Influence of Hue temple architecture on the Thai Hoa Palace in the royal citadel

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Abstract—The historical city of Huế in central Vietnam retains the imprint of the Nguyen Era (1802-1945), when many temples were built and restored. This paper examines the influence of architectural features of the Thai Hồà Palace in the royal citadel on the main shrines of Huế temples. This study is based on field surveys of square-enclosure Khau (□) temples in Huế city, which share similar styles of “double house, one foundation,” “one poem, one-drawing,” two-layered roof structures, and symbols of decorative motifs at the corner of the roof. The design of the royal palace closely followed the design of the traditional temples in Huế city. The influence of the traditional temples on the royal palace has shaped the cultural heritage of Huế.

Keywords: Huế temple, main shrine, Thai Hồà palace, royal citadel, architectural characteristics

Introduction

In 1558, Lord Nguyen Hoang (1525-1613), from the north of Vietnam, was sent to Huế city (Thuan Hồà) to rule the area. He recruited Buddhist monks from China to set up temples and to enrich the religious tapestry of Vietnam. Since then, Buddhism has been popular throughout the nation (An and Ha, 2006). In 1601, Lord Nguyen Hoang repaired the seven-story Linh Mu pagoda, which was previously associated with the Champa culture of central Vietnam (An, D. V., 1553) and is reported to have hosted a Buddhist conference in 1602. From 1802 to 1945, Huế was the capital of Vietnam under the last Nguyen Dynasty. The former royal capital is the center of Buddhism in Vietnam. During the Nguyen Era, many temples were
constructed and renovated, as evidenced by the numerous temples located in the city itself and in the surrounding areas. The Nguyen Lords, the Nguyen Dynasty and the aristocracy contributed greatly to the construction and restoration of countless temples in Huế, with Buddhism playing a significant role in the culture of the city.

Most of the temples in Huế were restored and reconstructed between 1957 and 1962 and it is a testament to the sympathetic restoration works that the religious structures have retained their traditional style. In 1993, Huế was inscribed on the list of World Heritage sites on the basis of Criterion IV of UNESCO’s selection norms: “The Complex of Huế Monuments is an outstanding example of an eastern feudal capital.” Thus, the temples are considered to be integral elements of the cultural and architectural characteristics of Huế. The temple ground plans can be classified into four main types defined by Vietnamese names and Chinese pictorial ideograms as follows: Nhat (一), Tam (三), Lieu (々) and Khau (口) (Liem, 2000). The temples with square Khau (口) layout have four buildings enclosing a central space. Their layout and decorative motifs share numerous traits with the Thai Hôa palace (Palace of Supreme Harmony), a spacious hall used for the emperor’s official receptions and important ceremonies in the Huế royal citadel. The square temples are among the most appreciated due to their completeness in form and arrangement since inception. There appears to be some basic concepts shared between the main shrine of these temples and the Thai Hôa palace in the royal citadel. This article analyzes the relationship in form, layout, and decoration between the royal citadel and the temples with the Khau square enclosure.

In Huế, temples are places of worship for Buddhist devotees. The main shrine is used for religious ceremonies and offerings. The royal citadel was the working headquarters and symbolic focus of the Nguyen Dynasty. The Thai Hôa palace was central to the planning of the citadel compound. This study examines the features which are shared between the temples and the royal citadel, in particular between the main shrine and the Thai Hôa palace.

As the center of Buddhism in Vietnam, Huế city has more than 100 temples. Those recently constructed or restored share few, if any, features with the traditional temples. A field survey found 21 temples with the Khau square plan. In some the layout was distorted by new constructions and renovations. Three are located in the northwest and
18 in the southwest. In nine temples, one to three buildings had been relocated during renovation, resulting in the closure of the inner courtyard and transforming the square plan structure in the process. Two temples had been reconstructed entirely in another format. Therefore, only ten of the 21 temples have retained their original layout. All of them are located in the southwest of the city. This article focuses on these ten temples, especially on the main shrine on account of its prominent position at the heart of the compound, akin to the supreme hall in a royal citadel.

The primary data are physical characteristics, collected by means of architectural measurements, photographs, sketch drawings, and so on. Historical data on the structures were collected from interviews, reports, articles, old pictures and photographs.

Literature review

Following the nomination of Hué as a World Heritage Site in 1993, many studies have been conducted on the city’s rich history and cultural heritage. An (2000) described the architecture of Hué monuments, including the citadel. He argues that the citadel was constructed in accordance with *feng shui* principles\(^2\) and the Vauban\(^3\) style of fortification from Europe. *Feng shui* originated in China, from where it spread to Vietnam and beyond. For Xiang (2012), the concept is a practical academic skill to explore and explain the relationship between natural phenomena and human living space. *Feng shui* integrates several aspects of Chinese philosophy, such as religion, science, witchcraft rituals, and so on. For Farrington (1999), it is a Chinese philosophical system for harmonizing the environment.

*Feng shui* is one of the Five Arts of Chinese Metaphysics (mountain, medicine, divination, destiny and physiognomy). *Feng shui* is concerned with an invisible force (cosmic energy) that integrates the universe, Earth and humanity, known as *qi*. *Feng shui* is used for orienting sites and buildings in an auspicious manner (Wikimedia Foundation, 2015). The auspiciousness of a site is affected by natural features such as mountains, bodies of water, stars, and compass orientation.

Tung et al. (2011) postulates that the Hué citadel is designed on *feng shui* principles, in which the Huong (Perfume) River represents
the Bright Court, the Ngu Binh Mountain serves as a screen, and the Hen and Da Vien sandbanks serve as Left Green Dragon and Right White Tiger respectively. On the basis of these analogies, the citadel illustrates the *feng shui* philosophy.

Liem (2000) has detailed the history of the city’s 33 temples. Thong et al. (1993) details the temples restored in 1957-1962 and influenced by the royal architecture and folk architecture of Huế.

This study is the first attempt to examine the influence of the main building of temples on the royal citadel in Huế. The following two sections analyze the royal citadel and the temples respectively.

**Royal Citadel**

*Components*

The Huế citadel is located at the center of Huế, along the northern bank of the Perfume (Huong) River. The royal complex is the location of centralized government and the symbol of the Nguyen Dynasty centralized power.

The citadel is symmetrically designed along a longitudinal axis, facing to the southwest. Construction began in 1805 (shortly after the Nguyen Dynasty was installed in Huế) by Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802-1819) and was completed during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (r. 1820-1840) in 1832 (An, 2011: 16-18).

The location is ideal for a royal site due to the auspiciousness of the river, plains and other physical features that embody fertility and abundance. According to *feng shui* principles, the Huong river, which flows in front of the citadel, represents the Bright Court, and was deemed to bring fortune to the Dynasty, since water means wealth, prosperity and power. Looking out from the citadel towards the Ngu Binh Mountain (Fig. 1), the Hen sandbank is on the left side and the Da Vien sandbank on the right. Ngu Binh Mountain, representing a Peacock, serves as a screen to deflect evil spirits, while the Hen and Da Vien sandbanks, representing the Left Green Dragon and the Right White Tiger respectively, are the citadel’s two guardians.

The citadel is encompassed by three walls, known as the Citadel Wall, the Imperial Wall and the Purple Forbidden Wall. Each wall guarantees a high level of security for each of the three internal areas,
namely the capital citadel, the royal citadel and the forbidden citadel (An, 2011: 15-16). The Capital Wall has a circumference of around 10,000m and is solidly built for the protection of all court activities.

The Imperial Wall measures around 2,400m in circumference and is pierced on each side by an entrance: Noon Gate (front), Hoa Binh Gate (back), Hien Nhon Gate (left) and Chuong Duc Gate (right). Office buildings located inside this wall were used by the monarchs and high-ranking mandarins for daily work. The enclosure hosts around 100 monuments of various types (Fig. 2). The Purple Forbidden Wall measures around 1,200m in circumference, housing the private quarters of the Nguyen emperors and their families.

For 30 years after the demise of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1945, Vietnam was in political upheaval involving conflict with the French colonial powers and the US. The Citadel area became a place of evacu-
ation and shelter during attacks. A great number of monuments were seriously damaged by conflict and by the passage of time. Following reunification in 1975, Hanoi became the new national capital, while Hué became the capital of Thua Thien province. As a World Heritage site, Hué attracts large numbers of visitors and is one of the most visited cultural attractions in Vietnam.

Figure 2. The map of the Royal citadel and Forbidden citadel. (https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Hoàng_thành_Huế, modified by the authors).
1) Region of the festive occasions: Noon Gate and Thai Hoá palace.
2) Region of worship: temples of Trieu, Thai, The Hung and Phung Tien.
4) Region of royal factories and treasures.
5) Region of princes’ studies and playgrounds.
6) Forbidden Purple: private quarters of the royal family.
Thai Hôa Palace

From 1558 to 1945, a period of almost four centuries, Huế citadel served as the capital of the Vietnamese kingdom, with Thai Hôa Palace located inside the second enclosure. The palace exists to this day, regal in its splendid features and traditional Huế architecture (Figure 3). The palace was initially constructed by Emperor Gia Long in 1805, renovated in 1833 by Emperor Minh Mang, and further refurbished in 1923 during the reign of Khai Dinh (An, 2011: 49-59).

Figure 3. Thai Hôa palace, the throne of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors (1802-1945). (http://www.molon.de/galleries/Vietnam/Central/Hue/Citadel/img.php?pic=16).

The Thai Hôa Palace is one of Vietnam’s most splendid architectural creations and part of the country’s historical, cultural and artistic identity. It is located on the main axis of the citadel, opposite the Forbidden Citadel and behind the Noon Gate (see Figure 2, area 1). The palace consists of two buildings connected by a common roof and common foundation in the so-called crab-shell layout, or “double house, one foundation.” The building is 44.0m long, 30.5m wide and 11.8m high.

The frame is constructed from ironwood and closely connected by means of trusses and beams. The 80 ironwood columns are adorned with dragon and cloud patterns that symbolize the relations between the Emperor and his subjects. The inner space is divided into seven gian or bays between the rows of columns, and two chai or verandahs (see Figure 4). Its two-layer roof is covered by lapis tiles. Between the two roof layers, there is a vertical panel on all four sides, decorated with drawings and poems of the Emperors on each panel, known as a “one poem, one drawing.” The roof ridge is decorated with two dragons
playing with the sun. The eaves and roof corners have ornamented designs with clouds, head-turning dragons and zoomorphic figures including unicorns, tortoises and phoenixes. All the decorations and the moldings along the eaves are inlaid with multicolored ceramics. The decorative patterns inside the palace include dragons and clouds. According to popular belief, the Vietnamese are descended from a dragon and consequently the dragon has become a powerful symbol. The dragon is also believed to embody the strength and majesty of the king and is depicted as one of the Four Sacred Animals together with the unicorn, the tortoise and the phoenix.

Figure 4. The plan of Thai Hôa palace with the style of “double house, one foundation”. (Sketched by the Conservation Center of Huế Relics and edited by the authors).

**Hue’s Khau temples**

**Configuration**

The plan of a Khau temple is understood as a “mouth.” The plan
is a combination of four buildings: main shrine (*chinh dien*); house for the monks (*tang xa*); house for guests (*khach duong*); and house of worship (*linh duong*). All the buildings are built with the same plan and architectural structure. These four buildings enclose a square-shaped inner courtyard. The layout is based on *feng shui* principles displaying symmetry, a strong axis, and balance between the left, right, front, and back (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. The overall plan of a Khau temple in Hué. (Thai and Srisuwan, 2015: 89).](image)

The temple's main entrance, the Tam Quan Gate, has triple gates. The main gate leads to the main shrine across a courtyard with a symmetrical arrangement of pine trees, cypress trees, numerous types of bonsai trees and potted plants. An auxiliary gate leads directly to the monks' quarters, guests' quarters and kitchen. Facing the house of worship is the reception hall, often called the main shrine. It consists of two buildings on one foundation, with a shrine for Buddhist worship located in-between. To left and right are rooms for the abbot and the monks respectively. Behind the main shrine is an inner court-
yard, adorned with plants, flowers, potted plants and bonsai trees, and surrounded by the monks' quarters and guest quarters. At the end of this courtyard is house of worship. Beyond is a courtyard with a dining hall and quarters for the novices. At the rear of the temple is an area planted with fruit trees, and the tombs of former monks.

In the ten Khau temples in Huế city which have retained their original layout, the main shrine, house of worship, and quarters for monks and guests are grouped around an inner courtyard. The enclosures are rectangular rather than square. The main shrine is the most important building and hence is the focus for the analysis of architectural characteristics.

All the ten Khau temples were built between 1674 and 1924, as listed in Table 1. They are found in four wards: Phuong Duc (1 temple), Truong An (2 temples), Thuy Xuan (4 temples) and An Tay (3 temples).

Table 1. List of traditional-style Khau temples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temples</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of Construction</th>
<th>Location (ward)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T-01</td>
<td>Bao Quoc</td>
<td>1674</td>
<td>Phuong Duc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-02</td>
<td>Quoc An</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>Truong An</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-03</td>
<td>Kim Tien</td>
<td>&gt; 1697</td>
<td>Truong An</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-04</td>
<td>Vien Thong</td>
<td>1697</td>
<td>An Tay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-05</td>
<td>Tu Lam</td>
<td>&gt; 1699</td>
<td>Thuy Xuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-06</td>
<td>Thuyen Ton</td>
<td>1708</td>
<td>An Tay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-07</td>
<td>Dong Thuyen</td>
<td>1739</td>
<td>Thuy Xuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-08</td>
<td>Tu Hieu</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>Thuy Xuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-09</td>
<td>Truc Lam</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Thuy Xuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-10</td>
<td>Dieu Vien</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>An Tay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thai and Srisuwan, 2015: 81-98.

Location of surveyed temples

The ten temples are set in relatively flat, semi-mountainous terrain among the thick forests of the Ham Long, Duong Xuan, Binh An hills, and Thien Thai and Ngu Binh mountains (Figure 6). The loca-
tion on a hilly site follows *feng shui* concepts. The Ngu Binh mountain serves as a protective screen.

![Map of ten temples of Khau structure in the southwest of Huế city. (Thai and Srisuwan, 2015: 85).](image)

**Plan of the main shrine in square-shaped Khau temples**

The main shrine is located to the south and consists of connected buildings with three or five bays between rows of pillars and two verandas. The bays, which are smaller than in the palace, house Buddha statues. The monks’ quarters are on the left, and the abbot’s on the
right. A longitudinal axis also runs through from the main entrance through the main shrine, inner courtyard and house of worship, as illustrated in Fig. 7.

![Diagram of the main shrine](image)

Figure 7. The plan of the main shrine (Thai and Srisuwan, 2015: 91).

**Architectural characteristics of the main shrine**

The architectural characters of the main shrine in the ten temples are shown in Table 2.

Eight of the ten are in the form of “double house, one foundation,” meaning the reception hall at the front and Buddhist shrine at the back are built on the same foundation (Figure 8).

In nine of the ten temples, the main shrine has a two-layer roof which allows light into the interior.

In these nine temples, the panels between the two layers of the roof are in the style of “one poem, one drawing,” meaning each panel is decorated with poems and drawings inspired by Buddhism.
In all ten temples, the middle of the roof ridge is decorated with dragon and swastika motifs.

Eight of the ten main shrines have animal decorations at the roof corners, while the other two have only dragon and clouds.

Table 2. Characteristics of the main shrine in Khau plan temples in Hué

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temples</td>
<td>Do</td>
<td>Cu</td>
<td>En</td>
<td>To</td>
<td>Sy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-01</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-02</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-03</td>
<td>●</td>
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<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-04</td>
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<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-05</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-06</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-07</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-08</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>T-09</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-10</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: compiled by the authors.

Do = Double house, one foundation;  
Cu = Double-layered roof;  
En = Drawings and poems on Buddhism;  
To = Symbol of the dragon and swastika in the middle top of the roof;  
Sy = Symbols of dragon, unicorn, tortoise, phoenix and cloud at the corners of the roof.

The temples have been constructed with natural materials sourced locally, such as jackfruit wood, ironwood, brick, glazed bricks, cement, sand, stone and ceramics. The main colors are gray and pale yellow. Strong and contrasting colors have been used in the motifs on the panels between the two roof layers on the main shrine.
Discussion

There are several similarities between the Thai Hoa Palace in the royal citadel and the main shrine of Khau plan temple. Both are situated at the centre of the site and both are in the “double house, one foundation” style. Both are laid out with a central axes and symmetry that reflect the concern for balance in *feng shui* philosophy. The Thai Hoa Palace, however, is much larger than the temple’s main shrines (seven compartments at Thai Hoa Palace against three-five compartments at the temple shrines), probably because of its practical and symbolic roles as the center of royal power.

![Main shrine of Quoc An temple](http://www.bookin.vn/chua-quoc-an).

The Thai Hoa Palace and the main shrines share the “one poem, one drawing” style, namely a double-layered roof and panels between the roof layers bearing poems and drawings. However, the text and figures on the panels are different. The panels of the Thai Hoa palace have poems and drawings about emperors while those on the temple shrines are on Buddhist themes.

The middle of the roof ridge on the Thai Hoa Palace has two dragons playing with the sun, which symbolize the power of the emperors. At the same position on the temples’ main shrines
there are a dragon's face and swastika, which can be read as the dragon and wheel of samsara, symbols of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in Buddhist philosophy. In addition, the roof corners both at the Thai Hóa Palace and the main shrines are decorated with dragon motifs, unicorn, tortoise, phoenix and clouds. These mythical animals were important to both royal architecture and religious architecture, especially dragon sculptures that are present in all temples and at the royal citadel.

Conclusions

Comparison or royal and temple architecture is a new field in Vietnam. This study has revealed the following similarities between the Thai Hóa Palace in the royal citadel and ten temples with a traditional Khau (◻) plan in the southwest of Hué city.

In both cases, the principal building is situated at the heart of the site, signifying its importance. They are both used by the public. Both have bays and verandahs which can accommodate a large number of visitors. Both share the style of "double house, one foundation," with two buildings on the same foundation. Both have two-layer roofs with panels in the "one poem, one drawing" style. Both have dragon motifs and other animals as decoration of roof ridge and roof corners.

These buildings have both practical and symbolic functions. The royal building is a symbol of the monarch's power and his wealth. The temple exudes calmness, in keeping with Buddhist tradition.

The Hué citadel is believed to have been constructed in conformity with feng shui philosophy (An, 2000) but there is no supporting documentation. Temples in Vietnam are frequently influenced by feng shui philosophy, though again there is no documentary evidence. This study found that feng shui philosophy acts as a mainstream of concept to royal architecture and religious architecture in Hué. According to Farrington (1999) and Xiang (2012), feng shui has been employed to ensure the auspiciousness of both the palace and the Khau temples. This is evident from the use of axes, symmetry, and balance in the architectural design. Feng shui is influential in the planning of the overall layout, but the construction is limited by architectural constraints.

The Thai Hóa Palace and the main shrines of Hué's traditional Khau temples seem to share the same architectural tradition.
Influence of Hué temple architecture on the Thai Hoá Palace

Notes


2 Feng shui guided the location for the royal architecture in the citadel, for its auspicious geographical features such as rivers, mountains, plains and other morphological characteristics representing fertile, verdant and luxuriant attributes.

3 Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707) was a French engineer, expert in military architecture, Marshal of France and honorary member of the French Academy of Sciences. Under Emperor Louis XIV, Vauban was responsible for upgrading the fortifications of around 300 cities. He is credited with inventing the military construction known as the “fortified city” or “inalienable city”, a type of fortification consisting of a “complex of architectural structures which are closely related [to] each other and bear characteristics of highly solid defense” (Hue Citadel – An Outstanding Example of Military Structure in Asia, by Nguyen Van Phuc, 2014, Hue Monuments Conservation Center, accessed on 30 June 2016 from http://www.fortress-namhansanseong.or.kr/upload/bbs/20141714204440.pdf).

4 “One poem, one drawing” (nhat thi-nhat hoa) is a style of royal architecture, with poems inscribed and drawings painted on panels.

References


Hue. Hue: Writers’ Association.

