

**TREATMENT OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL IN HISTORICAL NOVELS  
(FROM THE NOVEL *THE EMPRESS DOWAGER TU DU*  
BY TRAN THUY MAI)**

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**Abstract.** The treatment disposal of historical material in historical novels is always a problem when researching this literary genre. Each writer has different ways of processing, and forming different styles of writing historical novels. This study analyzes Tran Thuy Mai's treatment of historical documents in the historical novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* from the aspect of recreating historical characters. Historical characters are placed in a character system including real characters and fictional characters, forming a symbolic semiotic network. When placed in the world of art, historical figures are recreated as fictional characters: these are multi-faceted, multi-dimensional characters, seen from a personal perspective, with the personalities of everyday people.

**Keywords:** *Empress Dowager Tu Du*, historical character, historical novel.

## 1. Introduction

In historical novels, the most crucial element is historical material, which is of interest to both writers and readers as it forms the foundation for establishing genre characteristics. There has been much debate surrounding the incorporation of this material into fiction works. The comparison of literature and historical data is also often referenced, as it serves as a criterion for evaluating the value of literary works. As a result, the treatment of historical material in historical novels is a constant challenge when researching this literary genre. It can be argued that each writer has a unique approach to processing and incorporating historical materials, resulting in distinct styles of writing historical novels.

In Vietnam, research on historical novels has focused on various aspects such as genre characteristics, the movement of Vietnamese historical novels through literary periods, and analysis of specific works. The issues surrounding historical novels have been explored in terms of culture, discourse, nature of fiction, and concept of truth within these novels. Many critical researchers have conducted surveys of literature and history and have concluded that historical records are essentially a form of storytelling. This

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retelling can take on various forms. In his article “Thinking about History and Historical Novels,” Tran Dinh Su argues that the fictional nature of historical novels does not deny the past, but rather allows for the creation of new perspectives and possibilities through the process of imagination. By re-imagining historical characters and events, historical novels aim to present new discourses about history and offer new ways of speaking, new perspectives, and new judgments [1]. The researcher highlights the contrast between the straightforward elements found in historical documents and the captivating and engaging nature of novels when recounting historical events. Building upon this perspective, the author proposes fresh approaches to writing contemporary historical novels. This also serves as an explanation for the shifts observed in the works of modern historical novelists.

*Empress Dowager Tu Du* is a historical novel series consisting of 2 volumes, published in 2019 by Tran Thuy Mai. Since the novel's release, there have been quite a few articles about this work, mostly commentaries introducing new works in newspapers, and short interviews with the author about the history of the Nguyen dynasty. The author's feelings about characters and events; Some articles study the work from a religious perspective.

Thus, it can be said that up to now, the study of the novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* in particular and the historical novel genre in general from the perspective of processing historical data has not been questioned as a way of writing intended to create a new discourse on the creator's history. In this study, our goal is to examine the relationship between historical documents and novels, specifically focusing on the genre of historical novels. We will approach historical novels as a means of narrating history, where history serves as the foundation for creating stories. Furthermore, we will explore how historical novels can be seen as a way of interpreting historical data and a form of critical thinking. To illustrate this, we will analyze the novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* as an example of how historical data can be used as a narrative technique narrative, there are several important considerations to keep in mind. In this article, we will focus on Tran Thuy Mai's approach to incorporating historical documents in her portrayal of historical figures. Specifically, we will examine her treatment of Empress Dowager Tu Du, as the author's focus in this work is on character development and shedding light on historical figures through various perspectives and relationships.

## 2. Content

According to researchers, historical novels are novels that use historical characters and events as their subjects. While the author may fictionalize some characters and subplots, they must still respect the truth of history [2; p. 319]. This means that the historical material serves as the topic or scope of reality described, and the author's creativity, or subjectivity, influences how the topic is portrayed. Historical novels are a form of discourse on history, providing a way to talk about the past. In his research on historical narrative, Hayden White identified important aspects such as history as a text, the use of fiction in historical texts, and the poetics of history. He also discussed the nature of discourse about the past, the fictional elements of historical reconstruction, and the process of using literary devices to illuminate history. Emphasizing the literary nature of historical texts will help explain why the same historical event can be portrayed in multiple ways through different texts.

The events may not change in time, but the process of creating the story within those events does not completely coincide. The special thing is that it is challenging for people to clearly distinguish between historical science and literature. Every historical event, no matter what form it is written for or what purpose it is written in, is still a text constructed according to a certain structure [3].

Stemming from her attachment to Hue, understanding, and passion for the history of the capital, Tran Thuy Mai wants to bring history closer to young people. The writer chooses a realistic way of expressing nature and writes Vietnamese stories simply, expressing the soul of the national culture [4]. To “restore” history in that desire, the writer must have a way to adequately handle historical documents, to both recreate the historical atmosphere and let the past appear vividly, and closely.

The novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* creates an artistic world, where the character system includes real characters and fictional characters, forming a network of symbolic symbols. Real historical characters are placed in a fictional world, becoming aesthetic symbols, and interacting with other aesthetic symbols to create meaning for the narrative text.

The novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* revolves around the lives of the royal concubines in the Forbidden Palace during the Nguyen dynasty, spanning four reigns: Gia Long, Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc. Many historical figures are portrayed in this novel, with the most prominent being Empress Dowager Tu Du. The turbulent history of this period was marked by bloody wars, including the Tay Son rebellion that led to Gia Long's ascension to the throne, as well as plots to overthrow the king and the people's uprising after the death of General Le Van Duyet in Gia Dinh. As Tu Duc's reign came to an end, the looming threat of French colonialism further determined the fate of the people, with factors such as the purge of royal family members and massacres to suppress the spread of Christianity. Throughout the novel, Tu Du is the central character, bearing witness to the dynasty's changes and striving to maintain balance and harmony, minimizing the suffering and loss of the people. She is portrayed as an intelligent and intellectual child, a beautiful and modest woman, a saintly figure, a supportive wife to the king, and a virtuous mother to all the servants in the forbidden palace. Tu Du's presence repels evil and prevents petty plots from causing harm. She embodies compassion, and her gentleness, humility, simplicity, and compassion give her the strength to overcome all challenges in life.

Besides famous historical characters, fictional writers add other characters, these characters interact with historical figures, creating an artistic world. Among them, the notable one is Hanh Thao. She appears in the story as a maid with cooking talent. Hanh Thao herself is a delicate, emotional person who knows how to share and love. Living in the inner palace with so many plots and tricks, Hanh Thao always maintains a gentle, honest personality, thinking clearly and rationally. She not only knows how to sympathize with people in the same situation as her but also understands the pain in the hearts of noble women. This character consistently serves as a foil to the darker aspects of other characters, particularly the concubines in the Forbidden Palace. In a later conversation with Dang Hung, Hanh Thao expresses her thoughts on the suffering endured by these women. She is acutely aware that their opulent royal lifestyle is merely a facade, and she empathizes with their emotional turmoil. Despite the scandals surrounding her departure

from the palace, Hanh Thao maintains her dignity and composure as a rational and compassionate individual. The author devotes numerous pages to delving into the character's inner thoughts and feelings, including her happiness with Dang Hung, her shared experiences of joy and sorrow, her sadness at parting with her beloved aunt, and her hope of one day returning. These emotional developments are skillfully crafted by the author to align with the general psychological processes of women, resulting in a realistic and vivid portrayal of a fictional character.

Whether they are real-life prototypes or fictional characters, the characters in *Empress Dowager Tu Du* are all created according to novel principles. Therefore, when placed in the world of art, historical figures are recreated as fictional characters. Its novelistic nature is manifested in the fact that the characters are seen from the perspective of personal life, the characters appear multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional, with the personalities of everyday people

Tran Thuy Mai has recreated historical characters often found in historical documents into lively people, exploited not only from official positions but also mainly in daily life relationships. Such characters have the shadow of a personal character type that is typical for novels. In *Empress Dowager Tu Du*, the writer exploited historical characters associated with historical events, and at the same time discovered in them an everyday life as ordinary people. They have all levels of emotions: love, anger, nostalgia, sadness. They always have the desire to be shared, desire for happiness and love. These characters, whether acting according to ideals or obligations, whether in many different positions - kings or royal concubines, superiors or commoners - are all exploited in terms of human nature, carrying profound human values in their writing. This is evident in the characters living in the Forbidden Palace. For example, Queen Tong Thi Lan, wife of King Gia Long, is portrayed as a good wife and mother with a simple desire: to “welcome the emperor's husband with a delicious tray of rice and live together again with her beloved grandchildren.” Her happiness is derived from witnessing her regal husband enjoying his meal. On the other hand, the second concubine, Tran Thi Dang, is portrayed as being different from the queen. This woman is sharp, scheming, tough, and strong. She enthusiastically participated in manipulating the government, but deep down, she still could not shake off her selfish jealousy as an ordinary woman. These feelings stem from her desire to be loved, but she did not receive love from her husband, with whom she went through hardships during the anti-Tay Son period. Despite her experience and authority, she still carries the sadness and misfortune of a woman whose love has been shared. Similarly, King Thieu Tri, an emperor, also appears to be an ordinary person. In historical documents, Tran Trong Kim only briefly mentions Thieu Tri's gentle personality and his relationships with courtiers who assisted him, such as Nguyen Tri Phuong, Phan Thanh Gian, and Truong Dang Que [5]. In *Empress Dowager Tu Du*, Tran Thuy Mai portrays a beautiful image of an orphan prince who is not only lonely and shy, but also emotional, precious, and honorable. The writer sees Thieu Tri as an ordinary person with delicate, simple, filial, and faithful qualities, just like any other young person. As a young man, Hoang Ton Tong (Thieu Tri's young name) was also moved passionately in love. This is the story of a young man who falls foolishly in love for the first time, not because the girl is a beautiful beauty in a forbidden palace, but because she exudes a pure, innocent, and simple beauty - a beauty that is not tainted by any dirty calculations. This

is also the reason why Thieu Tri, despite having many beautiful concubines, only loved one person and later ascended the throne. Those are not the feelings of a king for his concubines, but the feelings of a man for his soulmate - an honest woman like the person he dreams of. The writer focuses on describing the personality of this young prince through his beautiful love for Pham Thi Hang, who later becomes Empress Dowager Tu Du. Despite being weak and poor, the prince defeats his talented younger brother in an archery competition, a feat that is beyond everyone's imagination. This victory is attributed to the power of his love for Pham Thi Hang, which transforms him into a brave and confident young man. Tong's inner strength is unstoppable, as seen in his triumph in the archery competition. This event marks a turning point in the life of a quiet and shy boy in the forbidden palace. The development of his character is a reflection of the wise king he becomes later in life. The author's focus on the king's emotions during his youth is evident, from his initial excitement for life to his feelings of passion and foolishness. Thieu Tri once wanted to run away from the golden palace, from his grandmother's schemes (who wanted to put her grandson on the throne) just to live with his only love. In history books, Thieu Tri, like many other kings, had many concubines, beautiful women, and children, but in this work, he is portrayed as a loyal king. The image of Thieu Tri as created by the writer appears completely different from the image in people's imagination of a dignified, majestic, majestic king on the throne, a completely likable, lovable, and approachable Thieu Tri. The writer delves deeply into the emotional turmoil of Ngoc Binh, a frequently mentioned character in stories about the royal concubine of the Nguyen dynasty. Her story is renowned in history due to her fate of being born into nobility as the daughter of a king and later marrying two kings. Historical records about her mainly emphasize that Ngoc Binh was the daughter of King Le Hien Tong, who later married Quang Toan and became Queen Tay Son. Her tragic fate was to witness her husband's death at the hands of her second husband, Nguyen Phuc Anh, in a bloody act of revenge against the Tay Son dynasty. In *Empress Dowager Tu Du*, the writer delves into the emotional turmoil within a woman's heart. During the day, she endured the jealousy and humiliation of other women who envied her beauty. At night, she was tormented by the memories of her first husband, Quang Toan, and the bloody image of his death. Writer Tran Thuy Mai skillfully portrays the short and tragic life of *Empress Dowager Tu Du* through these misfortunes.

Personal life characters are reflected in complex personal relationships that carry the breath of everyday life, so they often appear as multi-faceted, multi-dimensional people with contradictions and conflicts. This is the type of character with the existence of opposite sides in a person. Many historical characters in *The Empress Dowager Tu Du* were talented, noble, fair, generous, strong, and decisive, but at the same time could not hide their lowliness, weakness, weakness, and mediocrity when faced with deliberate choices in the process of consolidating their power.

*Empress Dowager Tu Du* mentioned historical issues, about the changes in the mountains and rivers through the process of exchanging positions of monarchs. King Gia Long in many different historical documents is mainly exploited through the process of ascending the throne and ruling. In this novel, Tran Thuy Mai portrays a wise and intelligent king who is also capable of making cold and calculated decisions. However, the depiction of the war against the Tay Son, as described by the writer, does not align

with the general historical accounts. Instead, it is revealed through the king's interactions with those involved in the conflict. With the brave generals who were with him in life and death, Gia Long both respected and remembered their merits and wanted to stay away to forget the invisible bond that affected the sanctity of the throne. Understanding this profound principle, Tran Thuy Mai described secret thoughts in her mind every time someone recalled the old days. He was not comfortable but still tried to show his gratitude to them. The novel studies psychological laws to provide reasonable the character of King Gia Long is portrayed as an ordinary person, allowing his emotions and thoughts to develop naturally. He is a wise king who knows how to utilize talented individuals and effectively manage his dynasty, but he also experiences the full range of human emotions, including joy, anger, and sadness. Despite the challenges he faced during the difficult times against the Tay Son, King Gia Long treated the women who stood by him with peace and gratitude. His feelings towards his queen are those of a devoted husband, treating her with the proper respect. However, his feelings towards his second concubine are more complex, as they are a mix of coldness and gratitude. While her sharpness has been beneficial in managing the court, her strong and sharp personality can also be difficult to handle. Like many other men, Gia Long did not appreciate women who lacked femininity. He believed that a woman who was too sharp and tough could only be a companion and not a suitable wife. As a king, Gia Long was aware of the influence his wife would have in managing his court. However, he allowed his advisor Dang Hung, a simple and honest man, to use her sharpness to remove Le Van Duyet, a hardworking and loyal supporter who helped Gia Long become emperor. This decision was made during the Tay Son feud, and it reveals a lot about Gia Long's characters. His behavior towards his concubine Ngoc Binh in the harem also sheds light on his personality. While he was initially drawn to her beauty, there was another reason that made him want to be with her - a reason that was both profound and contradictory: Ngoc Binh was once the queen of the Tay Son. After each orgy in the forbidden palace, King Gia Long's satisfaction was not the usual satisfaction of the flesh under the curtain but the satisfaction because every night he witnessed the pain and shame of Queen Tay Son. Under his hands, she was like a living tomb to pour all his resentment onto. Thus, the pride in the Tay Son's victory is endless. The writer went to the bottom of his emotions, looking into the deepest place of the human soul to interpret a character of the historical past. Historians can recognize and evaluate the relationship between Gia Long and Ngoc Binh: because of the beauty of Queen Tay Son, the king spared her. Tran Thuy Mai explains the suffering in the mind of a mentally tormented woman next to a king who rejoices in her pain to bring a fuller, more complete view of humanity. In the book "*Stories of Queens and Princesses Nguyen*" - by Luong Kim Thanh, it is simply recorded that Tam Phi was loved by the king because she was extremely beautiful. Because her body was weak and her sadness was not easily relieved after the death of Quang Toan and her family, after only eight years of living with Gia Long she passed away [6]. The novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du* goes into the world of the soul with logical insights about humans to show the profound cause of that sadness. This shows that historical novels, in addition to providing historical knowledge, also have a more noble task of creating historical possibilities to question the past. In the novel, there are times when the author lets characters converse with each other, revealing all their thoughts and emotions as people in the present tense are taking place. King Gia Long's dialogue under the curtain with his concubine Ngoc Binh partly

reflected the character's inner depth, thereby revealing a king with many angles and dimensions.

In historical documents, King Minh Mang was intelligent, decisive, and talented in ruling, but at the same time a conservative king - representing the stagnation of a feudal dynasty that had become backward. The fact that Gia Long chose Minh Mang to succeed to the throne and not Prince Canh's descendants was due to many reasons, the most prominent of which was that he clearly understood the plot of the French colonialists who wanted to annex Vietnam. Minh Mang is a conservative, closed-minded person who worships Confucianism. In the novel *Empress Dowager Tu Du*, Minh Mang is described in many aspects. From the way he ruled and treated those who had meritorious services to the previous dynasty, to the political reforms, the re-establishment of the dynasty, and especially the fact that he colluded with his mother, second concubine Tran Thi Dang, to eliminate the invaders. Political opponents make people shudder. The image of King Minh Mang shows all the light and dark sides, both as an explanation of history and as an explanation for the logic of cause and effect. In King Gia Long's teachings before his death, he was not reassured at all about Prince Dam, but he chose Dam over Dan because the older Dam was intelligent, decisive, and upright. Le Van Duyet's thoughts about Dam are from a different perspective: "Dam doesn't know how to laugh. Once the king does not know how to smile, the atmosphere in the house will be very tense" [4; p. 140]. Throughout the story of King Minh Mang, if there is a smile described in him, it will be a deep smile that appears in his thoughts, a smirk full of calculation or amusement because of a certain plot that is being plotted in shape. Behind every smile of Minh Mang, there could be a storm passing by, a war or someone's death, an injustice that cannot be erased. Even with his mother - a person who had great influence in bringing him to the throne, Minh Mang always had to be on guard. Minh Mang's handling of Pham Dang Hung also surprised people. The king knew clearly about Dang Hung's injustice but still decided to punish him simply to spite Le Van Duyet. What was later even more terrifying was King Minh Mang's dealings with Tong Thi Quyen - Prince Canh's wife. Immediately after the reaction of Tong Thi Quyen's family at the party at Anh Due royal palace was Quyen's sudden and unjust death. To explain this, Minh Mang only answered Dang Hung with the simple logic of an emperor: "Look back at history, only great evil people can do great good deeds!" [4; p. 341]. With Dang Hung, Minh Mang openly admitted: "I am the ruler, I must maintain autocracy. We encourage truth, preserve justice, reward morality, but truth, justice, or morality must all be at our feet" [4; p. 342]. Minh Mang established an authoritarian monarchy under him to maintain dignity. He used an upright person to restrain another upright person, setting a precedent of a "Four improper" court to strengthen the king's power. A wise and profound king, but at the same time a cruel king to his royal family members. Tran Thuy Mai's pen has carved a complete portrait of a monarch in the general spirit of an institution in which the king is the highest authority making life-and-death decisions even if they are unreasonable. The king is a wise and intelligent man, but he is also a vile person. Reading Tran Thuy Mai's novels, people admire his governing talent, but they also cannot help but feel sad about the tragic events that took place during that dynasty.

Discussing Truong Dang Que, the Japanese professor of political and social history of Southeast Asia Yoshiharu Tsuboi in the book *Dai Nam Confronting France and China*

1847-1855 commented: “Que was a man with good views, scholarly knowledge of literature, very wise in governing, extremely stubborn, great energy, cleverly calculated flexibility, and terrifying zeal in protecting the privileges of mandarins to trample the people” [7; p.236]. In Tran Thuy Mai's novel, Truong Dang Que first appears in a chance encounter with a young girl Pham Thi Hang when he rescued her from robbers. Dang Que at that time was built as a beautiful symbol of a hero, a man with strategic and military talent. During his journey to pass the exam, becoming a teacher for princes and later holding an important position in the dynasties of King Thieu Tri and Tu Duc, Dang Que always silently nurtured his noble love for Pham Thi Hang. This character exudes the temperament of a wise, calm, and emotional person. Tran Thuy Mai deeply engraved this character trait of the character, which is not found in historical records. In love with Pham Thi Hang, Dang Que appears as a model of a noble person, not calculating for personal gain and always sincere. But Dang Que is still just a normal person with feelings of love and anger. There are times when he feels sad when love slips out of his reach. People always see in him his quiet silence when facing hopeless love. Hang and Que always keep a sufficient distance like close relatives who care for each other. Que helps Mien Tong win the archery contest to get Hang, but his heart is still heavy with the sadness of a loser. When painful events occurred in Hang's family, Que became a confidant, a responsible brother who shouldered the burden and shared all his love. It can be seen that the writer has rebuilt a historical character in a way that makes the character close and intimate. In the eyes of historical researchers, Dang Que appears to be purely talented but conservative. But from the perspective of the novel, Dang Que appears to be both talented and simple, and what he wishes for, which governs his actions, big and small, is love. He cleverly maintained power for the ideal of establishing a brighter dynasty and for another reason: protecting the girl he loved for the rest of his life. Both Que and Hang went through events together and overcame adversity but always kept a sufficient distance and were full of regrets. The appeal of the novel lies in the fact that the writer has created the characters as living beings, both extraordinary and everyday, both noble and with hidden inner corners. And history still flows according to its own rules in the novel's interpretation imbued with the humanistic spirit.

The work of *Empress Dowager Tu Du* brought historical characters to life according to the novel's fictional principles. They appear vividly and extremely familiar. In all characters, no matter how extraordinary or noble, they are still present as real people with opposing sides. Although the character Tu Du is the embodiment of noble standards, he still sometimes becomes trivial when expressing his jealousy of women. Even though it is only a fleeting moment, it shows a very human nature. The second concubine Tran Thi Dang - is a woman full of calculations, toughness, coldness, and tricks, but somewhere in the depths of her soul, she still cannot hide her loneliness. A powerful woman can turn around all the problems of the government but is completely emotionally powerless. Even Pham Dang Hung, the most respected man by the king, was built as a model of integrity, humility, simplicity, fairness, and rigor, but at times he also became weak and small in front of the king the cruel truth of power. People in the highest position with the most authority, revered as a wise king, still sometimes become selfish, cowardly, and scary. In Thieu Tri's weakness, people still see surprising toughness and bravery. The writer uses the novel's uniqueness to explain people in the past, bringing them back to their very human nature with all its original complexity.



### **3. Conclusion**

The characters in historical novels are established by the writer based on psychological and philosophical laws: the laws of personality development are based on the common psychological changes of humanity; the law of cause and effect in the cycle of history, the logical explanation of the rise and fall of a certain dynasty. No one knows the future results but can find the rules of development, success, and failure in the past. That is why the explanations in historical novels are sometimes much more complete and convincing than regular records. The novel finds the depth of meaning, the inner deposits according to its interpretation. Historical figures in artistic creations may have many fictional details based on the writer's imagination, but it completely makes the reader believe in the second truth in the interpretation this is new. The character system in Tran Thuy Mai's work is not too different from those recorded in historical documents, but it still has a life of its own carrying noble humanistic values. It provides a complete explanation of human nature through opposites. These opposites not only exist in parallel but are always fighting and transforming within each other. The victory or harmony of the elements will determine human personality, determine its fate and life, just like the daily human world in which each of us lives. That is also a special way of handling historical data, creating the uniqueness of characters in historical novels.

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