

TIẾP NHẬN TIỂU THUYẾT “THỊ LỘ CHÍNH DANH” CỦA VÕ KHẮC NGHIỆM TỪ GÓC NHÌN THẮNG MAN SƯ TỬ HỒNG NHẤT THỪA ĐẠI PHƯƠNG TIỆN PHƯƠNG QUẢNG KINH VÀ VĂN HÓA TỈNH QUẢNG NINH

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Ngày nhận bài: 21/06/2023

Ngày nhận bài sửa sau phân biện: 09/10/2023

Ngày chấp nhận đăng: 16/10/2023

TÓM TẮT

Bài viết hướng đến tìm hiểu giá trị nội dung và nghệ thuật của tiểu thuyết Thị Lộ chính danh trong tương quan đặc điểm kinh Thăng Man sư tử hồng nhất thừa đại phương tiện phương quảng kinh và văn hóa Quảng Ninh. Theo đó, ba phương pháp được vận dụng bao gồm cấu trúc, thi pháp và phê bình Phật học đã làm rõ nhiều phương diện của các đối tượng nghiên cứu trên tinh thần tiếp nhận. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy có sự tương hợp nhất định giữa đặc điểm tổng hợp, sáng tạo và phong phú của nền văn hóa Quảng Ninh với nội dung nhất thừa, Phật tính và Pháp thân của kinh Thăng Man cũng như ba phương diện cấu trúc, nhân vật và biểu tượng của tiểu thuyết. Kết quả nghiên cứu cung cấp một mô hình và giới thiệu hướng tiếp cận mới cho các nghiên cứu liên ngành văn học – văn hóa – Phật học.

Từ khóa: Kinh Thăng Man, Thị Lộ chính danh, tiếp nhận, văn hóa Quảng Ninh.

A RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL “THI LO CHINH DANH” BY VO KHAC NGHIEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ŚRĪMĀLĀDEVĪ-SIṂHANĀDAVAIPULYASŪTRA AND QUANG NINH CULTURE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate the significance of content and artistry in the novel “Thi Lo chinh danh” in relation to the distinctive characteristics of the *Śrīmālādevī-Siṃhanādavaipulyasūtra*, and Quang Ninh culture, (a province along the northeastern coast of Vietnam). In this regard, three methods are used to elucidate various aspects of the research subjects within a receptive framework: structural analysis, poetic techniques, and Buddhist criticism. The research findings demonstrate a certain congruence between the comprehensive, creative, and rich characteristics of Quang Ninh's cultural heritage and the essence, Buddha-nature, and Dharma-body aspects of the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, as well as the three aspects of structure, characters, and symbolism in the novel. The results of this study provide a model and introduce a new approach to interdisciplinary research in literature, culture, and Buddhist studies.

Keywords: Exoneration of Thi Lo, Quang Ninh culture, receive, *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary research, from a scientific standpoint, has the potential to propose new perspectives on phenomena within broad-ranging relationships. The study of the novel *Thị Lộ chính danh* in the context of Buddhist scriptures and the culture of Quang Ninh also holds interdisciplinary value in the fields of literature, culture, and Buddhism. This study takes on added significance when set in the cultural context of Quang Ninh, a region rich in Buddhist cultural traditions and renowned as the birthplace of Truc Lam Buddhism during the Tran Dynasty, with hundreds of famous pagodas and temples. Additionally, the study of this historical literary work promises to contribute new insights into the characters and cultural traditions of Quang Ninh province. From a practical standpoint, works that explore and analyze legends and historical narratives always have a special appeal to modern readers, particularly when they are associated with themes such as regional culture (Quang Ninh) and the elevation of the role of women. Moreover, from an educational perspective, this topic reflects a humanistic and compassionate view towards the talented historical figure Nguyen Thi Lo, shedding light on the value of contemporary Vietnamese literature and contributing to the research and introduction of the award-winning works of the writer Vo Khac Nghiem, recipient of the Asia 2020 Award.

Approaching a contemporary novel such as *Thị Lộ chính danh* through the lens of a Buddhist scripture (*Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*) and the cultural characteristics of the region (Quang Ninh province) may raise questions about the possibility of identifying content and artistic elements in the novel that do not appear to be related to Buddhism at first. However, the universal essence of Buddhism allows for a broad perspective. *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* mentions a female character utilizing her talents for personal and collective spiritual growth, which bears significant resemblance to the central character in the novel, Thi Lo. From this point of convergence, the research can shed light on new perspectives from the Buddhist perspective in relation to cultural, historical, and social contexts.

Published in 2015, the novel *Thị Lộ chính danh* has not yet been systematically studied but has introduced several noteworthy features. In *Vo Khac Nghiem and the legend interpretation*, Tran Huy Quang asserts that this novel is a legendary narrative based on sensory realism. It elucidates historical ambiguities such as the education of Nguyen Thi Lo, the naivety of Nguyen Trai, and the “arrogance of the era” (Tran Huy Quang, 2019). In *Vo Khac Nghiem tackles a significant challenge*, Nguyen Quang Thieu highly appreciates the art of character development, aiming to create vivid characters that readers can feel every breath of (Nguyen Quang Thieu, 2019). Tran Ninh Ho, in *Country girl in the royal court*, focuses on the profound, simple, and rustic qualities of folk wisdom (Tran Ninh Ho, 2019), particularly intriguing regarding the depiction of Vietnamese women's power in politics, which is rarely associated with politics itself. These studies only provide preliminary observations on the characters and ideas, while the exploration of the novel's connection to Quang Ninh's culture and its relationship with Buddhism remains a promising research direction. Regarding the cultural aspects of Quang Ninh province, many authors have addressed this topic. For example, Nguyen Van Cuong discusses *Cultural governance in Cam Pha city, Quang Ninh province* (Nguyen Van Cuong, 2016), and Ngo Thi Thu Trang explores *the education of traditional cultural values through Tây ethnic poetry for minority students in Quang Ninh province* (Ngo Thi Thu Trang, 2022). Notably, Phan Hang, in *Culture is a resource and a driving force for development* (Phan Hang, 2023), provides a comprehensive overview of Quang Ninh's culture as a synthesis of coastal and island culture, industrial worker culture, and the convergence and interaction between the Red River civilization and the Northeastern region's culture. Building upon previous research, we acknowledge three characteristic features that can summarize Quang Ninh's culture: **the integrative nature** of the coastal, island, mining, and West-northern Red River cultures; **the creative aspect** manifested in the development of remarkable cultural achievements, exemplified by the Yen Tu Zen tradition; and **the richness** of the culture of ethnic communities such as

Dao, Tay, and San Chay, etc. Among these characteristics, the prominence of femininity emerges as a noteworthy factor. While the matriarchal culture is predominantly found among the Dao people, other ethnic groups such as the Kinh, San Chay, and San Dieu also share traces of feminine aspects in their agricultural-based cultures, symbolizing fertility, and continuity. Besides, Quang Ninh's culture early on absorbed new ideas from foreign traders, and within the coastal environment, women's role holds significance and sacredness in the community's collective consciousness. *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, also known as *Śrīmālādevī-Simhanādvaiṣṭyasūtra*, is often referenced in clarifying the spiritual essence of Buddhism through the works of Chan Hien Tam (2006) (*Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*), Thich Thanh Tu (2009) (*Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*), and Thich An Thuan (2018) (*Records of teachings and interpretations of the mystical Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*). Focusing on *Srīmālā*, this sutra presents fundamental tenets of Mahayana Buddhism such as the **Single Vehicle, Buddha-nature, and Dharma-body**. The central image and key meanings of the *Thăng Man* sutra have the potential to establish connections within a literary perspective, expanding the scope of research and linking it to artistic and cultural contexts. Therefore, this article utilizes the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, particularly incorporating the insightful interpretation by Thich Duc Niem (2004).

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the fundamental principles of dialectical materialism, this article examines the significant influence of Quang Ninh culture on literary and artistic works. Simultaneously, it considers the relative independence of individuals, specifically in the case of Thi Lo and *Śrīmālā*, both of which exhibit continuous development in their understanding and reception of events, literary works, and Buddhism. Inherent in this process is the contradiction between the new and the old, the specific and the general, all of which need to be respected in their

appropriate alignment with the subject matter. Furthermore, the article adopts a structuralist perspective, viewing works as a unified entity of content and art, where any change in one component results in a change in the overall structure. Therefore, *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* and the novel *Thi Lo chinh danh* must be placed within a larger framework that extends beyond the scope of social and cultural influences and connections. Moreover, the contemporary mindset decisively impacts the interpretation and reception of texts. Through the process of interpretation, the mechanisms of power governing interpretation and discourse gradually become evident. Lastly, a pragmatic approach governs the selection of the research subject, which is *Thi Lo chinh danh* as an exemplary work by Vo Khac Nghiem and representative of the Quang Ninh culture. Furthermore, this article also demonstrates a practical aspect by aiming to balance the literary and Buddhist aspects within the framework of Buddhist criticism.

From the perspective of reception, this article considers a commonly overlooked aspect of research, which is the reader in literature and Buddhism. The reception process affirms the role of the reader in co-creating and sustaining the life of a literary work. However, the American school of reception theory falls into contradiction when Jauss¹ emphasizes the public reception and the aesthetic distance between the reader and the work, suggesting that the closer the reader's aesthetic distance to the work, the less artistic value the work possesses. On the other hand, Robert Escarpit² views the similarity and cultural community between the writer and the public as factors contributing to the value of a literary work. Approaching *Thi Lo chinh danh* and *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* from the perspective of reception, the explanations provided in this article aim to seek criteria and values to position the works within the reception of the public and the history of thought.

¹ Hans Robert Jauss (1921 – 1997), a German scholar, renowned for his work on reception aesthetics theory, such as “*Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Science*”.

² Robert Escarpit (1918 – 2000) French scholar, writer, and journalist, renowned for his contributions to the field of sociological literary studies, *The sociology of literature* (1958).

Therefore, the three specialized methods applied in this article include structural analysis, poetic analysis, and Buddhist criticism. Firstly, the **structural analysis method** is employed by focusing on the text and technical aspects, but also considering the post-structuralist thinking to reveal semantic shifts and ambiguities that allow for the potential freedom of the reader. This method is used to investigate the structural content of *Thi Lo chinh danh* and identify the characteristics of *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, and then apply them in reverse to the works. Secondly, the **poetic analysis method** concerns the formal aspect, specifically the aesthetic significance that Aristotle, Russian Formalism, and Prague Structuralism aim to explore. Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization is asserted as a technique in *Art as Technique*. Tran Dinh Su in *Thi pháp thơ Tố Hữu* seeks methods and means of artistic expression to explore life through imagery. The poetic analysis method is employed in the article to connect the aspects of content and art, interpret the structure, characters, and symbols of the works in relation to the content, and understand them as forms with conceptual significance. Finally, the **Buddhist criticism method** is understood as “applying Buddhist ideas and art of the Buddhist scriptures to the study and resolution of literary and artistic issues” (Nguyen Thanh Trung & Thepa, 2022, p. 1306). However, in this article, the Buddhist criticism method clarifies its role not only in resolving literary issues but also as the subject of Buddhism itself. Through the comparison of both subjects, the spirit of the Bodhisattva adeptly applies both the Buddhist teachings and worldly teachings: “Great World-Honored One! From now until reaching the Bodhi-Enlightenment, concerning both internal and external teachings, there is no arising of attachment or regret!” (Thich Duc Niem, 2004, p. 162). Accordingly, the research framework of this article is diagrammed as follows:

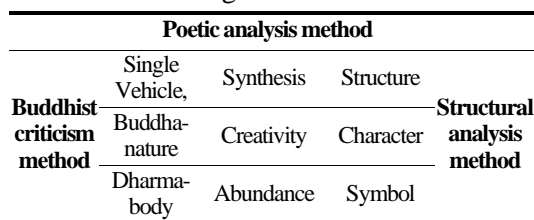


Figure 1. The research model

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Research results

Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra belongs to the group of Nhu lai tang sutras (The *Śrīmālādevī Simhanāda Sūtra*) emphasizes the concept of emptiness and Buddha's nature. It is believed to have been composed during the Ikṣvāku dynasty in the 3rd century, profoundly influencing the Mahāyāna tradition after the compilation of the second Buddhist canon. The main contents of this sutra can be summarized as follows: Single vehicle, Buddha nature, and the Dharma body. **Single vehicle** affirms the value and the singular path of the Buddha, unifying all inclinations within their diversity and converging towards a single holistic entity; any differences serve merely to accommodate the needs of sentient beings. According to this sutra, Ms. Śrīmālā identifies three types of individuals who attain enlightenment: those who achieve it through self-realization, those who attain it by hearing the Dharma, and those who attain it by having faith in the teachings. Thus, the concept of the Single vehicle in the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* closely aligns with Escarpit's perspective on the unified distance of reception that creates value, highlighting the holistic nature of Buddhist doctrine and all phenomena. This pathway of synthesis also reflects the overall Vietnamese culture and specifically that of Quang Ninh province. **Buddha's nature** emphasizes the inherent awakened consciousness present in all sentient beings, an immaculate inner reality (Dharmakāya) that can only be directly perceived through intuitive understanding, transcending conceptual reasoning. However, the concept of Buddha nature in the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* is specifically linked to compassionate actions and the care for sentient beings. Similarly, when Thi Lo explains to the king of Interest, Love, Wisdom, and Language in the *Diamond Sutra*, it is associated with the act of digging channels (Thich Duc Niem, 2004). The concept of “compassionate actions” (Parigraha) serves to actualize perceptions into actions. In the novel, Thi Lo and Nguyen Trai transform theoretical discussions into reality. They wholeheartedly believe in the power of faith in assisting the people and the country. They dedicate themselves to serving the people, and the king, and living a selfless life, willing to die for the

greater good. As stated by Thich Duc Niem, “*If we cannot integrate the teachings of Buddhism into our daily lives, if we cannot embody ourselves with the teachings of Buddhism as one, then what benefit do all the lofty ideals of equality and salvation bring to us?*” (Thich Duc Niem, 2004, p. 35). The significance of Mahayana Buddhism, according to Thich Duc Niem (2004), emphasizes the role of lay practitioners rather than just ordained monks, without gender distinctions. Hence, Śrīmālā becomes the main character and proclaims various sutra teachings. Similarly, Thi Lo is praised by the king for her profound insights and contributions. This spirit reflects the elevated position of women in Buddhism since ancient times. Buddha nature also transcends age distinctions, so although Nguyen Trai possesses great talent, he is restrained by his age and a conservative mindset. In contrast, Thi Lo stands out with her youthfulness and strong spirit of struggle for truth and justice. It is important to note that these points are not intended to compare Thi Lo to Nguyen Trai but rather to establish fairness in evaluation and creativity in character development. The concept of the **Dharma-body** represents the manifestation of the Trikāya theory in Mahayana Buddhism, believing that the Buddha is eternally present, steadfast, and immortal. It serves as a unifying force for all phenomena. Therefore, the detailed analysis and divination of fate by Master Thien Thong, specifically examining destinies and astrological signs, become a basis for the actions of court officials and royal attendants, despite being criticized from a strict Buddhist perspective. Nonetheless, this practice is a reality that has endured until today.

The three contents of the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* have a close relationship with the ideas, characters, and content of the novel *Thi Lo chinh danh*. If the Single-Vehicle meaning connects all phenomena into a unified whole, the novel is connected through the inspiring praise of the Vietnamese people's talent and love for their country. In fact, the core issue of literary art is the beauty of both the physical and spiritual aspects. Thi Lo is described as beautiful, but this beauty transcends the values of ordinary life and approaches the realm of perfection and sanctity, beyond the demands even of kings and lords. Therefore, the

descriptions of sexual relations between Nguyen Trai and Thi Lo do not diminish them but, on the contrary, create depth and elevation for the characters; it is the means through which they embrace the lifespan of sentient beings. Vo Khac Nghiem has brought the dialectical view of reality developed during years of writing about Quang Ninh's mining topics closer to Buddhist ideas, specifically the Buddha nature within everyone. Thus, even the antagonist Hoang Phuc is portrayed with certain talents and good intentions, and Le Loi, who was once seen as a prison warden obsessed with power, is now explained by Vo Khac Nghiem as haunted by the past; and even the cruelest queen in Vietnamese history eventually “*built many shrines, dug rivers, performed many good deeds, and treated Ngoc Dao and Ngoc Xuan mother and son with kindness*” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 613). In summary, the *Thi Lo chinh danh* novel focuses on exalting the spirit of valuing the people throughout Vietnamese history. The author provides numerous insightful and modern comments on this traditional theme. Therefore, although serving as a rhetorical device for the character Thi Lo, the novel remains continuously captivating due to its small innovations and the interweaving of these elements into a coherent structure (such as the detail of the legendary sword, which is not Thuan Thien but the Tran family's precious sword belonging to Tran Nguyen Han). It can be observed that the author has been successful in synthesizing traditional values from a fresh perspective. Therefore, the character Thi Lo also embodies the characteristics of an Eastern woman, such as beauty, integrity, endurance, and talent, while remaining humble and not seeking many honors. Nevertheless, Thi Lo's personality is straightforward and modern (not hesitating to allow the young king to paint her nude with the idea of preserving eternal youthfulness). It is precisely this aspect that creates/explains the tragedy of the character and demonstrates creativity in portraying historical figures. Phung Quan asserts that “*the tragedy of the Nguyen Trai couple represents a typical characteristic of all humanity*” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 626) due to the mistakes of history. However, we can see that this tragedy is common among individuals who do not experience popularity throughout history. Vo

Khac Nghiem's contribution lies in providing specific details, visualizing, and narrating the historical figures, resulting in a sense of divinity when the final chapter recounts the establishment of a temple for Thi Lo and her spiritual manifestation. This detail holds a value like the Buddha's recognition of Śrīmālā as a Buddha. The concept of the Dharma body in the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* suggests a deviation from the aspects of history, reception, and literary consciousness. Since all historical records are not absolute truths but rather subjective interpretations, essentially a type of reception by historians and the era. However, the issue does not fall into the personal labyrinth as depicted in the debate between Trang Tu and Hue Thi because the Buddha's teachings are defined by their transcendent, egoless, and non-linguistic nature, while the reception of literature is based on the textual structure. Therefore, the consciousness that carries the nature of reception, encompassing both Buddhist and literary consciousness, Vo Khac Nghiem integrates his own opinions and contemporary perspectives to refute the notion of “*singer belongs to no species,*” using the words of Tran Nguyen Han to debunk tales of spirits and gods, and incorporating numerous statements from Le Thai Tong about Confucius and the spirit of venerating national culture explicitly. It is the act of reception that enriches the literary and Buddhist significance rather than the pursuit of singular meaning.

Corresponding to the three main themes of the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* and the novel, there is an art of constructing characters, symbols, and the narrative structure employed by Vo Khac Nghiem. Firstly, the central character of the novel is vividly portrayed with a beauty that is both pure and captivating. Thi Lo truly embodies the qualities of a diligent and enduring woman, intelligent and astute, cautious, and clever, and holds sway over the court and officials. If Śrīmālā expounds on the marvelous teachings of the Single Vehicle, then Thi Lo also repeatedly expounds on successful methods of governing the country and its people in front of the king and the courtiers. Her role as a spokesperson for the Dharma, following the words of the Buddha, is also reiterated in the story when the king requests

Thi Lo to immediately recite her doctoral examination essay and expound on the king's decision for the courtiers. Thi Lo also possesses the talents of singing and financial management (engaging in coin forging from an early age). As mentioned before, from the perspective of Buddha nature, the evaluation of characters is diverse and multidimensional. Vo Khac Nghiem portrays Hoang Phuc and Ly Ky with various strengths that are reasonable rather than exaggerated. The phrase “*The Ho family's political issue is annoyed*” in the *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* demonstrates Nguyen Trai's favor towards the Ho family – a dynasty with a personal connection to him and many progressive and innovative ideas. Even Nguyen Trai himself has flaws, being described as “*disorderly, unclean, even lazy to bathe, lazy to eat, sometimes enduring hunger to sleep... not a brave person who dares to confront great battles... often unable to control himself*” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 92). Conversely, Thi Lo is almost flawless, but the medieval perspective finds it difficult to accept the incident of her being nude in front of the king. It is precisely this medieval perspective that influences the mystical elements in the novel *Thi Lo chinh danh* when Thi Lo is introduced to Nguyen Trai through two dreams of celestial maidens. Secondly, reception itself has its limitations. If it is independent of the text and based on reasonable grounds, the reception becomes prone to speculation and strays from the main issues. Vo Khac Nghiem has creatively developed various aspects of the character Thi Lo, particularly her name. In comparison to Śrīmālā in the corresponding sutra, Thi Lo in the novel has become a cultural icon with a tendency for praise, as her name is artistically and symbolically significant, containing multiple layers of meaning. “*The character Lo signifies a grand path, as well as the notion of revealing and expressing, with twelve strokes in the character. Within the six strokes of the character Lo lies the beauty of Lo Gem and Lo River*” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 78). The author has associated the character with the imagery of a grand, bright, and righteous path, considering it the main theme of the work. Therefore, the concept of a righteous name, as discussed by Confucius, is linked to the name

Thi Lo, examining the Ho family – a name tainted with blood, transforming into an infamous name; the righteous name of Nguyen Trai under the name Le Loi in the Binh Ngo Dai Cao, Thi Lo’s lesson to Le Nguyen Long about Confucius’s concept of a righteous name, etc. In fact, the author intended to keep the novel’s name as *Thi Lo* because Thi Lo itself carries the meaning of a righteous name. This approach seems to sacrifice the artistic element to serve reception, like how we refer to the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* rather than its full name, *Śrīmālādevī-Siṃhanāḍavaipulyasūtra*. However, this action by the author pushes reception away from reality, violates the principle of respecting the text, and deviates from cultural values. In fact, when interpreting Chinese characters, one can comment on multiple meanings within the same character, rather than commenting on all the meanings of a homophonic word. In *Dai Viet su ki toan thu*, Ngo Si Lien writes the name Nguyen Thi Lo as 阮氏路; accordingly, the character 路 (Lo) consists of a total of 13 strokes and is combined with the radical 足, indicating meanings such as path, position, aspect, way, method, morality, category, route, vehicle, and greatness. On the other hand, the character 氏 (Thi) represents a family name, middle name, title, the form of address, school of thought, and official title, without encompassing perspectives or urban areas as Vo Khac Nghiem uses other homophonic words. Clearly, synthesis or richness, and diversity must also be conscious within certain limits and boundaries. Thirdly, the author has structured a system of characters, space, time, layout, and symbols revolving around a central character, Thi Lo, while also incorporating the image of Nguyen Trai. Consequently, the character Thi Lo stands out as assertive and prominent compared to the talented yet hesitant Nguyen Trai: “It is solely due to my excessive reliance on past experiences and excessive confidence in the power of human ethics that I intentionally conceal the wickedness for a false stability of the court” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 606). Therefore, Tran Huy Quang comments on “the sophistication of the era” (Tran Huy Quang, 2019, p. 14), but this is the sophistication of the virtuous individuals, of

Nguyen Trai himself, and the distinguished figures of that era or any era. Specifically, it is the limitation of a Confucian scholar who, when teaching the king, would sit all day in the Kinh Dien hall waiting, in contrast to Thi Lo, who organizes engaging activities and limits each day to discuss only a few topics in a playful manner, treating study as play and play as study. Thi Lo surpasses Nguyen Trai in both courage and her position as a woman; hence, many images associated with Thi Lo carry multiple open-ended meanings and serve as symbols, particularly images of the bosom and thighs: “Her breasts swelled like spring, pulsating with the warm breath of a youthful heart” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 86), “The light of two candles flared up, gently touching the rounded breasts that emerged beneath the thin silk” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 598). The author also describes the feminine nature and beauty of Thi Lo through the scent, “A fragrance resembling incense, cinnamon, lemongrass... emanating from the ‘Duc Lo stream’” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 86), which makes the character attractive and subtly reminiscent of the image of ancestral mothers in the agricultural cultures of India and Vietnam. Interestingly, this very aspect creates the knot of the character’s destiny, captivating both the king and the courtiers while arousing envy and hatred in many. From the perspective of the three bodies, these symbols not only evoke desire but also serve as a means of connecting with the Dharma body. Those who understand carnal desire do not let it obscure their judgment and lead them astray but rather nurture their spiritual essence, as Thi Lo teaches the king: “Intimate relations done correctly and in moderation... will receive the grace of a royal consort along with the blessings of heaven and earth, which can drive away illnesses, strengthen physical vigor, invigorate the spirit, and enhance the clarity of mind” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, pp. 379–380).

3.2. Discussions

The profound significance of the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, the creative nature of Quang Ninh’s culture, and the construction of characters in the novel *Thi Lo chinh danh* can

suggest further thoughts on the issue of aesthetic distance in reception. This issue is closely related to the concept of anticipatory scope. However, the reader's anticipatory scope needs to be engaged to ensure the value of the work. In other words, regardless of proximity or distance, readers need to be elevated from the unfamiliar to the familiar, from afar to near, or vice versa, because the most important aesthetic pleasure lies in the appreciation of a literary text rather than its conformity or suitability to the reader's self. This process also elucidates the nature of reception in *Thi Lo chinh danh* the purpose of fictionalization, and the explicit historical details of the characters that create a close aesthetic distance. Yet, the introduction of new details increases this distance, ultimately aligning with history. Thus, the reception process transitions from equilibrium to instability and returns to a circular alignment with the reading process. This is the significance and effect that literature brings to readers, encompassing rich, complex, and multi-dimensional transformations, carefully structured within a contemporary literary work. As the author states: "Novels about modernity or history need to portray characters from the multi-dimensional perspective of the author, along with the interaction with today's readers in the midst of information explosion, as the time allocated for cultural reading has become limited." (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 627). It is precisely this richness of the text and life that establishes numerous similarities among identified systems as a basis for interdisciplinary research and the reception of this literary form. This article is also conducted based on the similarities in character types and the context of East Asia, incorporating methods from Buddhist criticism and addressing ideological issues such as humanity and women's rights. Moreover, this richness characteristic also reflects the author's creativity in contributing to the interpretation of various historical issues from a new perspective, particularly regarding the detail of Thi Lo's agreement to pose nude for the king's painting. Additionally, the author intertwines numerous personal interpretations and reevaluates traditional ideas, exemplified by King Le Thai Tong's opinion on Confucius's prolix style... Through these means, the author

also unravels the myths associated with Nguyen Trai, such as the curse lasting for three generations, Ngo Si Lien's opinions, and the legend of Le Loi as the king and Nguyen Trai as his helper.

Although there are several new elements, overall, *Thi Lo chinh danh* is still written in a traditional style, without utilizing techniques of spatial or temporal reversal characteristic of postmodernism, but rather employing a simple artistic mindset that is familiar and accessible to ordinary readers. Similarly, *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* follows the same pattern. Both texts are structured in a concise manner, with a comparable length of approximately 15 pages (including the Vi thanh section), exhibiting prominent Eastern cultural rhythms. If *Thi Lo chinh danh* incorporates the literary system and eloquence of Nguyen Trai (in works such as *Chieu gon*, *Cây chuoí*, *Tu tình*, and poetic verses, particularly in the chapter *Binh Ngo đái cao*) and Thi Lo's dialogues, then the system of praising verses in *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* also reflects an Eastern cultural space. "In Indian customs, whenever encountering a noble and dignified person, they often recite verses as a form of praise... Therefore, Ms. Śrīmālā recites verses facing Hang De La. The verses in Sanskrit are called Gia Da, a kind of ancient poetry similar to Chinese classical poetry" (Thich Duc Niem, 2004, p. 84). Furthermore, Vo Khac Nghiem's novel contains poetic elements in various passages, using folk rhymes: "women with big noses and large breasts, thick eyebrows often have eyelashes like palm leaves, dense and glossy fur, always desiring and never getting bored" (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 148); "what needs to be said must be heard" (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 401). The overall melody of the work is further enriched by folk tunes, "Quan ho" folk songs, and the talent of the author's melodious and clear voice, allowing the actual events to be incorporated into emotionally inspiring verses for Lam Son troops. The beautiful singing voice not only possesses artistic significance but also carries political and military implications. This meaning is also conveyed through the concept of the dharma body.

The traditional and folk-inspired writing style of Vo Khac Nghiem brings a surrealist element to the novel of *Thi Lo chinh danh*. This

novel focuses on the vivid depiction of profound conflicts between various character lines, such as between the Lam Son troops and the Ming dynasty (represented by Minister Hoang Phuc), between divine and mortal aspects of Le Loi, between the two main ministers and Thi Lo and the young king, and between the queen and Nguyen Trai and his wife. The successful portrayal of these conflicts creates a theatrical atmosphere and generates genre interactions, as the author states, “Write a novel with conflicts like a play, with visuals like a film” (Vo Khac Nghiem, 2019, p. 627). In addition to depicting real-life events, Vo Khac Nghiem's novel is filled with mystical elements such as spirits, divination, and dreams, exemplified by Nguyen Trai seeking a dream at the Tran Vu temple and the divine voice foretelling the destiny of the Le dynasty. However, these elements are kept from crossing into the realm of the fantastic, perhaps due to a belief in a unified world where everything is interconnected and undergoes mutual transformation, all originating from the mind. This connection between the dharma body, belief, and ultimate reality is also evident in *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*: “At that moment, when Śrīmālā finished listening to the Buddha's sermon, she respectfully stood up and achieved the ten dharma realms” (Thich Duc Niem, 2004, p. 151). The ritual of achieving the dharma realms requires a preceptor, a Buddha statue; otherwise, it is considered an illusion. In Śrīmālā's case, her attainment is based on the power of the mind. In general, people in the East perceive the concept of a correspondence between the human and the divine, where external scenes are intimately connected to the mind. There is no clear separation, as found in the Western approach, between subject and object in perceiving the mystical. Therefore, the Eastern notion of the mystical is closely linked to the psyche and approaches the realm of the supernatural, and in Eastern literature, it is considered a reality.

For example, in the scripture, Śrīmālā is in the palace of Adusa, and through her belief, she sees the Buddha (who is in the city of Sāvattihī) manifesting in the air. This is a result of faith, not only perceived by her but also by the palace maids. It all originates from the mind. However, the manifestation of the mind has become a reality that affects the surroundings (as evidenced

fragments of folklore). From this perspective, the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra* contributes further evidence to the interpretation of the tendency towards the surrealistic reality in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Specifically, the appearances of spirits or divine omens are products of the mind, or in other words, they are the result of perspective. The Vietnamese style of surrealistic reality differs from that of Latin America or the Western approach, as it does not strip bare or distort the imagery. While referring to the mystical, the Vietnamese still perceive it as a part of life (magical), but they still revere spirits and fear them (fantastic). At the same time, they apply it to understand nature (mythic). This synthesis often limits many works in Vietnam to the elements of postmodernity and modern fairy tales. Specifically, the detail of Nguyen Trai did not obstruct the sacrifice of Pham Thi Ngoc Tran, the wife of Le Loi, to the water deity, despite knowing that the existence of spirits cannot be trusted. However, faced with the situation of Ly An's 300 warships advancing towards Tay Do along with the dream of the sovereign, Nguyen Trai cannot intervene to avoid negligence. In turn, these details satisfy the preferences of Vietnamese readers, as the value of literature is evaluated through the receiving community. Therefore, the dreams of the master Thien Thong, such as the omen of a dragon and two soaring birds, or the night when the king died and the heavens and earth were in turmoil with unseasonal thunder and winds, also serve the purpose of arousing Śrīmālā and those around him to engage in spiritual practice, just as when the Buddha used divine powers to appear in the sky.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, through the three methods of Poetic analysis, Structural analysis, and Buddhist criticism method, this article has identified three characteristics of Quang Ninh culture and the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, applying them to analyze the content and artistic value of the novel *Thi Lo chinh danh*. This process has brought new contributions to the article in addressing the issue of reception distance in reception theory, paying attention to the use of Chinese characters in analyzing the name of the character Thi Lo, and particularly introducing and applying the experimental method of Buddhist critique in

interdisciplinary research. This system of methods, along with the research hypothesis, has linked the content system of the *Śrīmālādevī-Sūtra*, the novel *Thị Lo chinh danh*, and the characteristics of Quang Ninh culture into a coherent system, clarifying these three objects further. This topic can be further developed in the spirit of methodological completion, as Buddhist studies aim to clarify universal truths; Buddhist critique can easily be applied to any work, but the results will be universal and general, while literary art aims for uniqueness and creativity. The research hypothesis and approach, although initially effective, need to consider and calculate various factors of differentiation, culture, space, and time to ensure that these deviations do not disrupt the overall structure of the text and the work.

Regarding the novel *Thị Lo chinh danh*, Vo Khắc Nghiem not only demystifies the legend but also creates a new legend about Nguyen Thi Lo, portraying a worldly beauty deeply rooted in agricultural essence yet embodying the ideals of a strong woman. This assertion is clearly affirmed in the grand and sublime passages. Just as Nguyen Quang Thieu acknowledges, the author has overcome a significant challenge, not merely constructing a character but creating a legend with a compelling allure deeply resonating with East Asian sensibilities. This appeal stems not from saintly virtues but from the beauty of sensuality, intellect, and the crystallization of talent in the extraordinary women of Dai Viet. As a result, the imagery and traditional cultural values of Quang Ninh province have been partially discussed and clarified, contributing additional evidence to Resolution No. 11-NQ/TU on the construction and development of culture and the people of Quang Ninh. This contribution helps the people of Quang Ninh meet the sustainable development requirements set by the Provincial Party Committee, promoting qualities such as dynamism, creativity, grandeur, healthiness, civilization, and friendliness.

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