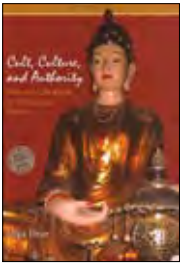


Vietnam



Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Lieu Hanh in Vietnamese History*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. xi + 260 pages, b/w map, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, US\$52.00; ISBN-978-0-8248-2972-8.

LIÊU HẠnh is a potent deity. She is the only female among the Four Immortals of Vietnam, and a main figure in Vietnam's Mother Goddess religion (Đạo Mẫu). Although not usually incarnated during spirit possession ceremonies, Liễu HẠnh has an important role as the goddess who presides over the Realm of the Sky. A number of ethnographic writings have examined the Mother Goddess religion and its spirit possession rituals, but *Cult, Culture, and Authority* is the only English-language history of the goddess Liễu HẠnh.

The history of Liễu HẠnh is complicated. Although stories say that her origins are celestial, and she is widely known as a daughter of the Taoist Jade Emperor, she has had several earthly incarnations. She cannot be clearly verified as a histori-

cal figure, but neither is she entirely celestial (3). Importantly, these contradictory stories have allowed the goddess to be “imagined differently at different times by different groups of people and by different institutions” (8). *Cult, Culture, and Authority* seeks to explain this process, illustrating that such stories have been a “means for expressing philosophical, ideological, or political messages” (11). Tying the past to the present, Dror illustrates how the image and history of Liễu Hạnh has been used to promote the interests of literati and the state in the past as well as in the present.

To present her argument Dror examines a number of texts from the eleventh through the twentieth centuries. Chapter 1 analyzes eleventh through fifteenth-century texts to establish the context of writing about Liễu Hạnh (13). Beginning in the eleventh century, writings about spirits emphasized their divine nature and little attention was given to their historicity. This changed in the fourteenth century with the publication of *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*, a work that “politicized the world of spirits” by writing about deities in order to illustrate the “good and bad customs of villages” (20–21). During the fifteenth century writings about spirits focused on organizing and ranking them, and spirits were provided with biographies “to demonstrate their worthiness for acknowledgement by the political authorities” (30).

Chapter 2 focuses on the appearance of Liễu Hạnh’s cult. This is difficult to determine because stories about her were written post-factum and dates for the construction of her shrines are unreliable. Although four stories date the appearance of her cult to the early Lê dynasty, all others place her appearance in the year 1557. Dror argues that the earliest reliable story was written by Đoàn Thị Diễm in the eighteenth century, and it formed the basis for many later versions. The story places Liễu Hạnh’s appearance at a time characterized by extreme turbulence and warfare between the Lê and Mạc dynasties. Confucian dominance was in decline, and the veneration of popular spirits flourished. The cult originated in an area where important battles were fought, and may have been a “force to alleviate the hardships of women’s lives” (80). Traveling female merchants disseminated it, and by the eighteenth century the cult of Liễu Hạnh was widespread.

Chapter 3 examines three works written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Hán, the classical Chinese language. Dror focuses on *Story of the Vân Cát Goddess* written by Đoàn Thị Diễm, which describes multiple incarnations of Liễu Hạnh. Drawing parallels between the lives of the author and the goddess, Dror asserts that Đoàn Thị Diễm “used the deity to tell her own story of a woman’s position in society” (104) and elevated Liễu Hạnh as “a figure worthy of emulation by women in the highest classes of society” (104). At the same time, the story may have sanitized the goddess, making her “available for use in philosophical and religious debates” (118).

Chapter 4 discusses two works on Liễu Hạnh written in vernacular (*Nôm*) poetry, each with its own purpose. One perceives her as a divine being “beyond human morality” and the other describes her as “a paragon of moral virtue” (121). Together these stories illustrate how the cult of Liễu Hạnh was used to express the agendas of those who thought and wrote about her. It also documents the process by which she became a symbol of Vietnamese nationalism.

Chapter 5 concludes the work by analyzing changes in perceptions of Liễu Hạnh during several periods in Vietnamese history. Popular cults were viewed as superstitious and dangerous during precolonial and socialist regimes, but they were viewed as markers of traditional culture that had potential value to the state during colonial and postsocialist regimes.

Dror's analysis of the contradictory and confusing texts about Liễu Hạnh is commendable, but some assertions have not convinced this reader. For example, Dror says that Liễu Hạnh may have been a prostitute, a statement that is based on the writings of Adriano di St. Thecla, an Italian missionary (65). Although he spent more than thirty years in Vietnam and his writings are described as "trustworthy" (67), this reader is not convinced that di St. Thecla's story should carry more weight than others. Liễu Hạnh also has been known as an innkeeper, a vendor of fruits, a mother, and as a celibate and dutiful daughter. Why, then, does the rumor of prostitution take precedence?

Although Dror writes that her work is historic, and not anthropological, she did interview a number of temple keepers and practitioners of the cult, attended a festival for Liễu Hạnh held in Phủ Dầy, and interviewed a man who claimed to be a direct descendant of the goddess. She describes séances for the goddess and discusses the community of spirit mediums who worship Liễu Hạnh. Unfortunately, these descriptions are not clearly situated in space (northern Vietnam) or time (the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries) and there are few references to contemporary writings. Consequently, some readers might mistakenly assume they accurately represent all spirit mediums of the Mother Goddess religion. For example, although Liễu Hạnh is described as "the pinnacle of an entire pantheon of deities associated with spirit possession" (74), this is mostly only true for northern mediums. Also, although one author wrote that some individuals turn to mediumship out of "repulsion to household chores" (77), people most frequently become spirit mediums in response to extreme illness or misfortune. Sadly, the lack of ethnographic data makes it seem as if spirit mediums are less devout and less spiritual than they actually are.

These caveats aside, *Cult, Culture, and Authority* is a fascinating book and Dror clearly proves her point that writings about Liễu Hạnh reflect more about the authors than the goddess herself. A well written and enjoyable read, the book should be required reading for anyone interested in Vietnamese history or popular religions.

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