



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Type of Fantasy Character in Medieval Fantasy Stories of Vietnam and South Korea

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: Jul 21, 2024

Accepted: Sep 13, 2024

Keywords

Fantasy characters

Fantasy stories

Medieval literature

Korean literature

Vietnamese literature

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ABSTRACT

Type of fantasy character in medieval fantasy stories of Vietnam and South Korea). Characters and the art of character building is one of the most important issues of story poetry in general and short stories in particular. On the basis of surveying and studying a number of typical medieval fantasy short stories of Vietnam and Korea, we found that the issue of characters has been paid great attention by writers, creating a world rich and diverse characters. Based on the origin of the character's appearance in relation to the descriptive writing style, it is possible to temporarily divide the characters in the medieval fantasy stories of Vietnam and Korea into two basic types, namely, those with strange origins fantasy and characters with real life origins, in which, characters with fantasy origins are built quite successfully by legends. Our report will focus on analyzing and interpreting this magical personality type, thereby describing its characteristics in ideological inspiration, human philosophy, dreams and aspirations about happiness for the people of medieval Vietnamese and Korean fantasy writers.

INTRODUCTION

Fantasy characters are those who possess extraordinary or fantastical traits. These characters might be surreal, endowed with mysterious or miraculous abilities, or possess peculiar characteristics that normal humans do not have. These fantastical figures can originate from the supernatural realm, entirely disconnected from the earthly world. They may also be individuals with earthly origins who, due to certain subjective or objective reasons, are transformed into fantastical beings. In some cases, they might even be mortal beings who, after death, return to the earthly world to complete unfinished business from their lives. Of course, classification here is only relative, as in many instances, a character can simultaneously be classified as both fantastical and mundane.

Overview of Research

Regarding fantasy characters in medieval fantasy literature from Vietnam and Korea, there have already been a number of prior research works that focus on either examining, classifying, or evaluating these characters in Vietnamese or Korean medieval fantasy literature. Here, we provide a brief review of previous studies that have analyzed and compared medieval fantasy characters from both countries, which serves as a necessary reference for our research.

The study “A Comparative Study of Legendary Novels from Korea, China, and Vietnam through ‘Kim Ngao Tan Thoai,’ ‘Tien Dang Tan Thoai,’ and ‘Truyen Ky Man Luc’” by Toan Hue Khanh (Toan Hue Khanh, 2004) is a valuable work. Although this study primarily focuses on the broader issues within the legendary novels of the three countries based on three specific collections, several characters from the genre have been discussed. Meanwhile, works such as *History of Korean Literature from Ancient Times to the Late 19th Century* (Ko Mi Sook et al.) and *Classical Korean Literature* (Woo An Yong et al.) barely mention the issue of characters in fantasy stories due to the specific nature of these books. In *Textbook of Korean Literature* (Phan Thi Thu Hien, Nguyen Thi Hien, 2017; Hussein et al., 2024) and *Classical Korean Literature: Process and Identity* (Phan Thi Thu Hien, 2017), Phan Thi Thu Hien and her research group primarily touch upon the content related to characters in legendary novels, making important contributions from this perspective. Several comparative studies of characters in the famous legendary novels *Kim Ngao Tan Thoai* and *Truyen Ky Man Luc* can be highlighted, such as: 1) “A Comparison of the ‘Person Lost in the Immortal Realm’ in Vietnamese Literature with the Novel ‘Cuu Van Mong’ (Korea)” (Nguyen Huu Son.a, 2008); 2) “Similarities in the Stories of Zen Masters from Korea and Vietnam before the 15th Century” (Nguyen Huu Son.b, 2012); 3) “The Female Character in ‘Kim Ngao Tan Thoai’ and ‘Truyen Ky Man Luc’” (Luu Thi Hong Viet, 2012); 4) “Dreams, Fantasies, and the Pursuit of Marital Happiness in ‘Tien Dang Tan Thoai,’ ‘Kim Ngao Tan Thoai,’ ‘Truyen Ky Man Luc,’ and ‘Vu Nguyet Vat Ngu’” (Nguyen Thi Mai Lien, 2014); 5) “Similarities and Differences in the Works: ‘Kim Ngao Tan Thoai’ (Korea) and ‘Truyen Ky Man Luc’ (Vietnam)” (Le Dinh Chinh, 2016).

Through these studies, most researchers have come to the shared conclusion that there are many similarities in the depiction and artistic construction of characters in Vietnamese and Korean legendary stories, despite differences in space, time, and the nuances of character traits between the two countries.

Building on previous research, our paper aims to systematically and comprehensively examine the appearance of fantastical characters in medieval fantasy literature from both Vietnam and Korea. From this, the paper will also clarify several fundamental issues related to the philosophical and humanistic inspirations, dreams, and aspirations concerning human happiness in medieval Vietnamese and Korean fantasy writers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To complete this research, we have employed a combination of the following main research methods:

Typological Literary Method and Genre-Based Literary Approach

The typological literary method aims to identify and point out common typological characteristics within the genre, particularly in the construction of fantasy characters in medieval fantasy literature from Vietnam and Korea. However, to avoid oversimplification and generalization, throughout the research process, we have paid special attention to national characteristics and the creative individuality of each author and collection of medieval fantasy stories from both countries. Additionally, we adhere to methodological guidelines for genre research to understand the characters in medieval fantasy literature from Vietnam and Korea within the context of the genre’s specific features, organizational principles, and interactions with other literary forms, especially

during the early stages of the genre's development. This method has allowed us to identify the historical features that characterize the development of the fantasy story genre in Vietnamese and Korean medieval literature through an in-depth study of the characters.

Cultural Perspective in Literary Research

Literature is a special component of culture. The cultural perspective approach in literary research allows us to adopt an interdisciplinary view, situating literature within the broader cultural context of each nation to explain research findings. Characters are representations of humans or human qualities, and through them, we can observe the complex features of culture. We believe that, through the fantastical characters in medieval Vietnamese and Korean short stories, writers have expressed multiple aspects of traditional culture.

Comparative Literary Method

This method is employed to compare the representation of different types of fantasy characters as well as the reflection of traditional cultural elements of both countries through these characters. We also explore the differences in certain artistic techniques used to construct characters in Vietnamese and Korean medieval fantasy stories. This method allows us, in specific instances, to highlight the inherited and innovative aspects of character representation among writers as the genre evolved in both countries.

In addition, throughout the research, we have employed various supplementary methods such as literary analysis, statistical classification, structural-systematic method, and others.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistical Results and Classification

Table 1. The appearance of fantasy character archetypes in medieval fantasy literature of Vietnam and Korea

No	STORY (Number of story with appearance of fantasy character)	NUMBER OF FANTASY CHARACTER	TYPES OF FANTASY CHARACTER	
			Characters with extraordinary origin	Characters with earthly origin
Vietnam				
1	<i>Thiên uyển tập anh ngữ lục</i> (<i>Thiên uyển tập anh ngữ lục</i>) (21 stories)	08	05	03
2	<i>Việt điện u linh tập</i> (<i>Việt điện u linh tập</i>) (40 stories)	29	20	09
3	<i>Linh Nam chích quái truyện</i> (<i>Linh Nam chích quái truyện</i>) (36 stories)	75	44	31
4	<i>Thanh Tông di thảo</i> (<i>Thánh Tông di thảo</i>) (15 stories)	34	32	02
5	<i>Truyện kỳ mạn lục</i> (<i>Truyện kỳ mạn lục</i>) (20 stories)	32	16	16
6	<i>Truyện kỳ tân phá</i> (<i>Truyện kỳ tân phá</i>) (04 stories)	09	09	0
7	<i>Lan Trì kiến văn lục</i> (<i>Lan Trì kiến văn lục</i>) (38 stories)	27	22	05

8	<i>Tang thương ngẫu lục (Tang thương ngẫu lục)</i> (41 stories)	40	21	19
9	<i>Thỉnh van di lục (Thỉnh văn dị lục)</i> (15 stories)	12	10	02
Total	230	266	179	87
Korea				
10	<i>Tam Quốc di sự (Tam Quốc di sự)</i> (86 stories)	176	132	44
11	<i>Dung Trại tung thoi (Dung Trại tung thoi)</i> (12 stories)	05	03	02
12	<i>Thu di truyện (Thù dị truyện)</i> (27 stories)	39	25	14
13	<i>Kim Ngao tân thoi (Kim Ngao tân thoi)</i> (05 stories)	42	32	10
14	<i>Xí Trại ký dị (Xí Trại ký dị)</i> (04 stories)	42	38	04
15	<i>Tam thuyết kỳ (Tam thuyết kỳ)</i> (09 stories)	32	23	09
Total	143	336	253	83
Grand total: 373		602	432	170

Looking at the above statistical table, we observe the frequent appearance of fantasy characters or characters that have been fantastically transformed in medieval fantasy literature from Vietnam and Korea. As a keen perception and a highly specific mindset of the genre, most fantasy writers have consciously and deliberately constructed these character types in the artistic worlds of their works. The group of cosmic supernatural origin characters constitutes a higher proportion compared to those of mortal origin. Interestingly, even for the supernatural-origin characters, fantasy writers still find ways to establish connections between them and the mortal world. In other words, when constructing supernatural fantasy characters within unique artistic spaces and times, authors always consciously seek out the relationships or involvement of these characters in the lives of humans in the mortal world. In this sense, no matter how mysterious or miraculous the world of fantasy characters may be, it can be affirmed that, in the end, medieval fantasy writers still aim to focus on human life, with all its dreams, ambitions, and aspirations for better things. This has both similarities and differences, to some extent, between Vietnam and Korea.

Among the fantasy characters that appear in medieval Vietnamese fantasy literature, there is a group of characters that are constructed to establish varying degrees of connection with the mundane world and mortal life, while a small minority have very little, if any, connection with the mortal realm.

Types of fantasy characters with varying degrees of connection to the mortal world

The connection between this type of fantasy character and the mortal world can be either minimal or substantial. Characters with a lesser connection to the mortal realm, according to our research, tend to be secondary characters. These characters appear in the narrative primarily to unveil or predict events that will occur in the lives of mortal beings. Author Đỗ Thị Mỹ Phương refers to this group as “wanderers of the mortal world” (Đỗ Thị Mỹ Phương, 2016, p.104), though we think they would be more accurately termed “*prophets of the mortal world*” (진세계를 예언하는 사람). This is because their role in the narrative is not for leisure or sightseeing, but rather to fulfill the function of foretelling a fortunate or ominous event that will affect the story's protagonist (they appear to

fulfill a specific mission). In many cases, these prophets also guide mortals on how to avoid misfortune, dissolve bad omens, and seize favorable opportunities in their fate. From a writer's perspective, we believe the appearance of these characters stems from humanity's innate desire to know the unknowable: what occurred in their past life, what their present holds, and what the future will bring. We are both anxious and curious about such matters, and it seems that only supernatural beings can provide us with this information. The presence of these prophets adds mystical, dreamlike, and supernatural elements to the narrative, making the story more engaging for readers.

In Vietnamese medieval fantasy literature, prophets of the mortal world frequently appear in stories about monks and renowned historical figures. Through dreams and visions, these prophets forewarn, guide, and lead mortals. For example, in the story of the monk Cẩm Thành: "That night, the monk dreamt of a deity who told him: 'If you follow the aspirations of the Nguyễn family, within a few years you will encounter great fortune'" (Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúy Nga trans., 1993, p.32). The Nguyễn family's aspiration mentioned here refers to Nguyễn Kính, a wealthy man who provided funds to build a temple and invited the monk Cẩm Thành to preside, though the monk initially declined. After receiving the divine message in a dream, however, the monk agreed. Similarly, prophetic figures also appear in stories about Đại Sư Khuông Việt, Monk Viên Chiếu, Monk Chân Không, and others. Particularly in collections such as *Việt điện u linh tập*, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái truyện*, *Lan Trì kiến văn lục*, and *Tang thương ngẫu lục*, these prophets of the mortal world appear with notable frequency. For example, in *Việt điện u linh tập*: "... while sleeping, a dream appeared of an old man with white hair, wearing formal, elegant robes, holding a feather fan and bamboo staff, introducing himself and stating his name..." (*Bổ Cáo Đại Vương*) (Đình Gia Khánh, Trịnh Đình Rư trans., 1997, p.46). In *Lĩnh Nam chích quái truyện*: "The king - referring to Lý Thái Tổ (noted by KimKi Hyun) - felt self-assured. After Emperor Lê Ngọa died, the king sought counsel at a temple, awaiting a sign. That night, he dreamt of a strange figure who told him: 'If you have ambition, you will succeed. All directions will follow, peace will reign in all nations, and within three years, people will find peace and prosperity. The dynasty will endure in peace for seven generations.' The king awoke, unsure of the meaning, and a dream interpreter suggested it was a good omen..." (*The God of Đẳng Châu*) (Trần Nghĩa, Vũ Thanh Hằng trans., 1997, p.143). Similarly, in *Lan Trì kiến văn lục*, prophetic characters appear in stories such as "Thunder on the Peak," "The Gate God of Cờn," "The Minister from the Đỗ Family," and "Nguyễn Trật." In *Tang thương ngẫu lục*, such figures emerge in stories like "Mr. Lê Anh Tuấn," "Mr. Nguyễn Công Hoàn," "Mr. Nguyễn Trọng Thường," and "Mr. Lê Trãi," with hints of divine intervention. For example, in "Mr. Nguyễn Công Hoàn": "In his old age, he visited the temple of Monk Huyền Quang and dreamt of the monk, who told him: 'You've uncovered the matter of Bích Cơ. The Emperor has extended your life by one cycle. Afterwards, he lived long before passing away'" (Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện trans., 1943, p.74; Romero-Carazas et al., 2024). In *Thính văn dị lục*, similar prophetic motifs appear in stories like "The Governor of Diển Châu" and "Nguyễn Mượn's Son". In *The Governor of Diển Châu*, a deity appears in a dream to tell the governor about his son's birth and instructs him on how to raise the child: "Tomorrow, summon a man with a sledgehammer. When your son is born, shackle his feet with these iron bands" (Trần Nghĩa, ed., 1997, p.956). When the governor ignores this advice, removes the iron bands, and throws them away, his son suddenly dies.

If prophetic characters tend to appear only once in a story, then the next category of fantasy characters appears more frequently and has a significant impact on the protagonist's fate. We call this group "*interveners in the mortal world*" (진세계를 간섭하는 사람). This concept has been previously addressed by scholars, notably Đỗ Thị Mỹ Phương in her dissertation, where she offers a thorough analysis, although focused on Vietnamese medieval fantasy literature (Đỗ Thị Mỹ Phương, 2016). In essence, these interveners have two main roles: either to bring peace, helping to eradicate evil forces that threaten mortal happiness, or to destroy, trampling on human life. Examples of benevolent interveners include figures such as the Jade Emperor, King Yama, the Dragon King of the South Sea, and Lady Linh Phi in Nguyễn Dữ's *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*; the fish god, the god of Chiêu Trưng

temple, the righteous tiger, and the immortals of the islands in Vũ Trinh's *Lan Trì kiến văn lục*; Prince Quảng Lợi in *Truyện kỳ tân phả*; and the tiger god and water deity in *Tang thương ngẫu lục*.

Over time, authors took a more realistic, less optimistic view of life. In Vietnamese medieval fantasy literature, particularly in later works like *Thánh Tông di thảo* and *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, divine intervention or assistance from supernatural beings becomes less frequent, and in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, such interventions are often mere "fairytale compensations." This shift stems from various factors, including the writers' outlook and the socio-political atmosphere of the time. As Confucianism reached its zenith in the 15th century, influencing societal structures and the central government, elements considered superstitious were minimized. Emperor Lê Thánh Tông, with his extraordinary achievements, believed that all problems could be solved through human willpower and inner strength. Issues of personal fate, love, and individual happiness were not prominent in *Thánh Tông di thảo*, which explains the scarcity of supernatural characters offering assistance. In this world, human will and capability determine success, happiness, and sorrow. In a few cases, even sacred figures are portrayed as absurd or corrupt, as seen in the satirical story "The Two Arguing Buddhas."

In medieval Korean fantasy literature, the character type of the "prophet of the mortal world," as observed in Vietnamese medieval fantasy tales, does not appear frequently. Collections such as *Dung Trai tùng thoại*, *Thù dị truyện*, *Kim Ngao tân thoại*, *Xí Trai ký dị*, and *Tam thuyết ký* rarely include this character type. However, in *Tam quốc di sự*, there are a few stories, such as "Kim Dữu Tín," "King Huệ Cung," "Lady Chân Thánh and Cư Đà Tri," "Duyên Hội's Avoidance of Scandal and Văn Thù Temple," and "The Two Saints of Bao Mountain," where this character type is present. On the other hand, divine beings - gods, goddesses, mountain spirits, tree spirits, forest spirits, river deities, and ocean gods - are abundant in *Tam quốc di sự*. These fantasy characters have the power to directly intervene and assist mortals, aiding Korean dynasties in the construction and defense of their government, helping officials and generals in their civil service examinations or military campaigns, and bringing peace and happiness to the local populace. What is interesting about many of these Korean medieval fantasy stories is that the deity figure is not always supreme. Some of the deity's actions and commands can be bureaucratic, unfair, and not necessarily beneficial to human life. For example, in the story of Bao Nhưỡng and the pear tree:

"The dragon often lived in a small pond near the temple and secretly helped Bao Nhưỡng spread Buddhism. One year, drought struck, causing the plants in the garden to wither. Bao Nhưỡng ordered the dragon to make rain. Thus, it rained just enough over one area. The Heavenly Emperor decided to kill the dragon for making rain without reporting it. The dragon told the monk about its dangerous situation. The monk hid the dragon under the veranda. Shortly thereafter, the Heavenly emissary arrived at the garden, demanding the monk surrender the dragon. The monk pointed to the pear tree in front of the garden. The emissary struck the pear tree with lightning and returned to heaven. The pear tree withered and broke, but when the dragon touched it, it came back to life" (Kim Won-Jung, 2012, pp.345; Hussein et al., 2024).

Of course, in other cases, the Heavenly Emperor is willing to appease mortals by warning them of the consequences of defying Heaven's will. For instance, in the story "King Hiếu Thành": "One day, the king summoned the great monk Biếu Huấn and ordered him: 'I am unfortunate to be without an heir. Ask the Heavenly Lord to grant me a son.' Monk Biếu Huấn ascended to Heaven, reported to the Heavenly Emperor, and returned with the message: 'The Heavenly Emperor says you may pray for a daughter, but not a son.' The king replied: 'Change the daughter to a son for me.' Monk Biếu Huấn returned to Heaven to plead again. The Heavenly Emperor said: 'It is possible, but if a son is born, the country will fall into ruin.' As Monk Biếu Huấn prepared to descend, the Heavenly Emperor called him back and warned: 'Do not upset the balance of Heaven and Earth. You have been ascending and descending Heaven as if it were a neighboring village, revealing all the secrets of Heaven. From now on, I forbid you from coming here again.' Monk Biếu Huấn returned and delivered the Emperor's

words to the king. The king responded: ‘Even if the country falls into chaos, I still want a son to continue my royal lineage.’ When the queen gave birth to a prince after a full month, the Heavenly Emperor’s warning came true. When the prince turned eight, King Hiếu Thành passed away, the political situation was tumultuous, and eventually King Tuyên Đức and Kim Lương Tương killed the young king. The kingdom fell into the hands of others” (Kim Won-Jung, 2012, pp.130-131).

Overall, Korean folklore, much like Vietnamese, is imbued with divine and supernatural elements. In a period when human understanding was still limited, and many phenomena could not be explained through empirical observation, people sought to rationalize events through divine intervention. Divine beings thus appear, aiding virtuous and talented individuals while destroying the wicked. It is also possible that, in some stories, divine characters are introduced to justify the ascension of certain individuals to power as part of a “preordained” plan.

In *Thù dị truyện*, divine beings with the ability to intervene in the mortal world also appear, albeit infrequently, as seen in the character of the deity in the story of Viên Quang. In *Kim Ngao tân thoại*, *Xí Trai ký dị*, and *Tam thuyết ký*, such fantasy characters are almost absent, as authors in these collections tend to focus on a different type of fantastical character, which we will discuss later.

At this point, we can observe the distinctive appearance of two types of fantasy characters: the “prophet of the mortal world” and the “intervener of the mortal world,” both of which are more prominently featured in Vietnamese literature compared to Korean works. In addition to these two character types, our research identified a third unique type of fantasy character: those who enter the mortal realm to “seek solutions for their own existence” (Đỗ Thị Mỹ Phương, 2016, p.108). We refer to these characters as “*seekers of the mortal world*” (진세계를 취하는 사람). These beings seek opportunities to express themselves, justify their actions, communicate, or receive some form of assistance from mortals, often to “complete” unfinished desires from their previous life (usually ghosts or spirits). This perspective is quite novel for writers of fantasy tales. In conventional logic, divine beings, supernatural entities, and godlike characters are thought to possess more power and authority than ordinary mortals. Yet, in these stories, the reverse is true: supernatural characters seek the mortal realm to explain, plead for, or fulfill some hidden longing. Ultimately, mortal life, despite its suffering, emerges as the most valuable form of existence.

In *Thánh Tông di thảo*, we can mention stories like “The Dream Inscription”, “The Tale of Two Goddess Maidens”, and “A Single Line to Win a Goddess”. These are three representative stories from this collection, and indeed from Vietnamese medieval fantasy literature, which feature seekers of the mortal realm. In “The Dream Inscription”, the author describes how the king dreams of an immortal playing the flute to reveal the injustice of the demon spirit of the golden bell and the lute. Once the bell and lute are unearthed, the spirit’s grievance is resolved. Similarly, Nguyễn Dữ’s tales, such as “The Demon General” and “The Story of the Temple of Lord Xiang”, also feature this character type. In “A Single Line to Win a Goddess,” the character Tôn Thần is falsely accused: “...two mountain gods, Tượng Sơn and Trĩ Sơn, falsely accused my father of crimes. The Heavenly Emperor passed the case to the Hoa Lư cave court. The cave lord was about to heed the lies of these two gods” (Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện trans., 1997, pp.622). With no one to clear Tôn Thần’s name, his wife and children sought help from a poor student from Trần Khê village: “My father was reinstated thanks to the grace you bestowed” (Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện trans., 1997, p.623)... Similar stories can be found in *The Sacred Temple of the Sea* by Đoàn Thị Điểm (about a spirit seeking human help to resolve unfinished grievances), and in several of Vũ Trinh’s stories, such as “The Minister of the Đỗ Family” and “The Spirit of the Old Tree.”

In general, the type of fantastical character referred to as “the seeker of the mortal world” appears quite frequently in medieval Vietnamese fantasy literature, often in deeply moving stories. These include wandering spirits, orphaned souls, or sacred entities who have descended into the

underworld but remain tied to earthly desires. These characters continue to seek or pursue in the present reality a wish, a dream - sometimes small, sometimes significant - either for themselves or for someone still living. The presence of these characters evokes a profound sense of humanity and compassion in the reader, highlighting the values that are sometimes disregarded or overlooked by the living.

This character type, the seeker of the mortal world, also appears frequently in medieval Korean fantasy literature. For example, in *Dung Trai Tùng Thoại*, Thành Hiện recounts the humorous story “The Ghost of Lady Trịnh.” As a ghost, it is clear that Lady Trịnh should have existed in another world, but she instead “...entered and relied on a servant girl. For many years, this ghost refused to leave.” More importantly, when she remained in the mortal world, living among the living, the ghost brought only good fortune: “She knew of both fortune and misfortune, luck and disaster in Lady Trịnh’s household beforehand. If someone attempted to cover up an evil deed and stammered while answering, no one could hide the truth from her, causing all to be afraid. Yet, no disaster ever occurred in Lady Trịnh’s household. The ghost’s voice was clear, like the song of a nightingale...” (Đào Thị Mỹ Khanh, 2014, pp.101). When the ghost was eventually banished by a high-ranking official, she tearfully explained her situation: “Since coming into this house, I have tried to bring much good fortune to this family and have never brought them any harm. I had hoped to stay here and watch over them, but I dare not disobey your command.” After that, the ghost wept bitterly and left...” (Đào Thị Mỹ Khanh, 2014, pp.102).

In *Kim Ngao Tân Thoại*, the story “Vạn Phúc Tự Hu Bồ Kỳ” (The Ghostly Game at Vạn Phúc Temple) depicts a fantastical romance between the scholar Lương and the ghost of a young woman named Hà from a certain village. During her life, she was known for her virtue, maintaining her chastity and purity despite the chaos of the world. However, even in death, Hà’s spirit was filled with sorrow because her parents believed she had lost her honor. The story recounts her meeting with Lương. Together, they experienced joy, composing poetry in a space and time far removed from the mortal world. Although Lương sometimes doubted that the woman was human, he reassured himself and continued to enjoy their time together. At the end of the story, when he realized he had been keeping company with a ghost, Lương felt no regret. On the contrary, he was moved with compassion and sympathy. “The next day, Lương brought food and wine, along with offerings, to Khai Ninh Village to revisit the site. Indeed, it was a burial ground. Lương prepared a ceremony, wept bitterly as he made offerings, burned joss paper, and buried the remains...” (Toàn Huệ Khanh & Lý Xuân Chung, 2004, pp.52). Through his actions, Lương helped Hà’s ghost to find peace: “Thanks to your kindness, I have been reincarnated as a man in another country. Although we are separated by life and death, I am deeply grateful for your compassion. You should continue to accumulate virtue and perfect yourself, so that together we can escape the cycle of reincarnation” (Toàn Huệ Khanh & Lý Xuân Chung, 2004, pp.53).

Other examples of this character type can be found in *Thù Dị Truyện*, in stories such as “Thôi Trí Viễn,” “The Red Sack Fairy,” and “The Tomb of the Two Maidens.” In these stories, the Korean author creates characters who, during their time on earth, suffered injustice and whose souls could not find peace in death. When these souls encountered living people, they finally had the chance to share their hidden grievances. For instance, in the story “Thôi Chí Viễn,” two sisters, Bát Nương Tử and Cửu Nương Tử, reveal their tragic tale when asked about their past: “My younger sister and I are the daughters of the Trương family in Cẩm Thành village, Phiếu Thủy County. Our father was not an official, but he became a local headman and amassed immense wealth. He had mountains of copper and caves of gold, which could never be depleted. When I turned eighteen and my sister sixteen, our parents arranged marriages. I was betrothed to Lâm Thương, and my sister to Minh Cổ. We often confided in each other, but despite baring our hearts to the heavens, we could not ease the sorrow in our hearts, which led to our early deaths...” (Kim Ki Hyun, 2019). When asked, “You have been in the grave for a long time, and the road to the inn is not far. If you meet a hero, could you converse with

him?" the younger sister replied: "The people who pass through here are all coarse and vulgar. Today, we are fortunate to meet a refined scholar, and we can share our deepest thoughts with him..." (Kim Ki Hyun, 2019).

The portrayal of the "seeker of the mortal world" in medieval Vietnamese and Korean fantasy stories, as analyzed above, reflects the authors' belief that a glittering, supreme, fantastical world no longer exists. At the same time, these characters illustrate the power and agency of mortal beings. Moreover, the philosophical message that life in the mortal world, despite its suffering, is still worth living, forms a major thematic element in the works of fantasy writers in both Vietnam and Korea. If we cultivate virtue and mend our hearts and minds, we not only lay the foundation for success in our careers and lives but may also move the gods and spirits to seek us out to "rely upon" and to "entrust" their desires to us.

The three types of fantastical characters - the 1) Prophet of the Mortal World, 2) Intervener of the Mortal World, and 3) Seeker of the Mortal World - may overlap and blur in some areas, making absolute categorization difficult. In fact, many fantastical characters could be classified as ordinary, everyday figures. Nevertheless, through this classification effort, we have sought to describe their appearance and role within the stories, along with the philosophical messages conveyed by the authors of both Vietnam and Korea.

The Type of Fantastical Characters with Little to No Connection to the Mortal World

In terms of frequency, this type of character appears far less often compared to those that have varying degrees of connection to the mortal world, as analyzed previously. Regarding their role in the narrative structure and plot, these characters typically serve as secondary figures (and when they are central figures, they tend to be co-protagonists; meaning that the story has two or more protagonists, with at least one being a mortal). This character type is often portrayed as the master of a supernatural realm - whether it be the heavenly realm, the underworld, or the aquatic world. We tentatively refer to this group of characters as the "*masters of the otherworld*" (초자연적인 세계의 주인). They possess immense powers, wield numerous magical abilities, have a thorough understanding of astrology and geography, and comprehend the philosophical principles of human life in general. These beings have extraordinary capabilities and can move or transport their realm to other dimensions. They are also fully capable of ascending to the mortal world, taking on a physical form, or transforming themselves to communicate and interact with humans. However, what is striking is that they hardly ever feel the need to do so and are entirely content with their own world, their own space, and their own time. Their space is an enchanting and beautiful world full of brilliant colors. Even in the case of the underworld, where the spirits of the dead and the damned are punished, there is an established hierarchy, with strict rules that each of its members dutifully follows. This otherworldly realm invites and welcomes visits from mortals. Many mortals, once they have the "opportunity" to visit this supernatural realm, quickly make arrangements in the mortal world to return, seeking a permanent "homecoming" to that otherworld.

From a philosophical standpoint, when constructing the "masters of the otherworld" character type, medieval Vietnamese and Korean fantastical literature aims to provide a comparative perspective on the mortal realm. This serves as a way to critique the injustices and contradictions of the real world, while simultaneously expressing the hope that good things can be achieved in the mortal world itself, rather than simply being a form of consolation in some other realm. Yet, within this very aspiration, there is a certain hesitation in the fantasy authors' minds, as the journey to true happiness for humanity cannot be fully realized in that other realm. The authors are fully aware that, ultimately, all of this is just a dream - an allegory for the self-discipline and refinement of individuals in the mortal world.

In medieval Vietnamese fantasy literature, the “masters of the otherworld” type of character appears sporadically in collections such as *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* and *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái Truyện*, but it was not until *Thánh Tông Di Thảo*, *Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục*, *Truyện Kỳ Tân Phả*, and *Thính Văn Dị Lục* that such stories achieved greater success. According to our research, two of the most representative stories in *Thánh Tông Di Thảo* are “Duyên lạ hoa quốc” (The Strange Love of the Floral Kingdom) and “Truyện lạ nhà thuyền chài” (The Strange Tale of the Fisherman’s House). In *Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục*, notable stories include “Truyện Từ Thức lấy vợ tiên” (The Story of Từ Thức Marrying a Fairy), “Chuyện đối tụng ở Long cung” (The Lawsuit in the Dragon Palace), and “Chuyện Phạm Tử Hư lên chơi Thiên tào” (The Story of Phạm Tử Hư Visiting Heaven). In *Truyện Kỳ Tân Phả*, standout tales include “Truyện nữ thần ở Vân Cát” (The Story of the Goddess of Vân Cát) and “Cuộc gặp gỡ kỳ lạ ở Bích Câu” (The Strange Encounter at Bích Câu). Meanwhile, in *Thính Văn Dị Lục*, the most representative tale is “Truyện Loa Đại vương” (The Story of Loa King).

In medieval Korean fantasy literature, the characters of supernatural realm masters appear sporadically in works such as *Samguk Yusa* and *Dung Trai Tùng Thoại*, but they are quite faint. Even in *Thù Dị Truyện*, they remain unclear. It wasn't until *Kim Ngao Tân Thoại* and *Xí Trai Ký Dị* that this character type became more apparent and meticulously constructed.

Within the flow of medieval Korean fantasy literature, *Kim Ngao Tân Thoại* by Kim Si-Seop stands as a pinnacle. In examining this collection, we found that in two out of five stories, the author constructs celestial beings as central characters in the narrative. The stories possess an ethereal, romantic quality throughout, enveloped in the sparkling, vibrant atmosphere of the dragon palace and another fantastical world - a realm shaped by human dreams and desires, carefully crafted by the author. For instance, if Nguyễn Dữ in *The Lawsuit in the Dragon Palace* only briefly touches on the fairness and uprightness of the Dragon King, then in *The Banquet at the Dragon Palace*, the figure of the Dragon King is portrayed more vividly - from actions and personality to speech and moral qualities. In the story, Han Sang - a scholar known for his literary skill and upright character - gains renown, which reaches the ears of the Dragon King. The Dragon King invites Han Sang to the underwater world to attend a banquet. This encounter demonstrates the author’s longing for talented scholars to be treated with respect by those in power. A gentle encouragement can move a scholar to dedicate all his efforts to serve the dynasty and contribute to the nation’s development. Naturally, Kim’s dream was never realized, but he projected this hope onto the figure of the Dragon King. In the story, the Dragon King appears as a wise monarch, courteous and benevolent, from his words, “I have long heard of your reputation, and today I finally have the chance to meet you - do not be afraid,” to his gesture of offering Han Sang a seat. Moreover, while conversing with Han Sang, when the Dragon King hears that distinguished guests have arrived, he immediately goes out to greet them. Once the guests are seated, the Dragon King expresses his desires, which is also the reason he invited Han Sang to the underwater palace. The king’s request is surprisingly humble for a sovereign. His humility comes from genuine sincerity and a pure heart, as well as from his respect and admiration for scholars. Naturally, Han Sang agrees, and not only that, he pours all his mental energy and skills into producing the most beautiful and elegant calligraphy for the Dragon King. The story doesn’t end there. It narrates Han Sang’s attendance at a banquet in the Dragon Palace, which is essentially a competition of talents and abilities among the palace officials, witnessed by the Dragon King, Han Sang, and three special guests - deities of the Jiang River, the Lạc River, and Bích Lan. The interesting part lies in how, due to the encouragement of the superior, the officials strive their utmost to showcase their talents. Clearly, with such benevolent leadership, subordinates are fully dedicated to serving the court. The words of Guo Jie-Shi provide an exemplary case.

In *Nam Viêm Phù Châu Chí* (The Story of Viêm Phù in the Southern Seas), Kim Si-Seop successfully constructs the character of a king from a distant land (in reality, Yama, the King of Hell). During his audience with the king on the dragon throne, through the conversation between Phác Sinh and the king, the author reveals that this divine ruler is a just and righteous sovereign, fair in his governance,

and always striving to reform the wicked so they might return to the path of virtue and abandon their evil ways. The king's aspirations may seem unattainable, but the reader is left deeply appreciative of his noble heart and just desires. Even in death, his dedication remains as intact as it was during his life. The king's confession to Phác Sinh goes as follows: "In life, I was loyal to my ruler, dedicating my entire strength to suppressing bandits, swearing that even in death, I would become a vengeful spirit to eradicate the bandits. After my death, this oath remains, as my loyalty has not waned, and thus, I ended up in this land full of evil to become its ruler. The subordinates I oversee here are all wicked and traitorous individuals from their past lives. They are confined here, under my rule, to abandon their wicked and rebellious ways. However, if one is not truly righteous and impartial, they cannot be a ruler here for even a single day" (Toàn Huệ Khanh and Lý Xuân Chung, trans., 2004, pp. 141). When the king learns that Phác Sinh is "a man of integrity, with unyielding willpower, living a life not swayed by power - truly deserving of the title 'nobleman' (a person who understands all things). Yet, on earth, you have been overlooked, much like a precious jade from Kinh Sơn left abandoned in desolation or the bright moon sinking into a deep abyss. If not for a skilled artisan, who would recognize such a treasure? Isn't that a shame?" (Toàn Huệ Khanh and Lý Xuân Chung, trans., 2004, pp. 141). In governing a country, the king also emphasizes to Phác Sinh: "- A ruler cannot use violence to oppress the people." With such profound insights, the King of Viêm Phù ultimately relinquishes his throne to Phác Sinh, as his time has come.

Similarly, in *Xí Trai Ký Dị* by Thân Quang Hán, two out of four stories feature such a character. These are *An Bằng Mộng Du Lục* (The Dream Journey of An Bằng) and *Thôi Sinh Ngộ Chân Ký* (The Story of Thôi Sinh's Encounter with Immortals). *An Bằng Mộng Du Lục* narrates An Bằng's visit to the Kingdom of Flowers and his return. The fantastical characters are anthropomorphized flowers, but they also symbolize real individuals in the current world. The motif of an ordinary character - An Bằng in this case, reading or reciting poetry before falling asleep and having his soul drift into the fairy world - resembles many similar motifs found in Vietnamese fantasy stories. In An Bằng's perception, the fairy world is described as: "... Finally, he followed the path to a large house. The house was surrounded by a white plastered wall with a green and red tiled roof. A radiant light emanated from the crevices of the mountains, casting a soft glow, making it feel as though this was not a place of the mortal world. Gradually, he approached the main gate, and all the inner doors painted in vibrant colors swung open at once. After a moment, a handmaiden emerged. Her bright lips and graceful figure in her blue sleeves were truly magnificent..." (Kim Ki Hyun, trans., 2019). The deities in the story include Giáng Lạc, Giáng Lưu, Nữ Vương, Lý Phu Nhân, Ban Cơ, Tồ Lai, Thú Dương, Đông Li, Thanh Y, Phù Dung... All of them are portrayed as beautiful, graceful, and gentle, with polite and proper manners. The appearances of these deities are described in great detail by Thân Quang Hán, which distinguishes them from many similar stories in Vietnamese fantasy literature and the broader development of the genre in Korea.

In the story "Thôi Sinh Ngộ Chân Ký" (Thôi Sinh Encounters Immortals), the author narrates the tale of Thôi Sinh, who, seeking a far-off place for sightseeing and to break away from his overly familiar living environment, accidentally falls off a mountain yet remains unharmed. He stumbles into a different world where several celestial beings appear. Through Thôi Sinh's narration, this celestial world emerges as beautiful, vibrant, and extraordinary. Here, the ruling figures of the immortal realm are mentioned, including the Fairy Grotto, the Immortal Isle, the Mountain Spirit, and the King along with his entourage. The joy and pleasure of the immortal beings' lives are so profound that eventually, even Thôi Sinh himself expresses his desire to stay: "I do not wish to return" (Kim Ki Hyun, trans., 2019). This presents an interesting contrast with *The Tale of Từ Thức Marrying a Fairy* in *Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục* by Nguyễn Dữ and significantly differs from *Drunken Visit to Phù Bích Temple* in *Kim Ngao Tân Thoại* by Kim Si-Seop, as both Từ Thức and Hồng Sinh eventually return to the mortal world after encountering a fairy (also within a celestial realm). Từ Thức feels a longing to return, while Hồng Sinh shows more deliberate initiative in returning to the mortal realm. The story concludes with the

detail: “Thôi Sinh entered the mountain, gathering herbs to sustain himself, and afterward, no one knew whether he lived or died...” (Kim Ki Hyun, trans., 2019).

In *Thù Dị Truyện*, a work largely comparable to *Thính Văn Dị Lục* from Vietnam, several characters who govern the supernatural realm continue to appear, though not as prominently. They emerge as somewhat more faded, no longer representing the figures of fulfillment and satisfaction with life in the vibrant, mystical space of the celestial or dragon realm. Instead, they convey feelings of unease, doubt, and anxiety about a life that remains incomplete. These sentiments reflect the contemplations of both Vietnamese and Korean fantasy writers regarding societal life during that time.

CONCLUSION

Through quantitative surveys of the representative collections of fantastical tales from both nations, along with qualitative descriptions, analyses, and justifications, this report has provided statistical data, classifications, and analyses of the fantastical character types in medieval fantastical stories of Vietnam and Korea. The world of characters in Vietnamese and Korean medieval fantastical literature is indeed diverse and rich. In relation to the roles of characters with descriptive narrative techniques, the use of fantastical and real elements, we have elucidated many points of similarity (predominantly) and some interesting differences (fewer) between the types of fantastical characters in the two nations' fantastical literature.

Fantastical characters who have connections to the mortal world can be classified as prophets of the mortal world, interveners in the mortal world, or seekers of the mortal world. The mortal world, or in other words, the human realm, is often the destination and deep concern of these characters. This mortal world, despite containing adversities, suffering, and the misfortunes of human existence, is also where the characters find a certain meaning for themselves. This serves as the philosophical sentiment that each medieval author seeks to convey through the portrayal of characters in their works. Ultimately, characters are refracted images of a nation's people, viewed through the artistic lens and aesthetic conception of each author and culture. Therefore, through character construction, authors impart their reflections, concerns, and aspirational values related to human existence, joy, sorrow, life and death, and the desires for happiness and reunion of people in their time.

Of course, aside from the points presented in this report, the character structure in fantastical literature from both countries carries many philosophical and cultural messages. In other words, through these characters, readers can also perceive expressions and dimensions of traditional culture in Vietnam and Korea. This will be an intriguing subject that we shall return to in future research.

WORKS USED FOR SURVEY AND CITATION IN THE STUDY

Medieval Vietnamese Fantastical Stories:

Thiền uyển tập anh ngữ lục (Anonymous; 禪苑集英語錄), consisting of 21 fantastical stories.

Source: *Thiền uyển tập anh* (translated and introduced by Ngô Đức Thọ and Nguyễn Thúy Nga), Institute for Buddhist Studies and Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 1990, and *Thiền uyển tập anh* (researched and translated by Lê Mạnh Thát), Vạn Hạnh Buddhist Studies Library, Saigon, 1976.

Việt điện u linh tập (粵甸幽靈集) by Lý Tế Xuyên, consisting of 40 fantastical stories.

Source: *Việt điện u linh tập* (translated and annotated by Đinh Gia Khánh and Trịnh Đình Rư, introduced by Trần Nghĩa), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 1, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 51-92, and *Việt điện u linh*, Hồng Bàng Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2012.

Lĩnh Nam chích quái lục (嶺南摭怪) by Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú, consisting of 36 fantastical stories.

Source: *Lĩnh Nam chích quái truyện* (translated and annotated by Trần Nghĩa and Vũ Thanh Hằng, introduced by Trần Nghĩa), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 1, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 143-184, and *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, Trê Publishing House - Hồng Bàng Publishing House, 2013.

Thánh Tông di thảo (attributed to Lê Thánh Tông) (聖宗遺草), consisting of 15 fantastical stories.

Source: *Thánh Tông di thảo* (translated by Nguyễn Bích Ngô), Literature Publishing House, Institute of Literature, Hanoi, 1963, and *Thánh Tông di thảo* (translated and annotated by Nguyễn Bích Ngô, introduced by Phạm Văn Thắm), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 501-626.

Truyện kỳ mạn lục (傳奇漫錄) by Nguyễn Dữ, consisting of 20 fantastical stories.

Source: *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (translated by Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện, introduced by Phạm Văn Thắm), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 185-320, and *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (translated by Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện, introduced by Trần Thị Băng Thanh), included in *Tiểu đấng tân thoại - Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 1999.

Lan Trì kiến văn lục (蘭池見聞錄) by Vũ Trinh, consisting of 38 fantastical stories.

Source: *Lan Trì kiến văn lục* (translated, annotated, and introduced by Hoàng Văn Lâu), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 819-878, and *Truyện kỳ tân phá* (translated by Ngô Lập Chi and Trần Văn Giáp, introduced by Hoàng Hữu Yên), Trê Publishing House - Hồng Bàng Publishing House, 2013.

Truyện kỳ tân phá (傳奇新譜) by Đoàn Thị Điểm, consisting of 4 fantastical stories.

Source: *Truyện kỳ tân phá* (translated by Ngô Lập Chi and Trần Văn Giáp), Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 1962, and *Truyện kỳ tân phá* (translated by Ngô Lập Chi and Trần Văn Giáp, introduced by Phạm Văn Thắm), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 337-450.

Tang thương ngẫu lục (桑滄偶錄) by Phạm Đình Hồ and Nguyễn Án, consisting of 41 stories.

Source: *Tang Thương ngẫu lục* (translated by Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện), Tân Dân Publishing House, Hanoi, 1943; *Tang Thương ngẫu lục* (translated and annotated by Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện, introduced by Trần Nghĩa), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 139-268, and *Tang Thương ngẫu lục* (translated by Trúc Khê Ngô Văn Triện, introduced and annotated by Trương Chính), Hồng Bàng Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2012.

Thính văn dị lục (聽聞異錄) (Anonymous), consisting of 15 fantastical stories.

Source: *Thính Văn dị lục* (translated and introduced by Nguyễn Thị Ngân, edited by Trần Nghĩa), included in *Comprehensive Collection of Vietnamese Classical Chinese Novels*, vol. 2, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997, pp. 951-984.

Medieval Korean Fantastical Stories:

Tam Quốc di sự (삼국유사) by Nhất Nhiên (Korean annotated translation by Kim Won Jung), Vietnamese translation by Trần Thị Bích Phương, Văn hóa Văn nghệ Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2012, consisting of 86 fantastical stories.

Dung Trai tùng thoại 慵齋叢話 [용재총화] (also known as "Miscellaneous Tales from the Land of Kimchi") by Thành Hiện, Vietnamese translation by Đào Thị Mỹ Khanh, Hội Nhà Văn Publishing House, Hanoi, 2014, consisting of 12 fantastical stories.

Thù dị truyện (Anonymous) 新羅殊異傳, temporary Vietnamese translation from the Korean version.

Source: Lee Daehyung 이대형 (Lý Đại Quýnh), *Soo yi jeon* 수이전 (Thù dị truyện), Somyeong Publishing, 1st Floor, Ran Building, 18/1621 Seocho-dong, Seocho District, Seoul. First printed on 10/03/2013, first published on 20/03/2013, consisting of 27 fantastical stories.

Kim Ngao tân thoại 金鰲新話 (금오신화) by Kim Thời Tập, consisting of 5 fantastical stories, Vietnamese translation by Toàn Huệ Khanh and Lý Xuân Chung, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội Publishing House, 2004.

Xí Trai ký dị 企齋記異 by Sin Quang Han (Shin Kwang-han), temporary Vietnamese translation from the Korean version.

Source: Shin Kwang-han 신광한 (Thân Quang Hán), *Ki Jae Ki Yi* 기재기이 (Xí Trai ký dị), Park Heon Soon 박헌순 (Phác Hiến Thuần), Comprehensive Publishing House Peom-woo (주범우출판사), Paju City, Gyeonggi-do Province, 15/10/2008, consisting of 4 fantastical stories.

Tam thuyết ký - Hoa sử (Anonymous) 三設記 - 花史, temporary Vietnamese translation from the Korean version.

Source: *Sam Seol Gi* 삼설기 - *Hwa Sa* 화사 (Anonymous, compiled and translated by Goo In Hwan 구인환). First printed on 20/02/2003, first published on 25/02/2003, Shinwon Culture Publishing (신원문화사), 25/636 Deungchon 1-dong, Gangseo District, Seoul, consisting of 9 fantastical stories

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