

Realist Sensibility in the Chinese Poetry of Nguyen Dynasty Royal Poets

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ABSTRACT

The royal poets of the Nguyen Dynasty, living in the 19th century—a period marked by intense historical upheavals and the flourishing of literature in both Chinese and Nom scripts—offer a rich subject for study. Examining the realist sensibility in their Chinese poetry involves dissecting both natural and social realities. Natural reality encompasses a diverse spectrum of nature, ranging from majestic and sublime, sometimes harsh and perilous, to familiar, simple, and romantically beautiful. Social reality is depicted through two contrasting portraits: the idealized vision of society and the actual, often turbulent, societal conditions. This analysis highlights the role of realist elements in shaping and reflecting the poets' consciousness. Exploring the realist sensibility of nature and society also allows us to uncover profound humanistic values in court poetry—values that transcend the boundaries of status and class in old society, particularly in the works of royal poets like Tung Thien and Tuy Ly. This study surveys the content of a selected corpus of Chinese poetry, limited to a microcosm of 90 poems, employing four traditional methods in rotation: literary analysis, literary history, comparison, and quantitative statistics. This approach helps dismantle stereotypes and lift the veil obscuring the true personas of historical figures faded by time.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, realist sensibility, royal poets, Nguyen Dynasty, humanistic values.

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century sounded urgent bells, propelling Vietnam's feudal regime onto the stage of history. In contrast to political collapse and social turmoil, the literary scene during this period became more vibrant than ever. It is regarded as the pinnacle of classical Vietnamese literature, achieving brilliant milestones. Among these, the Chinese poetry by poets of Nguyen Dynasty royal descent constitutes an immense corpus compared to the combined literary output of preceding centuries. However, amidst the inevitable and harsh currents of their era, these poets became overshadowed and gradually forgotten when compared to other writers from the scholar-gentry or urban classes. When discussing this period's literature, names like Nguyen Du, Ho Xuan Huong, Cao Ba Quat, Pham Quy Thich, and Trinh Hoai Duc are often cited. These were writers who endured great trials, shared the common pain of human existence, and resonated with the humanistic voice of their time. Meanwhile, most court compositions remained steeped in the feudal ideology's conventional chanting, turning a blind eye to contemporary realities. Studying realist sensibility through natural and social elements helps explain (and somewhat vindicate) the worldview and creative thought of this unique group of poets. This is also a journey rarely trodden by literary researchers and critics thus far.

Aiming to analyze the manifestations and significance of realist sensibility in the Chinese poetry of Nguyen Dynasty royal poets from a content perspective, and to determine the position of these works within the flow of literary history, this study focuses on the Chinese poetry of royal poets—emperors, princes, and princesses—during the first four reigns, from Emperor Gia Long to Tu Duc (1802–1883). However, the imperial poetry of Emperors Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc alone exceeds 15,000 poems, while the oeuvre of individual princes like Mien Tham and Mien Trinh approaches 4,000 poems each. Due to limitations in engraved texts, translations, and the scope of a single study, we selected and analyzed the content of 90 poems based on their

prominence, representing three author groups: emperor-poets (Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, Tu Duc), prince-poets (Mien Tham, Mien Trinh, Mien Buu), and princess-poets (Mai Am, Hue Pho). This selection serves as a microcosm, providing a comprehensive overview of Nguyen Dynasty court poetry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Vietnamese linguistic practice, the term “sensibility” is commonly used to denote “a special form of perception, not through reason or concepts, but through intuition and direct feeling” (Nguyen Thi Tuyet, 2015). This term carries a dynamic connotation, shifting with the unique identity of each perceiving subject. In the realm of art, sensibility directly participates in the processes of reception and creation. For artists, realist sensibility primarily stems from two elements: nature and society. These are not merely external objects or events but also materials through which poets perceive and recreate their artistic worlds. Realist sensibility is not just surface reflection but a deep understanding of the essence of things, phenomena, the laws governing nature and society, and the human conditional theme that took root in society and permeated the orthodox poetry of the late medieval court.

For a long time, the literary works of Nguyen Dynasty royal poets faced harsh criticism. This trend can be explained by academic research conditions, political contexts, and the lingering effects of a brutal war period. Any action perceived contrary to the nation’s collective interest was naturally condemned as reactionary or negative. Yet, if the legacy of this dynasty were truly valueless, it would not have sparked such intense and persistent debates. As always, a gap exists between objective history and perceived history. Post-1985 Renovation, the approach to studying Nguyen Dynasty cultural and literary heritage has become more objective and open. However, research on the Chinese poetry of Nguyen Dynasty royal poets remains relatively “scarce” compared to the broader achievements in Vietnamese medieval literature studies.

As early as the 1960s, Emperor Thieu Tri’s poem “Vu trung son thuy” was highlighted by the editorial board of the Vietnam Archaeological Journal, calling on contemporary scholars to study and interpret it. With a structure of just 56 Chinese characters that can be read as 64 different poems, the work posed a challenge to the academic community. Behind its intricate palindromic and interlocking techniques lies a multifaceted portrayal of landscapes in rain from an emperor-poet’s perspective. For preservation and documentation, in 1991, a research group on Han-Nom studies, including Phan Thuan An, Pham Duc Thanh Dung, Phan Thanh Hai, and Nguyen Phuoc Hai Trung, published “Thanh Kinh Nhi Thap Canh – Thieu Tri’s Poetry,” emphasizing: “It was the human resonance with nature that enabled Emperor Thieu Tri to craft 20 poems about scenic landmarks, bearing the vivid traces of the golden capital’s landscapes” (Phan Thuan An et al., 1991, p. 261). Similarly, in studying Prince Tuy Ly’s Chinese poetry, researcher Phan Van Cac noted: “This royal poet was so naturally and endearingly close to nature and rural Vietnam” (Phan Van Cac, 2010). When introducing the poetry of Princess Tam Khanh, particularly Mai Am, translator Luong An concluded: “Landscape poetry constitutes a significant portion of the Dieu Lien Poetry Collection [...] expressing a deep, affectionate attachment to nature” (Luong An, 2004, p. 41). These studies raise the question: How did the element of nature influence the Chinese poetry of Nguyen Dynasty royal poets? From this, the first research hypothesis (H1) emerges: The realist sensibility of nature in the poetry of Nguyen Dynasty royal poets is reflected through a diverse natural landscape, from majestic and sublime, sometimes fierce and raging, to simple, intimate, and romantically poetic.

Loving nature—trees, grass, flowers, moonlight, and the surrounding living space—elevates into a love for lofty mountains and vast rivers, reflecting the homeland’s image. The sensibility of natural reality is closely intertwined with social reality, both revolving around the shared theme of human life. As researcher Tran Dinh Su observed regarding the realistic portrayal in Confucian scholars’ poetry: “The path to realism and realist literature is not singular. In medieval literature, describing an event as real often aimed only to prove its authenticity, in the spirit of ‘true records’ like historical chronicles” (Tran Dinh Su, 1998, p. 444). In this spirit of immediate and objective documentation, Princess Mai Am wrote numerous poems expressing joy at news of military victories and the retreat of invaders. Pride in the dynasty is vividly conveyed through idealized depictions of the four social classes—fishermen, woodcutters, farmers, and herders—appearing frequently in royal poetry. By the late 19th century, amid tumultuous historical changes and the brutality of Western invaders, Prince Mien Tham’s poetry transcended the “deaf and blind” feudal ideology, openly expressing thoughts and feelings about the nation’s and people’s fate. This leads to the second research hypothesis (H2): The realist

sensibility of society is deeply polarized, ranging from an idealized portrait of peace and prosperity to a realistic depiction of turbulent upheaval.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the context of modernization, literary research has become increasingly diverse with new, profound approaches. However, given that the Chinese poetry of medieval Nguyen Dynasty royal poets has received limited academic attention, we prioritize the most traditional method: literary analysis. For deeper exploration, we apply the method of literary history. To study a literary work’s content and form fully and accurately, it must be situated within its historical, cultural, and social context. Combining traditional literary analysis with literary history enables the study to delve deeper and broader, unlocking cultural codes and understanding the work’s value in its creative context. Additionally, we employ supplementary methods like comparison and quantitative statistics to highlight similarities and differences in content and style across the three royal poet groups: emperors, princes, and princesses.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Realist Sensibility of Nature

From the roots of Southeast Asian wet-rice civilization, nature is both a divine force inspiring awe and fear among farmers and a lifelong companion. In art, nature is an inexhaustible wellspring, from folk songs to the classical verses of great poets. Medieval poetry is always imbued with natural imagery in a “heaven-human harmony” relationship. The Confucian belief that human virtue and morality share origins with the cosmos ensures that human character gravitates toward nature as a nurturing spiritual environment. Moreover, Confucianism holds that the ideal lies in the past, with purity primarily manifested in nature, and humanity’s greatest pride is the ability to perceive and admire nature in its diverse forms – from majestic and sublime to simple and intimate, and even fierce and unforgiving.

Majestic and Fierce Nature

The Nguyen Dynasty’s imperial capital was a unique region, encompassing diverse geographical features: towering mountains, vast seas, long rivers, plains, and lagoons. With the expansive vision of monarchs, emperor-poets wove Vietnam’s majestic landscapes into their poetry with varied emotional tones. From the divine verses by the Nhu Nguyet River: “The southern land’s rivers and mountains are ruled by the southern emperor” (Nam Quoc Son Ha – Divine Poem) (Bui Duy Tan, 2006, p. 32), to the Le Dynasty’s rulers, landscapes of rivers, mountains, seas, and skies held a special place in the orthodox poetry of accomplished Confucian scholars. While towering mountains and rivers are common in medieval literature, nor exclusive to the Nguyen Dynasty, in this era, the stature of mountains and rivers was uniquely crafted with the regal tone of an empire unified from north to south for the first time.

Imagine mountains, rivers, and seas appears most frequently, accounting for 35.4% of natural imagery, as shown in Table 6. Within the 90 selected poems, natural images appear in paired relationships, both oppositional and supportive: Mountain/Sea, River/Lake, Sky/Moon, Flower/Grass, Cloud/Moon, Sea/Smoke, Rain/Wind, Wind/Wave, Wave/Snow. These images appear 243 times, with Mountain/Sea/River/Lake alone accounting for 86 occurrences. The statistics below reflect only a small sample of royal poetry—90 poems out of to over 20,000 (rounded for the eight authors).

Table 1 Survey of Natural Imagery in 90 Selected Chinese Poems by Nguyen Dynasty Royal Poets.

6	Mountain	Sea	River	Lake	Sky	Moon	Flower	Grass	Cloud	Rain	Wind	Wave	Smoke
Minh Mang	2	2	6	0	7	0	2	0	0	2	2	1	0
Thieu Tri	5	4	4	3	4	3	3	2	3	4	2	1	3

Tu Duc	3	1	7	1	0	2	0	0	4	2	3	1	0
Mien Trinh	1	2	0	3	1	3	3	2	2	0	3	1	0
Mien Buu	2	0	4	2	2	5	3	1	3	2	2	0	1
Mien Tham	5	0	5	1	2	2	0	1	1	2	3	2	1
Mai Am	5	0	4	3	3	4	7	2	2	3	10	1	3
Hue Pho	2	1	6	2	0	3	2	2	5	4	4	0	3
Total	25	10	36	15	19	22	20	10	20	19	29	7	11

The mountains and rivers referenced here are not evoked through the familiar conventions of Chinese historical literature but are primarily the scenic landmarks of Phu Xuan, the rivers and mountains where emperors, princes, and princesses were born and raised. Describing the majesty of mountains, Emperor Minh Mang highlights Ngu Binh Mountain—a geographical shield protecting the imperial dynasty: “Before the palace, the lofty Ngu Binh stands green / Gathering winds and waters to guard the capital” (Ngu Binh Mountain – Minh Mang) (Tran Viet Dien, 2023). Continuing the legacy of his predecessors, Minh Mang was enthusiastic and zealous in the early days of nation-building. From the vantage point of the palace gate, Ngu Binh emerges as a majestic and splendid marvel of creation: “Mountain flowers, red and green, seem painted / Pines so enchanting, no brush can capture” (Ngu Binh Mountain – Minh Mang) (Tran Viet Dien, 2023). In this face-to-face perspective, the dominant hue of Ngu Binh is not only a vibrant green (“thuy” – a cool, neutral, serene tone) but also interwoven with the vivid red (“đan” – a bright, warm, striking hue) of countless unnamed flowers. “Đan thanh” typically refers to pure red and green in contrasting classical painting. Earlier literature favored simplicity and subtlety. In the later medieval period, alongside familiar pure tones of white and green, vibrant imagery through contrasting colors (green red) became increasingly preferred. This allows readers to envision a Dai Nam, transformed after years of war and turmoil, now distinct, autonomous, vibrant, and striking: “Enveloped year-round in deep green / Standing firm, a southern sky pillar rises” (Ngu Binh Mountain – Minh Mang) (Tran Viet Dien, 2023).

Both majestic and splendid, the Huong River flows gently. The ancients believed: “The wise delight in water, the benevolent in mountains,” meaning the wise appreciate the ceaseless flow of water, while the benevolent cherish the steadfast calm of mountains. The serene, poetic Huong River was where Nguyen Dynasty royal poets often drifted on boats, admiring landscapes and reflecting on the homeland their ancestors painstakingly built. From the imperial boat, gazing at the Huong River’s banks, Minh Mang considered the practical benefits of its flow for people’s lives: “Its source pure, its course long / Not merely fragrant by name / Its sweet waters quench the people’s thirst / Its calm flow spares the need for dikes” (Huong River – Minh Mang) (Vinh Cao, trans.) (Vo Dai Mau, 2002, p. 53). Yet, the Huong River is not merely utilitarian for agriculture; it is itself a monument of art, a lyrical source flowing through heaven and earth and enduring in poetry across eras. The clear, refreshing beauty of the Huong River at dawn is captured by Thieu Tri in Twenty Scenes of the Imperial Capital: “Ripples of fragrant water blend with misty hues / Boats chase the morning breeze, swiftly gliding / Heavenly wine not yet drained, riverside trees still wet / Mountain flowers, still lovely, weave clouds and light” (Huong River at Dawn – Thieu Tri) (Thu Trung, trans.) (Phan Thuan An et al., 1997, p. 163).

Beyond majesty and splendor, nature can also be fierce and ferocious, with a scale and power that ancient wisdom could not fully explain. After unifying the nation, the Nguyen court prioritized maritime sovereignty, implementing policies to exploit and protect the coastline. During naval inspections, steamship drills, and the construction of Tran Hai Citadel, Minh Mang often witnessed the roaring waves and winds at Thuan An seaport: “The flowing waters twist, perilous and hard / Sea winds unleash wild, raging waves / The sage himself bestowed

its auspicious name / May all vessels, coming and going, find peace and safety” (Thuan An Seaport – Minh Mang) (Nguyen Huy Khuyen, 2016, p. 53). Harmonious rains and winds are an eternal wish, from ancient times to the present. However, embracing the advantages of a long coastline also means accepting nature’s fury. Prince Tung Thien laments this power: “Nguu Mountain’s tall trees cast dark shadows / Yen Islet is besieged by fierce waves” (Hoanh Mountain – Mien Tham) (Ngo Thi Don, 2000, p. 206).

Despite a millennium of Chinese domination, Vietnamese culture resiliently preserved its identity, evident in the selective adoption of Confucian and Chinese literary elements. The Nguyen Dynasty’s Confucian revival focused on strengthening political-social institutions, while literature retained a strong national spirit with a deep awareness of cultural origins and identity. The landmarks, rivers, and mountains of Dai Nam were central themes, an inexhaustible source of inspiration stirring the souls of royal poets. There was no need to invoke distant Tai Shan or Lu Shan from the North; the South boasted its own majestic ranges like Hoanh Son, Hong Linh, Tam Diep, and Son Chu. Across the vast rivers and mountains where the emperor trod, every place was a marvel: “On both sides, steep cliffs soar to the sky / A long path stretches, clouds floating upon the earth” (Composed En Route to Son Chu – Thieu Tri) (Nguyen Trong Tan, 2018, p. 85).

Intimate and Poetic Nature

Nguyen Dynasty court poetry does not only dwell on grand, cosmic inspirations; it is also imbued with love for the homeland, first through everyday natural imagery in “living spaces” and “imaginative spaces,” later elevated into a “cultural space” of the Vietnamese. For farmers, tied to their fields, beauty lies in harmonious rains and thriving crops; for rulers, beauty is a unified nation where people live in peace and prosperity. After toiling in the fields, the buffalo leads, and the farmer strolls behind, gazing at the vast green fields under the sky. Similarly, after the tense affairs of court – where a single misstep could lead to grave consequences – emperors often sought solace in leisurely strolls through imperial gardens.

Unlike Gia Long’s era of relentless campaigns to establish the Nguyen Dynasty, under Minh Mang’s reign, order and discipline were restored. Within his palace, Minh Mang built Thieu Phuong Garden, east of Duong Tam Palace, north of Duyet Thi Hall, with the Ngu Ha stream flowing through. Years later, inheriting the ancestors’ cherished homeland, Thieu Phuong Garden in Tu Duc’s poetry reflects nature’s and forebears’ protection: “Passing bamboo pavilions to pine pavilions / Streams wind around halls, lush trees shade / Through rains and winds, unchanged it stands / The imperial garden guarded by verdant pines” (Impromptu at Thieu Phuong Garden – Tu Duc) (Nguyen Phuoc Hai Trung, 2021, p. 217). The palace’s living space mirrors Vietnam’s scenic beauty: ornate pavilions like Quang Bieu Hall, vast lotus ponds fragrant on Kim Thuy Lake, and moonlit nights where breezes carry scents clinging to sleeves.

As royals, emperors’ and princes’ residences were often built with grandeur, sometimes excessively lavish. However, this does not apply to many poet-princes and princesses like those of Tam Khanh and Tam Duong. Mien Tham’s residences were mostly garden houses for reading and tea, and later in life, he decisively moved to a simple plot, building a thatched cottage, shunning extravagance. His haunts – Ki Thuong, Tieu Vien, or Phuong Thon Thao Duong – embraced simplicity and harmony with nature. Princess Mai Am, sister of Prince Ten, lived with their mother, Lady Thuc, at Tieu Vien before marriage. Their souls were early drawn to the tranquil scent of grass and trees: “By the stream, the thatched hut moves to Can Hoa / Thousands of books hang high on four walls / Cranes sleep soundly to bamboo’s tune / Fish gather, drawn by zither’s melody” (Composed on Visiting Mo Van Sao, Built by Master Thuong Son – Mai Am) (Luong An, 2004, p. 115).

Overall, from “living spaces” to “imaginative spaces,” the landscapes, weather, flora, and fauna of Phu Xuan left a vivid mark on court poets’ works. Three distinctive Hue scenes – gardens, pagodas, and rain – recur in their poetry as a deep imprint in the subconscious.

Table 2 Survey of Garden, Pagoda, and Rain Imagery in 90 Chinese Poems by Nguyen Dynasty Royal Poets

Author	Garden	Pagoda	Rain
Minh Mang	2	0	4

Thieu Tri	3	1	4
Tu Duc	3	1	2
Mien Trinh	0	2	0
Mien Buu	1	3	1
Mien Tham	1	1	3
Mai Am	1	0	3
Hue Pho	0	1	4
Total	11	9	21

Gardens in the “living spaces” of princes lean toward serene, tranquil beauty – small plots beside fields, adorned with natural flowerbeds and grassy patches: “The quiet little garden faces the fields / A small house by the lake, moonlit and clear” (Garden Residence – Mien Buu) (Nguyen Khue, 2023, p.112). In Princess Mai Am’s poetry, Ki Thuong Garden brims with the green of “early leaves,” willows, and the pink of “setting sun” and “orchid flowers.” Those who visit Hue are struck by its greenery – sky, trees, and endless betel nut gardens: “Village gardens gather betel nut trees / The river city abounds with clouds and waters” (Impromptu in the Countryside – Mien Tham) (Phi Thi Thu Lan, 2011, p. 63).

Pagoda scenes are prevalent in Nguyen Dynasty court poetry. Phu Xuan hosts hundreds of pagodas, frequented by royal poets. An ancient pagoda steeped in Zen, nestled in My Am Mountain (later Thuy Van), enters Thieu Tri’s poetry as the ninth scenic beauty of the imperial capital: “Zen winds carry bell sounds through deep forests / The mystic realm spreads fragrance, a sea of dharma / Trees cling to sacred clouds, rising to higher realms / Monks’ sandals tread paths dusted with worldly grime” (Thuy Van Mountain’s Sacred Traces – Thieu Tri) (Tran Dinh Son, trans.) (Phan Thuan An et al., 1997, p. 140). Great poetry lies not in crafting visually intricate works but in awakening all senses, allowing readers to see, hear, feel, and experience with heart and soul. In tranquil spaces, the sound of monks’ sandals and pagoda bells, carried by the breeze, seeps into every heart.

The ringing of bells is the hallmark of Zen spaces, while rain defines Hue’s character. Born in a land of persistent rains, Nguyen princess-poets often used nighttime rain to express unnamed sorrows. Autumn rain in their poetry contrasts with the cheerful chirping of birds in spring gardens at dawn. Not that only autumn rain is worth hearing – spring rain often accompanies joyful moods: “Drizzle fills the lake with heavy drops / Spring’s lord nurtures, soaking grass and trees” (Spring Rain – Mai Am) (Luong An, 2004, p. 149). Yet, only autumn rain evokes profound desolation. Princesses’ poetry captures the patter of night rain on banana leaves: “East of the forest, the moon rises from cold sandy shores / Beyond green windows, rain on banana leaves subsides” (Sitting Alone on an Autumn Night – Hue Pho) (Do Thi Hao, 2010, p. 637). Cold rain mingles with longing, seeping into bones: “Alone at night, sorrow cuts deep / Cold air creeps, tightening its grip / Under lamplight, poetry captures longing / In rain, aching bones grow heavier” (Sitting Alone on a Cold Night – Mai Am) (Do Thi Hao, 2010, p. 550).

Conversely, for emperor-poets, rain often ties to hopes for favorable weather and concerns for agriculture and livelihoods. In Minh Mang’s poetry, rain-praying ceremonies are significant. His poems on this theme vary, reflecting natural, unpolished emotions: “Westward, heat rises, veiling the sun / Eastward, clouds gather at the horizon / Earnestly praying for a great rain to fall / May sweet showers bless all lands” (Praying for Rain – Minh Mang) (Nguyen Huy Khuyen, 2013, p. 43).

Realist Sensibility of Society

Idealized Reality: Peace and Prosperity

In Nguyen Dynasty court poetry, especially under the first four reigns, a vivid idealized reality emerges, built on discipline, order, and morality. The archetypal “fisherman-woodcutter-farmer-herdsman” model symbolizes

stability and harmony between nature and humanity.

Table 3 Survey of Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and Herdsman Imagery in 90 Chinese Poems by Nguyen Dynasty Royal Poets

Author	Fisherman	Woodcutter	Farmer	Herdsman
Minh Mang	1	0	5	0
Thieu Tri	1	1	1	0
Tu Duc	0	0	1	0
Mien Trinh	0	0	1	1
Mien Buu	1	0	0	0
Mien Tham	2	0	4	0
Mai Am	2	0	2	0
Hue Pho	2	1	1	2
Total	9	2	15	3

Fishermen often appear in imperial poetry with robust, skillful labor in the perilous work of seafaring: “The boatman deftly raises the oar” (Thieu Tri). Beyond strength, fishermen require agility in navigating boats. In peaceful times with favorable weather, their lives are as carefree and poetic as any: “Amid clouds and mist, joy in nature’s truth / A lone boat, full of charm / Mountains and rivers, touched by moonlight / Rivers and lakes, everywhere serene / Wife and children free from hunger, livelihoods secure / Fish and shrimp abound, easing debts for wine” (Moonlit Fishing Boat – Thieu Tri) (Nguyen Van Phuong, 2023, p. 260).

While fishermen are tied to rivers and seas, woodcutters are bound to deep forests. Their dangers – wild beasts – parallel the sea’s perils for fishermen. Yet, amid hardship, woodcutters sing loudly, a symbol of labor and peaceful life: “Singing high amid white clouds / Resting by a cold stream, sharpening an axe / Heavy firewood delays the return / Paths full of thorns, fraught with danger” (Woodcutter’s Song – Hue Pho) (Do Thi Hao, 2010, p. 662).

Among the four classes, farmers appear most frequently (15/29 instances, ~51%), which is unsurprising for an agrarian nation prioritizing agriculture. In harsh weather, farmers toil from dawn to dusk, often without time to cook: “Farmers’ meals lack the scent of cooked rice.” Exhausted, “all day without rest, muscles weary,” they endure cuts from seedlings and scorching sun, fearing only unfavorable weather. Drought and rain both bring worry. From the royal perspective, farmers evoke concern and empathy: “Cold pierces bones through thin clothes / Hands bruised by soaking waters / Tending crops, an ancient toil / White rice at harvest, wrought with hardship” (Inspecting Rice Fields – Thieu Tri) (Nguyen Van Phuong, 2023, p. 263).

Herdsman’s lives seem the most poetic. Royal poets often encountered them in late afternoons, napping or playing flutes, indifferent to worldly honors: “Lying on a buffalo, playing a few notes / Unaware of worldly glory or shame / Crossing barren slopes and broken paths / Gathering fallen leaves to mend an autumn cape / Fat buffalo, ample grass, my heart content / Why sing under the cart, tiring the throat?” (Herdsman’s Song – Hue Pho) (Do Thi Hao, 2010, p. 666).

Gazing at the vast, splendid rivers and mountains, with the four classes living in peace and fertile lands, the early Nguyen emperors saw a nation entering an era of prosperity rivaling the legendary reigns of Yao and Shun: “Fertile lands yield abundant wealth / People prosper, lives pure and rich / Rains gentle, fields well-watered / Seas calm, vast lands clear / Strange fish sustain the masses / Common mulberries and beans gain renown / The four classes thrive, lives fulfilled / Culture rises, peace reigns” (Quang Binh Scenery – Thieu Tri) (Nguyen Trong Tan, 2018, p. 69).

Reality in Practice: Turmoil and Stagnation

During the reigns of Gia Long, Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc (until 1858), the court faced rebuilding political, economic, cultural, and social systems after centuries of civil war. From Minh Mang's time, class conflicts surfaced through hundreds of peasant uprisings, large and small. Misaligned policies, corrupt officials, and foreign ambitions fueled the collapse of feudalism. During Minh Mang's 20 years and Thieu Tri's seven, the nation's foundations trembled; by Tu Duc's reign, collapse was inevitable.

As a Nguyen royal, Prince Tung Thien (Mien Tham) lived as a king's son, brother, and uncle, witnessing the reigns from Minh Mang to Tu Duc. Dying at 51, his final decade saw Dai Nam's people in misery. Initially, like his siblings, he rejoiced in victories over invaders: "Reports confirm the enemy's defeat / Sunlit red flags, spring fills the land / Foes silenced, fleeing in retreat / Smoke and fire fade from southern shores" (On Quang Nam's Victory – Mai Am) (Do Thi Hao, 2010, p. 590). With his brother Mien Trinh, he advocated resistance to protect national sovereignty, distrusting enemies' deceit: "Wise vassals raise banners high / For whom do bells and tripods record deeds? / Ghostly armies defy laws / Beware deceitful words" (Literary Scene I – Mien Trinh) (Ngo Thi Thu Trang, 2008, p. 13).

Yet, as he studied state affairs and awaited court decisions, Mien Tham grew bitterly aware of the monarchy's cowardly impotence, with the immediate consequence being the people's suffering. The Confucian ideal of peace collapsed. Fishermen and farmers, the majority due to the nation's rich resources, were the first to face starvation and cold. Farming and fishing offered no livelihood, caught between war, natural disasters, heavy taxes, and survival struggles: "Farmers and fishermen, trapped in poverty." Even when harvests were normal, hoping to survive droughts or floods, all grain went to official storehouses: "Ripe fields, all grain taken." Clinging to life, they toiled: "Chasing fish at dawn to feed ducks / Calloused hands and feet, seeking food / Starvation and cold kill alike / Children conscripted, fishermen and wives perish" (Living Together – Mien Tham) (Ngo Thi Don, 2000, p. 252).

From the idyllic prosperity in many royal poets' works, Mien Tham's later poetry depicts these classes plummeting to society's depths. Not only fishermen, woodcutters, farmers, and herdsmen but all people faced destitution. Gold panners, hoping to pay taxes, risked death in deep waters or high mountains, only to return and face insufficient tax payments, forcing some to mutilate limbs to reduce taxes: "Bitterly, taxes remain unpaid / Enduring a withered body / Breaking an arm, how not painful / Yet halved taxes bring relief" (Lament of Gold Panners – Mien Tham) (Ngo Thi Don, 2000, p. 229). The reality's conclusion is the people's ghostly wails: "Crying to the heavens, lamenting their suffering / Thunder roars, shaking ancient drums / Dark clouds cover the sky, rain pours on paths" (Lament of the Displaced – Mien Tham) (Ngo Thi Don, 2000, p. 262). The heavens offer no salvation, only more calamity, a portent of the final feudal dynasty's end.

DISCUSSION

The natural imagery in imperial poetry aligns with medieval poetry's familiar motifs—mountains, rivers, seas. However, in imperial works, these often serve to express the emperor's will and emotions, reflecting a ruler's tone in governing and guiding society. In contrast, nature in the poetry of princes and princesses is not merely a backdrop for emotions or moral ideals but is restored as an aesthetic object within the broader reality. Beautiful landscapes, blended with national pride and love for the homeland, fostered strong faith in the Nguyen Dynasty's future and ideals.

The social reality in the eyes of the first four emperors and most princes and princesses depicts the four classes living in peace, a vision of prosperity everywhere. Yet, Mien Tham, bound by Confucian ideology, could not ignore the turbulent, perilous social reality due to his broad knowledge and sensitivity. As a royal without real power or political involvement, he suffered as a mere "clothed rice sack," unable to save the suffering people or prevent the nation's collapse, his poet's voice as powerless as the people's cries to heaven. Nonetheless, his efforts were not in vain; years later, others would recognize and be moved by his honest, forthright heart.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the study on the realistic perception in the Chinese poetry of the Nguyễn dynasty's royal poets has

focused on analyzing two main aspects: natural reality and social reality, thereby elucidating the role of realistic elements in shaping the ideology and consciousness of court poets. The research findings demonstrate that the Chinese poetry of these royal poets not only reflects nature and society through the lens of feudal ideals but also embodies profound humanistic values that transcend class barriers, particularly in the works of Tụng Thiện Vương Miên Thắm and Princess Mai Am. The two research hypotheses (H1 and H2) were validated through the examination of 90 representative poems, employing a combination of four traditional methods: literary analysis, literary history, comparison, and quantitative statistics. These methods enabled an in-depth analysis, situating the works within their historical-cultural context while highlighting similarities and differences among the groups of emperor poets, prince poets, and princess poets. However, the use of quantitative statistical methods may not have fully captured the artistic depth of the works due to the limited number of poems analyzed.

Furthermore, the research underscores that the Chinese poetry of the Nguyễn dynasty's royal poets is not merely a product of feudal ideology but also bears the imprint of love for the homeland, national pride, and sensitivity to contemporary issues. Nature in their poetry, from Ngũ Bình Mountain and the Hương River to the Thiệu Phương Garden, serves as an inexhaustible source of inspiration and a space of imagination reflecting Vietnamese cultural identity. Regarding social reality, while emperor poets and most prince and princess poets depicted an idealized “fishermen-woodcutters-farmers-herdsmen” scene of peace and prosperity, Miên Thắm transcended class constraints to expose the painful realities of the populace amidst war and natural disasters. The humanistic values in court poetry, particularly the empathy for human conditions, have contributed to dismantling prejudices about court literature, affirming its position in the continuum of Vietnamese literary history.

Despite achieving noteworthy results, the study has certain limitations. First, the scope of analysis is restricted to 90 poems, which does not fully represent the vast corpus of over 20,000 poems by royal poets. Second, accessing original Chinese texts and translations remains challenging due to inconsistent archival conditions and varying translation quality. Third, the study primarily relies on traditional methods, without integrating modern interdisciplinary approaches such as discourse analysis or semiotics. In the future, research could expand its scope to include lesser-known royal poets and apply interdisciplinary methods to explore deeper layers of cultural and artistic meaning. Additionally, digitizing and fully translating Chinese poetry will facilitate the preservation and study of the Nguyễn dynasty's literary heritage.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare no competing interests related to this study.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest to declare.

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