In Vietnam, children learn that filial respect and gratitude are considered the highest moral virtues. In school, students are taught legends, proverbs, sayings, and folk songs in which the dualistic notions of mother and father, femininity and masculinity, yin and yang are thoroughly embedded. Indeed, the embedding begins in infancy, a perfect example being the following verse, which is used to lull babies to sleep in their cradles:

Father’s deeds are as great as Mount Thái Sơn,
Mother’s compassion is like the water of an eternal spring,
One should revere mother and respect father wholeheartedly
To fulfill the filial piety of a child.¹

From a broader perspective, Vietnamese share a sense of their common origins in that legend has it that they are descendants of Father-Dragon Lạc Long Quân and Mother-Bird/Fairy Âu Cơ [Cha Rồng and Mẹ Tiên]. This couple is unquestionably a primary reference point in Vietnamese mythology, yet it is by no means the only one. Exploring key features of the pairing of mythic mothers with mythic fathers, in this article we examine the metaphorical extension of mother/father images beyond the family context by considering the role of such imagery in the reproduction of key emblems of religious and national identity. Our point of departure is the emphasis that scholars (and practitioners) have increasingly placed upon the role played by

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women in Vietnamese culture as revealed by myth and history alike. Being anthropologists, we don’t intend to try to sort out what can and cannot be accepted as empirical historical fact. Drawing on the available evidence and debates about it, our aim is to identify an enduring cultural pattern. We then explore the evolving historical dynamic with which it has been associated and to which it has contributed. Of central importance here is a gendered symbolic gestalt that pairs mother goddesses with deities revered as fathers of the nation.

To better appreciate the way this symbolic gestalt functions, we focus on a popular pairing that has (re-)emerged since Renovation [Đổi Mới]: that of the Mother Goddess Lý Hoàng and the military general Trần Hưng Đạo. Following the revival of religious practices since Renovation—which has seen both the return of traditional beliefs and practices and the emergence of new forms—the cults of Lý Hoàng and Trần Hưng Đạo are among those that have become prominent. One often hears the popular phrase “August is Father’s death anniversary; March is Mother’s death anniversary” [Tháng Tám giỗ Cha, tháng Ba giỗ Mẹ], particularly at festivals of the Việt (Kinh) people in the Red River Delta. Among other things, the saying is used to help account for the variety of religious activities that occur during the lunar months of August and March. Although not all would agree, most contemporary religious practitioners in the delta maintain that the phrase refers to Mother Goddess Lý Hoàng and Trần Hưng Đạo. Meanwhile, scholarly literature written since Renovation has often been at pains to emphasize that venerating mothers and fathers, particularly the pairing of these two figures, can be considered a manifestation of Vietnamese cultural identity.

The cult of Lý Hoàng, known popularly as the Four Palaces cult [Tứ Phú], is based upon spirit possession by spirit mediums who claim to be in constant and intimate contact with the goddess and her subordinates. Trần Hưng Đạo defeated the invading Mongol and Chinese armies in the thirteenth century and thereafter became the most prominent symbol of Vietnam’s national tradition. Having been venerated and worshipped for centuries in a cult centered on exorcism, he is now popularly revered as a deity and called a “saint.” These two cults—the Four Palaces cult and the Saint Trần cult—attract devotees not only in the north but elsewhere as well, following migration from the delta.
Given that scholars have come to emphasize the way Vietnamese culture continued to honor women despite the influence of Confucianism, in this article we primarily focus on the mother side of the equation, that is, on the Liễu Hạnh cult, before turning to its explicit linkage to the Saint Trần cult. One advantage of our approach is that it draws attention to, and helps us to properly appreciate, the most popular female cult in the north. Another is that it helps us to recognize the contribution of Liễu Hạnh’s cult to the distribution of Trần Hưng Đạo’s cult. As the supreme deity of one of Vietnam’s most popular cults, Liễu Hạnh is spoken of in terms comparable to those applied to Trần Hưng Đạo. Her reputation and relationship to good and evil is, however, decidedly more complicated—which tells us much about the gendered nature of spiritual power in Vietnam. To speak of fathers and mothers is to speak of masculinity and femininity and the forces that unite and divide males and females. The gender dynamics that have served to differentiate the two cults have simultaneously shaped the character of the deities venerated by their followers, many of whom are devotees of both, which in turn helps explain the mingling and mutual dependence that has become a feature of rituals devoted to them.

Our inquiry begins with an exploration of the relevance of the principles of yin and yang to the understanding of mother and father figures in Vietnamese mythology and the pairing of one with the other. We discuss the evidence to be found in indicative historical sources to show how deeply embedded in Vietnamese cultural history the mother/father symbolic dyad has become, and how contemporary examples of it in Vietnamese popular culture both reflect and refract these antecedents. Our argument is that the mythologizing of mother/father imagery, while being premised upon familiar binary oppositions, actually articulates the complex complementarity that is integral to the way dualisms of gender have acquired cultural significance in Vietnam. On this basis, we explore the historical growth of the Liễu Hạnh cult, and the contemporary connection between it and the cult of Trần Hưng Đạo. We argue that while the coexistence of the two cults was noted centuries ago, the connection drawn between this particular Mother and Father only became explicit as a response to the quest for national cultural identity that has been such a feature of the postcolonial nationalism of the last two decades.
The Yin-Yang Binary in Vietnamese Culture

Following Claude Lévi-Strauss, a vast anthropological (and feminist) literature has focused upon the role played by binary oppositions in mythic thought, including the dichotomy that distinguishes between males and females and opposes them to one another. Lévi-Strauss argued that the opposition or contradiction expressed by such dualisms is not absolute but rather is “resolved” by mediating categories, juxtapositions, and analogies. Often this happens because although they are nominally equal and opposite, one of the pair typically assumes a position of dominance over (even subsumes) the other—man vis-à-vis woman, for example. The male/female, father/mother, yang/yin dualisms that are so pervasive in Chinese and Vietnamese thought provide a perfect illustration of the kind of mythic thinking that interested Lévi-Strauss.

Our aim here is not to present a comprehensive account of the binaries that characterize gender relations in Vietnamese culture, or the role of these binaries in the interplay between patriarchal tendencies and countervailing pressures. Rather, our aim is to highlight what can be learned from the way these matters have been debated by Vietnamese scholars with a view to developing a better understanding of the pairing of mythic mothers and fathers in general, and of Mother Liễu Hạnh and Saint Trần in particular.

The popularity of gendered dualisms is everywhere evident in Vietnamese discourse. Yin [âm] and yang [dương] thought, in particular, plays a crucial role; Neil Jamieson even argues that this tradition of thinking is all-pervasive. Yin-yang thinking in Vietnam manifests itself in the coupling of paired ideas, that is to say, in “counterpart-thought” [tư duy cặp đôi]. Nguyên Đăng Thúc refers to this as “the principle of twinning” [nguyên lý sinh đôi]. Vietnamese call “country” đất nước (literally “land and water”), for instance, or sometimes sông núi [river and mountain], and trời đất [sky and earth]. An extreme example of comingling or subsumption of the dualities might be the eighth-century king Phùng Hưng, who went so far as to call himself “the Great Father and Mother King” [Bố cái Đại Vuông].

The twinning of female with male is no less frequently found in religious thinking. For example, Buddha in Vietnam has taken female as well as male form. Kwan Kung and T’ien Hou [Empress of Heaven], two popular Chinese deities worshipped by Chinese residents [người Hoa] in Hồ Chí Minh
City, are grouped as a “couple,” and their temples are called “His Lordship/Grandfather Pagoda” [Chùa Ông] and “Her Ladyship/Grandmother Pagoda” [Chùa Bà]. Gender balancing can also be seen in the Four Palaces religion of Goddess Liễu Hạnh. Although it is regarded as a woman’s cult that venerates the Holy Mothers—from the four natural domains that reflect the yin-yang concept: earth-heaven, water-mountain—male spirits are nonetheless invoked as counterparts to the female spirits, Great Mandarins, Princes, and Boy-Attendants being juxtaposed to Holy Mothers, Dames, and Young Ladies.

We are in no position to say when exactly Vietnamese culture came to be influenced by the concepts of yin and yang, or precisely which elements of Chinese thought may originally have had the greatest bearing upon the importance accorded to these concepts. Rather than the remote (and arguably inaccessible) facts themselves, what we here wish to draw attention to is the nationalist aspect that has come to the fore in these debates. The yin-yang gestalt has been elevated by Vietnamese scholars to the status of a dominant “principle” [nguyên lý] and a “philosophy” [triết lý].10 In his influential book, Discovering the Identity of Vietnamese Culture, Trần Ngọc Thêm even argues that whereas the tradition of thought associated with the Eight Triagrams [bát quái] is a Chinese legacy, “yin-yang philosophy” [triết lý âm dương] is indigenous to Southeast Asia, and Chinese culture actually borrowed the words “yang” (meaning “gods” and “heaven”) and “yin” (meaning “mother”) from Southeast Asian languages (Chăm, Mường, ethnic Việt).11 Although his assertions remain controversial, for the purposes of our argument it is sufficient that such claims can plausibly be made.

Vietnamese scholars like to entertain the idea that unlike Chinese culture, Vietnamese culture is a “yin-respecting” culture [văn hóa trọng âm]. In contrast to the imported Confucian attitude of valuing men above women [trọng nam khinh nữ], in Vietnam the feminine element is deemed to be more emphatic than the masculine.12 Be that as it may, in many compound Vietnamese words, yin is placed before yang, such as vợ chồng [wife and husband], chẵn lẻ [even and odd], and vuông tròn [square and round]. In Vietnamese, large things are also often referred to as female, such as ngón cái [female finger] for “thumb,” sông cái [female river] for “a big river,” đường cái [female road] for “a main road,” and so forth. The Chinese influence is
evident, Trần Ngọc Thêm argues, where yang is placed before yin—for example, cha mẹ [father and mother], trai gái [boy and girl], đức cái [male and female]. His reasoning is that in the language of ethnic groups in the center of Vietnam, where Chinese culture did not have as great an impact, the word order is reversed: mother/father, female/male.13

There is ample evidence from folklore and oral history, as Nguyên Van Kỳ shows, that Vietnamese women have been portrayed as being resourceful, independent, and brave. See, for example, the saying “When the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting” [Giặc đến nhà dân bà cùng đánh].14 Here again, though, despite an openness to alternative explanations, the tendency is to attribute any and all patriarchal tendencies to Confucianism. Prior to its imposition, and persisting despite it, we are encouraged to find an underlying “matrilineal” or “matriarchal” ethos. From an anthropological standpoint, such arguments suffer from a confusion of kinship principles and power dynamics. We cannot debate these matters here; suffice it to say that matrilineal kinship systems do not in and of themselves make for matriarchal societies (even allowing that patrilineal systems may encourage patriarchal practices). To acknowledge this is not to take away from the fact that a culture that privileges images of powerful women gives them a degree of leverage lacking in cultures that deny women representation of this kind. Indeed, this is a key reason why Liễu Hạnh is such an interesting figure and her cult such an important phenomenon. As Nguyên Van Kỳ puts it, pointing to “the autonomy” of the deity’s disciples and the fact that with “few exceptions” they are all females, shows “how relative the position of men may be.”15

It certainly seems probable that the valuing of the feminine element did reflect women’s prominence in Vietnamese society,16 and that this may have helped compromise the impact of the Confucianist ideology that was elevated to a dominant position under the Lê Dynasty (1428–1788). Certainly, the influence of that ideology was not uniform throughout society. The Korean scholar Insun Yu argues that although the elite followed Confucianism, most of the population maintained Vietnamese traditions consistent with the important role of women in families. In terms of subsistence, Vietnamese women made a major contribution to the support of their families. They also had the legal right to possess private property (as stipulated in the Hồng Đức Code of the Lê) and to control family property.17
Given the equivocal position that women actually occupy in Vietnamese society,\textsuperscript{18} we wouldn’t want to exaggerate these so-called matriarchal tendencies. Rather, let us simply reiterate that there is no denying the importance of a cultural legacy that prides itself on respecting and honoring women [trọng phụ nữ]. For the popularity of female deities in Vietnam does appear to be attributable to the social circumstances of women and to their valorization as women. It seems reasonable to state that gender dualism in Vietnam therefore not only entails, but even tends to encourage complementarity.

The fact that there are intellectuals today intent upon recuperating the underlying meaning of the yin-yang complex in the name of Vietnamese culture is itself testament to its enduring national significance. Even more to the point is how this has been done: by paradigmatically grounding the entire cosmological edifice in the duality and complementarity of fathers and mothers. Rather than acting as simple binary opposites, yin and yang elements infuse one another; they emphasize relationships. Yin has yang elements, yang has yin elements—the ultimate goal being to achieve a balance between the two [quân bình âm dương], a balance that relates mother to father and both to earth and heaven, as well as to a wide range of other phenomena that are construed in cruder binary terms.

The Mother-Father Dyad

To speak of the position of women in Vietnamese society is to speak of the position of women within the family—of women as wives and daughters, certainly, but most importantly of women as mothers.\textsuperscript{19} Analogous to Trần Ngọc Thêm’s desire to stress the fact that Vietnam’s is a “yin-inclined culture,” the late cultural historian Trần Quốc Vương has argued that the “Mother Principle” [nguyên lý Mẹ] is endogenous to Vietnamese and Southeast Asian cultures, whereas the “Father Principle” [nguyên lý Cha] is an exogenous concept derived from Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{20} Again, from the standpoint of our own argument, the important thing may not be the accuracy or inaccuracy of such a claim but the fact that contemporary intellectuals are willing and able to emphasize the maternal in this way. That such an impulse continues to influence those devoted to analyzing and promoting the national culture is itself significant. As Philip Taylor’s detailed discussion
shows, such claims may be even more revealing for being questionable than for being right.21 Origin myths and ideologies are often more instructive than the actual events they mask and misconstrue.

Much depends upon how we interpret the evidence. Of the one thousand entries in Di tích lịch sử văn hóa Việt nam [Historical and Cultural Relics in Vietnam], published by the Institute of Hán-Nôm Literature [Viện Hán-Nôm] in 1991, only 250 are dedicated to female spirits. Yet it also has to be said that female deities have long been figures of major significance in popular religion. In Hội Chấn Biên [Collection of Genuine Records], written by Thanh Hóa Tụ in 1847 and revised by others later, fourteen of the twenty-seven deities are female.22 For their part, Đỗ Thị Hà and Mai Thị Ngọc Chúc have listed seventy-five of the most common female deities. Many goddesses have been honored as Mother [Mẫu], even without male partners or counterparts.23

“Mother,” or Mẫu, signifies a woman dynastically honored for her contribution to her nation or region. Examples of honorific titles include “Mother of the Nation” [Quốc Mẫu], including Quốc Mẫu Âu Cơ, the mythical mother of the nation; “Mother of the Kingdom” [Vương Mẫu], such as the mother of mythical hero Saint Gióng; “Buddhist Mother” [Phật Mẫu], including Man Vương, the mother of the natural deities of Cloud, Rain, Thunder, and Lightning;24 and “Saint Mother” [Thánh Mẫu], including Ý Lan (the wife of a Lý Dynasty king) and Liễu Hạnh. According to Đoàn Lâm, such titles were conferred by royal decree written in classical Chinese and remain widespread in the north.25 Prior to the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), there was no tradition of conferring such titles in the south, and the term “Bà Chúa” [“Noble Dame” or “Lady”] remains more prominent there. Among female deities in the south today, there are two popular goddesses: the Lady of the Realm [Bà Chúa Xứ] and the Black Lady [Bà Đen].26

By contrast, the appellation “Father” seems rarely if ever to have been officially granted. It has often, though, been popularly applied to certain male deities as a way of providing a balance or a counterpart relationship: a particular mother deity is associated with (though not actually wedded to) a particular father deity. Hence, although there are more temples and pagodas devoted to male than female deities, the figure of the mother is in key respects more prominent in Vietnamese culture than that of the father.
In fact, there are remarkably few “Fathers” in Vietnamese history who function as counterparts to the many mother goddesses populating the religious pantheon.

The mother/father coupling does, however, characterize the nation’s origin myth. Legend has it that Mother Âu Cơ, who was a fairy as well as a bird, married a dragon, Lạc Long Quân [Lac Dragon Lord]. The story is first documented in Lĩnh Nam chích quái [Marvelous Stories in Lĩnh Nam], edited in the fifteenth century. Âu Cơ gave birth to a bundle of one hundred eggs, which hatched into one hundred sons. Fifty of them followed their mother to the forests and mountains, the rest following their father to the oceans. Some of the sons who followed Âu Cơ became Hùng kings, the ancestors of the nation.27

The yin-yang dyad is also manifest in the myth. Not only does Lạc Long Quân/dragon/water (yin) marry Âu Cơ/bird/terrestrial (yang), but he also possesses yang attributes and governs water (yin), while Âu Cơ possesses yin attributes and governs heaven, mountain, and forests (yang).28 Another interpretation of this mythical couple sees the legend from the standpoint of cultural geography. Keith Taylor believes that this myth reveals “a sea-oriented culture coming to terms with a continental environment,”29 while Trần Quốc Vương sees the Âu Cơ–Lạc Long Quân myth as a reflection of the “littoral character” [bến sạc bến đào] of Vietnamese culture, which has been shaped by both land and sea. Mother Âu Cơ represents the mainland; Father Lạc Long Quân, the sea. From this perspective, according to Trần Quốc Vương, there are also three other religious “couples” in which wives are indigenous and husbands come from the sea: Buddhist Mother Man Ngu and Khâu A La (Idia) in the north, Poh Inu-Nagara and Prince Bác Hải (China) in the center, Princess Liệu Diệp (Phù Nam) and Kaundinya (India) in the south.30

Mother-father couples proliferate at the local and regional level, especially in the north. These have included Âu Cơ and Sơn Tinh in mountainous areas, Liệu Hạnh and Vua Cha Bát Hải [the King Father of Eight Oceans] in Thái Bình Province, and Liệu Hạnh and the sixth-century hero Lý Bí in Nam Định Province.31 But apart from Mother Âu Cơ and Father Lạc Long Quân, there is still debate about who can truly be said to be a Mother or Father of the Vietnamese. Among those identified have been
Liêu Hạnh and Chữ Đồng Tụ. Liêu Hạnh was one of the first mother goddesses to have her myths appropriated by the scholar-elite and dynastically legitimated. Chữ Đồng Tụ’s mythic partner was Tiên Dung, yet like Liêu Hạnh he became associated with trade and commerce and regarded as a progenitor of Vietnamese entrepreneurship [tô nghê buôn]. Writing in 1968, the historian Nguyễn Đăng Thục suggested that Chữ Đồng Tụ and Liêu Hạnh could even be regarded as the nation’s first ideal couple, a symbolic pairing or model that was amenable to modification with historical development.

Of greater salience is the association of both with Nội Đạo Tràng [the School of Inner Religion]. A Taoist-like cult that engaged in magic and exorcism while asserting its Buddhist foundations, Nội Đạo emerged in the seventeenth century in Thanh Hóa Province. Indicative of its influence, the school was said to have “one hundred thousand students.” Chữ Đồng Tụ (known also as Chù Đạo Tọ) came to be considered a forefather of Vietnamese Taoism, a mantle that would eventually be assumed by Trần Hưng Đạo, with whom he has often been assimilated. Chữ Đồng Tụ continues to be worshipped in many temples, particularly in Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An provinces in the center but also in the northern provinces of Hưng Yên and Hải Dương. Liêu Hạnh, meanwhile, is said to have come into serious conflict with the school (see more on this below).

As the Nguyễn Dynasty’s influence spread southward, according to Nguyễn Đăng Thục, the image of Father would come to be associated with Lê Văn Duyệt, a popular southern deity. An early nineteenth-century viceroy, he is now known as a spirit who maintains order and chases away criminals and ghosts. He is also a patron of business, particularly among the ethnic Chinese and foreign merchants. Similarly, the northern Mother Liêu Hạnh would become Mother Thiên Yana in the center and Black Lady in the south. Such transformations also happened the other way around, the image of Liêu Hạnh being subject to southern influence as the Việt expanded south.

Apart from Mother-Fairy Âu Cơ and Father-Dragon Lạc Long Quân, it is Liêu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo who have come to be the most popular pairing among devotees—particularly in the Red River Delta but also in the south owing to the southward migration of northerners. In both regions,
Trần Hùng Đạo has been increasingly incorporated into the pantheons of all those groups worshipping Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh.\(^{38}\)

**Liễu Hạnh: Her Cult and Women**

We have no way of knowing for sure whether or not Liễu Hạnh was an actual historical figure raised to the status of a deity, but in Phú Giàng (Nam Định Province), the holy land of her cult, there is no shortage of vestiges that testify to her human origins: her parents’ house, her village homeland (Văn Cát Village), the village homeland of her husband (Tiên Hướng Village), and her grave. It might therefore be that she was a real woman who suffered a premature death and was first deified by local people.\(^{39}\) Whatever the historical truth, it took the ongoing retelling and ritualization over several centuries of the myths associated with her to elevate her cult to a level where she could become a figure of quite extraordinary national significance and notoriety. For that to happen, she had to be made to matter to society’s powerful, not just the powerless.

The legends associated with Liễu Hạnh are diverse. Some are even mutually incompatible. The “earliest and the fullest” version of her story is Văn Cát Thần Nữ [The Story of Văn Cát Goddess] by the renowned scholar and woman of letters Đoàn Thị Diễm, written in the 1730s in classical Chinese. A response to it came in the form of a story emanating from the Annals of Nôi Đạo Tràng. In the meantime, Nguyễn Công Trọng wrote his vernacular Nôm poem “Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa Điện Âm” [Phonetic Transcription about Princess Liễu Hạnh] in the first half of the nineteenth century, while Kiều Oánh Mẫu popularized existing stories in 1910 by writing Tiền Phà Dichel Luc [Translation of a Fairy’s Record].\(^{40}\)

Liễu Hạnh is said to have been a daughter of the heavenly Jade Emperor. Exiled to earth, she was born in Vũ Bàn, Nam Định Province, in 1557. She married, had children, and disappeared when she was 21 years old, returning to heaven at the end of her period of exile. Missing her life on earth, she then returned several times to look after her family and to travel. She appeared in many beautiful spots, including Lạng Sơn (the province bordering China), West Lake in the capital Thăng Long (Hà Nội), and in Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An provinces in the center. A beautiful inn proprietress, Liễu Hạnh composed poems to puzzle Confucian scholars and was
supernaturally powerful. She gave blessings to good people, as well as punish-
ing the bad and those who dared to ridicule her. Men passing by would drink at her inn and pay court to her. Those who took liberties and went beyond simple courtship were punished with death or insanity. People feared her and built temples to pray to her. The Lê court (in the reign of Cân Nh Trị, 1667–1671) considered her an evil spirit, sending troops to destroy her temple. In revenge, she caused an epidemic that devastated the whole region; cattle as well as people sickened and died. To placate her, the court built a temple for her and then conferred her with titles.

Later accounts dating from the early nineteenth century tell contrasting stories. One has Liêu Hạnh defeated by the magicians of Nơi Đạo, then rescued by the Bodhisattva Kwan-Yin, which led to her submitting to Kwan-Yin and becoming a disciple of both Buddhism and Nơi Đạo. In addition to tensions between rival religious factions, these claims are indicative of a dynasty’s attempts to subdue and subsume an “unorthodox” cult. Yet it could also work the other way. In an edition of Hội Chân Diên arguably written in 1847 but later revised and abridged, Đoan Thị Diễm’s story is basically repeated but deviates to celebrate Nơi Đạo’s Taoist currents. Rather than describing Liêu Hạnh as submitting to Kwan-Yin, this version depicts Buddhism as having to accept her into its temples “on a par with its own deities.” The fact that this telling shifts her birth to the Mạc period is indicative of the dynastic rewriting of history and is perhaps also connected to contemporary events, it being a story written as much to impress foreigners, who had by then emerged as a threat, as it was for the Vietnamese themselves.

Đoan Thị Diễm’s version of the Liêu Hạnh story had clearly been inspired by accounts already familiar to her. To what extent she inflected or reinterpreted them is difficult to say. The authors who followed her certainly rewrote the story according to their own agendas. All the stories nonetheless agree on this point: Liêu Hạnh was charismatic, beautiful, and tempestuous—that is to say, dangerously exciting. But she is also portrayed as being an “evil” tà or vicious spirit thàm dỗ whom the populace feared and kings wished to tame. According to Olga Dror, in 1750 the Italian missionary Adriano di St. Thecla wrote in Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses [A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinenses] that Liêu Hạnh was said to have sung “disgracefully and impudently” and
that, “being jealous,” people killed her and threw her into the river. These events would certainly help account for the fear she inspired—one legacy of an unfortunate, premature, violent, or tragic death being a restless soul or malevolent spirit who wanders among the living wreaking vengeance.

Đoàn Thị Diệm’s account suggests that Liễu Hạnh’s cult may have become prominent in the sixteenth century during the reign of the Mạc (1527–1593). The Lê, promoting Confucianism and hostile to Buddhism and Taoism, had tried to curtail folk beliefs and practices. When the Lê were overthrown by the Mạc in 1527, a revival of folk religion and a decline in Confucianism followed.

Warfare between the Lê and the Mạc had made the second half of the century especially turbulent. The warfare between the northern [Bắc triều] Mạc, in Thăng Long, and the southern [Nam triều] Lê-Trịnh, in Thanh Hóa Province between the outer region [Đặng Ngoài] of the Lê-Trịnh and the inner region [Đặng Trong] of the Nguyễn (1627–1786), further divided the country. The restoration and emasculation of the Lê by the Trịnh saw the turbulence perpetuated into the nineteenth century, by which time the influence of European merchant adventurers and missionaries was becoming ever more decisive.

Given this context, it is hardly surprising that key events in Liễu Hạnh’s legend and the temples advertising them would be located at sites of strategic significance. Her homeland of Phú Giáo in Nam Định Province linked the capital with southern districts. As already mentioned, she is said to have appeared in the capital itself, on the border with China, and in the central provinces that suffered most in the civil wars. Her appearance in areas of critical military importance—as “Mother of the Whole World” [Mẫu nghi thiên hạ], for example, on the border between the north and the south—reflected the northern polity’s determination to demarcate its territory by placing female spirits on the fringes where rule was weak.

Dynastic rulers and the literati, together and separately, played a key role in legitimating, unifying, and standardizing—that is to say, rationalizing—key spirit cults. As James Watson has pointed out, local spirits were promoted by the authorities for a variety of reasons. Dynastic rulers sought to incorporate and control “unorthodox” deities. Titles were granted not only as a sign of recognition but also to assert authority over local beliefs and practices.
The titles that Liễu Hạnh was awarded by the Lê Dynasty—“Golden Princess to Whom Sacrifices Are Made as to the God of War” [Mã Hoàng công chúa] and “the Great General (King) Who Grants Victory and Peace” [Chế Thánh Hòa Đروع Đại Vương]—connect the deity to the story of the nation in that she is honored for helping the king to fight the enemy.50

As important as dynastic assertions of hegemony were in promoting and controlling the cult of Liễu Hạnh, it was the devotees themselves who were responsible for its diffusion throughout the country. The fact that Liễu Hạnh’s temples were located along heavily trafficked routes reflects the importance of traders in the dissemination of her cult—especially female traders. Liễu Hạnh’s homeland of Phú Giảng was a center of maritime as well as land-based trade between the north and the south. Her legend speaks of her appearing to men in the form of a beautiful tavern owner or innkeeper, or as a vendor of food and drink. She was a glamorous and talented merchant capable of intellectually defeating the Confucian scholar-elite, and it is easy to see how she would have attracted the devotion of women who were petty entrepreneurs. Her frequent journeying between heaven and earth and her apparent reluctance to be too tightly bound by domestic responsibilities fitted with her remarkable independence of spirit. Here was a mobile, self-reliant figure living by her wits with whom women experienced in the cut-and-thrust of trade would have been readily able to identify. In any case, the cult thrived along with the emerging commercial economy.51

The arrival of foreign merchants (Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French) from the sixteenth century on had led to the establishment of urban centers such as Hội An and Phú Hiền. The dominant role of women in entrepreneurship had surprised foreign visitors, including William Dampier, who commented upon their competence in regards to money changing and the management of their finances.52 He might have been even more surprised if he had known that it was women such as these who would be responsible for the spread of what was destined to become one of the nation’s most influential religious cults. For only women who had made a success of themselves in business were in a position to incur the expense associated with establishing and maintaining shrines.

One reason women were able to rise to prominence as traders and entertainers, to travel and spread the cult, was that it was wartime, and their
husbands and fathers were away fighting. Liêu Hạnh’s homeland in the heart of the Mạc Dynasty was subject to wholesale military conscription, the contending forces regularly passing through the province. Deprived of their husbands and having to fend for themselves, women suffering the consequences of war were likely to be encouraged by the image of a holy mother aided by and aiding a saintly father. Men may still not have been inclined to venerate female deities, doing so to a limited degree if at all, but from a woman’s point of view, as Dror puts it, who “better to understand their troubles than another woman, a female deity?” It was not merely because she was “useful,” though, that the Mother Goddess attracted devotees; it was because the festivals and séances organized by these women were spectacular sights. They not only augmented the popularity and prosperity of her cult; they also helped stabilize it.53

Despite the increased importance of trade and commerce and the growing influence of those involved in it—or perhaps because of it—women merchants still had to contend with the Confucian legacy. It disparaged them not only as women but also as traders. Of the four social categories—the scholar-elite [sĩ], agriculturalists [nông], artisans [công], and traders [thương]—traders were ranked lowest, trade being disdained and stigmatized. Status disparity often functions as a spur to social assertion, and elevation and dissemination of a cult dedicated to a female deity may well have helped these women to pursue their ambitions and advertise their achievements.

That said, it would be a mistake to reduce Liêu Hạnh’s elevation to women’s pursuit of their material interests alone. She could be mobilized to speak to and stand for a variety of (even contradictory) ideas and interests. The implications of this for her pairing as a mother figure with Trần Hưng Đạo as a father figure indicate that they are not simply opposites, inversions of one another—no more than any other woman merely mirrors her partner in being counterposed to him.

Liêu Hạnh vis-à-vis Trần Hưng Đạo

On the face of it, the pairing of these two deities seems counterintuitive. Liêu Hạnh has long incited controversy, even to the extent of being indicted as an evil and “unorthodox” spirit. By contrast, Trần Hưng Đạo has been
universally lauded and admired, his cult being supported by dynastic leaders from the very beginning. He has remained an “orthodox” figure whose achievements and character continue to be officially celebrated as well as popularly revered. How, then, did they become counterparts?

As the leader of the victories over the Mongols and Chinese in the thirteenth century, Trần Hưng Đạo was deeply venerated by not only the Trần Dynasty but all succeeding dynasties. Not only was he worshipped immediately after his death in 1300, but he had even been allowed build a “living temple” [sĩnh tự] for himself when still alive. Following his death, an epitaph [văn bia] written by the king’s father was put in his temple, comparing him with “Thương Phú,” meaning Lã Vọng, who in Chinese history help King Vũ Vương. It bestowed upon him the title “Master of the Court, Father Highness, General Highness, Merciful Hưng Đạo Đại Vương” [Thái sư Thương phú, Thương quốc công, Nhân vō Hưng Đạo Đại Vương].

It wasn’t until the late Trần Dynasty in the second half of the fourteenth century, however, that his cult appears to have become especially popular. The crisis faced then by the dynasty resulted in the development of the Việt’s pantheon of heroes, the popularity of Taoist-like practices proving crucial. From the outset, as recorded in Đại Việt sử kí toàn thư [The Completed Historical Records of Great Việt], the cult was characterized by two aspects that would continue to figure in the texts of succeeding dynasties: support for resistance against foreign aggressors and the curing of “epidemic diseases” [bệnh dịch]. Trần Hưng Đạo thus spoke to the needs of both the nation (dynasty/state) and the people.

Yet there is nothing to suggest that prior to the emergence of Liệu Hạnh’s cult, Trần Hưng Đạo’s cult had gone beyond the veneration of a hero in his homeland of Bảo Lộc and at the historic battle site in Kiếp Bạc. It was between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries that he was provided with a spirit story or hagiography that went beyond the official heroic narrative. Of those accounts that have survived, most of the earliest were written in the 1770s, after the key accounts of Liệu Hạnh had been written. These spirit stories of Trần Hưng Đạo share several common elements: he was originally a celestial official sent down to earth from heaven with a magic sword and other precious objects, his mission being to suppress the traitor Phạm Nhan. As far as the depiction of the mythical origins of these two
deities is concerned, this is not the only connection that can be drawn between Trần Hưng Đạo as an authoritative masculine national hero and Liễu Hạnh. They both were accorded heavenly origins (an attribution facilitated in the case of Trần Hưng Đạo, a clearly identifiable historical figure, by the fact that his birth date was unknown). Liễu Hạnh is a daughter of the Jade Emperor [Ngọc Hoàng Thượng đế], whereas Trần Hưng Đạo is a general of the Jade Emperor [Thành Tiên Đông tử], and in some modern interpretations, he is himself the Jade Emperor. Liễu Hạnh was exiled to earth as punishment for breaking a jade cup, whereas Trần Hưng Đạo volunteered to descend to earth to help the country.

Although spirit stories of Trần Hưng Đạo and Liễu Hạnh written in the eighteenth century share a number of common features, it is in the detailed depictions of Nơi Đạo that appeared in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a connection between the two, though still implicit, becomes more apparent. Trần Hưng Đạo was now seen as a progenitor of Nơi Đạo Tràng, even though as the “inner religion” the latter represented the “land” and Trần Hưng Đạo was a sea god often worshipped near rivers and the sea. Liễu Hạnh, meanwhile, was depicted as having been in dispute with the school. Both Liễu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo were becoming more popular as deities linked to Nơi Đạo—a shift that had to do with the turbulence associated with the warfare occurring during the Mạc and Lê dynasties.

Although the Mạc ruled for only sixty-six years, they infused the country with a new atmosphere that included the emergence of numerous local cults. Founded by Mạc Đăng Dung, the Mạc derived from a clan of fishermen [gốc dân chài], as had the Trần Dynasty of Trần Hưng Đạo. It is reasonable to suppose that the openness of these dynasties to popular cults may have had something to do with their use of their “humble” origins and the legitimation that could be derived from them.

Even so, the majority of manuscripts written about Trần Hưng Đạo collected in the Institute of Hán-Nôm Literature date from the 1850s to the early 1910s. All Hán Nôm depictions of him as “the King of Nine Heavens” [Cửu Thiên Vụ Đế] were also written during this time. The title signifies his mission to control ghosts and evil in three worlds: heaven [thượng giới], earth [trung giới], and the nether world [hạ giới], which is relevant to his association with Liễu Hạnh. To the extent that Liễu Hạnh’s defeat by Nơi Đạo was
popularly accepted, Trần Hưng Đạo’s recognition as Nơi Đạo’s supreme deity would have signified her symbolic subordination to him. Consistent with this, his enemy in popular belief, Phạm Nhan, who makes trouble for women, continues to be strongly associated with Liễu Hạnh. In the Hòn Chén Temple at Huế, Liễu Hạnh even has three assistant spirits who are incarnations of Phạm Nhan (Phạm Nhan, Phạm Nghinh, and Phạm Thạch). Yet even at Kiếp Bạc temple, where Trần Hưng Đạo is accorded the status of Jade Emperor, the connection goes no further back than the late nineteenth century.

In contrast to the elevation of Trần Hưng Đạo, it is clear that there has been more than one attempt to tame Liễu Hạnh’s spirit. In addition to the efforts made to subordinate her cult to male deities identified with Buddhism—Nơi Đạo and Trần Hưng Đạo himself—there remains a certain ambiguity in regard to her position vis-à-vis Trần Hưng Đạo as the Jade Emperor. If subordination has at times been the price of legitimation, her influence does not appear to have unduly suffered because of it. Rather, it appears to have increased along with Trần Hưng Đạo’s as a result of the growth of anticolonial sentiment, turning her into a patriotic figure, a “Mother of the country.” Both deities were used to invoke patriotism in the early twentieth century, scholars “borrowing” the names of popular spirits to convey what they wanted to say through “spirit messages.” There was, though, still no overt pairing of the two as Father and Mother.

It took Renovation, beginning in the mid 1980s, for the pairing to become explicit. In response to the quest for symbols of national identity that became so important in the early 1990s, a variety of “superstitious” activities, including spirit possession, came to be re-evaluated—among those associated with the cults of Trần Hưng Đạo and Liễu Hạnh. Admired now as exemplars of “folk culture,” these two deities would continue to be among the most popularly revered spirits. Their growing popularity in the decades after Renovation encouraged the association of one with the other, Saint Trần being incorporated (along with members of his family) into the Four Palaces [Tứ Phủ] cult of which Liễu Hạnh is the supreme deity, spirit mediums referring to them as “Father” and “Mother.” Devotees of Liễu Hạnh were even claiming to be possessed by “Saint Trần.” The deities still had their separate shrines, but altars to both could be found in many
temples. Today they can even be found in Buddhist pagodas, Buddhism being the religion in Vietnam with the greatest number of devotees. The result is a syncretic mingling of Taoism, Buddhism, spirit possession, and exorcism, with adherents of both cults attributing special significance to March and August, the lunar months in which the deities’ death anniversaries are celebrated.

Intellectuals continued to exert an influence by arguing that the two deities could and should be conceived of as Vietnam’s national father and mother. Linking the popular adage that connects their death anniversaries to yin-yang thought and agricultural rites, Nguyễn Minh San, a researcher at the Tạp chí Văn hóa Nghệ thuật [Journal of Culture and Arts], has argued that they function spiritually as “national Father-Mother” [Cha Mẹ dân tộc] symbols. Their pairing, according to the ethnologist and folklorist Ngô Đức Thịnh, represents “a magnifier” of the “family-model” found in ancestor worship. Patriotic spirit, in his view, is the most prominent manifestation of national cultural identity. Vũ Khieu goes further, arguing that this patriotic spirit has been transformed into a higher and more sacred form of “patriotism” [chủ nghĩa yêu nước], which is at the core of the “Vietnamese ideological system.” Seen in this way, “Vietnamese patriotism” has simultaneously been familized, spiritualized, and supernaturalized to the extent of itself assuming the character of a “religion.”

Mother Supreme, Father Sanctified

What more can we learn from the coupling of these two figures about the nature of the veneration of national mothers and fathers? What is it about Liễu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo and the characteristics they personify that imbues them with such significance? From a comparative perspective, it is possible to see certain symbolic parallels between their pairing and that of deities elsewhere—including, for example, the Chinese god of war Kwan Kung (Kwan Yu, or Guandi) and the goddess T’ien Hou (Empress of Heaven).

Within Vietnam itself, though, Father Trần Hưng Đạo and Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh epitomize national consciousness and its traditions.

Their coupling exemplifies yin-yang thought but, as we have seen, cannot be reduced to it. The cultural reproduction of fathers and mothers as counterpart symbols has been more complex than that. More important
than the simple replication of a static set of symbolic categories has been the transformations wrought by processes of change. Integral to the perpetuation of some things has been the mutation of others. As we have sought to show, the development and eventual entanglement of the two cults is the result of a complicated interplay between dynastic struggles for supremacy; the varying religious convictions of followers of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; the legitimation and rationalization of popular cults by dynastic rulers and the literati; the subsequent spread of popular cults with the growth of trade networks and commercial activity; the impact upon each of these of the arrival of Christian missionaries and colonialists; and, last but by no means least, the consequences of a prolonged anticolonial armed struggle followed by postcolonial national crisis.  

Trần Hưng Đạo’s cult, though far older than Liễu Hạnh’s, benefited from his eventual association with hers. Because female traders took with them not only devotion to her cult but devotion to his as well, these traders beholden to the Mother Goddess played a part in spreading his cult beyond his holy land. Trần Hưng Đạo’s reputation as a national military hero with the ability to cure the afflicted had always drawn devotees to him; that he would become an emblematic patriotic figure mobilized by nationalists to confront the colonial oppressor was to be expected. That Liễu Hạnh could similarly be mobilized not only augmented their association but helped enhance her status, with veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo by her followers further legitimating their devotion to her. This exchange and sharing of powers has been integral to making them the counterparts they have become: emblems not just of the nation but also of entangled masculinity and femininity. Some devotees, for example, see Trần Hưng Đạo and Liễu Hạnh as representing two systems of divine government, military [võ] and civilian [văn], essential for the well-being of the nation. In this view, Saint Trần is a military mandarin, whereas the Mother Goddess is a civilian mandarin. As already indicated, though, this has not prevented Liễu Hạnh from being accorded a quasimilitary function as a defender of the nation against foreign aggressors—which may well have facilitated her symbolic association with Trần Hưng Đạo.

As well as being the military protector of the nation as a whole, Trần Hưng Đạo is also the paternal protector of women and children. According
to some mediums, he still commands an army just as he did when alive. Meanwhile, he exterminates ghosts and evil spirits and cures diseases. For her part, Liêu Hạnh (along with her sister goddesses) has become a spirit of prosperity—a protector of the nation’s, but particularly women’s, material well-being—which is an ever more central role given the growth of the market economy and the risks associated with it. In this context, it is interesting that other female deities who support entrepreneurial activities, such as Lady of the Realm [Bà Chúa Xứ] and Lady of the Store [Bà Chúa Kho], are also popularly venerated, whereas female spirits associated with defense of the nation who have been sanctioned by the state, such as the Trưng Sisters or Lady Triệu, have been abandoned. Apart from local adherents, temples dedicated to these female heroes haven’t attracted devotees. The temple of the Trưng Sisters in Hà Nội is often closed, aside from the first and fifteenth days of the lunar months. In fact, it had been forsaken until statues of the sisters and twelve other women generals were “unveiled and washed in sacred water from the Red River.”

It seems reasonable to conclude from this that military heroism will continue to be less important for female deities and their devotees than it is for their male counterparts. No less notable is the fact that the most popular female spirits lack an orthodox historical biography. On the one hand, this suggests that female deities and their disciples have been deprived of a certain legitimacy; on the other, it suggests that part of the appeal of these cults has been that they have allowed women to avoid the constraints that come with legitimacy.

Seen in this light, it is noteworthy that in certain shrines, members of the emerging middle strata have often gathered to invoke both Liêu Hạnh and Trưng Hùng Đạo in the belief that, unlike ordinary spirits, their function is to enlighten people for the sake of the whole nation. As compared to market women, educated female mediums have used incarnation by Saint Trân to impart messages that reveal their concern for the nation’s destiny. They thereby voice collective as well as personal discontent, conveying messages that address state policies and the country’s future, as well as their own circumstances. Being educated, they have been conscious of Trưng Hùng Đạo’s standing as an approved deity with greater legitimacy than mother goddesses. By claiming to be Saint Trân, they have empowered themselves,
elevating their status within their religious communities as well as with their families. In contexts such as these, some mediums use the term c`c` to refer to the Mother Goddess and Saint Tr`n—c` being a personal pronoun designating an old person, male or female; ancestors and aged parents are often referred to as c` (singular) or c`c` (plural). By using c`c`, these mediums call upon family feeling to shape and facilitate identification with the nation.

The appeal of these figures is grounded in the particular ways women and men identify with them. Of the two deities, Li`u H`nh is certainly the more complex figure—both morally and emotionally—which is directly connected to the way she embodies female power. We do not know when she came to be identified with the pantheon once known as Chú V` [Assembly of Spirits], then Tam Ph` [Three Palaces], and now, more popularly, as T` Ph` [Four Palaces], which led to her becoming its supreme deity. It is not possible to say for sure whether she was added to the system or whether the spirits of T` Ph` were created to serve as her subordinates and elevate her status. The Vietnamese had long held to notions of natural spirits occupying different airspaces, but with Li`u H`nh these spirits came to be organized according to a family-inspired model of mothers counterposed (as previously indicated) to the Jade Emperor as father, a model that is in turn wedded to a court-inspired model of Mandarin, Princes, and Dames. Here she is supreme among female deities as well as having male spirits as subalterns (from Grand Mandarin down). She is not subordinate to Tr`n H`ng D`o within the Four Palaces cult itself; mother goddesses are placed in the center or main hall in these temples, while Tr`n H`ng D`o is accorded only a small place. He resides there as Father beside Mother. He is not higher but rather is worshipped to protect the temple of mothers. Elsewhere and in the eyes of others, Li`u H`nh may still be seen as subordinate to Buddha, the Jade Emperor, and Tr`n H`ng D`o—but not here.

Yet it would be a mistake even in those counter-cases to see the hierarchical relationship between Li`u H`nh and her male counterparts as nullifying their complementarity. As we have seen, aversion as well as ambivalence and ambiguity have characterized attitudes to Li`u H`nh since dynastic times. Her reputation has been simultaneously celebrated and
disparaged for centuries. The success of her cult in the face of the Confucian assault upon it testifies to the resilience of her image. The role played by her devotees in the promotion and dissemination of the nation’s most important male deity is indicative of the manner in which that image can be leveraged for other ends. It might even be construed as suggesting that only the most powerful, honored, and prestigious of masculine national heroes bears comparison with her. If she is not always and entirely his equal, without her his reputation would not be what it has become.

The very complexity of the picture would seem to suggest that the pairing of these deities must actually be associated with abiding as well as emergent tensions and contradictions afflicting gender relations on a number of levels. If, as it would seem, Liễu Hạnh’s popularity with women of different ranks has at times been of concern to men, this anxiety must have aggravated, and in turn been aggravated by, the prejudice that women are especially prone to superstition—as well as exacerbating any fears men may have had that the spirit herself might be used against them. The eventual cohabitation of the two deities in their respective temples may have helped nullify such prejudices and calm the fears arising from them. Be that as it may, while Liễu Hạnh’s preeminence in the Four Palaces cult powerfully illustrates the privileging of the feminine factor in the religious sphere, it also has to be seen as a response to the privileging of men in other spheres. Some may be tempted to stress inversion or subversion of gender stereotypes in all of this (see, for example, note 50); one difficulty with this line of thought, though, would be that the goddess embodies so many negative female characteristics. For all her daring, she has not ultimately been able to usurp male power; rather, she has more than once been forced to defer to it. Yet this might help to explain not only why she can appeal to men but also why so many women have felt free to risk flirting with what she represents. If they can recuperate her to themselves, they might the more easily identify with her and project their fantasies onto her.

As the daughter of the Jade Emperor, Liễu Hạnh can be said to be a heavenly princess. For those who would have her be a descendant of the Lê Dynasty (the dynasty that succeeded the Trấn Dynasty of Trần Hùng Đạo), she also has earthly royal blood (see note 74). She is also intelligent and educated, yet notably rebellious and unruly. A paragon of virtue, fidelity, and
filial piety, she is nonetheless vicious and vengeful. She rightly reacts to men’s lewdness and debauchery, but she shows little restraint. She inspires awe and fear, but she has to be tamed. She has been read as simultaneously exotic and indigenous, as pragmatic and principled, as vicious and virtuous, as a sinner as well as a saint; as a woman of extremes—exalted, but also capable of evil. Her appeal, as Dror puts it, has had little to do with whether or not she is “a model of moral perfection.” Rather, it has been the protection she provides to women against natural, war-inflicted, and other calamities, as well as “her ability to withstand male pressure.”

It might almost be said that Liêu Hạnh personifies feminine duality and that this is integral to the regard and respect she commands. She inspires fear and is admired for it. She also inspires pity. Many a woman might wish to emulate her, but few would envy her the estrangement from loved ones that she was obliged to endure. As much as she stands as a symbol of terror and torment, hers is also a story of love and longing. Her charisma comes, we would argue, from the way she symbolically condenses these divergent impulses. If the image of Liêu Hạnh bequeathed to us can be said to be a coherent one, it is a coherence that tolerates rather than reconciles contradictions. She matters not because what she is and what she represents can ever be resolved, but because it cannot. Of course, it also has to be said that at another level such considerations are irrelevant. No ordinary person among her devotees would today question Liêu Hạnh’s virtue. Though her status is unquestionably high, many wouldn’t even know her name, let alone know or want to know who she could really be said to be. For them, she is simply a Great Mother.

This different-things-to-different-people kind of symbolism has its advantages in a religious culture in which people choose their deities according to their efficacy and are promiscuous in their dealings with them. As well as helping to explain the range and depth of the Mother Goddess’s appeal, it also helps us understand how she could become so closely associated with that paragon of impeccable virtue, Saint Trân. For she can be said to be both his antithesis and his perfect counterpart. Embodying all that he does not while remaining subordinate to all that he represents, she complements him as perhaps no other could. As a woman, she is answerable to him, yet as a mother she is powerful enough in her own right to intercede with him—this
greatest of national heroes, this legendary general who could also be said to be the most imposing of fathers.

Conclusion

The pairing of Lý Hùng with Trần Hưng Đạo and the cohabitation of their cults that occurred in the decades after Renovation constituted a new development that was nonetheless grounded in, and reproduced, a symbolic gestalt of ancient pedigree. This gestalt evokes and expresses enduring concerns about national integrity and its preservation. The nation and its destiny are conceived of in filial terms—which links the Vietnamese identification with family and kinship to anxieties about, and ambitions for, the nation. The efficacy of national mothers and fathers thereby comes to be associated with that of the nation itself. Whether by default or design, the incorporation of Trần Hưng Đạo into the mother goddess religion would appear to have been one consequence of this impulse.

Reflecting on this fact should alert us to further developments in the post-colonial period. What emerging phenomena deserve our attention? One, in particular, appears worthy of brief mention: the deification since his death of Hồ Chí Minh, who has been officially elevated to the status of “Old Father of the Nation” [Cha già dân tộc]. In a special issue of Xưa và Nay [Past and Present], the official organ of the Vietnamese Historical Science Association, historians have explicitly compared the “two national Fathers”: Trần Hưng Đạo and Hồ Chí Minh. Proper consideration of the phenomenon necessarily requires separate treatment, but for over a decade now Hồ Chí Minh has been worshipped in many places as a deity. He has come to be invoked by spirit mediums in spirit possession rituals, and statues of him have been included in the Tự Phủ pantheon in public and private shrines. All this has gone far beyond anything the state anticipated.

Because of Hồ Chí Minh’s official and popular standing, it is unlikely in the foreseeable future that any female deity will emerge as a counterpart to him, though such an outcome cannot be ruled out entirely. More likely is some kind of parallelism. So long as he is seen as the creator and preserver of the nation’s sacred socialist destiny, his image is available for mobilization against the excesses of resurgent capitalism. How this might fit with devotional resort to female deities responsible for protecting the populace from
the vicissitudes of good and bad fortune remains to be seen. Here is an area where Liêu Hạnh’s image may once again also be subject to reinterpretation and contestation. As gender disparities are challenged, she could well become a symbolic figure for women promoting a feminist-inspired agenda. Then again, a fickle economy might encourage its victims to emphasize her capricious nature and the need to propitiate it.

As the forces of globalization become ever more entrenched and corrosive, a reworking of the symbolic opposition of the indigenous and the invasive would hardly be surprising. If this does occur, it will be interesting to discover whether and in what ways Trần Hưng Đạo and Hồ Chí Minh, as fathers, get mobilized in defense of the national heritage. In such circumstances, is it conceivable that some kind of fraternal counterpart relationship might develop? After all, Vietnamese mother goddesses have themselves, in certain respects and in certain contexts, functioned as a kind of sorority, as the Tứ Phụ pantheon illustrates. Viewed in this light, Hồ Chí Minh’s relationship to Trần Hưng Đạo could well prove similarly instructive.

Whatever the value of such speculations, there can be no doubt about the fact that modernization and globalization continue to provoke rapid generational change in Vietnam, and that this is already having an impact upon notions of filial piety. Where this might lead is a question of some concern to many, as is how we can best address the phenomenon as social scientists. If the line of argument we have advanced in this article has merit, as good a place as any to begin may well be by charting the changing nature of the verses mothers use to lull their babies to sleep.

**Abstract**

Within the family, filial respect is seen as the highest moral virtue in Vietnam, while venerating national mothers and fathers is regarded as
a manifestation of “national cultural identity.” In this article, the authors explore key features of the pairing of mythic mothers with mythic fathers. Their specific interest is the development of Mother Goddess Liêu Hạnh’s cult and the association it has come to have with that of Trần Hưng Đạo, who is revered as a Father of the Nation.

KEYWORDS: mythic mothers and fathers, nationalism, dualism, heroes and deities, Liêu Hạnh, Trần Hưng Đạo

Notes
1. Công cha như núi Thái Sơn
Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra
Một lòng thô mẹ kính cha
Cho trăm chữ hiếu nói là đạo con.
2. Some—for example in Đồng Bằng Temple (Thái Bình Province), a popular center of spirit possession rituals—would say that “Father” here refers to Vua Cha Bát Hải [the Father King of Eight Oceans], whose death anniversary is also August on the lunar calendar.
4. Thanks to the enthusiasm of spirit mediums, as well as postcolonial intellectuals who have argued that the goddess should be regarded as an emblem of cultural identity and who have played a key role in rehabilitating spirit possession, the cult has now been legalized in the Ordinance on Religions and Beliefs 2004 (see Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Hero and Deity). Phạm Quỳnh Phương’s interviews with temple keepers in Nam Định Province and with several researchers in 2007 show that a related collective effort to have the Mother Goddess religion recognized as a “national religion” is now occurring.
5. This is revealed by numerous interviews conducted in Hà Nội, Hồ Chí Minh City, and Nam Định, Thái Bình, Hải Dương, Lạng Sơn, and Lào Cai provinces.

8. One particularly well-known example is a poem seen as Vietnam’s first Declaration of Independence, which is said to have been written by the eleventh-century poet Lý Thường Kiệt. Here the words used are “Nam quốc sơn hà” [Sông núi nước Nam], which literally means “the mountains and rivers of the southern country.” See Nguyễn Đăng Thúc, *Lịch sử tư tưởng Việt nam* [History of Vietnamese Ideology] (1968; repr., HCMC: Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1992).


11. Trần Ngọc Thêm, *Tim về Bản sắc*, 99–121. He illustrates his argument with numerous etymological examples but actually makes his case by focusing upon the agricultural origins of the symbolic complex.

12. Ibid. See also Trần Quốc Vương, “Nguyên lý me.”


15. Ibid., 104.


18. See, for example, the discussion of the differing attitudes to male and female cults and male and female mediums and the status differences associated with these by Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Trần Hưng Đạo and Mother Goddess Religion,” in *Possessed by Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, eds. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2006), 31–54. The picture that emerges is as subtle as it is complex, but there is no mistaking the gender bias.

19. See Philip Taylor, “The Goddess, the Ethnologist, the Folklorist and the Cadre: Situating Exegesis of Vietnam’s Folk Religion in Time and Place,” *The
Australian Journal of Anthropology 14, no. 3 (2003): 392. Taylor argues that readings of goddesses as “symbols of the nation’s origins, nurturance and renewal” draw inspiration from kinship roles, which accord mothers primacy. In addition to being nurturing providers of life and familial reproduction, mothers are held to be “authoritative arbiters over children” and “mediators between lineages,” as well as “representatives of the household” in such “institutions as the market.” He relates this to the fact that “maternal spirits also feature in Vietnamese popular religious practice as preferred symbols of responsiveness, nurturance, and mediation, as well as possessing ultimate authority over the fates of their supplicants and the power to punish transgressions.”

24. Linh Nam chích quái [Marvelous Stories in Linh Nam], an anonymous work collected between 1370 and 1400 and edited by Vũ Quỳnh in 1492, mentions the story of Man Nuong that is associated with the beginnings of Buddhism in Vietnam. The story tells of an Indian Buddhist monk (Khâu Đa La) stepping over Man Nuong’s body while she was sleeping, leading to her mythic pregnancy. After she gave birth, her infant was given to a tree. Later, four Buddha statues were carved from a block of stone inside the tree. These Buddhist figures, Pháp Vân, Pháp Vũ, Pháp Lôi, and Pháp Điện [Dharma of Cloud, of Rain, of Thunder, and of Lightning], are still worshipped in four temples in Bắc Ninh Province. Man Nuong is thus worshipped as the Mother Buddha.
27. See Keith Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam. Lạc Long Quân came to the Red River Delta from the sea, subduing all evil demons and civilizing the people, teaching them rice cultivation and the wearing of clothes. He then returned to the sea, and a Chinese king entered the land from the north; finding it without a king, he claimed it for himself. The people cried out to Lạc Long Quân for
deliverance, and he returned from the sea, kidnapping Âu Cô, the intruder’s wife. Âu Cô eventually gave birth to the first of the Hùng kings, with Lạc Long Quân returning to his home in the sea after promising to come back if needed. A prince of the sea, Lạc Long Quân, and a princess of the mountains, Âu Cô, thus came to be regarded as progenitors of the Vietnamese.

28. Nguyễn Minh Sơn, “Quanh hình tưởng tượng Cha-Me dân tộc” [Understanding the Spiritual Symbol of the National Father-Mother], Tạp chí Văn hóa Nghệ thuật [Journal of Culture and Arts] 8 (1996): 21–25. Scholars have variously interpreted this myth and the way that it reconciles the elements of land and sea and their importance to the Vietnamese; for example, see Keith Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam; and Trần Quốc Vương, Văn hóa Việt nam—tim tôi và suy ngẫm [Vietnamese Culture—Exploring and Discussing] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa dân tộc, 2000). It is, moreover, but one of a number of myths where indigenous wives are associated with husbands who come from the sea in support of them (Trần Quốc Vương, Văn hóa Việt nam, 20).


31. Vua Cha Bát Hải is a Snake Spirit who is worshipped at the Đồng Bằng Temple, a center of spirit possession rituals. Lý Бр’s Temple is in the Phú Giấy area, homeland of Liễu Hạnh. Because his temple is called Đền Vua Cha [King Father Temple], some devotees couple them as Mother and Father.

32. The legend of Chu Đông Tử is collected in Linh Nam Chích quái. Chu Đông Tử was a poor boy who had to share his only loincloth [khô] with his father. When his father died, Chu Đông Tử buried his father with the loincloth and so often had to hide himself to avoid being seen naked. One day Tiên Dung, a daughter of the Hùng king, traveling by boat, stopped to bathe on the beach, not knowing that Chu Đông TỬ had covered his body with sand. When the water uncovered his body they found each other naked. Tiên Dung believed it to be their destiny and asked to marry Chu Đông Tử in spite of the king’s opposition. They didn’t dare return home but became traders. One day a Buddhist monk gave Chu Đông Tử a stick and a hat. One night they put the hat on top of the stick, and suddenly a palace full of possessions was theirs, with people and soldiers appearing. Angered, the king sent troops. Tiên Dung and Chu Đông TỬ, along with their palace, flew into the sky, leaving behind a swamp.

33. Nguyên Đăng Thúc, Lịch sử tuトレng, 68.

34. According to Keith Taylor, Chu Đông Tử had by the fifteenth century become an important figure of popular Vietnamese Taoism (Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, 152). See also Maurice Durand, Technique et panthéon des médiums Vietnamiens (dong) (Paris: Ecole Française D’Extreme-Orient, 1959); Trần Văn Giàu, Sự
The legend has it that a good man from Yên Ông Village in Thanh Hóa Province with the name of Trần Toàn (some sources say Trần Lộc, but both carry the “Trần” family name) was taught magic and exorcism by Sakyamuni Buddha. He not only helped to expel evil spirits but also created a school to teach his disciples exorcism of ghosts and devils. One disciple cured a seventeenth-century Lê king whose patronage included granting his religious faction the title “Nữ Đạo Tràng.” It is worth stressing that while a number of scholars have argued that the cults of Trần Hưng Đạo and Liễu Hạnh are manifestations of “Vietnamese Taoism” (Huard and Durand, Connaissance du Vietnam [Hà Nội: Paris Imprimerie Nationale, Ecole Française d’Extreme Orient, 1954]; Trần Quốc Vương, “Tháng Tám gìọ Cha”; Trần Văn Giàu, Lịch sử tu tượng), our argument is that these cults and the magic and exorcism associated with them need to be seen as a multilayered and multifaceted outgrowth of entangled syncretic processes.


37. According to Nguyễn Thế Anh, the Chăm goddess Po Nagar transformed into Liễu Hạnh, a process he describes as Vietnamization. See Nguyễn Thế Anh, “The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Po Nagar,” in Essays into Vietnamese Past, eds. Keith Taylor and John Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1995), 42–50. From another point of view, though, it is also indicative of the fact that to absorb as well as subordinate the Chăm, the northern dynasty had to accommodate itself to and assimilate Chăm deities—which we might call the Chamization of the Vietnamese.

38. See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Trần Hưng Đạo,” for a discussion from the perspective of spirit mediums of the various reasons for the incorporation of Trần Hưng Đạo’s cult into the Mother Goddess religion and his inclusion in the Mother Goddess pantheon.


40. See Olga Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority; Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 124–156.

41. Ibid., 107. According to Dror, Tâm Thánh Bảo Lộc [A Precious Record of the Three Saints], written or edited in 1807, is the most detailed manuscript on the school and may also be the earliest.

42. Ibid., 116.
43. Ibid., 83–118. Dror provides a detailed discussion and interpretation of the key literary sources, including Đoàn Thị Điểm’s portrait of Liễu Hạnh as a femme émancipée and the backlash against it.

44. Ibid., 66–67. After which the “Devil took her shape and name and introduced, developed, and secured her cult in many provinces.” The depiction of her as a shameless or impudent woman of easy virtue, an entertainer of men, is there also in the portrait provided by Lebreton from the Foreign Mission of Paris, writing in 1782. Lebreton reports a conversation with some Vietnamese describing her as “a prostitute worshipped in numerous locations.” See also Nguyễn Văn Huyễn, “Gộp phần nghiên cứu”; and Tạ Chí Đại Trương, Thần, Người và đất Việt [Viet Deities, People and Land] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1989).

45. Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Theo bước chân.”

46. Ibid. In the sixteenth century, Phố Cá tía in Thanh Hóa Province was located on the main north-south route, Thương Đạo Road. In the mid seventeenth century, when the main route was changed to Thiên Lý Road, Sông Sôn began to appear in Liễu Hạnh legends.

47. On the phenomenon of goddesses and borders perceived as being under threat, see Philip Taylor, “The Goddess,” 392, 396; and Goddess on the Rise, 23–25, 28–29.


50. It is difficult to be sure what was implied by the attribution to Liễu Hạnh of this male honorific, a title also conferred upon Trần Hưng Đạo (cf. Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority, 94). It may well be that these titles were merely Đoàn Thị Điểm’s inventions, designed to elevate the female deity to a status equal to that of male deities. But it is no less likely that what Đoàn Thị Điểm wrote was based on oral tradition and may have had some historical basis. If so, it may well have been the extent of popular devotion to the deity that forced the Lê Dynasty to acknowledge her.

51. Ibid., 59.

52. Philip Taylor, Goddess on the Rise, 104.

53. Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority, 57.

54. See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Hero and Deity, 26–31. In the first collection of Việt spirits, Việt Đền U linh [A Collection of Stories of the Departed Spirits in the Viet Pantheon], written in 1329, Trần Hưng Đạo was not included.
Dai Viet su kí toan thu [The Completed Historical Records of Great Viet], written in 1479 by Ngô Sĩ Liên, is the earliest surviving historical text in which Trần Hưng Đạo’s life and cult are mentioned. Ngô Sĩ Liên wrote that in 1427 the first Lê king had ordered his general to renovate Trần Hưng Đạo’s temple and prohibited the chopping down of trees in front of the temple, adding that “Nowadays, when the country has to cope with invaders, the royals come to pray [at Trần Hưng Đạo’s temple]. If there is a sound heard from the sword box, the enemies will be defeated. When Lạng Giang District had epidemic diseases, people came to pray to him at his temple.” See Ngô Sĩ Liên, Dai Viet su kí toan thu (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1971), 91.

55. Ibid., 50–52. For example, see Việt sáp tiêu án [Model Cases from Viet History] by Ngô Thọ Sỹ, written in 1772, or the 1774 revised version of Việt Điển Ư Linh [A Collection of Stories of the Departed Spirits in the Viet Pantheon].

56. Trần Lâm, “Nhìn lại về một nhân thần dân tộc” [Rethinking a National Human-Deity], Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Văn hóa Nghệ thuật [Translation of a Fairy’s Record], during this period.


60. Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority, 132. Kiều Ông Mậu wrote his popularization of the Liệu Hạnh story, Tiễn Phà Dịch Lược [Translation of a Fairy’s Record], during this period.

See Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority, 56.

According to Dror (Cult, Culture and Authority, 54–55), the Jade Emperor was most likely brought to Vietnam with the Ming in the fifteenth century. He appears for the first time in Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục [A Collection of Wonderful Stories], written by Nguyễn Dỗ in the sixteenth century, but he did not yet feature in popular belief, only becoming prominent in the late seventeenth century.


patriotic sentiment through spirit messages such as those of Liệu Hạnh: “Ái quê ca” [Ballad of Patriotism], “Khuyên nông” [Encourage Agriculture], and “Khuyên sỉ” [Encourage Scholars]. These messages were presented in the form of Kinh Đạo Nam [Southern Moral Scripture]. When Kinh Đạo Nam was banned by the French, the literati conveyed their messages through Trần Hưng Đạo’s “prayers” and those of other heroes. See Vũ Thời Khởi, “Hội Hương thiện và sự nghiệp” [Association of Inclining to Good], Xưa & Nay [Past and Present] 30 (1996): 28–29.

62. See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Hero and Deity; Philip Taylor, “The Goddess.”
63. Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Trần Hưng Đạo.”
68. On how notions of gender and nation inform and construct one another, see N. Yuval-David, Gender and Nation (London: Sage, 1997).
69. In the space available to us here we have not been able to give due weight to all of these factors, especially the coming of Christianity. According to Lịch sử Hà Nam Ninh [History of Hà Nam Ninh] (Hà Nam Ninh: Hà Nam Ninh, 1988), Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in the sixteenth century when the Mạc Dynasty was in power. It came to Giao Thủy District in Nam Định Province (the homeland of the Trần Hưng Đạo cult), where many fishermen and women converted to Catholicism. While the image of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady) was indigenized and developed its own following, the image of Liệu Hạnh in Phú Gıy (which is not far from Giao Thủy) developed as a symbol of those who were not Catholic [hướng]. The suggestive nature of these interrelations convinces us that further research is needed into the influence of Christianity upon the indigenous Mother Goddess cult as well as the influence of the latter upon the Christian Mother Goddess’s reception in Vietnam. See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Theo bước chân.”
70. For similarities with China, see Jean DeBernardi, Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 90.
72. For a detailed discussion of the empowerment of women that comes from contemporary cultic practices, and the association between this and the growth of trade and prosperity since Đổi Mới, see Phạm Quỳnh Phương, “Trần Huỳnh Dạo.”


74. According to Thien Do, Coulet in the early twentieth century commented that the three realms of the Liễu Hạnh cult—Sky, Earth, and Water—were governed by three kings whose three spouses were goddesses. The followers of this feminine cult preferred that the goddesses intercede with their spouses. On this basis, Thien Do argues that the goddesses thereby became “the immediate de facto powers representing the followers’ interests,” taking the followers’ “wishes to the highest level, ignoring all intermediate echelons of divine powers” (Vietnamese Supernaturalism, 105). Other scholars argue that Liễu Hạnh is regarded as the embodiment of the Heavenly Mother because she came to earth from heaven and is often covered with a red cloth. In some places, though, because of her human origins, she is regarded as an Earthly Mother. Professor Trần Lâm Biên even argues that the three Mothers of Sky, Water, and Forests [tam tòa Thánh Mẫu] are all embodiments of Liễu Hạnh, the idea originating in the notion of “one in three forms” [tam vi nhất thể] that is popular in a number of religious traditions, including Christianity (see note 68). Interview with Phạm Quỳnh Phương, September 10, 2003, Hanoi.

75. Dror, Cult, Culture and Authority, 129.


77. See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Hero and Deity, 163–172.