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**Dror/Cult, Culture, and Authority**

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## Introduction

Consider now all things fulfill high heaven's plan,  
Which sets humanity to thrive as best it can, yet foreordained.  
Some, doomed in dust to live, when dead as much have gained,  
And others gather dignities—those too attained by nod divine.  
—Nguyễn Du, *Kim Vân Kiều*

Nineteen eighty-eight. My first trip to Vietnam. I discover the country I studied for five years at Leningrad State University. The pages read, the lessons learned, the conversations conducted, all these come alive. Back then, Vietnam and the Soviet Union were still brotherly countries. I was an interpreter for a Soviet delegation on a visit of friendship. During the day I dutifully translated negotiations to develop programs of cooperation. But some evenings I had for myself. And on these evenings I tried to imbibe and absorb as much of Vietnamese culture as I could. I was mesmerized by the temples and was eager to learn as much as possible about the deities worshiped there. At the university, our primary focus was on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. But in Vietnam I found so much I had not studied during my student years! I approached my Vietnamese friends with incessant queries about what I saw and heard about different deities. It turned out that I was just opening the first leaf of what would become a long journey in my attempt to understand the incredibly rich palette of Vietnamese religious and spiritual life. The worship of spirits—whether of ancestors; of heroic or supernaturally potent people from the past; of birds, animals, sea creatures, or forces of nature embedded in particular features of the inanimate world; or of divine beings—is a fundamental aspect of Vietnamese religious practice. As the prominent French missionary and scholar of Vietnam Léopold Cadière has testified, the Vietnamese worship legions of spirits.<sup>1</sup>

After my first trip, I visited Vietnam again with another official delegation. But alas! I had even fewer opportunities to investigate what had previously stirred my curiosity. Later there were emigration, different countries, and different jobs. But I always wanted to go back to the Vietnamese temples and to become familiar with all the spirits that inhabit them. Consequently, when I was accepted for advanced study at Cornell University, I took the opportunity to enter the realm of this legion by following the traces of one of the most prominent spirits, Liễu Hạnh, usually respectfully called Princess Liễu Hạnh (Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh) or Mother Liễu (Mẫu Liễu). Why her? To be a potent female deity in Vietnam is quite an achievement, and the princess definitely has gained this status. This strong-willed beauty, by all accounts, had a very complex life and counts among her worshipers people of both genders and of all walks of life. I was intrigued by the persistence of her cult under different regimes, whether supported by the government or not, and by the extent of the revival of her cult during the current renovation era.

My interest grew when I heard about the séances associated with Liễu Hạnh's cult. She has proven to be a potent and responsive spirit in whom many people in many generations have been eager to find a protectress. But what sealed my decision to study Liễu Hạnh was a famous saying that links two popular temple festivals: "In the third month [we] celebrate Mother's death anniversary; in the eighth month [we] celebrate Father's death anniversary" (*Tháng ba giỗ mẹ, tháng tám giỗ cha*). The Mother and Father referred to here are Liễu Hạnh and Trần Hưng Đạo, who are commonly thought to have died in the third and the eighth months, respectively. Not many historical personalities in Vietnam are equal in fame and stature to Trần Hưng Đạo, the thirteenth-century prince who led the army in victory against the Mongol invasions. Much is known about Trần Hưng Đạo as a historical personality as well as the object of a spirit cult. Liễu Hạnh, however, cannot be verified as a historical figure in the same way as Trần Hưng Đạo. In comparison with him, she is a mysterious and problematic personality. This curious contrast persuaded me to look into the history of Liễu Hạnh, the woman who was worthy to be paired with the most potent male spirit remembered among the Vietnamese. In addition, she is counted as one of the Four Immortals and, at the same time, is a leading figure in the Cult of the Mothers.

The Four Immortals (Tứ Bất Tử) constitute a pantheon that some modern Vietnamese scholars have described as "a symbol of the ability to

survive, the indestructibility of the nation and the country from antiquity till now.”<sup>2</sup> Apparently, this pantheon was an outgrowth of the previous Eight Immortals (Bát Tiên), who were chosen from among twenty-seven spirits that appeared in a fourteenth-century courtly collection of tales. In the twentieth century this pantheon came to include three male spirits, Đức Thanh Tản Viên Sơn (the Spirit of Mount Tản Viên), Đức Thanh Gióng (the Spirit of Phù Đổng Village), and Chử Đồng Tử (the Consort of Hùng Princess Tiên Dung); and one female spirit, Liễu Hạnh. According to an early-twentieth-century French colonial report: “There actually exist in the province of Annam four temples that are particularly venerated; they are designated under the name Tứ Bất Tử, that is, the four temples of immortals.”<sup>3</sup> These four temples were those of Chử Đồng Tử in Đông Yên district, Hưng Yên province; of Đức Thanh Tản Viên Sơn in Bất Bạt district, Sơn Tây province; of Đồng Thiên Vương Đức Thanh Gióng in Tiên Dư district, Bắc Ninh province; and of Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa in Thanh Hóa province. The three male spirits are benevolent, and their appearance is attributed to the period of the legendary Hùng kings of antiquity. All three were mortals who achieved immortality through their human achievements, symbolized by struggles with nature or with human enemies. Liễu Hạnh differs from them not only by being female, but also by her much later emergence, her celestial origins, and her ambiguous character, which will be examined in detail in this work.

Liễu Hạnh also stands out in the Cult of the Mothers, called in Vietnamese Tam Phủ (Three Palaces) or Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces), in which “palaces” represent different domains of nature of which the Mothers are in charge: heaven, earth, and water in the Tam Phủ or heaven, earth, waters, and mountains and forests in the Tứ Phủ. Liễu Hạnh governs the celestial realm, the highest position. She has become the principal deity despite her “youth,” being the latest addition to the group of the Mothers, as the cults of the others originated before the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The cult of Liễu Hạnh ostensibly originated in the sixteenth century in a small hamlet of Vân Cát village in Nam Định province, which occupies the southernmost part of the Red River plain. Since that time, Liễu Hạnh’s cult has spread throughout the northern part of what is now Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> City people joined villagers in their recognition of her divine power. She is worshiped in Daoist as well as Buddhist temples. Initially a spirit to whom mainly women prayed, Liễu Hạnh attracted numerous male followers by the twentieth century. The establishment of commu-

nism almost obliterated her cult as well as many others. But in the late 1980s Liễu Hạnh's cult was revived to become one of the officially recognized signifiers of Vietnamese culture.

In the introduction to Adriano di St. Thecla's *Opusculum*, I analyze the Vietnamese terms that are today generally translated as "religion" (*tôn giáo*) and "religious belief" or "devotion" (*tín ngưỡng*).<sup>6</sup> The concept for the modern word "religion" was first borrowed from Western languages into Japanese in the late nineteenth century and designated with a word invented from classical Chinese characters; from Japan this word penetrated into Chinese and Vietnamese (*shūkyō* in Japanese, *zongjiao* in Chinese, *tôn giáo* in Vietnamese).<sup>7</sup> This concept reflects the influence of Western religious thought in terms of a "church" with systematic doctrine and an ecclesiastic hierarchy. Before this, religious practice among Vietnamese was diffused into all aspects of everyday life and not understood as a particular doctrinal or institutional orientation toward the supernatural world. That is why we can hardly speak about Buddhism or Daoism in Vietnam as religion, since they are also, in the words of Nguyen Tu Cuong, "of composite nature,"<sup>8</sup> incorporating in themselves elements of each other and of popular beliefs, and thus diluting any single doctrinal or ecclesiastical position.

Accordingly, the cult of Liễu Hạnh has never been a "religion" in the sense that this word is used today but is usually considered as a "belief" (*tín ngưỡng*). Liễu Hạnh is the name given to a certain sublime personality that has gained currency in the milieu of popular religion as an efficacious deity.<sup>9</sup> Vietnamese use two words to express the sacred or sublime potency of Liễu Hạnh, *thiên* (Chinese *qing*) and *linh* (Chinese *ling*), both of which, while registering the effect of overpowering awe in Rudolf Otto's term *mysterium tremendum*,<sup>10</sup> more specifically signify divine responsiveness to human supplication and the ability to make things happen. At the center of popular religious cults such as that of Liễu Hạnh lies the potent idea that threatening realities encountered in life, such as the fear of illness or of failure, are dispersed by the application of a causal logic that connects the divine power of a deity with one's own personal fate.

In this book I treat Liễu Hạnh's cult in terms of two parts. The first refers to the sublime, or what puts people in awe of an event, a deed, a personality, or an object—what makes them start worshiping. This is the "form" of a cult. This experience of the sublime is solemnized by ritual, which is a signifier of the sublime.<sup>11</sup> Ritual is a response to the awareness of utter difference, the difference between the divine and the

human realms. It marks out a space separate from everyday life where humans are enabled to experience the sublime and “is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest.”<sup>12</sup> Ritual is a mode of survival of the form, a bridge connecting it with the other part of the cult, which refers to discourses that position deities in different schemes of ideological affirmation. These discourses can be literary productions, but they can also mark relationships between a cult and state authorities, be this through the symbolic conferring of honorific titles or through direct state sponsorship of the deity. These elements constitute the “content” of the cult.

I started to think about the ideas of “form” and “content” in relation to popular cults during my fieldwork in Vietnam in 1998 and in 2000, when I conducted interviews with people attending temples of Liễu Hạnh. I was at first surprised to find that out of my ninety respondents 80 percent could not say anything about who Liễu Hạnh was or when her cult started. The other 20 percent simply repeated well-known aspects of the story of Liễu Hạnh written by Đoàn Thị Điểm in the eighteenth century and thereafter retold and republished again and again. To the respondents who knew nothing, my question seemed to be utterly irrelevant. Liễu Hạnh’s story had nothing to do with what attracted them to her place of worship. Seventy percent of them responded that it was Liễu Hạnh’s divine potency that brought them to the temples, while 30 percent referred to the scenic locations of the temples that created a peaceful atmosphere for their souls and minds. Neither of these two groups was interested in knowing about Liễu Hạnh’s personality or her deeds.

At first I attributed this to the fact that religious activity was suppressed during the years of communist rule in Vietnam between 1945 and the mid-1980s. Indeed, forty years could easily erase knowledge about Liễu Hạnh’s personality and the legends surrounding her cult. But later I discovered materials that demonstrated that the communist regime should not be blamed for this lack of cognition. The apparent lacuna is, rather, an aspect of the Vietnamese approach to religious beliefs and practices.

In the 1930s the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* conducted a survey of spirit-protectors worshiped in different locations in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> The survey consisted of questions about the nature of the deity, his or her biography, and ways of worshipping. I found 360 responses to this survey from different localities that claimed Liễu Hạnh as their village protector. My main interest was in responses to the following questions: What is the hagiography of the worshiped deity (day of birth, day of death or deifica-

tion [*ngày hóa, ngày hiển thánh*])? Since what generation has the deity been worshiped in the village? What merits does the deity have? Two-hundred eighty responded that they had no information on their deity's hagiography; the date of birth was in most cases unidentified, and in those cases when it was identified, it varied greatly. However, the responses were unanimous in the indication of the day of Liễu Hạnh's death and deification: the third day of the third lunar month. This date would be well known because for generations it has been the day designated for the annual festival of her cult.

Emile Durkheim saw communal ritual as a purely functional repetitive practice that integrates society by creating a religious identity to lend sacred sanctions to social norms.<sup>14</sup> However, is ritual necessarily related to moral content? Not always, and perhaps usually not. Rodney Stark demonstrates with the example of popular religious practice in China that rituals of prayer are simply “a quite self-centered and self-serving activity, consistent with rapidly shifting from one God to another on the basis of results.”<sup>15</sup> This statement echoes Martin Ahern's view of Chinese rituals as acts of deference, bribery, and negotiation with officials, thus bearing the character of bureaucratic efficacy.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most evident examples of a similar phenomenon in Vietnam is described by one of the leading scholars of popular culture, Đinh Gia Khánh. He refers to two deities both named Bà Chúa Kho, “Princess of the Storehouses,” who were keepers of military storehouses in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and who are worshiped in two different localities near Hanoi. According to him, the princesses deserve to be worshiped for their defense of national property and the sacrifice of their lives for this purpose. But he censoriously notes that people did not come to venerate them for their commendable contributions to the state; on the contrary, they came to ask for gifts from the deities. He concludes with this observation: “If the Princesses of the Storehouses were resurrected, they would flatly reject people coming to ask them to distribute national property to them” (*Nếu Bà Chúa Kho có sống lại thì chắc bà sẽ kiên quyết cự tuyệt những người đến cầu xin để bà ạ tán phát tài sản quốc gia cho họ*).<sup>17</sup> Should people be criticized for their hope to gain favors from those they worship? They are simply looking for assistance in their struggle with everyday life, which, in their view, does not always treat them fairly. What does this pragmatic approach tell us about their beliefs? It says that what counts is not moral norms but the deity's efficacy. The rupture between moral norms and efficacy makes the deity's “personality” or origins irrelevant to devotees.

The insignificance of a deity's "personality," in contrast with its "potency," is evident in the cult of the Chinese general Mã Viện (Ma Yuan), who in the first century C.E. suppressed the rebellion led by the Trưng sisters, a significant event in the nationalist historiography of early Vietnam. Mã Viện's role in subjugating Vietnamese heroines did not prevent him from being worshiped as a powerful spirit by the Vietnamese for many centuries. Elsewhere I have discussed my fieldwork on this deity and have described how local informants recall worshipping him for no other reason than that he was considered to be the local god, despite being presented in Vietnamese historiography as an oppressor.<sup>18</sup> It was the "form" of his cult, its ritual practice, that enabled the memory of Mã Viện to transcend the boundaries of his historical deeds and the limitations imposed by national historiography and to turn him into a spirit still worshiped almost two millennia after his death.

Thus, it is the "form" of a cult that becomes a tradition, an empty vessel of the ineffable sublime, a cultural form to be practiced and repeated generation after generation to acknowledge one's dependence on forces and beings beyond human comprehension. It is constantly being filled with different "content": stories that exemplify very human concerns and agendas. These narratives are all functions of language, and rather than signifying the sublime, as the "form" does, they signify human moral messages, the ideological contents that different authors provide for the popular cultic "form." Perhaps a convenient metaphor for the "form" and the "content" is a flower vase and flowers. I refer here not to a disposable vessel used to display flowers occasionally brought to one's house but to a cherished possession, an heirloom, that decorates one's household and attracts bouquets by its very existence. This vase is the persisting ritual form, but the flowers are like the narrative contents that change from author to author and from generation to generation.

Just as a vase can exist without flowers, so the ritual form of a cult can exist without the narrative contents of stories. However, the precious stability of the vase/form endows the flowers/narratives with the additional force of plausibility and attractiveness, which otherwise might be lost among other flowers/narratives. These narratives are all functions of language, and, rather than signifying the sublime as does the "form," they signify human moral messages, the agendas that different writers provide for the popular cultic form. Can these flowers/narratives exist without a vase/form and vice versa? Yes, they can. Vladimir Propp, one of the most famous of folklorists, connected the appearance of a tale with the

disappearance of a religion, thus suggesting that only on its death is a religion transformed into a narrative.<sup>19</sup> I would argue that a religion does not have to die in order to give birth to a tale, but, on the contrary, its existence can empower a tale with greater conviction. Without it, the existence of the tale must rely entirely on its literary quality. In contrast, when unified with a cultic “form,” even a pedestrian tale is enhanced by an aura of the sublime and of a well-established ritual representation of this sublime, which extends its popular appeal.

Who creates these narratives? Gustave Lagrand, a French colonial writer, cautioned: “One should not be too demanding while interrogating an Annamite on religion, even when one interrogates temple priests in rural areas or guardians of temples. Each one of them can enumerate the genies he honors and the dates of big festivals during the year, but that is all. What is the history or story of the genies? Why did they become the object of the cult? This is often too much to ask. . . . Oral tradition, tales and legends, are the basis for the religious practice of Annamites. But to collect these it is necessary to talk with the old literati who are more and more rare, and to peruse rare books.”<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the narrative contents of cultic practice were the business of literati and their books, that oral tradition was simply a means to popularize elite literary production.

Liễu Hạnh, as a sublime being, alert to hear prayers and able and willing to answer them, became the object of a cult that for several centuries has maintained a stable “form” through repetitive ritual observances. However, her personality was imagined differently at different times by different groups of people and by different institutions.<sup>21</sup> All of the narratives that have been constructed to locate her existence in the context of human thought, whether in the form of genealogies, hagiographies, royal decrees, disputations, panegyrics, or creative literature, are both possible and plausible because her cult has endured amidst the perennial forms of temple ritual, the performance of which has no need whatever of these narratives.

Liễu Hạnh’s cult has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars. The works on her cult can be divided into two main categories: First is what I would call “anthropological” scholarship, which describes the “form” of the cult, that is, rituals and ceremonies connected to it. Second is “philological” scholarship, represented by numerous collections of works reproducing Liễu Hạnh’s story. One of the best anthropological works of the first group is Maurice Durand’s *Technique et panthéon des médi-*

*ums vietnamiens*, in which he detailed the phenomenon of mediumship in relation to Liễu Hạnh's cult and to several other cults.<sup>22</sup> Pierre Simon and Ida Simon-Barouh extended this study, elaborating on differences between mediumship in Vietnam and shamanism elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Modern Vietnamese ethnographers, most notably Ngô Đức Thịnh, former director of the Institute of Folklore Studies, have published numerous articles on the practices connected with Liễu Hạnh's cult, presented through descriptions of festivals and temples, and placing the practice of the cult into the context of Vietnamese religious systems.<sup>24</sup> "Philological" scholarship mainly consists of republishing the "contents" of the cult, the stories of Liễu Hạnh in collections of folktales and stories of divine beings, especially the story written by Đoàn Thị Điểm, the celebrated female writer of the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Republishing these stories has recently been done on an unprecedented scale; many booklets containing these stories are available at temples where Liễu Hạnh is worshiped. Most of these works, while popularizing and preserving Liễu Hạnh's stories as an integral part of her cult, do not bring them into the larger context of Vietnamese cultural and political history.

Research on popular religion in Vietnam has received a boost in recent years. Three seminal works appeared in English, among which Shaun Malarney's brilliant anthropological study on the changes in a commune in Red River delta after the revolution pioneered the English-language scholarship.<sup>26</sup> Thien Do expanded and systematized our knowledge of the Vietnamese folk religion in South Vietnam in a work that has become a first survey of religious practices in this area.<sup>27</sup> Philip Taylor unveiled to us the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ, the Lady of the Realm, one of the famous and potent spirits in southern Vietnam, putting it into the context of the general practice of pilgrimage.<sup>28</sup> This book differs from the previous studies in being concentrated on a cult in the north and also in being a historical rather than an anthropological work. It is the first systematic study of the historical changes in Liễu Hạnh's cult and the various "contents" created for it. The task proved to be very challenging. I perused the numerous files in the French Colonial Archives in Aix-en-Provence (CAOM), the Archive of Foreign Missions, the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, and National Archive I in Hanoi. The archives, however, provide little evidence about popular cults, which reflects the status of both the cults and the followers of the cults as "subaltern" in comparison with major historical developments and personalities that occupy vast rooms in the archives. Thus, virtually the only

occasions when the cults are mentioned are when they have some political significance. Moreover, owing to the numerous dynastic changes that provoked revisions of the archives' contents, the tropical climate, and limited capabilities of preservation in Vietnamese archives, a lot of material that might have been found there has failed to survive.

In addition, inscriptions that could have supplied us with an abundance of additional information also fell prey to the vicissitudes of time, climate, and politics. Coedès observed that, despite their ancient custom of commemorating important historical events, “the Annamites do not seem to respect their ancient inscriptions; they cut them down (*bâchent*) without remorse for the most futile reasons; in particular, they do not hesitate to scrape them off to be re-carved with new inscriptions.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, while taking advantage of all possible sources, this work is primarily based on works produced by relatively unknown literati and officials as well as some prominent literary figures from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. According to Hayden White, whether a narrative tells a “factual” or a “fictional” story, it is “intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.”<sup>30</sup> While all historical narratives have a fictive literary component that cannot be separated from their supposed objective historical basis, in Vietnam the conflation of history and literature is especially evident. Practically all the people considered to have been “historians” were also writers of other genres, in prose or poetry, that we would today consider literature. History and literature were not separate domains. To study Vietnamese history means to study also its literature or to study history through literature, engaging it in a dialogue with history. This is the point of departure for approaching the materials available about Liễu Hạnh. These existing narratives are creative fictions, yet not unrelated to historical context. The works analyzed here were written either in classical Chinese prose or in poetic vernacular Vietnamese character writing, so the intended audiences ranged from the educated elite to illiterate villagers whose culture was based on memory and oral recitation. This book endeavors to explore the degree to which a context of historical specificity can be established for the cult of Liễu Hạnh and the way in which successive generations of intellectuals and/or officials used this cult as a form in which to cast the content of their own ideological preoccupations. It places each story, to the extent possible, within the context of a historical

time and place and of the author's personality and agenda. I believe that in doing this we are able to see most clearly both continuity and change.

In addition to textual study, I conducted extensive fieldwork at temples in several Vietnamese provinces and numerous oral interviews with followers of Liễu Hạnh's cult, visitors at her temples, government officials, and other researchers. The reality of this cult continues as a living experience today, with throngs crowding into temples to offer their prayers and donations, with mediums consulting and performing Liễu Hạnh and her divine colleagues, and with academic institutes accumulating knowledge and publications.

This book answers many questions about Liễu Hạnh's cult related to its historical specificity, the context of writings about Vietnamese popular religion in which it appeared and developed, and the materials on which our knowledge of it is based. However, the main question addressed in this book is how this cult has been used by intellectuals and the state. My thesis is that while the existence of the cult is testimony to the stability of the cultic form of popular worship, biographical information about Liễu Hạnh as a divine/human personality attached to historical and geographical contexts comes from intellectuals for whom Liễu Hạnh is not an object of worship as much as a means for expressing philosophical, ideological, or political messages.

The first chapter examines hagiographies as a mode by which Vietnamese dynasties appropriated popular spirit cults as extensions of royal authority. Texts datable to the eleventh through fifteenth centuries show that intellectuals wrote popular tales or invented stories about deities, deified beings, or divine personalities to propagate royal authority and to teach approved norms of behavior among the people. Beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, procedures were established for officially recognizing village deities and for organizing them into a divine host to support dynastic rule.

The second chapter reviews materials available for documenting the appearance and development of the cult of Liễu Hạnh in the context of northern Vietnam in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Important questions here are related to how deities are thought to appear as objects of human worship and to the historicity of Liễu Hạnh as a celestial being, a human paragon of virtue, or, as claimed by some, a prostitute. Liễu Hạnh is not an ordinary spirit; she quickly moved to the forefront of Mother worship and has occupied prominent places in a variety of

spirit pantheons. While her exceptional popularity precludes her from being considered as a representative or typical Vietnamese deity, it reveals qualities that have particular appeal and potency in Vietnamese society. This will help to explain why Liễu Hạnh was considered a useful focus of interest by educated people, who used her to advance their intellectual agendas.

The third and the fourth chapters examine literary works written about Liễu Hạnh in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries that promote themes such as feminism, antifeminism, Buddhism, Daoism, existentialism, and nationalism. While Chapter 3 deals with writings in Chinese classical prose, Chapter 4 analyzes vernacular Vietnamese poetry and explores the significance, in terms of audience, of bringing stories about Liễu Hạnh from the classical language into the vernacular language. For us today, the messages promoted by people who wrote about Liễu Hạnh convey all the information currently available about her. Consequently, a study of these texts draws us into the agendas of intellectuals and of apologists for particular ideologies or regimes.

The focus of the last chapter is the relation between cult and state. Governing regimes have demonstrated shifting perceptions of popular religion in general and of Liễu Hạnh's cult in particular as superstition or as tradition in precolonial, colonial, socialist, and postsocialist times. There are definite resonances between the policies of the precolonial and socialist regimes and between the colonial and postsocialist regimes, with the former seeking to police a distinction between religion and superstition and the latter willing to accept popular religion as cultural tradition. Finally, in the context of the postsocialist renovation era, the current flourishing of Liễu Hạnh's cult is described; the state now features it as a symbol of Vietnam's distinctive cultural identity.

Perhaps Liễu Hạnh's cult has survived through a variety of political regimes and intellectual agendas because it has been a point of struggle between rival visions of social authority. It initially posed a challenge to patriarchy and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attracted the hostility of ideologies that assert male ascendancy over women: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In the early twentieth century it was used in arguments about modernity and the nation. In fact, the history of Liễu Hạnh's cult begins at the time when Vietnamese rulers turned to Confucianism and attempted to enforce patriarchal values in village society. The continuing survival of the cult may represent a critique of that and similar attempts.