

Outlining the history of emotions in Vietnam: The case of Cao Ba Quat

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Abstract:

The emotional history of the Vietnamese people remains largely unexplored. To address this gap, this article analyses the literary works of Cao Ba Quat, a prominent figure in Vietnam's sentimentalist movement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study examines his emphasis on emotion, his methods of emotional expression, and the tension between emotional liberation and emotional restraint in his writing. It also highlights contradictions between his theoretical perspectives and practical applications, interpreting these tensions in relation to the constraints of centralised power on Confucian scholars in medieval Vietnam. Through the case of Cao Ba Quat, the article shows how literature could become a medium for articulating personal emotions, including grief, frustration, familial affection, and desire, while still remaining shaped by political, cultural, and literary constraints. By examining this case, the article delineates the limitations of the sentimentalist movement, which ostensibly liberated Vietnamese literature from the emotional constraints that dominated from the tenth to the seventeenth century, but did not fully overcome inherited norms of indirect and restrained expression.

Keywords: emotional control, emotional liberation, history of emotions, literary norms, political-cultural institutions.

Classification numbers: 8.1, 9.2, 10

1. Introduction

J. Marks, in his article "Emotion East and West: Introduction to a Comparative Philosophy", observed that although emotions have become a central focus of research in the West, there is "the almost total absence of references to Asian thought" [1]. He highlighted the necessity for comparative studies between Eastern and Western perspectives on emotions. Subsequently, in collaboration with R.T. Ames, Marks published *Emotions in Asian Thought: A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy*, which presents twelve essays examining Eastern conceptions of emotions in relation to Western philosophical traditions [2]. Beyond this volume, several works have addressed emotions in Eastern contexts, including B. Bruya's articles "Emotion, Desire, and Numismatic Experience in René Descartes, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming" and "Qing 情 and Emotion in Early Chinese Thought", U. Middendorf's "The Making of Emotive Language: Expressions of Anxiety in the Classic of Poetry", and R. Firth-Godbehere's book *A Human History of Emotion: How the Way We Feel Built the World We Know* [3-6]. Despite this growing body of scholarship, Vietnam remains largely absent from studies by foreign scholars.

Within Vietnam, there has not yet been a comprehensive, in-depth study of Vietnamese conceptions of emotion

or of their expression across historical periods. Existing discussions of the history of emotions in Vietnam are typically general and brief, as they are often addressed incidentally within broader analyses [7-10]. Tran Nho Thin provides the most extensive treatment of this topic, dedicating a 77-page chapter in his work *Cultural Approaches in Research and Teaching Literature* to "track the changes in the concept of emotions, the influence of this concept on themes, subjects, literary symbols, and other factors derived from this concept" in Vietnam from the Middle Ages (tenth to nineteenth centuries) through 1975 [11]. Nevertheless, Tran Nho Thin's account does not fully capture the emotional landscape of historical Vietnamese society, as numerous significant authors, works, and issues remain unaddressed.

This article seeks to fill a gap in current scholarship by analysing the literary works of Cao Ba Quat (1809-1855), focusing on his conceptualisation and articulation of emotions, thereby clarifying the specific ways emotions are reflected in Vietnamese sentimentalist literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Cao Ba Quat is widely recognised for his defiance of examination regulations, notably for secretly amending the exam papers of certain candidates to facilitate their success in the Thua Thien local examination in 1841. He is also renowned for his opposition to the Nguyen dynasty, the ruling government under whose

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examination system he had to endure significant challenges and hardships¹, ultimately participating in the Le Duy Cu's uprising in My Luong (present-day Hanoi, formerly Son Tay province). With these two bold actions, Cao Ba Quat was considered a man with a "heroic spirit" who "bravely expressed his feelings, both angry and heroic, both tragic and noble" in any situation [12]. Cao Ba Quat consistently emphasised the elevation of emotions and natural feelings in both his literary works and criticism. This emphasis contributes to his recognition as a prominent figure within the sentimentalist movement in Vietnam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [10]. Nevertheless, this focus does not imply that Cao Ba Quat freely expressed his personal emotions in his writings. The constraints on emotional expression, even for an individual regarded as courageous and resilient within the Vietnamese medieval autocratic regime, prompt consideration of whether Vietnamese Confucian scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were truly able to express their emotions.

This article analyses nearly 1,400 extant literary works by Cao Ba Quat² using frameworks from cultural studies and discourse theory. Drawing on the assertion that "[artistic] creation is governed by culture" [11, 13], it reconstructs the cultural environment in which these works were produced. It explores the influence of ideological trends, aesthetic and humanistic concepts, and the political, economic, and social contexts of Cao Ba Quat's era on his conceptualisation and articulation of emotions in literary language. Through discourse theory, the article examines emotions in Cao Ba Quat's literature as products of constructivist processes, emphasising the identity of the emotional speaker or representer, the situational context of emotions, and the power relations that inform their expression. Thus, this article elucidates two apparently contradictory aspects of Cao Ba Quat's personality and contends that these contradictions are linked to the restrictive nature of the centralised power structure in medieval Vietnam. By examining Cao Ba Quat's case, the article further explores the limitations of the sentimentalist movement, which is regarded as a response to the prioritisation of reason and sobriety among traditional Confucian scholars from the tenth to the seventeenth century [14].

¹Cao Ba Quat gained recognition for his intelligence and literary talent from an early age. However, between his first provincial examination in Bac Ninh in 1821 and the examination in 1841, he either failed or did not attain a high rank. Subsequently, following the recommendation of a mandarin from Bac Ninh province, he was summoned to the capital, Hue, and appointed to a minor position in the Ministry of Rites.

²Following Cao Ba Quat's death in battle and the suppression of Le Duy Cu's uprising, the Nguyen Dynasty exterminated the entire Cao family. Cao Ba Quat's literary works were confiscated, destroyed, and banned from storage and circulation. According to Vu Khieu [13], only 1,353 poems and 21 prose works by Cao Ba Quat remain.

2. Cao Ba Quat's exaltation of emotions

Emotional restraint represents a significant trend in Vietnamese literature from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries. Scholar Tran Nho Thin observed that Vietnamese writers, including Confucian ones, during this period typically avoided excessive or extreme emotional expression, maintaining composure and self-control even in adverse circumstances [11]. These writers also seldom addressed certain emotional states commonly experienced in life, such as romantic love [11]. This phenomenon can be attributed to the moralisation of emotions in Confucianism, a doctrine that exerted a profound influence on Vietnamese medieval literature, especially between the tenth and seventeenth centuries [15]. Y.P. Wang (2008) [16] observes that emotions play a central role in the ethical teachings of Confucius and Mencius. According to these philosophers, emotions not only motivate human behaviour but also serve as indicators of moral character within specific contexts [16]. Confucianism does not assign equal value to all emotions; rather, it maintains that "only with the emotional involvement in and commitment to the good can the good life be both possible and ethical" [16]. Consequently, Confucius and other Confucian thinkers advocated for the expression of emotions solely for morally justifiable reasons, as opposed to spontaneous or instinctive displays. The Confucian approach to moralising emotions is reflected in statements such as: "君子憂道, 不憂貧 The gentlemen only care about the Way, not about poverty" (論語 *The Analects*) [17]. Additionally, Confucian doctrine emphasises that emotional expression should be controlled and restrained, avoiding extremes and remaining appropriate to the context, the individuals involved, and established etiquette. This principle is articulated in the statement: "喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中, 發而皆中節謂之和; 中也者, 天下之大本也; 和也者, 天下之達道也; 致中和, 天地位焉, 萬物育焉 If joy, anger, sadness, and happiness are not expressed outwardly, it is called neutrality; if they are expressed in the right degree, it is called harmony. Neutrality is the great root of the world; harmony is the complete way of the world. When reaching neutrality and harmony, heaven and earth are in order, and everything grows" (中庸 *The Doctrine of the Mean*) [18]. This statement demonstrates that Confucian thinkers recognised emotions as an inherent aspect of human nature and did not advocate for their eradication. However, outward expressions of emotion must conform to the principle of "in the right degree", meaning they should be appropriate, moderate, and fitting; otherwise, they may disrupt social order. Thus, emotion is not merely a personal matter but becomes a behavioral standard essential for maintaining both social order and cosmic stability. Confucius's praise for the poem "關雎 Guanju" in 詩經 *The Book of Songs* exemplifies this standard within aesthetic creation: "關雎, 樂而不淫, 哀而不傷 'Guanju' is happy but not too happy, sad but not tragic" (*The Analects*) [17]. Although "Guanshu" addresses romantic

affection, an instinctual emotion prone to excess, Confucius esteemed it highly because it establishes boundaries for artistic expression. The poem regulates joy, preventing it from descending into indulgence and licentiousness, and restrains grief, preventing sorrow from becoming morbid sentimentality that could harm an individual's physical and mental well-being. In other words, by expressing emotion with restraint, "Guanshu" achieves the Confucian aesthetic ideal: art serves not as a means for unrestrained emotional release, but as a tool to guide individuals toward balance and harmony. Obviously, from philosophical discourse to literary theory, Confucianism consistently maintains that moderation of emotion reflects one's self-cultivation and morality. In accordance with these principles, devout followers of Confucianism, including Vietnamese Confucian scholars from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries, consistently regulated and controlled emotional expression in their literary works. The emotions depicted are frequently the outcome of deliberate attempts to reinforce moral standards such as "loyalty", "benevolence", "righteousness", and "trustworthiness", rather than to convey the complex emotional experiences of ordinary individuals.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a significant literary trend emerged that prioritised emotions/feelings. Literature was no longer evaluated solely through a moral lens but was increasingly appreciated for its focus on feelings and emotions. Works such as *Lament of the Soldier's Wife* by Dang Tran Con, *Records on Prolonged Grief* by Nguyen Ki Trai, and *Records on a Heart-breaking Pain* by Pham Nguyen Du were commended by contemporary intellectuals for their authentic and diverse portrayals of emotional states. Prominent literary characters, including Vuong Thuy Kieu in Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu*, were celebrated for their complex spiritual lives. The concept of "情 qing" (emotions/feelings) was regarded as the foundation and impetus for creativity, as well as the source of value in poetry and literature more broadly, according to numerous Confucian scholars such as Le Huu Kieu, Dang Tran Con, Le Quy Don, Ngo Thi Si, Pham Nguyen Du, Phan Huy Ich, Nguyen An, Bui Duong Lich, Nguyen Du, Nguyen Hanh, Ho Xuan Huong, and Vu Duy Thanh.

Among them, Cao Ba Quat stands out as the leading figure of the sentimentalist movement in Vietnamese literature during this period. He consistently underscored the central role of emotions. In his preface to 倉山詩集 (*Thuong Son's Poetry Collection*) by Mien Tham (1819-1870), Cao Ba Quat expressed his disagreement with the tendency of many contemporary writers to worship Tang poetry and mocked those who indulged in imitating stereotyped and stylised expressions, because according to him, "to write poetry, one must be rooted in emotions" [19]. In other words, he believed that the essence of poetry lies in emotions, in the sincerity of the feelings expressed. In his poems, he also

affirmed that having feelings/emotions is ordinary: "情詎能忘況客心 How can one forget feelings, especially for those far from home" (*The Boat Returns, Passing the Northern Island, I Have Been Sick for Several Days, at Midnight I Go up to the Mast, Looking at the Surrounding Scenery, Feeling Sad and Homesick, I Write a Poem to Tran Ngo Hien - The Second Poem*); "忘情能有幾 How many people can forget feelings" (*Having Thoughts*) [13]. Here, Cao Ba Quat did not interpret emotions through an ascetic, restrictive perspective of orthodox Confucianism. Instead, he asserted that expressing emotion is a legitimate inner necessity. Neglecting one's emotions was considered inhuman and nearly impossible for an authentic individual, especially in situations of solitude, displacement, or hardship. The most significant point in Cao Ba Quat's philosophy is his elevation of emotion as the defining criterion that separates human beings from the inanimate world. His statement "人生非草木/哀樂係知識 Humans are not plants/They have sadness and joy because they have consciousness" (*Writing a Poem When Receiving a Letter from Family*) [13] articulates an intrinsic relationship between emotion and intellect. According to him, humans differ from plants and trees not only in their perceptual abilities, but also because this perceptual capacity gives rise to emotional experiences such as sorrow and joy. Experiencing sorrow, joy, and existential anxiety, therefore, represents the highest form of awareness and humanhood. Thus, Cao Ba Quat demanded genuine emotions in art and exalted emotion as an indicator affirming the existential status of human beings, who were capable of resonance, pain, and profound love in life.

Not only did Cao Ba Quat contribute theoretically to the formation and development of the sentimentalist movement, but he also concretised its principles by showing the diversity of emotions in his literary works. It is clear that Cao Ba Quat did not conceal his distinct personality to meet established emotional standards. He openly expressed his bitterness and frustration at the indifference he faced during difficult times (*On October 17, After Being Tortured by the Ministry of Rites, I Force Myself to Write Four Poems*). He revealed the feeling of helplessness of a "decrepit but not the dead person/Trying to carry the worn-out skeleton still having to rely on others" (*Illness*), "a weak body still having to live", and "a guilty person abandoned" (*January 21, I am Taken to Thua Thien Prison*) [13]. He affirmed his determination to be a "stubborn immortal" (*Inviting Guests on September 9*), "a hat standing tall in the mortal world [...] not going into a low roof, bowing down or up must follow the will of others" (*The Song in Dong Vu*), and "stepping towards fame without bowing my head" (*Poems About the Shackle - The Third Poem*) [13]. He expressed his torment at making his old parents worry about him constantly (*September 7, I am Imprisoned in Tran Phu Prison Because of the Exam Incident*), and at seeing his old mother both happy and sad as she came to welcome him after many months apart (*Coming Home*). Remembering his

deceased sister, Cao Ba Quat could not hide his pain because he had not fulfilled his duty as a filial son and had entrusted the care of his two parents to his hard-working sister (*Crying for a Deceased Sister*). In addition, poverty made him even more tormented. Deeply imprinted in the mind of the man far from home were the images of his young child clinging to his wife's upper garment, crying from hunger (*Having Thoughts*), of his ill-fated daughter wearing ragged clothes and returning in his dream with a gloomy face (*Dreaming of a Deceased Daughter*), and of his poor wife, who had to work hard every day (*Receiving a Letter from My Wife with Warm Clothes, a Pen and a Few Other Things; Self-comfort*). He blamed himself for letting his wife and children drift into a foreign land (*End of the Year*), for causing his wife to work hard and suffer (*Blaming Myself*), and for allowing his daughter and son to die early in poverty (*Dreaming of a Deceased Daughter; Losing a Son*). Cao Ba Quat was bitter and regretful because he was an official but could not give his family a decent meal: “親戚日已疏/何嘗嘗速肥豕 Relatives are becoming fewer each day/When will I be able to slaughter a fat goat to invite them?” (*I Cross the Sandbank and Reach Dong Du Village, It is Dark, So I Stay There*) [13]. Medieval Vietnamese Confucian literature frequently addressed concerns regarding duties and responsibilities toward relatives. Confucian scholars prior to Cao Ba Quat, while attentive to filial obligations, often derived spiritual fulfilment from meeting the expectations of their parents and embodying the ideal of manhood. For these scholars, poverty was not a source of distress, as they believed that contentment could be found in living according to the Way (安貧樂道). Consequently, even when expressing regret for perceived shortcomings as sons, husbands, or fathers, Vietnamese Confucian writings on familial themes before the eighteenth century adhered to the emotional standard advocated by Confucius: “being happy but not too happy, sad but not tragic” (樂而不淫, 哀而不傷). In contrast, Cao Ba Quat's classical Chinese poetry departed from this tradition of emotional restraint. Rather than suppressing instinctive feelings to conform to the Confucian ideal of the gentleman, Cao Ba Quat openly conveyed his genuine emotions. His works are characterised by an unrestrained expression of sentiment, distinguishing them from the more controlled emotional tone of earlier literature. These emotions were frequently expressed through tears. Among male writers of the period, he most extensively examined the theme of tears in Vietnamese Confucian literature, producing 34 works on the subject. This number surpasses those of Nguyen Du (26 works), Pham Nguyen Du (16 works), Do Lenh Thien (13 works), Nguyen Hanh (9 works), Pham Thai (8 works), Ngo Thi Si (8 works), and Ngo Thi Nham (7 works). He shed tears when remembering his loved ones: “一緘燈下萬行啼 Before the lamp, opening the letter, tears stream down” (*Receiving a Letter from My Wife with Warm Clothes, Pen and a Few Other Things*); “驟見淚如催 Briefly seeing my child, tears

stream down” (*Dreaming of a Deceased Daughter*); “腸斷南風哭姊悲 Before the south wind, heartbroken, sad to cry for my deceased sister” (*Crying for a Deceased Sister*); “獨夜裁書淚 Alone in the night, I write a tearful letter” (*In the Evening, I Know the Address of a Brother's Lodging, and at Night, I Write a Letter to Send to Him*) [13]. He compared the sadness he felt as his relatives passed away one after another to the endless heaven and earth (*Writing a Poem When Receiving a Letter from Family*). Potent expressions such as “heartbroken,” “tears stream down,” and a sorrow described as endless as heaven and earth serve to illustrate that his personal grief had reached its utmost intensity, surpassing the limits of self-control. Notably, his act of “going crazy and shouting to everyone” (*Losing a Son*) [13] following the loss of his son represents the apex of this emotional outpouring. At this point, the archetype of the composed and self-possessed Confucian scholar collapsed, giving way to an individual experiencing profound anguish in the face of tragedy. This state of “going crazy” functions both as evidence of deep affection and as an indication of helplessness in confronting a harsh fate. By refusing to conceal or embellish his vulnerability, Cao Ba Quat revealed himself in a candid and unvarnished manner. The honesty of the emotions expressed in literature revealed the hidden corners of a determined and courageous man like Cao Ba Quat.

In particular, sexual desire - an emotion that was once considered taboo and rarely mentioned in Vietnamese Confucian literature from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries - also appears in Cao Ba Quat's poetry. Cao Ba Quat, like Dang Tran Con and Nguyen Gia Thieu in their celebrated works 征婦吟曲 (*Laments of a Soldier's Wife*) and 宮怨吟曲 (*Laments of an Odalisque*), employed ventriloquism by adopting a female narrative voice to express longing for physical intimacy with a spouse, as exemplified in poems such as *From the Day You Left* and *The Soldier's Wife*. He further conveyed this desire through symbols associated with married life, including the “衾 blanket,” “枕 pillow,” “閨 room,” and “床 bed.” For instance, he writes, “此夜殘魂繞繡閨 Tonight, [my] soul wanders around the embroidery room” (*Receiving a Letter from My Wife with Warm Clothes, Pen, and a Few Other Things*), “衾枕臥常單 Blanket and pillows often lonely” (*Alone in the Night*), and “天邊征客閨中婦 The man in the horizon, the woman in the room” (*Raining All Night, I Have Feelings and Write a Poem*) [13]. His yearning for reunion is also directly articulated upon receiving a warm coat from his wife (*Receiving a Letter from My Wife with Warm Clothes, Pen, and a Few Other Things*) and when observing a Western couple displaying affection on a boat (*Poem about a Western Woman*). The expression of romantic affection, including instinctual needs and the desire for physical intimacy, revealed Cao Ba Quat's recognition of the fundamental aspects of human nature. By openly

addressing his anxieties regarding the “blanket”, “pillow”, and “bed”, as well as his longing for spousal reunion, Cao Ba Quat challenged the prevailing taboos of a society shaped by Confucian asceticism, where marital affection was often subordinated to loyalty to the sovereign and filial piety or filtered through strict moral codes. Rather than perceiving romantic sentiment as degradation or sin, he valued it as an essential and legitimate aspect of spiritual life. Furthermore, Cao Ba Quat demonstrated openness by observing the happiness of a Western couple with admiration and empathy, rather than with hostility. In doing so, Cao Ba Quat engages with a fundamental dimension of human experience.

By incorporating tears, a broad range of emotions, and particularly sexual desire in his works, Cao Ba Quat transformed literature from a vehicle for moral instruction and the affirmation of aspirations into a medium for expressing everyday personal emotions. Nevertheless, he did not fully transcend the emotional constraints imposed by his social class during his era, a point that will be further examined in the following section.

3. The limits of expressing emotions in Cao Ba Quat's writings

In a poem dedicated to his close friend Diep Xuan Huyen (alias Di Xuan), Cao Ba Quat articulated a perspective that appears to contradict the emphasis on emotional expression he previously affirmed in literature: “涉世方知儉笑顰 After experiencing life, [I] realise that [I] have to be frugal with laughter and frowning” (*Dedicating to Di Xuan*) [13]. According to Cao Ba Quat, this insight was acquired through life experience. The notion of being “frugal” with laughter and frowning prompts several questions. Despite his reputation for challenging examination regulations and advocating for emotional expression, why did Cao Ba Quat believe that he, and perhaps Di Xuan, should refrain from freely expressing emotions such as laughter and frowning? Furthermore, how might the act of expressing emotions through smiling or frowning influence the individual? What forms of emotional expression were considered acceptable during Cao Ba Quat's era?

The precise date and circumstances of the poem's composition, *Dedicating to Di Xuan*, remain unknown, making it difficult to ascertain the specific experiences that informed the author's insights. Nevertheless, other literary works by Cao Ba Quat offer valuable context. During his imprisonment and torture for correcting examination papers, Cao Ba Quat reflected on the fate of Yang Xiu, who was executed by Cao Cao for discerning his intentions from a single command (*On October 17, After Being Tortured by the Ministry of Rites, I Force Myself to Write Four Poems - The Second Poem*). The precarious position of a subject serving the emperor is further illustrated in verses expressing the bitterness of a talented individual exiled for attempting to

protect other gifted persons: “擬向平人話心事/低聲長恐忤天顏 [I] want to confide in everyone/But [I] have to speak softly, afraid that if [I] go against the thought of Heaven, [I] will be hated by Heaven” (*On October 17, After Being Tortured by the Ministry of Rites, I Force Myself to Write Four Poems - The Fourth Poem*) [13]. As in these examples, Cao Ba Quat's statement in *Dedicating to Di Xuan* appears to convey a lesson on the strategies required of mandarins within an autocratic regime, where truth and ultimate authority resided with the sovereign. Although he maintained his innocence, believing his actions to be virtuous (*Poems About the Shackle - The Second Poem*), Cao Ba Quat could only speculate about his release from prison, as his fate was entirely subject to Emperor Thieu Tri: “何當架作雲梯去/一笑乘風穩趁休 [I] wish [I] could use this shackle as a ladder to the clouds/With a laugh, [I] could ride the wind to climb up to freedom” (*Poems About the Shackle - The Third Poem*) [13]. As in other subjects under medieval autocratic governments, Cao Ba Quat was denied absolute freedom, including the freedom to express personal emotions. Frowning, which signified annoyance, doubt, denial, or dissatisfaction, was considered inappropriate in the presence of the monarch. Conversely, laughter was seldom taken seriously and was thus discouraged in formal, disciplined settings such as the royal court³ [20]. The principle of “being frugal with laughter and frowning” likely represents a lesson Cao Ba Quat derived from his setbacks as a mandarin, particularly after facing severe consequences for violating examination protocols and for failing to navigate the complexities of courtly relationships.

Medieval mandarins could only gain respect, demonstrate their talents, and, at times, preserve their lives by mastering the art of winning others' hearts and minds. In theory, the monarch was expected to embody qualities such as extreme benevolence (至仁), filial piety (至孝), wisdom (至明), sincerity (至誠), and respectfulness (至敬) to justify his responsibilities and rights. However, as scholar Tran Ngoc Vuong observes, “no monarch in reality could fulfil even a part of such ideal requirements (...) Of course, there were countless differences between the theoretical model of the emperor and the real emperor in history” [21]. This discrepancy also characterised the relationship between the monarch and the scholar, mandarin, or subject. Although Xun Zi summarised the principle of governance as “愛民而安, 好士而榮, 兩者無一焉而亡 loving the people will bring peace, loving the scholars will bring glory; if one of these two is lost,

³While serving as a mandarin in the state of Lu, Confucius strongly objected to Duke Jing of Qi's use of singers and dwarfs to entertain Duke Ding of Lu and other guests. He described these entertainers as “a group of ruffians who bewitched the vassals and deserved to be killed.” As a result, Duke Jing of Qi was compelled to order their execution, despite such performances being customary in the Qi court [20]. This incident established a precedent for the Confucian perspective on laughter and comedy.

the throne will be lost" (cited in [22]), few rulers adhered to this principle in practice. Confucius similarly remarked, "吾未見好德如好色者也 I have never seen anyone who craves virtue as much as he craves beauty" (*The Analects*) [17]. The monarch's supreme power rendered his will the highest law [21], and scholars and subjects remained bound by loyalty to the king, precluding unwise or careless actions. Consequently, Confucian classics frequently emphasise the importance of observing the facial expressions of superiors. For example, "侍于君子有三愆: 言未及之而言谓之躁, 言及之而不言谓之隱, 未見顏色而言谓之瞽 When conversing, a gentleman has three faults: speaking before his turn, that is rash; speaking when his turn comes but not speaking, that is concealment; speaking before seeing the facial expression [of his superior], that is blindness" (*The Analects*) [17]. There are also requirements to adjust one's facial expressions and attitudes to be "gentle" and "modest," as in "君子有九思: 視思明, 聽思聰, 色思溫, 貌思恭... A gentleman has nine things to think about: look carefully, listen carefully, look gently, and act modestly..." (*The Analects*) [17]. One of the four standards of accomplished scholars (達士) was the ability to "察言觀色 examine others' words and observe others' expressions" (*The Analects*) [17]. A closer examination of the above citations reveals that Confucian instructions for scholars communicating with the monarch extend beyond reminders of social etiquette. Instead, they constitute a sophisticated art of survival and remonstrance within autocratic power structures. Notably, three citations from the *Analects* establish a fundamental requirement: the ability to examine words and observe facial expressions. Confucius warns that one of the three errors of gentlemen when attending to a monarch is "speaking before seeing the facial expression [of his superior]", while also identifying "examine others' words and observe others' expressions" as the standard for "accomplished scholars". This emphasis demonstrates that understanding the monarch's psychology is essential. In a context where the emperor's authority is absolute, a remonstrance - however justified - delivered at an inopportune moment, such as when the monarch is angry, complacent, or fatigued, is not only ineffective but may also result in severe consequences for the scholar. Thus, observing the superior's facial expression is not an act of flattery or servility; rather, it enables the subject to determine the optimal moment to influence the ruler's judgment. In addition to observing the counterpart, scholars are required to self-adjust so that their facial expressions and attitudes remain "gentle" and "modest", which helps to neutralise potential power conflicts. The primary purpose of remonstrating is to point out the mistakes or limitations of the monarch. Maintaining a humble and gentle demeanor allows the scholar to minimise the perceived threat to his superior's self-esteem, thereby preventing agitation and facilitating the acceptance of honest counsel. Thus, Confucian prescriptions

regarding body language, facial expressions, and attitude provide scholars with the means to reconcile two demanding obligations: fulfilling the duty of loyalty by candidly assisting the king in correcting errors, while prudently safeguarding their own lives amid the uncertainties of absolute authority. Both Confucian teachings and historical context compelled scholars to carefully regulate the expression of personal emotions. The tension between individual freedom and the constraints of centralised authority led scholars to suppress natural emotions and adopt implicit, cautious modes of expression.

This contradiction is evident in the restrained nature of Cao Ba Quat's emotional expression. Although he emphasised the importance of conveying feelings, his methods remained rooted in the implicit and cautious language characteristic of earlier writers. Rather than employing direct language, his resentment toward the king was conveyed indirectly through classical allusions such as "chicken tendon" from the story of Cao Cao and Yang Xiu, the phrases "the exiled person" and "the exiled soldier", or by drawing parallels with Qu Yuan, an intellectual who suffered injustice in ancient China. In a poem commemorating the seventieth birthday of his colleague Nguyen Cong Tru, Cao Ba Quat subtly expressed dissatisfaction with the Nguyen dynasty by posing a seemingly innocent question regarding Nguyen Cong Tru's retirement: "豈應六十九年非 Could it be that you were wrong for sixty-nine years?" (*Respectful Response to Mr. Nguyen's Poem*). Even when addressing the deeply human theme of sexual desire, Cao Ba Quat resorted to adopting a female voice or discreetly alluding to desire through symbols of married life. The limitations in Cao Ba Quat's emotional expression, despite his reputation as one of the most resolute and daring figures in medieval Vietnam, not only reveal the constrained fate of scholars, mandarins, and subjects under an autocratic regime but also highlight the boundaries of the sentimentalist movement in Vietnam from the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. Other prominent writers of this movement, such as Ngo Thi Si (1726-1780), Pham Nguyen Du (1740-1786), and Nguyen Du (1766-1820), did not attain full emotional liberation within Vietnamese Confucian literature. In their respective collections addressing grief over their wives' deaths - *Records on the Pain in the Room* and *Records on a Heartbreaking Pain* - Ngo Thi Si and Pham Nguyen Du illustrate that the emotional constraints of their era remained influential. Like Cao Ba Quat, they expressed sexual desires indirectly by employing conventional symbols associated with married life. The predicament of scholars under the autocratic regime, along with their sense of guilt for perceived failures in fulfilling familial and societal obligations, is subtly conveyed through the motif of tears. In contrast, although Nguyen Du was deeply affected by the suffering of the populace and recognised the court's inhumane policies as the root cause,

he refrained from overt indignation or from turning *Notes on What Was Seen on the Way to the North* into a direct critique of governmental abuses. Instead, he followed the traditional approach of Confucian scholars, presenting his poetry to the monarch as a depiction of reality in the hope of inspiring policy reform. According to scholar Tran Ngoc Vuong, medieval Vietnam offered only a few paths that preserved individual space and allowed some freedom and independence, including freedom of emotional expression [21]. These included heroes in troubled times, hermits, Zen masters, talented Confucian scholars, and knights or bandits. Cao Ba Quat's separation from the Nguyen dynasty and participation in the Le Duy Cu's uprising demonstrated his aspiration to become a hero in troubled times. However, before attaining freedom and independence, Cao Ba Quat paid with his own life and that of his entire family. Unable to "raise [my] hand to create a change in fate" (*Poem on the Misery of a Talented Scholar*) [13], he was ultimately unable to achieve complete emotional liberation within medieval Vietnamese Confucian literature.

4. Conclusions

Nearly 1,400 extant literary works by Cao Ba Quat document not only the events of his brief yet eventful life but also offer insight into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of a scholar, mandarin, or subject under the autocratic regime of medieval Vietnam. These writings demonstrate Cao Ba Quat's recognition of the importance of emotion in literature. In many respects, he transformed literature from a tool for reinforcing moral models into a medium for articulating the inner lives of ordinary individuals. His works display a broad spectrum of emotions, conveyed with notable intensity, which stands in sharp contrast to the emotional restraint typical of Vietnamese Confucian literature from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries. However, natural emotions in his works were not entirely unbounded; a degree of restraint persisted, as the author employed classical allusions, symbolism, ventriloquism, and other indirect modes of expression rather than direct language. This tension reflects the constraints faced by scholars within the autocratic context of medieval Vietnam. Although they encouraged greater emotional expression than earlier Vietnamese Confucian literature, Cao Ba Quat and other writers associated with the sentimentalist movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries remained subject to entrenched political, cultural, and literary norms. These constraints were arguably only relaxed in the early twentieth century, when the New Poetry movement provided a platform for more liberated emotional expression.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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