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## RETRIEVING A HISTORICAL FRAGMENT OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY VIETNAMESE CATHOLICISM THROUGH THE PILGRIMAGE CENTRE OF OUR LADY OF TRÀ KIỆU

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The Pilgrimage Centre of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, which is located in Central Vietnam, serves as a significant religious and spiritual tourist venue, attracting thousands of visitors every year. This site has experienced many vicissitudes during the late nineteenth century when the Literati Movement or the Scholars' Rising (Văn Thân) broke out and swept through many parishes. Trà Kiệu parish, however, demonstrated its resilience, gaining resurgence over time and becoming one of the notable pilgrimage and spiritual tourism sites of Catholicism in contemporary Central Vietnam. Nevertheless, this case is often obscured in the scholarship on Vietnamese Catholic history. Approaching from an interdisciplinary perspective, the research aims to retrieve a historical narrative of Trà Kiệu parish in the nineteenth century, partially reconstructing a fragment of the history of Catholicism in Vietnam. The article first elucidates the historical and cultural background of the Trà Kiệu site. It then analyses the alleged Marian apparition in Trà Kiệu and its miraculous effects on the consolidation of parishioners in their struggle against opposing forces. The article subsequently emphasizes on the ways in which the Trà Kiệu parish endeavours to sustain and reinvent the historical tradition of Marian devotion, transforming the Trà Kiệu site into a well-known pilgrimage centre that aims to serve the spiritual needs of Christians. In doing so, the research further attempts to provide insights into what Christians lived through such a historical experience during the period of the Literati Movement and how their Christian successors continued to uphold the historical tradition of Marian devotion to the present day.

**Keywords:** historical fragment; Literati Movement; Our Lady of Trà Kiệu; pilgrimage centre; spiritual tourism; Vietnamese Catholicism

### *Introduction*

Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, which is affiliated with the pilgrimage centre of the Holy Mother in Trà Kiệu, Đà Nẵng city<sup>1</sup> (previously Quảng Nam province), Central Vietnam. Emerging in the late nineteenth century, the title of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu (Đức Mẹ Trà Kiệu) embodied oral historical accounts and correlated to remained relics that served as material evidence of a period when Vietnamese Catholicism faced challenges. If the Catholic historical flow in Vietnam is considered a series of fragments, the phenomenon of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu represents a remarkable point in that history. Nevertheless, the scholarship on Vietnamese Catholicism, both Vietnamese and overseas, seems to have placed a great emphasis on the case of Our Lady of La Vang in Quảng Trị province and considered this phenomenon a typical case of Marian devotion as well as a greatly significant Marian symbol in Vietnamese Catholicism. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu drew much less consideration from scholarship on Catholic history in

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Central Vietnam. Comparing the well-known accounts of Our Lady of La Vang and those of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu among the general public, some poems said that:

“Quảng Trị có La Vang  
 Quảng Nam có Trà Kiệu  
 La Vang ai cũng biết  
 Trà Kiệu mấy ai hay”  
 (Quảng Trị has La Vang  
 Quảng Nam has Trà Kiệu  
 La Vang is well-known to everyone  
 While Trà Kiệu is rarely mentioned)  
 (*my translation*) [Phạm 2024, 98].

In fact, when investigating Vietnamese Catholicism in Central Vietnam, many studies paid attention to articulating the significance of the Hội An (Fai Fo) missionary station [for instance, Alberts 2012; Nguyen T. V. L., Nguyen V. S. 2020; Trieu 2022]. Likewise, in examining Marian devotion in Central Vietnam, recent scholars have concentrated primarily on Our Lady of La Vang rather than Our Lady of Trà Kiệu [Thien-Huong 2017; Duong 2024; Tran 2024]. To the side of Vietnamese Catholic historians, Phan Phát Huân discussed the stories of Trà Kiệu parish at times of confronting the Literati Movement [Phan 1965, 530–537]. Though touching on certain pieces of information about that parish, this work did not show many details that were recounted by M. Geffroy, a French missionary at that time [M. Geffroy... 1886]. Phạm Cảnh Đáng had substantial contributions to research on the history of the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage site [Phạm, Lưu 2018; Phạm 2020; 2024]. It is noted that Phạm Cảnh Đáng is a local Christian, and sometimes his words represent the testimony of his faith in Our Lady of Trà Kiệu. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Quang Hưng, a non-Catholic scholar, referred to Our Lady of La Vang and Our Lady of Trà Kiệu from a historical perspective; however, it was very brief, including quite general information about Trà Kiệu parish [Nguyễn 2010, 59–71].

In addition to drawing selectively on previous studies, the research employs interdisciplinary methodology, including historical studies and ethnological fieldwork, to further investigate the history of the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage site. Specifically, the historical studies here utilized the approach of microhistory, aiming to see the history of the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage site from below and connect it with ordinary people. A microhistorical approach that focuses on “small units and how people conducted their lives within them” [Magnússon 2003, 709]. The microhistorical approach searches “its subjects in their logical and cultural context”, and discusses subjects addressed both with “respect to known facts, and to what is not known” [Magnússon 2016, 198]. Though not refusing macrohistory as its complement, the microhistorical approach primarily emphasizes the details of a single case. In that sense, the research attempted to trace back the historical documents, particularly the French pieces of paper by a missionary who came to Trà Kiệu in 1886, which collected stories and narrated what was related to the events surrounding Trà Kiệu parish in 1885. Serving as a complement to this, the study conducted ethnological fieldwork and informal interviews in the form of conversations with local Catholics and pilgrims at the field site. The field trip occurred on 29 and 30 May 2025. The researcher conversed with certain local Catholics and pilgrims, encouraging them to share their stories and personal lived experiences in relating the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage site. The field data was noted, recorded and photographed, then fully written up and transcribed into a file that serves as a research diary. Along with the utilization of document analysis, the source of data collected from the field site, as well as participant observations, helped to triangulate with oral historical narratives surrounding Our Lady of Trà Kiệu in the past. At least, this occurred in a way that could illuminate how Catholics made sense of the past of the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage site in their daily lives.

Drawing on the interdisciplinary approach as mentioned above, the research attempts to revisit a fragment of Catholic history in Trà Kiệu in the nineteenth century and investigate how Catholics have lived with and recalled such historical fragmentation. From this, the study endeavours to provide more insights into understanding the past of a pilgrimage centre like Trà Kiệu, and how local Catholics have sustained the historical memories over time. Before delving into these issues, some background information on Trà Kiệu should be presented to help us better understand the site's historical significance and context.

### ***Historical and Cultural Background of the Trà Kiệu Pilgrimage Site***

Trà Kiệu had been a significant site in what is now Central Vietnam. It is located in the Thu Bồn Valley of Duy Xuyên, a historical area that was named by Lord Nguyễn Hoàng in 1604 [Ngô 2024, 106]. Trà Kiệu was once part of an ancient civilisation of the Cham people, who are now one of the ethnic minorities living in Southern Vietnam. According to archeological explorations, Trà Kiệu included layers of relics of Simhapura (*Lion Citadel / Sư Tử Thành*), which had been the capital of the Champa Kingdom during the periods of the fourth to ninth centuries. At present, some remnants of the ancient citadel Simhapura have been preserved at Trà Kiệu church (see **Fig. 1**) and the Museum of Sa Huỳnh and Cham Culture based in Duy Xuyên, Quảng Nam province (now Đà Nẵng city). Due to the significance of the historical relics, Trà Kiệu attracted many archeologists, both Vietnamese and foreigners to carry out excavations. Particularly, from 1993 to 2000, the joint team of Vietnamese, British and Japanese archeologists discovered many unearthed artifacts that date back to the second and third centuries CE [Đỗ et al 2017, 73].



**Fig. 1.** Roof-end tiles stamped with human faces by the Cham people, excavated in Trà Kiệu, and preserved in the traditional house of Trà Kiệu parish. Photo: The author

In the late tenth century, the capital of the Champa Kingdom was moved to Đồ Bàn, taking the name of Vijaya, which is now part of Gia Lai province (previously Bình Định province) in Central Vietnam. The Trà Kiệu citadel was abandoned. After losing in the war with Đại Việt (the Great Viet) in 1069, the Champa Kingdom gradually faded, then its citadel collapsed in 1471, and the vast area of the Kingdom was merged into Đại Việt under the reign of King Lê Thánh Tông [Nguyễn 2018]. During 1470–1497, under the rule of King Lê Thánh Tông, with the royal title of Hồng Đức (洪德), which means the flourishing development, thirteen men were sent to Trà Kiệu for land reclamation, establishing Trà Kiệu commune. These men include: Lê Đình Lộc, Lư Kim Giám, Nguyễn Thanh Long, Nguyễn Thanh Chiêm, Nguyễn Tất Thành, Nguyễn Quang Lộc, Nguyễn

Đặng Phò, Đinh Công Bình, Nguyễn Hữu Phối, Nguyễn Thành Nữ, Nguyễn Như Đon, Nguyễn Tá Tạo and Lê Quang Nghị [Phạm, Lưu 2018, 25]. Subsequently, they were honoured as the foremost ancestors of Trà Kiệu.

In the following years of 1535, 1578, 1657 and 1661, there were thirty-six leaders of clans from some areas of Tonkin coming to reside in Trà Kiệu. Lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên (1563–1635), who was often called Lord Sãi, ennobled the thirteen founders of Trà Kiệu with the formal title “Bá” (伯). This title means “elder brother”, the third of the five prestigious titles honoured by the king in the feudal dynasties. Added to this recognized merit, to express gratitude to the thirteen founders of Trà Kiệu, a temple known as *Nhà thờ Tiên hiền Trà Kiệu* (*The Trà Kiệu Temple of Land- Reclamation Ancestors*) was erected in 1680, during the reign of King Lê Hy Tông. Due to the large area of Trà Kiệu commune, it was then divided into five smaller communes: Trà Kiệu Trung, Trà Kiệu Đông, Trà Kiệu Tây, Trà Kiệu Thượng, and Trà Kiệu Nam. The Trà Kiệu Temple of Land-Reclamation Ancestors was changed to the name of *Nhà thờ Ngũ Xã Trà Kiệu* (*The Trà Kiệu Temple of Five Communes*)<sup>2</sup> (see **Fig. 2**). The temple was granted national relic status in November 2005. In April of every lunar year, this temple serves as a common place to organize ritual-related activities of people in Trà Kiệu, including local Catholics, to pay tribute to their ancestors.



**Fig. 2.** The Trà Kiệu Temple of Five Communes nowadays.  
Photo: The author

Trà Kiệu is an area with religious diversity. Besides folk beliefs, it witnesses followers of some major religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism. In the case of Catholicism, this religion in Trà Kiệu is well-known with the Centre of Holy Mother of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu (Trung tâm Thánh Mẫu Trà Kiệu), which is part of Trà Kiệu parish, Đà Nẵng Diocese. In terms of geographical location, Trà Kiệu parish is far from the centre of Đà Nẵng city, around 40 kilometres to the west-southwest. This religious site is situated between two significant religious and cultural sites – Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary and Hội An ancient town, falling in the area which was once the centre of Simhapura. To the east of the Trà

Kiêu parish is the Bửu Châu Hill (Jade Hill) which is 30–40 meters high, while the northern side is bordered by the ancient range of earthen ramparts. The parish is bound by the range of Kim Sơn hill to the west and the ancient wall to the south [Phạm, Luu 2018, 51]. The Centre of Holy Mother of Our Lady of Trà Kiêu is situated at the bottom of Bửu Châu Hill that was commonly identified as the citadel of ancient Simhapura [Glover et al. 1996, 168]. Meanwhile, the parish church stands at the foot of Kim Sơn Hill, at the site where the Marian apparition is reported to have once occurred.

Due to the proximity to the Hội An port, Trà Kiêu became a site that early welcomed visits made by Western missionaries. According to the information board stuck on the wall of the church of Trà Kiêu parish, during the years from 1596 to 1602, a Spanish missionary named Raphaen of the Augustinian order came to the place of Trà Kiêu<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, another document posited that the Francis missionaries were the first missionaries visiting Trà Kiêu. Nevertheless, such visits from missionaries seemed to be preliminary explorations. It was not until the years between 1628 and 1630 that Catholic proselytisation achieved results in Trà Kiêu [Phạm, Luu 2018, 61]. A certain number of whom were children of the thirteen founders, followed Catholicism at that period. They then moved to the area, which was once the inner zone of Simhapura, for having a better condition in holding their religious faith. They became the first Christians of Trà Kiêu parish [Phạm 2020, 24]. In 1722, Trà Kiêu parish had around 300 Christians. During the period from the 1700s to the early 1800s, the Francis missionaries observed the Trà Kiêu parish. Subsequently, the missionaries of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (abbreviation: MEP) assumed the position of observing the Trà Kiêu parish. Father Louis Maria Galibert (Vietnamese name: Lợi) oversaw Trà Kiêu from 1869 to 1877. Father Jean Baptiste Bruyère (Vietnamese name: Cố Nhơn) of MEP supervised Trà Kiêu parish from 1877 to 1912. Concurrently, during the time of Father Jean Baptiste Bruyère, in the late nineteenth century, Trà Kiêu's parishioners experienced hardship caused by persecution by the Literati Movement (*phong trào Văn Thân*). This movement held the sentiment of anti-French colonisers and anti-Catholics, raising the slogan “Pacify the Westerners and Massacre the Heretics” (*Bình Tây sát Tả*) [McLeod 1997, 35–71]. The sentiment as such derived from the suspicion harboured by intellectuals upon the correlations between Catholic missionaries and the invasion of French colonialism in Vietnam.

After overcoming the challenges in the nineteenth century, Trà Kiêu parish gained a revival more significantly in the twentieth century. In 1958, Trà Kiêu was selected as the Centre of the Holy Mother of God of Qui Nhơn Diocese, and this centre then became a part of Đà Nẵng Diocese, which was separated from Qui Nhơn Diocese in 1963. Thereafter, annually, at the end of May, Trà Kiêu has served as a significant religious venue for proceeding the great pilgrimage festival of Our Lady of Trà Kiêu (*Đại hội hành hương Đức Mẹ Trà Kiêu*), attracting thousands of pilgrims from the Đà Nẵng diocese as well as others. The pilgrimage festival, as such, was held to commemorate the assumed apparition of the Mother of God in Trà Kiêu. At present, Trà Kiêu parish belongs to the Đà Nẵng Diocese (Latin name: Dioecesis Danangensis). The parish has been placed under the supervision of Father Simon Hứa Thanh Tuyên and included six sub-parishes (*giáo khóm, giáo họ*): Giáo khóm Đông, Giáo khóm Tây, Giáo khóm Nam, Giáo khóm Bắc, Giáo họ Lộc Động, and Giáo họ Phú Nham.

### ***The Assumed Marian Apparition to Christians in Trà Kiêu Amid the Desperate Situation***

The Marian apparition was assumed to have occurred in Trà Kiêu amid the attack of the Literati Movement's force towards Christians. However, according to the documents by writers, no Catholic witnessed that miracle, but the Literati Movement's soldiers did. The narratives of the assumed apparition showed themselves as folk or oral stories, and this phenomenon was immersed in popular religious practices in Trà Kiêu parish. Tracing

the historical documents discussing the Marian apparition has, so far, had a significant document written in French by Father M. Geffroy, entitled “Une Page De La Persécution en Cochinchine” (*A Page of Persecution in Cochinchina*), published in Lyon, France [M. Geffroy... 1886, 428–439, 442–444, 452–455]. For the present research, this document was retrieved from Gallica-BnF, which serves as the digital library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The document, as mentioned, was composed in 1886, one year after the Literati Movement surrounded Trà Kiệu parish, providing vivid descriptions of the reported situation of Trà Kiệu parish at that time. It resulted from the field trip made by Father M. Geffroy, a missionary of Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP)<sup>4</sup>, who came to Trà Kiệu parish in 1886 and lived there for around two or three months [Phạm 2024, 99]. He conversed with local Christians to document accounts of Trà Kiệu parish at the time, in confronting with assaults from the Literati Movement.

According to Father M. Geffroy, Quảng Nam at that time was divided into three districts: the northern one, towards Tourane (what is now part of Đà Nẵng), observed by Father Mallard; the central one, towards the citadel, headed by Father Bruyère; and the southern one, entrusted to the management of a native priest by the name of Cấn-Du. Trà Kiệu was not the first place struck by the Literati Movement; rather, it was Tu-Ngai (*Tu Nghĩa*) in Quảng Ngãi, one province that has now shared a common border with Quảng Nam to the South. Until 1 September 1885, one day following the citadel’s capture by the Literati (Confucian scholars), Trà Kiệu parish was surrounded. In the initial time, Father Bruyère had a certain illusion of the violence and persistence of the attack that had suppressed Christians in Tu Nghĩa for over a month. He just posited to be able to resist for around two or three days until the Christians of Trà Kiệu parish could receive the aid from the French captain Ducrès, who sent a letter to Father Bruyère in mid-August 1885 and promised come to help. Moreover, as narrated by M. Geffroy, Father Bruyère relied even more on the protection of the Holy Mother of God and believed she would defend him at Trà Kiệu rather than seeking to take refuge on the sands of Tourane [M. Geffroy... 1886, 428].

In preparing to resist the suppression of the Literati Movement, as M. Geffroy wrote, Father Bruyère had four breech-loading rifles, five flintlock rifles and one Le Fauchaux rifle. Concurrently, his Christians also made spears day and night during the last days of August, as many as they were enough to equip three hundred and seventy men, dividing into seven companies. Meanwhile, five to six hundred women served as the reserve corps [M. Geffroy... 1886, 429]. According to the information board hung on the wall inside the traditional house (*nhà truyền thống*) of Trà Kiệu parish, each company was placed under the leadership of one man. The first company under Sir Đội Phổ, the second under Sir Luân, the third under Sir Nguyễn Viết Phương, the fourth under Sir Lưu Văn Thuận, the sixth under Sir Trinh, the seventh under Sir Trần Vĩ, and no record for the leader’s name of the fifth company<sup>5</sup>.

Along with that defensive arrangement, Father Bruyère had full confidence in God and the Blessed Virgin in sheltering the Trà Kiệu parish. Nevertheless, as M. Geffroy pointed out, the position of Trà Kiệu proved its disadvantages for the defence of Christians, unless they could hold the high ground. This actually required far more troops than Father Bruyère could muster. In fact, Trà Kiệu church was situated between Núi Trọc Hill (Bửu Châu Hill) and Kim Sơn Hill. If the Literati Movement’s force could occupy these heights, it would become more challenging for Christian defence. In the afternoon of September 1, 1885, the soldiers of the Literati Movement marched to Trà Kiệu parish and encircled it day and night from all sides, creating a huge circle of men for twenty-one days. The next day, September 2, 1885, Christians were pushed out of the defensive line on Kim Sơn Hill. They felt discouraged in resisting due to their defeat after defeat. Christians gathered on the esplanade of Father Bruyère’s house to pray for his final absolution. These Christians said that they “must die” and since “all resistance is useless”, they “would rather die in the church than anywhere else” [M. Geffroy... 1886, 429].

Even when capturing a cannon from the enemy, the Christians of Trà Kiệu suffered hopelessness. They refused to stay up during the night, insisted on withdrawing to their homes for lamentation or going to the church to wait for death there. Meanwhile, the soldiers of the Literati consolidated their encirclement, creating an enclosure so strict that nobody could escape. These soldiers never ceased beating their drums and rattles, shouting their megaphone every minute, saying that “Ô các Pôi cài về phai canh gui chonghien nhất, Pung cho Pua nào thoát ngle”<sup>6</sup> (Need to vigilantly watch and not let anyone escape). As M. Geffroy recounted, these sinister words were repeated many times over twenty nights. In that dreadful situation, Father Bruyère relied on the Holy Mother of God, fervently praying to her for her powerful protection. Finally, on September 2 and 3, 1885, he managed to raise the courage of his flocks, persuading them entirely. He said that “the enemy had to be fought, since it was the will of God and the Blessed Virgin”. In response, Christians said “let us listen to the Father” and “if we must die, let us die with weapons in hand” [M. Geffroy... 1886, 430].

The day of September 3 was truly a hard one in the situation that Christians of Trà Kiệu had to fight from dawn till dusk. They were so exhausted by fatigue and anxiety, begging their Father to allow them lay down their arms, withdraw to the church and await death there. Some dignitaries suggested that they should negotiate and think of ways to retreat safely to Tourane. Ong-Pho<sup>7</sup>, the leader of the first company of Christians in Trà Kiệu, showed his wavering courage and constantly encouraged Christians to listen to the Father. He insisted that “if we lay down our arms, the scholars will never allow us to retreat safely to Tourane. Let them parley as much as they like, let us always keep our weapons, and fight to the death”. One catechist, Phan, even assured that Father Maillard<sup>8</sup> was arriving to help. Christians believed him, took up their weapons again and followed the soldiers of Doi-Pho (Đội Phở) [M. Geffroy... 1886, 430].

To the side of the Literati, its forces were divided into different groups with their own leaders, entailing less mutual support among them. Some engaged in battle, the others simply watched and held their spears at an angle as if to repel an attack. At night, they did not directly fight, just keeping watch and distantly firing on Christians from the positions on the two hills, Bửu Châu and Kim Sơn, where they had installed their cannons and rampart rifles. Father Bruyère was a constant target during these fires. As shared with M. Geffroy, Father Bruyère shed many tears during those long days and interminable nights. Nevertheless, the resistance of Christians achieved better results on the fourth day, repelling two attacks of the Literati. They even captured certain cannons and ramparts from their enemy. Whenever the soldiers of the Literati run away, Christians shouted, “Jesou. Marial hê hê!” (Jesus, Maria hê hê!) [M. Geffroy... 1886, 442].

The reserve corps of Trà Kiệu parish, composing women, also joined to fight on the battlefield. They let their hair flow down their backs, terrifying soldiers of the Literati. Additionally, they leapt about, brandishing their blades or cutlasses and crying out: “Hey, hey, Jesus, Mary, Joseph,” when chasing the fleeing men of the Literati until they kill some [M. Geffroy... 1886, 443]. After succeeding, these women then returned to the church to express their thanks to the Mother of God. Regarding the spiritual role played by the Mother of God during the process of resistance of Christians in Trà Kiệu, M. Geffroy recounted as follows:

From the very beginning of the siege, Father Bruyère had placed a statue of the Blessed Virgin on a table in the middle of his house, with a candle on either side. Whenever it was necessary to go out to repel an attack, the candles were lit, and those who could not take part in the fighting, such as the elderly and children, recited the rosary together. Once the enemy was repelled, the combatants returned to give thanks to the Blessed Mother for their victory. They prostrated themselves before her image, holding their lances, some of which were still stained with blood, and did not rise until after a long and fervent prayer [M. Geffroy... 1886, 443]<sup>9</sup>.

On the fifth and sixth days of September 1885, the Literati fortified its force to the north of Trà Kiệu. Until the evening of the sixth day, the Literati transported immense piles of straw to cover the entire northern side of the Christian settlement, from Kim Sơn to Núi Trọc hills. This action obviously aimed to burn the bamboo hedge that surrounded the village of Trà Kiệu, putting villagers in imminent danger. A fight to the death was therefore decided upon for the following day, September 7. After imploring the help of the Blessed Virgin and strengthened by the encouragement of Father Bruyère, the Christians went to the north gate, pushing back the Literati force. The Christians then crossed the palisade of Literati and seized everything in their camp. The Christians continued their eagerness to thank the Blessed Virgin for their glorious victory. Nevertheless, on September 8, the Feast of the Nativity, the Literati force constantly marched from the north, advancing in great numbers that covered the entire Cham rampart and the fields separating it from the Christian settlement. From both hills – Kim Sơn and Núi Trọc, firing continued unabated; bullets whistled from all sides without ceasing [M. Geffroy... 1886, 443]. Trà Kiệu's Christians attempted to reinforce and reorganise their reserve corps, marching out to confront their enemy. However, attacked from both sides, they soon fled in disorder. The most intrepid were the women, who later boasted of having saved Christendom that day. The soldiers of the Literati lost more than they thought. They subsequently began to wane and felt unhappy because of the unequal treatment of different leaders in the distribution of the spoils of war. This situation fostered dissatisfaction among them. In battles, instead of winning, they were defeated [M. Geffroy... 1886, 444].

The Literati, however, insisted on destroying Trà Kiệu parish. On September 9 and 10, 1885, its soldiers transported and placed cannons on the two hills – Kim Sơn and Bửu Châu. Startlingly, in the morning of September 10, a dreadful cannonade began to resound. In Phú Thượng parish, Father Jean Maillard also felt the cannonade so terrible that he dared not hope that Trà Kiệu could resist it [M. Geffroy... 1886, 452]. Fortunately, Trà Kiệu held firm. Though the cannons placed on the two hills fired mainly at the church located between these hills, their cannonballs too often flew from one hill to the other. On September 11, 1885, a series of cannonade continued to occur. However, only one cannonball hit the church once in the small rose window above the altar. The other shots all landed too high. This situation was not due to poor aim or insufficient skill. A pointer of cannons, a former military mandarin, later admitted that he wanted to hit a beautiful lady dressed in white who was standing on the top of the church. All that day and the next, as M. Geffroy wrote, the pagans (païen) of the Literati force on Kim Sơn Hill kept shouting out that “it is quite extraordinary that this woman always stands on the top of the church, no matter how much we aim at her, we never hit her” (*C'est bien extraordinaire que cette femme se tienne toujours sur le haut de l'église, on a beau la viser, on ne l'atteint jamais*) [M. Geffroy... 1886, 453].

Regarding that event, Father M. Geffroy expressed his attitude carefully and raised questions, saying that: “Was this then a miraculous apparition of the Holy Virgin? Would this good Mother have personally protected the church dedicated to her immaculate heart? It is not for me to pronounce on such a serious matter”. (*Était-ce donc une apparition miraculeuse de la sainte Vierge? Cette bonne Mère n'aurait-elle protégé en personne cette église dédiée à son cœur immaculé? Ce n'est pas à moi à prononcer sur un fait si grave*) [M. Geffroy... 1886, 453]. In terms of Catholic theology, the Marian apparition belongs to the realm of private revelation. The official approval or disapproval of such a kind of apparition, however, requires rigorous investigations from the Catholic authorities. As such, it is not difficult to understand why M. Geffroy did not dare to confirm that the event was a Marian apparition in Trà Kiệu. According to M. Geffroy, pagans did not cease repeating those two days, September 10 and 11, 1885, that they saw a woman standing on the roof of the church. Sometimes, they spoke of her with respect and called

her a beautiful lady dressed in white; sometimes, they insulted her and became frustrated at not being able to strike her. It was surprising that, as M. Geffroy wrote, the Christians and their father in Trà Kiệu parish also heard what the pagans said, looked intently, but saw nothing [M. Geffroy... 1886, 453]. According to M. Geffroy, such an event in Trà Kiệu was not the only one. In the same circumstances, extraordinary things were also reported. Even in Trà Kiệu, the pagans from the Literati also said that they had to fight not only against the Christians but also against thousands of children who accompanied them on their outings. “These children came from above and descended along the bamboo when Christians went out” (*Ces enfants venaient d’en haut et descendaient le long des bambous quand les chrétiens sortaient*) [M. Geffroy... 1886, 453].

Regarding the reported appearance of a lady on the church roof, Father Bruyère, who had the local authority over Trà Kiệu parish at that time, had no confidence in making a public statement. In a report to the see of bishop in Qui Nhơn in 1886, he said that he actually did not witness the Marian apparition at Trà Kiệu as recounted. However, he believed that it should be a miracle. He posited that only owing to miracles, the church and parish house were saved from the horrific damage of canons, which were placed at positions distant from the church, just around dozens of meters [Phạm 2020, 101]. There has been no information that referred to the official approval or rejection made by the Catholic Church toward what is assumed to be the Marian apparition occurring at Trà Kiệu. Drawing on the belief of the protectorate of the Blessed Virgin, in 1898, Trà Kiệu church was reconstructed and took the name of “Beatrix Maria Auxilium Christianorum” (Beatrice Mary Help of Christians). In commemorating the event on Bửu Châu hill, a shrine was erected to be devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. So far, on the wall of the front face of the Trà Kiệu church, there is a sentence stating: “Nơi đây, Đức Mẹ đã hiện ra (Ngày 10 & 11. 9. 1885)” (Here is the place where the Blessed Mary appeared on September 10 and 11, 1885).

### ***Recreation of Historical Tradition and Folk Religious Practices***

The historical accounts of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu have been sustained and verbally imparted from generation to generation. They were recounted at prayer times or even in normal conversation, letting pieces of information be embedded into the listeners’ minds. Following this way, oral history was gradually turned into what is called “oral tradition” [Kah Seng Loh et al. 2013, 13]. A local Catholic writer by the name of Phạm Cảnh Đăng narrated that:

In the years of 1950–60s, amid the noon prayers of the Month of Flowers (May) inside the Mountain Church (now called Bửu Châu Shrine of Mother of God), we children often arrived very early to listen to the elders recount stories of the Marian apparition that saved the parish in battles against the Literati Movement’s soldiers in 1885. When growing up, we only vaguely retained fragments of the stories of events that were retold, and that was partly because, at that time, we were children and could not remember everyword clearly; on the other hand, due to elders passing down such stories according to their own memories, with certain details forgotten and memorable, insufficient and superfluous (*my translation*) [Phạm 2020, 11]<sup>10</sup>.

Though embracing pieces of inaccurate information and incompleteness due to the subjectivity of human memory, the oral stories were recounted many times, making sense of the pilgrimage site in Trà Kiệu as a sacred place for Catholics, both local and pilgrims, as well as tourists. On the fieldtrip on May 29, 2025, when visiting the Shrine of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu on Bửu Châu Hill, I made rapport with a local male Catholic who was born in 1960. His home is located at the foot of Bửu Châu Hill. In the afternoon, at around 15:28 p.m, he got me a ride on his motorbike around Trà Kiệu. He shared with me that “Trà Kiệu was previously named Simhapura (Lion citadel). The soldiers of the Literati,

when attacking, positioned cannons on the hills to fire at the parish church. She (meaning the Blessed Virgin) appeared in 1885 to “shelter her children”. The Blessed Virgin appeared to pagans there. A pagan woman saw the Blessed Virgin, reporting to Father, and subsequently converted to Catholicism”<sup>11</sup>. The oral stories, as such, were often found among other local Catholics and pilgrims to Trà Kiệu.

Beyond laypeople, the Catholic Church in Vietnam, particularly the Đà Nẵng Diocese, has deliberately inculcated and fostered sentiments of the historical event in the nineteenth century in Trà Kiệu parish. Historical items such as cannonballs, weapons and round hats of the Literati’s soldiers have been preserved and displayed in the traditional house of Trà Kiệu parish (see **Fig. 3**). These items evoke the sense of a historical fragment of Trà Kiệu. Along with this, Trà Kiệu parish collected stories told by the successors of the previous generations who had once participated in resistance against the Literati.



**Fig. 3.** A cannonball and some pieces of weapons reportedly seized from the Literati in 1885 are now displayed in the traditional house of Trà Kiệu parish. Photo: The author

As mentioned above, the traditional house of Trà Kiệu parish displays a board of information that includes statements attributed to the great-grandson of *Đội Phó*, the leader of the first company of Christians who directly fought back the Literati soldiers in 1885. Some pictures of Trà Kiệu church and French priests who served there in the nineteenth century are also collected and exhibited. Furthermore, the narratives around Our Lady of Trà Kiệu have been passed down and presented vividly throughout the annual great pilgrimage festival in late May. At that time, the event of Marian apparition to rescue Christians in Trà Kiệu appeared in sermons that were delivered to every pilgrim. Throughout the ritualisation of Marian apparitions, the Catholic church in Vietnam sought to inculcate the values of this religious event of Trà Kiệu into the communal minds of pilgrims.

The stories surrounding Trà Kiệu parish in the late nineteenth century were repeatedly narrated. In such a manner, the case of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu showed what Eric Hobsbawm described as “continuity with the past” [Hobsbawm 2013, 1].

The historical tradition of the pilgrimage centre of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu has been sustained vividly since it was constructed with a large space that could accommodate thousands of pilgrims. In contemporary times, following the religious policies of the Vietnamese state that ensure religious freedom, the great pilgrimage festival in Trà Kiệu becomes an event for Christians and spiritual visitors gathering (see **Fig. 4**). On this occasion, as my observation at the fieldtrip between May 29 and 30, 2025, many pilgrims engaged in spiritual popular practices. These practices were seen on the Bửu Châu Hill, where the Shrine of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu is located. It is interesting that on the top of this hill there is a deep well, which is folkly called “Giếng Tiên” (Fairy Well) with a surplus of water every season of the year. Pilgrims come to take water and drink directly, with the belief that this kind of water, bestowed by Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, cures their illness. Some of them brought the plastic cans of water from that well home, laying them on the altar of God to use when needed. They even shared such a kind of water for their fellowships in villages.



**Fig. 4.** The Procession of the Palanquin of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu from the parish church to the pilgrimage centre. Photo: The author

At the pilgrimage centre of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, as I conversed with a female Christian pilgrim from Kontum in the Central Highland of Vietnam on May 30, 2025, she said that she brought such water back home to allocate it to the elders and sick individuals. On the same morning of May 30, 2025, another Christian talked to me that that kind of water was believed to treat her in cases of sickness. It was noted that, as this Christian said, prayers should be practised before drinking such water. Along with this spiritual folk belief, Christians, when making pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, expressed their gratitude to her through another popular practice. As observed, on the wall surrounding the shrine of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, there are a lot of cement boards with engraved grateful words made by pilgrims. Many of such boards bore the common

expression “Tạ ơn Mẹ Trà Kiệu” (Gratitude to Our Lady of Trà Kiệu). Some of them even included the reasons why Christians expressed their thanks to Our Lady of Trà Kiệu. These reasons can be identified, such as Our Lady of Trà Kiệu rescuing Christians from traffic accidents, helping them to recover from illness, and so on. Such a religious practice has contributed to sustaining the legacy of the Marian apparition in Trà Kiệu, evoking the historical memories of the Catholic situation in the nineteenth century in Central Vietnam, and creating a religious tradition in Trà Kiệu. In that way, the past is not purely past, but has had a profound impact on the invention of the local religious identity of Catholicism in Trà Kiệu parish in particular and in Central Vietnam in general. Oral historical narratives of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu contributed to creating the appeal of the pilgrimage centre in Trà Kiệu, which attracted pilgrims and spiritual tourists from various areas of Vietnam, even from overseas.

### Conclusion

At present, the Pilgrimage centre of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu has held the annual great pilgrimage festival in late May. The accounts of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu in the nineteenth century are freely shared with the public. The role of Our Lady of Trà Kiệu is further interpreted as that of a protective mother of Christians and pilgrims, or spiritual tourists, whenever they face challenges in their contemporary lives. The dispersed historical memory of Trà Kiệu parish in the nineteenth century, especially, has become a form of heritage among local Catholics. It does not pull them backward. Conversely, such a heritage has served as an impulse to strengthen Catholic faith. Furthermore, it contributes to developing spiritual tourism in Trà Kiệu, attracting tourists and increasing income for local people living around the pilgrimage area. The case of the Trà Kiệu pilgrimage centre demonstrates the resilience of Catholics in Vietnam. Despite facing numerous historical challenges, they have upheld their faith by constructing the pilgrimage sites and affirming their significant place on the religious map of the country.

<sup>1</sup> On 1 July 2025, Quảng Nam province and Đà Nẵng city were merged into one by the name of Đà Nẵng city.

<sup>2</sup> “Ủy ban Nhân dân huyện Duy Xuyên” (2024), *Tóm tắt lịch sử di tích quốc gia Nhà thờ Ngũ Xả Trà Kiệu*, ngày 9 tháng 5.

<sup>3</sup> “Trà Kiệu – Trung tâm Thánh Mẫu Giáo phận Đà Nẵng” (n.d.), *Đất – Người – Đạo*, Bảng thông tin trước cửa nhà thờ Trà Kiệu.

<sup>4</sup> M. Geoffroy, with a full name Marie-Julien Geoffroy, was born in 1871 in France and passed away in 1918 in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh. During the period of 1894–1918, he served as a missionary in Qui Nhon in Cochinchina, which is now part of Central and South Vietnam. Source: *Irfa* (n.d.), “Marie-Julien Geoffroy 1871–1918”, available at: <https://irfa.paris/en/missionnaire/2119-geoffroy-marie-julien/> (accessed December 15, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> This information was retrieved from the board with the title: “Ông Đội Phở (viết theo lời kể của chất nội là ông Ba Gioan tức Trương Văn Trị)”, which is now placed inside the traditional house of Trà Kiệu parish.

<sup>6</sup> This is a Vietnamese sentence recorded by Father M. Geffroy. It is quite different from the present-day Vietnamese. That difference reflects the situation of Vietnamese language at that time. In addition, Vietnamese accent in Central Vietnam has often differed in pronunciation from that of the northern region.

<sup>7</sup> Ong Pho here means Ông Đội Phở with his real name is Trương Văn Phiếu was born in 1811. His biography is recorded in the tradition house of Trà Kiệu parish.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Maillard (1851–1907) (Vietnamese name: Thiên) was a French missionary of MEP. He oversaw Phú Thượng, one parish in Quảng Nam, located about 40 km from Trà Kiệu. See biography of Maillard on: *Irfa* (n.d.), “Jean Maillard 1851–1907”, available at: <https://irfa.paris/en/missionnaire/1521-maillard-jean/> (accessed December 18, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Original French version: “Dès le commencement du siège, le P. Bruyère avait placé une statue de la sainte Vierge sur une table au milieu de sa maison, avec un clerge de chaque côté. Toutes les fois qu’il fallait sortir pour repousser une attaque, on allumait les cierges, et ceux qui ne pouvaient pas prendre part au combat, comme les vieillards et les enfants, récitaient le chapelet en commun. L’ennemi repoussé, les combattants revenaient rendre grâce à la Bonne Mère de leur victoire. Ils se prosternaient devant son image en tenant en main leurs lances dont quelques-unes é taient encore teintes de sang, et ne se relevaient qu’après une longue et fervente prière” [M. Gefroy... 1886, 443].

<sup>10</sup> Original Vietnamese version: “Vào thập niên 50–60, trong những buổi đọc kinh trưa Tháng Hoa kính Mẹ (tháng 5) trên Nhà thờ Núi (ngày nay gọi là Đền Mẹ Bửu Châu), bọn trẻ chúng tôi bao giờ cũng đi thật sớm để nghe các bậc cha ông kể lại những sự tích về Đức Mẹ hiện ra để cứu nguy cho Giáo xứ và những trận giao chiến với quân Văn Thân thuở 1885. Khi khôn lớn, chúng tôi cũng chỉ nhớ lơ mờ đứt đoạn về những biến cố đã được kể lại, một phần do tuổi nhỏ chúng tôi không thể nhớ hết, phần khác do các bậc cha ông khi kể lại cũng tùy theo trí nhớ của mình, có chỗ quên chỗ nhớ, chỗ thiếu chỗ thừa”. See: [Phạm 2020, 11].

<sup>11</sup> Original Vietnamese version: “Trà Kiệu trước kia có tên gọi là Simhapura (Su Tử Thành). Quân Văn Thân khi tấn công đã đặt pháo trên đồi để bắn qua nhà thờ chính. Ngài (tức là Đức Mẹ) đã hiện ra năm 1885 để ‘che chở đàn con của mình’. Đức Mẹ hiện ra cho những người ngoại đạo ở đây thấy. Một bà bên ngoại nhìn thấy đã lên trình bày với Đức Cha và bà đó đã trở lại đạo”. This was recorded in my field diary in the afternoon of 29 May 2025 in Trà Kiệu, p. 7.

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Зионг Ван Б'єн

### Відтворення історичного фрагмента в'єтнамського католицизму XIX століття через паломницький центр Богородиці Чак'єу

Паломницький центр Богородиці Чак'єу, розташований у Центральному В'єтнамі, є важливим релігійним і духовно-туристичним осередком, який щороку приваблює тисячі відвідувачів. Упродовж кінця XIX століття це місце зазнало численних потрясінь, коли розгорнувся рух учених-літератів (Văn Thân), що охопив багато парафій. Водночас парафія Чак'єу продемонструвала стійкість, поступово відновившись і ставши одним із визначних центрів паломництва та духовного туризму сучасного католицизму в Центральному В'єтнамі. Однак цей випадок часто залишається поза увагою досліджень історії в'єтнамського католицизму. Спираючись на міждисциплінарний підхід, дослідження має на меті відтворити історичний наратив парафії Чак'єу XIX століття, частково реконструюючи фрагмент історії католицизму у В'єтнамі. У статті спершу з'ясовано історичний і культурний контекст місцевості Чак'єу. Далі проаналізовано повідомлення про об'явлення Діви Марії в Чак'єу та його чудесний вплив на консолідацію парафіян у протистоянні з опозиційними силами. Наступним кроком акцентовано способи, за допомогою яких парафія Чак'єу прагне підтримувати й переосмислювати історичну традицію марійної побожності, перетворюючи це місце на відомий паломницький центр, покликаний задовольняти духовні потреби християн. У такий спосіб дослідження також прагне висвітлити, що саме пережили християни в умовах руху вчених-літератів і як їхні наступники зберігають традицію марійної побожності до сьогодення.

**Ключові слова:** Богородиця Чак'єу; в'єтнамський католицизм; духовний туризм; історичний фрагмент; паломницький центр; рух учених-літератів

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