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The Way of the Matriarch.
Shamanism, Spiritism and Images of Women Worshipped as Goddesses in Northern Vietnam

Abstract: I aim to talk about the folk shamanistic practices of the Đạo Mẫu, the oldest form of spiritual practice in northern Vietnam. The paper also aims to discuss the religion in relation with the archetype of the Great Mother as understood by Erich Neumann. The ancient beliefs associated with the goddess Mẫu have served multiple historical purposes: from worshipping female warrior heroines that led armies against Chinese invaders in the 1st Century AD, considered to be incarnations of the Mother Goddess in difficult times, to allowing an avenue of empowerment for the women mediums that practiced shamanism and spiritism in the face of different actors trying to implement their belief systems and ideologies in the country.

Keywords: Đạo Mẫu; Mother Goddess; Indochina; Southeast Asia; Vietnam; Shamanism; Spiritism; Ancestor Worship.

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Erich Neumann in the opening of his analysis, argues that when speaking of the primordial image of the archetype of the Great Mother, we do not refer to any concrete image existing in space and time, but to an inward image at work in the human psyche and that the symbolic expression of this psychic phenomenon is to be found in the figures of the Great Goddess represented in the myths and artistic creations of mankind. Although Neumann never visited Vietnam and his book does not offer examples from South-east Asian myth, I believe the analysis he made holds valid and can be applied when discussing certain cults in Southeast Asia, particularly the Đạo Mẫu. For the purpose of writing this article, I have also chosen to interview a female shaman that I will name from now on during the article with the pseudonym Ánh Nguyễn, a common Vietnamese name.

With the reform and opening-up policies that started by the Vietnamese government in the 1980s known as the Đổi Mới (Renovation), Vietnam began to
experience fast economic growth but also a spiritual revival. The reforms included a increased freedom for spiritual beliefs, which in the pre-reform era were practiced only discretely, as they were considered superstitious thinking. The reforms were received well by members of all spiritual communities: the indigenous Vietnamese ones such as the Đạo Mẫu, Cao Đài as well as the community of the three faiths (tam giáo) (which includes Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism). It must also be added that even many new religions that never existed before appeared in the meanwhile.

The set of beliefs I will focus on however in this article, is the Đạo Mẫu. While many international scholars choose to translate the name of the religion as “Way of the Mother”, Ánh Nguyễn told me in our interview that the word Mẫu would be better translated as “Mother Goddess” or “Matriarch” recommending “Mother Goddess Religion” as a translation. It is an ancient polytheistic shamanic religion, according to many the oldest religion in Vietnam, that focuses on worshipping of the Goddess Mẫu as well as those who are believed to be the goddess’s incarnations throughout history and other tutelary deities. Claire Chauvet notes the recent growth of the Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces) denomination of the Đạo Mẫu in terms of numbers of temples, pilgrimages to temples as well as worshippers interested in requesting health, prosperity, family happiness, and so on in northern Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular. While the religion itself dates back to the 15th Century, the figures worshipped within the goddess pantheon date back to much earlier times, going back as early as before the 1st century AD, before the Chinese ever came to Vietnam, maybe as far back in time as the Bronze Age and some even being intertwined with the foundational myth of Vietnamese culture, the legend of the immortal mountain fairy Âu Cơ and the Dragon Lord Lac Long Quân, a tale I will soon return to.

The Đạo Mẫu is a shamanistic religion involving spirits possessing the body of a female shaman or medium who offers to connect the living world to that of the spirits. As Olga Dror mentions in her fascinating book, Cult, Culture and Authority – Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History, the spirit announces its will through the possessed medium, provides answers to questions, and treats the sick. Thus spirit possession becomes an ecstatic ascent to the hidden sublime. The possession ceremony includes getting in contact with the spirits that belong to the pantheon. Erich Neumann points out in his study of the archetype that originally, all ritual was a dance, in which the whole of the corporeal psyche was literally “set in motion”. Thus, he argues the Great Goddess was worshipped in dance. We notice this in Vietnam where the séances also involve performances of mediums changing clothing, dancing as well as performing ritual songs. In terms of prohibitions, Ánh Nguyễn says that eating meat and having sex is prohibited for 7 days prior to the spirit ritual as well as
talking bad things about deities. With respect to the things that are required from a shaman or worshipper she says that doing good deeds and avoiding doing harm to others is required. And yes, before becoming a shaman, one must have an older shaman as mentor which you are not allowed to betray under any circumstance.

Claire Chauvet illustrates in her essay *Changing Spirit Identities: Rethinking the Four Palaces Spirit Representation in North Vietnam*, the average duration of a ritual called **hầ bong**, (which Ánh translates as “serving the reflections/shadows” or **lên đồng** “mounting the medium”) lasts for about four hours. During this time frame, about 15 different spirits possess the shaman. Spirit incarnations (**giá**) start and finish with the medium sitting cross-legged with a red veil on her head in front of the altar under which each spirit takes possession of her body. Ánh also added in our interview that it’s not so much that the spirit of the deity enters your body during the ritual because she says a deity “would not enter a dirty mortal body no matter how much vegan food you eat” (abstaining from animal products is part of the cleansing ritual) but rather that what enters the body is the reflection/the energy which the deity gives you. Also, she says, spirits do not always come when the shaman calls as sometimes they are simply busy doing something else, other times a special connection being necessary with the particular spirit you want to contact. She gave me the example of the local goddess of the city of Hải Phòng, the Five Directions Goddess (**Bà Chúa Năm Phương**) which does not grant you her energy unless there is a special connection between her and the shaman. There are also some male musicians present that accompany the ritual with lute and percussion instruments. They invoke the spirits to descend and possess the body of the medium by singing the legend of the spirit (**châu văn**). These legends are often about glorious historical events, especially the struggle against Chinese invaders. As Chauvet notes, the people present at the ceremony are usually women, spirit mediums, or at least disciples (**đế tiè**) of the invoked spirits. Maurice Durand argues that the mediums are the evidence of the survival of a much older widespread shamanism in Vietnam.

Erich Neumann mentions the transformative character of the feminine, that rebirth can occur through sleep in the nocturnal cave (See also Fig 4), through a descent to the underworld realm of spirits and ancestors, noticing that rebirths are possible only through the death of the old personality. He mentions the potency of the female psyche in her character of shaman, sibyl, priestess and wise woman as well as the ways it has influenced mankind since times immemorial. He discusses the role of the woman as mana figure, as a repository of positive as well as negative magic, and that every magical process presupposes a ritual and every ritual presupposes a transformation of the human personality. It is such a role that women fulfill in the **Đạo Mẫu** religion as well.

Thus the woman is the original seeress, the lady of the wisdom bringing waters of the depths, of the murmuring springs and fountains, for the “original utterance of seerdom is the language of water”. [...] Because the ecstatic situation of the seeress results from her being overpowered by
a spirit that erupts in her, that speaks from her, or rather that chants rhythmically from her, she is the center of magic, of magical song, and finally of poetry. She is the source from which Odin received the runes of wisdom; she is the Muse, the source of the words that that stream upward from the depths.\textsuperscript{17}

While both women and men are allowed to be shaman within the religion, women constitute the majority. Another interesting thing to note is that the gender of the spirit and that of the possessed shaman do not need to be in sync. For example, one could be a female shaman possessed by a male spirit or a male shaman possessed by a female spirit. Neumann makes another observation when noting that the male shaman or seer is in high degree also to be deemed “feminine”, since he is dependent on his anima aspect, noting that he often appears in woman’s dress.\textsuperscript{18}

I have indeed personally witnessed stories from my people there that indeed confirm that some male shamans choose to wear female dress when performing ceremonies just like Neumann argued. This has also been confirmed by Ánh Nguyên.

Đạo Mẫu is a religion that is not uniformly practiced throughout the territory of Vietnam. There are no conflicts between denominations however as everyone is welcomed to practice their version of the faith. One of the more widely accepted versions is the Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces) denomination, particularly well represented in northern Vietnam. Ánh Nguyên pointed out in the interview that apart from the Four Palaces denomination each and every town or village in Vietnam may have its own specific Mother Goddess. She also mentioned that there isn’t any specific rite of passage for followers (no baptism, no introduction to the religion). If you are born in a family which practices the religion then you automatically become a follower, go with your parents to the nearby shrine to pray and so on. Theoretically one can worship a goddess even when she hasn’t done any good deed for the people, however, those will have fewer followers than the famous historical characters, the ones that Ánh calls as “those that have helped the people and saved the country” which have tens of millions.

The four palaces (and goddesses that inhabit them) each belong to a realm (Heaven – associated with the color red, Mountains – associated with green, Earth – with white, Water with yellow), and they are composed of a “Royal Court” and a family. Thus, in the Four Palace Pantheon, there are four Mother Goddesses (Thánh Mẫu), four Holy Emperors (Thành Đế), Five Venerable Mandarins (Tôn Quán), Twelve Holy Courtiers (Thành Chầu), Ten Holy Princes (Thành Hoàng), Twelve Holy Mistresses, (Thánh Cô) Five Holy Masters (Thánh Cậu). In total, about 52 different tutelary deities (and this is just in the Four Palace denomination). Ánh Nguyên mentioned in our interview that the way we should imagine each palace to be like a “Parliament” “Congress” or “White House” (her phrasing), a place in which the affairs of each specific realm are discussed, “like the government that runs a country”. In a similar way “the Four Palace Government runs the cosmos.” However, she goes on to point out, that here on the mortal plane there is no centralized institution running the religion being similar in that way to
Japanese Shinto. Anyone is welcome to worship whatever spirits they like without a canon of sacred texts or an institution (like is the case with the Catholic Church, Orthodox etc.) Moreover, Ánh says that practicing the Four Palace is compatible with other local beliefs such as Buddhism or Daoism, however not with, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. When I asked her why not Christianity, she said that unfortunately many Christians were involved in destroying their shrines and temples during the colonial era and the Vietnam War. Thus she says it has more to do with the past historical context than the religion itself as many locals have relatives that died in the war so they are not yet ready to accept the idea of Christian Đạo Mẫu followers at ceremonies. That being said, I personally was granted permission to attend a hâu bông ritual (as an observer).

The primary deities of the Đạo Mẫu, are of course the four mother goddesses: The First Mother Goddess of the Heavenly Palace (Mẫu Đề Nhật Thương Thiên), who is also known as (Mẫu Liễu Hạnh), the primary deity of the religion, the Second Mother Goddess of Mountains and Forests (Mẫu Thương Ngàn), the Third Mother Goddess of the Water Palace (Mẫu Đề Tâm Thảo), and the Mother Goddess of the Earth Palace (Mẫu Địa Phi). This setup fits perfectly with the observations made by Erich Neumann in his work on the Great Mother Archetype:

Nature Symbols from every realm of nature are in a sense signed with the image of the Great Mother, which, whether they be stone or tree, pool, fruit or animal, lives in them and is identified with them. Gradually, they become linked with the figure of the Great Mother as attributes and form the wreath of symbols that surrounds the archetypal figure and manifests itself in rite and myth.¹⁹

Of course, the other emperors, mandarins, courtiers, princes, mistresses, and
holy masters also have names, legends and their roles within the religion. However, during the present article, I want to focus on the prominent goddesses as well as the heroines worshipped as their incarnations. It may be essential to note that the deities mentioned can be worshiped collectively within the Four Palace denomination but also separately. For example, one may choose to honor only princess Liễu Hạnh, and despite that she is the primary deity, she was added to the palace in the 16th Century, with the other mothers being worshipped as Olga Dror points out even before that. As Ngô Đức Thịnh mentioned, the stories of the mothers of Earth, Water, Forest, and Mountains go back in time as far as Vietnamese prehistory.

Among the first women worshipped as incarnations of the Mother Goddess by the Đạo Mẫu, we find the mythical Âu Cơ, which is the mythological mother of all Vietnamese. The legend of Âu Cơ and the Dragon Lord Lạc Long Quân is the foundational myth of the Vietnamese people. It appeared for the first time (in written form) in the folk story collection Lĩnh Nam chích quái (Amazing Stories from the Land of Linh Nam), which was edited in the 14th Century by Trần Thế Pháp. The Dragon Lord is what we may call a myth- ical marine “culture hero” or “civilization hero” that came from today’s South China Sea (which the Vietnamese prefer to call the Biển Đông Sea or East Sea). He has taught the ancient people living in the Red River Delta (an area in today’s northern Vietnam) how to plant rice, wear clothes, and battled the local demons. Erich Neumann, in his book on the Great Mother archetype quotes the sociological school of anthropologists who correlate the Great Mother with agriculture and the economic dominance it gave to women. The legend posits the ancient Vietnamese at a level of development where agriculture was fundamental for society. It still is in some parts of the country and the Mother Goddess cult which has been present there since times immemorial.

But getting back to our legend, Lạc Long Quân was invited by the local population to be their king but refused and returned to the sea, not before instructing the ancient Vietnamese people to call him if they ever needed help. This event came to pass when the people belonging to the kingdom from the north (today’s China) wanted to expand their empire to the south. The northern king came along with his army as well as his wife, Âu Cơ. The southerners, who did not have a military or a leader at that time, invoked the help of the mythical Lạc Long Quân. The Dragon Lord returned, and the strategy he chose was to kidnap Âu Cơ from the king and take her to the top of Tần Viên Mountain. The northern king seeing he could not defeat Lạc Long Quân and could not get his queen back, retreated with his armies. Âu
Co fell in love with Lac Long Quan and gave birth to a sack of 100 eggs that grew up to be children. However, after some time, the couple split and Lac Long Quan took 50 of the children with him back into the sea while Au Co took the other 50 with her in the mountains. Those left with Au Co grew up to be the ancestors of the Hung Kings and the Vietnamese people. Firstly, it is noteworthy to mention here that, with the male god leaving, the ancient Vietnamese were left only with a Mother Goddess that assumed the role of the Great Mother. Secondly, her seat of power was a mountain (Tien Yen Mountain). As Erich Neumann remarks:

> The original throne [of the Goddess] was the mountain, which combines the symbols of earth, cave, bulk, and height; the mountain was the immobile, sedentary symbol that visibly rules over the land. First it was the Mountain Mother, a numinous godhead; later it became the seat and the throne of the visible or invisible numen; still later, the “empty throne,” on which the godhead “descends.” The mountain seat as throne of the Great Goddess, of the Mountain Woman, is a later stage of development; its most beautiful representation is perhaps the well-known Cretan seal showing the Mother Goddess standing on the mountain and a youth worshipping her.²⁴

Thus, when Lac Long Quan took Au Co to the mountain top, he enthroned her, therefore empowered her. The theme of the male god empowering the female goddess has repeated throughout Vietnam’s history later on. In the south of Vietnam, a much more recent religion, the Cao Dai claims that when the world was created the Jade Emperor (Duc Cao Dai), shared half of his power with the Mother Goddess. In fact, this aspect of the Cao Dai is a symbolic derivative from the original myth of Au Co and Lac Long Quan. What is rather unusual in our case is that Lac Long Quan chooses to go back into the sea, uninterested in becoming king and thus leaving Au Co as the single goddess without any male counterpart or symbolic principle.

Another relevant thing to mention about the legend of Au Co, as Professor Keith Weller Taylor notes in his book, The Birth of Vietnam, is that the story may show proof of a bilateral society. The children are portrayed as being equally divided between parents after the couple “divorces” which points to particularities in terms of the roles of men and women in ancient Vietnamese society. Other sources also indicate that the status of women was very high within the group of people that settled in the Red River Delta in the Bronze Age (1000 BC), who are the ancient ancestors of the Vietnamese, the Lac Viet.

The term bilateral seems to be most appropriate for describing Vietnamese society in early historical times. The law codes of Vietnamese dynasties in later centuries reflect a high status for women, indicating resistance to patriarchal influence from China. Ancient Vietnamese society may not have been controlled by women, but it is clear that women enjoyed hereditary rights that allowed them to assume roles of political leadership. [...] Like Japan, Korea, and
other, more transitory, realms on the periphery of China, Vietnam received Chinese civilization without losing its own personality.25
The law code of the Vietnamese Le Dynasty (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) reveals strong female rights in marriage and inheritance that Chinese law never countenanced.26

Taylor also mentions that women of this culture were free to marry whoever they wanted without interventions from parents. This fact was very different from the traditional practices of northern Asia – where arranged marriages persist – or similar traditions in other parts of the world and goes on to quote sources written by Chinese historiographers who note the failed attempts of implementing Chinese cultural norms in Vietnam using the disdainful tone imperial officials often reserved for unorthodox marriage customs:

Concerning marriage in Chu-Yai where all administration has been abandoned, in the eighth-month family leaders assemble the people and men and women on their own volition take one another and become husband and wife with the parents having nothing to do with it. In the two districts of Me-Linh in Giao-Chi and Do-Long in Cuu-Chan, when an elder brother dies, a younger brother marries his widow; this has been going on for generations, thereby becoming established customs, so district officials give in and allow it, not being able to stop it. In Nhat nam Prefecture, men and women go naked. In short it can be said that these people are on the same level as bugs.27

The Chinese official adopts a disdainful tone because, for the imperial Chinese

![Figure 4. Altar of the Great Mother Goddess in Phú Tây Hồ Temple, Hanoi (Photo: personal archive)](image)

Down to our day, the feminine vessel character, originally of the cave, later of the house (the sense of being inside, of being sheltered, protected, and warmed in the house), has always
borne a relation to the original containment in the womb.\textsuperscript{29}

Then there is the issue of the goddess being seated. About this issue Neumann is also very clear.

Her very unwieldiness and bulk compel the Great Mother to take a sedentary attitude, in which she belongs like a hill or mountain to the earth of which she is a part and which she embodies. Even where she stands, her center of gravity draws her downward toward the earth, which in its fullness and immobility is the “seat” of the human race. The seated Great Mother is the original form of the “enthroned Goddess,” and also of the throne itself. As mother and earth woman, the Great Mother is the “throne” pure and simple, and, characteristically, the woman’s motherliness resides not only in the womb but also in the seated woman’s broad expanse of thigh, her lap on which the newborn child sits enthroned. [...] It is no accident that the greatest Mother Goddess of the early cults was named Isis, “the seat,” “the throne,” the symbol of which she bears on her head; and the king who “takes possession” of the earth, the Mother Goddess, does so by sitting on her in the literal sense of the word. The enthroned Mother Goddess lives in the sacral symbol of the throne.\textsuperscript{30}

The representation of the Goddess as she is portrayed in figure four is by no means unique to the Phú Tay Hồ temple in Hanoi, I can testify that the image is recurrent in other Vietnamese temples where feminine deities are worshipped.

The Great Mother is the giver not only of life but also of death.\textsuperscript{31} – Erich Neumann

Keith Weller Taylor, referring to the Vietnamese legend of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân argues that the theme of the local culture hero neutralizing a threat by appropriating the source of its legitimacy (the kidnapping of Âu Cơ) foreshadowed the historical relationship between the Vietnamese and the Chinese\textsuperscript{32} as well as other invading forces. While that is undoubtedly the legend of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân, we do know historically that the Chinese Empire did continuously try to invade Vietnam for more than 1500 years, having no fewer than eight unsuccessful invasion attempts (but also periods of successful occupation between Vietnamese uprisings). One of the most famous episodes of revolt that I will return to later on is the Trung Sisters’ rebellion against the Han Chinese empire. In 40 AD, the two sisters appointed 35 female generals to lead an army of 80,000 men and women, eliminating Chinese imperial forces from northern Vietnam, after which they crowned themselves queen and viceroy. In 248 AD, a 19-year-old girl named Triệu Thị Trinh, also known as Lady Triệu gathered an army of 1000 people and led yet another insurrection against the Chinese empire. Both the sisters and Lady Triệu are worshipped as an incarnation of the Mother Goddess by the Đạo Mẫu, and as pointing out in the beginning, many important streets in northern cities are named after them. The Mongols of Kublai Khan, on the other hand, after conquering everything from Central Europe to the Sea of Japan (including China where they established the Yuan Dynasty) and
thus creating the most extensive empire by landmass in the history of the world, tried to also expand towards South East Asia and the kingdom of Đại Việt (modern northern Vietnam) where their progress stopped, with the infamous Golden Horde being defeated by Trần Hưng Đạo three times consecutively in 1258, 1285, and 1287 before Kublai Kahn finally gave up. (It is noteworthy here to mention that Trần Hưng Đạo is also worshipped in the Đạo Mẫu Four Palace pantheon, but, as male, he has only the status of “saint,” which is lower than that of the four prominent goddesses).

After the Chinese and Mongol invasions, in modern times, consecutively, Imperial Japan was forced to leave Vietnam in 1944 and the French Union in 1954 after the violent battle of Dien Bien Phu (where, as Karen Gottschang mentions in her book Even the Women Must Fight, Memories from North Vietnam half of the 260.000 volunteers who assisted the army were women). Further still in time, the USA retreated in 1975 after a 20 years’ war started because the US was afraid Vietnam would become a Chinese satellite state, only to be shocked a few years after they left when the Chinese invaded yet again (for the ninth time) and were (yet again) defeated, in the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979. Since then, the American National Security Agency (NSA) concluded that the extremely intricate 20.000 km long supply trails, roads, tunnels and traps through the jungles of Southeast Asia that connected North and South Vietnam were “one of the greatest feats of military engineering of the 20th Century.” Of course now we know from researchers like Gottschang that the respective trails, roads and tunnels wouldn’t have existed without the hundreds of thousands of women who built them, women who also constituted 70% of all youth volunteers in the Vietnamese forces.

The Khmer Rouge’s 1978 invasion didn’t end very either. After repelling the initial Khmer attacks on Vietnamese civilian population, the counterattack after news spread of the ethnic cleansing and systematic rape campaigns in which Pot targeted, among other groups, ethnic Vietnamese men, women and children living in Cambodia. The campaign against the Khmer Rouge covered an area of 181.000 square km of difficult jungle terrain with no tanks, no aircraft, no supporting artillery, only men and women foot soldiers with very few vehicles. The incursion removed Pol Pot from power in less than 2 weeks.

As Neumann commented on the nature of the Terrible Mother archetype, this woman who generates life and all living things is the same who takes them back into herself, who pursues her victims and captures them with snare and net, noticing also that among all peoples the goddesses of war and the hunt express man’s experience of life as a female exacting blood: Artemis, Diana, Kali, Gorgon, Ishtar, Isis are such manifestations.

This repertoire of repelling foreign incursions is essential because worshippers believe that many of the incarnations of the Goddess Mẫu have been heroines who took up a leading role against invading foreign powers. Claire Chauvet mentions, for example, the primary trend present in the country of comparing Four Palaces Đạo Mẫu denomination spirits with heroines who sacrificed themselves for the country or that the religion itself has served as a resistance movement that solidified and consecrated local traditions that came into opposition with the influence of more
patriarchal practices coming from northern Asia. Olga Dror points out in this sense that the cult of Princess Liễu Hạnh (the primary Mother Goddess worshipped by Đạo Mẫu followers) emerged precisely at a time when, under the influence of the Chinese empire, Chinese administrators began to enforce specific values incompatible with a society where women were allowed to marry who they wanted, work in whatever profession they chose and in which they were able to occupy positions of military and political leadership.

Notice the representation above. Neumann suggests in his discussion of the archetype that the figure of the goddess with upraised arms is found almost wherever the archetypal figure of the Feminine appears and that the “specific activity” of the upraised arms is unquestionably religious, whether we interpret it as prayer, invocation or magical conjuring. About the religious significance of the upraised arms gesture Neumann gives the example of the Bible where the raising of Moses’ arms determines the victory of the Hebrews over the Amalekites.

The women represented on the elephants in the photo are the famous Hai Bà Trưng (Two Ladies Named Trưng); Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, both of whom the Đạo Mẫu worship as incarnations of the Mother Goddess. The historical events in which the two sisters took part are relevant to the Vietnamese because they succeeded in starting a popular revolt in 40 AD that successfully liberated the country from the Chinese empire. At that time, northern Vietnam was under the control of a corrupt Chinese administrator named Su Ting. The Chinese official taxed the population excessively, extracted luxury resources which he sent to China and demanded bribes for government functions to work. It also seemed that Su Ting was interested in introducing cultural reforms to the region that were not very popular with the local population (especially women) because of their patriarchal nature. Initially, Trưng Trắc, along with her husband and other villagers, tried to start a revolt. They were however caught, and Su Ting executed Trưng Trắc’s husband and the other men involved in the rebellion by hanging them in front of the city gate. That being said, both Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị were trained by their parents in the art of war, so they attempted again, this time independently gathering and organizing an army of 80,000 male and female soldiers. Trac is remembered saying: “Foremost, I will avenge my country, Second, I will restore the Hung lineage, Third, I will avenge the death of my husband, Lastly, I vow that these goals will be accomplished” and proceeded in doing just that.

The two sisters appointed 36 female generals, the widows of the men executed by Su Ting as their generals in command.
of the new army. Hearing that there was an army led by 36 women coming towards them, the Chinese administrator considered it would be handled quickly, which however was a strategic mistake because the two sisters promptly started conquering villages, towns and finally taking over all 65 fortified cities from the Chinese armies, liberating northern Vietnam and forcing Su Ting to disguise himself and barely escape alive back to China. They stopped the taxation of the population, undid the cultural reforms, and ruled with Trưng Trac as queen and Trưng Nhi as viceroy.

They were defeated only when the Chinese emperor sent his best general, Ma Yuan, some years later to reconquer the territory, who was very careful and did not underestimate the Trưng sisters. Some say the sisters walked into a river and committed suicide to avoid capture; others that they were executed and their heads were sent back to the emperor in China as trophies. Whatever the case, the romantic image of two young warrior queens (they were about 20 years old), who rose to oppose the most powerful empire of their time, managing achieve independence for their country before meeting their tragic end had become the subject of both Vietnamese folk legends and poetry for the next 1000 years. A short time after their deaths, many hundreds of temples and shrines dedicated to the two sisters began appearing around Vietnam. Nowadays, in February, the Vietnamese have a national holiday commemorating the two sisters, both worshiped by the Đạo Mẫu as incarnations of the Mother Goddess. Believers claim that in a shamanic ceremony, their spirits could be invoked, contacted, and questioned while possessing the body of a medium.
In the year 243 AD, a new revolt against the occupation of the Chinese empire led by a woman occurred, the one started by Lady Triệu (Bà Triệu). Information about this historic episode comes mainly from Vietnamese sources. The reason for this is because, as Professor Keith W. Taylor notes, Chinese sources of that time remember the rebellion led by Lady Triệu as being just “barbarian stubbornness without any historical relevance.” On the other hand, the Vietnamese remember this revolt as the most important event of the 3rd Century. The historian Trần Trọng Kim mentions Lady Triệu in his volume Việt Nam sử lược, A Brief History of Vietnam:

Her parents were dead all when she was a child, she lived with her older brother Triệu Quốc Dat. She was a strong, brave, and smart person. On the mountain, she gathered a band of 1,000 followers. Her brother tried to persuade her from rebelling, she told him: “I only want to ride the wind and walk the waves, slay the big whales of the Eastern sea, clean up frontiers, and save the people from drowning. Why should I imitate others, bow my head, stoop over and be a slave? Why resign me to menial housework?” When she went to battles, she usually wore yellow tunics and rode a war-elephant. She proclaimed herself Nhựy Kiều tướng quân (‘The Lady General clad in Golden Robe’).

Her army managed to stop the imperial forces for six months, after which the numeric superiority of the Chinese began taking its toll. The rebellion was crushed, and sources argue that, similarly to the case of the Trưng Sisters, she killed herself to avoid capture. Other women worshipped by the Đạo Mậu include Võ Thị Sáu, a young girl that joined the anti-colonial movement in the 20th Century who was caught, sent to prison and then executed by the authorities a few years later. As Ánh said, every town and village has a Mother Goddess aside from those of the main pantheon of the Four Palaces.

That being said, to conclude the article on a more peaceful note, nowadays, in modern times, it appears Vietnamese women lead differently by moving from the battlefield to the boardrooms of various business fields. And this is by no means a coincidence but is also related to the cult of the Mother Goddesses, as Olga Dror explains in Cult Culture and Authority. She notes that even as far back as the sixteenth century, the cult of the Goddess Liễu Ḍạnh was spread by travelers, more specifically female traders. She points out that back then, women were the ones in control of trading goods in Vietnam.

Women dominated market and trading activities in the north, and the cult itself bears many distinctive female features, including an association with commercial activities. […] In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the only village women to travel seem to have been merchants or entertainers, and only they were in a financial position to finance the development of this cult. It is entirely appropriate that such people would revere a deity thought to be close to traveling women and to be able to protect them and to grant them favors. Liễu Ḍạnh is portrayed in most
stories as engaged in some kind of market or business activity, as the owner of a stall, tavern, or inn, which attests to the connection between her cult and female merchants.\textsuperscript{45}

Another deity who is connected to business is Bà Chúa Kho (The Lady of the Storehouse), a woman who guarded storehouses against Chinese invaders. In her temple in Bac Ninh, people purchase and then burn fake printed money and votive gold in order for the goddess to grant them success in business:

To add in some modern-day statistics, contemporary studies done by MasterCard show that Vietnam ranks 1\textsuperscript{st} in Asia\textsuperscript{46} and 6\textsuperscript{th} worldwide concerning the percent of women business owners, with 31\% of businesses owned by women.\textsuperscript{47} To put that into context, Germany and the USA occupy the 23\textsuperscript{rd} and respectively 24\textsuperscript{th} place. Women are also highly represented in the workforce, with 80\% of women actively employed (10\% more than in China), thus featuring on the 4\textsuperscript{th} position in worldwide OECD rankings according to The Economist\textsuperscript{48} behind only Iceland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Women also hold 30\% of senior management positions in companies,\textsuperscript{49} and studies show that businesswomen in Vietnam seem to be more sensitive to good customer service than men.\textsuperscript{50} Concerning the ease of doing business, while it takes 67 days on average for a woman to start a business in Laos and 99 days in Cambodia, Vietnamese women manage to do it in 24.\textsuperscript{51} Vietnam also fares well on gender equality issues for a country in its current stage of development, ranking 56\textsuperscript{th} on the Global Gender Gap Index (while Cambodia ranks 112\textsuperscript{th} and Thailand 71\textsuperscript{st}). There has been significant improvement in the female-to-male income ratio for formal employment, which rose from 70\% in 2007 to 83\% in 2015\textsuperscript{53}). Also, years before the COVID pandemic started, Vietnam began to outpace its giant

\textsuperscript{45}Figure 9. Lady of the Storehouse

\textsuperscript{46}Figure 10. Entrance to the Temple of the Lady of the Storehouse

\textsuperscript{47}Figure 11. People burning votive gold and face money
Chinese neighbor in terms of yearly economic growth rates while during the year of the pandemic itself also achieving the highest GDP growth rate in Asia without having a single quarter of economic contraction as Yen Nee Lee points out in “This is Asia’s top-performing economy in the Covid pandemic – it’s not China.”

All in all, as we have seen, the Đạo Mẫu has influenced many things in northern Vietnam, contributing to the appreciation of women and the different roles they can fulfill in society. It has survived the attempts to replace it with other value systems including periods in which it went underground when shamans were shunned being accused of superstitious thinking. And it has even contributed to economic development and the support of women traders from the 16th century through today. Acknowledging all these things, UNESCO recognized the cult in 2016 as a part of the intangible heritage of humankind.

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Notes


11. *Ibidem*, p. 86.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 453
17. *Ibidem*, p. 457
18. *Ibidem*, p. 456
19. *Ibidem*, p. 81
20. Olga Dror, *Cult Culture and Authority*, p.3.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 149.
45. Dror, Cult, Culture and Society, p. 57.


