

Leveraging Folk Religion and Symbolic Art in Inclusive Education: Cultural Identity and Art Therapy Practices in Northern Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of cultural heritage and inclusive education, drawing on the legends and symbolic representations of the Four Immortals (Tứ Bất Tử) in Northern Vietnam as pedagogical resources for special education. Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates literature review, field observation, visual analysis, and artistic practice, the research is grounded in Cultural Diffusion Theory, Structural and Functional Theory, Semiotic Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory, and Aesthetic Theory, alongside approaches from Conceptual Art and Installation Art. The study aims to demonstrate how indigenous belief systems can be adapted to support cultural identity formation and art therapy among diverse learners. Findings reveal that the syncretic nature of folk religion in Northern Vietnam offers a dynamic framework for inclusive educational practices. The legends and visual representations of the Four Immortals serve as powerful vehicles for moral education, social cohesion, and emotional expression. By translating sacred symbolism into contemporary art creation, educators can cultivate cultural identity and provide meaningful, culturally responsive art therapy interventions. This research underscores the value of integrating indigenous cultural resources into special education curricula to promote holistic development and inclusive learning environments for students with diverse needs.

Keywords : Arts, Culture, Vietnam, Legends, Symbol, Folk Religion, Religion

1. Introduction

Religious practices emerged as mechanisms to elucidate natural phenomenon and phenomena in

our world. Early human societies developed legends and symbols to account for all of nature and the cycle of life and death. Over time, these narratives evolved into a system of intricate

beliefs that offered a conceptual framework for understanding the universe and the human place within it. Religion also assumes a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion. It establishes a shared set of values and moral principles, contributing to community harmony. Many religious traditions incorporate communal rituals and practices that strengthen social bonds. Nevertheless, the role of religion exhibits considerable variation across cultures, reflecting the diversity and complexity of human experience.

Religion plays a significant role in the societal and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. This region is a hub for a variety of religious traditions, creating a rich diversity of practices and beliefs. These include native folk religions, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Specifically, Theravada Buddhism is particularly influential in Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Mahayana Buddhism, which aligns with the indigenous folk religion, dominates a large part of Vietnam, while Islam is the dominant faith in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Uniquely, the Philippines is the only nation in the region with a predominantly Christian population.

Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country, boasts a vibrant mix of religious influences and historical amalgamation. The religious situation in Vietnam is marked by a rich diversity of beliefs and practices, deeply entwined with the nation's history and culture. The Vietnamese government's approach to religion is characterized by regulation and control, reflecting a broader strategy to maintain social and political stability. Understanding the complexities of religion in Vietnam requires acknowledging both its cultural richness and orientation posed by state policies in the contemporary context of Vietnam.

Regarding Vietnamese Folk Religion: although Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity have gained prominence as the most well-known imported religions in Vietnam, the indigenous belief is called Folk Religion which maintains significant influence. Vietnam's unique religious landscape is shaped by the state's religious policies. While the government reports that about 86% of the Vietnamese population identifies as

non-religious, this doesn't exclude the practice of folk religion and worship of folk beliefs. This is because these traditions are deeply ingrained in the culture and are fully recognized by the Vietnamese government. Non-religious status is still affirmed by the government as being allowed to worship folk religion. Thus, more than 86% of the Vietnamese population is reported to be following folk religion in Vietnam. Indeed, its religious building as decorative motifs or sculptures and religious activities as ceremonies play a central part in Vietnamese spiritual life, matched and existed even in Buddhist temples. The religious landscape of Vietnam and its development really is a fascinating blend of original folk religion interwoven with major world faiths such as Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

Vietnamese Folk Religion has a rich and varied mythology with many different gods and spirits worshipped. The Mother Goddess is one of the most important figures in Vietnamese folk religion, believed to protect and provide for the people. Other important figures include legendary characters who are associated with different aspects of nature or history and believed to have the power to control the elements. Besides religious types such as the belief for ancestors, Fertility, village's tutelary gods, animal or natural phenomena deities, worshipping the "Four Immortals" is very popular, prevalent and occupies the most important position in the folk religious system and outstanding in spirit of Vietnamese. Even today, each folk religious symbol of the Four Immortals continues to inspire cultural practices and traditions in Vietnam. It is a vital part of the country's cultural heritage and a testament to the enduring influence of folk and historical culture of Kinh ethnic in Vietnamese society.

Until nowadays, in the constant exchange and change of cultural flows, the Folk Religion of Kinh's people has also constantly transformed to match the modern life. On the other side, the modern-life people in Vietnam faces numerous psychological challenges, including pressure to succeed in a highly competitive world, the impact

of social media and digital technology on mental health, and economic and social challenges related to finding meaningful employment. These challenges can lead to feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout, as young people struggle to find balance in a rapidly changing world. Vietnamese Folk Religion, with its emphasis on worshiping, cultural and artistic building, ritual, community, social harmony, and respect for tradition and authority, can offer today's generations a sense of rootedness and continuity in a rapidly changing world. By reinforcing these values, folk beliefs can help to create stable, cohesive societies that can survive and thrive in challenging environments. As such, Vietnamese folk religion has the potential to play an important role in supporting the psychological well-being and balance of young people in Vietnam today. The official recognition of the Mother Goddess religion such as part of the country's heritage in 2013 is a testament to the government's efforts in this regard.

2. Objective

2.1 To study the legends and symbols of folk religion in Northern Vietnam

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the legends and symbols of folk religion in Northern Vietnam. Relevant data are collected through surveys, field investigations, interviews, focus group discussions, and visual documentation. Based on these methods, the study examines the historical development of folk religion in Northern Vietnam, as well as its legendary narratives, symbolic structures, ritual practices, and cultural meanings within contemporary society.

The survey component is conducted using a structured questionnaire designed to explore significant aspects of Northern Vietnamese folk religion, particularly sacred legends, symbolic representations, ritual activities, and the interpretation of religious meanings. The questionnaire encourages participants to express their perceptions and experiences related to

cultural symbols, spiritual beliefs, and ritual practices associated with local religious traditions.

The survey is distributed among selected participants, including local residents living near religious sites, ritual practitioners, cultural participants, artists, and visitors engaging with folk religious activities. This diverse group of respondents enables the research to gather multiple perspectives ranging from lived religious experiences to cultural and symbolic interpretations. The collected information contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious symbols and legendary narratives are perceived, transmitted, and reinterpreted within contemporary contexts.

In addition, this study conducts interviews with key informants (K.I.), casual informants (C.I.), and general informants (G.I.) in order to obtain detailed insights into the meanings and functions of folk religious symbols and legends in Northern Vietnam. Data are recorded through audio and video recordings, field notes, and photographs to ensure accuracy and completeness for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis in this research refers to the systematic process of organizing, interpreting, and synthesizing qualitative information collected from documentary sources, surveys, observations, interviews, and field investigations. Rather than emphasizing statistical analysis, the study focuses on identifying patterns, meanings, and relationships embedded within cultural beliefs, symbolic systems, legendary narratives, and ritual practices.

The analytical process involves classification, thematic grouping, and interpretative synthesis. Data are categorized according to major research themes, including the historical development of folk religion in Northern Vietnam, sacred legends and mythological narratives, symbolic representations in religious practice, and the cultural significance of ritual objects and sacred spaces. Similar forms of data are grouped together to reveal recurring patterns in beliefs, symbolic expressions, ritual performances, and social perceptions.

Through this interpretative process, the study identifies the relationships between folk religious practices and symbolic meanings within Northern Vietnamese cultural contexts. Particular attention is given to the ways in which legends and symbols function as cultural representations that preserve collective memory, spiritual identity, and local belief systems.

Furthermore, visual documentation—including photographs, video recordings, sketches, and observations of sacred spaces—is analyzed as part of the qualitative data. These materials support the examination of visual symbolism, spatial organization, ritual environments, and material culture observed during fieldwork. Where appropriate, diagrams or thematic illustrations may also be employed to clarify symbolic relationships and cultural patterns identified throughout the study.

4. Results

Following the analysis of the historical development of folk religion in Northern Vietnam, this section focuses on two fundamental components that shape its cultural and spiritual system: legends and symbols. These elements are not only integral to the belief structure of the folk religion but also function as carriers of meaning, values, and collective memory within the community.

Legends, particularly those associated with the “Four Immortals” (Tan Vien Son Than, Chu Dong Tu, Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh and Thanh Giong), represent narrative foundations that reflect the worldview, moral ideals, and historical consciousness of the Vietnamese people. As identified in this study, these legends are deeply embedded in religious practices and continue to influence contemporary perceptions of spiritual identity.

4.2.1 Legends

Legends play a key role for folk religion in Northern Vietnam. Legends are more than narratives in telling stories and historical experiences but they tell stories for how people have believed over time, and on how beliefs have evolved. They serve as interpretive models for

how history and morality are encoded in human spirituality -- in the sense that you can link human life to the sacred being.“

In Northern Vietnamese folk religion, belief does not appear to be an independent side narrative in itself. It is rather intertwined with legends, which tell about the origin, and power, to the gods, spirits, for example the guardians of gods, spirits and other symbols. Legend-based stories of nature and history will give meanings to rituals and social relations and rituals. Legends are not real but they are stories told from their roots; they make sense and relate to a mythic, historical context that is representative of how people think; they tell us of how we lived. However they fit in in relation to ritual performances and so are more and more closely associated to ritual life in this very sense with them. Belief is not just expressed by storytelling for this, and festivity, ceremonies and communal life plays at many events because legends can now become an actual thing in real life. Rituals that create and distribute legendary narrative are organised to ensure that, during this process, a group of people can reenact legendary story lines and become actual places in our lives and also become meaningful. Legend also form the basis of the construction of symbolic systems and, if we work the myth in ritual materials, statues, and images, the meanings are distilled and recorded in our lives through the meaning and the symbols. These symbolic forms aren't depictions of specific stories but represent a structure (values, powers, relationships presented in legend) for what they represent. Therefore, legends in the folk religion of Northern Vietnam are seen as the narrative layers between belief, ritual practice and symbolic representations within cultural life. Legends can be understood not only as cultural accounts, but also with its way of making them to keep on telling and changing how people live in the past and at present.

Legend of Tan Vien Son Than

The legend of Tan Vien Son Than, also known as Son Tinh, is one of the most prominent narratives within the system of the “Four Immortals” in Northern Vietnamese folk

religion. The story revolves around a powerful mountain deity who competes with Thuy Tinh (the Water God) to marry Princess My Nuong, the daughter of the Hung King. After fulfilling the king's challenge by bringing rare offerings, Son Tinh wins the princess. Enraged by his defeat, Thuy Tinh unleashes floods each year in an attempt to reclaim her, but Son Tinh continuously raises mountains to protect the land and the people. This recurring conflict symbolizes the struggle between humans and natural forces, particularly the seasonal floods of the Red River Delta.

Beyond its narrative form, the legend reflects early belief structures rooted in the worship of natural forces. Tan Vien Son Than embodies the sacred power of mountains, representing stability, protection, and control over the environment. The story can be understood as a mythologized explanation of natural phenomena, while also expressing the human desire to overcome and adapt to ecological challenges.

Over time, the legend has absorbed and reflected influences from Buddhism. While Tan Vien Son Than is not originally a Buddhist figure, later

interpretations tend to emphasize qualities such as compassion, protection of living beings, and a moral alignment with the welfare of the community. In many temple contexts, the figure is not only revered as a powerful deity but also associated with a sense of spiritual guardianship that resonates with Buddhist ethical frameworks. This transformation illustrates how folk belief gradually incorporated Buddhist values without losing its original identity.

At the same time, the legend also shows clear traces of Confucian and Taoist influence. From a Confucian perspective, the narrative reinforces ideals such as loyalty, moral responsibility, and the protection of the social order. Tan Vien Son Than is often interpreted as a righteous figure who safeguards the people and maintains harmony within the kingdom. In contrast, Taoist elements can be observed in the characterization of the deity as a master of natural forces, capable of controlling mountains and confronting water through supernatural means. This reflects a worldview in which humans and nature are interconnected through cosmic balance and transformation.



Figure 1: Statue of Tan Vien Son Thanh at the temple Tan Vien, Xu Doai – Ba Vi

In the modern period, particularly after 1945, the legend of Tan Vien Son Than continues to hold cultural and symbolic significance. It is no longer understood solely as a myth but also as a representation of resilience and collective identity. The annual flooding motif, for instance, has been reinterpreted as a metaphor for the enduring struggle of the Vietnamese people against both natural and historical challenges. Moreover, the figure of Tan Vien Son Than has been integrated into heritage preservation, tourism, and contemporary artistic practices, allowing the legend to persist within new social and cultural contexts. Rather than fading into the past, it remains an active source of meaning that bridges traditional belief with modern interpretation.

Legend of Chu Dong Tu

The legend of Chu Dong Tu presents a very different image from Tan Vien Son Than. It is quieter. More human. Yet equally significant within the system of the “Four Immortals.” The story begins with poverty. Chu Dong Tu is a poor fisherman who lives with his father, owning only a single loincloth. After his father’s death, he chooses to bury him with that cloth, leaving himself with nothing. One day, while bathing in the river, he encounters Princess Tien Dung, who happens to stop at that place during her journey. The unexpected meeting leads to their union, not through royal arrangement but through chance and mutual acceptance. From this moment, the story shifts. It becomes a journey.

Together, they build a life outside the rigid structures of the court. They travel, trade, and later encounter a spiritual master who initiates them into a path of cultivation. Eventually, both ascend to immortality. The ending is abrupt. Almost symbolic. It leaves space for interpretation.

At its core, the legend reflects an early layer of folk belief centered on human experience rather than cosmic conflict. Chu Dong Tu is not a

warrior. He is not a ruler. He is an ordinary man who becomes extraordinary through transformation. The narrative emphasizes movement—social, spiritual, and existential. It also introduces a rare motif in traditional narratives: the crossing of class boundaries. A princess chooses a commoner. Not by obligation. By will. Buddhist influence can be observed in the later development of the story, particularly in the theme of renunciation and spiritual awakening. The transition from material life to a path of enlightenment mirrors key Buddhist ideas. Detachment appears gradually. First from poverty, then from status, and finally from the physical world itself. The figure of the spiritual teacher reinforces this shift. It suggests a structured path toward transcendence, rather than a purely mythical transformation. Quietly, the legend moves closer to a moral narrative. Confucian elements, however, remain present in tension with this transformation. The relationship between Chu Dong Tu and Princess Tien Dung challenges conventional social hierarchy, especially the expectations of filial duty and royal order. In a

strict Confucian reading, such a union would be problematic. Yet the legend does not condemn it. Instead, it allows an alternative moral

space—one where personal virtue and sincerity carry more weight than social position. This is important.

Taoist influence appears more subtly. It lies in the idea of harmony with the natural and spiritual world, and in the possibility of achieving immortality through cultivation. The journey motif, the encounter with a master, and the final ascension all reflect a Taoist worldview in which transformation is fluid and continuous. There is no fixed boundary between human and divine. Only process.

.Figure 2: Statue of Chu Dong Tu at the temple Da Trach – Hung Yen



In the contemporary context, especially after 1945, the legend of Chu Dong Tu has been reinterpreted in several ways. It is often associated with themes of individual freedom, social mobility, and the value of personal choice. The crossing of class boundaries resonates strongly in modern society. At the same time, the story's spiritual dimension allows it to remain relevant within religious practice, particularly in temple rituals and festivals dedicated to the deity. It does not disappear. It adapts. Today, Chu Dong Tu exists both as a cultural figure and as a symbolic narrative. A figure of transformation. A story about movement—across class, across belief, across states of being.

Legend of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh

The legend of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh occupies a distinctive position within the system of the “Four Immortals.” Unlike the previous figures, her story moves between heaven and earth. It is not linear. It unfolds in cycles of descent and return.

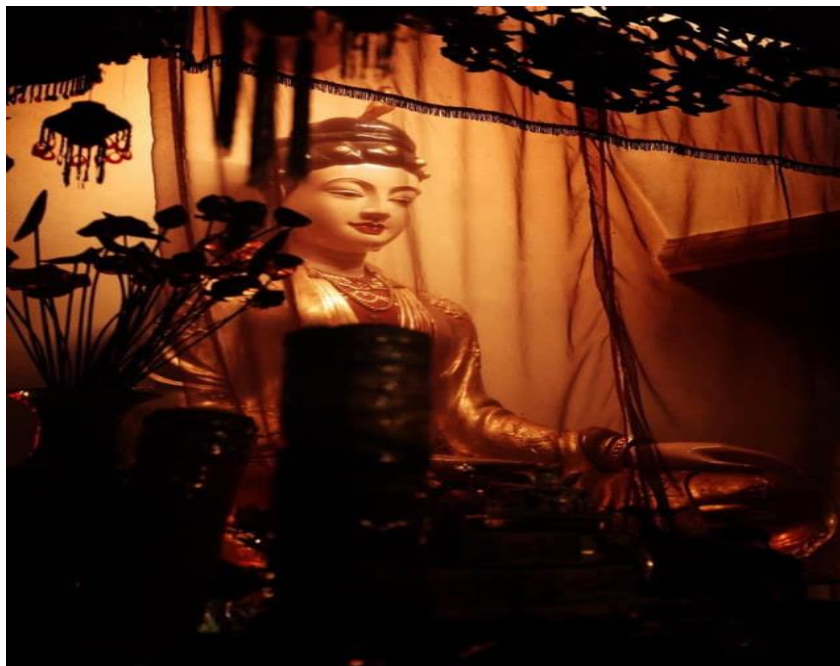
According to the narrative, Lieu Hanh was originally a celestial being, often described as a daughter of the Jade Emperor. Due to a transgression, she was banished to the human

world and lived as a mortal woman. In her earthly life, she experienced the full range of human conditions—family ties, motherhood, and social relations. After her death, she returned to the heavens, yet this was not the end. She descended again. More than once. Each return carried a different form, a different role, but the same presence.

Her character is not fixed. At times she is benevolent, offering protection and blessings. At other times, she appears unpredictable, even severe. This duality is central. It reflects a conception of the sacred that is not entirely stable or moralized, but dynamic and responsive. In its earliest layer, the legend reveals a strong connection to indigenous beliefs, particularly the worship of mother figures and fertility deities. Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh embodies both creation and authority. She is associated with life-giving power, but also with control over destiny and fortune. The emphasis is not on conquest or transcendence, but on presence—an active, living force within the world.

Buddhist influence becomes visible in later interpretations, especially in the framing of her descent as a form of karmic consequence. The idea that her earthly existence is the result of a prior action aligns with Buddhist notions of cause and effect. At the same time, her repeated returns to the human world can be read as acts of compassion, a willingness to remain connected to human life rather than withdraw completely. However, unlike strictly Buddhist figures, she does not dissolve into detachment. She remains engaged. Intensely so. Confucian influence appears in the gradual structuring of her image within social and moral frameworks. In some versions of the legend, her role as a mother and a figure of familial authority is emphasized, aligning her with Confucian ideals of order and hierarchy. Yet this alignment is never complete. She exceeds those boundaries. Her independence, her autonomy, and her capacity to challenge authority complicate any attempt to fully contain her within Confucian norms. Taoist elements, on the other

association with supernatural powers reflect a Taoist cosmology in which the boundary between the human and the divine is fluid. She is not confined to a single form or space. She shifts. She appears and disappears. Her presence is both material and immaterial at once. In the modern period, especially after 1945, Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh has become one of the most enduring and influential figures in Vietnamese spiritual life. Her worship is central to the Mother Goddess religion, which has been formally recognized as part of the country's cultural heritage. This recognition has reinforced her role not only as a religious figure but also as a cultural symbol. Her contemporary significance lies in this dual position. She represents tradition, but also adaptability. For many, she embodies a form of feminine power that is both protective and independent. In artistic contexts, her image often serves as a point of departure for exploring themes of identity, spirituality, and transformation. She does not belong entirely to



hand, are more deeply embedded. Her movement between realms, her transformations, and her

the past. And she continues to return

.Figure 3: Statue of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh at the temple Cung Mau – Thien Tru

Legend of Thanh Giong

The story begins in an ordinary rural setting. A child is born to an elderly mother after a mysterious encounter. For several years, the boy does not speak, does not walk, and shows no sign

of development. He remains still. Silent. Then everything changes. When the kingdom faces invasion, the child suddenly speaks for the first time, asking for weapons and a horse. From that moment, his body grows rapidly. He becomes a

giant. Armed with an iron horse and iron staff, Thanh Giong rides into battle, defeats the enemy, and restores peace. After the victory, he does not return to ordinary life. He ascends to the sky. The structure of the legend is simple, but highly symbolic. Thanh Giong emerges from stillness

into action, from anonymity into heroism. There is no gradual transformation. It is sudden. Almost explosive. The narrative captures a collective imagination shaped by the need for protection and resistance.



Figure 4: Artwork Thanh Giong by Indochine Artist Nguyen Tu Nghiem (1990) in the National Museum of Vietnam

In its earliest layer, the legend reflects a form of hero worship rooted in the realities of ancient agrarian society. The figure of Thanh Giong represents the ideal defender—one who arises from the people and acts at a critical moment. His connection to the land is important. He is born in a village. He grows from the soil. Even his weapons, though described as iron, carry a sense of elemental force rather than crafted refinement.

4.2.1 Symbols in the folk religion in Northern Vietnam

It helps that in this case our belief in Northern Vietnamese folk is not about narrative alone. It is created by things we can feel and touch/experience while seeing and being seen. Symbols are where these meanings settle.

In many cases you do not have to remember a full legend to find someone and get the picture of them. A statue, an object, a little setup at an altar could already point to a much larger tale. This is true because meaning doesn't need an explanation each time. If it is here even if only to recall the fact that something is in place then it's something we can relate to and to see in something familiar somewhere.

Symbols manifest themselves in many ways— from statues, ritual objects, architectural details, colors and spatial arrangements. They are not separate from practice. They are part of it. People come up to them and say, give them and move around them.

But those repeated actions give the symbols their weight.

What is noticeable about these forms is that they are very simple. No trying to show anything over the table. A figure would usually be inert, just in front of his/her feet and wouldn't really move at all. Some aspects of the narrative are heavily stressed there and others fall through the cracks, and so on. This doesn't detract as some. All in one go so it makes it more focused.

And in many temples symbols are not always visible. Some are placed deeper inside those doors, behind curtains and in enclosed spaces. You do not stand and observe them long. You meet, do the right things and move off. They're brief and you don't talk to anyone but in time you know.

So symbols take shape in this context and here that is a focus of this section. It will focus on how elements in visual form are built, how meaning is made out of visual things and how symbols and how they have remained in ritual life and the latest context. You are not to regard symbols as something to be treated as isolated devices—it's a process of making the relationship between what we can feel with it (legend and practice and practice, and everyday experience are two completely different things in your mind) and it's with them that we feel that all symbols can be understood.

Symbol of Chu Dong Tu

The symbolic representation of Chu Dong Tu is more structured than it first appears. While the legend emphasizes movement and transformation, the visual system - especially in temple sculpture and ritual practice—reorganizes this fluid narrative into a stabilized form.



Figure 5: Statue Chu Dong Tu at Temple Da Trach

Line, form and stylistic expression

In sculptural representation, such as the statue at Da Trach Temple, Chu Dong Tu is depicted in a

frontal, symmetrical posture. The body is upright, stable, and hieratic. Unlike the narrative image of a wandering figure, the sculptural form aligns him with the visual language of a dignified deity or

mandarin-like figure. The lines are controlled and vertical, reinforcing authority and presence rather than movement. The form is compact and centralized. Shoulders are squared, hands are positioned in a formalized gesture, and the facial expression remains neutral, almost detached. There is little narrative detail in the body itself. Instead, the stylization abstracts the figure into a symbolic identity—no longer a poor fisherman, but a transformed being within the sacred order. This transformation is important. The symbol does not illustrate the story. It resolves it.

Color symbolism and visual color schemes

The color system in the representation of Chu Dong Tu reflects both sacred hierarchy and ritual intensity. In temple sculpture, dominant tones include red, gold, and dark lacquered surfaces. Gold is used to highlight divine status and transcendence, while red functions as a marker of ritual power and spiritual activation.

Unlike the more earth-bound palette of Tan Vien Son Than, the color here is brighter and more contrasting. Gold surfaces catch light. Red deepens the spatial field. The combination produces a visual emphasis on elevation—moving the figure away from ordinary human conditions.

In festival contexts, particularly in the Chu Dong Tu – Tien Dung festival of the Red River Delta, this color system expands into the environment. Costumes, banners, and ritual objects adopt vivid reds, yellows, and multicolored patterns. The visual field becomes dense and active, reflecting the communal and celebratory nature of the ritual. Ritual-derived forms and visual conventions

The symbolic form of Chu Dong Tu is strongly shaped by ritual structure, especially through the paired worship with Princess Tien Dung. In temple space, this pairing often defines the spatial organization of the altar, where both figures are presented in parallel or relational alignment. This is not incidental. It reinforces the narrative core of union and transformation across social boundaries.

In festival practice, the palanquin procession becomes a key symbolic form. Unlike purely hierarchical processions, the movement here emphasizes continuity and relational flow—often associated with the riverine culture of the Red River Delta. The act of procession recalls the journey motif embedded in the legend, but translates it into collective movement.

Boats, water references, and open spatial arrangements are also present in certain ritual contexts, reinforcing the association with river landscapes and transitional spaces. These elements do not appear randomly. They anchor the symbol within its environmental and cultural origin. The ritual does not retell the story directly but it reconstructs its structure through movement and form. Symbolic belief layers

The symbolic meaning of Chu Dong Tu is formed within the broader system of Vietnamese folk religion, where spiritual figures represent both supernatural belief and human-related values. As defined in this study, folk religion refers to the belief in spiritual entities that exist within the natural and social world, including figures such as Chu Dong Tu .

At the primary level, Chu Dong Tu represents a human-origin figure who later becomes deified. This distinguishes him from other figures associated with natural forces. His symbolic role is therefore closely connected to human life, social interaction, and transformation. This reflects an important characteristic of folk religion, where the boundary between human and divine is not fixed but can be transformed through belief and narrative.

At the next level, the symbol becomes part of the system of the “Four Immortals,” which forms a central structure in Northern Vietnamese folk religion . Within this system, each figure represents a different aspect of belief and cultural value. Chu Dong Tu, in this context, is associated with mobility, connection, and the relationship between individuals and society. In addition, the symbolic meaning is shaped by the integration of multiple religious influences. As indicated in the thesis, Vietnamese folk religion incorporates elements from Buddhism, Taoism,

and Confucianism, forming a combined belief system rather than separate traditions . Through this integration, Chu Dong Tu is not only a

narrative figure but also a symbolic representation of spiritual development, moral values, and social meaning.

These layers do not function independently. They are combined within a single symbolic system.

a)



Figure 6: Ceremony Tien Dung - Chu Dong Tu at Temple Da Trach

b)

Moral Education and Social Teaching

In Vietnamese folk religion, symbols play an important role in conveying cultural values and supporting social cohesion. The figure of Chu Dong Tu contributes to this function by representing key aspects of human life, belief, and transformation. As discussed in the thesis, folk religion helps reinforce values such as community connection, cultural identity, and ethical behavior within society .

The story and symbolic system of Chu Dong Tu emphasize the relationship between individuals and society. Through his transformation from a common person into a spiritual figure, the narrative reflects the idea that belief and practice can influence one's position and meaning within the community. This aligns with the broader role of folk religion in shaping social understanding and cultural continuity.

Symbol of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh

Ritual activities and festivals related to Chu Dong Tu also contribute to this educational function. These practices create opportunities for collective participation, where cultural values are not only remembered but actively performed. According to the study, such practices help strengthen social unity and maintain the transmission of cultural traditions across generations.

In the contemporary period, especially after 1945, the role of folk religion remains relevant in supporting cultural identity and social stability. The symbol of Chu Dong Tu continues to function within this framework, not only as a religious figure but also as a cultural reference that connects past traditions with present society. Its meaning is not separated from practice.

The symbolic system of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh is not fixed in a single visual form. It exists through layers of representation—statue, ritual, performance, and collective movement. Unlike other figures, her symbol is not fully contained within the object. It extends beyond it.

c) Line, form and stylistic expression

In sculptural representation, such as statues found in temple spaces, Thanh Mau

Lieu Hanh is often depicted in a seated posture. The body is relaxed, slightly inclined rather than rigidly upright. One leg may be raised or folded in a more informal manner, creating a break from strict symmetry. This is important

The lines are smooth, continuous, and flowing across the surface of the body and garments. There is no sharp angularity. Instead, form is built through soft transitions - between shoulder and arm, between torso and drapery. The figure appears stable, but not static.

Facial expression remains calm. Controlled. The eyes are slightly lowered, not fully closed, suggesting awareness rather than detachment. There is no overt emotional display, yet the presence is strong. The body does not assert power through mass. It holds it quietly. Stylistically, ornamentation is integrated into the form rather than applied on top. The folds of the garment, the surface sheen, and the proportional balance all contribute to a unified visual structure. The symbol is not minimal, but it avoids fragmentation.

Color symbolism and visual color schemesColor plays a central role in defining the symbolic presence of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh. In temple settings, the dominant visual combination often includes deep red backgrounds

and gold-highlighted surfaces. Red intensifies the spatial field, creating a sense of enclosure and sacred concentration. Gold reflects light, emphasizing the surface of the figure and reinforcing its elevated status.The inter



Figure 7: Statue Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh at Temple Thanh Mau – Thai Binh

action between red and gold is not decorative. It produces a visual hierarchy - background and figure, space and presence. In ritual contexts, particularly during festivals such as the Phu Day festival, the color system expands significantly. Bright reds, yellows, greens, and other saturated tones appear in co-

stumes, flags, and processional objects. The visual field becomes dense and dynamic. Color is no longer contained within the object. It spreads across bodies, movement, and space. Each color carries specific associations within the Mother Goddess system, but they also function collectively. They generate intensity. They activate perception. Color does not remain on the surface. It constructs the atmosphere.

Ritual-derived forms and visual conventions

The symbolic form of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh is deeply shaped by ritual practice, especially through *hầu đồng* and large-scale festivals such as Phu Day. In these contexts, the symbol is not static. It is performed.

During ritual procession (*rước kiệu*), the deity is represented through a moving structure - palanquins, offerings, banners - carried by a coordinated group. The movement is continuous, often circular or processional, reinforcing the idea of presence that travels rather than stays fixed. At the same time, mediumship rituals transform the human body into the site of representation. Through costume changes, gesture, and rhythm, different aspects of the deity are enacted. The symbol unfolds in time. Not all at once.

This creates a layered visual system:

object → body → movement → space.

Temple statues function as anchors within this system. The image is only one part. The symbol exists in the process. They stabilize the presence of the deity.

But they do not define its limits. The full symbolic structure only becomes visible through ritual activation.

Symbolic belief layers

The symbolic system of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh is formed through the layered structure of Vietnamese folk religion, where spiritual figures embody both supernatural belief and cultural meaning. As defined in this study, folk religion includes the belief in deities that inhabit and influence both the natural and social world. Within this framework, Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh represents a distinctive type of deity - one that is not purely associated with nature or heroism, but with spiritual presence and human-related experience.

At the foundational level, her symbol is closely linked to indigenous beliefs in mother deities and fertility-related worship. This layer emphasizes her role as a source of life, protection, and spiritual authority within the community. Unlike other figures, her presence is not limited to a specific domain such as mountain or river. It is more diffused.

At the next level, the figure becomes integrated into the system of the "Four Immortals," where each deity represents a different aspect of belief and cultural identity in Northern Vietnam. In this system, Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh is associated with spiritual mediation—connecting the human world with the divine. This reflects her narrative role as a figure moving between realms. These layers do not replace one another.

They accumulate. A further layer emerges through the integration of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which together shape the broader structure of Vietnamese folk religion. Buddhist influence contributes ideas related to spiritual causality and moral consequence. Taoist elements reinforce her ability to move between worlds and transform forms. Confucian influence introduces aspects of social order and moral positioning, though not in a strictly fixed way. The symbol of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh therefore operates as a composite structure, where indigenous belief, narrative identity, and religious philosophy coexist within a single system.



Figure 8: Procession of the sacred decree honoring Thanh Mau at Temple Vinh Son

Moral Education and Social Teaching

Within the context of Vietnamese folk religion, symbols function as carriers of cultural values and social meaning. The figure of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh contributes to this function by representing key aspects of spiritual belief, social identity, and cultural continuity. As noted in the thesis, folk religion plays an important role in reinforcing values such as community cohesion, respect for tradition, and cultural identity. The symbolic system surrounding Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh emphasizes the relationship between the individual and the spiritual world. Through her role as a mediating figure, the symbol reflects the idea that human life is connected to a larger system of belief and meaning. This connection is not abstract. It is maintained through ritual practice.

Ritual activities, particularly those associated with the Mother Goddess tradition, provide a

structured environment in which these values are experienced. Participation in rituals, festivals, and ceremonies reinforces a shared cultural framework. According to the study, such practices contribute to the preservation and transmission of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

In the contemporary period, especially after 1945, the symbolic role of Thanh Mau Lieu Hanh remains significant. It is not only believed.

It is practiced. Her worship has been recognized as part of national cultural heritage, reflecting the continued importance of folk religion in shaping identity and social values. The symbol extends beyond religious meaning, functioning as a cultural reference that connects tradition with modern society.



Figure 9: Spirit Possession Performance - A mystical ritual offering to the Mother Goddess

Symbol of Thanh Giong

The symbolic system of Thanh Giong is constructed through a tension between stillness and eruption. In temple space, the figure appears controlled, contained within a formal structure.

In ritual practice, however, the symbol expands outward—into movement, sound, and collective intensity. It does not remain quiet for long. Line, form and stylistic expression

In sculptural representation, Thanh Giong is often depicted as a youthful yet authoritative figure. The posture is upright, frontal, and symmetrical. Lines are firm and direct, with little deviation. The structure emphasizes verticality, reinforcing a sense of readiness and strength.

The body is not overly dynamic in static form. There is no exaggerated gesture of battle. Instead, power is held in reserve. The face is composed, almost stern, with focused eyes and minimal expression. The figure does not narrate action. It suggests potential. This restraint is important.

The symbol does not show the moment of attack. It holds the condition before it.

In certain representations, decorative elements such as helmets, armor-like garments, or stylized accessories appear. These do not function as realistic details but as signs—indicating role and identity. The form remains simplified. Concentrated



Figure 10: Statue Thanh Giong at Temple Phu Dong - Gia Lam

.Color symbolism and visual color schemes



Figure 11: The modern monument Thanh Giong at mount of Soc – Soc Son 2010 by

Vu Duy Thuan – Nguyen Van Nam

The color system associated with Thanh Giong is more contrasting and energetic compared to other figures. In temple settings, deep reds and dark tones create a dense visual background, against which the figure is highlighted through brighter accents - gold, green, or blue elements in costume and ornamentation.

Red dominates the spatial field. It signals ritual intensity, but also evokes urgency and action. Gold is used to mark sacred authority, while green or blue tones may appear in garments, suggesting vitality and connection to natural forces.

In festival contexts, particularly at Soc Temple, the color system becomes amplified. Bright red flags, ceremonial objects, costumes, and symbolic weapons fill the space. The visual field is saturated. Movement intensifies the color

experience, as elements shift rapidly within the crowd.

d) Ritual-derived forms and visual conventions

Color is not stable, it moves with the ritual. The symbolic form of Thanh Giong is most fully realized through ritual practice, especially in the Giong festival at Soc Temple. Here, the symbol is not limited to a statue or object. It is distributed across actions, objects, and participants.

Processions play a central role. Ceremonial objects - such as symbolic weapons, flags, and offerings - are carried through structured movement. These objects are not merely decorative. They represent fragments of the legend: the iron horse, the weapon, the act of defense. However, they are not reconstructed literally. They are abstracted into symbolic forms.



Figure 12: The Giong ritual ceremony at – Soc Son, Ha Noi

Crowd participation is essential. The large number of participants, the density of bodies, and the collective motion all contribute to the construction of the symbol. At certain moments, the movement becomes almost chaotic—yet it remains within an underlying ritual framework. This tension between order and intensity defines the experience.

Temple space, by contrast, stabilizes the symbol. The statue provides a fixed point. It anchors the shifting dynamics of the ritual. Without it, the system would disperse.

We can regard the symbol of Thanh Giong: it exists in both states as contained and expanded.

e) Symbolic belief layers

Within the framework of Vietnamese folk religion presented in this study, the symbol of Thanh Giong is constructed through a layered system that combines natural belief, historical imagination, and later religious integration. At the foundational level, the figure represents a supernatural being connected to extraordinary human capacity—an individual who emerges from ordinary conditions but possesses latent power. This reflects the broader definition of folk religion as belief in spiritual entities that interact with the human world and influence social life.

At a second level, Thanh Giong is situated within the system of the “Four Immortals,” where each figure embodies a particular dimension of cultural and spiritual meaning in Northern Vietnam. In this structure, Thanh Giong represents the force of protection and defense, linking the symbolic system to collective memory and historical consciousness. The figure is not only mythical but also culturally embedded as a representation of communal resilience.

A further layer is formed through the integration of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements, which together shape the composite nature of Vietnamese folk religion. Buddhist influence contributes to the idea of selfless action and detachment from worldly reward. Taoist elements appear in the supernatural transformation and ascension of the figure. Confucian values reinforce the role of duty, loyalty, and social responsibility. These layers do not operate separately but are combined within the symbolic structure.

The symbol, therefore, functions as a synthesis.

Natural belief, cultural identity, and religious philosophy converge in a single figure.

Moral Education and Social Teaching

As indicated in the thesis, Vietnamese folk religion plays an important role in reinforcing social values, cultural identity, and collective cohesion. Within this system, the symbol of Thanh Giong carries a clear function related to moral education and social teaching.

The figure represents the idea of responsibility toward the community. Through his narrative and symbolic presence, Thanh Giong embodies the principle that individuals are connected to a larger social structure and are expected to contribute to its stability and protection. This reflects the broader role of folk religion in promoting social harmony and shared values.

Ritual practices associated with Thanh Giong, particularly large-scale festivals, reinforce this function through collective participation. As noted in the study, such practices contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions, as well as the strengthening of social bonds across generations. The symbol is not only understood intellectually but experienced through action.

In the contemporary period, especially after 1945, the significance of Thanh Giong has been further reinforced within the context of national identity and cultural heritage. The figure is not only part of religious belief but also functions as a cultural symbol that reflects resilience, unity, and continuity within Vietnamese society.

The moral lesson is embedded in the structure of belief and practice.

5. Conclusion

In the folk religion in Northern Vietnam, symbolic statues of the Four Immortals constitute the most visible and enduring material expressions of legendary narratives. Field observations conducted at Giong Temple (Phù Đổng), Sóc Temple (Sóc Sơn), Hạ Temple (Ba Vì), Và Temple (Sơn Tây), Dạ Trạch Temple, Khoái Châu District, Hưng Yên Province, and Tây Hồ Temple (Hà Nội) indicate that these statues are not designed to represent historical realism. Instead, they function as condensed symbolic forms, through which essential legendary attributes are visually encoded and ritually activated. In the folk religion in Northern Vietnam, symbolic statues rarely survive as ancient artifacts. Unlike religious traditions with relatively stable material continuity, the sculptural heritage of Northern Vietnamese folk belief has been repeatedly disrupted by historical and

geopolitical circumstances. Prolonged warfare—including more than a millennium of conflict with Chinese dynasties, over a century of French colonial domination, and approximately three decades of war against the United States—has resulted in the widespread destruction or replacement of earlier religious material culture. As a consequence, symbolic representation within this belief system has evolved under conditions of material impermanence.

Within this historical context, statues in the folk religion in Northern Vietnam function primarily as symbolic markers rather than historical likenesses. Their value lies not in antiquity or artistic realism, but in their capacity to signify legendary presence. The figures of the Four Immortals are thus rendered through simplified, emblematic forms that emphasize symbolic attributes over individualized features. This tendency reflects a broader cultural strategy in which meaning is preserved through symbolism when material continuity cannot be guaranteed.

A distinctive feature observed across many ritual sites is the partial concealment of statues. Sacred images are often veiled with cloth or placed within enclosed inner chambers that remain closed outside ritual moments. This practice contrasts with the open display typical of institutional religions and reinforces a conception of sacredness rooted in distance, restraint, and reverence. The act of concealment shifts

attention away from visual consumption toward ritual interaction and symbolic imagination, allowing the deity's presence to remain potent without reliance on constant visual exposure.

Another defining characteristic of this symbolic system is the central role of written and literary description. In the absence of extensive surviving sculptural traditions, the images of the Four Immortals have been primarily sustained through legends, classical texts, inscriptions, and vernacular literature. These written sources provide detailed narrative and symbolic frameworks that guide the interpretation of statues, even when physical representations are minimal or stylistically recent. As a result, the authority of the image derives less from its material form than from its alignment with established literary and legendary descriptions. Taken together, these features indicate that symbolic statues in the folk religion in Northern Vietnam should be understood not as static objects of visual devotion, but as interfaces between legend, memory, and ritual practice. Their symbolic power is reinforced precisely by historical discontinuity, concealment, and narrative mediation. Through this adaptive symbolic strategy, the legends of the Four Immortals continue to be materially and ritually anchored despite repeated disruptions to physical heritage.

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