

Research On Dragon Symbolism In Hue Imperial Architecture During The Nguyen Dynasty

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Abstract—This article examines the dragon symbolism system in Hue imperial architecture during the Nguyen Dynasty, a UNESCO-recognized world cultural heritage site. Through morphological analysis combined with symbolism studies, the research clarifies the artistic characteristics, representational standards, and profound cultural-political significance of dragon imagery in the space of imperial power. The results demonstrate that dragons during the Nguyen period were not merely decorative elements but also tools for symbolizing supreme authority, reflecting Confucian ideology and the distinctive royal institution of Vietnam's last feudal dynasty.

Index Terms—Dragon symbolism, Hue imperial architecture, Nguyen Dynasty, imperial art, symbolism studies, royal authority

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945) was Vietnam's last feudal dynasty, leaving behind an extraordinarily rich system of architectural and imperial artistic heritage in the ancient capital of Hue. Among the imperial artistic symbols, dragon imagery holds a central and particularly important position, appearing everywhere from palaces, temples, and tombs to royal ceremonial costumes and objects.



[Figure 1: Hue imperial architecture with intricate dragon decoration system]

According to Ernst Cassirer, humans are "symbolic beings" (animal symbolicum) who exist and create the world through symbol systems. Dragon imagery in Nguyen Dynasty imperial art is precisely such a symbol with a complex emblematic-ideological-aesthetic structure, closely linked to the distinctive cultural-political value system of Vietnamese feudal society.

This research aims to answer three main questions: (1) What are the morphological characteristics of dragon imagery in Hue imperial architecture? (2) What cultural-political values of the Nguyen Dynasty are reflected through dragon symbolism? (3) What distinctive features does Nguyen-era dragon imagery have compared to previous dynasties?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining:

- Symbolism method to decode the cultural-political layers of meaning embedded in dragon imagery
- Artistic morphological-figurative analysis method to study visual elements such as composition, lines, colors, and materials
- Historical-art historical method to place dragon imagery in the specific historical-social flow
- Field survey method at Hue imperial heritage sites to collect visual materials

The research was conducted through surveys of representative sites such as the Hue Imperial Citadel (Thai Hoa Palace, Long An Palace), royal tombs (Gia Long Tomb, Minh Mang Tomb, Tu Duc Tomb, Khai Dinh Tomb), combined with analysis of photographic materials and artifacts preserved in museums.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Morphological Characteristics of Dragon Imagery in Hue Imperial Architecture

3.1.1. Position and Classification

Through field surveys, dragon imagery appears in various positions within imperial architecture with diverse functions and representations:

Position	Characteristics
Palace/Pavilion Roofs	Raised relief dragons, mosaic porcelain inlay, highest position, representing supreme authority. Usually paired dragons (<i>song long</i>) in symmetry, facing the center.
Columns/Pillars	Dragons coiled around columns (dragon pillars), representing the power to support the heavens. Carved in wood or stone with exquisite technique and undulating lines.
Screens/Walls	Relief dragons or painted dragons, creating solemn spaces. Symmetrical composition, often combined with clouds, waves, sun/moon.
Dragon Throne	Most exquisitely carved dragons, lacquered red and gilded. Most direct symbol of imperial power. Only five-clawed dragons (<i>ngu trao long</i>).

3.1.2. Detailed Morphological Characteristics

Analyzing the collected images, Nguyen-era dragons have distinctive morphological characteristics:

Body Structure: Vietnamese dragons during the Nguyen period have long, gracefully undulating bodies, different from the more rigid Chinese dragons. Large heads, antlers branched like deer, large round eyes expressing compassion, short noses, wide mouths with sharp teeth but not fierce. The dragon body has clear scales, soft belly, short legs with claws (3-5 claws depending on rank), long undulating tail.



[Figure 2: Detail of raised relief dragon with colorful mosaic porcelain inlay technique]

Lines and Postures: Smooth, flexible curves creating a sense of movement. Diverse postures: dragon ascending to heaven (*long trieu thien*), dragon descending to sea (*long ha hai*), dragon holding jewel (*long tho chau*), two dragons competing for jewel (*song long tranh chau*). Expression both majestic and benevolent, reflecting the philosophy of "royal way" in Confucian thought.

Colors and Materials: Golden (lacquered red and gilded) for dragon thrones, emperor's clothing - the

highest symbol of nobility. Five colors (blue, red, yellow, white, black) on mosaic porcelain palace roofs - reflecting the five elements. Natural carved wood on columns and beams - expressing closeness to nature. Blue stone, white stone for outdoor sculptures.

3.2. Analysis of Representative Dragon Patterns from Survey Images

3.2.1. Dragons on Palace Roof Architecture

From images surveyed at the Hue Imperial Citadel, dragons on palace roofs typically appear in symmetrical pairs, represented through raised relief technique and colorful mosaic porcelain inlay. Particularly striking is the dragon imagery coiled on the curved roof edges, demonstrating powerful soaring movement.



[Figure 3: Dragons on roof corners demonstrating powerful soaring movement]

Notable details: Dragons have clearly branched antlers, large round eyes, wide open mouths but not fierce-looking. Dragon bodies undulate along natural curves, dragon scales represented by small inlaid porcelain pieces in color, creating a shimmering effect under sunlight. Predominant colors are yellow, blue-

green, and orange-red - representing the five elements and prosperity.

Significance: The highest position on the palace roof represents dragons as the most noble spiritual creatures, protecting the palace from above. Paired symmetrical dragons symbolize yin-yang harmony and cosmic order. Facing the center (where the dragon throne is located) expresses reverence and protection of the emperor's throne.

3.2.2. Dragons on Gate and Bridge Architecture

Architectural works with bridges and gates leading to main palaces demonstrate harmonious combination of brick-stone architecture with curved-roof wooden architecture, creating solemn and sacred spaces.



[Figure 4: Palace gate and bridge leading to the imperial court with exquisite balustrade decoration system]

Outstanding features: Bridges leading to palaces have balustrades decorated with exquisite floral patterns, demonstrating royal class. The gate roof has raised relief dragons combined with Chinese calligraphy patterns. Surrounding water creates feng shui landscape, reflecting architectural images that enhance solemnity.



[Figure 5: Lake landscape and imperial architecture reflection creating sacred space]

Spatial significance: Bridges and gates create boundaries between secular space and sacred space. Passing through gates and bridges carries the meaning of 'purification' before entering sacred territory. Lakes symbolize 'dragon pools' (long tri), where dragons reside, protecting the palace.

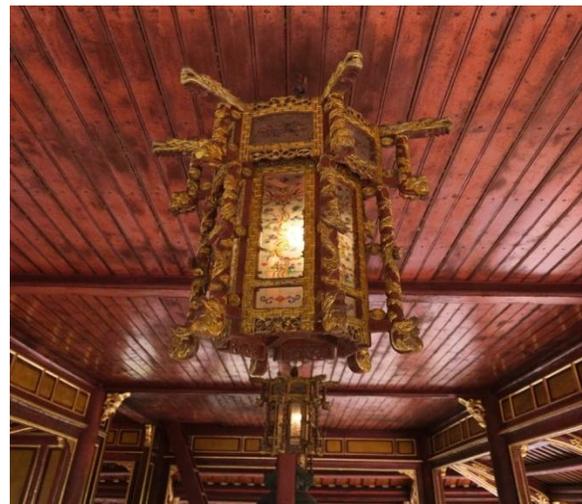
3.2.3. Decorative Details on Horizontal Boards and Eaves

Decorative details on horizontal boards (name plaques above doors) and eave corners demonstrate the most exquisite artistic techniques of Nguyen-era artisans.



[Figure 6: Horizontal board with artistic carved dragon and calligraphy]

Horizontal boards above palace doors usually have two symmetrical dragons flanking Chinese calligraphy characters (indicating the palace name). Dragons are carved with extremely fine, three-dimensional details. Combined with colorful painted patterns, creating a majestic and solemn overall appearance.



[Figure 7: Eave corner with decorative carved dragon details]

3.3. Cultural-Political Significance of Dragon Symbolism

3.3.1. Dragon as a Tool for Symbolizing Supreme Power

In Confucian ideology, which was the orthodox political ideology of the Nguyen Dynasty, dragons symbolize supreme authority, becoming an indispensable attribute of the emperor. The emperor was called the 'True Dragon Son of Heaven' (Chan Long Thien Tu), and dragon images were the exclusive privilege of royalty.



[Figure 8: Dragon throne - symbol of supreme imperial power]

The exquisite and overwhelming appearance of dragons at every corner of imperial palaces was not accidental but a calculated strategy to 'awe' and control subjects psychologically. When entering palace spaces, everyone could feel supernatural power, thereby revering and submitting to royal authority.

3.3.2. Power Hierarchy System Through Number of Dragon Claws

An important characteristic of Nguyen-era dragons was the strict regulation of claw numbers according to social status:

- Five-clawed dragon (ngu trao long): Reserved exclusively for the emperor, appearing on dragon thrones, dragon robes, imperial seals

- Four-clawed dragon (tu trao long): For royal relatives, princes
- Three-clawed dragon (tam trao long): For high-ranking officials
- Decorative dragons (1-2 claws): Used in public architecture, folk temples and pagodas

This hierarchical system clearly expressed the ideology of 'class distinction' in feudal society. Violating regulations could be considered 'disrespect to superiors' and be severely punished. This was how the court used art to maintain social order and political power.

3.3.3. Dragons in Sacred Space and Ritual

According to Mircea Eliade, in traditional societies, space is divided into 'sacred space' and 'profane space.' Hue imperial space is a typical sacred space, organized according to complex symbolic principles to recreate cosmic order.

In this space, dragons play the role of 'power symbols' representing the center position of the universe. The king sitting on the dragon throne with carved dragons, in the center of Thai Hoa Palace, represents the position of 'world center' (axis mundi). All order revolves around this dragon symbol.

In imperial ceremonies such as court assemblies (le thiet trieu), conferment ceremonies, great sacrifices, dragon imagery is always present and creates a solemn, sacred atmosphere. Placing dragons in strategic positions (palace roofs, dragon thrones, pillars) was not random but the result of careful calculation in terms of symbolism and psychology.

3.4. Comparison with Previous Dynasties and Cultural Influence

Compared to Ly-Tran dynasty dragons, Nguyen-era dragons have distinct differences:

Criteria	Ly-Tran Dragons	Nguyen Dragons
Style	Simple, approachable, somewhat humorous	Majestic, solemn, elaborate, strictly standardized
Lines	Strong, bold, free	Soft, undulating, with exquisite details
Standards	Flexible, few restrictions	Strict (claw distinction by rank)
Meaning	Protective spirits, approachable deities	Symbol of absolute power, political tool



[Figure 9: Palace architecture demonstrating harmonious combination of decorative elements]

This difference reflects changes in political ideology. During the Ly-Tran period, Buddhism had strong influence, and kings remained close to the people. During the Nguyen period, Confucianism was completely orthodox, kings were elevated to absolute positions, distant from subjects. Dragons became tools to maintain this power distance.

IV. DISCUSSION

This research has demonstrated that dragon imagery in Hue imperial architecture during the Nguyen period was not merely a simple aesthetic element but a complex symbolic system with profound political and cultural characteristics. According to Michel Foucault, power operates not only through oppression but also through the production of knowledge, shaping subjects and creating behavioral norms.



[Figure 10: Panoramic view demonstrating the overall space of power]

Dragon imagery is precisely such a 'mechanism for symbolizing power.' It simultaneously performs multiple functions:

- Demonstrates the supreme authority of the king in the eyes of court officials and subjects
- Imposes and maintains visual order in imperial ceremonial space
- Directs and shapes the perceptions and emotions of those who interact with imperial space

Particularly, the research discovered the development of dragon symbolism through the stages of the Nguyen Dynasty. From the early period (Gia Long - Minh Mang) with solemn, classical style, to the middle period (Thieu Tri - Tu Duc) with technical refinement, and the late period (Dong Khanh - Bao Dai) with Western influence, dragon imagery underwent transformation processes reflecting profound changes in political ideology and social culture.

However, the research still has some limitations that need to be addressed in the future. First, due to research conditions, it was not possible to survey all imperial heritage sites, especially those destroyed during war. Second, deeper comparative research with dragons in other East Asian imperial art is needed to better clarify the process of cultural exchange and Vietnam's unique identity.

V. CONCLUSION

The research has achieved important results in clarifying the symbolic and morphological value of dragon imagery in Hue imperial architecture during the Nguyen period. Key findings include:

First, Nguyen-era dragon imagery has distinctive morphological characteristics: long, gracefully undulating bodies, large heads with branched antlers, large round eyes expressing compassion, brilliant colors reflecting the five elements, exquisite mosaic porcelain and lacquer-gilding techniques.

Second, dragons are the central symbol of royal power, used as a tool for 'symbolizing power' to demonstrate, maintain, and reproduce the political-social order according to Confucian ideology. The hierarchical system through claw numbers clearly represents feudal social order.

Third, compared to previous dynasties, Nguyen-era dragons tend toward higher standardization, stronger symbolic power, reflecting the complete orthodoxy of Confucianism and the model of absolute royal authority.

This research has significance both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it contributes to clarifying the symbolic system in Vietnamese imperial art, adding to the repository of research on symbolism and traditional art. Practically, research results can be applied in the conservation and restoration of Hue imperial heritage sites, as well as in developing applied art products based on traditional cultural heritage.

Future research directions can expand to other symbols in the imperial art system such as phoenixes, qilin, turtles, as well as comparative research with imperial cultures in the East Asian region to better clarify Vietnam's identity and cultural exchange process.

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