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## The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu

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### Abstract

*Vietnamese literature is greatly affected by Chinese literature but, during the process of receiving, Vietnamese authors have always been conscious of creativity to match the culture imbued with national identity. In the Medieval Ages, each country had heroes to inspire creativity in literature. According to orthodox opinion, there are heroic characters who fight against foreign invaders and serve the royal dynasty. In unorthodox opinion, there are the chivalrous, righteous heroes in chaos who save the world. Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) of China and The Tale of Kieu of Vietnam are considered two typical works depicting the portrait of the hero of the chaos. Both works bring a heroic model that is newer and more unique than the orthodox heroic one. The study of the heroic characters of the chaos in the two works from a comparative perspective will find out the similarities and differences in the literature of both countries in the Chinese cultural area.*

**Keywords:** *Heroic character, Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga), The Tale of Kieu*

### Introduction

There are certain similarities in the formation of heroic characters in *Water Margin Saga* and *The Tale of Kieu*. In terms of geographical location, Vietnam and China both belong to the East Asian cultural region and are influenced by Confucianism. The authors of *The Tale of Kieu* and *Water Margin Saga* were greatly influenced by the teachings of Confucius. Therefore, the system of heroic characters in these works, although aspiring for freedom, cannot escape from certain orthodox beliefs about the Confucian gentleman and ethical standards such as Zhong (loyalty), Xiao (filial piety), Li (propriety), Yi (righteousness), Zhi (wisdom), and Xin (trustworthiness). These are orthodox beliefs based on the traditional cultural foundations and virtues of both nations.

In terms of context, both works were created during the post-medieval period and share a common feature of a society undergoing significant changes. Shi Nai'an completed *The Water Margin* towards the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. This was

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4688 *The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu*

when China frequently faced political instability, internal rebellions, purges, and overthrowing of dynasties. *The Tale of Kieu* was also born in a similar social context. In the second half of the 18th century, Vietnamese society was also in turmoil, with a weak and corrupt government, witnessing internal rebellions and widespread peasant movements. Intense social contradictions, dominated by the forces of money, led to the suffering and degradation of the common people. The historical backdrop had a profound impact on literary creation, giving rise to new models of heroic characters. These were not the noble and aristocratic heroes of epic tales, who adhered to principles such as righteousness, wisdom, governance, and peace, but rather individuals who struggled against injustice, rescued the weak, and upheld righteousness and heroism in order to fight for justice in life. This type of heroic character was closely connected to everyday life, humanized, and deeply rooted in the consciousness of serving the people.

The heroic characters in *The Water Margin Saga* and *The Tale of Kieu* possess not only conventional characteristics but also unconventional traits. They not only embody the virtues of a Confucian hero but also bear the spirit of camaraderie from the folk tradition. They value integrity over talent, engage in acts of resistance against authoritarianism, and protect the dreams of the oppressed. Alongside these similarities, the heroes of chaos in these two works also have distinct differences that reflect the cultural nuances and aesthetic perspectives of each country.

## Content

### 2.1. The conventional characteristics of the heroic figures in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu* can be summarized as follows

In Confucian society, a heroic figure must possess certain qualities: Benevolence, Wisdom, and Courage (The three virtues of a Confucian gentleman: Benevolence does not worry, Wisdom does not doubt, Courage does not fear). They have "benevolence" to show compassion and aid the weak, "wisdom" to discern right from wrong, and "courage" to confront countless difficulties without fearing authority.

*"To eliminate wickedness, eliminate greed, eliminate violence and oppression,*

*There must be virtue, intelligence, and heroism."*

*(Bao Kinh Canh Gioi - Chapter 5 - Nguyen Trai)*

Despite being heroes of chaos, the characters in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu* share certain conventional characteristics in the Confucian view of heroism. Beyond benevolence, wisdom, and courage, they also possess qualities like integrity, filial piety, and ritual. The first character mentioned by Shi Nai'an in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* is not one of the Liangshan heroes but Gao Qiu. Gao Qiu's path of advancement serves as an accusation against the decline of the Northern Song Dynasty's government. The author portrays Gao Qiu in contrast to the standards of a hero: "Regarding Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom and Trustworthiness, he absolutely understood none of it" [1, p.75]. This contrast marks the beginning of Shi Nai'an's depiction of the journey of the 108 Liangshan heroes.

Regarding space, heroes emerge within the societal space, originating from an exalted source that holds universal significance. According to Tran Nho Thin: "The image of heroes fighting and sacrificing for the nation-building cause and its defense, for struggles against oppressive

forces, is placed in the space of the heavens, earth, mountains, and rivers. The hero Tu Hai is depicted by Nguyen Du as "With sword and lute, he trekked mountains and sailed rivers." The hero's image is highly similar to Pham Ngu Lao wielding a spear amidst the landscapes. Whether they are swords, spears, or paddles, these landscapes are essential spaces" [9, p.133]. While female characters often appear in secluded chambers, male characters, especially heroes, are closely associated with the societal space. Both *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu* depict heroes within vast spaces that carry a universal scope. If Tu Hai is described as "A sword and a lute, half a load, mountains and rivers in a single paddle," the Liangshan heroes in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* embody the 36 stars of Heavenly Spirits and the 72 stars of Earthly Fiends. The heroic characters in both works not only share a connection with the cosmic space but also harmonize with geographical space. Tu Hai is intertwined with the expansive space of oceans and skies, a realm of rivers and lakes where heroic wanderers and knights-errant reside:

*"He gazed afar at the sky and the endless sea.*

*Then with his sword, he jumped on the saddle and prepared to leave"*

Song Jiang, like Tu Hai, appears as a hero with an image of riding forth on a horse, carrying a clear whip:

*"With a clear whip and a straight-moving horse,*

*Whose inner thoughts are revealed from within"* [2, p.13].

In *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)*, the geographical space is extensive. From Mount Shaohua, Mount Peach Blossom to Liangshan, these are the meeting places of righteous heroes. This space serves as a premise to emphasize the heroic spirit.

Regarding physical appearance, besides intellect and courage, a hero must possess physical and spiritual strength. The Eastern literary concept of the universe shapes the depiction of heroes. Associated with mystical beliefs and cosmic influences, heroes are often described as extraordinary beings, endowed with unusual appearances, and abilities beyond the ordinary, embodying the power of the universe. These are individuals "ordained by fate, following the will of heaven". Thus, the heroic characters in both works are individuals of cosmic stature, majestic and magnificent, possessing unparalleled strength and exceptional talents:

*"With tiger mustache, square chin, silkworm eyebrows,*

*broad shoulders and big stature"*

Nguyen Du depicts Tu Hai using symbolic imagery: "With tiger mustache, square chin, silkworm eyebrows," the facial features of Ban Chao from the Han Dynasty, and the brows resembling Guan Yu from the Three Kingdoms period. In "Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)," when describing Lin Chong, Shi Nai'an also employs this artistic detail: "Feet clad in pointed shoes, a hand gripping a Sichuan fan, round face, lion's beard, eagle's jaw, a body eight feet tall" [1, p.203]. Notably, the shared formula for describing heroes is their immense height and breadth, bearing extraordinary appearances. Wu Song is also described by Shi Nai'an as being "eight feet tall": "Wu Song, eight feet tall, an imposing figure, strength equivalent to a hundred thousand catties, which is why he was able to defeat the tiger on Jingyang Ridge and gained resounding fame" [2, p.149]. Similarly, Lu Zhishen is also portrayed with a tall and broad figure: "Round face, large ears, straight nose, square mouth, a curly beard on either side of the cheeks, eight feet tall, broad shoulders" [1, p.113].

Linked to their appearance is their formidable martial prowess and extraordinary abilities:

*"He was plainly a majestic hero  
with superior martial arts skills, and a strategic mind"*

Nguyen Du focuses on depicting Tu Hai as a martial general. Each word used to describe Tu Hai resonates with the strength of a nobleman, head held high, feet rooted in the ground: dignified, heroic figure, exceeding capability, head in the sky, stepping on the ground, waving widely. These descriptions not only showcase strength but also manifest masculinity, robustness, and the extraordinary qualities of a hero. This is the image of a hero according to the Confucian perspective. In *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)*, Wu Song displays unparalleled strength when he kills a tiger barehanded: "He embraced the stone and lifted it up, then threw it to the ground with a thud; it sank a foot into the ground" [2, p.277]. Li Kui simultaneously kills four tigers, and Lu Zhishen uproots a large willow tree at the Xiangguo Temple... All contribute to the idealized strength of righteous heroes. They utilize their prodigious strength to uphold righteousness, and vanquish oppressive forces – the attribute of "courage," a conventional perspective of heroes.

Another characteristic of heroes according to the conventional perspective is their firm determination. In Confucian ideology, a man must establish three fundamentals: establish virtue, establish accomplishment, and establish speech. On the path to success, a Confucian gentleman must master his own body and transcend worldly desires:

*"Half a year later, while they still love each other passionately,  
the call of adventure, of power and glory beckon his heart. "*

Despite enjoying a blissful life with Thuy Kieu, the irresistible beauty of the lady cannot bind the heroic Tu Hai. This represents the steadfastness of a hero according to the conventional perspective. They master their own bodies, overcome all temptations to live, and serve their heroic ideals:

*"Having said that, Tu soon rode off.*

*With the wind behind its wings, the great eagle soared into the sky. "*

Tu Hai decides to leave to pursue his ideals. A bird cannot live in a cage; it must ride the wind, soar through the clouds, and journey to expansive horizons, fulfilling the aspirations of a true man. Similar to Tu Hai, some characters in *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* also exhibit the characteristic of firm determination. Song Jiang is depicted by Shi Nai'an: "Song Jiang was originally a formidable warrior, always inclined toward martial training, and as for physical appearance, he did not emphasize it much" [2, p.70].

Based on the factors of the era, social ethics, cultural space, and overall perspective, the heroes in the novels *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu* embody strong masculinity with physical beauty, extraordinary talents, and heroic charisma. They possess a sense of chivalry, saving lives and resisting cruel forces. They are heroic figures of chivalry in troubled times, rescuing the oppressed and not representing the epic hero archetype. However, this does not mean they are disconnected from the orthodox views of heroes according to Confucian standards. They are still individuals influenced by the three talents of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, which form the cultural foundation of the East.

## 2.2. Unconventional characteristics of heroes in *Shuihu Zhuan* (The Water Margin Saga) and *The Tale of Kieu*

In the early medieval period (10th to 15th century) of Vietnamese literature, the heroes exhibit many similarities with the characters in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as they are influenced by orthodox Confucian ideology. They are exceptional individuals, possessing exceptional talents, exceptional loyalty, exceptional intellect, exceptional bravery, and they conduct themselves according to the principles of self-cultivation, family harmony, state governance, and world peace. In the later medieval period, both Vietnam and China witnessed the decline of feudal authority. Society was disrupted, and the noble standards were replaced by the dominance of powerful ruling classes. People became victims of materialistic forces. Thuy Kieu had to sell herself to redeem her father and subsequently faced the tragedies of life. The heroes in *Water Margin* had to bribe officials multiple times to alleviate their punishments. Tong Jiang in *Water Margin* was someone who helped others and saved lives, but he was framed and exiled. These are the heroes born in chaotic times: "During the Song Dynasty, it was easy to become an official, but difficult to remain one in a court lacking moral principles. The sycophantic courtiers were all extravagant in exercising their powers, using those who were close and hiding away those who had money. Hence, it was easy to become an official" [2, p.115].

*"How did it come to this,*

*Do heroes oppose fate and suffer bitterness from heaven?"* [1, p.222]

This context led to the emergence of heroes with a desire to challenge the societal order of their time, change their destinies, and confront suffering. They are people of action. Their ideals are focused on helping others, not for the sake of glorifying themselves as rulers, but to support those oppressed by injustices. Contrasting with the orthodox Confucian perspective, the heroes in *The Tale of Kieu* and *Shuihu Zhuan* (*The Water Margin Saga*) defy imperial rule. For the vulnerable, they are heroes willing to self-sacrifice and fight for justice. The actions of these heroes during turbulent times in both works symbolize the breakdown of established norms. Despite possessing unconventional characteristics, they still uphold virtues. Because they help others and save the world, their goals are not self-glorification; their objective is to aid those who suffer. These actions signify a disruption of the Confucian order. Despite many unconventional characteristics, they maintain moral integrity. This is because they help others and save the world without intending to overthrow the monarchy. The heroes' sense of integrity is about aligning with the people and pursuing the greater good rather than adhering to the oppressive feudal regime.

Unlike heroes from epic sources who usually come from privileged classes in society, the heroes during this chaotic period in both works are people's heroes who defy the heavens to act for the people. The authors create a "corner of the world" for these heroes to roam freely, breaking free from confined spaces and restrictions:

*From then on, his martial might thundered far and wide.*

*He had his own kingdom in his corner of the sky*

*(The Tale of Kieu)*

*"A corner of the world is all they need,*

*Cunning strategy, wisdom, and courage they exceed."*

4692 *The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu* (*Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* [2, p.432]

Tu Hai and the Liangshan heroes all have their own "corner of the world" to express their heroic ideals, avoiding the constraints of societal expectations. Lu Zhishen epitomizes the image of a liberated hero: "With a broad-bladed sword and a river pole, the four directions of land and water await like grieving companions." [1, p.158].

*"Stirring the heavens, roiling the waters below,*

*Who knows what lies above in the expanse?"*

In Eastern Confucian society, the nobleman must respect the heavens and worship the king. However, Tu Hai disrupts this viewpoint by asking, "Who knows what lies above in the expanse?"

Tran Dinh Su argued that the 'highest degree of individualization and personalization is shown in *The Tale of Kieu*... The characters in *The Tale of Kieu* have broken away from the character archetype that serves a moral purpose to portray the human psyche' [7, p.360]. The case of Tu Hai is indeed accurate in this sense. While the heroes in the traditional sense adhere to the heroic archetype, transcending physical suffering, *The Tale of Kieu* ushers in a new perspective in character depiction. *The Tale of Kieu* and *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* demonstrates the dynamic evolution of literature, transitioning from the portrayal of functional characters with epic qualities to more complex individuals in the midst of real human emotions. This marks the fusion of elevated heroes with the mundane. They possess rich human qualities, living with the emotions of real individuals: Lin Chong and Song Jiang shed tears upon hearing distressing news from their hometowns, Wu Song shivers and shoots someone due to the cold, Lin Chong groans when subjected to humiliation by being immersed in boiling water. Even dignified heroes sometimes succumb to tears in the face of pain. Physical pain contributes to revealing the humanity of real people. By the late medieval period, the heroes in Vietnamese and Chinese literature have been 'humanized' and rich in character portrayal.

In their interactions with women, the heroes in *The Tale of Kieu* and *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* all come to the aid of women. Tu Hai saves Thuy Kieu, Lu Zhishen rescues the daughter of Taigong twice. Even Shi Nai'an demonstrates gender equality by depicting female heroes. The mighty heroes occasionally also succumb to emotions upon encountering the beauty of women: "The hearts of even the mightiest tremble before women'. In terms of gender interactions, although the heroes are men, they cannot escape the desires of romantic love and the stirring emotions of human life:

*"He brought his card to her chamber.*

*They both glanced at each other, liking what they saw"* (*The Tale of Kieu*).

The lives of courtesans and skilled women are looked down upon in patriarchal societies. They are considered playthings for the aristocracy and scholars. In Confucian societies that value female chastity, courtesans and skilled women are naturally disdained. However, in *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu*, the heroes value and aid women engaged in singing and performing. This breaks the Confucian stereotypes and marks a new element in the ideology of the rebellious heroes. Song Jiang comes to the aid of a singing girl, stating: 'I will give twenty taels of silver as capital for her to make a living. I will then find a kind-hearted person for her to marry, so she won't have to sing and struggle like this

anymore' [3, p.60]. Similarly, Tu Hai respects talented female artists, breaking Confucian norms regarding chastity. Tu Hai rescues Thuy Kieu and appreciates her talents. This hero not only refrains from looking down on the past but also elevates Kieu. The word "love" is evidence of going against Confucianism.

The non-conventional hero Tu Hai defied societal prejudices and rescued Thuy Kieu from her miserable fate. In the depths of the cycle of suffering in her life, Thuy Kieu was given a helping hand to lift her out of the dark abyss of society. Tu Hai transformed Kieu from someone scorned and looked down upon by society into a respected noblewoman.

Beyond breaking Confucian stereotypes about chastity, Tu Hai also challenges the Confucian principle of "self-cultivation".

*"For their love nest, the couple chose a quiet place.*

*In it was a lavish bed, and a screen decorated with the eight gods" (The Tale of Kieu)*

The lines construct a romantic image that emphasizes sexual elements. Confucianism criticizes sexual desires as harmful to individuals. Especially for heroes, maintaining dignity and adhering to the moral principles of Confucianism's ten thousand acts to be diligent, inner holiness, and outer kingliness are crucial. However, Tu Hai takes actions that greatly value Thuy Kieu. The items related to the bedroom, are associated with joy and affection, and are meticulously prepared, serving as evidence of his regard for Kieu.

In times of adversity, Lin Chong's actions are noble and compassionate. The hero pens a divorce letter to his wife before being exiled, ensuring she can remarry:

*"Why should the rain and wind be unjust?*

*To have someone share the burden of love with someone else*

*It's a pity to live in this world*

*Heroes can only resent fate when they lose to heaven" [1, p.227].*

"Loyalty" means the standard for evaluating heroic figures entering society. If heroes adhere to the orthodox Confucian perspective, they emphasize the virtue of "loyalty" while heroes during turbulent times emphasize the virtue of "righteousness" Righteousness is expressed in relationships between siblings, as well as within family relationships. It is built on the foundation of equality in relationships, being ready to lend a helping hand in times of distress. These heroes stand with the people, act on behalf of justice, and take from the wealthy to give to the poor: "Song Jiang entered the city, first rescuing Liu Tang, then opening the treasury to take salaries, sharing a portion with the residents there, and then bringing the rest to *Liangshan*" [4, p.367]. In *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)*, Shi Jin is willing to confront authoritarian power, even burning down his livelihood to protect virtuous heroes. Wu Song kills his sister-in-law for vengeance, while Dai Zong becomes a criminal after rescuing Song Jiang. In *The Tale of Kieu*, Tu Hai readily prepared to hold a trial to settle debts of gratitude and revenge for Thuy Kieu:

*"The commander's tent was erected in the middle of the camp.*

*Lord Tu sat next to his wife.*

*When the first round of drums just ended,  
a roll call had been taken of those arrested.*

4694 *The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu*  
Tu said to Kieu: "Favors and grudges between you and them,

*I'll leave you all powers to act as you wish to honor justice."*

Kieu, once a person "tossed about by the wind and rain" saved by Tu Hai from the mud of society, is placed in the position of a court official. This action embodies a heroic figure's willingness to aid the oppressed, allowing them to live and take charge of their lives, presiding over justice, and punishing those who once oppressed them. Tu Hai envisions a dream of a just society. It represents justice for the people, aligned with their desires and moral principles.

*"I still regret that your two parents*

*are separated from you and live in a distant place.*

*If I could get them to come here,*

*so you and them can be united, then I'm happy"*

Tu Hai is a person who values emotional connections. This heroic figure achieves a balance between personal emotions and higher virtues. The heroes in both works embody a spirit that prioritizes righteousness over talent, tightly weaving together righteousness and emotions – a representation that deviates from orthodox standards.

By breaking the confines of orthodox Confucian principles, authentic and relatable heroes emerged. Nguyen Du and Shi Nai'an depicted portraits of extraordinary yet ordinary heroes of chaotic times. These heroes not only carry out actions that uplift society, but they also live true to their human nature. The new ideas of these authors introduced highly relatable heroic characters. This contributes to the diversity of heroic archetypes in literature and marks the development of post-classical literature compared to earlier periods.

### **2.3. The differences in the behavior of heroic individuals**

When religions were introduced to Vietnam, they blended with indigenous belief systems and cultures to create new shades. This is the result of a process known as "indigenization," which led to hues imbued with ethnic characteristics. Confucianism, upon arriving in our country, also underwent a "restructuring" to transform into new concepts that aligned with the cultural life of the Vietnamese people. Consequently, despite being influenced by China, alongside the points of similarity, Vietnamese culture and literature also exhibit notable differences. In *The Tale of Kieu*, the heroic character Tu Hai fundamentally illustrates differences when compared to the heroes in *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)*.

In *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)*, the heroes define their actions as carrying out the will of heaven. However, in this path of righteous action, there are instances where their deeds tarnish the ideals they have set forth. Lin Chong kills Lu Qian by "placing a knife on his abdomen, cutting open his belly, and then holding his liver in his hands." He also kills Sai Bat by "raising a knife to cut off Sai Bat's head and then turning to cut off the heads of Fu An and Lu Qian, binding their three heads together by their hair, and placing them on an altar in the temple" [1, p.273]. Likewise, Li Kui consumes human flesh, Wu Song kills nineteen people in Militia Instructor Zhang's house, and so forth. These are expressions that deviate from the spirit of humanity. Song Jiang concedes: "During the battles, it also inflicted significant harm upon the people" [4, p.371]. During the process of seeking revenge, they are willing to kill innocent people, disturb the populace, and engage in actions not unlike those of



wild bandits.

In *The Tale of Kieu*, Tu Hai embarks on a journey to "reveal his extraordinary face" which involves a taking lots of lives as well:

*"Reflect on what happened since you started warfare.*

*Piles of human bones along the "Vo Dinh" river"*

Nevertheless, Tu Hai exhibits a spirit that upholds morality, values, and compassion. The conduct of the heroic figure Tu Hai demonstrates justice, repaying favors and settling grievances, even though it involves ruthless actions:

*"Tu said to Kieu: "Favors and grudges between you and them,*

*I'll leave you all powers to act as you wish to honor justice"*

In the face of the power of life and death, Tu Hai leads with arguments that are empathetic and reasoned. According to Tu Hai, the end result of those who act unrighteously is inevitable:

*"The rogues and the cruel ones,*

*they reap what they sow, and no one will pity them"*

Tu Hai, as depicted by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan, was initially a mere bandit, involved in theft, extortion, and violence. However, through his literary artistry, Nguyen Du transformed Tu Hai into a character with noble qualities, a genuine human spirit, and alignment with Vietnamese cultural traditions:

*"With his power, Kieu settled all the scores of her past.*

*She punished her enemies, and repaid her benefactors.*

*Thus, she had a great reputation for justice and kindness.*

*Near and far, she was highly praised"*

The principle of "Virtuous Person" from Confucianism, as it was introduced to Vietnam, was characterized by a deep compassion for humanity in all its aspects. Nguyen Du dedicated considerable thought and emotion to the character Tu Hai with the aspiration of shaping a society enriched by noble values amidst the darkness of the night.

The heroes in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* gathered their forces with the purpose of opposing the ruling authority, yet they held the aspiration for exoneration: "Therefore, nowadays they wish to establish a group to express gratitude to the heavens, earth, and divine spirits. One purpose is to seek forgiveness and blessings for the well-being and peace of their comrades, and the other is to hope for the government's prompt pardon so that together they can wholeheartedly repay their debt to the nation" [4, p.371]. Song Jiang obeyed the king's orders to suppress internal uprisings, hoping to regain favor with the court, seek amnesty, and promote his position. This indeed marked a betrayal of the original ideals set forth by Liangshan Heroes and a betrayal of the people. In the end, the valiant Liangshan heroes met a senseless sacrifice: Song Jiang was schemed against and killed by evil spirits with poisonous drugs, Li Kui likewise perished due to poison, Hua Rong took his own life beside Song Jiang's grave... These were tragic deaths of valiant heroes who clung to a shattered belief in their righteous path. Similarly, Tu Hai in Nguyen Du's "The Tale of Kieu" also concluded his life with death. The significant difference lies in Tu Hai's persistent pursuit of his goals until

4696 *The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu*  
the very end of his life.

*"If I constrain myself and returned to the Court,*

*A surrendered subject is not well looked upon.*

*Those officials are tied together by their mandarin dresses.*

*Is it worth being a duke and have to bend your back and bow your head?"*

It was the notion of "love" that led Tu Hai to accept surrender. His death wasn't caused by poison, nor was it a result of suicide; rather, it was a dignified death befitting a hero who faced the heavens with his head held high and firmly planted feet on the ground.

*"When his great soul left to join the deities' abode,*

*he still stood straight within the circles of enemies"*

That hero had failed in a position of raised head and with a proud heart.

*"Firm as stone, hard as bronze,*

*no one can shake or move his body the slightest hair"*

The stance of dying upright in the midst of battle is a testament to a courageous spirit. Nguyen Du sculpted a statue of Tu Hai in the minds of readers as the ideal hero. Tu Hai only yielded before Kieu's love and perished in the treacherous schemes of corrupt officials. His death reflected the tragedies of that era.

The majority of the heroes in *Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* are depicted as martial generals. They achieved success through martial skills, extraordinary strength, and battles where they remained undefeated after dozens of rounds, and they drank alcohol without getting drunk. Shi En and Wu Song: "Every time they encounter alcohol, they would drink three cups before leaving. Gradually, they would pass through ten places of alcohol " [2, p.289].

According to Confucianism, besides moral ethics, the true gentleman must also be knowledgeable in poetry, history, rituals and music. In *Analects*, Confucius wrote: "The beginning of culture and the arts lies in harmony with music; completion of moral self-cultivation lies in the attainment of music." Hence, when constructing Tu Hai, Nguyen Du didn't merely portray him as a martial hero, but also infused him with the traits of a scholar, a dandy, one who appreciates and values both talent and beauty: "On his arrival at the town, he heard of Kieu's fame". Thuy Kieu was renowned not just for her beauty but also her talents, particularly her skilled fingers on the musical instrument that even Ho Ton Hien acknowledged: "The more he watched and listened, the more enchanted he was". Tu Hai sought out Kieu not only driven by carnal desire but also mingled with an admiration for her talent. Even as a heroic figure of great martial prowess, Tu Hai approached Kieu with a gentle intention, a desire to be captured by the charms of beauty.

"With sword and lute, he trekked mountains and sailed rivers" – the word "lute" in this verse depicting Tu Hai has been subject to various interpretations. According to historical anecdotes from Hoang Sao: "Selling the loyal sword / The foremost vast river and mountains" (A sword and bow on the back, crossing mountains and rivers with a single paddle)" Then, "lute" is understood as a weapon and "sword and lute" as an image of a

"swordsmen." The second interpretation considers "lute" to be a musical instrument. Tu Hai carries a strong artistic trait. He sought Kieu with the desire to appreciate her skilled lute playing and to find a soulmate, a kindred spirit. To become Kieu's soulmate, Tu Hai had to be not only a martial hero, but also knowledgeable in ceremonial music. In this aspect, we understand "lute" to be a musical instrument. Nguyen Du fashioned Tu Hai not just as the portrait of a skillful martial hero, but also as an artist, a dandy. He didn't just wield the sword to defeat evil, but also appreciated beauty. Nguyen Du depicted a beautiful and down-to-earth portrayal of Tu Hai, accentuating his humanity.

## Conclusion

The Late Medieval Ages of both Vietnam and China witnessed significant societal changes. Literature aims to reflect a rich variety of realities and spiritual lives. Authors began to write about "observable things" with new and innovative works in terms of both content and artistic form. The peasant uprisings gave rise to valiant heroes who resisted the ruling dynasties. They were talented individuals, driven by aspirations and dreams to assist the people and save the world. Consequently, they became inspirations for writers to creatively depict and introduce into literature a new and unfamiliar portrait of heroes compared to the late medieval period. *Shuibu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga)* and *The Tale of Kieu* both portray portraits of heroes in times of turmoil. These heroes exhibit characteristics that align with Confucian orthodoxy while also breaking away from Confucian thought. This duality is an expression of a society marked by disorder and a rupture of Confucian values. These heroic figures gradually moved beyond the realm of epic poetry to become more realistic and relatable individuals. Vietnam and China share many similarities due to their shared Han cultural heritage and the influence of Confucianism, which is why their depictions of heroes have common traits. However, the differences in local cultures have given rise to distinctive characteristics in the portrayal of heroic figures during times of turmoil in each country.

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- 4698 *The Heroic Characters of Chaos in Vietnamese – Chinese Literature in the Late Medieval Ages Through the Two Works: Shuihu Zhuan (The Water Margin Saga) and the Tale of Kieu*  
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