



**THE QUALITIES OF AN EMPEROR IN THE IMAGE
OF THE TOAD – A NEW ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE
IN MEDIEVAL VIETNAMESE POETRY**

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Abstract:

Vietnamese medieval literature, spanning nearly a thousand years, achieved brilliant successes, one of the most remarkable being Nom literature, primarily Nom poetry ((the traditional Vietnamese script). Medieval Vietnamese Nom poetry flourished from the 15th century with famous authors, such as Nguyen Trai, Le Thanh Tong, and Tao Dan Poetry Group, and later reached its peak in the 18th century with Nguyen Du, Doan Thi Diem, Ho Xuan Huong... Le Thanh Tong and Tao Dan Poetry Group left behind a representative collection of Nom poems, including Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection. In this collection, besides expressing emotions about natural phenomena and historical figures, the authors also focused on themes familiar and commonplace in Vietnamese rural life. One particularly noteworthy poem is "Thiem thu", which describes a toad. But what is special here is that the author has impressively portrayed the image of the toad from its appearance and characteristics, and from a cultural perspective, the toad has embodied the noble qualities of an emperor.

Keywords: Vietnamese Nom poetry, Tao Dan Poetry Group, Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection, qualities of an emperor, metaphor

1. Statement of the problem

In classical literature, especially in classical Eastern literature, the techniques of descriptive imagery, metaphor, and simile are often used with specific artistic intentions of the author. When describing or commenting on something, the author often incorporates a deeper meaning so that the reader can understand and feel the creator's purpose. Classical poetry often favors objects that are symbols of aesthetics, such as the moon, flowers, wind, snow, mountains, waterfalls, etc. However, in medieval Vietnamese Nom poetry, there is also a theme favored by many poets, which is poetry

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praising simple objects and events closely associated with Vietnamese rural life. These objects, through the pen of the poet, appear both familiar and express the author's artistic intentions. Medieval Vietnamese Nom poetry, from the 15th century, through authors such as Nguyen Trai, Le Thanh Tong, Tao Dan Poetry Group, to later periods with Nguyen Binh Khiem, Ho Xuan Huong, and Nguyen Dinh Chieu, never lacked poems praising objects, things close to the lives of Vietnamese farmers, such as banana trees, fans, dogs, toads, ants, jackfruit... These poems are characteristic literary products of medieval Vietnamese Nom poetry.

Vietnamese literature from the 15th century onwards achieved significant success in national pronunciation writing (literature in the Nom script). During the reign of King Le Thanh Tong, literary and artistic activities flourished, and along with the emergence of a large creative force came a group of poets, led by King Le Thanh Tong, known as the Tao Dan Poetry Group. Their main activities were composing and reciting poetry and literary criticism. From composing poems in Chinese characters for the king to creating works in the Nom script, they achieved noteworthy successes.

In recent years, research on the Tao Dan Poetry Group in Vietnam has also received attention, with initial studies mainly focusing on the group's origins, number of members, and the roles of its members. It is possible to mention the article by researcher Lam Giang in the Han Nom Journal in 1987 with the title "*Initial study of Tao Dan Poetry Group*" [1], or the article by two authors Mai Xuan Hai and Bui Duy Tan with the title "*Again discussing Tao Dan Poetry Group during the Le Thanh Tong era*" [2], also published in the Han Nom Journal in 1997. Researchers also began to study the poetic value of the Tao Dan Poetry Group. The most valuable document is probably the Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection [3], introduced by two professors, Pham Trong Diem and Bui Van Nguyen, published in 1982. Besides that, it is also necessary to mention articles in and outside the country, such as the article "*Tao Dan Poetry Group - Poetry, the universe and the state institution during the Hong Duc era (1470 - 1497)*" [4] by researcher John K. Whitmore, translated by author Tran Hai Yen and published in the Literature Journal in 1996. Professor Bui Duy Tan also has two articles revolving around the poetry of Tao Dan Poetry Group are *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection – A great work of Vietnamese literature of the 15th century* [5] and "*Tao Dan Poetry Group – “Quynh Uyen Cuu Ca” and the Role of Le Thanh Tong*" [6] were both published in the Literature Journal. In general, these research works have summarized the basic value of the Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection in the flow of Vietnamese literature. However, the above studies have not yet delved into the study of specific content aspects; therefore, studying the value of each poem in the entire collection is necessary. The study of the poem "*Thiem thu*" in this collection also aims at that purpose.

2. Research Content

2.1 Tao Dan Poetry Group with the Group of Poems Praising Objects

During the Later Le Dynasty, especially under the reign of Le Thanh Tong, Vietnamese literature had many great achievements, especially the birth of the Tao Dan Poetry Group. Besides writing in Chinese characters, the authors of the Group also focused on writing national pronunciation poetry (Nom poetry). These works were compiled by later generations into a collection of poems called *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection*. According to Professor Bui Van Nguyen's survey, "The complete *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection* currently has 328 poems, divided into five parts" [3;14], including Heaven and Earth, Human, Landscape, Object and Leisure. Accordingly, Object has 69 poems praising objects from familiar folk to elegant and romantic such as vegetables, potatoes, ants, toads, flowers, plum blossoms, bamboo, pine trees...

The national pronunciation poetry praising objects in the *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection* both inherits the vernacular poetry of Nguyen Trai from the early 15th century and serves as a precursor to vernacular poetry in later periods, such as the works of Nguyen Binh Khiem and Ho Xuan Huong. A special feature of national pronunciation poetry is that when poets write poems praising an object, they do not simply describe the object itself, but also consider its inherent value. Furthermore, the authors in the Tao Dan Poetry Group were all profound scholars or of noble birth, so their perception and evaluation of objects were also somewhat unique. In the *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection*, there is a section of poems praising objects called "Pham Vat Mon" (a category about various objects). Besides objects and phenomena commonly included in poetry such as wind, snow, moon, flag, poetry, flowers, wine, etc., there are also ordinary things familiar to the lives of Vietnamese people such as: potatoes, vegetables, stove, vegetable-headed old man, trivet, conical hat, toad, flea, ant, needle, kite, scarecrow, fishing net, earthenware teapot, mosquito, chicken, duck egg, mill, and swing. Most poems praising objects have two layers of meaning. Firstly, the object is described with its most basic attributes; secondly, hidden behind these characteristics may be qualities related to human beings, or stories originating from historical records. From this, the object mentioned is suddenly clothed in a noble and elegant garment. For example, the banana tree, familiar to the Vietnamese countryside with its soft trunk, is likened by the author of the *Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection* to a sword chasing away invaders, with the leaves resembling a flag of peace. Furthermore, the banana tree is associated with purity and cleanliness, with the water flowing within its trunk.

*"Doc gio guom dau kinh cuong khau,
La cuon co xuan tuong thai binh.
Trong sach xua sau ay tiet,
Moc mua nhuan goi trong minh."*

In this unique and evocative style, it's not surprising that even the most ordinary, and sometimes somewhat unsightly, animals in nature are endowed with admirable qualities by the authors. One of the animals familiar to Vietnamese people, mentioned in *Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection*, is the toad. The poets have written a poem praising the toad, titled "Thiem thu", as follows:

*“Chu thuo nen than tam ao soi
Chon nghiem tham tham mot minh ngoi
Nang tay may phut oai hum nep
Tac luoi doi lan chung kien lui
Mung may dan con ra chiu am
De con a to ket lam doi
Mieu duong co thu vang lung tieng,
Giup duoc dan lang keo nang noi.”*

Initially, readers might only notice the author's depiction of an animal commonly found in nature, but upon analyzing each line, one discovers the regal qualities embodied in this ordinary creature.

It can be said that using ordinary objects to speak of great and extraordinary things is a very distinctive literary style of the Tao Dan Poetry Group during the reign of King Le Thanh Tong in Vietnam.

2.2 The Toad - A Noble Mythical Creature

Returning to the poem about the toad (*Thiem thu*) mentioned above, the author of the *Hong Duc National pronunciation poetry collection* did not use the Vietnamese name "toad" for the title, but instead used the Chinese name "*Thiem thu*", which partly shows the solemnity in naming the object by the group of authors. This technique also creates uniqueness and a court literary style for Tao Dan Poetry Group of that period. The name "thiem thu," besides expressing solemnity, also evokes the image of a mythical creature in Chinese legend, "*Liu Hai playing with the Golden Toad*". This is a traditional Chinese folk legend, originating from Taoist stories, with the main content being a love story. The core character of this legend is Liu Xuan Ying (also known as Hai Thiem), who lived during the Later Liang Dynasty in China. After being enlightened by Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongxin, he became an immortal. His name was later separated into the character Liu Hai and the Golden Toad (Kim Thiem). Thus, the Golden Toad itself is an embodiment of the immortal.

Furthermore, in classical Chinese culture, the toad has a very special dwelling place, which is the moon. The sun and the moon are two symbols of light for ancient Eastern people. For the Chinese, the sun symbolizes the yang principle, and the moon symbolizes the yin principle; the sun is hot, the moon is cold... In the seventh volume of the *Huainanzi*, the book "*Huainanzi*," King Liu An of Huainan wrote: "In the sun there is a crow, and in the moon there is a toad." Thus, the toad's dwelling place is the moon, one

of the highest positions in nature, where there is a palace (the Guanghan Palace, the moon palace), so the toad possesses the character and demeanor of a king.

In Vietnamese folklore, toads hold a significant status. There's a Vietnamese saying, "The toad is the nephew of the God of Heaven," stemming from the folk tale "*The Toad Sues Heaven*". During a year of severe drought, when all living things were on the verge of dying, the toad decided to ascend to Heaven to seek justice. Along the way, the toad encountered crabs, bears, tigers, bees, and foxes. Upon reaching Heaven, the Jade Emperor sent a rooster, a dog, and the God of Thunder to fight the toad, but these creatures were successively defeated by the toad's companions. Finally, the Jade Emperor had to invite the toad in, agreeing to send rain down to Earth whenever the toad gnashed its teeth. From then on, the Vietnamese folklore has passed down the following verse:

*"Con Coc la cau ong Troi
Ai ma danh Coc thi Troi danh cho."*

Although this is a folk tale, it's clear that the toad holds a significant place in Vietnamese culture.

Thus, in both Vietnamese and Chinese cultures, the image of the toad is not simply that of an ordinary, ugly-looking animal, but rather a creature with noble and regal qualities. Today, to attract wealth and good fortune, many people place images of toads holding gold coins in their homes, hoping for smooth business operations, good luck, and abundant income.

2.3. The poem "Thiem thu" in *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection*

Medieval Vietnamese poetry, when speaking of emperors, often associated them with noble and extraordinary things and phenomena such as dragons, five-colored clouds... Dang Minh Khiem, a poet who served as an official under King Le Thanh Tong, wrote in his poem about King Dinh Tien Hoang:

*"Thuy ung hoang long khai de vuong,
Tuoc binh thap nhi su quan cuong."* [8;74]

Translate:

*"An auspicious sign appears: the golden dragon, a great emperor emerges,
Suppressing the power of the twelve warlords."*

The author compares the emperor to a golden dragon to emphasize the nobility, greatness, and extraordinary qualities of a king.

Returning to the poem "Toad" in *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection*, this poem is essentially about a toad, with realistic descriptions such as the toad's rough skin, expressed through the phrase "*oak coat*"; the toad's sitting posture is depicted in the

second line, "*sitting alone in a solemn, secluded place*". However, from this second line onward, the toad acquires the characteristics of a monarch. "Solemn place" refers to a dignified place, the residence of those with high social status such as officials and kings. And in the following four lines, the emperor's qualities are further clearly expressed through the image of the toad:

*"Nang tay may phut oai hum nep,
Tac luoi doi lan chung kien lui.
Mung may dan con ra chiu am
De con a to ket lam doi."*

The toad's qualities even intimidated the tiger. The line "*with its hand raised for a few minutes, the tiger cowered*" evokes the folk tale of a contest between a tiger and a toad. Knowing the tiger intended to eat it, the toad proposed a competition: if the tiger won, it could eat the toad; if the toad won, the tiger would have to leave and not bother it anymore. The first part of the competition was a long jump. The two animals jumped across the river to see which one jumped further, proving stronger and winning. With its cleverness and resourcefulness, the toad grabbed the tiger's tail. When the tiger jumped to the other side, instinctively, it lashed its tail forward. The toad seized the opportunity to release the tiger's tail and landed in a bush in front of the tiger. The tiger was both surprised and angry. Seeing this, the toad told the tiger that it liked to eat tigers, had already devoured one before, and opened its mouth to show that it still had tiger fur clinging to it. Terrified, the tiger fled. Although small, the toad's resourcefulness turned danger into safety, allowing it to escape harm and strike fear into the heart of the king of the jungle. The author of Tao Dan Poetry Group also used this story to highlight the toad's intelligence. Even the ants, like soldiers, were under the toad's command. Thus, the toad's imposing presence intimidated even the large tiger, considered the king of the jungle, and controlled the small ants, which represented unity. This can be considered a kingly quality among all creatures.

In the fifth sentence, besides mentioning the biological characteristics of the toad, the author also uses wordplay to express the toad's aristocratic qualities. When a toad gives birth, its offspring will have the form of a tadpole; after a while, the tadpole loses its tail and transforms into the form of a toad. The author uses wordplay with the phrase "receiving warmth" to refer to the ancient custom of "inheriting warmth" in feudal society, where, when the king and officials held positions in society and the court, their descendants would enjoy the blessings of their ancestors. The transformation from tadpole to toad is also an expression of this "inheriting warmth" custom.

In the sixth sentence, the author of the *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection*, once again elevates the status of the toad. The toad can mate with "the beautiful maiden," that is, Chang'e, on the moon. Returning to the story mentioned in Liu An's *Huainanzi*, there is a toad on the moon. A Chinese folk tale recounts that Hou Yi asked for the elixir of immortality from the Queen Mother of the West, but Chang'e stole it and

fled to the moon, causing Hou Yi great sorrow and regret, leaving him with no way to continue the relationship. Afterwards, Chang'e transformed into a toad on the moon. Thus, in essence, the toad and Chang'e are of the same species and can therefore be a couple.

And in the last line of the poem "*Thiem thu*", the author of *Hong Duc national pronunciation collection* wrote: "*To help the villagers escape the scorching sun.*"

This is reminiscent of the Vietnamese folk tale of *the Toad Sues Heaven*. Thanks to the toad grinding its teeth, the people were saved from drought; thus, the toad could save the people. In the traditional thinking of the East, someone who saves the people from calamity can be considered a wise ruler, possessing the qualities of an emperor.

Overall, the toad embodies the qualities of a noble monarch, possessing majesty, a distinguished lineage, and being loved and even respected by the people.

3. Conclusion

Poetry aims at humanistic values; therefore, each poem is a product that beautifies human life. At the same time, every object, event, and phenomenon in life can serve as a subject for poetry. From a simple object, the author can embed certain values to express a particular artistic intention. The fact that the author of the *Hong Duc national pronunciation poetry collection* bestowed upon the toad noble qualities, even the spirit of an emperor, demonstrates a novel and unique artistic perspective in medieval Vietnamese literature. The poets not only demonstrated profound knowledge of nature and the folk culture of Vietnam and China, but also showed a breakthrough in artistic creation. This laid the groundwork for the later form of Nom poetry praising objects.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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