

THE HEROIC IDEAL AND THE CRISIS OF CONFUCIAN DISCOURSE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIETNAM: *RECORDS OF THE UNIFICATION OF IMPERIAL LÊ* BY THE NGÔ GIA VĂN PHÁI

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Abstract:

Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê (皇黎一統志; *Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí*) is a well-known Vietnamese historical novel written in classical Chinese in the late eighteenth century. It was written by several members of the Ngô family literary group (Ngô gia văn phái). Drawing on Joseph Campbell's study of the mythological hero, this article extends the concept of the hero to the study of Vietnamese historical novels written in classical Chinese. By adapting Campbell's model and combining it with discourse analysis, the article examines the roles of characters within the work's narrative structure. Although these characters undertake journeys of their own in which they assume the role of heroes, they also serve as helpers to the central figure, Nguyễn Huệ. Shaped by Confucian learning and the Confucian social order, they invoke Confucian political principles in pursuit of their aims. Their journeys, however, suggest that the ideal of the hero as junzi (Confucian gentleman) finds no full realization in practice. They also expose the tensions between Confucian discourse and the social realities of late eighteenth-century Vietnam.

Keywords: *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, late eighteenth-century Vietnam, crisis of Confucian discourse, heroism, political conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí (皇黎一統志; *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*), also known as *An Nam nhất thống chí* (安南一統志), is a historical narrative written in classical Chinese by several authors associated with the Ngô gia văn phái. It portrays the profound political and social upheavals that transformed Vietnam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the decline of the Lê-Trịnh regime and the rise of the Tây Sơn movement to the consolidation of power under the Nguyễn dynasty. By representing the figures and events of this transitional period, the work not only provides a valuable account of historical events but also reveals how Confucian intellectuals perceived, evaluated, and reconfigured established norms of political legitimacy, loyalty, moral virtue, and heroism amid a crisis of the traditional order.

Previous studies of the novel's heroic characters, including those by Đỗ Đức Dục (2008), Nguyễn Lộc (2004), Nguyễn Thanh Nhã (2013), and Nguyễn Đăng Na (2006), have largely evaluated these figures through Confucian or Marxist frameworks. As a result, characters have often been placed in opposing categories, such as loyal and treacherous, heroic and villainous, or orthodox and heterodox. Read through Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero, however, the novel presents heroic figures whose qualities cannot be fully captured by these oppositions. Their multifaceted portrayals also bring into view the tensions within Confucian discourse in late eighteenth-century Vietnamese society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs Joseph Campbell's theory of the heroic archetype to examine the representation of heroic figures in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, a Vietnamese historical narrative written in Literary Chinese. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), Campbell conceptualizes the hero's journey as a recurring narrative pattern comprising three broad stages—departure, initiation, and return—and seventeen constituent steps (Campbell, 1968). The journey involves both external adventure and internal transformation: the hero leaves the familiar world, confronts a series of trials, acquires new knowledge or power, and returns transformed. Rather than applying all seventeen steps mechanically, this study uses Campbell's model as an interpretive framework for examining the narrative trajectories, transformations, and ideological contradictions of heroic characters in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*.

The given study uses typological analysis to determine types of characters that fit into the mythological hero model suggested by Joseph Campbell and to explore the specific characteristics of a particular heroic image. Nevertheless, as Vietnamese folklorist Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân remarks, Campbell's model, although "strongly universal," is "also the cause of the theory's crisis because it erases cultural diversity and imposes a Western template on non-Western narrative traditions" (Ngân, 2026, p.216–217). In this study, Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey serves as a framework for interpreting the structure of characters' actions, rather than as a template against which they are mechanically measured. The study does not assume that every character passes through all the stages of Campbell's model, nor does it equate the mythological hero with a historical figure. Elements of the model are used only where they clarify how the work organizes action and constructs character. Departures from the model are examined in relation to the historical context, the Confucian ideal of the junzi, and the work's narrative conventions.

Taking Campbell's theory as a point of departure, the study retains the functional designations of "hero" and "helper" while adapting their meanings to the narrative conventions of the historical novel. Characters are classified according to their narrative functions and their positions within particular lines of action, rather than solely by their historical status or their conformity to the Confucian ideal of the junzi. A "hero" is a character whose distinct goals and conflicts, together with a sequence of choices, trials, and outcomes, form a line of action that the narrative places in focus. A "helper" is a character whose actions primarily advance another character's line of action. These roles are relational: a character may function as a helper in Nguyễn Huệ's journey but become the central figure when their own story is considered. Campbell's model is therefore applied to the organization of action within each narrative strand, rather than imposed as a fixed framework on the entire cast.

Table 1. Classification of Character Types Informed by Campbell's Model

Role in the Narrative Action	Classification Criteria
<i>Hero/Protagonist</i>	A character with distinct goals or conflicts, whose choices shape a significant sequence of events and whose trials and eventual fate form the focus of a narrative strand.
<i>Helper</i>	A character whose actions primarily support or advance another central character's journey, while their own development is not the focus of the narrative strand under consideration.

Moreover, the paper uses discourse analysis to examine how the subject position of the Confucian gentleman (junzi; 君子) is recast as that of a hero in the social and political context of late eighteenth-century Vietnam. It analyzes two bodies of discourse: that of the novel by the Ngô family literary school (Ngô gia văn phái) and that of the Confucian classics, using the Song-

dynasty scholar ZhuXi’s commentary on the Four Books, *Tứ thư chương cú tập chú* (*Collected Annotations on the Four Books*; 四書章句集注), as a point of reference. In doing so, the paper examines the relationship among language, Confucian ideology, and power, while identifying the gap between orthodox Confucian discourse and social reality as it emerges in the portrayal of heroic figures.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* and its types of heroic characters

Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê is a well-known chaptered novel (chương hồi; 章回) written in Classical Chinese. It was written by a group of authors from the Ngô Thì family of Tả Thanh Oai village, Thanh Oai district, Hanoi. The novel consists of seventeen chapters and depicts political conflicts among several factions, including the Lê dynasty, the Tây Sơn forces, the Trịnh lords in Đàng Ngoài, and the Nguyễn lords in Đàng Trong.

The historical setting of *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* is the final three decades of the eighteenth century, a period of severe political crisis in Vietnam. Under the Later Lê dynasty (1533–1789), the king retained nominal authority while the Trịnh lords exercised effective power in the north. The country also experienced a succession of prolonged conflicts, including the Lê–Mạc and Trịnh–Nguyễn wars and, later, the struggles involving the Tây Sơn, the Trịnh lords, and the Nguyễn lords. Peasant uprisings, the rise of local leaders, and conflicts involving neighboring states further complicated the political situation. Instability intensified in the second half of the eighteenth century and continued until the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802 (Sử, 1999).

These political and social upheavals profoundly affected Confucian scholar-officials and exposed divisions within the educated elite. Such divisions can be read as signs of tensions within Confucian political thought itself. As the dominant framework for evaluating political authority and moral conduct, Confucianism faced growing difficulty in accounting for the realities of this period.

Against this social background, *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* depicts a range of heroic figures motivated by aspirations for social change and hopes for a new political order. The novel uses expressions such as “times of disorder” (thế loạn), “heroes from all quarters” (bốn phương anh hùng), “men of talent” (nhân tài), and “men of valor” (trượng phu) in its portrayal of these figures. According to the Vietnamese scholar Trần Ngọc Vương, such characters can be understood in relation to the figures of the “great man” (đại trượng phu; 大丈夫) and the “scholar-warrior hero” (người anh hùng thư kiếm) (Vương, 1999, p.453). They represent an emerging literary character type shaped by the historical and social conditions of late medieval Vietnam.

Based on the theoretical framework by Campbell, the heroic figures in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* can be divided into two main groups: the figures of heroes and the figures in the category of helper. Nguyễn Huệ (or Nguyễn Văn Bình), Ngô Thì Nhậm, Trần Công Xán are the representatives of the first type, and the representative of the helper one is Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. These two types have their essential features as described below.

This study examines four principal characters in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*: Nguyễn Huệ, Ngô Thì Nhậm, Trần Công Xán, and Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. Applying the theoretical framework and criteria for distinguishing character types set out above, it classifies them as follows.

Table 2. Classification of Character Types in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*

Characters	Role in the Character's Own Narrative Strand	Function in Nguyễn Huệ's Narrative Strand
Nguyễn Huệ	Central heroic figure.	The central character of a narrative strand
Ngô Thị Nhậm	The central figure in a narrative strand focused on the Confucian <i>junzi</i> .	A political strategist who assists Nguyễn Huệ.
Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh	The central figure in a narrative strand tracing a personal journey and transformation.	A military aide to Nguyễn Huệ for a brief period.
Trần Công Xán	The central figure in a narrative strand focused on the loyal Confucian minister.	Does not function as a helper in Nguyễn Huệ's narrative strand.

The table distinguishes characters by their narrative functions, using the narrative strand as its unit of analysis. This study identifies a strand centred on Nguyễn Huệ and a separate strand for each of the other three characters: Ngô Thị Nhậm, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, and Trần Công Xán. Nguyễn Huệ's strand is the primary focus and involves the other characters in different ways. Within it, Ngô Thị Nhậm serves as a political strategist who assists Nguyễn Huệ, while Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh provides military assistance for a limited period. Trần Công Xán does not serve a helper function in Nguyễn Huệ's strand; his role is examined through his own narrative strand.

3.2. The Journey of the Heroes in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*

3.2.1. Heroic Figures Across Narrative Strands and Their Choices of Action

The section "Heroic Figures Across Narrative Strands and Their Choices of Action" draws on Campbell's discussion of the "Call to Adventure" (Campbell, 1968, p.45).

In *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, the heroes' journeys do not encompass all seventeen stages of Campbell's monomyth, but they do pass through key stages within its three major phases. In terms of social position, the heroic figures include military generals, Confucian scholars at court, and gifted strategists.

Nguyễn Văn Bình (Nguyễn Huệ) is the principal figure examined in this study. His heroic journey begins in Quy Nhơn, when he is called upon to enter and subdue new political territories: first Phú Xuân, under the Nguyễn lords, and ultimately Đàng Ngoài, where the Trịnh lords held power in the name of the Lê dynasty. Thuận Quảng and Bắc Hà were considerably larger than Tây Sơn, Nguyễn Huệ's home region. As a "thượng công" within the Tây Sơn leadership, Nguyễn Văn Bình was assigned the task of taking Phú Xuân (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.91). On the fourteenth day of the fifth month of the Bính Ngọ year, during the Cảnh Hưng era (1786), Bình took Thuận Hóa. This event marks the completion of the initial stage of Nguyễn Huệ's heroic journey.

Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê also show the Adventure of the supporting characters, including Hữu Chỉnh, Ngô Thị Nhậm. Campbell emphasizes the role of helper in the hero's journey as follows: "The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region." (Campbell, 1968, p.89). The supporting characters of *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* display a distinctive feature, which they have opposing political missions: Ngô Thời Nhậm and Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh were officials who served the Tây Sơn dynasty, whereas Trần Công Xán served the enemy of Tây Sơn - the Trịnh lords. However, their aiding role is not considered. This proves that the typological features of the helper figure are highly accentuated.

Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh takes an adventure to seek a feasible life in a new place. He moves from his hometown, Nghệ An, located in Bắc Hà, to the Tây Sơn territory in Nam Hà. The "call to departure" in the journey of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh are the result of his great gift, namely, his strategic gift, and his capacity to judge historical situations. Chỉnh himself describes his choice of going to

the Tây Sơn region as an act of “abanboning his country... doing it with the purpose of ensuring his own survival “the world has many worlds, why not have no place to go?” From the perspective of Confucian, the southward journey of Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh is a violation of the Confucian normative system, to the extent that it comprises leaving the country and state to conform to a conflicting political unit, or Tây Sơn. His determined gesture of departure indicates a decisive temperament when he began his journey south: as the ship weighed anchor, Chỉnh gave three gun-fires, then giving an order to the rowers to turn his ship, full in the middle of the stream, and hoist up the sails, turned to sea and sailed directly out to sea.

Ngô Thì Nhậm is also involved in his own mission of a political agenda to assist Nguyễn Huệ of the Tây Sơn faction, Ngô Thì Nhậm had an outstanding lineage as a high-ranking Confucian scholar-official of the Lê dynasty in Bắc Hà. His choice of going south and join the parties in Tây Sơn was also influenced by his disillusionment with the Trịnh lord and the Emperor Lê. Nhậm was a man well-versed with the ways of the social. The collaboration between Nhậm and Tây Sơn is an adventure as runs counter to the orthodox Confucian principle of zhong jun (忠君, loyalty to the ruler), a central political ideal within Confucian scholars. The story of Ngô Thì Nhậm in Nam Hà is presented as a helper of Nguyễn Huệ. He was a strategic planner, who had plans to fight against Bắc Hà for Tây Sơn. Due to the advice of Nhậm which the Tây Sơn army succeeded in defeating the invading Qing Dynasty. This proves that the path that Nhậm takes in Nam Hà is a considerable and remarkable path to his role as a helper (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.354).

The character Trần Công Xán (or Trần Công Thuộc) has a presence of about thirty-five times in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*. In contrast to Nguyễn Huệ, Trần Công Xán is not an epic hero; he is a kind of intellectual heroism as a *da zhangfu* (“đại trượng phụ”) as conceptualized in the Confucianism tradition. His trip is not marked by military conquering but with completion of a diplomatic mission between the Lê dynasty and the Tây Sơn dynasty.

In contrast to Nguyễn Huệ, Trần Công Xán’s journey is not aimed at territorial expansion or the establishment of a new political order through military force. Rather, it is directed toward a peaceful political settlement and thus differs sharply from the paths taken by Ngô Thì Nhậm and Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh. Xán is portrayed as travelling from Bắc Hà to Phú Xuân to confront the Tây Sơn military leadership directly and seek a conciliatory solution that might bring the armed conflict to an end. His journey to Phú Xuân is presented as a duty arising from his loyalty to the Lê dynasty and his sense of responsibility for the fate of the state.

Trần Công Xán’s conduct is guided by the Confucian principle of zhong jun (忠君), or loyalty to the ruler. His political choices remain grounded in his allegiance to the Lê dynasty, reflecting an orthodox Confucian understanding of political morality. In this sense, Xán’s journey represents a continuation of his moral commitments rather than an act of political opportunism. Bắc Bình Vương remarks to his subordinate officials: “I have heard that Bắc Hà is full of men of talent, but now that I have come here, I see only Trần Công Xán as one who truly bears a manly bearing” (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.245).

In Nguyễn Huệ’s view, descriptions such as “the bearing of a true man,” “the bearing of a great minister,” and “an unyielding manner in the presence of authority” express his admiration for Trần Công Xán’s moral integrity and forthrightness. While Ngô Thì Nhậm and Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh undertake journeys into new political territories, Xán’s journey is directed toward changing the course of the conflict between rival factions.

3.2.2. The hero’s journey into Martial Exploits and the Aid of the Helper

As the hero sets out on the journey, the appearance of a helper corresponds to the third stage of Campbell's model, "Supernatural Aid" (Campbell, 1968, p.63).

Courageous Commitment refers to the hero's decision to answer a "call to adventure" and undertake a journey involving challenges beyond ordinary experience. In legends, myths, and folktales, helpers often possess supernatural powers, which they use to assist the hero. In "*Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*", it is true that the helpers do not exhibit their supernatural powers, but such a functional role is not fundamentally any different. Unlike the myth generalized by Campbell, in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, the helper figures do not possess supernatural powers. Nevertheless, they still have the capacity to provide political direction. They are wise advisors, specializing in offering strategies and intellectual guidance that help the hero overcome arduous challenges, or they act in support so that the hero can achieve his goal. One of the archetypal representatives of the helper is Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, a retainer of Nguyễn Huệ.

The first threshold of the Hero Nguyễn Huệ: Embarking on the Conquest of Thuận Hóa

The First Threshold marks the hero's entry into an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous world. In Campbell's account, this threshold may take the form of a dense forest, an ocean, or a hostile frontier. Crossing it marks a transition into a new realm, where the hero encounters the trials that drive the subsequent stages of the journey and its accompanying transformation.

In *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, Thuận Hóa represents the First Threshold that Nguyễn Huệ must cross. Formerly a center of power for the Nguyễn lords, it was unfamiliar territory to him, with difficult terrain and formidable defenses. Phú Xuân, a stronghold in the region, is repeatedly described as a strategically important military site: "Phú Xuân Citadel has been turned into the extreme frontier and a strategic military stronghold" (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.603). The citadel stood on the riverbank, its walls rising more than two trượng above the water. At that point, Tây Sơn warships fired on it from the river but could not reach the walls. Thuận Hóa thus constitutes a threshold Nguyễn Huệ must cross before leading his army into other territories. The hero receives assistance from helpers during this stage of the journey.

Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh plays the role of a "helper" in Nguyễn Huệ's journey. Chỉnh's own process of self-realization begins with his decision to assist Huệ by addressing his uncertainty about a campaign against Bắc Hà. Chỉnh proposes a military and political strategy that enables Huệ to move beyond Thuận Hóa, advance northward, and challenge the Trịnh regime. His advice concerns the timing of the campaign, the strategic conditions in Bắc Hà, and its political justification under the slogan "eliminate the Trịnh and support the Lê": "Chỉnh told Binh: Your lordship is to take Thuận Hóa, a single triumphant battle and your name will be heard all around the land. The art of war is based on three fundamentals, which include timing (thời), positioning (thế), and opportunity (cơ). With the combination of the three, no one can lose. The generals, the troops, and the court, in Bắc Hà, are complacent, undisciplined, and disordered. This is when one should attack... This opportunity must not be wasted" (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.97).

Chỉnh is mentioned frequently in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*—approximately six hundred times. His shifting political allegiances, his association with the Tây Sơn, and his movements between Thuận Hóa and Bắc Hà place him at the center of the political instability in late eighteenth-century Đại Việt. His story is marked by dramatic reversals: he leaves Bắc Hà, becomes a helper to the Tây Sơn, and is eventually executed by them. Positioned between the Tây Sơn and the political elite of Bắc Hà, Chỉnh is trusted by neither side. The Tây Sơn come to doubt his loyalty, while figures in Bắc Hà suspect him of acting on behalf of the Tây Sơn. His predicament illustrates the uncertainty and danger involved in navigating the political conflicts of the period.

3.2.3. The Road of Trials: The Hero Confronting and Overcoming Trials

The hero faces a series of challenges, corresponding to the sixth stage of Campbell’s model, “The Road of Trials.”

Campbell argues that, after crossing the First Threshold, the hero encounters a series of increasingly demanding trials. As he writes, “The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: Can the ego put itself to death?” (Campbell, 1968, p.102). These trials may arise from external obstacles, such as unfamiliar territories, fortifications, ambushes, local customs, climate, and human resistance, or from internal conflicts involving the hero’s emotions, desires, and loyalties. In *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*, external trials include the challenges posed by new territories and political opponents. Internal trials, by contrast, concern the hero’s struggle with aspects of himself that he has not yet acknowledged. Campbell describes this process as a confrontation in which the hero must relinquish familiar assumptions about himself and recognize a connection with what initially appears opposed to him (Campbell, 1968, p.125).

Nguyễn Huệ’s first major trial occurs when he considers leading his forces into Bắc Hà. At this point, he faces an internal conflict, expressed in his hesitation to launch an attack (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.97). This hesitation can be read in relation to the Confucian principle of the “Rectification of Names” (正名). Huệ regards himself as a man from Nam Hà and Bắc Hà as unfamiliar territory. He is aware that advancing north would raise questions about the legitimacy of his actions. He observes that Bắc Hà is a great country with many talented people and warns that “even a small wasp has a sting and must not be taken lightly.” He then asks: “A nation that has existed four centuries, and we now all at once suddenly grab one, how will people judge of such an act?” (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.97). His words suggest concern not only about the military risks of the campaign but also about how it would be judged politically and morally. Moreover, Nguyễn Nhạc had authorized Huệ to take Thuận Hóa, but had not ordered him to advance into Bắc Hà. As Nguyễn Nhạc’s subordinate, Huệ also had to consider the obligations of the ruler–subject relationship.

“That would be a very fine venture. But I had been ordered to attach Thuận Hóa, not to invade another country. Once one thing is done, what comes next?” (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.119).

In addition to these internal conflicts, Nguyễn Huệ faces a formidable external challenge: the political and military forces of Bắc Hà. He regards the northern campaign as a venture into unfamiliar territory. Bắc Hà, where the Lê dynasty had ruled for centuries, cannot be taken lightly. Yet Bình’s resolve is strengthened by Chính’s analysis of three elements of warfare: timing (thời), strategic position (thế), and opportunity (cơ) as well as the political situation in Bắc Hà and the proposed justification for the campaign: removing the Trịnh lords while supporting the Lê dynasty. Together, these considerations lead Bình to advance northward.

Read through Campbell’s model, the march into Bắc Hà constitutes a major trial in Huệ’s journey. Its unfamiliarity and the strength of the forces he must confront test both his resolve and his ability to act on Chính’s advice.

At the same time, Nguyễn Huệ’s advance from Thuận Hóa into the “unfamiliar territory” of Bắc Hà runs counter to a principle of military strategy. Trần Công Xán, who stands on the opposing side, makes this point to the Trịnh lord: “The enemy has advanced into foreign territory, precisely what the principles of warfare advise against.” From the perspective of Confucian scholars in Bắc Hà, Nguyễn Huệ is a man from another region; his campaign can therefore be viewed as an invasion.

The helper character Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh must also face objective trials and subjective trials

An external trial for Chỉnh is the uprising of the arrogant soldiers (kiêu binh) in the imperial capital of Thăng Long. The uprising brings down the political forces that had supported him in Đảng Ngoài, leaving him in a precarious position with his life at risk. The narrative describes Chỉnh as initially confused and frightened by the sudden upheaval. He soon regains his composure, however: without informing others of his plans, he privately gives his wife a few instructions and then goes to Doanh Cầu Garrison to consult Dao Trung Hầu (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.653).

Chỉnh's first internal trial arises from his violation of the Confucian moral code governing the relationship between ruler and subject. Having previously turned against the Bắc Hà regime, he followed the Tây Sơn forces to Nam Hà. Later, when sent north on an official mission, he conspired with northern forces against the Tây Sơn in an attempt to consolidate power for himself. Chỉnh thus faced two pressures at once: hostility from people in Bắc Hà and the prospect of punishment by the Tây Sơn. The narrative describes his predicament: "Chỉnh received the news with the greatest confusion. At least he had known that he had lost his position; he could not stay there; but he could also not go away: there were no boats on the water, no troops on land; he had no place to retreat to, and had no idea where to make his way." (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.146).

In this trial, Chỉnh had to contend with hostility from Bắc Hà scholars and soldiers, as well as abandonment by the Tây Sơn brothers. His ordeal involved both an external trial the immediate danger to his life and an internal one: a confrontation with his own arrogance and overconfidence. After Xán and his companions went south, Chỉnh remained convinced that matters would turn out in his favor. He declared openly at court: "I see right into the situation of the Tây Sơn." (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.257). His confidence in his own judgment and abilities left him poorly prepared for the threat he faced. At this point, Chỉnh failed to anticipate its scale or the hardships that would follow. This trial was therefore more unpredictable and dangerous than those he had previously encountered.

The hero's exceptional abilities become evident in the way he confronts and overcomes adversity

Nguyễn Huệ confronts and overcomes trials through strategic judgment and tactical skill. His relationship with Nguyễn Nhạc, however, presents a different kind of challenge. Bình's unauthorized advance into Bắc Hà creates tension between the two brothers. Fearing that Bình would become difficult to control after taking Thăng Long, Nguyễn Nhạc leads his troops north, although he has no wish to rule Bắc Hà: "The Tây Sơn emperor had always been aware that Bình was scheming and cunning; He had feared that if Bình took Bắc Hà, upon returning, Bình would inevitably be proud and hard to tame." (Nguyễn Đăng Na, 2006, p.607). This conflict constitutes an internal trial within the Tây Sơn leadership. Huệ's growing power alters the balance between the brothers, and, after a temporary settlement, he declares himself king in Phú Xuân.

In his dealings with the Lê dynasty, Huệ initially adopted a modest and conciliatory stance to establish a temporary peace between former adversaries. During his first entry into Thăng Long, for example, he framed his relationship with the Lê emperor in terms of the Confucian ruler–subject hierarchy. He referred to himself as a subject and acknowledged the Lê ruler as emperor: "I came here in the righteous support spirit and would never pretend to have merit. Furthermore, this journey owes itself not to human endeavors, but to the will of Heaven." (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.118). Huệ thus justified his march into Thăng Long by invoking Heaven's will: he presented his actions as an effort to restore royal authority and reunify the realm. Although he had the military strength to depose the Lê dynasty upon reaching Bắc Hà, he chose a conciliatory approach. This decision demonstrates the political judgment that the novel attributes to him as a heroic figure.

Quang Trung¹ showed his mastery of strategy in the challenge of facing the Qing force through appropriate use of competent talent. He gave Ngô Thì Nhậm responsibility of diplomacy and on the way to the march that he consulted the great scholar Nguyễn Thiếp. Ngô thì nhậm suggested a tentative retreat to eventual success, whereas Nguyễn Thiếp seeing the strategic conditions asserted that it was imperative to strike at this very moment, any delay would would forfeit all opportunity (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.374).

Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh had served the Lê dynasty in Bắc Hà before moving south to Nam Hà. His principal challenge was to gain the trust of the Tây Sơn leadership. To do so, he sought first to win Nguyễn Nhạc's confidence and then to demonstrate his loyalty to the Tây Sơn forces and Nguyễn Huệ. He began by voluntarily offering members of his family as hostages as a pledge of good faith (Ngô Gia Văn Phái, 2002, p.84). Chỉnh then devoted himself to Nguyễn Nhạc's service and planned campaigns against Champa, Siam, and Muang Phuan. He personally led troops into battle, helping to defeat neighboring forces and strengthen his relationship with Nhạc. When an emissary arrived with a message from the Lê court recalling Chỉnh to Thăng Long, Chỉnh killed him, although the emissary was his brother-in-law. Chỉnh subsequently advised Nhạc on how to take Thuận Hóa, a territory Nhạc had long sought to bring under his control. Winning the confidence of the so-called “Heaven-sent king” thus brought Chỉnh partway toward his goal. He still had to win the confidence of Bắc Bình Vương.

As a helper to Bắc Bình Vương Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh encourages Huệ to pursue a larger political ambition. Chỉnh makes two arguments. First, he praises Bình for taking Thuận Hóa in a single campaign and argues that the circumstances favor a further advance. His assessment rests on three elements of warfare: timing (*thời*), strategic position (*thế*), and opportunity (*cơ*). Second, he advises Bình to march under the banner of “eliminating the Trịnh and supporting the Lê,” invoking a cause that could attract support across the realm (Na, 2006, p.607). Chỉnh's advice thus combines praise for Bình's military achievement with an assessment of strategic conditions and a claim to political legitimacy.

3.3. “Other Faces” of the hero and the crisis of confucian discourse

3.3.1. The Standard Traditional Confucian Approach to the Hero

Campbell's model presents the heroic journey as a process in which an individual responds to a call and undertakes a consequential task. In this respect, the model offers a point of comparison with the Confucian ideal of the junzi (君子), although the two figures should not be treated as equivalent. Confucianism, understood as a teaching concerned with social governance (Viện, 1994, p.532), places the junzi within an order governed by ritual propriety (li; 禮). One of the aims associated with this ideal is to bring peace and order to All Under Heaven (ping tianxia; 平天下). The sequence of self-cultivation (xiushen; 修身), ordering the family (qijia; 齊家), governing the state (zhiguo; 治國), and bringing peace to All Under Heaven describes a progression from personal moral cultivation to public responsibility. The junzi must therefore attend to his own conduct before assuming responsibility for the family and the state. Read alongside Campbell's model, this progression makes it possible to examine how the novel's heroic figures move between personal virtue and political action, and where their actions fall short of the Confucian ideal.

The junzi is also expected to exemplify the social ethics expressed in the Three Bonds (tam cương): ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. Within this framework, loyalty to the ruler is particularly relevant to the political choices examined in this study. Confucian texts

¹ Quang Trung was the reign title of Nguyễn Huệ after he proclaimed himself emperor of the Tây Sơn dynasty.

also associate the junzi with wisdom (zhi; 知) and courage (yong; 勇) (Zhu Xi, 2014, p. 30). Read alongside Campbell's hero, the junzi likewise develops virtues in pursuit of a larger aim: bringing peace and order to All Under Heaven.

3.3.2. Other Faces of the Hero in Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê

Campbell also suggests that heroic figures can embody conflicting qualities. Alongside affirmative images such as the saint, the immortal, the enlightened one, the emperor, the creator, and nirvana, his account includes darker images and actions: death, killing, regicide, bloodshed, destruction, deception, and inner division. These contrasting elements reflect the oppositions to which Campbell repeatedly returns. In the context of this study, such tensions raise the question of how a character's moral commitments are translated into political action in pursuit of a social ideal.

Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê presents a multidimensional portrayal of heroism. On the one hand, its heroic figures possess virtues associated with the Confucian junzi. Nguyễn Huệ recognizes and recruits talented individuals. In his dealings with the Lê ruler, he observes the conventions of the ruler–subject relationship while seeking to reunify the country and restore peace. Trần Công Xán, meanwhile, remains committed to loyalty to his ruler and travels south to negotiate with the authorities in Đàng Trong in an effort to end the conflict. In these respects, both figures embody aspects of the Confucian ideal of a morally responsible leader who acts from a sense of duty to restore political stability.

On the other hand, *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* also portrays the “other faces” of its heroic figures, which emerge from their internal contradictions. These take two main forms. The first is the hero's imperfection: heroic qualities coexist with moral failings. Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, Trần Công Xán, and Ngô Thì Nhậm are all portrayed as figures who do not fully conform to an idealized image of the hero. Nguyễn Huệ, for example, displays military brilliance, strategic skill, and an ability to recognize talent and win support, particularly among the Bắc Hà literati. Yet the novel also presents a less magnanimous side to his conduct toward former allies and political opponents. Vũ Văn Nhậm, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, and Trần Công Xán were all executed amid the conflicts in which Huệ played a central role.

Moreover, the internal trials of Nguyễn Huệ are rooted in the reality that he was not a person with some ideal qualities as expressed in the Confucian discourse, the most significant of which was Trí (wisdom): The wise are without fear (Trí giả bất úy 智者不畏); The principle of Rectification of Names (Danh chính ngôn thuận 名正言順). Nguyễn Huệ felt uneasy about leading his army into Bắc Hà because he regarded it as a separate political realm and questioned the legitimacy of attacking it. Nevertheless, he chose to advance. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, meanwhile, is portrayed as a highly capable and resourceful figure whose military contributions significantly advanced the Tây Sơn cause. Yet his ambition and confidence in his own abilities also contributed to his downfall.

Second, the heroic figures are marked by internal contradictions. In the relationship between Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh and Nguyễn Huệ, these tensions emerge through a series of oppositions: refinement and rusticity; adaptability and rigidity; Thăng Long and Tây Sơn; the capital and the mountains and forests; center and periphery; established authority and newly emerging power; individual ambition and collective purpose; and a willingness to take risks and a preference for caution. The same oppositions are also found in the case of Trần Công Xán and Ngô Thì Nhậm like: rigidity / dynamism; the focus on loyalty (“trung”忠) / the focus on wisdom (“trí”

智); Thăng Long / Tây Sơn etc. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh and Trần Công Xán are further opposed, action/contemplation, exterior/ interior, warrior/ sage, executor/ supporter, etc.

3.3.3. *The Crisis of Confucian Discourse of the hero - the junzi*

In this article, the “crisis of Confucian discourse” refers to a crisis in the application of Confucian categories of moral and political judgment. As dynastic authority fractured in late eighteenth-century Vietnam, ideals such as loyalty, righteousness, and the junzi did not disappear. Rather, their meanings and claims to authority became contested: fidelity to an established ruler could conflict with the duty to restore political order, while figures positioned outside the old dynastic hierarchy could acquire moral and political legitimacy through their actions. The crisis becomes visible in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* when the narrator’s evaluations, characters’ stated principles, and the consequences of their choices no longer yield a consistent judgment of who deserves to be called a hero.

Ku Boon Dar’s historical survey of the Tây Sơn indicates that the Tây Sơn leaders used the concept of the Mandate of Heaven to justify their uprising against the old authority (Dar, pp. 8–9). This was a crisis of legitimacy (正名, rectification of names) – a fundamental Confucian category concerning the forces governing the state, as Confucius affirmed in the Analects: “必也正名乎” (If one wishes to govern the state, one must first rectify names) (Kongzi, p.131).

Another study by Lê Thị Lan indicates that, in the 18th century, the dichotomy between the nominal authority of the Lê king and the actual power of the Trịnh lords directly affected the political and moral values of Confucian scholars. Loyalty to the king in name could simultaneously mean serving the lord in practice (Lan, pp. 450–452). This political crisis influenced the diversity in interpretations of the Confucian concept of “loyalty” (trung). Although all belonging to the Confucian scholar class, the historical figures Lê Quý Đôn, Trần Công Xán, and Ngô Thời Nhậm determined different objects and ways of practicing loyalty. Lê Quý Đôn was associated with serving the Trịnh lords (usurping authority); Ngô Thì Nhậm aimed to assist an enlightened ruler (the Tây Sơn); Trần Công Xán remained firmly loyal to the Lê king (Lan, pp. 464–465).

The “crisis of Confucian discourse” does not mean that this discourse lost its validity or was completely erased. More precisely, while Confucian categories continued to be used, their validity and meaning changed when political authority was in crisis. Thus, the “crisis of Confucian discourse” manifests in the instability of the ability to determine who is a loyal minister, who is a hero, and which power is legitimate. This is clearly demonstrated in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê*.

These other faces of the hero show the hero as a partial depiction in the portrait. The dissolved image of the hero-junzi is a mirror of changes in the social thought as they were introduced by representatives of the Confucian elite. *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* reveals that the virtues traditionally praised in the Confucianism, like loyalty (忠) and uprightness (正), turn into an extremely destructive force against the hero-junzi in the search of the ideal of social peace. An example is the case of Trần Công Xán. Xán was talented, scrupulous, and faithful to the Lê dynasty, but it is these same traits that came to be the biggest test of his. Trần Công Xán was mentally ready to argue to death when negotiating with the Tây Sơn to re-take Nghệ An (Na, 2006, p.740). Vũ Văn Nhậm threatened him, saying: “I am afraid that a bird out of the nest, in returning home, will have no perch to sit upon” (Na, 2006, p.741). Ngô Nho encouraged Xán to amend the diplomatic letter and submit it to the Bắc Bình Vương, but Xán insisted on taking it as it was. In prison, the Bắc Bình Vương tried to convince Xán to give up, but he was still not able to influence him. This proves that the external trials were not the major issue to Trần Công Xán; the

main issue regarding his mission was to preserve the moral integrity and loyalty to the emperors Lê.

Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê also suggests that no character fully embodies the Confucian ideal of the junzi. Ngô Thì Nhậm displays wisdom, but his loyalty is open to question; Trần Công Xán remains loyal, but his judgment proves limited; Nguyễn Huệ demonstrates courage (dũng), but does not consistently act with benevolence (nhân). Each figure thus faces conflicts between personal commitments and the demands of political action. These imperfect portrayals suggest a crisis in the Confucian ideal of the heroic junzi as represented in the novel's account of late eighteenth-century Vietnam.

The heroic journeys in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* can be understood through the tension among three factors: the pursuit of political authority, the Confucian moral principles to which the characters are committed, and the realities of contemporary power struggles. Nguyễn Huệ's ambition to advance into Bắc Hà is constrained by the Confucian norms governing the ruler–subject relationship. When he first arrives there, he does not depose the Lê ruler. Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh faces a different conflict: his pursuit of power comes into tension with the expectation of loyalty to his ruler. To navigate such dilemmas, the characters adjust their choices to the political circumstances they encounter. Huệ, for example, seeks a means of unifying the country while confronting the question of the Lê dynasty's legitimacy. Trần Công Xán, by contrast, refuses to abandon his loyalty to the Lê dynasty, even as that commitment places him in danger. Their divergent choices show that political action cannot always be reconciled with the ideal conduct prescribed for the Confucian junzi. The novel thus exposes a crisis within the discourse of the junzi as a figure capable of restoring order to the realm.

4. CONCLUSION

Applying Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero to the characters in *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* allows us to examine how their actions unfold amid the political struggles of late eighteenth-century Vietnam. Figures such as Nguyễn Huệ, Trần Công Xán, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, and Ngô Thì Nhậm exercise agency in different ways as they pursue political aims and engage with Confucian principles, including the ideal of “pacifying all under heaven” (bình thiên hạ; 平天下). In pursuing this ideal, however, they reveal both virtues and limitations, resulting in multidimensional portrayals of heroism.

In a society marked by factional conflict, these varied portrayals of heroic figures call into question the classical Confucian ideal of the junzi. None fully conforms to this ideal, and their political choices bring moral commitments into tension with the demands of historical circumstances. This gap between ideal and action reveals a crisis of Confucian discourse as represented in the novel's account of late eighteenth-century Vietnam. Although *Records of the Unification of Imperial Lê* was written by Confucian scholars, it does not portray a flawless savior-hero who embodies that ideal. Rather, the novel presents imperfect heroic figures whose actions test how Confucian ideals function when different actors invoke them in competing struggles for political legitimacy. This reading shows that the crisis of Confucian discourse emerges through the novel's portrayal of heroic action, rather than serving merely as the historical background against which that action takes place.

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