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Ethnic Minority Communities of Northern Vietnam and the Nôm Verse Epic Lục Vân Tiên Written in Old Tai and Nôm-Tày Scripts- A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Bùi Thị Hằng
Teacher, M.A. My Thanh Junior High School, Ben Cat Ward, Ho Chi Minh City.

Trần Thanh Xuyên
Senior Lecturer, M.A. Hau Giang Community College

Phạm Văn Luân, Ph.D
Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture

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ABSTRACT: According to our findings, the vitality and cross-cultural influence of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Nôm verse epic, Lục Vân Tiên, are not only known through the Nôm manuscript transcribed into the Quốc ngữ script by Trương Vĩnh Ký, but are also vividly demonstrated through versions of Lục Vân Tiên written in the Old Tai script in Sơn La province and the Nôm-Tày script in Cao Bằng province, over 2000 km away from Gia Định (the birthplace of the Nôm verse epic Lục Vân Tiên). For over a century, despite limitations in transportation, printing, and translation, and through the folk methods of oral transmission/teaching via Vân Tiên recitation performances (nói thơ Vân Tiên) in Bến Tre and local indigenous memory, Lục Vân Tiên has undergone a special cross-cultural journey. It has spread and is present even in the remote Northwest border region and the northernmost part of the nation. The Lục Vân Tiên Nôm verse epic, in its Old Tai and Nôm-Tày versions, has been widely circulated among ethnic minority communities in northern Vietnamese provinces through poetic performance styles (khắp xư) of the Tày people, etc. From there, the "adapted" Lục Vân Tiên Nôm verse epic quickly integrated into the folk cultural stream of the Tai and Tày communities in northern Vietnam. It has thus historically flowed from indigenous memory to a global vision for the Vietnamese people today, embodying Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's spirit of "four seas singing in harmony as one family" (bốn biển âu ca hợp một nhà).

KEYWORDS: Old Tai Script; Nôm-Tày Script; Indigenous Memory; Nguyễn Đình Chiểu; Lục Vân Tiên Nôm Verse Epic.

1. INDIGENOUS MEMORY FROM THE JOURNEY OF THE NOM VERSE NARRATIVE LỤC VÂN TIÊN TO THE ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES OF THE NORTHERN PROVINCES VIA ANCIENT THAI AND NOM-TAY SCRIPT MANUSCRIPTS

In the realm of contemporary Vietnamese cultural studies, "Indigenous Memory" represents a novel and pivotal category for facilitating a profound understanding of the interplay between memory, space, and identity. Approaching "Indigenous Memory" through the lens of ancient archives not only serves as the optimal methodology for the research and conservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage but also repositions the human subject within the temporal continuum of past, present, and future through its transcultural resonance.

"'Indigenous Memory" constitutes a category within the realms of Cultural Studies and Memory Studies, encompassing a totality of experiences, knowledge systems, symbols, rituals, narratives, and living practices transmitted, preserved, and reproduced by indigenous communities throughout the passage of time. In our conceptualization, Indigenous Memory serves as a system of representation and maintenance of a community's cultural identity within a specific geographical space, where history, tradition, and the natural environment converge to form the 'collective memory' of the indigenous population. "Indigenous Memory" is grounded in two primary theoretical frameworks: First, 'Collective Memory' as proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1925), which asserts that memory does not exist in isolation but is invariably shaped and sustained within a spatial and communal context. Second, Pierre Nora's concept of 'Lieux de mémoire' (Sites of Memory) (1984), implying that collective memory is anchored in specific locales, symbols, rituals, or objects possessing evocative power and a sense of 'belonging,' thereby acting as conduits for maintaining identity and fostering community cohesion. Consequently, "Indigenous Memory" is viewed as a form of spatial-cultural collective memory, functioning to facilitate identification, connection, and transmission. However, "Indigenous Memory" extends beyond mere internal cohesion and sedimentation; it also manifests diffusion and development in exceptional cases, such as Nguyen Dinh Chieu's Nom verse narrative Luc Van Tien within the collective memory of ethnic minority communities in the Northern mountainous provinces.

"Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888) – a figure distinguished by UNESCO as a great poet and a cultural celebrity of humanity. He consistently embodied the ideals of patriotism, humanism, and peace; and despite his visual impairment, he served as a beacon illuminating the message of moral rectitude, benevolence, righteousness, and ambition.In 1846, while in Hue preparing for the Metropolitan Examination, he received the tragic news of his mother's passing prior to the examination date. He resolved to abandon the examination to return South to observe

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the mourning period; however, en route, the combination of excessive grief and severe illness resulted in the total loss of his sight. Upon completion of the mourning rites, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu established a school in Gia Dinh, delved into the practice of traditional Vietnamese medicine, and commenced his literary composition. This era was characterized by his concurrent engagement in teaching, medical practice, and the creation of the renowned Nom verse narrative, Lục Vân Tiên. The impact of Lục Vân Tiên has been profound and far-reaching, both domestically and internationally. Globally, it has been translated into five languages: French, Ukrainian, Japanese, English, and Korean, ranking as the fourth most translated Vietnamese work overseas, following The Tale of Kieu, the poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương, and Prison Diary; additionally, scholarly works on Nguyễn Đình Chiểu have been published in Russian. Notably, over the past four years at Osaka University (Japan), the verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên has been incorporated into the curriculum of the Vietnamese Language Section within the School of Language and Culture Studies, where Prof. Dr. Shimizu Masaaki has analyzed the Nom script in Lục Vân Tiên from a philological perspective to facilitate Vietnamese language instruction.

In terms of international influence, with the exception of The Tale of Kieu, no classical Vietnamese literary work parallels Lục Vân Tiên. At the National Museum of World Writing Systems, within the exhibition themed "*The Great Journey of Civilization Accompanying Writing*," the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên was solemnly displayed as the representative specimen of Vietnamese script. Dr. YPARK Jun-ho of the National Museum of World Writing Systems highly acclaimed the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên as a precious heritage, expressing the hope that "*...this will serve as a magnificent commencement for our friendship, fostering opportunities for deeper exchange and cooperation through the legacy of the world cultural celebrity Nguyễn Đình Chiểu*"[1]

The domestic vitality and influence of Lục Vân Tiên are not solely evidenced by the existence of Nom manuscripts or Trương Vĩnh Ký's transcription into the National Script (Quốc ngữ), but are also vividly manifested through its dissemination to Northern ethnic minority communities via versions in ancient Thai and Nom-Tay scripts.The territories of ethnic minorities in Son La and Cao Bang are situated in the Northern mountainous region. Despite being geographically separated from Gia Dinh (the birthplace of the work) by over 2,000 kilometers, more than a century ago, Lục Vân Tiên—the magnum opus of Southern literature—had already permeated the remote frontier regions of the nation. In these locales, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên, through its remarkable transcultural resonance, was adapted into the verse narratives of the Thai and Tay peoples.The Lục Vân Tiên verse narrative in Thai and Nom-Tay scripts circulated within these ethnic communities through forms of oral poetic performance known as Khắp xư. Consequently, this 'adapted' poetic version of Lục Vân Tiên rapidly integrated into the folkloric tradition of the Thai and Tay communities in Vietnam. Why, then, does the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên leave such a distinctive imprint within the Indigenous Memory of the Northern mountainous ethnic minorities?

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên was composed circa 1851, predating the French colonial period in Vietnam, bearing a didactic message on human morality for the Southern populace of that era: "*For men, loyalty and filial piety stand paramount / For women, chastity and virtue are the precepts of self-cultivation.*" Comprising 2,084 'six-eight' hexameter verses and divided into four sections (Phạm Văn Luân, 2022), the work is structured as a verse narrative written in Nom script, featuring rich artistic imagery. It was widely embraced by the populace, who placed their faith in the ideals of righteousness advocated by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. The Lục Vân Tiên verse narrative possesses a distinct vitality and has generated a miraculous diffusion effect—transcultural in nature—through the folk performance art of 'Vân Tiên recitation,' which is currently recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage of Vietnam. Through this rustic mode of oral transmission, the recitation of Lục Vân Tiên serves not merely as a pastime for generations of residents in Ben Tre and Southern Vietnam but acts as a conduit for upholding ethical norms and the spirit of chivalry. Consequently, the work is not only revered and taught, but the 'Lục Vân Tiên spirit' has been actualized within daily life, spanning from the Northern ethnic minority communities of the past to the modern-day 'street knights' in Ho Chi Minh City and Vinh Long, who embody the ethos of 'intervening in the face of injustice'...

Living a life of 'righteousness' (nghĩa khí) serves as the central leitmotif manifested by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu throughout Lục Vân Tiên, thereby illuminating Vietnamese morality, character, and culture within a cultural landscape extending from Gia Định to the imperial capital of Hue. Against this cultural backdrop, the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên emerges as an epic poem extolling justice and the cherished moral values of life, alongside various themes that have contributed to cementing the stature of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in the hearts of the people. Although Nguyễn Đình Chiểu does not engage in extensive literary discourse within Lục Vân Tiên, he implicitly manifests the philosophy of 'literature as a vehicle for the Way' (văn dĩ tải đạo), distinct from the perspectives held by orthodox Confucian scholars of his time. While Confucian scholars conceptualized the 'Way' primarily as the 'Way of Heaven', Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, though upholding the celestial principle, placed significantly greater practical emphasis on the 'Way of Humanity'. This overarching philosophy elucidates the integrity and temperament of the Southern people, permeating Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's literary corpus with a 'transcultural' spirit. G. Aubaret—the French Consul in Bangkok and the first to translate Lục Vân Tiên into prose—wrote in 1864: '*...in this work lie the fundamental characteristics of a people with whom we have long coexisted, leading us to consistently regard it as a product of the human intellect that possesses the rare merit of faithfully representing the sentiments of an entire nation…*' (Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, 2001:624)

Endowed with unique values that transcend time, space, and linguistic barriers, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên is recognized not merely for its utilization by the French in their pursuit of the 'civilizing mission' aimed at the hearts and minds of the Southern populace; rather, this celebrated work rapidly disseminated throughout both Southern and Northern Vietnam, undertaking a 'transcultural' journey via versions in ancient Thai and Nom-Tay scripts—variants that have remained largely obscure until recently..

The Ancient Thai Script Version of Lục Vân Tiên

[1] For further reference, please visit: https://lyluanphebinh.vn/tin-tuc/cac-su-kien-noi-bat-lien-quan/2815/ngay-quoc-te-bao-tang-va-cau-chuyen-truyen-tho-nom-luc-van-tien-cua-nguyen-dinh-chieu-o-bao-tang-quoc-gia-he-thong-chu-viet-the-gioi (Accessed February 20, 2026).

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"In 2010, while participating in a scientific research project to develop software for Nom, Thai, and Cham scripts at the Thua Thien Hue Center for Information Technology (currently Hue City), Researcher Nguyễn Thế and programmer Phan Anh Dũng were dispatched to conduct surveys and collect materials on ancient Thai scripts in provinces such as Nghe An and Son La. Possessing a specialized background in Museology, Researcher Nguyễn Thế, during his collaboration with the Sơn La Provincial Museum, discovered a genre of literature originally belonging to the Kinh people but transcribed in ancient Thai script, which was being preserved within the museum's archives bearing titles (inscribed on the outer covers) such as: Quám Vân Tiên (Lục Vân Tiên), Tống Trân Cúc Hoa (also noted as Túng Tân, Trạng Nguyên); Lưu Bình Dương Lễ; Trương Viên, Hoàng Trừu… These constitute anonymous Nom narratives that have circulated within folklore since antiquity. Of particular significance is Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên, which was adapted into ancient Thai script and circulated within the Thai community in the Northwest region.



Figure 1 Ancient Thai script manuscripts of adaptations derived from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên. – Source: Son La Museum.

The work Lục Vân Tiên is a Nom verse narrative (composed in the six-eight hexameter form), authored by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu during the early 1850s. This masterpiece was first published by Trương Vĩnh Ký in 1889. Functioning as an epic novel in verse comprising 2,084 lines, Lục Vân Tiên conveys profound messages regarding loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness; it elucidates human ethical norms through the prism of relationships—between monarch and subject, parents and children, siblings, friends, and spouses. It upholds the spirit of righteousness and the imperative to aid the distressed, while simultaneously condemning the vices and moral degradation prevalent in the feudal society of that era.Through Lục Vân Tiên, the author articulates an aspiration toward the ideals of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, envisioning a reality where humanity thrives in a social environment defined by benevolence and equity.. The language employed in Lục Vân Tiên is rustic, unadorned, sincere, and forthright, embodying the distinct cultural ethos of the Southern Vietnamese people. Standing as a popular Nom verse narrative composed in a storytelling style, Lục Vân Tiên possesses a literary quality that remains accessible and intimately connected to everyday life. The author deftly depicted the inner psyche of each character, delineating a sharp distinction between good and evil, while aligning with the principle of karmic retribution—a perspective that resonated profoundly with the popular sentiment. Consequently, Lục Vân Tiên has been widely disseminated throughout Southern Vietnam and the South Central region. Indeed, hardly anyone in these territories is unfamiliar with the tale. The folk-oriented literary nature of Lục Vân Tiên has engendered a unique 'transcultural' influence, allowing it to rapidly assimilate into the mainstream of Vietnamese folk literature and diffuse across all regions of the country.

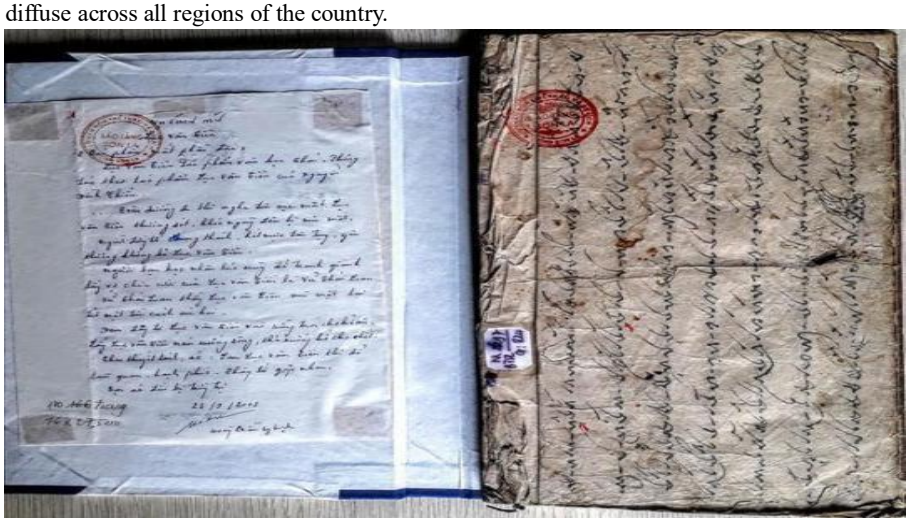


Figure 2 The ancient Thai script version of the verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên is widely circulated throughout the Thai ethnic communities via the medium of poetic performance (Khắp xư). – Source: Son La Museum..

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Currently, the Son La Provincial Museum houses and preserves a collection of 11 Lục Vân Tiên manuscripts transcribed in ancient Thai script, bearing various titles such as Quám[2] Vân Tiên, Lục Vân Tiên, and Vân Tiên. Certain volumes are bound collectively with other narratives, including Trạng Công, Hoàng Trừu, and Chiêu Quân. These Lục Vân Tiên manuscripts are inscribed on Dướng paper (mulberry bark paper) and Dó paper, featuring diverse dimensions: 14x24cm, 16x29cm, 21x21cm, 27x34cm, 20x26cm, 15x27cm, 21x34cm, and 15x24cm. The most voluminous item, titled Quám Vân Tiên (Accession Number GI 128), comprises 170 pages of thin Dó paper measuring 16x29cm. This evidences that the ancient Thai script version of Lục Vân Tiên was historically transcribed into multiple copies and widely disseminated among the ethnic minority communities in the Northern mountainous region

Recently, the Son La Association of Literature and Arts published the two-volume work: Adapted Folk Verse Narratives of the Thai People in Northwest Vietnam[3] by Lò Thanh Hoàn. Volume I of this publication features Quám Vân Tiên, an adaptation derived from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên. When utilized in poetic performance, this adaptation typically commences with a preamble: "To serve as a high official, one must diligently care for the nation and abide by the royal decrees," before proceeding to the main narrative. To initiate the recitation, performers often captivate the audience with a passage of poetry that is lyrical and sentimental in nature.

Now, let us recount the tale of a young nobleman [4] named Lục Vân Tiên,
Who had devoted three full autumns to studying under his master,
Having thoroughly mastered both ethics and literature.
Hearing that the Great Monarch had opened the royal examinations to select talent,
He reasoned in his heart that the time for high office had arrived.
He beseeched his master for permission to attend the examinations,
Yet, his heart remained heavy with reluctance to part from a certain maiden.
He sought her out to bid farewell, saying: '
I cherish you, yet now we must part, our paths diverging.
If your affection is true, I pray you write a few lines.'
Upon his words, she took up her brush and composed a poem,
With calligraphy as exquisite as if molded by the Celestial Spirits,
Resembling peach blossoms in the garden, redolent with scent:
'Hereafter, should you attain high rank and great power,
Do not forget your faithful one, who shall come to seek refuge in you.'
Handing it directly to him,
His joy surged, bursting into chords of the heart as he vowed:
'I swear before the Divinities in the heavens above,
Until the moment the Sky Spirit (Then Bun) illuminates the eastern horizon,
I shall ask for your hand in marriage, that we may be forever united, my love.'
He then completed his own verse and presented it to her;
Their words spoken, the two swore solemn oaths:
'To remain together eternally, never forsaking our bond.'
He drew her close, opening his warm embrace,
Loving one another, while tears streamed down like rain.

Proceeding to the main narrative of the work, the adapter has endeavored to adhere closely to the plot to ensure that the audience would comprehend the full scope of the original work:

Lục Vân Tiên received a missive from his father, Lục the Elder,
Urging him to hasten his return to the family home,
By a cruel twist of fate, his mother had passed away,
Departing from her husband and child to join the ancestors,
Overwhelmed by the grievous news, Vân Tiên collapsed, writhing in wailing lamentation,
Summoning his attendant close to share the burden of sorrow:
'I aspired to high office to become a support for my parents, yet that hope is now denied,
Instead, I am plunged into the depths of tragic bereavement.'
The nobleman felt as though half his life had perished,
He wept so profusely that darkness claimed both his eyes"...

Verse narratives possess a distinct narrative quality; their language, rich in imagery and cadence, resonates profoundly with the human heart. The majority of Kinh Nom verse narrative plots follow a tripartite structure: Encounter, Tribulation, and Reunion. They typically conclude with a happy ending grounded in the principle of karmic retribution—where good begets good and evil begets evil—of which Lục Vân Tiên serves as a quintessential exemplar. This narrative structure aligns perfectly with the collective psychology and worldview of the Thai ethnic people, as well as the broader community of ethnic groups in Vietnam. Folklore researcher Cà Chung from Son La observes: "The Thai people have possessed

[2] ***Quám***: Books, stories, or narratives.
[3] Son La Association of Literature and Arts, 2016.
[4] It is translated from "tạo" which means a title designating hereditary chieftains/leaders and certain dignitaries within Thai ethnic inhabited areas; their daughters are addressed as "Nàng".

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their own writing system since ancient times. Furthermore, they have long maintained the tradition of storytelling through poetic recitation. The tradition of composing poetry and verse narratives among the Thai developed quite early; however, indigenous themes and plots were insufficient to fully satisfy their creative impulse. Consequently, they sought out and adopted narratives from other ethnic groups.

Prominent Nom verse narratives of the Kinh people that have been adapted by the Thai people include: Nhị Độ Mai (Quám Mai công); Tống Trân - Cúc Hoa (known as Túng Tân, Chãng Nghiên, or Trạng Nguyên); Hoàng Trừu (Trạng Tư); Lục Vân Tiên (Quám Vân Tiên); The story of Thúy Kiều (Quám Thư Kiêu or Thư Cẩu); Phạm Công (Phạm Tải - Ngọc Hoa); Lưu Bình - Dương Lễ; and Trương Viên..

Upon examining the plot synopses of several verse narrative adaptations in ancient Thai script currently preserved at the Son La Provincial Museum, we observed that certain works bear specific dates, such as: Lưu Bình - Dương Lễ, composed in the 5th year of the Reign of Minh Mạng (1824); and Trạng Nguyên (Tống Trân - Cúc Hoa), composed in the 19th year of the Reign of Tự Đức (1866)...Thus, viewed through a transcultural lens, drawn from indigenous memory, the Thai community adapted Nom verse narratives of the Kinh people over a century ago—and potentially even earlier, almost immediately following the dissemination of these works in Southern Vietnam. These Thai script adaptations have been embraced and cherished by the Thai community in the Northwest region, standing alongside canonical indigenous verse narratives based on ancient Thai folklore, such as: Khun Lú - Nàng Ủa, Sống chụ son xao, and Tàn chụ sống sương...

In addition to the ancient Thai script adaptation of Lục Vân Tiên currently housed at the Son La Museum, we posit a hypothesis regarding the likely existence of numerous other verse adaptations derived from Kinh literary works, which may be preserved within domestic and international library systems and archival centers; as well as within ethnic minority communities in the Northwest region, and among the Thai populations in Nghe An and Thanh Hoa. During the feudal era, mandarins and the intelligentsia within ethnic minority groups were required to master Han-Nom scripts to facilitate communication, participate in civil service examinations, and conduct administrative protocols with the Imperial Court. In the introduction to Volume 2 of Adapted Folk Verse Narratives of the Thai People in Northwest Vietnam, author Lò Thanh Hoàn observed: "*The Kinh (Vietnamese) language is the language of the Monarch; mastery of the Monarch's language is a mandatory requirement, serving simultaneously as a source of pride and prestige for mandarins and intellectuals in their discourse*"[5].Consequently, the presence of Vietnamese Nom literary works within the regions inhabited by the Thai and other ethnic minorities in the Northwest is entirely plausible. Literary works written in Nom script, such as Nguyễn Du's The Tale of Kiều, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên, and various anonymous Nom narratives of the Kinh people, were selectively adapted by Thai Confucian scholars and mandarins into Thai verse narratives, catering to the spiritual and cultural imperatives of the Thai community throughout the Northwest region and adjacent localities.

Beyond the Han script, certain ethnic minority groups in the Northwest, such as the Tay and Dao, also developed their own indigenous writing systems derived from Han characters. Consequently, within Vietnam's linguistic corpus, alongside the Vietnamese Nom script, there exist the Nom-Tay and Nom-Dao scripts. The Kinh people utilized the foundation of Han characters to innovate the Nom script centuries ago. It was precisely through this Nom script that masterpieces such as Nguyễn Trãi's Quốc âm thi tập (National Language Poetry Collection), Nguyễn Du's The Tale of Kiều, and Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên, along with numerous other Nom literary works, emerged to enrich the national literary heritage. The most recent discoveries regarding Lục Vân Tiên manuscripts transcribed in the Nom-Tay script in Cao Bang serve as a vivid testament to this phenomenon, notwithstanding the current paucity of research materials and time dedicated to this subject.

The Nom-Tay Script Version of Lục Vân Tiên

"Within the traditional literary corpus of the Tay people in the Viet Bac region in general, and Cao Bang province in particular, a significant volume of Nom-Tay manuscripts remains preserved. These tomes primarily document indigenous local knowledge, encompassing: the system of customs and rituals throughout the human life cycle; experiences in agricultural production and livestock husbandry; professional manuals for ritual masters (thầy cúng, thầy tào); compilations of folk tales in both prose and Nom verse; courtship songs; and chants for specific occasions such as house-warming, longevity celebrations, full-month observances for infants, weddings, festival orations, and funeral eulogies. This richness and diversity have served as the subject matter for numerous published works by the researcher Hoàng Triều Ân (born Dec 1, 1931 – died Oct 24, 2019). He served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists (Terms I and II) and was a close associate of the late Prof. Dr. Sc. Tô Ngọc Thanh (President of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists), with whom he had previously studied in China; alongside other scholars such as Kiều Thu Hoạch, Hoàng Thị Nhuận, Nông Vĩnh Tuấn, Nông Thị Huế, Mông Thị Bạch Vân, and the Tay poet Nông Quốc Chấn...



Figure 3 Covers of research volumes on culture composed in the Nôm-Tày script. – Source: The Author.

[5] Son La Association of Literature and Arts, 2018

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Notably, the Nôm-Tày literary corpus encompasses works originally composed in Vietnamese Nôm (the Nôm of the Kinh people) that were transcribed into the Nôm-Tày script, such as: Nam Kim - Thị Đan, Lưu Đài - Hán Xuân, Nhân Lăng, Lương Sơn Bá - Chúc Anh Đào, Tống Trân - Cúc Hoa, and Lục Vân Tiên... Among these, Lục Vân Tiên has left a profound imprint on the cultural and artistic life of ethnic minority communities in Cao Bằng. According to Meritorious Artist Hoàng Quỳnh Nha (79 years old, residing in Group 1, Tân Giang Ward, Cao Bằng City; former actress of the Cao Bằng Provincial Art Troupe): In 1958, the verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên was adapted into a folk musical play by the Tay playwright Nông Đình Tuấn (of Nà Riều village, Nam Tuấn commune, Hòa An district, Cao Bằng province) and staged for the Nam Tuấn commune's grassroots cultural team to perform, serving the residents throughout the communes of Hòa An district. Subsequently, during the 1960s and 1970s, the Cao Bằng Provincial Art Troupe staged the Lục Vân Tiên verse narrative as a professional theatrical production to serve ethnic minority communities in Cao Bằng and the provinces of the Việt Bắc region. Throughout the run of this production, Meritorious Artist Hoàng Quỳnh Nha had the distinct honor of portraying the character 'Kiều Nguyệt Nga,' performing entirely in the Tay language



Figure 4 Confucian Scholar Hoàng An Định, Researcher Hoàng Triều Ân (center), and Confucian Scholar Thân Văn Lư.
Source: The Author

According to translator Ma Văn Hàn, a specialist in translating Nôm-Tày script into Vietnamese, since the early 20th century, the specific work Lục Vân Tiên was utilized by Tay Confucian scholars—such as Hoàng Đức Hậu and Hoàng An Định in Lam Sơn Village (Phúc Tăng commune, Thạch Lâm district, now Hồng Việt commune, Hòa An district, Cao Bằng province)—to instruct students in both literacy and moral character. Elder Dương Sách (98 years old, a member of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists residing in Nà Lóa Village, Đức Long commune, former Hòa An district, and a former student of the scholar Hoàng An Định) recounts: He was instructed by Master An Định in Nôm literacy and human ethics, modeling his conduct after the example of Lục Vân Tiên, through the analysis of the humanistic values embedded within Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's celebrated masterpiece. In Cao Bằng province, a manuscript of the Lục Vân Tiên verse narrative was previously preserved within the household of the great-grandchild of the Confucian scholar Hoàng An Định (Lam Sơn Village, Hồng Việt commune, former Hòa An district). Furthermore, the scholar Thân Văn Lư (1922–2019) from Thua Khau Village (Bình Long commune, former Hòa An district) translated Nguyễn Du's The Tale of Kiều, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc's Prison Diary (Ngục Trung Nhật Ký) into the Nôm-Tày script. According to Ms. Thân Thị Kim Liên, daughter of scholar Thân Văn Lư, in 1967, her father donated the aforementioned works to the Cao Bằng Provincial General Library. Tragically, during the Border War in February 1979, this entire collection of materials was incinerated and destroyed. Regrettably, regarding the manuscripts kept within the family, upon Mr. Lư's passing in 2019, the family ritually burned all his personal belongings in accordance with the customs of the Tay people in Cao Bằng. Consequently, original physical manuscripts are now exceedingly rare, posing significant challenges for illustration, digitization, archiving, and the preservation and promotion of Nôm-Tày cultural values—particularly concerning Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên.

2. REVITALIZING INDIGENOUS MEMORY IN ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES TO PRESERVE AND PROMOTE THE VALUES OF THE NOM VERSE NARRATIVE LỤC VÂN TIÊN VIA ANCIENT THAI AND NOM-TAY SCRIPT MANUSCRIPTS

As dedicated researchers deeply committed to the miraculous transcultural vitality of the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên within the ethnic minority communities of Vietnam's northernmost regions, we posit that the process of creative cultural acculturation among the ethnic minorities in the Northern mountains warrants thorough scholarly investigation within the contemporary context, particularly now that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu has been honored by UNESCO on a global scale, and amidst the current administrative restructuring, involving the merger of provincial units and the reorganization of district-level entities. Reality demonstrates that, alongside innovative approaches to evaluating Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's poetry both domestically and internationally, it is imperative to urgently initiate formal research to establish practical measures for preserving and promoting the values of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên. This must be grounded in the indigenous memory of ethnic minority communities, specifically through the lens of ancient Thai and Nom-Tay script manuscripts. In this spirit, we propose the following solutions:

First, it is essential to consolidate existing research results and initial findings regarding the ancient Thai and Nom-Tay script manuscripts of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên, thereby expanding fieldwork and comprehensive surveys regarding the textual and scriptural aspects of Lục Vân Tiên within the folk life of ethnic minorities nationwide. This should lead to the organization of scientific conferences at various levels to solicit expert and public opinion, culminating in official research publications that are digitized and widely disseminated throughout the Vietnamese ethnic communities.

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Second, organize the collection and research of indigenous memory through performance arts associated with the Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên in the folk life of ethnic minorities nationwide. Based on this, conduct comparative analyses to elucidate the evolution and imprint of the "Vân Tiên poetry recitation" form from Bến Tre (historically) as it underwent creative acculturation through the folk performance forms of the Thai and Tay peoples. This represents the most effective and unique preservation strategy in the current context, rooted in the foundation of indigenous memory.

Third, compile and publish adapted versions of the Lục Vân Tiên verse narrative in the languages of Vietnam's ethnic minorities, prioritizing the introduction of the 11 ancient Thai script adaptations into educational curricula teaching ethnic languages. On this basis, select and digitize the most prevalent handwritten manuscripts in ethnic minority languages, promoting creative preservation methods based on indigenous memory through these adapted works.

Fourth, establish networks and exchanges between "Vân Tiên Poetry Recitation Clubs" in Bến Tre and ethnic minority community groups, grassroots cultural troupes, and professional art troupes practicing folk performance adaptations of Lục Vân Tiên in the Northern provinces. From there, study the creative acculturation process and replicate the "Vân Tiên Poetry Recitation Club" model from Bến Tre (now Vĩnh Long) to provinces such as Sơn La and Cao Bằng (former administrative units), adapted to the folk art forms of ethnic minorities. This aligns with indigenous cultural traditions while continuing to promote Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's cultural heritage, aiming toward the establishment of a "Vân Tiên Poetry Recitation Association" both domestically and internationally.

Fifth, expedite research for the implementation of the "Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Memorial Museum" project, featuring a specialized gallery for manuscripts and translations of Lục Vân Tiên in Bến Tre (historically), establishing satellite museums in provinces nationwide and abroad. This should follow the model of the "Hall of Fame" at the Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Library (Vĩnh Long province) or the display of Lục Vân Tiên Nôm scripts as Vietnam's representative exhibit at the National Museum of World Writing Systems in Korea. The ultimate goal is to collect, digitize, and preserve all handwritten manuscripts, translations, and adaptations derived from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Lục Vân Tiên within the ethnic minority communities of the Northern provinces

3. CONCLUSION

Indigenous memory, preserved through ancient Thai and Nom-Tay script verse adaptations derived from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Nom verse narrative Lục Vân Tiên, constitutes a precious cultural heritage of the Vietnamese nation. These enduring folk masterpieces require significant attention from relevant authorities to ensure their preservation and the promotion of their values.

Currently, we posit that the corpus of ancient Thai and Nom-Tay manuscripts in the Northern provinces holds vast reserves, potentially numbering in the thousands. These texts concentrate on primary genres such as history and literature, alongside diverse categories including agriculture, calendrical science, and medicine; as well as religious texts concerning divination, auspicious dates, amulets, sorcery, and ritual prayers. Crucially, this corpus includes adaptations of Lục Vân Tiên circulated within ethnic minority communities. In recent years, the cultural sector has largely limited its scope to implementing the project "Preservation, Translation, Utilization, and Promotion of Ancient Thai Script Book Heritage" in Son La and select neighboring localities. Utilizing project funding, relevant units have organized the translation of texts from ancient Thai script into the contemporary Thai script and the National Language (Quốc ngữ); conducted editing, research, and proofreading of translations; utilized and disseminated the values of the ancient Thai book collection; and exhibited original manuscripts at the Son La Provincial Museum. However, resources have not yet been allocated to expand these activities into the domain of Nom-Tay scripts. Consequently, relevant agencies—with the participation of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists and the Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association—must go beyond merely investing in and selecting representative ancient Thai books for publication. It is imperative to intensify awareness-raising campaigns directed at all administrative levels, cultural management officials, folklore researchers, and the general public regarding indigenous memory and historical materials derived from ancient Thai and Nom-Tay books (specifically, conducting deeper research into Lục Vân Tiên manuscripts in Nom-Tay script). This will establish a theoretical and practical foundation to bolster education and enhance the capacity for self-preservation of national cultural heritage against the risk of oblivion, thereby contributing to safeguarding and promoting the nation's precious traditional cultural assets, with the cultural heritage of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu serving as a focal point. The application of digitization and the practice of "Vân Tiên poetry recitation" folk performance—aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of Lục Vân Tiên in ancient Thai and Nom-Tay scripts—will not only create favorable conditions for research, preservation, and the promotion of indigenous memory regarding Nguyễn Đình Chiểu among cultural organizations, folklore researchers, and ethnic communities; it also serves as an effective medium for connecting and exchanging Vietnamese culture with the world.

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Corresponding Author: Bùi Thị Hằng