

Vietnamese Traditional Narratives as Ecological Parables Promoting an Ecological Ethos

Tradycyjne opowiadania wietnamskie jako przypowieści ekologiczne
promujące etos ekologiczny

Anthony Le Duc

St John's University, Thailand

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5547-7127> • leduc.anthony@asianresearchcenter.org

Received: 28 Apr, 2025; Revised: 16 Jun, 2025; Accepted: 18 Jun, 2025;

Pre-published: 18 Jun, 2025

Abstract: This paper explores the ecological dimensions of Vietnamese traditional narratives (folktales, legends, and myths), arguing that they function as ecological parables that encode moral, spiritual, and practical lessons about humanity's relationship with the natural world. While ecocriticism has examined the ecological themes in various literary traditions, the ecological insights within Vietnamese folklore remain largely unexplored. This study addresses that gap by conducting an ecocritical reading of nine widely known Vietnamese narratives. These stories are interpreted not only as cultural texts but also as pedagogical tools that promote an ecological ethos rooted in relationality, stewardship, balance, and reverence for the natural world. The analysis draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory and insights from ecocritical perspectives to uncover how these narratives reflect and shape human-nature relationships. The paper discusses the potential of these narratives to foster ecological consciousness and offers suggestions for recontextualizing them as tools for promoting environmental ethics and sustainability in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Vietnamese folktales, ecological parables, environmental ethics, traditional narratives

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje temat ekologicznego wymiaru tradycyjnych opowiadań wietnamskich (podań ludowych, legend i mitów), argumentując, że funkcjonują one jako przypowieści ekologiczne przekazujące moralne, duchowe i praktyczne przesłania dotyczące relacji człowieka z przyrodą. Dotychczasowe badania nad motywami ekologicznymi koncentrowały się na różnych tradycjach literackich, jednak wietnamski folklor wciąż pozostaje w dużej mierze niezbadany pod kątem zawartych w nim treści ekologicznych. Artykuł stanowi próbę wypełnienia tej luki poprzez ekokrytyczną lekturę dziewięciu powszechnie znanych opowiadań wietnamskich. Historie te interpretowane są nie tylko jako teksty kulturowe, ale także jako narzędzia edukacyjne, promujące etos ekologiczny oparte na ideach współzależności człowieka i przyrody, troski, równowagi oraz szacunku wobec świata naturalnego. Analiza opiera się na strukturalistycznej teorii Claude'a Lévi-Straussa oraz perspektywie ekokrytycznej, a jej celem jest zbadanie sposobów, w jaki opowiadania te

zarówno odzwierciedlają, jak i kształtują relacje między człowiekiem a naturą. W artykule omówiono też potencjalną rolę tych opowiadań w budowaniu świadomości ekologicznej oraz przedstawiono propozycje ich rekontekstualizacji jako narzędzi wspierających rozwój etyki środowiskowej oraz idei zrównoważonego rozwoju we współczesnym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: ekokrytyka, wietnamskie podania ludowe, przypowieści ekologiczne, etyka środowiskowa, tradycyjne opowiadania

Introduction

Since the emergence of environmentalism over half a century ago, one consistent theme has been clear: genuine environmental protection requires more than technological fixes. It demands a profound reorientation of human values and a transformation in our ways of living. In recent decades, the field of ecocriticism has arisen as a creative interdisciplinary method for examining how narratives reflect, reinforce, or challenge human relationships with the natural world. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” suggesting that stories are not ideologically neutral but shape environmental values and worldviews (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii). Lawrence Buell (1995) contends that literature can greatly influence environmental perception by helping to shape and reflect our relationship with the natural world. As Buell (2005) suggests, literature is not only descriptive but also prescriptive; in other words, it has the potential to shape environmental ethics and moral imagination.

Richard Kerridge (1998, 5) describes ecocriticism as an effort “to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces.” Most importantly, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. Greg Garrard (2004, 5) similarly defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself.” Within this discipline, two principal branches are often identified: cultural ecocriticism and literary ecocriticism. Traditional narratives, as literary texts, fall within the latter.

These theoretical perspectives offer tools for interpreting traditional narratives—not only for their cultural significance but also for their embedded environmental worldviews. An ecocritical approach to traditional narratives can be further informed by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist theory, which offers a framework for analysing their embedded ecological dimensions (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Lévi-Strauss’s work on myth, especially in *Indigenous and oral cultures*, demonstrates how stories encode ecological wisdom through symbolic oppositions and cultural logics (Lévi-Strauss 1966). The French anthropologist posits that

folktales reflect relationships between living beings and their environments, engaging with elements such as landscape and ecosystems. A key tool of this method is the identification and interpretation of binary oppositions—such as earth vs. sky, sea vs. land, and nature vs. culture. By examining how traditional narratives organize these oppositions and portray interactions between human and non-human entities, ecocritics can reveal the narratives' underlying messages about environmental ethics and human-nature relationships.

The insights of these scholars are particularly relevant for traditional oral stories, which often encode ecological wisdom through symbolism, spiritual cosmology, and moral allegory. While ecocriticism initially focused on Western literary traditions, recent perspectives have called attention to the ecological dimensions of non-Western, indigenous, and postcolonial narratives. Scholars like Ursula Heise (2008), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) have contended that oral cultures also possess important contextual, relational, and narrative-based understandings of ecology. In this context, folklore—including oral and performative traditions, customary practices, and material culture—represents a form of traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations, embedding cultural memory, cosmological meaning, and environmental ethics.

This paper argues that Vietnamese traditional narratives (folktales, legends, myths) can function as ecological parables—stories that encode moral, spiritual, and practical lessons about humanity's relationship with the natural world. An ecological parable, as used here, refers to a story—often traditional and symbolic in form—that transmits environmental values, promotes ethical cultivation, and inspires sustainable behaviour.

Vietnam, with its rich oral tradition and deep cultural ties to land and water, offers a fertile ground for ecocritical inquiry. However, while some scholars have examined Southeast Asian folklore for its environmental implications, Vietnamese traditional narratives remain underexplored as sources of ecological insight. This study addresses that gap by conducting a qualitative ecocritical reading of nine widely known Vietnamese narratives. These stories are interpreted not only as cultural texts but as pedagogical tools that can contribute to fostering an ecological ethos rooted in relationality, stewardship, balance, and reverence for the natural world.

Following Claude Lévi-Strauss's insight that myths reflect the symbolic logic of ecological relationships (Lévi-Strauss 1966), and Buell's call to attend to the ethical dimensions of literary imagination (Buell 2005), this paper adopts an ecocritical framework to explore how Vietnamese folktales reveal, challenge, and reinforce human-nature relationships. Accordingly, it aims to: (1) Discuss the pedagogical and ethical potential of Vietnamese traditional narratives

as ecological parables; (2) Analyse selected tales through an ecocritical lens to uncover embedded environmental values; and (3) Offer suggestions for recontextualizing these stories as tools for shaping ecological consciousness today.

1. Traditional Narratives as Pedagogical Tools

Traditional narratives constitute one of the most enduring expressions of cultural memory and ecological wisdom. They belong to the broader category of folklore, which includes oral narration, rituals, crafts, and other forms of vernacular expressive culture (Klein 2001). Jan Brunvand (1978) describes folklore as “the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples.” In this study, the term “traditional narratives” is used inclusively to refer to folktales, myths, and legends that are orally transmitted, symbolically rich, and often cosmologically charged. These stories not only transmit ethical and cultural values but also embed ecological relationships, survival strategies, and environmental worldviews through narrative form.

Scholars have long recognized traditional narratives as important vehicles for cultural and ecological literacy. Zipes (2006) argues that folktales possess significant power to cultivate ethical and civic values in young people and communities. Similarly, Dahal and Bhatta (2021) assert that these narratives serve as pedagogical tools that preserve cultural identity and contribute to moral and societal development. Even beyond moral instruction, Hynynen (2015) found that fairy tales could support language learning and classroom engagement—demonstrating their versatility as teaching tools. While many scholars promote traditional narratives in formal education, Stith Thompson (1946, 461) emphasizes their importance in communities with limited access to formal schooling. In these settings, such stories serve to convey practical and ethical knowledge to all members of the community.

In Vietnam, traditional narratives have long shaped moral and educational formation, transmitting core cultural values and fostering intergenerational identity. As Ngo and Luong (2023) note, these stories serve as “repositories of collective memories,” preserving cultural practices, beliefs, and norms across generations. Nguyen and Nong (2022) describe them as carriers of “cultural codes” useful for both education and cultural transmission. Tran Thi Minh Phuoc, author of *Vietnamese Folktales for Children*, notes that these stories often convey moral lessons about right and wrong, promoting values like loyalty, honesty, kindness, and bravery while also reflecting Vietnamese traditions and culture (Silverman 2024). She recalls how

stories from her elders instilled the five Confucian virtues: benevolence, righteousness, decorum, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

Crucially, traditional narratives do not only transmit moral values—they also cultivate ecological consciousness. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, traditional stories “teach us to live again in a world made of gifts,” embedding environmental ethics within relational and spiritual frameworks. Ecocritics such as Ursula Heise (2008) and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) have emphasized the role of indigenous and postcolonial storytelling in shaping what Heise calls a “sense of planet”—a worldview rooted in place, ecology, and interspecies interdependence. In this light, traditional narratives effectively serve as prescriptive literature to guide ethical reflection and motivate ecological responsibility (Buell 2005).

Regional studies from Southeast and South Asia affirm this insight. For example, Sultoni et al. (2023), in their study of Indonesian Banyumas folklore, found that these narratives convey ecological wisdom, emphasizing respect for ecosystems, resource stewardship, and spiritual reverence for nature. Similarly, Mago and Anand (2022) note that traditional stories from Northeast India, rich in nature-based settings, therianthropy, taboos, and spirit beliefs, promote ecological sensitivity and ethical awareness. Passed down within families, these stories serve as cultural blueprints for ecological ethics.

In Vietnam, these connections between moral formation and environmental awareness are especially salient. The agrarian way of life—centred on rice cultivation, monsoon rhythms, and communal labour—has shaped values of interdependence, resilience, and reverence for nature. Many traditional narratives reflect this ecological embeddedness, linking virtues such as humility, generosity, and justice not only to social harmony but to sustainable living.

In this light, some Vietnamese traditional narratives can be understood through an ecocritical lens as ecological parables—stories that teach how to live in respectful relationship with the land, honour the sacredness of nature, and recognize the consequences of ecological disruption. Their continued transmission—whether through formal education or oral storytelling—represents a vital cultural resource for nurturing ecological ethos rooted in both spiritual cosmology and daily life. This tradition is further enriched by Vietnam’s syncretic religious worldview, which blends Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and indigenous animism (Quan et al. 2018). In this cosmology, nature is not inert but animated with spirit and moral consequence. Traditional narratives are thus not only cultural texts, but performative acts—ritualized and embodied expressions of ecological wisdom.

In the next sections, we examine specific Vietnamese traditional narratives to uncover the ecological insights that render them authentic ecological parables.

2. Vietnamese Cultural and Spiritual Milieu

Vietnamese traditional narratives reflect a wide range of human experiences and values such as love, perseverance, gratitude, justice, and transformation. These stories, however, are not abstract moral tales. They are rooted in the ecological and cultural realities of traditional Vietnamese life, shaped by the land, water, and seasons. It is noteworthy that the Vietnamese often use the term “*đất nước*,” which is literally the combination of the two words “land” and “water” to refer to the country or nation. Vietnam’s diverse geography—ranging from forested mountains to fertile river deltas and a long coastline—profoundly influenced the daily lives of its people and, in turn, the narratives they told. Wet-rice agriculture, which has historically served as both an economic foundation and a cultural cornerstone, demanded deep sensitivity to the cycles of water and weather (Ngo 2024). The rice plant, more than a food source, occupies a revered place in Vietnamese cosmology and storytelling, symbolizing life, sustenance, and cultural continuity (Nguyen and Nong 2022).

In this ecological setting, water held a paradoxical role: a life-giving force essential for cultivation and also a potential source of destruction through floods and storms. Communities developed sophisticated techniques such as dike-building and irrigation systems to manage these waters. Spiritual beliefs often mirrored these realities, incorporating the veneration of natural elements—rivers, rain, wind, and the sun—as deities or spiritually charged forces. The phrase “favourable rain and harmonious wind” (*mưa thuận gió hòa*) encapsulates the traditional aspiration for harmony between human life and the natural world (Nguyen and Nong 2022, 14).

Natural features such as banyan trees, bamboo groves, and sacred mountains recur throughout Vietnamese narratives not only as settings but as morally and spiritually active agents. Banyan trees (*cây đa*) in particular, often found in village centres (Song Tre 2018), are commonly believed to be inhabited by guardian spirits (Vuong et al. 2018). Even today, many continue to believe in the existence of “*thần cây đa, ma cây gạo*” (literally, spirit in the banyan tree, ghost in the bombax ceiba tree). Indeed, in traditional Vietnamese worldview, nature is understood as alive, spiritually inhabited, and responsive to human behaviour.

Culturally, village life emphasized kinship ties, communal labour, and deference to elders—values embedded in many traditional narratives (Nguyen and Nguyen 2024). The daily demands of rural existence fostered virtues such as resilience, loyalty, gratitude, and justice—values frequently reflected in traditional storytelling and often shaped by Confucian ethical

thought, which permeated Vietnamese society due to a thousand years of Chinese political and cultural hegemony. As a result, Vietnamese cosmology is a synthesis of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and indigenous animism. In this worldview, the boundaries between physical and spiritual realms are porous, and the health of the natural world is intimately tied to ritual, moral action, and spiritual order. As Vuong et al. (2018) note, “Vietnamese popular religion was characterized by the worshipping of ancestors, local deities and goddess, local festivals honouring local gods (especially village gods), various forms of exorcism of harmful forces, spirit-possession, the practices of divinations; the offering to deities, goddess, even the Buddha for luck (in the forms of good weather, good harvest, children, health, etc.).” Nature was viewed as animated by spirits, and harmony between human, natural, and cosmic forces was maintained through rituals, offerings, and moral conduct.

Within this cultural-ecological framework, traditional narratives often feature elements such as magic, transformation, fate, and supernatural intervention—not as fantasy, but as culturally meaningful ways to express moral truths and personal “desires of the people to have enough to eat, to sleep sound, to have a benevolent ruler, and to be blessed by the deities and supernatural beings” (Vuong et al. 2018). The inclusion of supernatural elements reflects a worldview in which nature and spirit are inseparable, and where ethical living includes respect for both visible and invisible dimensions of reality. Indeed, Vietnamese people strongly believe that life events can be profoundly influenced by supernatural forces beyond their control (Nguyen and Nguyen 2024). This mentality is clearly reflected in the popular saying, “The planning lies with human, the success lies with heaven” (*mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên*).

Against this rich cultural and environmental backdrop, this study selects nine traditional Vietnamese narratives for close ecocritical analysis. These stories were chosen based on their thematic richness, cultural longevity, and prominence in Vietnamese oral tradition. The selection includes a diverse range of narrative types—origin myths, moral tales, royal legends, and folk stories—reflecting the breadth of Vietnam’s folkloric repertoire.

Each story was analysed through an ecocritical lens to identify key environmental motifs and ethical insights. From this process, various ecocritical themes were identified and then synthesized into four overarching analytical categories that structure the paper’s discussion:

- (1) The awesome power and agency of nature;
- (2) Interconnectedness and reciprocity between human and nature;
- (3) Ecological stewardship and the consequence of transgression; and
- (4) Nature as transformative force.

Table 1 presents a brief summary of each narrative alongside the ecological themes identified through an ecocritical reading. These themes include sacred ecology, relational responsibility, interconnectedness, stewardship, and the consequences of environmental transgression.

Table 1. List of narratives with brief summary, and ecocritical themes¹

Traditional Narrative	Description	Ecological Themes
1. <i>Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh</i> (Mountain God and Water God)	The Mountain and Water Gods compete for a princess. Sơn Tinh wins, and Thủy Tinh floods the land annually in revenge.	Nature's dual power; balance between land and water; adaptation to seasonal floods; myth as ecological memory.
2. <i>Mai An Tiêm</i> (Mai An Tiem)	Exiled to an island, Mai An Tiêm cultivates watermelons, survives, and earns redemption.	Sustainable living; resilience; nature as redemptive force; seeds as regeneration symbols.
3. <i>Trầu Cau</i> (The Betel and Areca)	A tragic love triangle ends in the transformation of siblings into betel vine, areca tree, and limestone.	Human-nature interconnectedness; ritual ecology; landscape as moral archive; life-death-regeneration cycle.
4. <i>Cây Tre Trăm Đốt</i> (The Bamboo with a Hundred Knots)	A poor servant, betrayed by his master, uses magical bamboo to demand justice.	Nature as moral ally; bamboo as cultural symbol; ecological justice; empowerment through nature.
5. <i>Sự Tích Hạt Gạo</i> (The Legend of the Rice Grain)	A selfish son learns humility through a sacred rice grain and his mother's sacrifice.	Sacred food; filial ecology; moral regeneration via agriculture; food as spiritual legacy.
6. <i>Cây Khế</i> (The Starfruit Tree)	A humble brother shares starfruit with a magic bird and is rewarded; his greedy sibling is punished.	Reciprocity with nature; greed and ecological limits; sacred moderation; nature as ethical arbiter.
7. <i>Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy</i> (The Legend of the Rice Cakes)	A prince creates rice cakes symbolizing Earth and Sky, earning succession.	Cosmic ecology; food as sacred offering; cultural sustainability; agriculture as ritual.
8. <i>Chú Cuội</i> (Uncle Cuội)	Cuội loses a magical banyan tree to the moon due to negligence, becoming a lunar figure.	Sacred nature; environmental responsibility; cosmic ecology; consequences of neglect.
9. <i>Thánh Gióng</i> (Saint Gióng)	A mute child becomes a giant warrior defending Vietnam, ascending to heaven post-victory.	Heroic ecology; divine protection of land; nature as ally in justice.

3. Ecological Ethics Embedded in Traditional Narratives

The nine traditional narratives presented here reflect the syncretic nature of the Vietnamese cosmological worldview. This spiritual framework recognizes the presence of unseen forces, ancestral spirits, and karmic consequences, all woven into daily life and reflected in story.

¹ All the stories presented in this paper can be found in various websites including <https://eva.vn/>. In addition, many of the stories are included in an anthology titled *Kho Tàng Cổ Tích Việt Nam* (The Treasury of Vietnamese Folktales) by Nguyễn Đồng Chi, first published in 1957. The book can be read online at <https://www.sachhayonline.com/tua-sach/kho-tang-truyen-co-tich-viet-nam>. Due to the limit of this paper, the plot of each narrative cannot be recounted fully. Referring to these sources will be helpful for readers not familiar with specific Vietnamese stories discussed in this paper.

Within these tales, nature is by no means a passive backdrop or a stage for life events but a morally charged and spiritually animated presence. Nature is capable of nurturing, guiding, protecting, or punishing, depending on the ethical quality of human behaviour.

Viewed through an ecocritical lens, these stories function as ecological parables—vehicles of traditional ecological knowledge that encode moral lessons, environmental values, and cultural practices shaped by Vietnam’s agrarian and spiritual heritage. They portray a deeply relational world in which land, water, animals, and plants are not mere resources, but co-participants in a shared moral and cosmological order. Nature is shown to be generous but exacting, sacred but vulnerable, and always responsive to the intentions and actions of human beings.

Across these narratives, themes of interconnectedness, balance, and cosmic reciprocity emerge consistently. They affirm that harmony with nature requires humility, gratitude, and restraint, while warning of the consequences of greed, neglect, or hubris. Together, these tales offer a powerful ecological ethos rooted in cultural memory—an invitation to live not above or apart from nature, but within its sacred web of relationship and responsibility.

3.1. The Awesome Power and Agency of Nature

In Vietnamese traditional narratives, nature is imbued with immense power, capable of shaping human destiny, demanding respect, and responding to human actions. The untameable force of nature is vividly illustrated in the epic tale of *Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh* (Mountain God and Water God), which personifies the eternal conflict between land and water. Serving as an allegory for Vietnam’s seasonal floods, it depicts the natural phenomenon as a battle between cosmic forces. Thủy Tinh’s vengeful floods clash annually with Sơn Tinh’s steady mountains, creating a perpetual tension. As a country that experiences its share of typhoons, tropical storms, floods, and landslides, the phenomenon portrayed in the story is all too familiar. Yet within this struggle, human resilience and adaptation are also present, suggesting that coexistence with nature requires humility and endurance. As an ecological parable, the story advocates for the acceptance of powerful natural cycles that humans cannot fully control but must learn to live with. As a Vietnamese saying goes, “*Nắng mưa là chuyện của trời*” (Sunshine and rain is the affair of the heaven).

In the legend of *Thánh Gióng* (Saint Gióng), nature exercises power and agency in dynamic cooperation with humans. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop, nature becomes an active force intricately woven into the fabric of the hero’s journey and fate of the nation. Gióng, the miraculous child-hero, is nourished by agricultural produce that supports his

supernatural transformation, underscoring the life-giving relationship between humans and the land. When his iron sword—crafted by human hands—breaks in battle, he turns to bamboo, a native and culturally significant plant, to continue fighting. In this moment, nature emerges as an indispensable ally in repelling foreign invaders.

While traditional Vietnamese beliefs always saw the role of supernatural powers in childbirth (Nguyen and Nguyen 2024), Gióng's birth, following his mother's encounter with a giant footprint in the earth, highlights the supernatural quality hidden within nature. Here, the Earth participates in the act of creation, the birth of a child destined to be a national hero. His eventual ascent to heaven from Sóc Sơn Mountain transforms the landscape into a sacred realm, infusing ecological spaces with both spiritual and national significance. Nature, therefore, is not merely a setting in the tale, but a co-agent in shaping identity, morality, and the collective memory of the people. Importantly, common to Vietnamese cosmology, the legend reveals a dynamic interplay among human, natural, and supernatural powers. While Manggala (2023) identifies these three elements as separate entities in the story, in reality, it is often impossible to draw clear distinctions between what is “human-made” and “natural,” or between “natural” and “supernatural.” These elements are intertwined and mutually influential, forming a holistic and fluid system of meaning. What is perceived as supernatural may, in fact, be nature's latent power, activated in appropriate times.

Nature also demonstrates power and agency by acting as an arbiter of justice. In *Cây Tre Trăm Đốt* (The Bamboo with a Hundred Knots), the magical bamboo becomes the medium through which moral balance is restored. A servant, faithful and wronged, is vindicated by invoking the bamboo's supernatural power, while the greedy landowner is humiliated. Justice emerges not from human institutions but from nature itself, which intervenes to expose deception and reward virtue. This aligns with the Vietnamese proverb “*Ông Trời có mắt*” (“The heaven has eyes”), which reflects a belief in justice and the moral responsiveness of the cosmic order.

The tale depicts nature not merely as a passive setting but as an active moral force that responds to human actions. When the servant is deceived after completing the impossible task of finding a bamboo with one hundred knots—a condition set by the landowner to avoid fulfilling his promise of marriage—he utters a magical incantation (“*Khắc nhập! Khắc nhập!*” – “Join together! Join together!”), and the bamboo pieces miraculously bind together. The same phrase later causes the bamboo to trap the deceitful landowner, rendering him helpless and forcing a public reckoning. Through this supernatural intervention, the bamboo itself enacts justice in a way that no social or legal system in the story is shown to do. Nature here becomes

both witness and judge—exposing human greed, avarice, and deception, and wielding agency to correct wrongdoing. The narrative reveals an ecological worldview in which moral order is inseparable from the natural order.

3.2. Interconnectedness and Reciprocity between Human and Nature

The traditional narratives in this study also reveal a worldview that emphasizes the intimate and reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world. Rather than perceiving nature as a separate or subordinate entity, these stories often portray it as an active participant in human affairs—absorbing, reflecting, and even preserving human emotions, morality, and culture. In the story of *Trầu Cau* (The Betel and Areca Story), the theme of interconnectedness finds symbolic expression in the transformation of human figures into elements of nature. In the story, two loving brothers, Tân and Lang, are separated after Tân marries. Feeling lonely, Lang leaves home and dies by a river, turning into stone. Tân, searching for him, dies beside the stone and becomes a tree. His wife later dies there too and becomes a vine wrapping around the tree. Moved by their love, King Hùng creates the betel-chewing tradition using the vine (betel), tree (areca), and lime as symbols of loyalty and affection.

These three natural elements—areca tree, limestone, and betel vine—become eternally intertwined, their union forming the essential components of the betel quid, a culturally significant item in Vietnamese ceremonies, particularly weddings and formal as well as informal social encounters. As the Vietnamese are apt to say, “*Miếng trầu là đầu câu chuyện*” (The betel quid is the beginning of the conversation). This poignant tale powerfully suggests that human emotions and bonds are not fleeting but are indelibly inscribed upon the landscape itself. Nature evolves into a living memorial to love, fidelity, and sorrow. The betel vine’s act of physically entwining around the areca tree serves as a compelling metaphor for enduring human relationships, persisting even beyond death. Consequently, the ritual of chewing betel quid transcends a mere social practice, becoming an ecological act that honours the memory of human bonds through their transformed natural forms.

More than just an origin story for a cultural custom, this narrative affirms the inseparability of human bonds and natural elements. This resonates with Val Plumwood’s ecophilosophy and her critique of dualisms, particularly the human/nature divide. For Plumwood (2002), such dualisms are not only inaccurate but also harmful, obscuring the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings and contributing to the exploitation of the non-human world. The *Trầu Cau* (The Betel and Areca) story, through its seamless transformation of human beings into natural forms and the enduring significance of their intertwined existence

in the betel quid, embodies this nondualistic perspective. Nature becomes the vessel through which human love, loyalty, and memory are preserved, elevating the ecological world from a mere resource to a sacred archive of relational and cultural meaning. The plants used in the betel quid are valued not solely for their utility but for their symbolic role in rituals of marriage and social unity, underscoring an intrinsic interconnection between humanity and the natural world (Le Duc 2024a). This connection highlights that human culture is not separate from nature but is fundamentally embedded within it, with humans existing as an integral part of a larger natural order (Plumwood 2002).

The tale of *Cây Khế* (The Starfruit Tree) also offers a compelling and grounded illustration of the intricate interconnectedness and profound reciprocity that can exist between humans and the natural world. In this story, two brothers inherit different fortunes: the greedy elder takes everything, leaving the younger only a starfruit tree. One day, a magical bird comes to eat the fruits. When the younger brother laments about this, the bird promises to reward him with gold for sharing the fruit. The young man becomes rich with the gold offered to him, which is enough to fill a three-span bag. When the elder brother takes the tree and tries to exploit the bird with a giant bag (twelve spans), his greed leads to his downfall—he is dropped into the sea and never seen again.

The magical bird, acting as a personified agent of nature, establishes a reciprocal relationship with the younger brother based on his simple act of generosity—sharing the bounty of his starfruit tree. This mutual exchange yields tangible benefits for both: the bird receives vital nourishment, sustaining its life, while the human is rewarded with gold, a symbol of significant material wealth. Crucially, the bird's actions transcend a mere transaction; it signifies nature's inherent capacity to engage with human kindness, reaching out in response to a fundamental need—the provision of food. The narrative emphasizes that this interaction is not extractive but rather an exchange where nature, through the figure of the bird, offers something of immense value in return for a relatively modest offering. The gift of gold underscores the extraordinary and often unexpected generosity that nature can bestow.

Viewed through a conventional lens of balanced exchange, the reward of gold for a few starfruits might appear disproportionate. However, this apparent imbalance reveals a deeper ecological truth: true reciprocity within the human-nature relationship often transcends strict, quantifiable equivalence. Nature's giving frequently surpasses human offerings, operating on a scale and with a richness that human notions of fairness or tit-for-tat exchange cannot fully encompass. *Cây Khế* (The Starfruit Tree) subtly teaches that when human interaction with nature is characterized by kindness, humility, and a lack of self-serving expectation, the natural

world can respond with transformative and often surprising abundance. This story champions an ethic of generosity and trust, suggesting that when humans approach nature with respect and care, recognizing its intrinsic value beyond mere utility, nature, in turn, reciprocates in ways that can profoundly enrich human lives, often exceeding any direct contribution (Le Duc 2024b).

3.3. Ecological Stewardship and the Consequence of Transgressions

Examining the Vietnamese traditional narratives from an ecocritical lens, one also discovers their function as cautionary ecological parables, contrasting the virtues of stewardship, gratitude, and moral integrity with the destructive outcomes of greed, negligence, and ecological imbalance (Le Duc 2025). The tale of *Chú Cuội* (Uncle Cuội) powerfully illustrates the critical theme of ecological stewardship and the severe consequences that arise from transgressions against the natural world. The central element, the magical banyan tree serves as a potent symbol of both the boundless generosity and the inherent limits of nature's benevolence. Deeply embedded within the fabric of traditional Vietnamese village life, the banyan tree, alongside the communal well and the village meeting house (*Đình*), represents the spiritual, social, and ecological heart of the community (Nguyen 2020). In this narrative, a man named Cuội finds a banyan tree imbued with miraculous healing powers; the tree willingly extends its help to humanity without reservation. However, this generosity is not unconditional as this benevolent relationship is predicated upon respect and adherence to ecological stewardship.

The pivotal transgression occurs when the sacred banyan tree is watered with unclean water by Cuội's wife, an act representing human negligence and a violation of the implicit understanding of care required for such a powerful natural entity. This act of disrespect, even unintentional, triggers a decisive response from the banyan tree. Imbued with its own agency, the banyan tree uproots itself and ascends towards the moon, withdrawing its life-giving presence from the human realm. Cuội's desperate and ultimately futile attempt to follow the departing tree and reclaim its benefits poignantly highlights the irreversible consequences of violating sacred ecological relationships.

The narrative serves as a cautionary tale, emphasizing that when nature is disrespected and its inherent sanctity disregarded, its valuable gifts can be permanently lost to humanity. The individuals who suffer the consequences are not only those directly involved in the wrongful act but also innocent bystanders, in this case, Cuội himself who experiences permanent exile on the moon. Thus, humans become not only alienated from nature but also from each other.

The ascent of the banyan tree to the moon transforms a terrestrial ecological loss into a celestial and enduring reminder of the importance of ecological responsibility. The story suggests that nature is not a passive resource to be exploited without consequence, but an active force with its own integrity, capable of giving and withdrawing its support depending on the quality of human stewardship.

The Vietnamese folktale of *Mai An Tiêm* (Mai An Tiem) provides a compelling narrative that underscores the profound ethic of balance and responsibility inherent in a sustainable relationship between humanity and nature. Unlike stories that might emphasize human dominance or the forceful extraction of resources, *Mai An Tiêm* illustrates that true survival and enduring prosperity arise from a posture of patient cultivation, keen observation of natural rhythms, and a deeply respectful engagement with the land. Exiled to a deserted island by the king due to a misunderstanding, Mai An Tiêm's eventual success comes not from an act of conquest over a wild landscape, but rather from his ability to understand and work in harmony with the natural environment. The mysterious arrival of the watermelon seeds, while seemingly serendipitous, becomes the catalyst for his success, but it is his diligent labour, his careful attention to the island's conditions, and his patient tilling of the land that ultimately yield abundance.

This narrative champions a model of human-nature interaction rooted in self-sufficiency and hard work rather than entitlement. Mai An Tiêm's story implicitly teaches that the resources necessary for survival are not simply to be taken but are to be cultivated and appreciated through dedicated effort. His self-reliance is not a solitary act of dominance but a testament to his ability to tap into nature's inherent potential through understanding and respectful action. This example of sustainable labour, where human effort aligns with natural processes, is so fundamental that the story has been incorporated into the Vietnamese education curriculum to instil in young people the virtues of hard work, resilience in the face of adversity, and a fundamental ecological awareness (Trinh 2024). Mai An Tiêm's eventual redemption and return to favour further underscore the societal value placed on such a harmonious and responsible approach to the natural world.

The story of *Cây Khế* (The Starfruit Tree) likewise serves as a potent parable for the principles of stewardship responsibility and the dire consequences of ecological overexploitation driven by greed. The narrative starkly contrasts the behaviours of two brothers in their interactions with a magical bird (nature). The younger brother embodies responsible stewardship through his respectful engagement with the bird. His willingness to share the fruit of his starfruit tree, accepting nature's rhythm of giving, fosters a reciprocal relationship that

benefits both parties. As Tran (2010) aptly points out, the ability to share the fruits began with the man's good care for the starfruit tree, enabling it to produce fruits good enough to eat. His sharing of the produce unlocks nature's inherent generosity, symbolized by the gold offered by the bird within mutually understood boundaries. His action of taking only enough gold to fill a three-span bag (as directed by the bird) demonstrate a mindful approach to the natural world, recognizing its value and engaging with it in a way that respects its limits and fosters a balanced exchange.

Conversely, the elder brother's actions epitomize the destructive nature of overextraction. Fuelled by avarice, he disregards the value of "*vừa đủ*" (knowing what's enough) and attempts to greedily grab an excessive amount of gold by overfilling his over-sized twelve-span bag. This act represents a clear violation of the established boundaries of reciprocity and a blatant attempt to exploit nature's gift for personal gain without consideration or restraint. The immediate and fatal consequence of his greed—his plunge into the ocean—dramatically underscores the perilous outcomes of unsustainable exploitation of the natural world's resources. The bird's continued existence, in stark contrast to the elder brother's demise, symbolizes the enduring resilience of nature itself, highlighting that while individual actors may transgress and perish, the natural world persists, often enforcing its own non-negotiable limits.

3.4. Nature as Transformative Force

In various ways, Vietnamese traditional narratives depict the transformative potential of nature. The narrative *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giày* (The Legend of the Rice Cakes) illustrates the transformative power of nature not through dramatic physical metamorphosis, but through the profound cultural and spiritual significance imbued in its products, particularly rice. The rice cakes crafted by Prince Lang Liêu as part of a food competition among the siblings to inherit the throne transcend their simple form as food and become powerful symbols that articulate a fundamental understanding of the cosmos and humanity's place within it. The round *bánh giày*, representing the Sky, and the square *bánh chưng*, embodying the Earth, are not merely culinary creations; they are tangible manifestations of a cosmological worldview where Heaven and Earth are in harmonious balance (Avieli 2005).

This story reveals the transformative power of simple natural elements to represent deep spiritual principles. Rice, used to make the cake, is not just for physical sustenance but becomes a spiritual offering. The act of transforming simple rice and other natural ingredients into these symbolic cakes highlights humanity's role as both a cultivator and interpreter of nature's gifts. By imbuing these agricultural products with cosmological meaning, the story underscores the

idea that human actions related to the land are not mundane but are spiritually significant, demanding reverence for the natural world and its cyclical rhythms of planting, growth, and harvest. Thus, the rice cakes signify the very forces that sustain life. They represent the linking of human culture and tradition directly to the transformative power of the Earth to yield nourishment and the overarching order of the universe.

The tale *Sự Tích Hạt Gạo* (The Legend of the Rice Grain) powerfully illustrates the transformative power of nature through simple image of a grain of rice. The narrative begins with a selfish and ungrateful son, a stark contrast to the devotion of his mother. Her final act of entrusting him with a single grain of rice and tasking him with bringing it to the royal palace sets in motion a transformative process deeply intertwined with the inherent potential within that seed. The arduous journey undertaken by the son becomes the crucible for his moral regeneration, a transformation mirrored by the latent power within the seemingly inert grain. Experiencing hunger, hardship, and solitude forces him to reflect on his mother's selfless care, which initiates a profound internal change. Simultaneously, the single grain of rice, carried with intention and perhaps even a nascent understanding of its importance, undergoes its own remarkable transformation. It eventually grows into rice, becoming the very first of its kind, a source of nourishment that will sustain generations.

In the story, the transformation of the rice grain into a plant mirrors the human moral development. Thus, this is not merely a physical process but is deeply imbued with moral and spiritual significance. The rice is more than just sustenance; it is a "sacred gift," born from the mother's sacrifice, love, and emotional labour. It carries a moral and spiritual charge that transcends its material utility. Furthermore, the son's own moral regeneration is explicitly linked to the process of cultivating rice itself, a practice that demands patience, humility, and diligent care for the land.

This narrative also embeds traditional Confucian values of filial piety within an ecological framework. Honouring one's parents is implicitly connected to honouring the land and the labour that sustains life, as the rice itself becomes a symbol of the mother's sacrifice and the Earth's bounty. Therefore, cultivation and sharing of rice are not just agricultural practices but spiritual rituals of remembrance and moral formation, binding ecological and economic acts to profound ethical responsibilities within the family and community.

3.5. Concluding Remarks

Across these traditional narratives, Vietnamese cosmology and environmental ethics converge in a reality where nature is alive, imbued with agency, and profoundly interconnected

with human existence. Whether through elemental conflicts, moral allegories, acts of transformation, or symbols of cosmic balance, these stories portray nature not merely as a resource but as a sacred partner in the human journey. They cultivate ecological consciousness by embedding respect, reciprocity, and responsibility within the cultural imagination. From the symbolic offerings of rice cakes to the enduring struggle of mountain and flood, from metamorphic grief to justice-bearing bamboo, nature in these tales serves as teacher, guardian, witness, and judge. In their rich and diverse imageries, these narratives reveal a worldview where the survival of culture, community, and the Earth itself depends on living in ethical harmony with the natural world.

Conclusion

The above discussion suggests that certain Vietnamese traditional narratives can serve as ecological parables that foster an ecological ethos. While these narratives may have originally been used to convey other cultural and civic values not explicitly related to ecological concerns, this paper demonstrates that through an ecocritical reading of narratives, some are found to provide moral frameworks for understanding humanity's place in the natural world, offering wisdom that aligns with current calls for sustainability, justice, and harmony. Furthermore, the fact that these values are embedded in the folktales across centuries—long before there was a notion of an environmental crisis—highlights the potential of traditional narratives as vehicles for environmental education.

In a time when global ecological challenges, such as climate change and resource depletion, are pressing issues, these narratives through a new interpretive lens offer valuable insights into how cultural heritage can guide and inform modern-day environmental ethics. The stories remind us that the principles fostering an ecological ethos are not new; they have been part of human thought for generations. These stories and countless more that have not been examined in this paper offer both a reflection of historical ecological consciousness and a potential tool for engendering a more sustainable and just relationship with nature in the modern world. The task now is to retrieve these traditional narratives and reinterpret, recontextualize, and apply their embedded ecological principles to contemporary concerns.

In the context of environmental humanities, integrating such traditional narratives into ecological pedagogy allows for the localization of global ecological values within indigenous epistemologies. While these stories should not be stripped of the original pedagogical intentions that have been communicated over the years, in light of contemporary environmental concerns, it is important to recognize their potential for promoting an ecological ethos. Thus, efforts must

be made by educators, community leaders, and environmental advocates, especially in the Vietnamese context, to make use of these indigenous resources to promote human flourishing as well as environmental well-being.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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