

The Role of Legends in Folk Beliefs and Festivals in Hai Phong

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze the relationship between legends and folk festivals, emphasizing the role of legends as a medium for preserving cultural values and as an important tool in maintaining the spiritual life of the community. In particular, the Đền Nghè Festival, commemorating the female general Lê Chân, is highlighted as an example of the integration between legends and beliefs in shaping the unique cultural identity of the people of Hai Phong. The paper also points out the importance of maintaining and promoting these festivals in order to protect and develop the region's intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Legends, Role of legends, Folk beliefs, Festivals, Hai Phong

1.INTRODUCTION

Hai Phong, a coastal region in the northeastern part of Vietnam, has long been renowned for its rich and diverse legends. These stories are not only associated with the history of the region's formation and development but also profoundly reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and folk cultural activities of the local community. Each legend serves as a vital piece of the folklore treasure, conveying messages from the past, memories of national heroes, and individuals who made significant contributions to the exploration and preservation of Hai Phong. Legends are not merely mystical stories but also tools that help explain historical phenomena, cultural imprints, village names, architectural structures, and festival rituals. According to research in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, legends are considered a folk genre that aims to reflect and explain significant historical events that impact a nation, a tribe, or a locality [1]. In Hai Phong, legends are linked to historical figures and traditional festivals, such as the legends of Lady Chua Mo, General Le Chan, and Ngo Quyen, as well as the fishing village of Nam Hai, as documented in *General Le Chan in the Consciousness of Hai Phong People* [2] and *Preservation of Ancient Legends in Kien Thuy: Past and Present* by various authors [3].

A prominent feature of Hai Phong legends is their close connection to the folk belief system. These stories have been orally transmitted through generations, not only to preserve cultural values but also to maintain faith in the guardian deities of the land. From an artistic perspective, legends possess several fundamental characteristics, as discussed in the literary theory research paper *Characteristics of Genre and Textualization of Vietnamese Folk Legends* published in the *Journal of Literary Theory, Criticism, and History* by Tran Thi An, Issue 2, 2017 [4]. Time and space coexist as parallel factors, forming the artistic world of legends. Additionally, the art of plot construction often follows a simple storyline, structured in three steps in the protagonist's life. Legends commonly follow specific motifs: the protagonist's origin and the heroic motif. The art of character portrayal typically features a single main character, with few supporting roles. Most main characters are historical figures whose merits and deeds are recorded in historical documents.

From a religious perspective, some notable studies include *Village Deities and Tutelary Gods of Vietnam* by Nguyen Duy Hinh in the *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, Issue 9, 2004 [5]; *Hai Phong Tutelary Gods and Offerings*

(Dan Tri Publishing House, 2010) by historian Ngo Dang Loi [6], which provides an overview of Hai Phong's people and a comprehensive survey of Hai Phong's tutelary gods throughout various historical periods; and *Prominent Traditional Festivals of Hai Phong* by Trinh Minh Hien (Hai Phong Publishing House, 2006) [7], which thoroughly catalogs traditional festivals in Hai Phong across different villages and their connections to historical figures who contributed to the nation's independence.

Additionally, numerous notable articles have been published, such as *Research on the Origins of Ngo Quyen Worship in Hai Phong* by Nguyen Thuy An and Nguyen Thi Tam, published in the *Journal of Science - Hai Phong University*, Issue 45, 2021 [8]; and under the perspective of tourism development, *The System of Ngo Quyen Worship Monuments in Hai Phong and the Practical Guide Activities of the Faculty of Tourism* by researcher Nguyen Thuy An, published in the *Journal of Science - Hai Phong University*, Issue 39, 2020 [9]; as well as *The Hero Le Chan and the Nghè Temple Festival* by Le Hong Ly, *Journal of Folk Culture*, Issue 4, 1987 [10].

Based on the aforementioned studies, we believe that choosing the topic of legends in the folk belief life of Hai Phong serves as an essential means to reflect the community's spiritual faith, contributing to the creation of the unique cultural identity of this coastal region. Moreover, this paper aims to affirm the position of legends as an important component of the Vietnamese folk literature heritage. This foundation will help preserve and promote traditional cultural values in the context of modernization and globalization. To understand the role of legends in folk religious life, we analyze the theoretical and practical aspects involved, specifically in the content presented below

2. CONTENT

2.1. Hai Phong Folk Legends Praising the Merits of Heroes in Land Exploration and Expansion

Folk legends have long become an essential part of the spiritual life of each community, reflecting cultural and historical values, as well as portraying characters who have had a profound impact on society. In Hai Phong, a region of strategic importance throughout the history of resistance against invaders and national development, folk legends not only extol the merits of national heroes but also demonstrate the bond between people and the land, thereby fostering strong resident communities. The legends of Lady Chua Mo and Yet Kieu are two typical examples affirming the roles of historical figures in building and protecting this land.

The Legend of Lady Chua Mo – A Symbol of Female Enlightenment and Community Connection: The legend of Lady Chua Mo is one of the unique stories of Hai Phong, celebrating the contributions of Princess Tran Quynh Tran, who significantly contributed to the development of the Van Uc riverside area, now Ngu Phuc commune, Kien Thuy district, Hai Phong. Although born into a royal lineage, Princess Tran Quynh Tran voluntarily gave up her noble life and chose monasticism after an unfulfilled love affair with Tran Khanh Du, a talented general of the Tran dynasty. Her choice was not merely a personal decision but also a socially meaningful act when she decided to return to the wild land to reclaim, develop the economy, and improve the community's livelihood [3].

From a historical perspective, the princess's establishment of estates, opening of markets, and encouragement of people to reclaim land and make a living were not only practical actions to stabilize society but also symbols of female strength in uniting the community. Moreover, she created a strong connection between spiritual and practical life, as her wooden bell (mo) was used to regulate the rhythm of the local residents' labor activities. This represents a model of "self-cultivation" intertwined with "family governance and national management," which the princess executed, making society more harmonious and prosperous. The veneration shown by the people after her death, demonstrated through the construction of a shrine and the organization of festivals, proves the profound influence of the princess on the spiritual life of the community.

The Legend of Yet Kieu – A Hero of Waterways and the Formation of the Fishing Village Community: While Lady Chua Mo represents the model of female enlightenment, the legend of Yet Kieu exemplifies the model of a waterway hero – a warrior dedicated to the people and the nation. Yet Kieu, whose real name was Pham Huu The, was born into a poor family in Ha Bi village, Hai Duong province, and grew up in challenging conditions. However, thanks to his talent and resourcefulness, Yet Kieu became one of the prominent generals under the Tran dynasty, playing a significant role in the victory against the Mongol-Yuan invaders. His career was not only associated with remarkable military achievements but also with the protection and development of the Nam Hai fishing village community, where he lived and worked after retiring from military service.

According to the legend, after defeating the Yuan invaders, Yet Kieu continued to care for the people's livelihood. He requested permission from King Tran to allow the fishing villagers to legally engage in fishing, creating stable living conditions, freeing them from the precarious life of wandering and facing death on the waters. This clearly demonstrates the hero's concern for the people's welfare and the close bond between national heroes and the community. The legend also recounts how Yet Kieu, after stepping into the river and merging with the waters to shield the villagers, "transformed into a deity" in the river. As a result, the people of Nam Hai established a temple to worship Yet Kieu, honoring him as the village's tutelary god, and organized boat racing festivals to commemorate his contributions [3]. The formation of the Nam Hai fishing village is also closely linked to the villagers' worship and gratitude toward Yet Kieu. The boat racing festival not only serves as a memorial but also as a unique cultural event, reflecting the robust development of the fishing village community while expressing their gratitude to the hero who brought stability to this land.

The above analysis shows that both the legends of Lady Chua Mo and Yet Kieu bear profound humanistic values, affirming the roles of national heroes in exploring and protecting new lands. Each story reflects great ideals of loyalty, chivalry, and community cohesion. The connection between heroic figures and geographical-social space has contributed to shaping strong residential communities, enriching the folklore treasure of Hai Phong. At the same time, these legends also represent a process of culturalization and sacralization of historical figures, highlighting their contributions not only in warfare but also in building a peaceful and stable life for future generations.

2.2. Legends of Historical Figures and Anti-Invasion Heroes in Hai Phong

Folk legends, especially stories about heroes who fought against invasions, are an indispensable part of the cultural heritage of the Vietnamese people. These legends not only reflect historical values but also portray the indomitable fighting spirit of generations, particularly concerning the heroes from Hai Phong. One of the most prominent figures is Lê Chân, a famous female general in Vietnamese history, associated with legends about her resistance against invaders. According to legend, Lê Chân was originally from An Biên, Đông Triều. After being forced by the governor Tô Định to become his concubine, she refused to submit, leading to the murder of her family. She fled to the coastal area of An Dương, where she not only reclaimed land along the river but also organized military forces, training local militias to prepare for battle. Later, she joined the uprising led by the Trưng Sisters to fight against Tô Định's forces. The people of Hai Phong not only regard her as a heroic general but also venerate her as a Holy Mother, a patron deity of the Port City. Lê Chân, therefore, is not only a resilient warrior but also a cultural pioneer, closely associated with the development of the An Biên area (now Hai Phong) [2].

Besides Lê Chân, many other female characters in legends have left their mark in the fight against foreign invasions, embodying unwavering spirit and patriotism. Mai Thị Cầu, a legendary female hero, is depicted as the beloved daughter of Mai Thúc Loan. After her father, the king, was defeated by the Tang invaders, she, along with her son and brother Mai Kỳ Sơn, called upon forces to resist. Upon hearing of her brother's sacrifice, she chose to drown herself rather than fall into enemy hands. This legend not only illustrates her fervent patriotism but also her boundless sacrifice for the ideal of defending the nation [3].

Alongside Mai Thị Cầu, Không Hoàng is another legendary female figure known for her bravery. Không Hoàng was the princess daughter of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh. After her father was assassinated by the traitor Đỗ Thích, Không Hoàng, with intelligence and courage, participated in avenging her father by eliminating Đỗ Thích. Her story symbolizes intelligence, quick thinking, and bravery in defending family and homeland [3].

The legend also recounts the story of Bà Từ Nhan, a woman who, together with her two daughters Hoa Nương and Ngọc Nương, rallied the villagers to resist the treacherous official Kiều Công Tiễn. Their determination and anger against traitors made Bà Từ Nhan a model of a resilient mother and wife, protecting her family and homeland from invaders [3].

Despite belonging to different generations, these figures all represent the spirit of patriotism and relentless struggle for the freedom and independence of the nation. This spirit has been inherited from one generation to another, evident not only in major uprisings but also in small yet courageous acts of the people in defending the country.

The victory at Bạch Đằng River in 938, under the command of Ngô Quyền, is a typical example of the nation's glorious triumph in the fight against invasions. This victory marked the end of more than a thousand years of Northern domination, opening a long period of independence for the Vietnamese nation. Ngô Quyền, with his

outstanding military talent and ability to unite the people, led the army to defeat the Southern Han forces in this battle, inaugurating a new chapter in the country's development. In this context, the Bạch Đằng victory is not only Ngô Quyền's accomplishment but also the crystallization of the entire nation's strength in defending the homeland. The legend of Ngô Quyền, as a symbol of national solidarity, remains deeply engraved in Vietnamese history and culture [8].

Thus, the legends of historical figures and anti-invasion heroes in Hai Phong not only reflect glorious historical feats but also affirm the solidarity and deep patriotism of the people of Hai Phong in particular and the Vietnamese nation in general. These stories not only enrich the folk cultural heritage but also serve as lessons in resilience, loyalty, and collective strength in defending the nation.

2.3. The Belief in Worshiping Ngô Quyền

Ngô Quyền is an important historical figure known for his remarkable achievements, particularly the victory at the Bạch Đằng River in 938 against the Southern Han invaders. This victory marked the end of over a thousand years of Northern domination and initiated a new era for the Vietnamese nation. Therefore, the belief in worshiping Ngô Quyền emerged, becoming an essential part of the spiritual and cultural life of the people of Hai Phong, as well as many other regions in Vietnam.

The belief in worshiping Ngô Quyền is deeply rooted in the practice of venerating deified human beings and honoring heroic figures, especially in the context of villages where Ngô Quyền is worshiped as the village deity (Thành Hoàng). This practice not only reflects the people's reverence for Ngô Quyền but also demonstrates the integration of history, culture, and politics within the community's spiritual life. Worshiping Ngô Quyền has transformed a historical figure into a divine symbol, acting as a protector and guardian for the community in the collective consciousness of the people.

Origins of Belief and Spirituality: Ngô Quyền was a real historical figure. Worshiping Ngô Quyền elevated him to the status of a deity among the Vietnamese people. Initially, the belief began with honoring Ngô Quyền as a heroic figure. Over time, under the influence of the feudal government, Ngô Quyền was deified as the village deity (Thành Hoàng), becoming a divine guardian of the community. Despite changes in titles, the core purpose of worship remained aligned with ancient totemic beliefs - seeking protection and blessings from the deity. This reflects the continuation of the totemic belief system within village communities 888.

Historical Origins: History records Ngô Quyền's activities in Hai Phong, most notably the great victory on the Bạch Đằng River in 938 - a monumental achievement in the nation's history. Ngô Quyền, as the commanding general, ended over a thousand years of Northern domination and ushered in a period of independence for Vietnam. His historical endeavors, such as building the Vành Kiệu fortress, training soldiers, and especially the Bạch Đằng battle, have been passed down through folk stories and worship ceremonies. These events have been memorialized by the villages of Hai Phong, contributing to the formation of the belief in worshiping Ngô Quyền. This belief not only demonstrates gratitude for Ngô Quyền's contributions but also affirms his vital role in the spiritual and historical life of the community 888.

Political Origins: Throughout feudal history, honoring prominent historical figures, especially those who made significant contributions to the nation, was utilized by feudal dynasties as a tool to consolidate power and manage the spiritual life of the populace. Ngô Quyền became the village deity - a guardian of the village and a symbolic authority of the feudal regime. The political institutionalization of the belief in worshiping Ngô Quyền was promoted during the Lê Sơ dynasty and subsequent reigns. The conferral of deity status and official recognition by feudal regimes transformed Ngô Quyền into a symbol of royal power, reflecting the integration of belief and politics in social life 888.

Currently, Ngô Quyền is worshiped in many communal houses and temples in Hai Phong, notably Hàng Kênh and Dư Hàng communal houses, where he is venerated as the village deity. The rituals and festivals honoring Ngô Quyền in Hai Phong are still preserved and celebrated, affirming the enduring vitality of this belief. Statistics show that up to 28 villages still worship Ngô Quyền, demonstrating the widespread influence of this belief within the Hai Phong community. The belief in worshiping Ngô Quyền is not only associated with folk festivals but also actively supported by local authorities, reflecting the combination of spiritual and political culture 888.

Beyond the inner-city areas, the worship space for Ngô Quyền has expanded to the suburban areas, especially the Trảng Kênh scenic area, linked to Ngô Quyền's triumphs in the Bạch Đằng battle. This area has become a new worship complex, built in 2008 to honor national heroes, including Ngô Quyền. Although the belief in worshipping Ngô Quyền here is not directly maintained by the villagers of Trảng Kênh, this complex still plays a vital role in preserving and promoting historical and cultural values.

Thus, the belief in worshipping Ngô Quyền not only reflects respect and gratitude towards a national hero but also signifies the amalgamation of history, culture, and politics. Worshipping Ngô Quyền contributes to preserving historical values, sustaining spiritual life, and reinforcing the political authority of feudal dynasties. This belief continues to thrive among the people of Hai Phong, emphasizing the enduring strength of national traditions.

2.4. The Nghè Temple Festival - The Commemoration of General Lê Chân

The Nghè Temple Festival, held annually, is not only an occasion to commemorate General Lê Chân but also a cultural and historical event that embodies the values of both history and faith within the Hai Phong community. The festival spans three important dates: the 8th of February in the lunar calendar, which marks her birthday; the 15th of August, commemorating her victory; and the 25th of December, which is the anniversary of her death. Among these, the 8th of February is regarded as the most significant day, dedicated to celebrating the birth of Lê Chân. The festival lasts four days, from the 7th to the 10th of February, aligning with the legend of her birth on the 8th of February. According to the legend, Lê Chân was born with exceptional beauty, leading the villagers to believe that she possessed extraordinary qualities. This myth reflects not only the sacredness of the festival but also the special relationship between real time and mystical time in folk culture, where all events are intertwined with a sense of reverence and mysticism [10].

Nghè Temple, located in a narrow alley on Lê Chân Street, is currently the only historical site dedicated to General Lê Chân in the Northern Delta, and it has been recognized as a national heritage site. The temple is a sacred space that preserves the historical memories of Lê Chân and serves as the spiritual anchor for the local community. According to legend, after her death, the villagers of An Biên dreamt that Lê Chân returned to announce a message, instructing them to bring a stone slab engraved with the words "Thánh Chân Công Chúa" (Saint Princess Chân). The villagers followed the dream and erected a temple at the location where the stone fell, facing east. Thus, the Nghè Temple has become not only a site of worship but also a place that reflects the community's respect, gratitude, and hopes for a better future.

The ceremonies during the Nghè Temple Festival are performed with great solemnity and precision. On the 7th of February, the "arrival ceremony" is held, where a procession carries the statue of Lê Chân to the village temple. On the 8th of February, the official ceremony takes place with a grand ritual, featuring 17 participants, including high-ranking officials and assistants, who perform a series of very formal rites. The offerings for the ceremony are special, including four pigs and two essential items: sea crabs and noodles. Sea crabs, a local seafood delicacy from Hai Phong, and noodles, a dish linked to the agricultural economy, carry deep meanings in the legend of Lê Chân, especially when these offerings are connected to the story of her death and transformation into stone. This symbolizes the harmony between agriculture and the fishing industry in the culture of Hai Phong residents [7].

Another significant ritual is the procession of the village deity statue. The statue of Lê Chân is carried from Nghè Temple to An Biên Temple in a grand ceremony. This procession is not only an act of veneration but also a manifestation of the integration between earth, sky, humans, and deities, helping participants experience the sacredness and protective power of Lê Chân. The procession lasts about two hours and attracts a large crowd, creating a lively, festive atmosphere.

In addition to the main ceremonies, the Nghè Temple Festival also features several traditional folk games. Wrestling is one of the popular activities, tied to the legend of General Lê Chân training her soldiers to enhance their physical strength and resilience. This game is played under the shade of ancient trees, evoking a sense of a peaceful countryside yet full of vigor. Another prominent event is the boat racing competition, which recreates military training during the time of the Trưng Sisters when Lê Chân and other generals trained their soldiers in naval combat by rowing boats on rivers. This activity not only commemorates the military training but also has the symbolic meaning of praying for rain and abundant harvests, reflecting the agricultural and fishing livelihoods of Hai Phong residents. Some people say that due to the many rivers in Hai Phong, it was easy for Lê Chân to establish naval forces and train soldiers in boat rowing for river battles. Thus, this game not only honors the method of military training but also carries a prayer for rain for agriculture.

The Narcissus Flower Contest is also a special activity of the festival, originating from a legend related to the narcissus flower, which is associated with the image of Lê Chân. Although the contest has been interrupted for many years, the belief in the sacredness of the festival and the reverence for her remain deeply embedded in the hearts of the local people. The narcissus flowers are offered to the goddess as a symbol of respect and devotion from the villagers to General Lê Chân, who played a significant role in defending their homeland.

The Nghè Temple Festival, with its rich ceremonies and cultural activities, is not only an occasion for the people of Hai Phong to honor the contributions of General Lê Chân but also serves as a symbol of the connection between history, faith, and community life, helping preserve and promote the traditional cultural values of the local people.

3. CONCLUSION

Hai Phong is a land that preserves many unique and valuable folk festivals, reflecting the cultural characteristics of the region, the customs, and the temperament of the coastal people. The festivals of Hai Phong are closely associated with the forms of labor, production, agricultural products, and the enduring struggle of the people over thousands of years to protect the country's coastal borders. The diversity of festivals in Hai Phong highlights the unique cultural traditions and the rich spiritual life of the people in this region, which is blessed with both geographical and human resources.

Legends and traditional folk festivals are closely intertwined, with each serving as both a foundation and a means of development for the other. Legends are the roots, the basis for the creation of festivals. Legends reflect the local history and culture, providing explanations for the origins and existence of festivals. Festivals, in turn, serve as the environment that helps legends take root in people's hearts. Festivals are the "performance form" of legends, ensuring their survival and promoting their value in people's lives throughout the history of the nation.

It can be said that the relationship between legends and festivals is dialectical and reciprocal, with each complementing and relying on the other for existence. This connection has contributed to the preservation, development, and enduring value of both historical and cultural traditions, as well as folk festivals, in Hai Phong./.

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