

Mausoleums of the Nguyễn Dynasty Kings: Architectural Art and Landscape Value

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Abstract:

The Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) was the last monarchical dynasty of Vietnam. This dynasty left behind a massive and majestic complex of relics in Huế city, the ancient capital of Vietnam, with many types of architecture, including citadels, palaces, temples, mausoleums of kings and royals, recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage in 1993. This paper introduces the 7 most important mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings, currently existing in Huế city, focusing on the issues of planning ideology, architectural art and landscape value.

Keywords: *Nguyễn Dynasty, mausoleum, Huế imperial capital, architectural art, landscape value*

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Introduction

The Nguyễn Dynasty (阮朝, 1802–1945) was the last monarchical dynasty in Vietnamese history. It was established by Nguyễn Ánh (阮映, 1769–1820), a descendant of the Nguyễn lords (阮王), who had ruled Đàng Trong (南河: the southern region of Vietnam), for 220 years from 1558 to 1777. Although originating from Đàng Ngoài (北河: the northern region of Vietnam), the Nguyễn lords led the territorial expansion of Vietnam toward the south, thereby shaping the country's modern geographical boundaries. They established their capital in Phú Xuân (富春), later known as the imperial city of Huế. The Nguyễn lords reigned through nine generations before being overthrown in 1777 by the military forces of the Trịnh lords from Đàng Ngoài and by the Tây Sơn movement, which was led by peasants from central Vietnam. The Tây Sơn defeated the Trịnh army in Phú Xuân in 1786 and dissolved the Lê-Trịnh Dynasty in Thăng Long (昇龍 or 昇隆, later Hanoi) in 1788, thereby establishing the Tây Sơn Dynasty (1788–1801).

Nguyễn Ánh, a descendant of the Nguyễn Lords in Đàng Trong, launched a prolonged military campaign against the Tây Sơn regime that lasted nearly a quarter of a century. He ultimately prevailed in 1801, bringing an end to the Tây Sơn Dynasty. In 1802, Nguyễn Ánh ascended the throne under the reign title Gia Long (嘉隆), officially founding the Nguyễn Dynasty.

The Nguyễn Dynasty ruled Vietnam for 143 years through thirteen kings, before being overthrown by the Vietnamese communist revolution in August 1945.

Despite existing for less than a century and a half, the Nguyễn Dynasty left behind a monumental complex of heritage sites in the imperial capital of Huế (順化京都). These include numerous architectural structures of significant historical, cultural, and artistic value, recognized both nationally and internationally (Nguyễn Vũ Lân, 2021; Phan Thuận An, 2008), including seven imperial mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings (阮朝帝陵). This complex was designated a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage in 1993.

This paper introduces the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings, located in the west-southwest of present-day Huế (順化) city.

Overview of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings in Huế

Brief history of the construction of the Nguyen kings' mausoleums in Huế

The Nguyễn Dynasty had thirteen kings. However, due to various complex historical circumstances, only seven mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings are located in the imperial capital of Huế. These include: *Thiên Thọ lăng* (天授陵) of King Gia Long (嘉隆, r. 1802–1820); *Hiếu lăng* (孝陵) of King Minh Mạng (明命, r. 1820–1841); *Xương lăng* (昌陵) of King Thiệu

Trị (紹治, r. 1841–1847); *Khiêm lăng* (謙陵)¹ of King Tự Đức (嗣德, r. 1848–1883); *An lăng* (安陵)² of King Dục Đức (育德, reigned for only three days, 1883); *Tư lăng* (思陵) of King Đồng Khánh (同慶, r. 1885–1889); and *Ứng lăng* (應陵) of King Khải Định (啟定, r. 1916–1925).

According to the Nguyễn Dynasty's architectural master plan for the capital city in the early 19th century, Kinh Thành (京城: the Citadel of Huế) and Hoàng Thành (皇城: the Imperial City of Huế), where the kings resided and ruled, were located in the eastern part of the imperial capital. In contrast, the mausoleums of the kings, empresses, and royal family members were situated in the western part of the capital (Phan Thuận An, 1992). Within the ideological framework of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the king was considered the supreme sovereign and symbolized by the sun. The sun motif appeared frequently in Nguyễn era literature and fine arts, especially in decorative patterns on palaces and mausoleums of the kings in Huế. The setting sun was understood as a metaphor for the passing of the king. After death, the king, like the sun, would journey westward to find eternal rest (Phan Thuận An, 2014). Based on this belief, all mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings were constructed to the west-southwest of the imperial capital of Huế (see Fig. 01).

The construction of the Nguyễn imperial mausoleums in Huế spanned nearly 120 years, beginning in 1814 when King Gia Long built *Thiên Thọ lăng* as his “future residence” in the afterlife, and concluding in 1931 with the completion of *Ứng lăng*, the mausoleum of King Khải Định, the twelfth king of the Nguyễn Dynasty.

Among the seven mausoleums, six were commissioned and begun while their respective kings were still alive. These include *Thiên Thọ lăng*, *Hiếu lăng*, *Xương lăng*, *Khiêm lăng*, *Tư lăng*, and *Ứng lăng*. *An lăng*, the only exception, was built posthumously for King Dục Đức by his son, King Thành Thái (r. 1889–1907).

The mausoleum built in the shortest time was *Xương lăng*, which was completed in just ten months (1847–1848). The mausoleum that took the longest to complete was *Ứng lăng*, which required eleven years of construction (1920–1931).

The largest mausoleum is *Thiên Thọ lăng*, occupying an area of 2,875 hectares (Phan Thanh Hải, 2010; Phan Thuận An et al., 1992). This complex includes the mausoleum of King

¹ Inside *Khiêm lăng*, in 1884, the Nguyễn court commissioned the construction of *Bồi lăng* (陪陵), the auxiliary mausoleum of King Kiến Phúc (1883–1884), the seventh king of the dynasty, who reigned for only eight months.

² Inside *An lăng*, two additional imperial tombs were added later. These include the tomb of King Thành Thái, son of King Dục Đức and the tenth king of the Nguyễn Dynasty (reigned 1889–1907), who passed away in 1954, and the tomb of King Duy Tân, the eleventh king (reigned 1907–1916), who died in exile in the Central African Republic in 1945. His remains were repatriated and reinterred in *An lăng* in 1987.

Gia Long and Empress Thừa Thiên Cao hoàng hậu (First Empress), the tomb of Empress Thuận Thiên Cao hoàng hậu (Second Empress), and the graves of four other members of the Nguyễn royal family. The smallest mausoleum is *Ứng lăng*, with a total area of only 0.6 hectares.

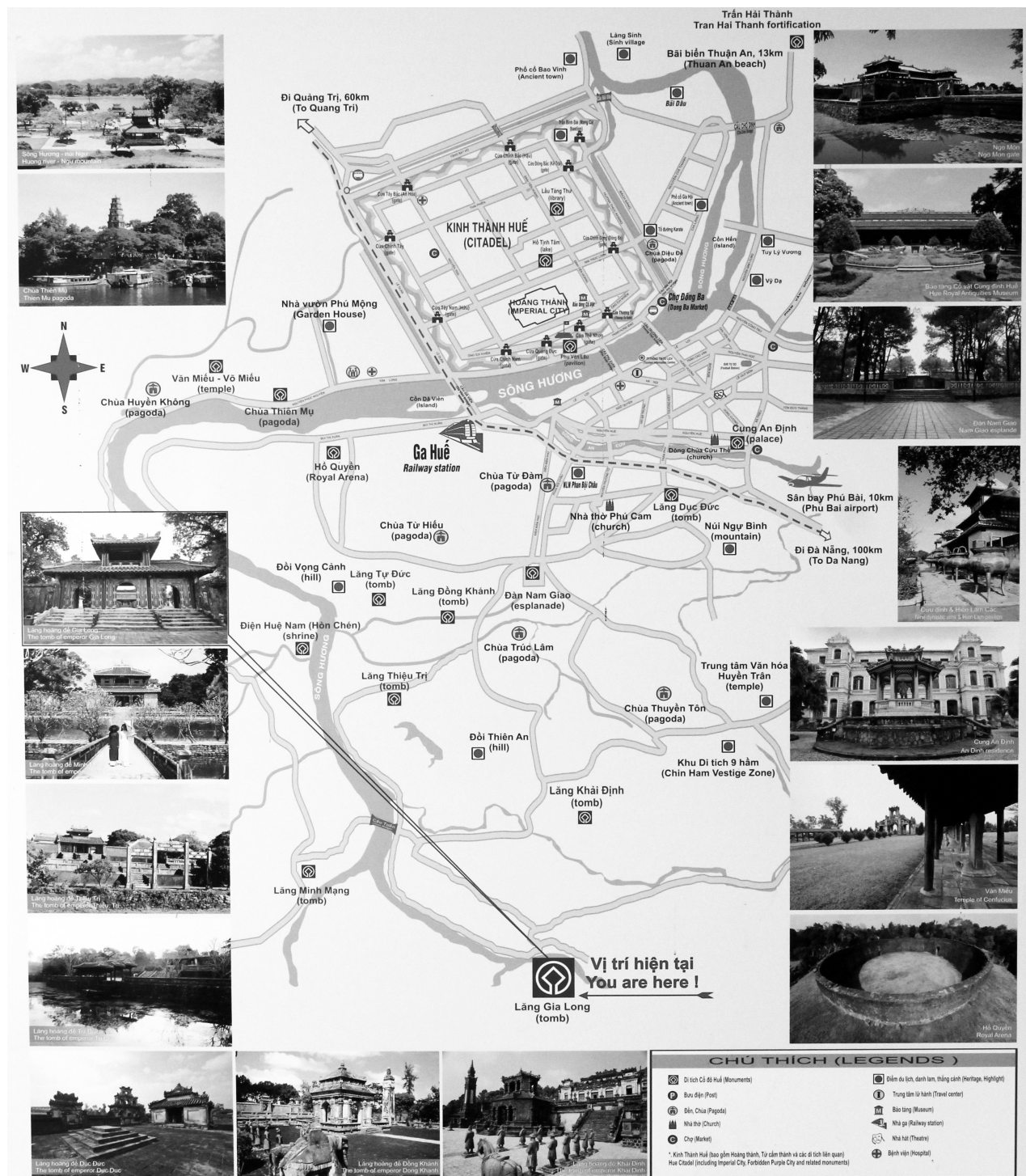


Fig. 01. The mausoleums of the Nguyen kings is located in the the west-southwest of the imperial capital of Huế.

Common characteristics of the imperial mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings

The *lăng tẩm* (陵寢: mausoleums) of the Nguyễn kings in Huế exhibit four major shared characteristics:

First, following the principle of “*túc vị trị lăng*” (即位治陵: ascend the throne and build a mausoleum), most of the Nguyễn kings initiated the construction of their mausoleums while still on the throne.¹ A substantial portion of the state’s manpower and resources, along with the personal commitment of the king, was dedicated over many years to the construction of these monumental burial complexes. The ideological and artistic themes of each mausoleum were proposed by the king himself, architectural plans were submitted for imperial review and approval, and the king often supervised the construction process personally (Phan Thuận An, 2014) (see Fig. 02 and Fig. 03).

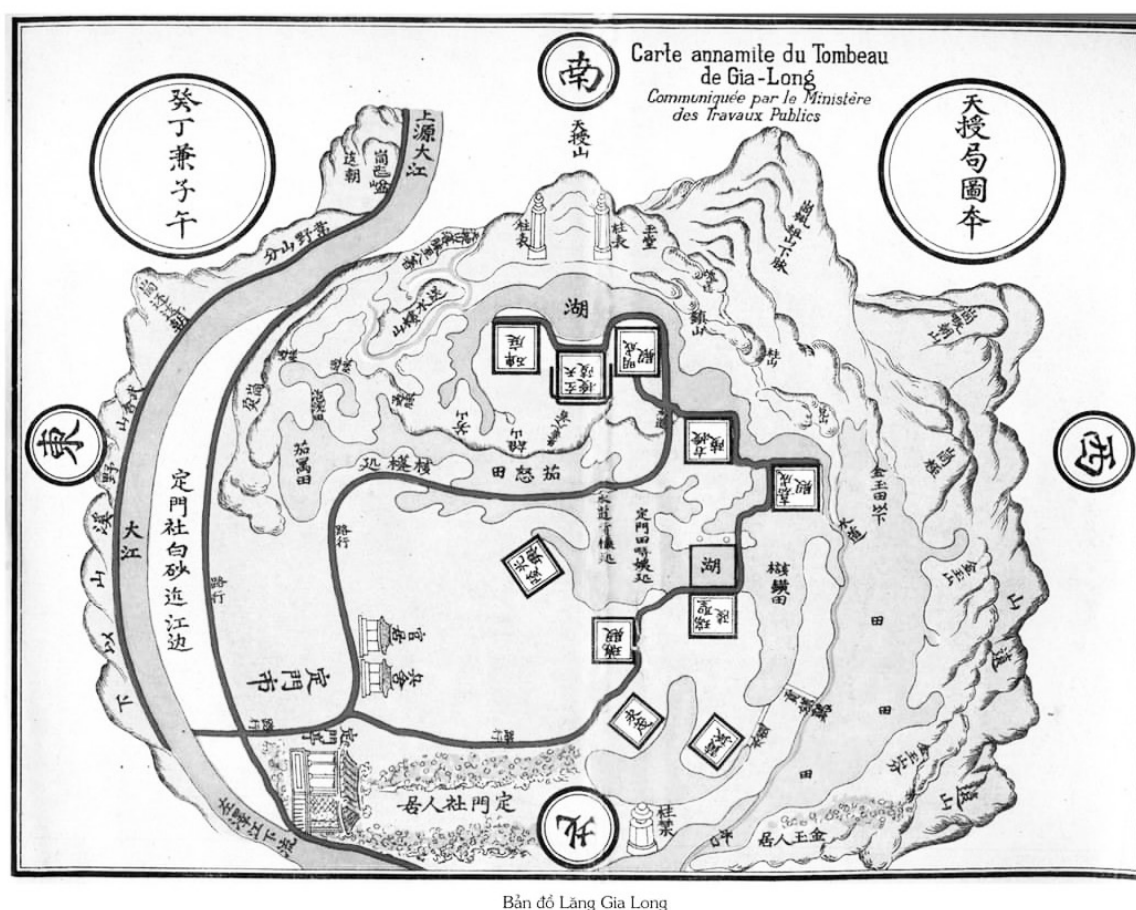


Fig 02. The planning drawing of Thiên Thọ lăng by the Ministry of Public Works of the Nguyễn Dynasty.

¹ As for kings Dục Đức, Kiến Phúc, and Đồng Khánh, because they died at a young age and reigned for only a brief period, their mausoleums were constructed posthumously by their descendants or successors.

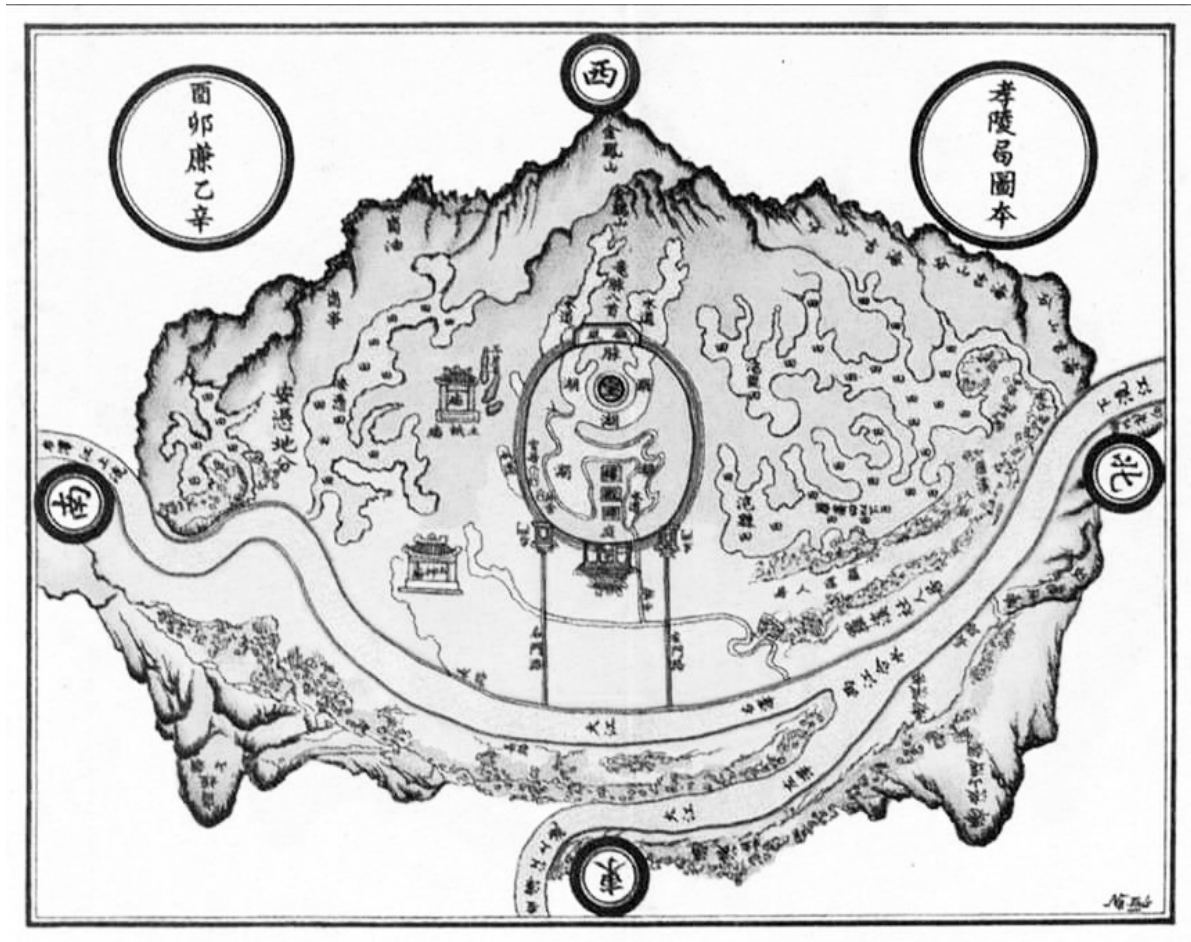


Fig 03. The planning drawing of Hiếu lăng by the Ministry of Public Works of the Nguyễn Dynasty

Second, the Nguyễn imperial mausoleums strictly adhered to principles of *feng shui* (風水). Before construction began, the king would commission geomancers to survey the mountainous terrain west of the capital to search for auspicious sites, known as “*vạn niên cát địa*” (萬年吉地: eternal auspicious lands). These locations were expected to meet key *feng shui* criteria, including: “*son triều thủy tụ*” (山朝水聚: mountains converging and water gathering), “*tiền án hậu chẩm*” (前案後枕: a protective front and supportive rear), “*tả long hữu hổ*” (左龍右虎: left-side dragon and right-side tiger guardians), and “*huyền thủy minh đường*” (玄水明堂: mystical water and bright courtyard). Geomancers would present the selected sites to the king for final approval.

The chosen sites consistently satisfied the following *feng shui* elements:

* *Mountain* (山): A mausoleum must be protected by hills in the front, with mountains at the rear to provide solid support. The flanking terrain, with left and right hills converging toward the front, forms the symbolic shape of “left dragon and right tiger guardians”, signifying royal authority and celestial harmony.

* *Water* (水): The presence of ponds, streams, or creeks flowing in front of the mausoleum ensures the formation of “*chi huyền thủy*” (之玄水), a zigzagging and mystical water flow that enhances the spiritual energy of the burial site.

* *Wind* (風): The orientation of the mausoleum, particularly the burial chamber, had to be aligned with auspicious directions in accordance with the *tuổi* (年歲: birth year) and *mệnh* (命: destiny) of kings, while avoiding exposure to harmful winds (惡風) that could affect the mausoleum's sanctity.

* *Dragon vein* (龍脈): The tomb chamber (玄宮) where the king's remains were interred had to be located precisely on a favorable geomantic vein (龍脈), to ensure the enduring stability and prosperity not only of the deceased king but also of his descendants in the realm of the living.

To achieve these objectives, the most skilled geomancers in Vietnam at the time would dedicate months or even years to meticulously surveying the mountainous regions to the west and southwest of the imperial city of Huế in order to identify the most auspicious site for the king's eternal resting place (Golosova Elena Vladimirovna and Hung Manh Chu, 2019; Phan Thuận An, 2014).

Third, the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings were not merely burial sites for deceased monarchs. Rather, they were extensive architectural complexes that served both as sanctuaries for the living and as “heavenly resting places” for the dead. Accordingly, each mausoleum was composed of two main sections: the *tomb area* (陵墓), where the king's body was interred, and the *residential-temple area* (寢殿), which included shrines, halls, pavilions, towers, kiosks, and altars. While still alive, the king would occasionally leave the imperial palace to spend time at the mausoleum site for leisure and reflection. After the king's death, this area became a sacred space where royal descendants and Nguyễn dynasty officials conducted ceremonial worship, annual death anniversaries, New Year tributes, grave tending day, and other rites of remembrance.

In this sense, the mausoleum functioned almost as a “secondary palace” or a “retreat residence” for the reigning king. For example, *Khiêm lăng* of King Tự Đức was composed of dozens of architectural structures designed to accommodate the king's daily and leisure activities. These included:

* *Hòa Khiêm điện* (和謙殿), the king's private quarters, which later became the main shrine for his and the empress's worship;

* *Xung Khiêm tạ* (沖謙榭) and *Dũ Khiêm tạ* (愈謙榭), the pavilions where the king would fish, compose poetry, and enjoy the scenery;

* *Lưu Khiêm hồ* (流謙湖), the lake for boat rides and flower picking;

* *Minh Khiêm đường* (鳴謙堂), a royal performance hall;

* *Y Khiêm viện* (依謙院) and *Trì Khiêm viện* (持謙院), the residences which housed imperial consorts and maids who accompanied the king during his visits to the mausoleum.

After the king passed away, these buildings were preserved and transformed into spaces of ancestral worship dedicated to the kings, empress, meritorious officials of the dynasty, and even served as permanent residences for the king's surviving concubines and attendants.

This characteristic marks a fundamental distinction between the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings and those of Chinese emperors. In contrast, Chinese monarchs never used their mausoleums during their lifetimes (Golosova Elena Vladimirovna and Hung Manh Chu, 2019).

Fourth, although the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings share a common ideological theme, they are not uniform in layout, architectural planning, style, or number of structures. Depending on the topography of the selected site, Nguyễn architects adopted a design principle that harmonized with the existing natural landscape, utilizing hills, streams, and terrain to create architectural compositions that were both aesthetically integrated with the environment and functionally suited to their purpose.

In addition, each mausoleum reflected the individual artistic preferences of its patron king, resulting in a distinct identity for each complex. These distinctive traits may be summarized as follows:

* *Thiên Thọ lăng* (天授陵) of King Gia Long: majestic and integrated into the natural landscape. (see Fig. 04)

* *Hiếu lăng* (孝陵) of King Minh Mạng: grand, symmetrical, and solemn. (see Fig. 05)

* *Xương lăng* (昌陵) of King Thiệu Trị: harmonious and graceful. (see Fig. 06)

* *Khiêm lăng* (謙陵) of King Tự Đức: elegant and poetically scenic. (see Fig. 07)

* *An lăng* (安陵) of King Dục Đức: simple and dignified. (see Fig. 08)

* *Tư lăng* (思陵) of King Đồng Khánh: charming and vibrant, blending Oriental and Western decorative arts. (see Fig. 09, and Fig. 10)

* *Ứng lăng* (應陵) of King Khải Định: magnificent and intricate, with strong Western architectural and artistic influences. (see Fig. 11, and Fig. 12)



Fig 04. The overview of *Thiên Thọ lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 05. The overview of *Hiếu lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 06. The overview of *Xương lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 07. The overview of *Khiêm lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

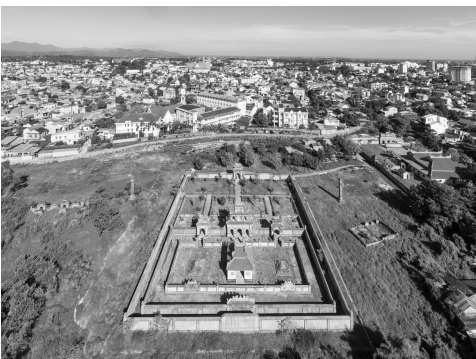


Fig 08. The overview of *An lăng*.
Image credit:
Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 09. Ngưng Hi điện (凝禧殿) in *Tư lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



**Fig 10. The burial area
of King Đồng Khánh in Tư lăng.**
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



**Fig 11. Thiên Định cung (天定宮)
in Ứng lăng.**
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 12. Interior of Thiên Định cung in Ứng lăng. Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

Architectural art of the imperial mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings

The architectural art of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings embodies the general characteristics of Nguyễn era architecture and is deeply influenced by the court architecture of Huế.

Planning and layout

Each imperial mausoleum follows its own specific master plan, shaped by the personal vision and preferences of the reigning king, who was regarded as the “future occupant” of

the mausoleum. However, every plan was required to comply with the principles of *feng shui*, incorporating elements such as: *tiền án* (protective front hills), *hậu chẩm* (supportive rear mountains), *minh đường* (bright courtyard), *thủy tụ* (converging waters), *tả long* (left-side dragon), and *hữu hổ* (right-side tiger). Moreover, the architectural ensemble had to include structures that fulfilled essential functions such as worship, ritual practice, burial, commemoration, and the glorification of the deceased king.

As a result, Nguyễn era architects consistently divided each mausoleum into two main zones: the *worship zone* and the *burial zone*. These zones were usually laid out as separate entities, often demarcated by enclosing walls (as seen in *Thiên Thọ lăng*, *Khiêm lăng*, *An lăng*, *Tư lăng*, and *Ứng lăng*). (see Fig. 13, Fig. 14, Fig. 15, Fig. 16, and Fig. 17) In other cases, natural elements such as lakes, streams, and hills within the mausoleum grounds were utilized as boundaries between functional areas, as seen in *Hiếu lăng* and *Xương lăng*. (see Fig. 18, and Fig. 19)

The orientation of Nguyễn mausoleums also reflects distinctive characteristics. Unlike Chinese imperial mausoleums, which strictly follow a north-south axis, the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings commonly follow an east-west axis, with adjustments based on the geographic latitude of Vietnam and the solar trajectory throughout the year. This departure



Fig 13. Architectural works in *Thiên Thọ lăng* are separated by enclosing walls.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 14. Architectural works in *Khiêm lăng* are separated by enclosing walls.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 15. Architectural works in *An lăng* are separated by enclosing walls.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 16. Architectural works in *Tư lăng* are separated by enclosing walls.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 18. Architectural works in *Hiếu lăng* are separated by ponds.

Image credit:
Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 17. Architectural works in *Ứng lăng* are separated by enclosing walls.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 19: Architectural works in *Xương lăng* are separated by ponds.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

from Chinese orientation conventions illustrates a localized adaptation rooted in both environmental conditions and symbolic cosmology (Golosova Elena Vladimirovna and Hung Manh Chu, 2019).

Architectural style

The mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings, and more broadly the architectural ensemble of the Nguyễn royal court in Huế, embody a distinct stylistic identity. While influenced by the planning concepts and architectural models of the Ming and Qing dynasties of China (1368–1911), which the Nguyễn Dynasty in Vietnam regarded as exemplary, these structures also reflect unique characteristics. At the same time, they differ significantly from traditional architectural forms found in northern Vietnam during the same historical period.

Specifically:

* Most of the major architectural structures within the royal palace and the imperial mausoleums in the imperial capital of Huế are constructed using timber frame systems and roofed with tiles. They are relatively delicate and refined in design, moderate in scale, and not as grand as the monumental architecture of the Ming and Qing imperial courts. At the same time, they lack the heavy and rough construction style found in the court architecture of earlier Vietnamese dynasties such as the Lý, Trần, and Lê (10th to 18th centuries), as well as in traditional temples and communal houses in northern Vietnam.

* The architectural structures in the *tẩm điện* (the *residential-temple areas*) of the Nguyễn mausoleums are primarily wooden buildings. Common styles include “*trùng thiềm điệp ốc*” (重檐疊屋: two overlapping roof structures joined by a central gutter) (see Fig. 20)¹; “5 gian 2 chái” (five-bay two-wing) (see Fig. 21) and “3 gian 2 chái” (three-bay two-wing) configurations (see Fig. 22) for the principal halls. Entranceways often follow the “*vọng lâu*” (望樓) style, characterized by two-story gate towers with three arched passages (see Fig. 23, and Fig. 24). In the burial areas, structures such as stele house, ceremonial halls, stone grave, screen walls, and halfmoon-shaped ponds are mainly constructed from stone, large bricks, and lime mortar (see Fig. 25 and Fig. 26).

* With the exception of *Ứng lăng*, the gateways and doors in the *tẩm điện* areas are typically made of wood and roofed with glazed tiles. In contrast, the gates in the burial

¹ Traditional wooden architecture does not tend to grow in height. Therefore, Huế artisans chose the smartest architectural solution, creating the “*trùng thiềm điệp ốc*” (重檐疊屋: two overlapping roof structures joined by a central gutter) architecture to expand the interior space, but still ensure the moderate height of the building, to avoid the unfavorable weather and climate factors in Huế region, which seriously affect architectural works during the rainy and stormy season. (Nam Tran Thanh, 2023)

areas are usually crafted from brass and decorated with *pháp lam* (enamel bronze painting) (see Fig. 27), or built from brick and lime plaster with glazed ceramic ornamentation (see Fig. 28).

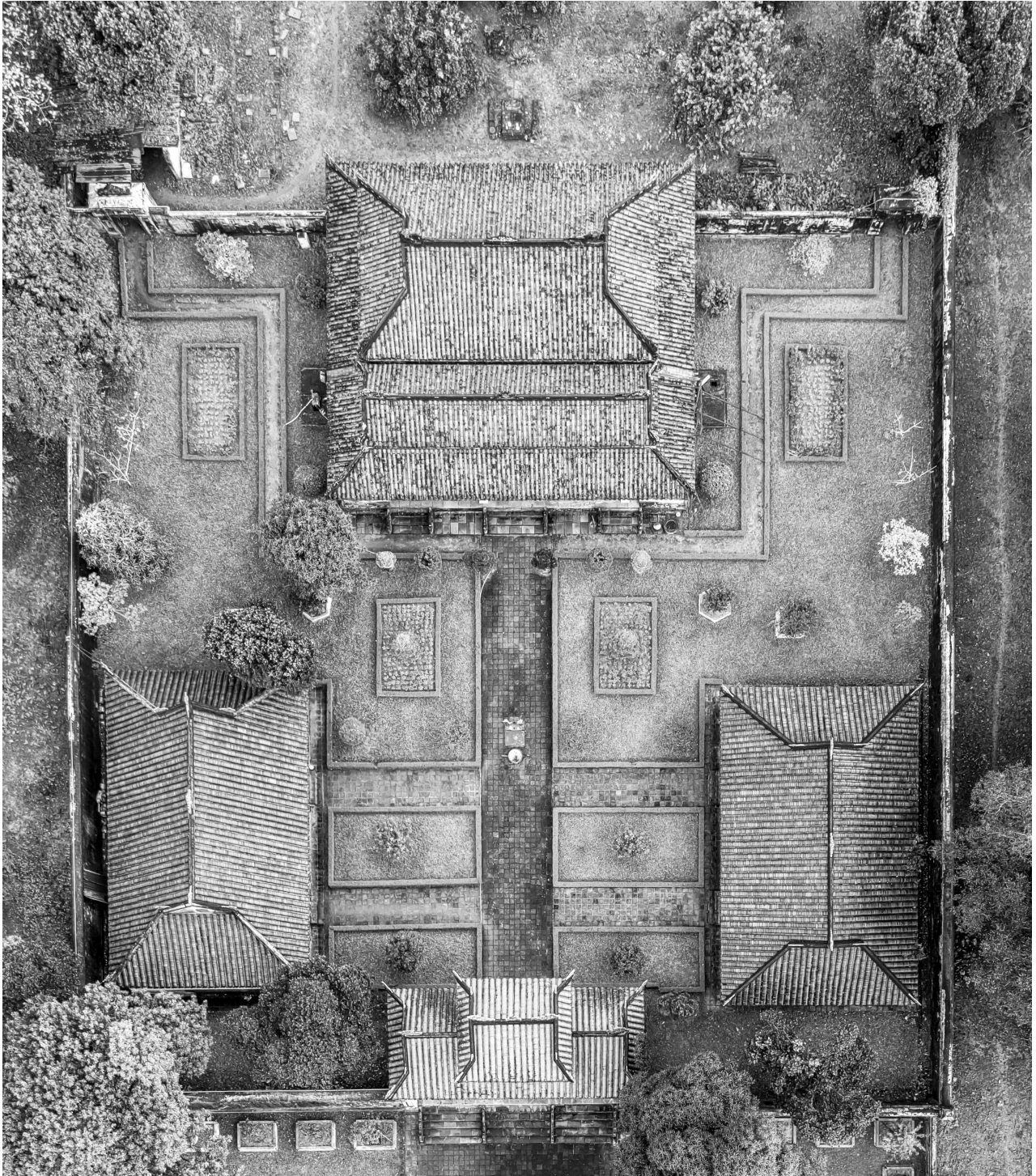


Fig 20. The “trùng thiềm điệp ốc” style of *Minh Thành điện* (明誠成禧殿) in *Thiên Thọ lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 21: The “5 gian 2 chái” mansion of Hòa Khiêm điện in Khiêm lăng.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 22: The “3 gian 2 chái” mansion in Tư lăng.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 23. The “vọng lâu” style of the Hiển Đức môn (顯德門) in Hiếu lăng.

Image credit: Trần Đức Anh Sơn



Fig 24. The “vọng lâu” style of the Hồng Trạch môn (鴻澤門) in Xương lăng.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 25. The “vọng lâu” style of the Cung môn (宮門) in Tư lăng.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 26. The stele house in Khiêm lăng is built with bricks and lime mortar.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 27. The stele house in Ứng lăng is built with bricks and cement.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 28. Enamel bronze painting in Tư lăng.

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

Decorative Art

There are three major thematic groups in the decorative programs of the mausoleums of Nguyễn kings: natural phenomena (sun, moon, clouds, thunder and lightning), classical motifs drawn from Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Vietnamese folklore, including the *tứ linh* (four sacred animals), the *bát bửu* (eight treasures), the *bát tiên* (eight immortals) (see Fig. 29), and representations of flora and fauna (see Fig. 30). Although some of these themes were borrowed from Chinese culture, most originated from Vietnamese symbols and traditional beliefs.

Art during the Nguyễn Dynasty was fundamentally decorative in nature. This artistic character is vividly expressed throughout the mausoleums. Nguyễn artisans employed a wide range of techniques in decorating architectural elements, including painting (watercolors on lime plaster and lacquered gold on wood) (see Fig. 31, and Fig. 32), lime plaster bas-reliefs (see Fig. 33), molded terracotta sculpture (see Fig. 34, and Fig. 35), wood, bronze, and stone carving, and inlay work using porcelain and ceramic shards (see Fig. 36).

Of particular significance is the emergence of ceramic mosaic art in Huế region during the 18th century. Initially used in the decoration of temples, pagodas, and shrines in popular religious architecture, this technique was later adopted into royal architecture. Over time, it evolved into porcelain mosaic art and reached a high level of aesthetic sophistication in the decorative program of Ứng lăng (Nam Thanh Tran, 2023).



Fig 29. Plaster phoenix inlaid with porcelain on the screen in *Khiêm Thọ lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 30. Plaster dragon inlaid with porcelain in *Thiên Định cung* in *Ứng lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 32. Gilded lacquer designs in *Ngưng Hi điện* in *Tư lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

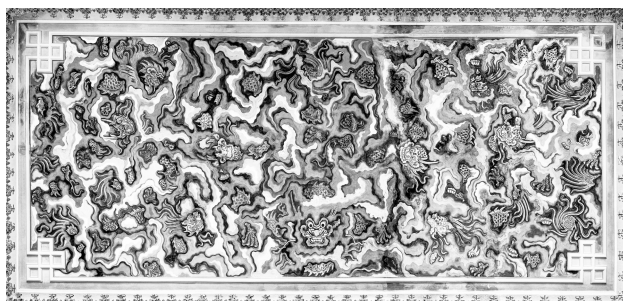


Fig 31. The “nine dragons hidden in the clouds” design painted in powder on the ceiling of *Thiên Định cung* in *Ứng lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig 33. Plaster dragon in *Ứng lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Phúc Bảo Minh



Fig 34. Terracotta “dragon holding the Thọ (壽) character” design in *Tư lăng*.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

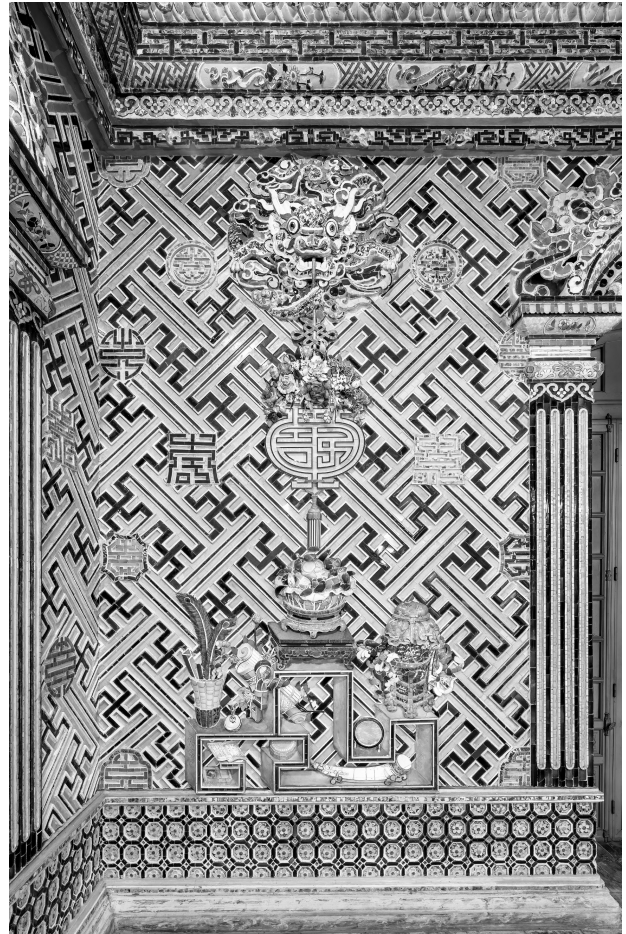


**Fig 35. "Woodcutter and Farmer"
terracotta design in Tư lăng.**

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

**Fig 36. The Vạn (卐) and the Thọ (壽)
characters by porcelain mosaic
in Thiên Định cung in Ứng lăng.**

Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



The ornamentation on the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings features unique artistic symbols, lively motif variations, and rich layers of symbolic meaning. For example, the representation of the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter, is expressed through emblematic plants such as apricot, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo, or peach blossom, lotus, willow, and pine-tree (Trần Đức Anh Sơn, 1992). The *bát bửu* motif is associated with the three major philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism), while the *tứ linh* (dragon, qilin, tortoise, and phoenix) symbolize imperial power, royal legitimacy, and eternal endurance.

The artistic value of the decorative programs in the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings lies in their integration of courtly aesthetic symbolism with the general principles of Nguyễn architectural ornamentation (Nguyễn Vũ Lâm, 2021).

Landscape values of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings

In addition to their distinctive architectural and artistic significance, the imperial mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings in Huế also embody valuable landscape attributes.

Nguyễn Dynasty architects did not merely construct grand and splendid mausoleums

for the kings. They also transformed remote and desolate areas into magnificent scenic sites, turning isolated mountainous regions into elegant parks.

The planners, architects, and artisans of the Nguyễn era fully utilized the surrounding natural environment, incorporating it deliberately into the architecture and guiding it to serve the aesthetic and symbolic intentions of each project. Where nature was lacking, they modified the terrain or introduced built elements to create a harmonious visual impression. Cultural researcher Từ Chi observed, “*The exterior space flows into the architectural space, drawing architecture closer to nature and contributing to the reorganization of the overall spatial environment*”. (Phan Thuận An, 1992)

Within the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings in Huế, most hills, streams, rivers, lakes, and vegetation of the foothill region were either preserved or adapted to serve as contextual backgrounds for the tomb architecture. The internal circulation paths were designed not only to ensure functional access but also to respect the existing terrain and maintain harmony with the natural surroundings.

Several elements, including greenery, ornamental landscapes, ponds, and lawns, were integrated into the mausoleum environment. These features helped dispel the somber atmosphere typically associated with burial grounds and transformed these spaces into vibrant and serene gardens. This approach aligned with the Huế people’s innate affinity with nature, where the natural world is regarded as an inseparable part of the living space. It reflects the idea that nature and humanity form a unified whole. This sense of harmony constitutes both a visual ideal and a philosophical worldview rooted in the cultural identity of Huế. (Trần Đức Anh Sơn, 2004)

The architects and artisans who created the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings consistently employed pairs of contrasting spatial elements such as mountain and water, high and low, stillness and movement, circle and square, visible and invisible. These contrasts were used to organize architectural components and to achieve spatial symmetry and balance between built forms and natural surroundings.

Water features in particular played a central role in the landscapes of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings. Except for *Ứng lăng*, which followed Western design principles and composition, water landscapes occupied significant areas and conformed to the principles of *feng shui*. According to these principles, a balanced site requires a mountain at the rear, water in the front, and two smaller hills on either side symbolizing the *thanh long* (blue dragon) and *bạch hổ* (white tiger). This arrangement reflects a meticulous consideration of natural elements according to geomantic criteria, contributing to the distinctive layout of the mausoleum of the Nguyễn kings in Huế. Examples include the landscape compositions of *Thiên Thọ lăng*, *Hiếu lăng*, *Xương lăng*, and *Khiêm lăng*. (Duy Khiem Tran et al., 2023)

In addition, lakes and winding streams within the mausoleums serve as focal points and facilitate interaction between the natural and man-made environments. These elements are complemented by pavilions, terraces, platforms, and halls strategically placed throughout the mausoleums. (see Fig. 37)

The architectural form known as *thủy tạ* (水榭: waterside pavilion) is also a defining feature of the landscape design. Notable examples include *Hu Hoài tạ* (虛懷榭) in *Hiếu lăng*, and *Xung Khiêm tạ* (冲謙榭) and *Dũ Khiêm tạ* (愈謙榭) in *Khiêm lăng* (see Fig. 38). A *thủy tạ* is a structure built over water. It typically consists of two or three segments partially enclosed by wooden walls, with curved rooflines. Along with the surrounding lakes, these pavilions serve as scenic highlights that enhance the visual and symbolic value of the landscape.

Trees also play an essential role. Greenery is considered one of the five elemental components in traditional *feng shui*, alongside metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Trees, or the color green, are associated with the wood element, symbolizing vitality, longevity, and the power of growth (Duy Khiem Tran et al., 2023). For this reason, large quantities of



Fig. 37. Tân Nguyệt hồ (新月湖) and Trừng Minh hồ (澄明湖) in Hiếu lăng.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong



Fig. 38. Xung Khiêm tạ (冲謙榭) and Dũ Khiêm tạ (愈謙榭) in Khiêm lăng.
Image credit: Nguyễn Tấn Anh Phong

trees are present throughout the mausoleums of Nguyễn kings in Huế, featuring diverse species, many of which are old-growth trees of native origin. Architectural structures are often partially concealed beneath the canopies of ancient pines, mirrored in tranquil lakes,

and enveloped in a lush green atmosphere. The presence of trees and lawns transforms the mausoleums into peaceful gardens that once served as places of leisure for the kings during their lifetimes and now stand as sacred resting grounds after death.

Vietnamese classical architecture is generally characterized as landscape-based or what is now referred to as *landscape architecture*. This artistic tradition reached its pinnacle in the mausoleums of Huế. In 1981, following his visit to Huế, then Director-General of UNESCO Amadou Mahtar M'Bow concluded that: *"The tombs of the Nguyen dynasty... constitute original variations on the single theme. Each of these tombs is a perfect example, after its own fashion, of an architecture attuned to the landscape; and each strikes a particular chord in the visitor's sensibility. The tomb of Gia Long, set amidst a vast natural park, gives an impression of strength and serenity, that of Minh Mang is invested with great solemnity, while that of Tu Duc induces a mood of quiet reverie"*. (Phan Thuận An, 2015)

Conclusion

The complex of mausoleums of Nguyễn kings in Huế, left by the Nguyễn Dynasty for future generations, is a vital component of Vietnamese royal architectural heritage. It represents a cultural treasure of Vietnam and was recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage in 1993.

These mausoleums are outstanding achievements in architectural planning. They apply traditional Oriental principles of *feng shui* and geomancy, drawing from the natural topography of the mountains, hills, rivers, and streams located west of the imperial capital. The mausoleums were designed and constructed to be monumental and magnificent, yet harmoniously integrated with the natural landscape. They also reflect Confucian values embedded in royal mortuary architecture while accommodating the personal wishes and preferences of the Nguyễn kings who commissioned them.

The architecture of the mausoleums of Nguyễn kings successfully combines two core functions. First, the sites served as leisure gardens and retreats for the ruling elite. Later, they became final resting places for the kings and members of the royal family. This dual function is a distinguishing characteristic that sets the mausoleums in Huế apart from the mausoleums of Chinese emperors.

The architecture of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings reflects not only the worldview of the Nguyễn monarchs but also the broader attitude of the Huế people toward death. It expresses a calm and wise acceptance of mortality, embracing it as a natural part of life. The kings prepared to welcome death by transforming their burial grounds into eternal homes, peaceful and dignified spaces equipped with all the amenities of both life and the afterlife. These mausoleums represent a synthesis of sacred and secular elements.

They embody the idea of “*a realm of the living for the dead.*” More than a decade ago, a Western visitor to the Nguyễn tombs in Huế described the site as a place where “*le deuil sourit et la joie soupier*” (mourning smiles and joy sighs). (Phan Thuận An, 2014) This remark captures the profound humanism and philosophical depth expressed in these architectural works.

The architecture and decorative art of the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings reached the highest level of aesthetic refinement during the Nguyễn era. These mausoleums contributed significantly to the form, achievements, and artistic value of Nguyễn dynasty art. It is an art form deeply rooted in traditional Vietnamese aesthetics, selectively absorbing the indigenous visual culture of earlier settlers, along with foreign artistic influences from China and the West, to create a distinctive Nguyễn era art tradition that has left a lasting impression on the visual culture of Vietnam.

Rooted in Confucian ideology and Oriental philosophical and aesthetic thought, and realized through the artistic talent of court architects and the craftsmanship of skilled artisans, the mausoleums of the Nguyễn kings are unique artistic creations. They possess a distinct stylistic identity that sets them apart from mortuary architecture elsewhere in the world. These mausoleums are not only cultural and historical monuments but also scenic treasures with significant landscape value. They are valuable tourism resources inherited from the Nguyễn Dynasty, gifted to future generations by the Vietnamese people and by humanity at large.

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