



ON THE ADAPTATION AND SURPASSING IN HUE'S CULTURE

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Abstract. Using logic and historical methods, comparison and contrast, in this article, the author clarifies that Hue's culture belongs to the central cultural region, which represents for Vietnam in the nineteenth century. Overcoming the unfavourable natural disasters and severe weather conditions, Hue's culture became the narrative of the spiritual and material life of Vietnam's last feudal dynasty. With positive values, Hue's culture has become the guarantee of Hue's identity. It is the energy source for the present and future development of Hue City in particular, and Thua Thien Hue province in general.

Keywords: Hue's culture, Hue's identity, adaptation, surpassing

1. Introduction

Hue City was the capital of the last feudal dynasty of Vietnam. During the very first days of opening the realm to the South, inheriting the spirit of *Binh Ngo Dai Cao*, the Nguyen lords affirmed that culture is an essential basis for establishing national sovereignty.

Hue's culture has been extracted from the harshness of natural conditions, human relations, and the resilient will of Hue's residents. The uniqueness of Hue's culture originated from adapting and surpassing. Adaptation means mastering nature and taking advantage of its negative aspects to serve humans to become the subject and object of culture. Surpassing is the preservation of cultural values that the cultural subject has created from practical activities and also the integration of the quintessence of other cultures. It is the cultural subject's selection according to its own purpose, creating Hue's cultural identity. Today, Hue's culture is an essential vehicle in developing Hue to become an Asian cultural centre.

2. Hue culture - an imprint of adaptation and surpassing

The cultural sub-region of Hue belongs to the Central cultural region, and “Nature has given Hue a unique appearance.” (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2008, p. 249). That appearance plays an essential role in creating Hue’s cultural identity. Observing the history formation of major cultures of mankind since ancient times, we can see how natural conditions affect the culture, for example, ancient Egypt – Mesopotamia culture. “Culture is created by people under specific economic, political, and social conditions. Still, culture is also influenced by natural conditions, climate, resources, landscapes, rivers, mountains, etc. These natural conditions have contributed to forming the attributes and cultural identity of a region, a nation, etc. People creating culture, in any circumstances, have a relationship with nature, realize both advantages and disadvantages, and find what nature can give culture unique influences and creative inspirations” (Pham Thi Hong Vinh, p.4, 2010).

Culture arises from nature through human daily activities. Therefore, “culture is a system of relations” (Phan Ngoc, p. 32, 1998). Different relationships create different cultural values, and the degree of penetration of these relationships determines the quality and level of each cultural space. What the identity of a cultural space or its appearance looks like is determined by the discrepancies and unity of the relations.

Hue’s culture is the integration of the relations of the cultural subject¹ with the natural environment, historical circumstances, and economic conditions, along with the adaptation and surpassing² of values of other regions and cultural spaces. Approaching Hue’s culture, one should never rely on instances. Hue’s residents and Hue’s culture are foreign to superficiality. It is also why Hue’s culture does not belong to the hasty category.

Hue’s culture penetrates the tenet of *Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, forming a unified system. Hue’s culture is like the voice and fingerprints of Hue’s people. Therefore, to understand Hue, one must comprehend Hue’s culture. To understand Hue’s culture, one must be aware of the subtle nature and depth of those relationships and be an insider. Through two lines of a poem by poet To Huu, “*Nỗi niềm chi rứa Huế ơi – Mà mưa xối xả trắng trời Thừa Thiên—* What are you (Hue) sorrow of – That you cause the pouring rain everywhere (Thua Thien)”, one can feel that it is the persistent rain, the constant rain, and the torrential rain. Rain chills a person to the bone. Rain causes clothes not to get dried. However, Hue’s residents do not often

¹ Only man is the subject of culture.

² “Surpassing means to absorb the new but to innovate it, but to innovate on the basis of an old that has also been renewed. It means protecting the old and the new so that it is suitable for the innovation that needs to be carried out.” *Surpassing* is transliterated from German *Aufheben* or French *dépassment*. (Phan Ngoc (1998, pp.. 28-29).

take these feelings seriously. The rain is only a matter of God, but it is the drops of culture and has become a life philosophy among Hue's residents. They find the tenderness of those drops in their contemplation.

From the perspective of culturology, it can be seen that, in Hue, human relationship with nature and the living environment is the relationship between adaptation and development³. It is *vô vi* (*vô vi*—act as if you do not act; act but others do not notice) in the true sense of Lao Tzu, a famous philosopher of ancient China. *Vô vi* is to obey the laws of the Tao⁴ and nature. Therefore, *vô vi* is an adaptation to existence. This adaptation has two meanings: the cultural subject adapts to the natural environment, and the environment interacts with the human adaptation. In that sense, nature is not only preserved and developed but also shows cultural subjects' respect for the human environment. Thus, adapting to the natural environment is a development and surpassing, which is an indicator of human creativity in the relationships with living conditions.

According to statistics, there are about 1,700 dishes in Vietnam, while Hue possesses around 1,300 menus (folk dishes, royal dishes⁵, and vegetarian dishes). Hue's cuisine is a multi-coloured picture whose creators are the diligent Hue women. In the minds of Hue's residents, that is the origin of "*Huế thương, Huế mình*" (Beloved Hue; Hue is mine).

Hue's everyday cuisine is the cuisine of rural life. The raw material that determines the taste of Hue is the *ruoc* (shrimp paste). Hue's beef noodle soup with lemongrass and shrimp flavour is famous everywhere. Another dish is *com hến*—mussel rice. Historically, it originates from cold rice—the leftover rice stuck to the bottom of the clay pot and could not be scraped off. It rests there overnight with the lid opened. The cold rice of yesterday can feed the hanger the following morning with all other things that can be picked up around the house. From the materials that make up the mussel rice and the imagination, one can envisage the philosophy of the interaction of the five elements *metal, wood, water, fire, and earth*. Few people can notice that Hue's mussel rice has an addictive quality⁶.

Uncomplicatedness (simple) does not mean mediocre. Simplicity still has the feature of ethereality. The simplicity bears the distinctive imprint of a cultural region. According to painter Pham Dang Tri (1920–1987), the colour of nature has become the colour of human life.

³ This can also be found in Hue Buddhism in the concept of impermanence.

⁴ Tao is the ontology, the law, and the operating way of all things.

⁵ There will be a separate article on this issue. In Hue, royal cuisine and popular cuisine are not a dividing wall like in feudal China, it's just a row of plants. See <https://www.bietko.com/2021/12/hang-rao-cay-xanh-xu-hue-dep-den-nao-long.html>.

⁶ "The smell of mussel rice, one can always remember" (Hong Duong).

“Is it because the natural colours in Hue are so beautiful that they captivate people's hearts and affect the colours created by people in daily life through candies, five-colour lanterns, and especially through richly dyed robes?” (Pham Dang Tri, 2003, p. 157). “As for purple, Hue’s women perceive it as an elegant colour. It does not look sad, just like a smile. It is not too passionate like jasmine but faintly like the frugal and delicate orchid. Therefore, women and girls often wear purple. Purple is a cold negative colour located at the bottom of the light spectrum, emitting short wavelengths and gentle light. However, Hue’s purple also has its own colour gamut. Hue’s purple is not the colour of hyacinth in the South or lilac in the North, nor is it the same as the deep purple of climbing spinach fruit juice as many people think. For the residents of the Ancient Capital, Hue’s purple does not turn to black or red but is just as dark as the colour of pupils’ ink on white paper”⁷.

Germans are proud and challenge anyone who can translate “dasein” and “sein” out of the German language and still have German meanings. Similarly, someone who understands *êm rúa*, *Huế thương*, *Huế mình*, *tím Huế* (leave it like that; I love Hue; Hue is mine; the purple of Hue) must be the one having tremendous connections with Hue. It is one of the manifestations of adaptation that has been socialized into Hue’s quality in culture. Therefore, the quality of culture is not only immersed in symbols or words but emerges when these symbols or words are named correctly.

Adaptation is a process of changes based on proper understanding of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. The role of subjectivity is displayed through adaptation. But an adaptation in the form of initiative is an adaptation of development. In this sense, Hue’s quality and Hue’s identity are shaped into *Hue’s ego* through that development.

Adaptation and surpassing have created and preserved cultural elements such as Hue’s dialect⁸ (Hue’s accent), customs, festivals, architecture, cuisine, poetry, beliefs in life, the philosophy of life, etc. It seems that is the way people bring souls into things. For Hue, the Perfume River is not only the geographical boundary of the City’s north and south sides. But looking at the water flowing, one can feel the poetic soul and tenderness of a Hue girl. The Perfume River⁹ is the shape of the heavenly blue *ao dai* (girls and women’s traditional dress).

⁷ https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ph%E1%BA%A1m_%C4%90%C4%83ng_Tr%C3%AD.

⁸ See: Pham Xuan Phung (2020), *Hue language in To Huu poetry*, Song Huong Magazine 380/10.

⁹ Perfume River or Huong Giang (香江) "Huong Giang originates from the right and left sources of the upper land of Thua Thien province, winding around fields and gardens, flowing through the capital, to Thuan An Estuary and then to the East Sea. On both sides of the streams, there is a variety of “*Acorus gramineus*”, which is an elixir of longevity, fragrant, growing on both sides of the stream, making the water turn out fragrant. Huong Giang (Perfume River) got its name because of that.

Source <https://baodanang.vn/channel/6059/201601/xuat-xu-ten-goi-song-huong-2463445/>.

Hue's natural features are likened the fanciful¹⁰ traits of a Hue girl, but it is the whimsy of loveliness, the whimsy of the charm. Still, if she is too *unpredictable*, the opposite side of the appeal will take place, leading to the loss of the magic charm. This reality sets out how to exploit and develop Hue from its cultural potential in the most reasonable and effective manner. *Never socialize the uniqueness massively in culture*. That is a valuable lesson learned from many countries where their rich cultures have been taken as the essence of development.

From the essence of Hue's culture, it can be seen that surpassing in Hue's culture is actually a process of screening and elimination to refine a value system. This process depends on the capacity and purpose of the cultural subject. Therefore, not everything has the ability to surpass. This can be clearly seen in architecture, art, music, and even in cuisine. It is "Borderless expressions in the cultural life – royal art and folk art under the Nguyen feudal dynasty"¹¹. These fields only show signs of surpassing because, here, the accumulation of quantity is not sufficient to change the quality. Still, to a certain extent, the diversity and richness of the form and shape of culture are preserved.

Hue's culture is viewed as a symbol of the "Vietnamese culture of the nineteenth century" (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2008, p. 251) with the outstanding characteristic of reflection¹². Therefore, it is not wrong to claim that Hue's culture tends towards philosophy. Contemplation is evident not only in intellectual culture but also popular culture.

Hue's residents and material activities in Hue are the determining factors of the function of culture in social life. The natural conditions and the living environment substantially affect the *personality* and *mode of thinking*¹³ of the subject. However, when promoted, the dynamism and positivity of consciousness will more or less overcome the limitations and restrictions of nature.

The development of human thought indicates that the forms of social consciousness in the process of reflecting social existence affect each other under the command of a dominant social consciousness form. In the Nguyen Dynasty, it was Confucian thought¹⁴. In other words,

Across the Perfume River are Dap Da Dam, Da Vien Bridge (Bach Ho), Phu Xuan Bridge, Trang Tien Bridge, Cho Dinh Bridge, Kim Long Bridge and the upcoming Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

¹⁰ The quality showing the negative side of natural conditions that are not favorable for human life.

¹¹ Nguyen Huu Thong (2008), *The cultural and artistic life of the Nguyen Dynasty: the boundary between the royal court and folklore*, Song Huong Magazine, no. 235.

¹² Poet Do Thanh Binh, in the poem *Hue – Love*, seems to have had a sharp view of Hue as: "a gentleness mixed with a little contemplation".

¹³ Nguyen Tien Dung (editor, 2016), Bui Nguyen Han and Nguyen Hoang Tue Quang, *Textbook of Culturology*, Publishing House: Hue University, p. 111.

¹⁴ It was not until April 1919 that the Confucian-style exam ended in Vietnam.

Hue's culture resides under Confucianism – *Confucianism of the nineteenth century*. Confucianism has given Hue a *royal cultural image*¹⁵.

Right from the time of expanding the territory to the South, the Nguyen Lords affirmed “establishing sovereignty with cultural factors”¹⁶. Following that tradition, King Gia Long (1762–1820) did not consider the economy seriously when he chose Hue as the capital. This is the Achilles heel in his vision of the relationship between culture and economy. Taking culture as an advantage before the economy more or less reduced the power of the impact of social consciousness in the effects on social existence, especially the formation of elite cultural schools, representing the look of the Nguyen Dynasty. “Vietnamese feudalism has not yet met both objective and subjective factors to form a line of aristocratic intellectual culture and art, existing independently and in parallel with folk art”¹⁷.

Hue's culture developed under the conditions that the economic support was modest, creating the uniqueness¹⁸ of this cultural space to uphold *loyalty* not only in culture but also in human life. This *Hue loyalty* has its drawbacks. When that loyalty completely separates from the economic base, it becomes precarious: “Hue's residents live, eat, dress, and behave in a particular way. Those who do not understand Hue would think that Hue's residents are scrupulous and stylish. Those who understand Hue's residents and know about Hue's culture would say: “*Kiểu Huế là rúa. Có chi mà thắc mắc.*” (“Hue's style is like that. There's nothing to wonder about.”)

One of the typical characteristics of Hue's behavioural culture is the “*mệ*” – a term implicitly indicating a person belonging to the royal bloodline. This culture was initiated and nurtured by those living in the lords' houses surrounded by high walls and closed gates. Originally, “*mệ*” was the word Hue's residents used to call women over 60 years old. It is also the word children call their grandmother: maternal grandmother, paternal grandmother or aunt grandmother. But the word “*mệ*” in Hue's language is also used to address the princes and princesses of the Nguyen Phuoc clan, whether male or female. These nobles used “*mệ*” when talking to outsiders as a way to express their noble origin: I am of aristocratic lineage, having a bloodline relationship with the golden emperor in the Forbidden City. They used “*mệ*” to

¹⁵ To this day, Hue's residents still remember yellow is the colour of the king, blue is the colour of the royal family when roofing tiles. The king's dragon has five claws, the prince's dragon has one claw less.

¹⁶ Nguyen Su and Pham Thi Thu Hang (2014), *On the relationship between kingship and theocracy in the socio-political thought of King Minh Mang from the perspective of cultural heritage*, Cultural Heritage Magazine, 2(47), p. 62.

¹⁷ Nguyen Huu Thong (2008), *The cultural and artistic life of the Nguyen Dynasty: the boundary between the royal court and folklore*, Song Huong Magazine, no. 235.

¹⁸ It is what is used to distinguish one particular from another.

distinguish themselves from other classes of people in the imperial capital. “Mê” had a private life hidden within the walls of lords’ houses. Every time “mê” went out of those mossy walls, “mê” had a particular way of acting, both arrogant and tolerant, willing to give grace to those inferior, no matter if they possessed more wealth and money than “mê”¹⁹.

“Mê” culture and “mê” personality created Hue’s lifestyle. Hue’s lifestyle seems to be a faint shadow of the Confucian conception of scholars. In terms of personality, a scholar is someone who would rather die than suffer humiliation; he is a wealthy person, knightly and full of compassion. Therefore, scholars are respected by people. When discussing the scholar in the *Analects*, Confucius (551–479) points out that there are genuine scholars and there are “unreal names” (*hữu danh vô thực*—All that glitters is not gold.) The “unreal name” is the mismatch between the inner and outer connotations of the scholar and is often revealed when facing economic issues: Being perhaps unintentional all day, “mê” immersed in reciting poetry, playing chess, harping, chatting, etc., so “mê” just ate a sweet potato or a piece of cassava. “Mê” just forgot about eating. Until it was dark, “mê” slowly put the only remaining can of rice in the clay pot and went down to the river to clean the rice. In “mê”’s hand was a candle flickering. “Mê”’s hands were shaking because of hunger. “Mê” did not want anyone to see this scene. But accidentally, that day, at the riverbank were still people. One of the dwellers said:

““Mê”, it’s late at night. Why do you still go down to the river? If you accidentally stumble, you will be miserable.”

When the matter had come to this point, “mê” answered slowly, in a disrespectful voice:

“Who’s that? Today, I have a good mood, and I want to come down here to drop off the lamp for fun. Wow, the river surface at night is shimmering with white candlelight, and you can see all the beauty of Hue.” After saying that, “mê” breathed a sigh of relief; holding the candle, “mê” plugged it into the earthen pot with rice and letting it float on the river. “Mê”’s dinner is floating away.

“What do you feel? Is it pretty?”

No one said a word, but they all understood. That’s what “mê” was!²⁰

Do not rush to conclude that the *Hue lifestyle* is not positive, but rather consider the *Hue lifestyle* as a unique phenomenon of Hue’s behavioural culture. From a cultural perspective, any cultural phenomenon has two sides. The *Hue way of life* reveals the pride of a scholar, but that

¹⁹ Tran Duc Anh Son (2021), *Hue Style*, Publishing House: Universal. Ho Chi Minh City, p. 71.

²⁰ Nguyen Huu Thong (2008), *The cultural and artistic life of the Nguyen Dynasty: the boundary between the royal court and folklore*, Song Huong Magazine, no. 235.

spirit seems a bit too outrageous²¹. Suppose we put Hue's lifestyle with K. Marx's (1818–1883) conception of human nature²² and the interaction between phenomena and nature in the process of reflection. In that case, we can see that Hue's lifestyle is just a phenomenon that does not bear much nature. However, in terms of their philosophy of life, Vietnamese people seem to be leaning towards the concept: "*Giấy dù có rách tả tơi; Cái lễ phải giữ cho đời tiếng thơm*" (A clean fast is better than a dirty breakfast).

3. Conclusion

We can preliminarily conclude that *Hue's culture is a combination of unity and conflict* from the culturological approach and interdisciplinary methods. The driving force of the creation and development of Hue's culture lies in the factors constituting the human environment in Hue. *Hue's culture is a part of Hue's ego*.

Unity is just isolated cases of differences that have determined the diversity, multi-dimensionality and richness of Hue's culture. From the very beginning, Hue's culture was not a closed system. The openness of the system allows Hue to assimilate and transform the positive elements of other cultural spaces to Hue's culture. The openness also allows Hue to filter out the cultural elements that lacked behind in the social consciousness.

Like every other cultural entity, Hue's culture is not a perfect block of jade. In numerous cases, because perfection is so emphasized, the reactions of that perfection itself are usually hidden. The problem is that all spiritual values have meaning only when they are materialized in life. It is the strength of culture. It is also the soft power of culture.

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²¹ See also: Thanh Tinh (April 1975), *Motherland*, Publishing House: But Viet, SG, Section 7 Mr. Hoang's son.

²² C. Marx and Ph. Engels (1995), "In its reality, human nature is the sum total of social relations". Collection, v. 3. Publisher: National politics, Hanoi, p. 11.

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