practitioner through endless lifetimes of higher stages of self-cultivation [*tu thân* 修身], in this story, typical of the romance genre, the vow is understood as the lover's oath of constancy and loyalty.

The lover's vow is conflated with the Bodhisattva vow, and whereas the latter leads to Buddhahood, the former leads to a greater bond with the beloved, which is often spoken in terms of karmic debt. For example, when Giáng Kiều walked out of the portrait and reunited with Tú Uyên she explained why she, a transcendent, had decided to descend into the world, "It is because of a former karmic cause [*năng nhân* 曩因] that we have met each other. Now I have deigned to come to the world of dust to take up these former karmic bonds, to bind myself to you again, and to complete this unfinished debt."<sup>95</sup> After his drunken assault on her, she said to him before parting, "I have served you for years, [but] our worldly karmic bonds have ended, so I must hence forth go back."<sup>96</sup> Whereas in Buddhist soteriology, the resolution of a karmic debt is considered a success, here it is a setback, a cause of their separation, and the beginning of his descent into despair and thoughts of suicide. Instead of a vow leading to a gradual diminution of karmic debt, an oath made in love leads to stronger karmic bonds and greater debt, which in this story is celebrated.

Here, Buddhist language appears in poetry and narrative without the context of a Buddhist soteriology. Nevertheless, it is not mere secular love poetry in Buddhist guise. It is Daoist love poetry in Buddhist guise. In Buddhism, love and desire keep one bound to the world, but in this story, if the object of love is a transcendent, then love can also lead to escape from the world. Đoàn Thị Điểm uses the image of karmic connection not only as a potent symbol for the mutual yearning of lovers separated by vast time and space, but she also places it within a Daoist soteriological framework. Karmic connection becomes the lifeline that Giáng Kiều used to rescue Tú Uyên out of the world of transience.

Đoàn Thị Điểm seems to be saying that special karmic bonds survive particular deaths, enduring through countless lives and deaths, whereas “worldly karma” is temporary and fleeting. Worldly karma is made in life, then disperses upon death. This is the type of karma to which Giáng Kiều was referring when she left Tú Uyên and returned to heaven. And yet, some karmic bonds are rare, strong enough to survive numerous lifetimes (e.g., “five hundred years,” “three lifetimes,” etc.). Indeed, Giáng Kiều exclaimed that their bonds transcended the world. After their reconciliation she spoke about “feelings so strong that even the deities are moved,” and “a worldly vow that penetrates to heaven.” She knew that she was a transcendent and he was mortal, and that normally they were bound to separate again, but she confidently exclaimed that their bond was now “settled” [*đính hī* 訂矣]. She knew something that Tú Uyên did not: he was bound for transcendence, and they would ascend to heaven as a family.

Thus, whereas the two stories of *duyên* analyzed above speak in distinctive Confucian voices, in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s tale, one finds a clear Daoist framing of the *duyên* discourse. Đoàn Thị Điểm describes the twists and turns of Tú Uyên and Giáng Kiều’s love: their initial meeting, separation, and mutual pining; the consummation of their bonds of love; and then their tragic separation, final reunion, and eventual ascent to heaven with their son. Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story works within a larger narrative arc that depends on the distinction between earthly *duyên* [*trần duyên* 塵緣], which is temporary, and transcendent *duyên*, which can lead not only to escape from this very world but also an eternal matrimonial bliss that can endure for the figurative “five hundred years.” Moreover, in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s

story, the Confucian ideal of attaining wealth and honor through exam success is subverted and the Confucian skepticism toward “divine transcendents” is mocked,<sup>97</sup> while the soteriology of transcendence is celebrated. It is indeed the female protagonist who successfully “seduces” the dutiful Confucian student away from his proper goal, truly a tragic ending in Confucian eyes.

Aside from Đoàn Thị Điểm’s surviving literary works, the few sources on her life do not shed light on her use of the Daoist voice.<sup>98</sup> To my knowledge, Đoàn Thị Điểm was not a member of any known Daoist community nor did she engage in any Daoist practices. During her life, Đoàn Thị Điểm’s literary talents were widely recognized. She tutored palace women for a time before leaving to start a private school. She persistently refused marriage proposals, helped support her brother’s wife and children after his early death, and finally married at age thirty-seven. Extraordinary for her time, Đoàn Thị Điểm was independent, deeply learned, and actively engaged in the male-dominated literary world.

Her story collection, comprised of prose and poetry written in Literary Sinitic prose, is entitled *New Genealogy Based on Transmissions of Marvels* [*Truyện kỳ tân phả* 傳奇新譜] and consists of six tales, four of which focus on female protagonists. In two of the stories, the protagonists are female transcendents. In one particularly long story, she narrates the adventures and love life of a Daoist female transcendent, Princess Liễu Hạnh.<sup>99</sup> Liễu Hạnh was exiled from heaven and born to a human family. She married and had one child but died young. When she returned to heaven, she yearned for a reunion with her earthly family. Yet soon after reuniting, she left them and began to roam freely in the world (as transcendents do). She had many adventures, literary exploits, and poetic repartees with literati gentlemen, often besting them with her sophisticated word play and abstruse and erudite allusions. She returned to heaven but descended once more to have a final tryst with her former husband, who had then reincarnated. Finally, she left him, wandered in the world, and eventually became recognized as a deity [*thần*] because of her numinous responsiveness [*linh ứng*].

Overall, as Olga Dror has noted, Princess Liễu Hạnh undermined and escaped Confucian male authority.<sup>100</sup> Her love life and adventures in the

world of men celebrate female agency. Similarly, strong female agency is seen in the Tú Uyên tale. It was, after all, the transcendent Giáng Kiều who initiated the encounter at Jasper Creek, she who traveled through a magical painting into the earthly world, she who led Tú Uyên away from the Confucian path, and she who taught him the techniques of attaining transcendence.<sup>101</sup> In short, in these two tales, Đoàn Thị Điểm used Daoist voices to imagine alternative visions of reality in which women, albeit extraordinary women, can have agency and initiative in love and literary expression.

### Love and Home

The tragic story of the Confucian official Từ Thúc marrying a transcendent then unwittingly losing his place in paradise has a long history in Vietnamese popular culture.<sup>102</sup> Nguyễn Dữ's version in *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected* is the locus classicus. The story shares many similarities with Đoàn Thị Điểm's tale of Tú Uyên and Giáng Kiều, especially the theme of a young Confucian student having an unexpected, marvelous encounter [*kỳ ngộ*] with a female transcendent and forming a karmic connection [*duyên*] with her. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the two stories, centrally, the fact that though both male protagonists eventually married the female transcendent, in one story, Tú Uyên gained transcendence, while in the other, Từ Thúc lost both his beloved and paradise. Indeed, in the story of Từ Thúc, the narrative emphasizes the vast cosmological and metaphysical chasms between this world and the world of transcedents. The moral of the story is clear: though the karmic bonds of love can reach across these immense chasms, they can be broken too.

In Nguyễn Dữ's story, the protagonist Từ Thúc lived during the Trần Dynasty. In the ninth year of the Quang Thái 光泰 reign period (1396) there was a flower-viewing festival at a temple. A beautiful young maiden, around fifteen or sixteen years of age, was holding a flower blossom when she accidentally snapped it. A caretaker arrested her, and by evening no one had come to claim her. Từ Thúc took pity and used his overcoat to ransom her. Later, near Thần Phù Estuary, he saw a five-colored cloud swirling, forming a lotus blossom, and rising out of the water. As he approached, he

found a beautiful mountain. He came ashore and composed a poem to celebrate the scenery. When he found a cave opening, he girded his garment and entered the cave, trodding not more than a few steps when the cave opening closed. It became dark and he squeezed through a narrow curving passage. As he crawled up, slowly the passage widened. He ascended an incline, and finally, saw sunlight. All around were resplendent palaces, with flowers and foliage made of precious gems. Suddenly two maidens in dark robes appeared, greeted him, then went back to report his arrival, later returning to escort him. He followed them, passed through crimson-colored gates, and found himself before a transcendent lady robed in white. She beckoned him to sit on a smaller divan and said,

Your original fondness for the marvelous has become an obsession, and now the pleasure of this trip should suffice for your entire life. But do you recall the [previous] meeting of karmic connection?<sup>103</sup>

卿本好奇成癖，茲遊快樂，足慰平生，夤緣契遇，獨不記之乎

He humbly expressed his astonishment and requested to be told more. She smiled and explained that this was Mount Fu Lai, the sixth of the thirty-six grotto heavens.<sup>104</sup> The transcendent lady said,

“I am Lady Wei, a terrestrial transcendent of the Southern Marchmount.<sup>105</sup> Because of your eminent righteousness and providing [relief for] someone’s hardship, I have invited you here.” Then she looked at a servant girl and said, “Tell the maiden to come.” Tù Thúc glanced and saw that it was the same person who had earlier snapped the [branch of the] blossom. The transcendent lady pointed at the maiden and said, “This is my daughter Giáng Hương. She was endangered while viewing blossoms and was rescued by you. The significance [of this] is not forgotten. I want you [and her] to be bound in matrimony, as a small recompense for your immeasurable kindness.”<sup>106</sup>

妾即南岳地仙魏夫人也。以卿高義能給人之困，故屈邀至此。目侍兒喚阿娘來。徐竊睨之，乃前折花人。仙娥指謂曰此我兒絳香，昨有看花之厄，蒙君救援，此意不忘，欲結佳婚，少報不費之惠。

The mortal Tù Thúc and the transcendent Giáng Hương were married, and the next day a great banquet was held. Many transcendents arrived to congratulate the blessed pair and many rare delicacies were served on

extravagantly decorated wares. A transcendent addressed Tù Thúc and said,

We have wandered here for only some eighty thousand years and the Eastern Sea has already turned to dust three times.<sup>107</sup> Now you have journeyed afar and have not considered the boundaries between the world of dust [and the transcendent world] as insurmountable. And you have not thought of betraying the marriage bonds of three lifetimes. Therefore, do not say that talk about divine transcendents is nonsense.<sup>108</sup>

我曹遊此僅八萬年，南溟已三揚塵矣。今郎君遠涉，不隔兩塵之限，三生香火，想亦不負，勿謂神仙之說為荒唐也。

The banquet continued as a dance troupe performed and Giáng Hương served a heavenly beverage. A transcendent joked that he thought Jade Maidens were not supposed to have husbands. Someone in a dark robe replied, “The pairing of the princess [of our] household is certainly due to some former karmic causes.”<sup>109</sup> A discussion ensued on how it could be possible that transcendents could be free from the world of dust and desire below but still have spouses. After a while the Transcendent Lady responded, “I have heard that one can encounter transcendents, but it is difficult to pray [for them]. [Even] if the Đạo is not cultivated, it comes of its own accord. With regard to rare and marvelous meetings [between humans and transcendents] what age does not have one?”<sup>110</sup> Giáng Hương told Tù Thúc that she is not like other transcendents who have spouses. She explained that her “seven essences have not been purified and her one hundred faculties are easily aroused. Though she wanders in the Purple Palace, she is bound to the karmic connections of the world of dust. Though her body abides in the Jade Tower, her mind-heart is muddied by the world.”<sup>111</sup> Then, to celebrate the occasion, Tù Thúc inscribed ten poems on a blank folding screen.

After one year, as Tù Thúc began pining for home, he asked Giáng Hương if he could temporarily return home. She would not agree at first. He begged for permission to return temporarily, to bid farewell to family and friends, and to arrange his affairs before returning to the land of transcendents and staying with her forever. Giáng Hương finally relented and told her mother of Tù Thúc’s request, who then allowed it. She

commanded a cloud chariot to take Tù Thúc. Upon parting, Giáng Hương gave Tù Thúc a letter and said to him, “On another day when you read this, do not forget our former affections.”<sup>112</sup> Then she wept and bid farewell. In a twinkling he found himself home. Though the mountains and streams remained the same, everything else had changed. He went to elderly villagers to inquire whether they knew of anyone with his name and surname. They all said that they had heard of a person named Tù Thúc, but that he had disappeared into the mountains over eighty years ago. Then he learned that it was currently the fifth year of the Diên Ninh reign period of the Lê Dynasty (1458).<sup>113</sup> Tù Thúc was disappointed and wanted to fly away on the cloud chariot. He opened the letter that Giáng Hương had given him, which read, “Two sweethearts became bound in the midst of clouds, but now the former karmic connections have broken. Oh, to visit the transcendent mountain upon the seas, a later meeting there shall never be.”<sup>114</sup> Tù Thúc then went into the mountains, and no one knows what became of him.<sup>115</sup>

This story illustrates the basic Daoist proposition that transcendents and mortals are cosmologically and metaphysically incompatible and are of fundamentally different substances [*chất*]. Entrance into the world of transcendents is only attainable by those permitted and blessed. Even then, they must travel beyond the seas, search out magic mountains on islands, and be tested once more by navigating through dark, narrow, and winding cavern passages. In short, they must go to the outer reaches of this world of light, into a liminal world of darkness, and back out into another parallel world of preternatural brilliance and jeweled splendence. Past the boundaries of space, they enter a time unlike worldly time, where one year equals decades of human years. Indeed, one of the transcendents at the wedding banquet commented, “We have wandered here for only some eighty thousand years and the Eastern Sea has already turned to dust three times.”

And yet, by means of some “marvelous encounter” [*kỳ ngộ*], when a transcendent deigns to manifest in our world, mortal and transcendent can meet temporarily. Moreover, if the mortal responds correctly, the transcendent can bestow various boons, such as fortune telling, miracle drugs, talismans or spells, esoteric instructions, and, in this story, even the gift of transcendence through marriage. But the gift of transcendence bestowed through marriage does not guarantee permanent transcendence. In this



narrative, it is notable that Tù Thúc's transcendence was gained through marriage and not through techniques of self-cultivation, for example. This means that in some sense Tù Thúc remained a mortal, a mere trespasser in the realm of the transcendentals. And thus, his love bond [*duyên*] with Giáng Hương did not guarantee that he could remain in the realm of transcendentals. Ultimately, the story's tragic plot raises the question, Where does Tù Thúc really belong?

Tù Thúc and Giáng Hương had a marvelous encounter [*kỳ ngộ*], and they consummated that initial joining of karmic connections with "marriage bonds of three-lifetimes." The marriage was blessed by Giáng Kiều's mother, Lady Wei, and was celebrated by various transcendentals attending the wedding banquet. But this did not end well because when karmic bonds bind mortal and transcendent, both are made into liminal beings. Both become interlopers in each other's respective home realms. For example, consider the structural symmetry of the story. At the beginning of the narrative, Tù Thúc used his overcoat to ransom a transcendent who was detained in the world of mortals. He enabled her return to her home. Later, at the end of the narrative, she released him from her world and enabled him to return to his home. This suggests that neither was really ready to live permanently in each other's realms. They were indeed trespassers; they did not belong in the places they found themselves.

This tale is a double tragedy: having lost both homes, Tù Thúc was truly homeless and belonged nowhere; he went into the mountain and was never seen again. In sum, the need for romantic love and the need for home are sometimes in conflict. In this tragic story, Nguyễn Dữ emphasizes the fragility of the love connection and the conflict of romantic love with home by emphasizing the fundamental incommensurability of the two lovers. A twist of fate, a serendipitous *duyên*, brought the lovers together, but *duyên* alone could not overcome that incommensurability. In this story, Tù Thúc's tragic end pivots on Daoist cosmological and soteriological assumptions: the worlds of mortals and transcendentals are fundamentally different in time and space, and the basic substance of mortals and transcendentals are fundamentally incompatible. Though the author Nguyễn Dữ speaks with a pronounced Neo-Confucian voice in other tales, in this tale the voice he adopts, or mediates, is distinctively Daoist.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have offered a way of analyzing premodern Vietnamese tale literature written in Literary Sinitic. Building on the methodological insights of scholars of China who have used tale literature to examine social, cultural, and religious history, such as Xiaofei Kang, Manling Luo, Sarah M. Allen, Glen Dudbridge, Robert Hymes, Robert F. Campany, Edward Davis, and others, I have shifted focus away from the fictionality of a single story or the ingenuity of a single author. I have provided close readings that attend to the intertextual resonances among several stories from multiple story collections to examine how such intertextual discourses reflect a social and cultural context that makes certain recurring themes and motifs not just meaningful, but also compelling and widespread, a part of the shared cultural repertoire.

Through close readings of four tales, I have shown how a cluster of key images and metaphors related to the concept of karmic connection [*duyên*] were used to describe bonds of deep love—as they are imagined persisting through time and space, across boundaries of life and death, heaven and earth. This discourse of karmic love connection was embedded in different discursive frames and thus yielded different types of voices, Neo-Confucian and Daoist. In the latter case, the speakers-writers were not Daoist themselves, but they used the Buddhist discourse of love karma, by way of Daoist voices, for their own narrative purposes. Thus, I claim that (a) in traditional Vietnam, the karma discourse was a part of a larger, shared common repertoire of religious discourses that was not exclusive to Buddhist voices; (b) this common repertoire of karma discourses consisted of metaphors and images that were assembled using different narrative and discursive frames, for different ideological or narrative purposes, and to yield different types of voices; and (c) these different types of voices were produced by speakers/writers according to their own agenda. In short, the study of Vietnamese narratives of marvels, the uncanny, and the numinous can help scholars understand different types of religious phenomena in premodern Vietnamese culture and society, but how these diverse texts reflect multiple discourses and voices and how they are constructed by various speakers/writers must be considered.

This study raises a host of important questions that can guide future research. Scholars are coming to realize that how “Buddhism,”

“Confucianism,” and “Daoism” are defined in traditional Vietnam depends largely on how “religion” is defined. For example, it is clear that scholars should avoid essentialist constructions built on metaphorical language that perpetuate the view that religious traditions existed as monolithic, clearly bounded entities acting in the world as autonomous agents.<sup>116</sup> Rather, religious traditions consisted of fluid, loosely bounded communities that had common repertoires of practices, which were combined into different assemblages, at different times, and for different purposes, sometimes religious, political, polemical, or ideological.<sup>117</sup> As some scholars have noted, “religion” does not refer to a natural category in the world. Nevertheless, the category can be used to refer to specific forms of collective human activity.<sup>118</sup> Religions are communities (real and imagined) that agree to a common transcendent authority concerning ultimate values, the nature of reality, and the efficacy of practices. Moreover, even within such communities, there will be variations with regard to the moral implications of these authoritative visions of the good and the real, as well as differences as to how to assemble various elements within a shared repertoire of discourses and practices. These differences will likely correlate to “subject positions” (defined with respect to voluntary and involuntary acquiescence to authority and power).<sup>119</sup> For example, different types of Buddhist positionalities (i.e., royal patron, lay devotee, lay ritual client, monastic administrator, monastic ritual expert, rural monk or nun, etc.) entail different assemblages of Buddhist practices and discursive resources, just as different types of Daoist positionalities (i.e., lay ritual specialist, lay client, etc.) or Confucian positionalities (i.e., government administrator, local teacher, aspiring examination candidate, etc.) also require combining elements of sets of discourses and practices into different assemblages, dependent on the specific ritual occasion or practical needs.

Thus, to what extent Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist voices found in tale literature may correlate to different types of social positionalities and communities of practice is an important and complex question, raising a host of interconnected issues and problems, all of which must await another occasion. Though much more work is needed, I hope this essay charts a way forward. This approach and method can be used to track the circulation of other religious discourses and themes across diverse discursive frames, such

as discourses on reincarnation, discourses on karmic vengeance, the return-from-death theme, the shared Confucian ethic of filial piety [*hiếu* 孝], the Daoist theme of the “banished transcendent” [*trích tiên* 謫仙], and much more. As the focus is expanded to include more types of discourses and themes found in tale literature, we will better understand how discourse and voice relate to social positionalities and practices.

For example, in typical narratives of karmic vengeance, an aggrieved [*oán hận* 怨恨] soul seeks retribution [*báo thù* 報仇] for a perceived injustice by pursuing an antagonist lifetime after lifetime.<sup>120</sup> Within a Confucian framework, such tales were used to explain sudden evil or calamity befalling an otherwise upright and incorruptible person. By attributing a calamity to a past-life debt of vengeance, heaven’s justice can be reaffirmed, the sense of “theodicy” minimized, and the Confucian political project of governing through virtue [*đức* 德] upheld. Within a Buddhist framework, such tales of aggrieved souls were used as didactic narratives to propound the truth of the doctrines of karmic retribution and reincarnation. In partisan hands, such tales were used to assert the Buddhist claim to exclusive possession of the rituals and material paraphernalia that can exorcise malevolent forces without resorting to enmity, thus promising an end to the cycle of violence and final deliverance for the aggrieved soul. Within a Daoist framework, such tales of vengeful spirits were used to illustrate the awesome powers of the talismans [*phù* 符], rites, and incantations [*chú* 咒] that are the special preserve of Daoist ritual specialists. In short, not only were shared repertoires of discourses embedded in contrasting discursive frames, as I have shown, these diverse discursive frames themselves correlated to diverse and competing ritual frames that presupposed ideological difference and contrasting notions of numinous power.

I suspect the more closely we examine tale literature, the clearer it will become that shared repertoires of religious discourses were sometimes reassembled within different discursive frameworks, by certain voices, to make competing claims of exclusive access to rituals of numinous efficacy [*linh* 靈] or competing claims of moral authority [*đức* 德]. Such voices, which reflected certain positionalities within the organized and textualized traditions of the three religions, often created a high ground

for themselves by inventing a common enemy to attack or appropriate, namely, the much maligned and so-called “licentious cults” [*dâm từ* 淫祠] of local religion.

Thus, understanding the patterns of correlations and competition among communities of practice and their social positionalities—and being able to describe the self-differentiating assemblages of discourses and practices that were built from elements of shared cultural repertoires—is essential to comprehending the historical phenomena that we label “Buddhist,” “Daoist,” “Confucian,” or “local religion” without reifying or essentializing these categories. I am confident that with close readings of tale literature and careful analysis of the ritual and social setting of stele inscriptions [*bi ký* 碑記], we can begin to make more nuanced distinctions among these different patterns of shifting, interconnected, and contrasting correlations.<sup>121</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

*This essay examines Vietnamese tales of marvels [kỳ] and the uncanny [quái] composed in Literary Sinitic and offers close readings of four narratives through focusing on the theme of predestined love [duyên]. The essay shows that the discourse of duyên was embedded in both Confucian and Daoist voices and that this reflected a common cultural repertoire in which the discourse of social karma was a part of a shared moral metaphysics. The essay offers a theory and methodology for examining tales of marvels and the uncanny, arguing that heretofore scholars have read around the depictions of religious phenomena, rather than by means of them.*

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, Daoism, transmission of marvels, *truyện kỳ*, love karma, *duyên*

## Notes

1. These include but are not limited to *Compendium on Mystic Numina of the Viet Realm* [Việt điện u linh tập 越甸幽靈集] by Lý Tế Xuyên (fl. fourteenth century); *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* [Linh nam chích quái 嶺南撫怪] by Trần Thế Pháp (fl. fourteenth century); *Dream Records of a Southern Man* [Nam ông mộng lục 南翁夢錄] by Hồ Nguyên Trừng (fl. fifteenth century); *Records at Hand on Ô Châu* [Ô Châu cận lục 烏州近錄] by Dương Văn An (1514–1591); *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected* [Truyền kỳ mạn lục] by Nguyễn Dữ (fl. sixteenth century); *New Genealogy Based on Transmissions of Marvels* [Truyền kỳ tân phả 傳奇新譜] by Đoàn Thị Điểm (1705–1748); *Jottings amid the Rain* [Vũ trung tùy bút] by Phạm Đình Hổ (1768–1839); *Random Records of Great Upheavals* [Tang thương ngẫu lục 桑滄偶錄] by Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án (1770–1815); *Quick Notes in Respite* [Công dư tiệp ký 公餘捷記] by Vũ Phương Đê (1698–1761); and *Lan Tri's Record of Things Seen and Heard* [Lan Trì kiến văn lục 蘭池見聞錄] by Vũ Trinh (1759–1828). For a more comprehensive list, see Trần Nghĩa, “Tiểu thuyết chữ Hán Việt Nam, danh mục và phân loại” [Vietnamese Fiction in Chinese: Titles and Classification], *Tạp Chí Hán Nôm* [Hán Nôm Journal] 4, no. 33 (1997): 485–495.
2. In Anglophone and Francophone studies of the Vietnamese phenomenon of *tiên* [*xian*], scholars have translated this term variously as “immortal,” “fairy,” or “genie.” Following the growing consensus in Daoist studies, I translate *tiên* as “transcendent.” Robert F. Campany has argued for the term “transcendent” over “immortal.” First, many other spirit beings can be described as “immortal.” Second, immortality is not the distinguishing feature of the *xian* as much as the fact that *xian* figures “neither escape, change, nor depart to an utterly distinct place; they remain in a temporal and spatial matrix, although they gain extraordinary ways of maneuvering in that matrix.” See Robert F. Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4–5n4. Moreover, as Stephen R. Bokenkamp argues, the term “immortal” presupposes a fundamental ontology that is not found in Daoism. Bokenkamp explains, “There is thus not a single chasm between mortals and immortals, but a chain of being, extending from non-sentient forms of life that also experience growth and decay to the highest reaches of the empyrean.” See Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 21–24. For an explanation of the sino-graph for *xian*, see Edward H. Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time: The Taoist Poetry of Ts'ao T'ang* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 21.

3. *Tinh/jing* can also be translated as “seed” or “germ.” When a *jing* takes human or animal form, it is a sprite or specter. See Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 85–86. For example, on peony and chrysanthemum sprites in *Strange Tales from Make-do Studio* [*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異], see Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 82. On the tale of Huangying, see Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 114–118. On flower sprites appearing as female lovers, see Daniel Hsieh, *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction* (New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), 120–123. Also, Nguyễn Dữ’s *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected* contains a story in which student Hà Nhân one day unexpectedly met two maidens, one surnamed Willow [Liễu] and the other surnamed Peach [Đào]. They claimed that, as servant girls, ever since the death of their master, they had been in hiding. The two then seduced Hà Nhân. The three had a torrid affair. However, Hà Nhân’s parents arranged a marriage for him, though he still yearned for the maidens and visited them one final time. Later, he is told that the house he had visited to see them had been abandoned for some twenty years. Hà Nhân then realized that the maidens were the essences [*tin*h] of precisely the willow and peach trees in the garden. For a discussion of this story, see Kyung Jeon Hye, *Nghiên cứu so sánh tiểu thuyết truyền kỳ Hàn Quốc, Trung Quốc, Việt Nam* [Comparative Research of Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese Transmission of Marvels Fiction] (Hà Nội: Đại Học Quốc Gia Hà Nội, 2004), 73–85.
4. On the cosmology of realms and dimensions found in the Vietnamese *truyện kỳ* stories, see Cuong T. Mai, “How Not to Become a Ghost: Tales of Female Suicide Martyrs in Sixteenth-Century Vietnamese Transmission of Marvels (*truyện kỳ*),” in *The Routledge Handbook on Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Candi Cann (New York: Routledge, 2018), 243–244.
5. Traditional Chinese and Vietnamese religions share the concept of *linh* [*lin*g 靈]. The term is difficult to translate because it has a wide semantic range and can be used to refer to a variety of religious phenomena, particularly a certain quality of power manifest in the world that has non-visible origins and which can be attributed to deities, ancestors, spirits of the deceased, essences [*tin*h] of vegetation or minerals (such as flowers or rocks), various animals, or even certain features of landscapes such as distinctive trees or mountains. On this term, Đỗ Thiện has rightly stated, “an understanding of *linh* power is therefore indispensable in examining popular religion in

- Vietnam . . .” See Đỗ Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 9, 16. See also Keith W. Taylor, “Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam,” in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 1986), 139–176; Keith W. Taylor, “Notes on the Viet Dien U Linh Tap,” *Vietnam Forum* 8 (1986): 26–59; Georges Condominas, “Vietnamese Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1997), 256–260; Leopold M. Cadière, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Viêtnameiens* [Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese], 3 vols. (Sài Gòn: d’Impressions d’Extrême-orient, 1955–1958); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Religion in Vietnam: A World of Gods and Spirits,” *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture, and Society* (New York: Asia Society, 1985), 22–39. A plethora of secondary literature is available on the concept of *ling* in Chinese religions, but scholars of Vietnam have yet to exploit it for comparative purposes. See, for example, Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 19; von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, 5; Stephen F. Teiser, “The Spirits of Chinese Religion,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 34–35; Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 78–79. On *linh/ling* as “magical efficacy,” see Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 64–66; in terms of conceptions of divinity, see Randall L. Nadeau, “Divinity,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall L. Nadeau (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 222, 274, 330, 374; and in relation to conceptions of ritual efficacy, see Joshua Capitanio, “Religious Ritual,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall L. Nadeau (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 309–333.
6. Rather than provide full translations of each of the lengthy narratives, in this essay I will provide paraphrases and translations of only select passages (all of which are mine). My translations are based on the modern editions of the Chinese texts found in Chan Hing-ho 陳慶浩, Cheng A-tsai 鄭阿財, and Trần Nghĩa 陳義, eds., *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san* 越南漢文小說叢刊 [Collectanea of Vietnamese Han and Nôm Fiction], series 1 and 2 (Paris and Taipei: École Française d’Extrême-Orient and Student Book Co., 1992). See *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (series 1, vol. 1), *Truyện kỳ tân phả* (series 1, vol. 2), and *Vũ trung tùy bút* (series 2, vol. 5). I have also consulted the modern French translation of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* by Nguyễn Trần Huân, *Vaste recueil de légendes merveilleuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962). I have found modern Vietnamese translations helpful, but also at times misleading. I have consulted



translations in the four-volume *Tổng tập tiểu thuyết chữ Hán Việt Nam* [Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Fiction in Chinese], ed. Trần Nghĩa, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 1997). For the modern Vietnamese translations of the tales I analyze here, see, respectively, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, vol. 1, trans. Ngô Văn Triện, 185–320; *Truyện kỳ tân phá*, vol. 1, trans. Ngô Lập Chi and Trần Văn Giáp, 337–451; and *Vũ trung tùy bút*, vol. 2, trans. Nguyễn Hữu Tiến, 5–138.

7. Some of these texts, or portions of them, have long been studied, particularly by European, North American, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese scholars. For example, parts of *Compendium on Mystic Numina of the Viet Realm* have been well mined. See K. Taylor, “Authority and Legitimacy” and “Notes on the Viet Dien U Linh Tap”; Olga Dor, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007); Liam C. Kelley, “Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta,” in *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier Over Two Millennia*, ed. James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 78–105. Also, parts of *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* have been well studied; see Liam C. Kelley, “The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (2012): 87–130; and Liam C. Kelley, “Inventing Traditions in Fifteenth-Century Vietnam,” in *Imperial China and its Southern Neighbours*, ed. Liam C. Kelley and Victor H. Mair (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), 161–193. For some scholarly analysis of *Dream Records of a Southern Man*, see Kathleen Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 71–76; John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly, and the Ming (1371–1421)* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1985); Nguyễn Đăng Na, “*Nam Ông Mộng Lục*: Vấn đề dịch bản, văn bản, tác giả và tác phẩm” [*Dream Records of a Southern Man*: Issues of Translation, Text, Author, and Work], *Tap Chí Văn Học* [Journal of Literature] 7 (1998): 41–58. On *Jottings amid the Rain*, see George E. Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006). Various excerpts from these tale compilations have been translated. See George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Moreover, some later *truyện kỳ* collections have received attention from historians, such as *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*, on which see Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018),

and for research on *New Genealogy Based on Transmissions of Marvels*, see especially Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*. The most comprehensive study in English of the earliest-known Vietnamese *truyện kỳ* tradition remains Nam Nguyen's dissertation, "Writing as Response and Translation: *Jiandeng xinhua* and the Evolution of the *chuanqi* Genre in East Asia, Particularly Vietnam," (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2005). Jeon Hye Kyung's comparative study of Nguyễn Dữ's compilation in light of some Chinese and Korean *chuanqi* texts is also important; see Kyung Jeon Hye, *Nghiên cứu so sánh*; and Kyung Jeon Hye, "Ý nghĩa văn học sử của tiểu thuyết truyền kỳ Hàn-Trung-Việt" [The Significance of the Literary History of Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese Transmission of Marvels Fiction], *Nghiên Cứu Văn Học* [Literary Studies] 12 (2006): 59–74. For references to *truyện kỳ* from the view of the history of Vietnamese literature, see Peter Kornicki, "Sino-Vietnamese Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature*, ed. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-Yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 568–577; Emanuel Pastreich, "The Reception of Chinese Literature in Vietnam," in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1096–1104; Bao Yan, "The Influence of Chinese Fiction on Vietnamese Literature," in *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17th–20th Centuries)*, ed. Claudine Salmon (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2013), 163–195; Maurice Durand, *L'univers des truyen nôm* [The Universe of Nôm Tales] (Hà Nội: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1997); Đinh Phan Cẩm Vân, "Cái 'kì' trong tiểu thuyết truyền kỳ" [The "Marvelous" in Transmission of Marvels Fiction], *Tạp Chí Văn Học* [Journal of Literature] 10 (2000): 48–53; and Trần Nghĩa, "Tiểu thuyết chữ Hán Việt Nam." Scholars of religion, in general, have neglected these texts, with the significant exception of some pioneering works, such as Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người, và đất Việt* [The Spirits, People, and Land of Việt] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1989); Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Tín ngưỡng thành hoàng Việt Nam* [Tutelary-Spirit Beliefs in Vietnam] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1996); and Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo* [The Vietnamese and Daoism] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2003). Thus, overall, these tale compilations have not been studied to shed light on the cultural constructions of the marvelous and uncanny per se, that is, as reflections of religious phenomena. The majority of scholarship has raised questions primarily about historical issues external to the internal discourses of the texts, thus reading around the discourses on the marvelous and uncanny, rather than by means of them.

8. If we understand either *zhiguai* or *chuanqi* as proto-fiction or fiction in the modern sense, then this would force a vast diversity of texts into an

anachronistic category introduced only quite recently by early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals. On other hand, if we understand these texts through the Han bibliographical category of *xiaoshuo*, as defined by Ban Gu (32–92 CE), for example, then they are mere “minor tales,” defined primarily by what they are not (e.g., official historical narrative). For a trenchant refutation of the idea of early-medieval *zhiguai* as fiction, see Robert F. Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 156–159; and more recently, Zhang Zhenjun, *Buddhism and Tales of the Supernatural in Early Medieval China: A Study of Liu Yiqing’s (403–444) Youming lu* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). See also Carlos Yu-Kai Lin, “The Rise of Xiaoshuo as a Literary Concept: Lu Sun and the Question of ‘Fiction’ in Chinese Literature,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 8, no. 4 (2014): 631–651; Robert E. Hegel, “Traditional Chinese Fiction: The State of the Field,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (1994): 394–426; Ming Dong Gu, *Chinese Theories of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative System* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 23–25; Rania Huntington, “The Supernatural,” in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 110–131. On the problem of defining medieval *chuanqi*, see Manling Luo, *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 8–9; Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 5–11. In short, neither uses of the category *xiaoshuo*/fiction to analyze and interpret *zhiguai* or *chuanqi* suffice for the study of cultural, religious, or social history. Indeed, Glen Dudbridge has noted the problem of reading the phenomena described in tale literature merely as “literary tropes, not as actions of the living society which engendered them.” This approach is especially seen in scholarship that is “locked in a discourse of fact and fiction.” Thus, Dudbridge understands Tang stories not so much as fiction but as a type of “literature of record.” See Glen Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T’ang China: A Reading of Tai Fu’s Kuang-i chi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 16. See also Glen Dudbridge, “Tang Sources for the Study of Religious Culture: Problems and Procedures,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 12 (2001): 148.

9. Mark Muelenbeld has argued that the categories of fiction and fantasy are “poor analytical premises” for understanding the religion and society of late-imperial China depicted in the *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 [Canonization of the Gods] (early seventeenth century). This vernacular novel reflects some ritual practices, specifically late-imperial Daoist Thunder Rites [*leifa* 雷法], and their social context. Muelenbeld argues that “the spirits, specters, monsters, goblins, ghosts, and all other so-called supernatural phenomena are in fact

entirely understandable within the discourse of ritual professionals during the late imperial age.” See Mark Muelenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Chinese Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015), 8. Indeed, scholars of Chinese religions have long questioned the theoretical distinctions between fiction, fantasy, drama, entertainment, ritual, and religion, especially considering how they are all informed by a shared cultural imaginary and set of social practices. See, for example, Richard G. Wang, “An Erotic Immortal: The Double Desire in a Ming Novella,” in *Literature, Religion, and East/West Comparison: Essays in Honor of Anthony C. Yu*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 144–161; David Johnson, ed., *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies Publications, 1995); Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, eds., *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996); and Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Asia Center, 1998). For methodological and theoretical insights, scholars of Vietnam would do well to explore the wealth of sinological research on the religious context of early medieval *zhiguai* and the rich store of scholarship on the relationship between tale literature, Buddhist and Daoist hagiography, and social practices. See, for example, Terry F. Kleeman, *A God’s Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); Company, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*; and Robert F. Company, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009). Moreover, new theoretical horizons have been opened up by scholars who have examined tale literature to explore interactions among religious specialists, Daoists, and local cults of the Tang-Song. See Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001); Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Alister D. Ingliss, *Hong Mai’s Record of the Listener and Its Song Dynasty Context* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*; Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society*.

10. In this essay I follow Manling Luo’s approach to *chuanqi*, focusing on tale literature as “a mode of discourse—encompassing casual conversations, narrative poems, and prose accounts—and as a medium of social culture formation, rather than as simply a conventional literary prose genre.” See Luo, *Literati Storytelling*, 10. Also, I find helpful Sarah M. Allen’s shifting focus

- away from fictionality and toward seeing the tale as social practice and exchange. Allen has noted that for the Tang tales, “the dominant rhetoric is that of supplementation rather than of creation.” See Allen, *Shifting Stories*, 9.
11. Robert F. Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012), 29.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, 68. The concept of “family karma” in Chinese religions is complex and appears in a variety of guises, depending on context. On the Buddhist version, see Stephen F. Teiser’s discussion of the Buddhist intervention into the Chinese cult of the dead through the Ghost Festival and the tradition of the Ten Kings of purgatory. See Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994); and Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). See also Kenneth S. Ch’en’s discussion of the Buddhist appropriation of filial piety in *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), chapter 6. For Daoist considerations of family karma, and ways of overcoming it, see especially Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Simple Twists of Fate: The Daoist Body and Its Ming,” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 151–152; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Franciscus Verellen, *Imperiled Destinies: The Daoist Quest for Deliverance in Medieval China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), 68–69. Both Buddhist and Daoist versions appropriate certain discourses and practices from Confucianism and popular religion.
  14. Đỗ Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism*, 145.
  15. For example, the late tenth-century collection, *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* [*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記], contains fifteen volumes [*juan* 卷] on the topic of predestination [*dingshu* 定數], and of these, two volumes focus on stories of predestined marriage [*hunyun* 婚姻]. See Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 [Extensive Records from the Taiping Era], 10 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961).
  16. Nam Nguyen has offered a tentative outline of Nguyễn Dữ’s life, suggesting that he was born ca. 1496, resigned from office before Mạc Đăng Dung’s usurpation of the throne in 1527, and died before 1547. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 319. Jeon Hye Kyung has argued that the compilation was completed sometime between 1520 and 1530. See Kyung, *Nghiên cứu so sánh*, 51–54. Moreover, there is some debate regarding how to

- transliterate the author's given name, whether it should be Dữ, Tự, Dư, or Dự. Nguyễn Khắc Kham makes a compelling case for Tự in "Questions about a Sixteenth-Century Vietnamese Collection of Tales in Classical Chinese," *The Vietnam Forum* 9 (1987): 23–36. Nevertheless, in this essay I will use Dữ out of convenience, since it is the most common transliteration to date among scholars and lay people. Also, tradition has long suggested that Nguyễn Dữ studied under the renowned scholar Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491–1585), with Phùng Khắc Khoan (1528–1613) as a classmate. However, there is reason to doubt both details, according to Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, "Đoán định lại thân thế Nguyễn Dữ và thời điểm sáng tác *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*" [Re-evaluating the Life of Nguyễn Dữ and When He Composed *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*], *Nghiên Cứu Văn Học* [Literary Studies] 1 (2006): 123–134.
17. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 88.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Located beneath a large mountain that sits in the northern reaches of the northern sea, Fengdu is one of several places identified in Chinese religion as the abode of the dead. (The others are the Yellow Springs and Mount Tai.) It is ruled by a vast underworld bureaucracy filled with tribunals, officials, guards, and "earth prisons" [*địa ngục* 地獄]. On the earth prisons of Fengdu, see Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 33–37; and Verellen, *Imperiled Destinies*, 26–27. And on late-imperial pictorial representations of Fengdu's offices, bureaus, tribunals, and so on, see Susan Shih-shan Huang, *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 123–129.
  20. 此即酆都別署，二十四司之一也。凡人初死，必經于此，由朱錄尚有生還，陷墨籍斷無出理，非公誠於樂善，恐亦無由得脫也。Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 88.
  21. 我父能活千人死，不能救一子貧，為善者，果何益哉。Ibid., 89.
  22. 吾即德公兒也，古來伉儷莫匪夙緣，孰謂赤繩，紅葉，果虛語哉。Ibid., 89. The symbol of the red thread used to represent fated marriage has its locus classicus in the Tang-period tale "Matrimony Inn" [*Dinghun dian* 定婚店]. In this tale, the young man Wei Gu had a chance meeting with the deity of matrimony and was told he will not marry until fourteen years hence because the girl he is destined to marry was then only three years old. The deity declared that Wei Gu can do nothing to prevent the marriage because the two are predestined and the deity himself had bound them by a red thread. See William Nienhauser, "T'ang Tale," in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 588.

Note that the fated red thread is a bond of marriage, not necessarily affection. Thus, the symbol of the red maple leaf adds an additional dimension. The red maple leaf symbol is best known from the Song-period tale “Record of Drifting Red” [*Liu hong ji* 流紅記]. In this tale, student Yu You chanced by the imperial canal and saw a floating red maple leaf upon which is written a beautiful poem of sadness and longing. He surmised that a palace lady composed it and sent a poem downstream into the palace in reply. Much later, he discovered that his new wife is precisely the palace lady who had written the poem and that she had also serendipitously received his response. The two were amazed at their fated marriage. Thus, the symbol of the red maple leaf also connotes an emotional dimension, which is not found in the symbol of the red thread. For a translation of the tale, see Zheng Zhenjun and Jing Wang, *Song Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2017), 33–42; and for Tang precedents to the story, see Hsieh, *Love and Women*, 80–83.

23. On the relationship between the correlative cosmology and self-cultivation in Neo-Confucianism, and the role therein of moral transformation by means of teaching [*jiaohua* 教化], see David S. Nivison, “A Neo-Confucian Visionary: Ou-yang Hsiu,” in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. David S. Nivison and A.F. Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 97–132.
24. “Neo-Confucianism” is not a neutral term nor a wholly accurate one according to Hoyt C. Tillman, “A New Direction in Confucian Scholarship: Approaches to Examining the Differences Between Neo-Confucianism and Daoxue,” *Philosophy East and West* 42, no. 3 (1992): 455–474. See also Benjamin A. Elman, “Rethinking ‘Confucianism’ and ‘Neo-Confucianism’ in Modern Chinese History,” in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph series, 2001), 526, 530. Created by outsiders, the term “Neo-Confucianism” lacks historical nuance, often invokes a hidden teleology, and tends to elide the internal disagreements and contradictions among a cluster of distinct intellectual movements that have been labeled, alternately, Study of the Dao [*Daoxue* 道學], Study of Principle [*Lixue* 理學], or Study of the Heart-Mind [*Xinxue* 心學]. See for example, John Makeham, ed., *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), xi. By contrast, some scholars have argued that, at minimum, these different tendencies (whether they are called lineages, fellowships, or schools) nevertheless did share a host of distinct values, problems, assumptions, practices, and goals, as well as a set of authoritative texts and commentaries, such that the term “Neo-Confucianism” can still be used as a broad generalization to refer to a “cumulative

- intellectual tradition.” See Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 78–80, 86, 108. On “Neo-Confucianism” as a set of “family resemblances,” see Makeham, *Dao Companion*, x–xiii. See also Wm. Theodore de Bary, “The Uses of Neo-Confucianism: A Response to Professor Tillman,” *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993): 541–555. Agreeing with these latter views, I see the different sub-traditions of Neo-Confucianism in China, emerging roughly from the Song and enduring into the Qing, as “intellectual streams” that assembled variations of a shared repertoire of discourses, values, practices, and key concepts, such as principle [*li* 理], nature [*xing* 性], vitality [*qi* 氣], innate goodness [*shan* 善], and mind [*xin* 心]. See, Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 78; and Makeham, *Dao Companion*, x–xv, xxv–xxx.
25. In this essay, I use the term “Neo-Confucianism” to refer to two intertwined but distinct phenomena: (1) the philosophical tradition and examination curricula built on the Cheng-Zhu synthesis, which became the basis of the state-sponsored orthodoxy of the early Ming, and (2) the broader culture of popular encyclopedia, compendia, moral ledgers, educational primers, pictorial books, family instructions and ritual guides, manuals of self-improvement known as morality books, and the general culture of literary production at large. On the former, see Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 95–97, 106, 145–150, 226–228; and Peter Ditmanson, “The Yongle Reign and the Transformation of *Daoxue*,” *Ming Studies* 39 (1998): 7–31. On the latter phenomena of Neo-Confucian influences on the broader popular and elite cultures, see especially, Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 241–246, 268; Anne E. McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998), 59–60; Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū* 中国善書の研究 [Research on Chinese Morality Books] (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1960); Sakai Tadao, “Confucianism and Popular Educational Works,” in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 331–366; Cynthia J. Brokaw, “Yüan Huang (1533–1606) and the Ledgers of Merit and Demerit,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 1 (1987): 137–195; Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Cynthia J. Brokaw, “Supernatural Retribution and Human Destiny,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 423–436; Cynthia J. Brokaw, “Publishing, Society and Culture in Pre-modern China: The Evolution of Print Culture,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005): 135–165; Daria Berg, *Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China 1580–1700* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 152–153; Kang Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox*:



*Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 85–85; Patricia B. Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). The elite and examination-based form of Neo-Confucianism was transmitted to Đại Việt by way of the “Ming expansionism” of the early fifteenth century and subsequently consolidated by the Lê Dynasty, particularly during the Hồng Đức reign of Lê Thánh Tông, as John K. Whitmore and others have shown. See A.B. Woodside, “Early Ming Expansionism (1406–1427): China’s Abortive Conquest of Vietnam,” *Papers on China* 16–17 (1962–1963): 1–37; John K. Whitmore, “Chiaochih and Neo-Confucianism: The Ming Attempt to Transform Vietnam,” *Ming Studies* 4 (1977): 51–91; John K. Whitmore, “Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1984): 296–306; Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly, and the Ming*; John K. Whitmore, “Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet, c. 1430 – c. 1840,” in *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830*, ed. Victor Lieberman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 221–243; John K. Whitmore, “The Two Great Campaigns of the Hongduc Era (1470–97) in Dai Viet,” *South East Asia Research* 12, no. 1 (2004): 119–136; John K. Whitmore, “Paperwork: The Rise of the New Literati and Ministerial Power and the Effort toward Legibility in Đại Việt,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 104–125; Li Tana, “The Ming Factor and the Emergence of the Việt in the 15th Century,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 83–103; Yu Insun, “Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên: A Comparison of Their Perception of Vietnamese History,” in *Việt Nam: Borderless Histories*, ed. Nhung T. Tran and Anthony J.S. Reid (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 45–71; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Giáo dục và khoa cử Nho học thời Lê ở Việt Nam qua tài liệu Hán Nôm* [Confucian Education and Exams during the Lê in Vietnam through Hán and Nôm Documents] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2009). The influx and diffusion of cultural forms of Neo-Confucianism into Đại Việt have received comparatively less attention, in my view, but Nhung T. Tran has shed much light on the impact of Neo-Confucianism at the local and popular levels, especially as seen in the state’s efforts at instituting a “gender system” of family laws and sexual morality. See N. Tran, *Familial Properties*. On gender and Neo-Confucianism in Vietnam, see also Yu Insun, “The Equal Division of Inheritance among Sons and Daughters in Lê Society: A Revisit,” *VNU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no. 5 (2019): 531–538; Anh Q. Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteenth-*

- Century Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–7, 114–122; Miyazawa Chihiro, “Re-thinking Vietnamese Women’s Property Rights and the Role of Ancestor Worship in Pre-Modern Society: Beyond Dichotomies of Equality versus Non-equality and Bilateral and Non-bilateral,” in *Weaving Women’s Spheres in Vietnam: The Agency of Women in Family, Religion, and Community*, ed. Kato Atsufumi and Kristen W. Endres (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 57–80; Philippe Papin, “Saving for the Soul: Women, Pious Donation and Village Economy in Early Modern Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015): 82–102; Peter Kornicki and Nguyễn Thị Oanh, “The Lesser Learning for Women and Other Texts for Vietnamese Women: A Bibliographical and Comparative Study,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 147–169. The question of how continuing developments in Chinese Neo-Confucianism from the late Ming into the Qing might have influenced elite and popular culture in Vietnam—especially from the Mạc Dynasty, to the period of the Trịnh-Nguyễn civil wars, and into the Nguyễn consolidation—is extremely complex and lies outside the scope of this essay.
26. For a succinct summary of the Neo-Confucian religious cosmology, see Keith N. Knapp, “The Confucian Tradition in China,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall L. Nadeau (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 162–167. For the case of Vietnam, John K. Whitmore has noted, “The literati championed proper ritual and moral action, which would influence the correlative forces binding Heaven, Earth, and Man.” See Whitmore, “Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet,” 232.
  27. On the practice of self-observation in the Neo-Confucian self-cultivation tradition, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought,” in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. Theodore DeBary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 145–247.
  28. Nam Nguyen has argued that the commentarial notes should be attributed to Nguyễn Dữ, see “Writing as Response and Translation,” 369, 545n72.
  29. This tale will be discussed and analyzed in detail later in the essay.
  30. Following Nam Nguyen’s translation, with modifications, see “Writing as Response and Translation,” 373; Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 210.
  31. The book *Hidden Blessings of Doing Good* was one of several texts that the Ming promulgated in occupied Đại Việt beginning in 1419. The other texts included the *Five Classics*, *Four Books*, *Great Compendium on Nature and Principle*, and *Realization of Filial Obedience*. See Whitmore, “Chiao-chih and Neo-Confucianism,” 69–70; Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly, and the Ming*, 123; Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 570. This promulgation of Neo-Confucian texts should be seen in light of the Ming’s earlier

- confiscation and destruction of local texts, on which see, Alexander Ong Eng Ann, “Contextualizing the Book-Burning Episode during the Ming Invasion and Occupation of Vietnam,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 154–165; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 179–181; C. Michele Thompson, *Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2015), 18; Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, 69, 74. Nam Nguyen provides a list of the titles of some of the lost books, relying on Phan Huy Chú. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 213–215.
32. Published by imperial order in 1409. Young Kyun Oh notes that six hundred copies of this text were sent to Korea in 1419, during King Sejong’s reign. Another one thousand copies were sent later that year, and even more volumes subsequently, so that the total copies sent by the Ming to Korea numbered in the “thousands.” See Young Kyun Oh, *Engraving Virtue: The Printing History of a Premodern Korean Moral Primer* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 69–72.
  33. Morality books and ledgers of merit and demerit emerged in the twelfth century, mostly with Buddhist and Daoist themes. See Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*; Brokaw, “Supernatural Retribution and Human Destiny”; Catherine Bell, “Printing and Religion in China: Some Evidence from the *Taishang Ganying Pian*,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (1992): 173–186; Catherine Bell, “‘A precious raft to save the world’: The Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and Printing in a Chinese Morality Book,” *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (1996): 158–200; and Catherine Bell, “Stories from an Illustrated Explanation of the Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–37. Accounting terminology was used to quantify merit and demerit. This gave expression to the goal of manipulating one’s “root destiny” [*benming* 本命] and made the process attractive to a wide audience. See von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, 141. Thus, morality books began to proliferate in the early Ming, especially due to imperial sponsorship. See Oh, *Engraving Virtue*; Sakai, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū*, 7–41; Brokaw, “Publishing, Society and Culture in Pre-modern China.” By the late Ming and Qing, Confucian and Buddhist versions become widely available, particularly due to private writers, such as Yuan Huang (1533–1606) and monks like Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615). On the latter, see Yü Chün-fang, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). This broad circulation was enabled by an upsurge in commercial publishing, increasing

literacy, and unprecedented economic growth. As for Confucian morality books, de Bary has noted Yuan Huang's departure from earlier Daoist versions, which emphasized the surveillance of the gods and earning divine favor: "The good deeds prescribed pertained to the ordinary conduct of life, and the promised recompense answered to the ordinary needs of human life." See de Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism," 176.

34. Here, the Yongle Emperor refers to a passage from *Classic of Documents* [Shujing 書經], where the meaning of *yinzhi* 陰騭 differs slightly from his own usage. The line from *Classic of Documents* reads, "Heaven furtively regulates [*yinzhi*] the people below and they abide in cooperation with each other" [惟天陰騭下民，相協厥居]. Following Legge's commentary to this passage (but with modifications), in this context, I believe *zhi* 騭 has the morally neutral meaning of "to settle" or "regulate," rather than "bless" or "reward." See James Legge, trans., *The Shoo-king (Shu Ching)*, vol. 3, pts. 1–2, *The Chinese Classics*, 7 vols. (London: Trübner, 1865), 320–322.
35. The graph *zhi* 騭 in *yinzhi* 陰騭 is ambiguous. Though it originally referred to a stallion, it also came to mean, "to settle," "to raise," "to evaluate," or "to administer." This can be seen in the usage of *yinzhi* in a passage from *Classic of Documents*; see Legge, *The Shoo-king (Shu Ching)*, 320–322. This is why I think Kleeman translates the word *yinzhi* in the title of the text, *Yinzhi wen* 陰騭文—and multiple occurrences of the word in the body of the text—as "hidden administration." See Terry F. Kleeman, "The Lives and Teachings of the Divine Lord of Zitong," in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 64–71. However, depending on the context, *yinzhi* can also mean "hidden blessings" or "hidden virtue." In fact, for Kleeman's text *Yinzhi wen*, the context suggests that here *yinzhi* should be translated as "hidden virtue" and not "hidden administration." For example, the first line of *Yinzhi wen* reads: 帝君曰 吾一十七世為士大夫身。未嘗虐民酷吏。救人之難，濟人之急，憫人之孤，容人之過。廣行陰騭，上格蒼穹。人能如我存心，天必賜汝以福。 See Jiang Yupu 蔣予蒲 (1756–1819), ed. (ca. 1800), *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 [Essentials of the Daoist Canon] (Taipei: Kaozheng chubanshe 考正出版社, 1971 reprint), 9.36a. Kleeman translates: "The Divine Lord said: 'I have assumed the identity of a scholar-official seventeen times. Never have I mistreated the people or abused my clerks. I saved people in distress, helped them through emergencies, took out on the orphaned, and forgave humans their transgressions. Extensively have I carried out my hidden administration, extending up to the blue vault of the sky. If people can maintain a heart like mine, Heaven will certainly bestow blessings upon them.'" See Kleeman, "The Lives and Teachings," 70. Here, I suggest this emendation: "Extensively have I practiced hidden virtue," rather than

“Extensively have I carried out my hidden administration,” because the Divine Lord is not telling ordinary people to carry out “hidden administration” (in the manner of a deity in the celestial bureaucracy). Rather, Lord Wenchang is clearly exhorting *yinzhi* in the sense of cultivating “hidden virtues,” to do acts of goodness in private and without wish for reward, just as he had done for seventeen lifetimes as a scholar-official. In other words, in this passage, *yinzhi* is describing the actions of Wenchang’s human incarnations, not the administering of a celestial deity. There are other instances in the text where *yinzhi* is better translated as “hidden virtue” or “hidden blessings.” When *yinzhi* refers to how heaven or the celestial bureaucracy responds to the deeds of humans, then it means “hidden administration.” But when it refers to what humans do, then it clearly means to practice “hidden virtues” or to gain “hidden blessings.” In summary, while *yinzhi* can mean “hidden administration,” by the Ming, and especially in the context of morality books, *yinzhi* is often used as a synonym for *yinde* 陰德 and *yingong* 陰功. For a discussion of the language of moral recompense in Nguyễn Dữ’s *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected*, see N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 375–391. For an alternate translation of the *Yinzhi wen*, rendered as “The Silent Way of Recompense,” see Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 902–904. The most comprehensive examination of the *Yinzhi wen* in its historical context remains Sakai Tadao’s study of morality books; see Tadao, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū*, 404–437. See also Joanna Handlin Smith, *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 106; Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 147n86; Vincent Goossaert, *Livres de morale révélés par les dieux* [Morality Books Revealed by the Gods] (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 2012), 15–24.

36. See, Ming Chengzu 明成祖 (1360–1424), *Weishan yinzhi* 為善陰騭 [The Hidden Blessings of Doing Good], *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書, zibu 子部, vol. 121 (Jinan: Qi Lu shu she, 1997), 1a–1b. In an unpublished conference paper, Liam C. Kelley has noted that we do not know when morality books first arrived in Vietnam. See Liam C. Kelley, “Divine Lord Wenchang Meets Great King Tran: Spirit Writing in Late Imperial/ Colonial Vietnam,” unpublished paper presented at “Beyond Teleologies: Alternative Voices and Histories in Colonial Vietnam,” University of Washington, Seattle, March 1–2, 2007, 10. However, I believe that we have language in other types of sources that hints that morality books may have appeared in Vietnam as early as the fifteenth century, though there is currently no definitive evidence, to my knowledge. As I show in this essay, there are some widespread resemblances in Confucian discourses of familial moral

retribution seen in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources, especially tale literature and stele inscriptions. And at least one morality book, *Hidden Blessings of Doing Good*, was promulgated in Vietnam on orders of the Ming court. But we do not know how many copies were sent or how influential it was, nor do we have any surviving Vietnamese editions, to my knowledge. For example, on the ultimate impact of the Ming attempt to influence Vietnamese education during the occupation, Whitmore writes, “Yet, for all the official Chinese input, the degree of local impact depended on the teachers, many of whom were probably Vietnamese, and the system left much room for their own approaches.” See Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly, and the Ming*, 125, 193–194. Kelley has written on a later Vietnamese morality book phenomenon linked specifically to the spirit-writing cults of Wenchang and Trần Hưng Đạo that flourished during the mid- to late nineteenth century and continued into the early twentieth century. This latter morality book upsurge may have been linked to Lê Quý Đôn’s commentary on the “Tract on Hidden Blessings” [*Âm Chât Văn Chú*], which was completed in 1781, published in 1839, and translated into Nôm in 1859. See Kelley, “Divine Lord Wenchang,” 10–15. Roughly contemporary with these Vietnamese phenomena, in Taiwan, spirit-writing cults were also flourishing. Interestingly, they also promulgated morality books with a Confucian emphasis. See Philip Clart, “Confucius and the Mediums: Is There a ‘Popular Confucianism?’” *T’oung Pao* 89, no. 1/3 (2003): 1–38. On the *Âm Chât Văn* in Vietnam, see also Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 570, 760. On the *Âm chât văn chú*, see Emile Gaspardone, *Bibliographie Annamite, extrait du Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 34 (Hà Nội, 1935), 28. A stele inscription dated 1843 at Ngọc Sơn Temple in Hà Nội mentions a society established to promote good works and the worship of the Imperial Lord Wenchang [Văn Xương Đế Quân]. See Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, *Một số vấn đề về văn bia Việt-Nam* [Some Issues with Regard to Vietnamese Stelae Texts] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2008), 314–318. On Daoism, the worship of Văn Xương Đế Quân, and the publication of morality books and spirit writings at Ngọc Sơn Temple, see Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 755–776; Trương Đình Hoè, *Les immortels vietnamiens d’après le Hội Chân Tiên* [The Vietnamese Immortals According to the *Hội Chân Tiên*] (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1988), 16.

37. *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* is a fourteenth- to late fifteenth-century compilation of narratives about heroes, deities, and rulers of antiquity attributed to Trần Thế Pháp, about whom very little is known. Most contemporary scholars doubt the historicity of the narratives. However, there is disagreement with regard to what extent, if at all, the narratives reflect

- ancient popular oral tradition or are the medieval “inventions” of a literate elite. See, especially, Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 364–357; K. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 153, 210; Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*, 21–30; Kelley, “The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan”; Kelley, “Inventing Tradition;” Liam C. Kelley, “Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta,” in *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia*, ed. James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 78–105. The compilation has been enlarged over time and exists in several manuscript versions. See Keith W. Taylor, “What Lies behind the Earliest Stories of Buddhism in Ancient Vietnam?” *Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 1 (2018): 110n5; and Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm* [Investigating the Treasury of Books in Hán and Nôm] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1990), 2:186–192.
38. On Vũ Quỳnh’s preface, see Kelley, “Inventing Traditions,” 162, 164; Kelley, “The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan,” 89, 95; Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*, 21–30. Tạ Chí Đại Trường has argued that this preface traditionally attributed to Vũ Quỳnh is actually by Trần Thế Pháp. See Tạ Chí Đại Trường, “Comments on Liam Kelley’s ‘The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Invented Tradition,’” trans. Trần Hạnh, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (2012): 139–162; and Bùi Văn Nguyên, trans., *Tân đính lĩnh nam chí quái* [New Edition of *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks*] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993).
39. The locus classicus of the phrase “chastising evil and encouraging goodness” [*cheng e er quan shan* 懲惡而勸善] is found in the commentary on *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 [Lord Cheng, 14th Year 成公, 十四年]. See Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition/ Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 815.
40. From the Chinese text provided in Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách*, 2:186–192. See also Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 2, 1:25–26, 143–144.
41. For a summary of these two tales from *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* and an analysis of their shared literary themes, see Eric Henry, “Chinese and Indigenous Influences in Vietnamese Verse Romances of the Nineteenth Century,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2001): 13–16. On the tale of Chử Đổng Tử, see also K. Taylor, “What Lies Behind,” 115–116; Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 390–394; Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels en Annam* [The Cult of Immortals in Annam] (Hà Nội: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1944),

- 12–19, 59–61. On the tale of Thôi Vỹ and its precedents in Chinese literature, see the excellent analysis in N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 165–210. Moreover, as Cuong Tu Nguyen has noted, the text *Sources for a Gazetteer of An Nam* [*An Nam chí nguyên*, *Annan zhi yuan* 安南志原] contains a section on transcendents and Buddhist monks [*tiên thích* 僊釋]. See Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiên Uyển Tập Anh* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 51. Cuong Tu Nguyen provides a translation of this section in appendix 3. See Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam*, 251–254. A very brief biographical note on Thôi Vỹ 崔焯 is included, and notices for four other famed Daoists, including An Kỳ Sinh 安期生 (or Yên Kỳ Sinh, who is said to have attained the Dao on Mount Yên Tử), Đổng Phụng 董奉 (who is said to have once resurrected Shi Xie with a magical drug), Cát Hồng 葛洪, and Trần Đạo Căn 陳道根. See Émile Gaspardone, *Ngan-nan tche yuan et son auteur* [Sources for a Gazetteer of Annam and Its Author] (Hà Nội: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1932), 208–209. On the Chinese tradition of An Kỳ Sinh, see Company, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 226n335. And on his cult in Vietnam, see Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 353–382; Gustave Dumoutier, *Les Cultes Annamites* [Annamite Cults] (Hà Nội: F.H. Schneider, 1907), 58.
42. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 292–311; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Văn bia thời Mạc* [Stelae Texts of the Mạc Period] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1996).
43. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 292–311.
44. *Ibid.*, 297–300. For a translation into modern Vietnamese and the Chinese transcription, see stele 72 in Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Văn bia thời Mạc*, 183–187, 380.
45. The inscription says: 佛道本乎明色心, 辨其因果, 老子為道本乎專氣致柔抱一守稗真 [The Way of the Buddha is rooted in illuminating the lustful mind and differentiating cause and effect. Laozi roots the Way in concentrating on pneuma, attaining suppleness, embracing the one, and guarding the real]. My translation, following Nam Nguyen, with modifications. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 297–298.
46. This stele inscription suggests that Diệu Thiện was known in some Buddhist circles in the Mạc region by at least the late 1500s. As Berezkin and Nguyễn have noted, scholars generally believe that the two figures of Nanhai Guanyin (aka Miaoshan 妙善, Diệu Thiện) and Songzi Guanyin entered Vietnam sometime in the 1500s or 1600s. In part, this is based on Vietnamese scholarship on woodblock images and statues. See Rostislav Berezkin and Nguyễn Tô Lan, “On the Earliest Version of the Miaoshan-Guanyin Story in



Vietnam: An Adaptation of a Chinese Narrative in the Nom Script,” *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 5 (2016): 553; Nguyễn Tô Lan and Rostislav Berezkin, “From Chinese Precious Scrolls to Vietnamese True Scriptures: Transmission and Adaptation of the Miaoshan Story in Vietnam,” *East Asian Publishing and Society* 8 (2018): 111. Also, Berezkin and Nguyễn note that this general timeline corresponds with current knowledge about the general transmission of Chinese texts into Vietnam, especially novels, and their adaptations into vernacular six-eight rhyme [*lục bát*] from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Note the double meaning of *ming* 名 here. She got her “name” and her “renown” through goodness.

47. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm refers to the theme of “goodness” [*thiện shan* 善] in the teachings of Mencius. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm deliberately invokes the terms “good scholars” [善士], “the way of goodness” [善道, or “the good way”], and “good teachings” [善教]. Compare this rhetoric to some teachings of Mencius: “The good scholar [善士] in a village makes friends with the [other] good scholars in the village. The good scholar in a state makes friends with the [other] good scholars in the state. The good scholars in the realm [beneath heaven] makes friends with the [other] goods scholars in the realm.” My translation, following D.C. Lau, with modifications. See D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 158. Also consider *Mencius* (14.32): “To maintain the essentials and to apply broadly, such is the way of goodness” [守約而施博者、善道也], and *Mencius* (13.14), “Good governance is not better than good teachings with regard to gaining [the support of the] the people . . . good governance gains their wealth and good teachings gain their heart-minds” [善政不如善教之得民也 . . . 善政得民財、善教得民心]. Thus, we see in this inscription Nguyễn Bình Khiêm identifying a commonality with Buddhism [*thiện*], then co-opting goodness to present the teachings of Mencius.
48. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm is quoting from the *Doctrine of the Mean* [Zhong Yong 中庸], which states, “Thus, the root of the Way of the Gentleman is in the self, and it is made evident among the people” 故君子之道本諸身、徵諸庶民. Moreover, in stating, “Reverencing, maintaining, and upholding are explained through reading” 遵守舉被解讀, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm wants to emphasize that transmitting knowledge about goodness and practicing goodness are both rooted in reading 讀 (no doubt, reading the Confucian classics). This seems to be an implicit comparison with the Buddhist way of practicing goodness.
49. This is my translation, following Nam Nguyen, with modifications. See, N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 308–309. For a modern Vietnamese translation and transcription of the Chinese, see stele 135 in Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Văn bia thời Mạc*, 318–322, 397.

50. Nothing else is known about Dương Chuân, except that (as noted on the stele itself) he was a student at the Imperial College [Quốc Tử Giám] and was from Trình Viên Village, present day Phú Xuyên.
51. Reference to the Wenyan 文言 commentary to the *Yijing*, where it says, “A family with accumulated goodness will certainly have an abundance of blessings. A family with accumulated non-goodness will certainly have an abundance of calamity” 積善之家必有餘慶，積不善之家必有餘殃. See Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), *Chongkan Songben shisanjing zhushu* 重刊宋本十三經註疏 [Reengraved Song Edition of the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries to the Thirteen Classics] (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1960), 1:60b.
52. See N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 308–309.
53. We should not assume that expressions of ambivalence toward the extraordinary, *ipso facto*, mean that literati or officials were atheists or skeptics. To do so would presume a Western notion of divinity and discourses on “belief” (or “disbelief”) in divinity that do not map exactly onto the Chinese case (nor, I would argue, the Vietnamese case). See, Nadeau, “Divinity.” For example, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) did not reject the existence of ghosts and spirits [*gui shen*] as much as he was wary of the deleterious effects of worship taken too far, at least, by Confucian standards. See, Daniel K. Gardner, “Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World: Chu Hsi on Kuei-Shen,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 4 (1995), 598–611. Moreover, Zhuxi accepted divination and was concerned with correct geomancy to ensure auspicious burials. See Michael Lackner et al., eds., *Fate and Prognostication in the Chinese Literary Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), xi–xiii; Patricia Buckley Ebrey, “Sung Neo-Confucian Views on Geomancy,” in *Meeting of Minds: Intellectual and Religious Interaction in East Asian Traditions and Thought, Essays in Honor of Wing-tsit Chan and William Theodore de Bary*, ed. Irene Bloom and Joshua A. Fogel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 75–107.
54. Another text that might have influenced the moral discourse of sixteenth-century Vietnamese Confucian voices is the primer known as *The Precious Mirror for Illuminating the Heart-Mind* [*Mingxin baojian* 明心寶鑑], a late-Yuan/early-Ming anthology of unknown authorship, but later edited by Fan Liben 範立本 [whose preface to the text is dated 1393]. It encompasses twenty brief chapters of moral exhortations, each filled with excerpts from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist texts, including *Tract of the Most Exalted on Stimulus and Response* [*Taishang ganying pian*]. Each chapter exemplifies some moral principle, such as perpetuating goodness [*jishan* 繼善], heaven’s principles [*tianli* 天理], obeying fate [*shunming* 順命], filial deeds [*xiaoxing* 孝行],

rectifying the self [*zhengji* 正己], guarding one's nature [*jiexing* 戒性], examining the heart-mind [*shengxin* 省心], regulating the family [*zhijia* 治家], and so forth. See Fan Liben 範立本, *Mingxin baojian* 明心寶鑑 [Precious Mirror for Illuminating the Heart-Mind] (Beijing: Dong fang chu ban she, 2014). Thus, the discourse of morality books in this text is unmistakable. Additionally, in his book *Records of Comprehensive Inquiries in Distant Lands* [*Shuyu zhouzi lu* 殊域周咨錄] (ca. 1570s), Yan Congjian 嚴從簡 makes note of nearly two dozen Chinese works found in sixteenth-century Vietnam, two of which are especially important for our purposes, namely Qu You's *Jiandeng xinhua* and *The Precious Mirror*. See Yan Congjian 嚴從簡, *Shuyu zhouzi lu* 殊域周咨錄 [Records of Comprehensive Inquiries in Distant Lands] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000). The deep influence of Qu You's text on Nguyễn Dữ's *Transmissions of Marvels Casually Collected* is well known. The impact of *The Precious Mirror* is less well known. Future research might show correlations between *The Precious Mirror* and the moral imagination of *truyện kỳ* tales and the discourse of Confucian commemorative inscriptions. Li Tana notes that *The Precious Mirror* was brought to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam and that "it was the first Chinese book to be translated into a Western language." See Li Tana, "The Imported Book Trade and Confucian Learning in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam," in *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia*, ed. Michael Aung-Thwin and Kenneth R. Hall (London: Routledge, 2011), 180n23. On Yan Congjian's view of Đại Việt, see Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, 109. *The Precious Mirror*, known in Sino-Vietnamese as *Minh Tâm Bảo Giám* (or *Minh Tâm Bửu Giám*), was later translated into Nôm, several manuscript copies of which survive: 1836 (Paris, MG.FC.30226), 1881 (Paris, BN.A.58), 1888 (VNV.206; VNV.187; VHV.718), 1907 (A.171), and 1924 (VHV.720). For more on these Nôm manuscript versions, see Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, *Thư mục Nho giáo Việt Nam* [A Bibliography of Vietnamese Confucianism] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2007), 92; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Giáo dục và khoa cử*, 23, 145; and Liam C. Kelley, "Confucianism' in Vietnam: A State of the Field Essay," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 358. See also, Trương Vĩnh Ký's (1837–1898) translation of the text into modern *quốc ngữ*. See Trương Vĩnh Ký, *Minh Tâm Bửu Giám* [Precious Mirror for Illuminating the Heart-Mind] (Sài Gòn: Hoa Tiên, 1968 reprint).

55. See also, Dutton, Werner, and Whitmore, *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 109, 152, 186–188, 248–251, 294, 305; Trần Kim Anh, "Cuộc đời Phạm Đình Hổ và đôi điều về tác phẩm của ông" [The Life of Phạm Đình Hổ and Some Issues Related to His Works], *Thông Báo Hán Nôm Học* [Bulletin of Hán Nôm Studies] (1995): 9–20.

56. See Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*.
57. During the Lê Dynasty, the rank of *sinh đồ* 生徒 was given to a graduate of the triennial Provincial Exams [*thi hương*] who successfully completed three of the four exam stages. The candidate who successfully completed all four stages was given the rank *hương cống* 鄉貢 (or *cống sĩ* 貢士, tribute student). See also Anh Q. Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 5–6; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Giáo dục và khoa cử*, 71–72; Keith W. Taylor, “Vietnamese Confucian Narratives,” in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002), 344–345; Cuong Tuan Nguyen, “Private Academies and Confucian Education in 18th-Century Vietnam in East Asian Context: The Case of Phúc Giang Academy,” in *Confucian Academies in East Asia*, ed. Vladimir Glomb, Eun-Jeung Lee, and Martin Gehlmann (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 92n13. Samuel Baron, a merchant of Dutch and Vietnamese descent, provides a brief description of the examination ranks and exam process of late seventeenth-century Tonkin. See Olga Dror and Keith W. Taylor, eds., *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2006), 230–232.
58. In 1821, Phạm Đình Hồ was summoned to Huế to serve at the Hàn Lâm Academy, but he retired soon thereafter. In 1826 Emperor Minh Mạng appointed Phạm Đình Hồ to the prestigious Imperial College [*Quốc Tử Giám*], but he left the position in 1832 and dedicated himself to literary work. Over twenty works have been attributed to Phạm Đình Hồ, including a compilation of commentaries on key Confucian texts titled *Quần thư tham khảo*; a Hán-Nôm dictionary [*Nhật dụng thường đàm*]; and *Collected Statutes of the Lê Dynasty* [*Lê triều hội điển* 黎朝會典]. On *Quần thư tham khảo*, see Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, *Thư mục Nho giáo Việt Nam*, 112. Scholars do not agree that all the works attributed to Phạm Đình Hồ were written by him. See Trần Kim Anh, “Cuộc đời Phạm Đình Hồ.” Also, for a work on women’s education attributed to Phạm Đình Hồ, see Kornicki and Nguyễn Thị Oanh, “The Lesser Learning for Women,” 154.
59. Both *Jottings amid the Rain* and *Random Records of Great Upheavals* were completed between 1808 and 1818. The latter compilation was authored with Nguyễn Án 阮案 (1770–1815). In China, the *biji* genre encompassed an enormous variety of topics and was especially popular during the Song. See Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 162. As Lydia Chiang has noted, the term *biji* refers to “a loosely defined literary category consisting of study notes, literary sketches, anecdotes, and personal observations written in the classical

language.” See Lydia Sing-Chen Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 5, 27. Moreover, as Kang Xiaofei, Robert Hymes, Alister Inglis, Peter Bol, and many others have shown, genres outside of official historiography gave literati space to think, consider, and discuss a host of marginal topics, particularly those deemed improper by some but of fascination to many and that could not be dismissed outright, such as dreams, spirits, deities, prodigies, and the uncanny. See Kang Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox*; Hymes, *Way and Byway*; Inglis, *Hong Mai’s Record*; and Peter K. Bol, “A Literati Miscellany and Sung Intellectual History: The Case of Chang Lei’s *Ming-tao tsa-chih*,” *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 25 (1995): 121–152. Lydia Chiang has argued, moreover, that literary compilations of tales of the uncanny served as means of, “self-expression, gender and class identity construction, meaning creation, value generation, individual empowerment, and societal transformation.” See Chiang, *Collecting the Self*, 7. Daria Berg has made a similar argument with regard to women editors of late-imperial literary anthologies. See Berg, *Women and the Literary World*.

60. Hoàng Bình Chính (1736–1785), also known as Hoàng Trọng Chính, attained the Presented Scholar [*tiến sĩ* 進士] degree in 1775 at the age of forty (thirty-nine by Western reckoning), served as a scholar in the Hàn Lâm Academy, and has one known work attributed to him, *Records of the Customs and Lands of the Hưng Hoá Region* [Hưng Hoá xứ phong thổ lục 興化處風土錄], dated 1778. See Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúy Nga, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, *Các nhà khoa bảng Việt Nam, 1075–1919* [Exam Graduates of Vietnam, 1075–1919] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2006), 743. This account of Hoàng Bình Chính is also summarized in Liam C. Kelley, “From Moral Exemplar to National Hero: The Transformations of Trần Hưng Đạo and the Emergence of Vietnamese Nationalism,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 6 (2015): 1976.
61. I presume this refers to Hà Khẩu Quarter [*phường*], east of Thăng Long imperial citadel, and not Hà Khẩu [Hekou], which is in the border region between Yunnan and Cao Bằng.
62. Hoàng Bình Chính instructed the servant to return with a reed mat from the temple of Trần Hưng Đạo for his wife to lie on. This is very likely a reference to a talismanic or apotropaic remedy against the baleful influence of a demonic deity named Phạm Nhan, who is known as an enemy of Trần Hưng Đạo and is often seen as the cause of many gynecological sicknesses. Anh Q. Tran provides a summary of the story of Trần Hưng Đạo’s defeat and killing of Phạm Nhan. In this version, Phạm Nhan is named Nguyễn Nhan, also called Bá Linh. He fought on behalf of the Yuan invaders but was killed and cursed by Trần Hưng Đạo to forever subsist on the blood of parturition.

Thereafter, Phạm Nhan tormented women, and a custom arose in which a reed mat and ash water from the shrine of Trần Hưng Đạo could be used as a remedy for gynecological illnesses. See Anh Q. Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 254–255n59. See also Kelley, “Divine Lord Wenchang,” 33; Kelley, “From Moral Exemplar,” 1974–1975. Olga Dror provides a synopsis of an alternate tale about the origins of Phạm Nhan in which he was killed and his body severed, three parts of which became the focus of three cults. See Olga Dror, *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses: A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 172–173. Phuong Q. Pham also gives a brief historical overview of the relationship of Phạm Nhan to the cult of Trần Hưng Đạo. She describes the modern cult of Phạm Nhan at Kiếp Bạc, where he appeared to be an ambiguous deity that was believed to be efficacious but also capricious and destructive. See Phuong Q. Pham *Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009), 40, 76–78, 93. Also, Nguyễn Tô Lan’s translation of Mai Viên Đoàn Triễn’s (1854–1919) *An Nam Phong Tục Sách* refers to a tradition of exorcism and healing at the temple of Trần Hưng Đạo related to Phạm Nhan. See Mai Viên Đoàn Triễn, *An Nam phong tục sách* [The Book of Annamese Customs], trans. Nguyễn Tô Lan (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hà Nội, 2008), 53–54. See also Đỗ Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism*, 12–15; Dumoutier, *Les Cultes Annamites*, 74–83; Maurice Durand, *Technique et panthéon des médiums vietnamiens* [Technique and Pantheon of Vietnamese Mediums] (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1959), 57–63; Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* [A Historical Outline of Vietnamese Culture] (Sài Gòn: Bốn Phương, 1938 reprint), 218–219, 228.

63. 妾非人崇者，興道王其如我何，所以小瘥，為王體貌地耳，雖然夫人病行將愈矣，來月有命公當司臬於海陽，妾請陪侍巾櫛。Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 2, vol. 5, 125. Here the spirit woman’s use of the term *nhân trụy* 人崇 is probably a reference to the figure of Phạm Nhan.
64. *Ibid.*, 125.
65. The years Giáp Thìn and Ất Tỵ (1784–1785) were a tumultuous time in both Đàng Ngoài and Đàng Trong. In Đàng Trong, between 1784 and 1785, the Tây Sơn rebels defeated Siamese forces at Rạch Gầm, and Nguyễn Ánh sought refuge on the island of Phú Quốc. Meanwhile, in Đàng Ngoài, these years would see the eventual collapse of the Restored Lê (1593–1789), which was then nominally ruled by Lê Hiến Tông (r. 1740–1786). However, power was really held by the Trịnh lords, specifically Trịnh Khải (1763–1786), who came to the fore after the death of Trịnh Sâm in 1782. Unfortunately for the Trịnh

and Lê, in 1784, the year before Hoàng Bình Chính's return, various ominous portents were reported in Đàng Ngoài. For example, "On the first day of the tenth month in the year Giáp Thìn, in the Thùy Quân Lake in the capital, there was a sound like thunder, and the waters of the lake boiled over, and on the following day all of the shrimp and fish in the lake were dead . . ." See Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 159.

66. Dongting Lake 洞庭湖 [Grotto Court Lake] is a large lake located south of the Yangtze River, in northeastern Hunan Province. In China, Dongting Lake is featured in many stories, poems, and paintings and also serves as the setting for various tales pertaining to numerous local deities in the surrounding area. See Campany, *Strange Writing*, 67. A particularly famed account is found in the late eighth-century tale by Li Chaowei about the marriage of the exam candidate Liu Yi and a daughter of the Dragon King of Dongting Lake. For a translation of the tale see Glen Dudbridge, "Tale of the Transcendent Marriage of Dongting Lake," in *Anthology of Tang and Song Tales: The Tang Song Chuanqi Ji of Lu Xun*, ed. Zhenjun Zhang and Victor Mair (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2020), 93–113. See also, Meghan Cai, trans., "The Tale of the Supernatural Marriage at Dongting," in *Tang Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader*, vol. 2, ed. William Nienhauser (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2010), 1–21. On the tale of Liu Yi in Yuan Drama, see C. T. Hsia, Wai-Yee Li, and George Kao, eds., *The Columbia Anthology of Yuan Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 372. On the depiction of the Liu Yi tale in Yuan-period decorative art, see Fan Jeremy Zhang, "Dreams, Spirits, and Romantic Encounters in Jin and Yuan Theatrical Pictures," in *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Shih-shan Susan Huang (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 144–145. See also Idema and Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, 136; Hsieh, *Love and Women*, 183–187; Nienhauser, "T'ang Tale," 584; John Minford, trans., "The Dragon King's Daughter," in *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations, Vol. 1: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*, ed. John Minford and Joseph S.M. Lau (New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000), 1034–1046. On the literary theme of "divine women" in the Dongting region, see Edward H. Shafer, *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in T'ang Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 57–69. In another tale, a drunken scholar in a boat on Dongting Lake encountered female water deities. See Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 196. Not all liaisons end well. In one tale, three men were seduced and drowned by daughters of the Dragon King while on Dongting Lake. See Hsieh, *Love and Women*, 225. In Vietnam, Động Đình lore is also numerous. One of the most famous references is found in

*Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks*, where it is said that Lạc Long Quân's mother, the wife of Kinh Dương Vương, was a daughter of the Lord of Động Đình Lake. For an analysis of this Vietnamese tale and possible Chinese precedents, such as the account of Liu Yi, see Kelley, "The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan," 99–105.

67. Phạm Đình Hổ is invoking the memory of the ancient kingdom of Văn Lang, which was said to have had its northern border at Lake Động Đình. This is why he calls the area of the lake "the inner land." He sees it as the ancestral place where many Viet ancestors and spirits originated and to which they are still connected, precisely like Hoàng Bình Chính, for example.
68. 而余嘗聞諸長公子云。我國前輩，多為內地之神，亦多在洞庭者，如阮公仲瑋之事，余既載於桑滄偶錄，與此所傳黃公，夙世因緣，皆事之甚怪者。Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 2, vol. 5, 126. According to a tale in *Random Records of Great Upheavals* (vol. 1, tale 23), Nguyễn Trọng Thường was known as a literary prodigy. One evening, when he was still a student, a beautiful maiden came to him with tea and fruits, and they conversed amiably. This reoccurred for several years. However, one day she took leave but said that they would meet again at Furong Station near Dongting Lake. Many decades later, Nguyễn Trọng Thường took an envoy mission to China and on his return, he stopped at Furong Station and saw a dilapidated shrine. He inquired about it with a local, who told him that it was dedicated to someone named Nguyễn Trọng Thường. Adjacent was a shrine to the man's deceased wife. Nguyễn Trọng Thường then understood. He paid to have the shrines repaired. Subsequently, he arrived at Furong Station and that night the maiden came to him. By morning he was dead. See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 7, 178. The historical Nguyễn Trọng Thường (1681–1738) was born in Trung Càn Village, Thanh Chương County (present-day Nghệ An Province). In 1712, at age thirty-two, he attained the *tiến sĩ* degree and worked as an official for the Lê Dynasty. Indeed, he died during the return trip of an envoy mission to China and his body was returned for burial. See Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúc Nga, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, *Các nhà khoa bảng*, 650–651; Đào Tâm Tĩnh, "Nguyễn Trọng Thường: Người mở đường đại khoa và đi sứ cho dòng họ Nguyễn Trọng, Trung Càn" [Nguyễn Trọng Thường: A Pioneer of Advanced Learning and Ambassadorship for the Nguyễn Trọng Clan of Trung Càn Village], *Khoa Học và Công Nghệ Nghệ An* [Nghệ An Science and Technology] (2018): 25–32. The resemblance to the tale of Hoàng Bình Chính is "uncanny," as the author Phạm Đình Hổ notes. It is also significant that the discourse of love karma is not invoked in this tale of Nguyễn Trọng Thường.



69. This tale is set in 1484 (Giáp Thìn) during the Hồng Đức reign period (1470–1497) and takes place at Jasper Creek Quarter, southwest of Thăng Long imperial citadel. Jasper Creek Daoist Belvedere [Bích Câu đạo quán 碧溝道觀] now sits in the vicinity. Nguyễn Văn Huyền claims that this Daoist temple was founded during the late fifteenth century. See Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 86. Doãn Kế Thiện offers a more precise date (1485) but provides no documentation. He is probably using the date provided in the story itself. See Doãn Kế Thiện, *Cổ tích và thắng cảnh Hà Nội* [Legends and Scenic Sites of Hà Nội] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa, 1959), 153. By contrast, Nguyễn Duy Hinh surmises that the temple most likely postdates the fifteenth century. See Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 646–647, 761–762. Presently, the temple altar includes images of Tú Uyên, Giáng Kiều, and their son. Nguyễn Văn Huyền also describes spirit writing which invokes the transcendent Tú Uyên. See Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 113–131. It is notable that Jasper Creek Daoist Belvedere is not mentioned in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s tale. Rather, the “marvelous encounter” with Giáng Kiều occurred during a Buddhist festival at Jade Flagon Temple [Ngọc Hồ Tự], which is about one kilometer east of present-day Jasper Creek Daoist Belvedere. Additionally, an oral tradition claims that a Daoist temple was built on the site of Tú Uyên and Giáng Kiều’s former home, after they had attained transcendence. See Đỗ Thị Hào, *Các nữ tác gia Hán Nôm Việt Nam: Khảo cứu, phiên âm, dịch chú, văn bản, tác phẩm* [The Women Writers of Vietnamese Hán and Nôm: Research, Transliteration, Annotated-translation, Text, and Work] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2010), 148. This suggests that perhaps the present-day Jasper Creek Belvedere was established (or renamed as such) only after Đoàn Thị Điểm’s narrative became more widely known.
70. This tale is found in Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story collection *New Genealogy Based on Transmissions of Marvels* [*Truyện kỳ tân phả*], which is undated. Yet currently scholars believe that Đoàn Thị Điểm must have completed the text at least by 1735, the year of the death of her elder brother, Đoàn Doãn Luân, who wrote a surviving commentary to the text (attached to the 1811 edition). See Đỗ, *Các nữ tác gia Hán Nôm Việt Nam*, 67; Dương Đình Khuê, *Les chefs d’œuvre de la littérature vietnamienne* [Masterpieces of Vietnamese Literature] (Sài Gòn: Kim lai Ấn-quán, 1966), 117–126. Moreover, despite Phan Huy Chú’s (1782–1840) observation that Đoàn Thị Điểm’s work contains six stories in total [*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* 歷朝憲章類誌], some modern scholars, such as Hoàng Xuân Hãn and Nguyễn Đỗ Mục, have argued that only three stories in the collection are by Đoàn Thị Điểm and that “The Marvelous Encounter at Jasper Creek” was composed by Đặng Trần Côn (?–1745). Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn An’s brief note on Đoàn Thị Điểm, in

*Random Records of Great Upheavals*, also seems to support this view (vol. 1, tale 30). However, other scholars, such as Trần Văn Giáp and Đinh Gia Thuyết, have argued for Đoàn Thị Điểm's authorship. Additionally, the tale "The Marvelous Encounter at Jasper Creek" became widely popular when it was adapted into Nôm. Trần Văn Giáp and Phạm Ngọc Lan have attributed the composition of this vernacular Nôm version to Vũ Quốc Trân, who lived during the nineteenth century. For an English translation of the Nôm adaptation, see Huynh Sanh Thong, trans., "The Marvelous Encounter at Blue Creek," *Vietnam Forum* 11 (1988): 150–172. For an analysis and comparison to the tale of Tù Thúc, see Durand, *L'univers des truyen nôm*, 141–148.

71. The term *kỳ ngộ* 奇遇 [marvelous encounter] refers to the theme of a man (usually an examination candidate or an official) serendipitously meeting a female transcendent, then having some type of liaison or marriage with her. Indeed, since earliest times Daoism has combined sexuality and religion in multi-various and complex ways. Early Chinese poetry shows a fascination with the erotic encounter between men and female deities (and vice versa). Eventually, this theme generated a host of related literary and poetic motifs, including the theme of the journey into the realm of the transcendents by way of an enchanted grotto [*you xianku* 遊仙窟]. In this motif, the human reaches the abode of the transcendents, has an erotic encounter with female transcendents, sometimes marrying her and/or receiving from her the secret arts of transcendence. Some tales end in tragedy, when the man leaves the magical abode, only to never find the abode of the transcendents again. On the motif of the erotic encounter in early Chinese poetry, see Hsieh, *Love and Women*, 22; Shafer, *The Divine Woman*; Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 41; Wai-ye Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 33–35, 89–90. On the eighth-century poem about the female transcendent Jade Flower, who became bored of paradise and descended to seduce a male lover but then had to depart after her tryst, see Suzanne E. Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 231–233. For an extended discussion of the motif of "divine love" between Daoist divinities and human male lovers in Ming erotic novellas, see Richard G. Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption, and Religiosity in Cultural Practice* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011), especially chapter 5. On the *youxian ku* theme, see Hsieh, *Love and Women*, 156, 173, 181–187; Nienhauser, "T'ang Tale," 583; Huntington, "The Supernatural," 117–118; Timothy Wei Keung Chan, "A Tale of Two Worlds: The Late Tang Poetic Presentation of the Romance of the Peach Blossom Font," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd series, 94, no. 4/5 (2008): 209–245;

- Paul Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies: Gender and the Male Community in Early Chinese Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 204–215.
72. Jade Flagon Temple [Ngọc Hồ Tự 玉壺寺] was established in 1218 during the Lý Dynasty and has been rebuilt several times since. See Doãn Kế Thiện, *Cổ tích và thắng cảnh*, 149–152; Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 94. In Đoàn Thị Điểm's tale, Tú Uyên's friend Hà Lang 何郎 reminded him that Emperor Lê Thánh Tông once had a “marvelous encounter” with a female transcendent at a garden near this temple. See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 54.
73. Here the image of the crimson leaf invokes its literary association as “match-maker.” Moreover, in this context the crimson leaf serves as a symbolic and literal go-between. Literal because it allows two lovers to communicate, and symbolic because the two lovers are human and transcendent, one living on earth and the other in heaven. The leaf symbolically connects heaven and earth. Hence, the crimson leaf serves at once to symbolize the vast chasm between heaven and earth, while also gesturing to the possibility of joining the two realms of heaven and earth through love, for it alludes to the karmic bond which can connect lovers across worlds and lifetimes.
74. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 51.
75. On the erotic connotations of the image of the dancing male and female phoenixes, with particular reference to late-imperial Chinese literature, see Berg, *Women and the Literary World*, 146.
76. The Indigo Bridge, a common image in *chuanqi* narratives, refers to a site of romantic rendezvous, particularly between men and female transcents. Its locus classicus is the Tang Dynasty tale of Pei Hang 裴航, attributed to Pei Xing 裴鏞 (fl. ninth century). The story, sometimes referred to as “Pestling Medicine by Indigo Bridge” [*Lanqiao daoyao* 藍橋擣藥] tells of student Pei Hang's serendipitous meeting with a mysterious Lady Fan, an exchange of poetic verses, then an encounter with a mysterious old woman who issued him a test of pestling medicine for one hundred days by Indigo Bridge. He succeeded in the arduous task through the help of Jade Rabbit and was rewarded with the younger sister of Lady Fan, maiden Yunying 雲英, who is also a female transcendent. The narrative can be found in the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* [*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記], see Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, vol. 50, 7b–11b. On Pei Xing, who also authored the well-known *chuanqi* tales, the “Kunlun slave” [*Kunlun nu* 崑崙奴] and the story of the female assassin Nie Yinniang 聶隱娘, see Idema and Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, 138.

77. 如來有靈，還當主張這事，把的紅葉，倒作媒人可也。Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 51.
78. 眼前色相本來空。Ibid., 52.
79. 人生難遇者嬋娟，安得黃金換夙緣。Ibid., 53.
80. 浮世縱能諧夙願，此緣誓不負今生。Ibid., 53.
81. White Horse Temple [Bạch Mã Temple] is located in Hà Khẩu Quarter, east of the Thăng Long imperial citadel. This temple has a storied history that is intertwined with the ninth-century Chinese general Gao Pian [Cao Biền], the deity Long Đổ, and the founding of Thăng Long as the capital of the Lý Dynasty by its first ruler, Lý Thái Tổ. The name White Horse comes from a dream in which Lý Thái Tổ saw a white horse and was told to build city walls along the tracks of its hoof prints. Workers later found mysterious hoof prints and successfully built city walls along the tracks. On Cao Biền, particularly with reference to geomancy and narratives related to the founding of Đại La (former site of Thăng Long), see Keith W. Taylor, “The Rise of Dai Viet and the Establishment of Thang-Long,” in *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft*, ed. K.R. Hall and J.K. Whitmore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for South and South-east Asian Studies, 1976), 173; Keith W. Taylor, “A Southern Remembrance of Cao Bien,” in *Liber Amicorum: Melanges offerts au professeur Phan Huy Lê*, ed. Philippe Papin and John Kleinen (Hà Nội: Thanh Niên, École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1999), 241–258; Momoki Shiro, “Nation and Geo-Body in Early Modern Vietnam: A Preliminary Study through Sources of Geomancy,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010), 126–153; John K. Whitmore, “Transformations of Thăng Long: Space and Time, Power and Belief,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 3–4. 因求夢于祠所。See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 55. Oracular dreams are a well-known theme in late-imperial Chinese drama, *chuanqi* tales, and stories of the uncanny. See Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 7, 135. The practice of performing purification and propitiation rites at a temple, and even sleeping at the temple, in the hopes of gaining a dream vision or communication with a deity (or the dead) is often referred to as seeking a “responsive dream” [ứng mộng 應夢]. On the enormous proliferation of texts on dream interpretation, miraculous dreams, and dream incubation among late-imperial literati, see Lynn A. Struve, *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019). Oracular dreams that seek direct communication with a being from another world fit into the “visitation

paradigm” that Robert F. Campany has noted. See, Robert F. Campany, *The Chinese Dreamscape, 300 BCE–800 CE*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 122 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2020), 132–160.

82. The theme of deities and transcendents using an image or a painting as a portal to enter the human world is seen in *chuanqi* literature, drama, and tales of the uncanny. Perhaps the most well-known example is found in “Record of the Returning Soul” [*Huanhun ji* 還魂記, also known as “Peony Pavilion”], by Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616). In this drama, a young man fell in love with a girl in a portrait. She came to him in a dream and instructed him to open her grave to revive her. On the theme of young men becoming entranced by beautiful maidens in paintings, see Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 183–193; Judith T. Zeitlin, “The Story of the Three Wives’ Commentary on The Peony Pavilion,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1994): 127–179. On the erotic undertones of such tales, see Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas*, 106. And on the literary use of mirrors, paintings, and dreams as means of imagining personhood, see Chiang, *Collecting the Self*, 47–48. Moreover, in *Random Records of Great Upheavals*, the authors, Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Ân, tell a story about how a deity once entered the world through a statue/image [*tượng* 像] and abducted a local woman. Here I paraphrase: One day in late summer a certain man [*mỗ át* 某乙] and his wife went to collect straw to mulch taro fields when suddenly out of a temple a red-faced, burly man over nine feet tall appeared and abducted the man’s wife. The man ran for help. He and the villagers rushed to the temple and saw the man’s wife standing dazed, leaning against a pillar. In the temple was a statue of a guardian spirit [*già lam* 伽藍]. His visage suddenly changed, and his right hand seemed to be covering the wife’s kerchief. “They were greatly astonished by the oddity; they knocked down the image and destroyed it” 衆大驚異，踣其像毀之。See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 7, 196.
83. Later, when they had reconciled after his bout of drunkenness, she marveled at how “a scroll painting can convey the crimson thread,” which connects lovers through time and space 畫軸托紅絲。See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 59. The miraculous painting is a portal that connects this world to the other. Like the “uncanny” crimson leaf, this “marvelous” painting is a medium that allows beings to connect across the two worlds. And in doing so, the painting underscores the wide chasm between the two worlds while also holding out the possibility that the “crimson thread” can connect beings across this very chasm.

84. The Southern Marchmount refers to the southernmost of the five sacred peaks in Daoism. Presently, it is associated with the Hengshan mountain range in Hunan Province. See Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 19; James Robson, *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) in Medieval China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009); Thomas H. Hahn, “The Standard Taoist Mountain and Related Features of Religious Geography,” *Cahiers d’Extrême Asie* 4 (1988): 147–155.
85. For a brief account of Giáng Kiều as a transcendent, see Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 25–30; and *Anthology of Assembled Perfected [Hội Chân Biên 會真編]*, chapter 7. The *Anthology of Assembled Perfected* was completed in 1847 and is attributed to Thanh Hoà Tử, about whom nothing else is known. For a French translation, see Trương Đình Hoà, *Les immortels vietnamiens*. For a modern Vietnamese translation, see Nguyễn Thanh Tùng, trans., *Hội Chân Biên [Anthology of Assembled Perfected]* (Hà Nội: Đại Học Sư Phạm, 2020). And for a modern edition of the Chinese text, see Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 2, vol. 5. For a discussion of issues of authorship and textual sources, see Trương Đình Hoà, *Les immortels vietnamiens*, 13–26; Trần Nghĩa, “Ảnh hưởng của Đạo giáo với tiểu thuyết chữ Hán Việt Nam” [The Influence of Daoism on Vietnamese Fiction in Chinese], *Tạp Chí Hán Nôm [Hán Nôm Journal]* 4, no. 41 (1999): 3–12. See also Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 11; Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*, 61, 113–118.
86. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 57.
87. 五百年這段姻緣，今夕始與君訂矣。 Ibid., 58.
88. 情重神能感...塵願通瓊宇...畫軸托紅絲。 Ibid., 59.
89. 妾侍君有年，塵緣已盡，當從此歸矣。 Ibid., 61.
90. 寧甘死相見，不忍生別離。 Ibid., 65.
91. Ibid., 65–66.
92. 況君名在仙籍。 Ibid., 66. He was in fact probably a “banished transcendent.”
93. This image reflects the theme of “ascending to heaven in broad daylight” [*bairi shengtian* 白日升天] found in Daoist hagiography. It signals the attainment of the highest Daoist goal of immediate ascension to the celestial bureaucracy, sometimes transported by “a carriage of clouds driven by dragons.” See Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Notion of ‘Form’ and the Ways of Liberation in Daoism,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004): 122. In perhaps one of the most distinctive examples, Liu An (Prince of Huainan) is said to have ascended “in broad daylight” with an entire household, including chickens and dogs (that had accidentally partaken of an immortality drug). For a discussion of this tale, see Robert F. Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 111–112,

- 233–238; and the classic study by Yü Ying-shih, “Life and Immortality in the Mind of Han China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25 (1964–1965): 106. This theme of ascension was not unknown in Vietnam. For example, Trần Nguyên Đán 陳元旦 (1325–1390) once composed the poem “On Mysterious Heaven Belvedere” [*Đề huyền thiên quán* 題玄天觀], in which he wrote, “Ascending to heaven in broad daylight is easy, [but] serving to the utmost Yao and Shun is hard. Sixty years burdened in the dusty [world], I turn my head in shame [before] the yellow cap [Daoists]” 白日升天易, 致君堯舜難, 塵埃六十載, 回首愧黃冠. Also, in the tale entitled “One Night Swamp” [*Nhất dạ đầm* 一夜澤], from *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks*, we read of Chử Đồng Tử and his wife Tiên Dung ascending to heaven, along with their palace and retinue of servants. See Lê Hữu Mục, trans., *Lĩnh nam chích quái* [Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks] (Sài Gòn: Khai-Trí, 1961), 51–54.
94. 人生難遇者嬋娟, 安得黃金換夙緣。Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 53.
95. 曩因相遇, 屈致塵, 事係夙緣, 今復與君再結, 以完未了之債。Ibid., 57.
96. 妾侍君有年, 塵緣已盡, 當從此歸矣。Ibid., 61.
97. Earlier, the narrator notes that “though, as for all the affairs of divine transcendents, he usually did not trust [them].” 但神仙一事, 素所不信。Ibid., 51.
98. Much has been written on Đoàn Thị Điểm. For this essay I have relied on Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*; Đỗ Thị Hào, *Các nữ tác gia*; Bùi Hạnh Cần et al., *Nhóm tác gia nữ sĩ Việt Nam* [Female Literati Writers of Vietnam] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2002); and Trần Cửu Chân, *Les grandes poétesses du Việt-Nam: Etudes littéraires: Đoàn-Thị-Điểm, Bà Huyện Thanh-Quan, Hồ Xuân-Hương, Sương Nguyệt-Anh* [The Great Poetesses of Vietnam, Literary Studies of Đoàn Thị Điểm, Huyện Thanh Quan, Hồ Xuân Hương, Sương Nguyệt Anh] (Sài Gòn: Imprimerie de l'union Nguyên-Văn-Cua, 1950).
99. Research on Liễu Hạnh is voluminous and still growing. In English, Olga Dror's pioneering studies are the most important. Dror has shown that while we have no definitive evidence showing when the Liễu Hạnh cult emerged, based on extant texts, it most likely arose during the mid-sixteenth century. There remain many aspects and dimensions of the Liễu Hạnh cults still to be investigated, such as Liễu Hạnh's relationship to the Cham deity Po Nagar. See Nguyễn Thế Anh, “The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Pô Nagar,” in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 47–48; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

- (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University Press, 1998), 105–106. Also, Liam C. Kelley has noted some overlap of the Liễu Hạnh and Văn Xương Đế Quân 文昌帝君 cults, as seen in a text dated 1902. See Kelley, “Confucianism’ in Vietnam,” 359. On the association of the Liễu Hạnh cult and the cult of Trần Hưng Đạo, see Kelley, “From Moral Exemplar,” 1993. On the Liễu Hạnh cult, see also Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 255–257; Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 724–739; Đỗ Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism*, 95–98; Trương Đình Hoè, *Les immortels vietnamiens*, 47, 94–98; Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Le culte des immortels*, 20–24, 35–46, 168–182.
100. Olga Dror, “Đoàn Thị Điểm’s ‘Story of the Vân Cát Goddess’ as a Story of Emancipation,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 63–76.
101. Đoàn uses the theme of marvelous encounter in both narratives. But contrasting with the common usage in Chinese literature, in her tales, the female transcedents show as much initiative and agency as the male human lovers. In Vietnam, it is not yet clear when the theme of kỳ ngộ entered the literary or poetic imagination. In an (undated) poem inscribed on stone, the famed fifteenth-century official and literatus Vũ Quỳnh commented, “The transcendent ones and [people] of the world enjoy marvelous encounters” 仙家世界欣奇遇. See Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, ed., *Văn bia Lê sơ tuyển tập* [Collection of Select Early Lê Stele Inscriptions] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2014), 368. Also, Đoàn may have been inspired by Nguyễn Dữ’s story of Từ Thức marrying a female transcendent (discussed later in this essay). Đoàn includes two inter-textual markers in the story “Jasper Creek,” one referring to the story of Chử Đồng Tử and the other to the story of Từ Thức, which suggests she was well-read in stories of the *zhiguai* or *chuanqi* type. In Đoàn’s story, the two female transcedents, Tiên Dung Công Chúa and Giáng Hương, descended to congratulate Tú Uyên and Giáng Kiều upon their marriage, and they said in ironic jest, “We have resided in the Golden Terrace and have long been separated from the world of desire. How could we have known that a Jade Maiden among us would now have a husband!” And Giáng Kiều responded, “Since [olden times] many female transcedents have taken spouses in the human world” 從來僊女多嫁人間. See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 2, 58.
102. The tale of Từ Thức marrying a female transcendent would come to inspire a variety of vernacular works, including a Nôm poetic retelling composed in 6–8 meter, as well as retellings in popular theater, such as *chèo*. On vernacular versions and their relationship to Nguyễn Dữ’s classical version, see Đỗ Thị Ngọc Diệp, “‘Từ Thức lấy vợ tiên’ trong truyện cổ tích, truyện truyền kỳ và



- truyện thơ Nôm,” [“Tù Thúc Marries a Transcendent’ in Ancient Legends, Transmission of Marvels, and Nôm Verse Tales] (master’s thesis, Đại Học Thái Nguyên, 2019), see especially page 15 for a list of published *quốc ngữ* versions of the “Legend of Tù Thúc’s Grotto,” and 28–30 for a list of *quốc ngữ* transcriptions of the Nôm story, which probably dates after Nguyễn Du’s *Truyện Kiều*. Also, this tale of Tù Thúc has a marked resemblance to that of Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇 entering Mount Tian Tai and coming upon a grotto, having dalliances with divine maidens, then leaving the grotto and returning to the human world that had already passed through some seven generations. On this tale by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), see Zhang Zhenjun, *Buddhism and Tales of the Supernatural*, 13, 227; Trương Đình Hoè, *Les immortels vietnamiens*, 79; and on its appearance in Yuan drama, see C.T. Hsia, Wai-Yee Li, and George Kao, eds., *The Columbia Anthology of Yuan Drama*, 372; and on its depictions in decorative art, see Zhang, “Dreams, Spirits, and Romantic Encounters,” 142–144.
103. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 206.
104. Grotto heavens are utopian realms hidden beneath mountains. They are paradisiacal worlds where transcendents dwell and where there is no illness, old age, or death. Ten great and thirty-six minor grotto heavens have been identified. See Robson, *Power of Place*; Hahn, “The Standard Taoist Mountain.” On the grotto heaven as a kind of “microcosmic calabash,” see Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 61–65. On the thirty-six grottos in Vietnam, see Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Người Việt Nam với đạo giáo*, 634–635; and in Chinese Daoism, see Franciscus Verellen, “The Beyond Within: Grotto Heavens (*dongtian* 洞天) in Taoist Ritual and Cosmology,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995): 265–290. The compilation *Random Records of Great Upheavals* attests to a vibrant culture of magical mountains and sacred caverns in northern Vietnam (tales 13, 24, 32, 37 in vol. 1; and tale 37 in vol. 2). See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 7, 171–172, 178–180, 183, 186, 214. Also, on an alternate meaning of grotto [*động* 洞] as a term for settlements in the southwest of the Chinese empire, see Kelley, “Inventing Traditions,” 175.
105. This is probably a reference to Wei Huacun 魏華存 (251–334), a historical Daoist adept, who was believed to have attained the Dao. Later, she was identified as the divine being that had revealed scriptures that would become the central texts of the Shangqing Daoist tradition. Wei Huacun would later be identified as a Grand Master of the Shangqing tradition and venerated as Lady of the Southern Marchmount [Nanyue furen 南嶽夫人]. See Robson, *Power of Place*, chapter 6. See also Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 105; Isabelle

- Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 115–120. On the textual figure of Lady Wei as the preeminent “writing woman” in late-imperial literature, see Berg, *Women and the Literary World*, 29, 55.
106. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 206.
107. This is a reference to the general idea of an unfathomably long span of time. The statement echoes the transcendent Ma Gu’s statement to Cai Jing in a tale from the *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* [*Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳], “Since I entered your service, I have seen the Eastern Sea turn to mulberry fields three times.” See Company, *Making Transcendents*, 262. On Ma Gu (“Miss Hemp”), see also Shafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time*, 90–102, and on Ma Gu / Ma Cô in Vietnamese traditions, see N. Nguyen, “Writing as Response and Translation,” 186–199.
108. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 206.
109. 家姬契合，誠是宿因。 Ibid., 207.
110. 妾聞仙可遇而難求，道不脩而自至，希奇之會，何代無之。 Ibid., 207.
111. 非若妾七情未洗，百感易生，跡紫府而累塵緣，身瓊臺而心濁世。 Ibid., 207.
112. 異日見此，無忘舊情。 Ibid., 209.
113. The fifth year of the Diên Ninh 延寧 reign period of the Lê Dynasty is 1458. He attended the festival in the ninth year of the Quang Thái 光泰 reign period of the Trần Dynasty, or 1396. Thus, it had been sixty-two years. In the narrative, the villagers say it had been some eighty years since his disappearance.
114. 結鳳侶於雲中，前緣已經已斷，訪仙山於海上，後會無由。 See Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, *Việt Nam Hán văn tiểu thuyết tùng san*, series 1, vol. 1, 210.
115. An alternative view might see Từ Thức as an earthbound transcendent. Departing into a mountain is a typical theme in narratives of earthbound transcendents, see Company, *Making Transcendents*, 57. In any case, he has still lost his domestic bliss with Giáng Hương.
116. I agree with the theoretical positions of scholars like Robert F. Company, Stephen R. Bokenkamp, David Frankfurter, and Robert Hymes who see religion (or religious traditions) less as coherent semiotic systems in the Geertzian sense, and more like culture defined as a set of resources, a toolkit of discursive frames and practices, some components of which, if seen from a certain perspective, may be deemed contradictory. Overall, scholars of the religions of Vietnam have yet to apply this theoretical insight to produce

reflexive research that can counter simplistic, essentialist narratives about supposed entities such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, “animism,” or “folk religion.” By contrast, numerous theoretically informed studies that question, deconstruct, and remedy such definitional and category problems can be found in scholarship on Chinese religions. See Robert F. Campany, “The Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (2003): 287–319; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “The Silkworm and the Bodhi Tree: The Lingbao Attempt to Replace Buddhism in China and Our Attempt to Place Lingbao Taoism,” in *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerway, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004), 317–339; David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). On culture as a “toolkit” of resources, see Ann Swidler, “What Anchors Cultural Practices,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001), 74–92; Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

117. I am referring to a trend in theorizing religion that is broadly known as the “social ontology of religion,” which sees religion less as an interior state of agreement with a set of propositional truth claims, and more as practices anchored at certain social sites. See Stanley K. Stowers, “Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Household and Families,” in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 5–19; Stanley K. Stowers, “The Ontology of Religion,” in *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, ed. Wili Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Equinox, 2008), 434–449. In this view, religion can also be described as socially constituted “forms of life.” See Kevin Schilbrack, “A Realist Social Ontology of Religion,” *Religion* 27, no. 2 (2017): 166. Also, within this view, religion can be seen as “a complex of culturally prescribed practices,” or a kind of social practice that makes transcendent meaning, experience, and power possible. See Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 22, 97; Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For instance, Stanley K. Stowers sees religion as first of all a kind of human doing. And as such, religion possesses a “social ontology,” because “the ontology of religion is a subset of human social ontology.” For Stowers, religion consists of “practical skills for living life day to day” and is enacted “at specific places in time and space.” For example, Stowers has examined sacrifice in ancient Mediterranean religions as forms of social exchange at certain sites (family, clan, village, city,

- etc.). See Stanley K. Stowers, “The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings versus the Religion of Meaning, Essences and Textual Mysteries,” in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice: Images, Acts, Meanings*, ed. Jennifer Knust and Zsuzsa Verhelyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.
118. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi; Smith, *Religion: What It Is*, 46; and on J.Z. Smith, see Schilbrack, “A Realist Social Ontology,” 173–175.
119. On “subject positions” in Chinese contexts, see Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9–10. And on the importance of the family, local community, and voluntary associations as the social contexts of religious practice in Chinese religions, see Philip Clart, “Popular Religion,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall L. Nadeau (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 219–235. There are important comparative possibilities here, which future research should explore. See also Catherine Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of ‘Popular Religion,’” *History of Religions* 29, no. 1 (1989): 35–57.
120. The scholarship on avenging ghosts [*yuanhun* 冤魂, or aggrieved souls] in the Chinese religious context is rich and complex. For a useful bibliography, see Zhang Zhenjun, “From Demonic to Karmic Retribution: Changing Concepts of ‘Bao’ in Early Medieval China as Seen in the ‘You Ming Lu,’” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 66, no. 3 (2013): 267–287. On the Vietnamese context, see Mai, “How Not to Become a Ghost”; and Đỗ Thiện, “Unjust-Death Deification and Burnt Offering: Towards an Integrative View of Popular Religion in Contemporary Southern Vietnam,” in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 161–193.
121. For studies of donative steles and their social and religious contexts, see N. Tran, *Familial Properties*; Papin, “Saving for the Soul”; Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, *Một số vấn đề*; Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, *Văn bia thời Lê xứ Kinh Bắc và sự phản ánh sinh hoạt làng xã* [The Stelae of the Kinh Bắc Region during the Lê Period: Reflections of Village Life] (Hà Nội: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2003).