

Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2007, xi+260 pp., cloth, \$56.00, ISBN: 078-0-8248-2972-8.

Olga Dror's *Cult, Culture and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* is a significant contribution to Vietnamese historical and historiographical study. In it, Dror examines a noted female cultic figure, Liễu Hạnh, not primarily to determine her historical facticity, but rather to explore the ways in which successive generations of Vietnamese literati have depicted her. In addition, Dror is interested in examining what she sees as a considerable degree of continuity in efforts by successive Vietnamese states to manipulate and control cultic activity, seeking to exercise authority over the realm of popular belief and culture. The study is very much a literary and historiographical one in which Dror examines an array of significant Vietnamese literary and historical texts, attempting to understand their respective author's motives for offering differing depictions of Liễu Hạnh. As she notes, "Rather than bringing us closer to Liễu Hạnh, the stories written about her brings us closer to those who wrote the stories." (pp. 82–83) While perhaps a truism from a historiographical perspective, the point is an important one, and Dror's arguments regarding this historiographical process are convincing, even as some of them are highly speculative. Indeed, her work is a reminder of the often frustrating limits

to the historical paper trail that bedevils scholars of Vietnamese history. Yet Dror demonstrates that with some creativity, useful and provocative scholarship on less accessible aspects of Vietnamese history is possible.

The introductory chapter is an examination of the role of spirits and spirit cults in early Vietnamese society, and particularly as these attracted the attention of the Vietnamese state. It also provides a useful survey of the reasons for and mechanisms by which the state attempted to regulate the realm of the spirits and their worship. She shows how the state "bureaucratized" local spirits, seeking to place them under the umbrella of state authority, and thus effectively undercut their autonomy. Dror also offers compelling analysis of the two earliest Vietnamese compilations of tales about spirits, the *Việt Đình U Linh Tập* (Collection of Stories on the Spirits of the Departed in the Viet Realm), and the *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* (Wonders Plucked from the Dust of Ling Nam). Here she effectively uses these texts to demonstrate how tales about spirits and cults to these spirits were manipulated by their scholar compilers to serve the interests of the state, and sets the stage for her argument that the tales about Liễu Hạnh were similarly reworked to serve the agendas of particular political viewpoints.

The second chapter examines what evidence exists for the earliest emergence of the cult of Liễu Hạnh, considering the types of circumstances that might have contributed to the development of

this type of cult. She links the cult's appearance to the era of the Mạc dynasty in the second half of the sixteenth century, providing some intriguing speculation about the religious policy of that regime, and a possible connection between the cult's emergence and the fact that so many women were left at home as their husbands and brothers were being drafted into contending armed forces. The third chapter commences the historiographical analysis, which lies at the heart of this study, and looks carefully at three eighteenth and nineteenth-century accounts of the Liễu Hạnh story. Dror gives considerable attention to the account written by Đoàn Thị Điểm, who ranks as one of a handful of famed Vietnamese female writers of the pre-twentieth century period. Dror argues that it is Điểm's account, "Tales of the Vân Cát Goddess" that has become the essential Ur-text regarding Liễu Hạnh, and that it is generally regarded as the most reliable version of the story. Ironically, Dror argues that Điểm's telling of the story is not a simple legend or re-articulation of the cult story, but rather a complex narrative designed in part as Điểm's autobiography, as well as a critique of the Confucian-dominated society in which she grew up and lived. Perhaps not surprisingly, Điểm's account later sparked another round of revisions to Liễu Hạnh's story by male literati. Dror concludes the chapter by looking at two such revised tellings in which writers representing the Buddhist and Daoist establishments sought to lay claim

to Liễu Hạnh while at the same time reining in a cult focused on what they viewed as a threatening female figure.

Chapter four looks at the ways in which the tale of this efficacious female spirit was once again transmogrified in the nineteenth century, most notably at the hands of the scholar-official Nguyễn Công Trứ, and then later those of the historian Kiều Oánh Mậu. Here, as with Đoàn Thị Điểm, Dror offers useful biographical background to each man, situating them and their work in particular historical circumstances of the early and late nineteenth centuries respectively. She argues that Trứ sought to focus his telling on the divine and sublime nature of Princess Liễu Hạnh, while the later Mậu, living through the stark realities of French colonialism, emphasized her potentialities as an agent of resistance who could rescue the newly imagined nation. In a concluding chapter, Dror brings the story to the modern period, examining the changing fortunes of Vietnamese spirit cults in general and that of Liễu Hạnh more particularly. She traces the attitudes of the French, and later the independent Vietnamese regimes towards popular spirit cults and beliefs, arguing for a tension between state authorities who viewed these cults either as "superstition" or "culture." She shows how the fortunes of these cults faded, particularly during the war and the immediate post-war years of the 1950s through 1980s, and then describes a revival of the Liễu Hạnh cult in the *đổi mới* era after 1986, in which the temples were refurbished,

people were allowed to attend them unimpeded, and the state sought to capitalize on the tourist potential manifested by these and other “cultural” rituals.

Given the relative paucity of materials with which to work, Dror, like most good historians of earlier Vietnam, carefully assesses what is available, and attempts to extract plausible interpretations from them. While narrowly an examination of the emergence and evolution of a particular Vietnamese cult, her interpretative approaches are ones that offer new ways of thinking about other issues and other texts in Vietnamese history. This book makes contributions on numerous levels. It offers the most detailed English-language examination to date of a particular popular spirit cult, tracing its historical antecedents in compelling fashion. It also gives us a powerful case study of the ways in which popular cultural systems interacted with the Vietnamese state and its representatives across the centuries. The particulars of this important dynamic are too often neglected in the scholarship, and Dror does a very good job of highlighting it. The book also ranges across the multiple belief systems that have historically been found across Vietnamese society: Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and spirit cults, and historicizes their interactions, overlaps and contestations in a nuanced way that goes well beyond the vague truisms that often dominate historians’ comment on these religious forces.

In particular, Dror’s notion of the Liễu Hạnh cult as a kind of vessel into which different types of content are placed, is noteworthy. It not only creates the framework for the book, but is an important insight that gives pause to scholars who misguidedly try to ascribe particular authenticities to popular cultural practices. Dror also demonstrates one of the more intriguing patterns linking Vietnamese literary and popular culture, namely the ways in which there is an ongoing circulation of tales between the oral and written realms. She shows how existing tales are recorded, then are transmitted, often orally, only later once again to be recorded as “oral” tradition. This complex process is critical for understanding the evolution of Vietnamese cultural lore, and Dror offers a very good case study demonstrating how this process functions.

There is something in this study for everyone, making it a distinctively rich work of scholarship, with much to offer the larger field of Vietnamese studies, whether one is interested in history, literary analysis, religion, or ethnographic research. The earlier sections are more compelling than the discussion of the cult’s turbulent path through the twentieth century, but all are worth reading. Moreover, while there are moments in which this ambitious work seems in danger of over-extending itself, and when the threads of the story line become rather thin, Dror skillfully maintains sufficient focus on the Liễu Hạnh cults as an effective lynchpin for the project. This book is a serious and important

contribution to scholarship on Vietnamese social and literary history, and will remain a significant point of reference for scholars for a long time to come.

George Dutton
