

ФИЛОЛОГИЯ

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THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS OF VIETNAM WITH THE WESTERN LITERATURE IN THE 17TH CENTURY (A CASE STUDY OF JERONIMO MAIORICA'S NÔM HAGIOGRAPHIC WRITINGS)

Abstract. The article discusses the first meetings of Vietnam with the West through the Catholic literature, which partly shows the multi-dimensional nature of the relation of Vietnam with the West in the early 17th century, i.e., in the pre-colonial period of Vietnam. The activities of the first European people arriving to Vietnam in the early 17th century were related with Christian missionaries. Due to the adaptation of Christian literature and the collaboration of the European Jesuits with the Vietnamese writers in creating Catholic Nôm texts, the first steps of Vietnamese Catholic literature were made, leading to the big changes of Vietnamese literature in the succeeding centuries. Jeronimo Maiorica and some of his Nôm hagiographic works as expression of acculturation of Vietnam in the seventeenth century will be examined from a Western-Vietnamese comparative viewpoint.

Keywords: Vietnamese literature, Jesuit missionaries, Jeronimo Maiorica, hagiographies

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ПЕРВЫЕ ВСТРЕЧИ ВЬЕТНАМА С ЗАПАДНОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРОЙ В XVII в. (ИЗУЧЕНИЕ АГИОГРАФИЧЕСКИХ СОЧИНЕНИЙ ДЖЕРОНИМО МАЙОРИКИ НА НОМЕ)

Аннотация. В статье представлены первые эпизоды знакомства Вьетнама с Западом через католическую литературу, что отчасти показывает многомерный характер их отношений в начале XVII в., т. е. в доколониальный период. Первыми европейцами, прибывшими во Вьетнам в начале XVII в., были христианские миссионеры. Благодаря адаптации христианской литературы и сотрудничеству европейских иезуитов с вьетнамскими писателями в создании католических текстов на номе появилась вьетнамская католическая литература, что привело к большим изменениям в национальной литературе Вьетнама в следующие столетия. В статье на основе сравнения западной и восточной культур рассматриваются некоторые из агнографических работ Джеронимо Майорики на номе как выражение окультуривания Вьетнама в XVII в.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамская литература, иезуитские миссионеры, Джеронимо Майорика, жития.

Introduction

The activities of the first Europeans arrived to Vietnam in the early 17th century were related with Christian mission. They marked the beginning of Vietnamese Catholic literature through adaptation of Christian literature and the collaboration of the European Jesuits with Vietnamese writers in composing the Catholic Nôm texts.

The Europeans who came to Vietnam in the 17th century also told about the openness of the Vietnamese people. For example, Borri (2014) commented on the Cochinchinese people as follows:

“This good nature and civility of the Cochinchinese, makes them so courteous to strangers, whom they allow to live according to their laws, and to wear what clothes they please; and so they praise their customs and admire their doctrine frankly preferring them before their own, quite contrary to the Chinese, who despise all but their own customs and doctrine.” [Dror & Taylor 2006: 114–115].

De Rhodes (1994) was a rather extreme, prejudicial Christian priest, who called non-Christian beliefs superstitious, disdained the Vietnamese following “Tam giáo” (three teachings, i.e., Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) as “dark people” and considered that honoring Confucius as a saint was unreasonable and wrong because Confucius “if he was called as a saint, he had to know there is God who created heaven and earth, if he didn’t know, how could he be a saint” [Rhodes 1994: 57–58].¹ However, describing the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, Rhodes could not resist to show the diversity, richness and quite open nature of the 17th century Vietnamese people in cultural life, which he himself recognized as people “greatly ingenuous and of good sense” [Ibid.: 38].² He also put many lines in his book to describe how Lord Trịnh He also put many lines in his book to describe how Lord Trịnh Tráng hospitably welcomed the Jesuit priests Juliano Baldinotti and Julius Piani in Tonkin in 1626 [Ibid: 76–77].

After several attempts without too much achievements by the Dominican and Franciscan orders in the late 16th century, the missionaries of Jesuit order in the early 17th century tried to apply new methods of evangelization in Vietnam, as well as in Southeast Asia in general. Soviet scholar E.O. Berzin wrote about that in his book “Catholic Church in Southeast Asia” (1966): “There was now at the forefront a thorough study of the country, in which a given missionary should work, a fundamental knowledge of the language and local customs [...] A missionary (if permitted by the circumstances) should spend his whole life in the intended country, naturalize in it, live the same life of the indigenous people, and not stand out as much as possible. The Jesuits allowed everything — the missionary could wear the clothes of European merchants, of Vietnamese peasants, or impersonate a Buddhist monk” [Berzin 1966: 32].

The 17th century was a century of fierce conflicts between ruling powers, leading to a civil war and division of the country into Tonkin [Đàng Ngoài] ruled by Trịnh’s House and Cochinchina [Đàng Trong] ruled by Nguyễn’s House, which had continued until the second half of the 18th century

¹ Vietnamese translation by Hồng Nhuệ: “Người Đàng Ngoài tôn ông là thánh nhân, nhưng vô lý và trái lẽ, [...] Bởi vì theo tôi, nếu ngài được gọi là thánh nhân, thì ngài phải biết có một Đức Chúa Trời dựng nên trời và đất, nếu ngài không biết thì sao là thánh nhân được”; French translation by Henri Albi (1590–1658): “Et ce Confucius est appelé des Tunquinois par excellence, et sans queue, Le Saint, mais en vain, et contre toute raison, [...] Car, je le disais, ou cet homme, que vous appelez le Saint, avoir quelque connaissance du grand Dieu, Créateur du Ciel et de la Terre, ou non: s’il ne la point connu, il n’a pû être Saint” [Rhodes 1651: 61–62].

² Vietnamese translation: “rất chất phác và rất có lương tri”; French translation: “grandement ingénu et de bon sens” (Rhodes 1651: 61).

with the establishment of Tây Sơn dynasty. Wars, political conflicts, social unrest affected the spiritual life of Vietnamese people, especially peasants. Berzin in another work “Southeast Asia and the Expansion of the West in the 17th and Early 18th Century” (1987) suggested that in the mind of the Vietnamese exploited peasants, the injustices of the current government related with the injustices of the current mainstream religion (i.e. Confucianism in this case). So, “Christianity could offer the Vietnamese peasant a spiritual alternative, and it was Vietnam that became the first independent country in the East where Catholic missionaries managed to create a mass church” [Berzin 1987: 166].

The Vietnamese reception of European Catholic literature in particular, as well as the Western culture in general, began in such context, when the French invasion and colonization of the country had not taken place yet.

Jeronimo Maiorica and his Hagiographical Writings

Jeronimo Maiorica, an Italian priest, was born about 1581 or 1591 in Naples. He entered the Jesuit order in 1605 and was sent for mission to Asia. In the 16th and 17th centuries Rome of Italy and Lisbon of Portugal were centers of Catholicism, where all missionaries had to gather before leaving for the Far East Asian regions. Initially Maiorica was sent to Japan; however, the persecution of Christianity by the Japanese authorities forced him to change his route to the Southeast Asian countries, first to Makassar of Indonesia, then to Macau, and later, in 1624, he arrived to Vietnam along with other several Jesuits including Alexandre de Rhodes. Maiorica learned Vietnamese in the Jesuit communes in Nước Mặn of Bình Định province in Cochinchina. He tried to go to Japan again, but failed due to the bad weather. For two years, he had been prisoned in Champa, then was ransomed by a Portuguese merchant. He went to Đà Nẵng through Cambodia, and finally in 1631 arrived to Tonkin, where he began his missionary activities. Primarily Maiorica evangelized in Nghệ An province, but had continuously moved forth and back between Nghệ An and the capital Thăng Long until his death in 1656.

According to the Jesuit archives, Maiorica was an erudite person, very fluent in Vietnamese and skillful in rhetorical art. In *Truyện nước Annam Đàng Ngoài chỉ Đàng Trong* (*The Tale of Annam from Tonkin to Cochinchina*), the earliest Vietnamese document where Maiorica was mentioned, Philipphê Bình recited a story about the dispute between Maiorica and ten Buddhist monks in Trịnh Tráng's Palace, the result of which was that “ten Buddhist monks could not win him”, and among them there was a monk of Thành Pháo pagoda, who, admiring Maiorica decided to convert to Christianity and became a supportive assistant of Maiorica in creating the Nôm liturgical and hagiographical works [Cao Thế Dung 2002: 470; Ostrowski 2010: 27].

During his staying in Tonkin Maiorica wrote some Catholic works serving his mission. He wrote totally about 45 works in Nôm script, 15 of which have survived and are preserved in the National Library of France in Paris [Nguyễn Hưng 2000: 23]. Those books belonged to different genres of Christian literature, including theological, dramatic and hagiographical compositions. Maiorica's hagiographical works made up the largest part of his writings and played an important role in the development of Vietnamese prose.

Catholic hagiography was a literary genre which consisted of new elements for Vietnamese literature in the 17th century, marking a new point of the development of Nôm narrative prose, which had been unpopular in Vietnam until then in comparison with narrative prose written in Chinese and poetry written in Nôm. Catholic Nôm works, on the contrary, were often written in prose, including

primarily the *Bible* adaptations, the catechetical and the hagiographical texts, which were results of collaboration between the European Jesuit priests and the Vietnamese former Confucians converted to Christianity. Maiorica along with the other missionaries such as Francisco de Pina, Christophoro Borri, Alexandre de Rhodes introduced in their writings not only the Christian ideas but also Western literary styles and genres, which were still unfamiliar with Vietnamese readers at that time.

Although fluent in Vietnamese, Maiorica still needed the help of Vietnamese Confucians in order to create a large number of Nôm texts. In the manuscript of the two-volume book *Truyện Thánh Mẫu* (*Tale of Holy Virgin Mother*), alongside Maiorica's name, there was a Vietnamese name "Văn Nghiêm" in the last pages: "Cầu cho Văn Nghiêm cùng" (Please pray also for Văn Nghiêm) [Maiorica 2003c, 1: 123]; "Ai được sách này xin cầu cho Văn Nghiêm cùng nhứt sách này bằng hai đồng tiền bà goá" (Who get this book please pray for Văn Nghiêm and put two widow's mites) [Maiorica 2003c, 2: 191].³ Văn Nghiêm might be a certain Maiorica's Vietnamese catechist or an acquaintance, who helped him in writing the books.

Another name was Francisco (thầy giảng Phanchicô) of the former Buddhist monk from Thành Pháo pagoda after converting to Christianity, whom Philipê Bình mentioned in his book as a catechist and the most supportive assistant of Maiorica in composing Nôm texts. Francisco himself credited as the author of *Phục dĩ chí tôn* (伏以至尊 *Prostrating to Give Honor*) written in classical Chinese and later translated by Phạm Trạch Thiện (1818–1903?) into Nôm and circulated among Vietnamese Christian communities as a prayer for the deceased. So far, it has not been possible to identify whether Văn Nghiêm and catechist Francisco were the same person or not, but Maiorica's works were certainly products of his collaboration with Vietnamese people.

In addition, the biography of Maiorica said that he was very busy with his missionary works, often in travelling, so it was possible that he only recited the stories orally, even during a boat trip on the river to visit his pastoral parishes [Ostrowski 2010: 25], and the Vietnamese assistants recorded his words in Nôm writing. Such kind of composing texts was quite common among the Jesuits. The autobiography of Ignatius de Loyola was also created in that way, so its original version before being translated into Latin had been written in both Italian and Spanish because Ignatius told and read to different scribes. This had a significant impact on the characteristics of the tales: they had elements of both written and oral literature, and were quite similar with the Vietnamese folktales as well as such classical narrative genres as *ký* (記 record) or *lục* (錄 chronicle).

Maiorica's hagiographies could be classified into two types: long-scale and short-scale tales of the saints' lives. *Truyện Ông Thánh Inaxu* (*The Tale of St. Ignatius*; hereafter *Thánh Inaxu*) and *Truyện Ông Thánh Phanxicô Xavie* (*The Tale of St. Francis Xavier*; hereafter *Thánh Xavie*), along with *Truyện Đức Chúa Chi-thu* (*The Tale of Jesus*), *Truyện Thánh Mẫu* (*The Tale of Holy Virgin Mother*), *Truyện Bà Thánh Y-sa-ve* (*The Tale of St. Elizabeth*) and many others were long-scale hagiographies with the amount from 113 to 653 pages.

The synaxarion type were 12-volumes collection of short-scale biographies of Jesus, Mary and nearly 500 Christian saints, arranged by the days of twelve months of the year. They reminded of the tales about Zen masters in *Thiền uyển tập anh* (禪苑集英 *Collection of Outstanding Figures of*

³ There was in this sentence the reference to *Gospel* [Mark 12:41-44; Luca 21:1-4] about a poor widow giving only two small coins (mites) to the Church's treasury but being praised by Jesus as greatest contributor because she donated her whole livelihood, that proved the writer's knowledge of Catholic literature as well as his ability in using Christian allusions.

the Zen Garden) compiled in the 14th century. The miraculous, mythical elements in the narrative structure made them not much different from the legends of the village guardian deities or Vietnamese historical heroes, as the episodes of *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (嶺南摭怪 *Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam*) by Trần Thế Pháp, *Việt điện u linh tập* (越甸幽靈集 *Collection of Ghost Stories in Việt Realm*) by Lý Tế Xuyên, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (傳奇漫錄 *Collection of Strange Stories*) by Nguyễn Dữ, or *Thánh Tông di thảo* (聖宗遺草 *Thánh Tông's Posthumous Manuscript*) credited to king Lê Thánh Tông and so on.

Cultural Interference in *Thánh Inaxu* and *Thánh Xavie*

Composed in 1634, Maiorica's *Thánh Inaxu* was obviously an adaption of *The Autobiography of Ignatius de Loyola*, "the groundwork of all the great lives of him that have been written" [O'Connor 1900: 6].⁴

Since the number of pages were almost the same as that of the original, Maiorica's work retained the major episodes of *The Autobiography* and placed them in chronological order and chapters. The chaptered structure fictionalizing accounts of Ignatius' travels across the cities alongside with the adventure characteristics of the protagonist's activities made *The Tale* similar with adventure novel which were very popular in European literature of the Late Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. It was also not much different from "chương hồi tiểu thuyết" (章回小說) written in vernacular Chinese and familiar with Vietnamese readers at that time.

However, being as a hagiographic work, it also had the typical structure of that genre: the tale began with a short introduction of Ignatius' family and his marvelous childhood, and finished with the saint's death and the miracles which happened after his death, that were not mentioned in *The Autobiography*. While *The Autobiography* much concentrated on the account of the author's internal struggle in his journey towards God, *Thánh Inaxu* paid more attention on the magic elements for mythicizing the protagonist's image to achieve the effective propagation of Christian thoughts to the masses.

Thánh Xavie was also a long-scale narration with nine chapters, describing Xavier's missionary activities in Asia. Life and legends of Xavier were famous in Far Eastern countries including Vietnam. For example, the Vietnamese Jesuit authors of *Tây Dương Gia tô bí lục* (西洋耶穌祕錄 *The Secret Accounts of Jesus' Religion from the West Ocean*) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries mentioned a legend that had been widespread among "tả đạo" (unofficial religious sects) in Vietnam from the earlier time about "a bishop with the holy name of Francis", who was sent by the

⁴ *The Autobiography* was recorded by Ignatius' disciple Luis Gonçalves da Câmara (1520?–1575), who was the person sent by the Society of Jesus to meet Ignatius for getting information of his life. Ignatius told his stories in Spanish to Gonçalves da Câmara, then, according to the notes based on Ignatius' narration, Gonçalves da Câmara's dictated them to the Italian and Spanish scribes. The original text written in both Spanish and Italian languages was lost, only its copies remained and were preserved in the Jesuit monasteries. The Latin translation was made by the French father Annibal du Coudret during his serving in Rome in the years 1558–1561. The hagiographic collection was compiled by Heibert Rosweyde (1569–1629) and then by Jean Bolland (1596–1665). Its Latin translations were published later entitled *Acta Sanctorum*, which consisted of 68 episodes arranged by month and memorial day for saints, and *The Autobiography* which was put in the 34th volume of July, part 7 (Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/actasanctorum34unse/page/n9>). Although the compilation of *Acta* might have taken place after Maiorica had written *The Tale of St. Ignatius*, this proved that the stories of Ignatius, as well as those of Francis Xavier had been broadly circulated in the communities of Jesuit priests as catechetical tools.

Pope to bring gold and silver into China in order to buy land for establishing the Christian parish there. For gaining that goal, Francis cut a buffalo skin into small strips to measure the land [Phạm Ngô Hiền et al. 1981: 290]. This legend, obviously related with the motifs of talented and deceptive heroes in Vietnamese folklore, did not correspond to reality, because Xavier had never been in mainland of China. However, it was a fact of legendizing and popularizing Xavier's image in Vietnam, which might have been thanks to the merits of Maiorica and his Jesuit contemporaries. *Thánh Xavie*, similar to *Thánh Inaxu*, was primarily based on real historical facts, however, in order to exalt Xavier's image, Maiorica did not refuse to use such folk motifs familiar to Vietnamese readers as the dead going back to life, or the God appearing in the protagonist's dream to predict his fate or to guide him in doing something. He also used the pattern of fairytale's beginning as "A long time ago in the country of Navara there was a man..." (Đời xưa ở nước Na-va-ra có một người tên...) [Maiorica 2003b: 130] to indicate Xavier's family origin.

Besides, the introduction of the protagonist could also remind some fantastic tales in medieval Vietnamese collections as seen in the following comparison:

<i>Thánh Xavie</i>	<i>Tale of Hà Ô Lô</i> (<i>Lĩnh Nam chích quái</i>)	<i>Tale of Từ Thức</i> (<i>Truyện kỳ mạn lục</i>)	<i>Tale of a Female</i> <i>Ghost of Mai Châu</i> <i>Thánh Tông di thảo</i>
Under the Jiajing reign of Great Ming there was a holy man named Francis Xavier (Đời vua trị nước Đại Minh tên là Gia Tĩnh có một người Thánh tên là Phanxicô Xavie) [Maiorica 2003b: 129]	In Thiệu Phong year of Trần Dụ Tông reign there was a man from Ma La village named Đặng Sĩ Doanh (Năm Thiệu Phong đời Trần Dụ Tông có một người làng Ma La tên là Đặng Sĩ Doanh [Trần Thế Pháp 2016: 116])	In Quang Thái year of the Trần dynasty, there was a man from Hóa Châu named Từ Thức. (Trong năm Quang Thái đời nhà Trần, người ở Hóa Châu tên là Từ Thức) [Nguyễn Dữ 1999: 304]	By the end of Nguyên Phong year of the Trần dynasty, there was a female ghost in Mai Châu (Cuối niên hiệu Nguyên Phong đời nhà Trần ở Mai Châu có một nữ yêu tinh) [Nguyễn Bích Ngô 2017: 21]

Both *Thánh Inaxu* and *Thánh Xavie* provided the Vietnamese readers with not only knowledge of the new religion in the early 17th century, but also with geographical, historical and ethnical knowledge of the countries and peoples around the world. For example, to describe Xavier's journey from Portugal to India, Maiorica wrote:

"Ông Thánh Xi-cô bởi nước Phô-tu-ga cho đến nước Thiên Trúc khỏi một năm ba tháng mới đến nơi, vì chung đến giữa biển hết gió phải vào nước mờ hóng tên là Mô-sa-bi-ghê" (It took a year and three months to arrive because the wind stopped blowing in the middle of the sea, and he had to come to the soot country called Mozambique) [Maiorica, 2003b: 139].

This phrase gave information of the voyage direction, the method of sailing operation and the image of African people in Mozambique (black as soot). The names of the famous people such as Ferdinand Catholicus or Martin Luther were introduced with the historical events related by them. For example, Maiorica wrote about Martin Luther as follows:

"Từ Đức Chúa Giê-su ra đời được một nghìn năm trăm hai mươi một năm thì quỷ giục lòng một thằng kia tên là Mat-ti-nho Lu-tê-rô xưa đã làm thầy cả mà bỏ, lại làm ngụy cùng Đức Chúa

Trời”(In the year of 1521 from the Birth of Jesus, Satan incited a man named Martin Luther who used to be a father but quitted to revolt against Almighty God) [Maiorica 2003b: 14].

The toponymes of the world in Maiorica’s stories were phonetically transcribed in both traditional Sino-Vietnamese (âm Hán Việt) way, e.g., Thiên Trúc (India), Đại Minh (Great Ming i.e. China), etc. (In the text, those words were written in Chinese characters) and Western way (e.g., Phô-tu-ga (Portugal), Pha-lang-sa (France), I-xi-pha-nia (Spain), Pha-ri (Paris), Sê-lo-na (Barcelona), Vê-ni-sa (Venice), etc.) which were novation for Vietnamese. The numbering of the years in Maiorica’s books were a mix of Christian calendar and traditional Chinese regnal years calculation. For example, the date of Xavier’s death was informed as follows:

“Từ Đức chúa Giê su cho đến ông thánh Xi cô sinh thì được một nghìn năm trăm năm mươi hai năm, mà ông thánh Xi cô sống được năm mươi lăm tuổi, đời vua Gia Tĩnh tam thập nhất niên” (It took 1552 years from Jesus’s Birthday to the day that Saint Francis passed away, at the 31st year of Jiajing Emperor’s reign, he had lived for 55 years) [Maiorica 2003b: 171].

Maiorica, or rather his Vietnamese assistants, whether intentionally or not, had brought elements of Vietnamese medieval narrative into Christian hagiographies, and that made them familiar and more suitable to Vietnamese “horizon of expectation”.

Cultural Interference in *Truyện Bà Thánh Tiêudola*

One of the interesting examples of the encounter of medieval Vietnamese literature and Maiorica’s hagiographies as “messengers” of Western Catholic literature in Vietnam is the case of *Truyện Bà Thánh Tiêudôla* [*The Tale of St. Theodora*] (Book of September, 2nd Day). The prototype of Maiorica’s St. Theodora was probably Theodora of Alexandria due to the similarities in her biography: she was born in Alexandria of Egypt, married to a mandarin but betrayed him, then disguised as a man to be a monk, her female identity was revealed only after her death. However, Maiorica’s story is at the same time a fictional work with the details of her being accused of a bastard child’s fathering, her enduring the people’s humiliation and mockery and material hardships to raise the child, the relationship with her husband. Those narrative elements could have been influenced by the image popular in European culture of the ascetic Christian nuns, also known as “Desert Mothers” living in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Israel in the 4th and 5th centuries. There could have been also the influence of or similarity with the painting of St. Theodora and a child at her side, created by Maiorica’s contemporary Italian painter Bernardino Capitelli (1589–1639).

Bà Thánh Tiêudôla was similar to the story about Quan Âm Thị Kính (Thị Kính Guan Yin) in Vietnam. Thị Kính was accused falsely of trying to kill her husband; she disguised herself as a man to be a Buddhist monk, was again falsely accused of impregnating a skittish girl named Thị Mầu. However, thanks to her endurance of all indignities and her spirit of self-sacrifice, she could enter into Nirvana and became Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy). Although the Nôm anonymous novel in verse *Quan Âm Thị Kính* might have been composed in the 19th century, the folktale of Thị Kính originated from ancient Buddhist legends, had circulated in Vietnamese folklore for centuries before. The image of “Quan Âm tống tử” (Guan Yin giving child) had been worshipped and become inspiration for traditional Vietnamese literature and folk arts.⁵ In the 17th century Vietnamese Catholic people’s perception, it could be easily identified with the image of Mary with Jesus.

⁵ Sometimes in Vietnamese folklore, Thị Kính and her adopted child were identified with Guan Yin (Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara) and Shencai Tongzi (Sudhana) worshipped in many communities in Vietnam. For example, Sùng Nghiêm

The comparison of *Bà Thánh Tiêudôla* with the story of Thị Kính Guan Yin can offer some ideas about the motif of woman disguising herself to be a monk as an interferential phenomenon between the Buddhist spiritual tradition long-established in Vietnam and the Christianity as a new religion just introduced to Vietnamese in the early 17th century. From a gender perspective the disguise in both cases of Theodora and Thị Kính could be considered as a variation of androgynous theme, which was popular in world literature as embodiment of the aspiration towards ideal unity.

The Chinese have the Yin-Yang principle; Brahma of Hinduism is formless and genderless; the Buddhist *tantra* looks forwards overcoming dichotomies including gender dichotomy; Judo-Christian God created both man and woman after a special model, so “God transcends gender: not male not female, but God” (Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae). Disguising as a man to enter the monastery, accepting to adopt an illegitimate child and suffering misery to raise the child for human salvation were acts that made both Theodora and Thị Kính to be similar to Virgin Mary and Guan Yin, i.e., to be similar to absolute integrity.

The comparison of St Theodora story with Thi Kinh story might be one of the examples expressing the idea of transcending the male – female dichotomy as well as the dichotomies of the East and the West or Vietnam and the West in the context of the 17th century globalization.

Conclusion

Vietnam's first contacts with Western literature took place in the early 17th century, associated with the activities of evangelization of Christianity by the Jesuits.

Jeronimo Maiorica's hagiographies were among the earliest works of Vietnamese Catholic literature. As an Italian writer and missionary in Vietnam, Maiorica himself as well as his works embodied the representative of “the West”, which brought to Vietnam not only the Christianity as new religious ideas and beliefs, but also new knowledge of the world and new style of its narration, which continued to develop in the succeeding centuries. At the same time, Maiorica and his *Nôm* works reflected the cultural exchange between Vietnam and the West, the process of acculturation in which the elements of the Western newcomers' culture found the way for themselves to assimilate with the native traditional culture. It was not one-way, but interpenetrative process, which became historical necessity for modernization of Vietnamese culture.

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