

Character Image of Battle Hero in Mnong Epic of Vietnam

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Abstract The Mnong epic is one of the cultural heritage that still exists in the Central Highlands cultural region of Vietnam until today. With the image of the hero expressed in the epic, where the highest concentration of aspirations and dreams of the community is highest, helping readers and listeners to understand more about the life of the soul, cultural and social activities of people here. The hero in the Mnong epic with beauty, talent, strength and bravery is the generalization of the ideal aspirations of the entire community of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In the Mnong epic, the social differentiation is very primitive, there is no concentration of community power on an individual, the personal monopoly role is unclear, and the collective nature is clearly revealed. The social power is divided equally for everyone, without the appearance of the model of military leader and heroes in the epic that really make the soul of the battle. The heroic characters of the battle are recognized and praised for the victories of the talented heroes, but the decisive harmony of the work is always the magnanimous and reverberating mettle of a whole group. The strength of victory in the Mnong epic is the strength of the collective, the community. In the epic, the hero may not be the head of the tribe but their strength, talent, bravery contribute to the general of the community, they represent the strength, aspiration of community and preserve the survival of the community before the enemy.

Keywords: *the heroic characters of the battle, Mnong epic, Vietnam*

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1. Introduction

The epic is the complete picture of people's life in the form of telling the story of a hero in the past. In the epic, the heroic characters are the central element of the epic art world, representing the spirit, talent, bravery and wisdom of the community. The Mnong epic is one of the cultural heritages that still exists in the Central Highlands cultural region of Vietnam until today. With the hero image expressed in the epic, where the highest concentration of aspirations and dreams of the community, helping the readers and listeners understand more about the soul life, cultural and social activities of the people here. The research, collection of Central Highlands epic and the epic of Mnong people have been attractive to many researchers.

Since 1974, the French ethnographer named Georges Condominas in the book *We eat a forest of stone - the god Gô* has mentioned "a storytelling form of the Mnong Gar named Noo proo and he calls it an epic" [1]; 190]. In the book of *Folk literature of ethnic minorities in Vietnam*, author Vo Quang Nhon also said that Mnong people have the epics of "Mnong people have epics of Dam Bori, Trang guy, etc." [2]; 369] but the author has not yet identified the indigenous name and the specific content of these epics. Do Hong Ky in the essay of *Ot nrong - archaic epic Mnong* presents about the environment,

method of oratorio and function of living, content and method of expression, social basis and reflecting content of the archaic epic Mnong. The author demonstrates that *Ot nrong* is an archaic epic, which contains both mythological elements and heroic elements of the epic [3]. In the essay of *Plot and character in the epic nrong of the Mnong people*, the author discusses the plot and link plot of the story, analyzes the features of the plot of the epic *Ot nrong*, the expression of character's action in the plot of *Ot nrong*. The author asserts: "The plot structure of the epic nrong is a continuous structure. The single plots merge together into the link plot. The single plots have a close relationship with each other and at some level, they have their relative independence. This feature of the epic nrong is similar to the epic "De dat de nuoc" of Muong people" [4]. In *The mythical epic Mnong*, the author has analyzed the contents of *ot nrong* such as the epic Mnong talking about human formation; the three-level world in the epic Mnong and some of the typical characters who operate in that world; the character of creating the world; cultural hero characters; war and battle heroes; praising the working life, wealth and happiness of the community; reflecting the great movement in Mnong society; The epic Mnong is an encyclopedia that does not exist in writing but exists in the memory of artisans. Besides, the author analyzes the structural features of the work, the artistic tactics and the ideological-aesthetic function of the epic structure of Mnong. The author asserts that *Ot nrong* is a

mythical epic in the aspects of oratorio, living functions, poetics, social basis and reflection contents [5]. In *Epic of Mnong* [6] and *Mnong Nong folk cultural aspects* [7], the author reiterates the discovery of the epic Mnong, analyzes the phrase of *ot nrong*, discusses the author, method of writing and handing down, artisans, the public and the oratorio environment, the function of living, the content and the prosody of nrong and proves that the epic Mnong is the mythical epic. In *Epic of Mnong people* [8], the author publishes the results of the investigation, survey and collection with over 100 epic Mnong works which are known. The author re-publishes the issues of the content of the epic Mnong such as: the three-level world, the character of the creation of the world, the heroic cultural character, the war and the heroes of battle, praises the rich working life, the issues reflecting the great transformation in the society of Mnong people, ... the issues of the prosody of the epic Mnong such as: building the plots and characters, art methods. Thereby, the author generalizes the picture of the epic Mnong. Phan Dang Nhat in *Ot nrong, a newly discovered massive epic system of genealogy* [9] and *Central Highlands epic region* [10] has confirmed that it is a massive epic system of Mnong people. In *Basic properties of the epic*, the author compares the specific works of the two groups of antique epic and archaic epic when analyzing the features of the epic (the existing environment, time birth period, reflection content, artistic features, etc. [11]. The author affirms in the article *To learn more the epic Mnong – ot nrong* that through epic Mnong, the readers and listeners can be aware Mnong's historical - social phenomena such as festivals and war problems [12]. Ngo Duc Think in *Central Highlands epic in discovering and issues* generalizes the period of Central Highlands epic discovery and collection in the area of ethnic groups, the number and volume of the works, the changes in the awareness of the Central Highlands epic. At the same time, the author systematizes the academic issues of the Central Highlands epic that have been posed: the concept of the Central Highlands epic, defining the genre and classification of the Central Highlands epic, the period of the Central Highlands epic, the artistic features of the epic, Central Highlands epic region and the Central Highlands epic and the epic of Southeast Asia [13]. In the article *Unity and diversity of the Central Highlands epic* analyzes the general features of the Central Highlands epic, shows the similarity of genre, content expressed, structure of the works, aspects of mind and language, method of oratorio and handing down, etc. and the diversity and peculiarity of the epic of ethnic groups, sub-regions, through subcategories, the length or short of the works, the reflection of the age content of the epic, the form of performance, the structure of the works of verbal transformation, the form of language and the artistic images, etc. The author has counted the number of the Central Highlands epic collected with more than 800 works including 300 Mnong works. The author affirms that: "Since ancient times, the two ethnic groups of Mnong and Xtieng were from the same root, later divided into two ethnic groups as today. The number of the works of the epic *Ot nrong* collected accounts for the largest number of 281 works. Usually, these works have the most length, from 700 – over 1000 pages (30-40 hours of

oratorio). In particular, most of these epic works are in the form of continuity (genealogy), creating the most massive and longest works in our country and the world" [14].

To Dong Hai in *New discoveries around the epic Mnong* have mentioned new findings around the epic nrong. The author asserts that nrong is a series of continuous epic with massive volume at the top of the epics that have been discovered in the world [15]. In *Looking back on the process of collection and study of the epic Mnong*, the author Nguyen Xuan Kinh re-systemizes the process of collecting, translating, publishing and the research, awareness process of the epic Mnong in the past and provides the conclusion: "The collection and publication of the epic Mnong is conducted later and implemented in a short time, but the achieved results in quantity are significant" [16]. In *Vietnamese epic in Asian context*, the authors have introduced the achievements in collection and study of the epic in Vietnam. In particular, the authors have mentioned the diversity and consistency of the Central Highlands epic, the basic content reflected in the epic [17]. The author of *the Central Highlands epic - a treasure of priceless spiritual culture* has affirmed: "The Central Highlands epic is a panorama of an age, reflecting honestly and vividly the life activities of the community, the battle for noble humanity values, etc." [18]. In *the Central Highlands, priceless spiritual values* has introduced the Central Highlands epic associated with names of the mythical heroes, the heroes of the Central Highlands village who have been set great hopes by generations of the people in this region. The author affirms that: "The interesting and fascinating things in the Central Highlands epic are its historical and cultural values with convincing historical records of a historical period of the nation which according to some researchers, the Central Highlands epic may be born in the period when the Central Highlands society has the great changes due to the wars of the villages, etc. and there are very long epics, maybe they are the longest epics that have been known in our country so far which are the *Ot nrong* of the Mnong people about 30,000 sentences" [19]. Nguyen Thi My Loc in *System of heroic characters in the epic Mnong* has made system and analyzed the feature of heroic characters in 9 works of the epic Mnong and makes interesting comments and comparisons [20].

In addition, many authors have studied in depth the content and art of each work in the massive epic treasure of the Mnong people in the Central Highlands such as E De and Mnong folk literature by Truong Bi [21], *Epic of Pirating ancient gong of Tiang village* [22] and *Epic of De Leng* [23] by Nguyen Xuan Kinh, *Epic of Precious medicine at Sky and Moon lake* by Do Hong Ky [24], *Epic of Kra, Nang catches Bing, Kong* by Tran Nho Thin [25], etc. In *Epic of Leeches swallow Tiang village*, the author Bui Thien Thai said that the work of *Leeches swallow Tiang village* is a heroic epic, while other epics of the Mnong people are mythical epics and Mnong epics is a series of epics [26]. Tran Thi An in *Introduction of Rong epic, Rong catch Leng's soul Rong bat hon Leng* has emphasized the rudimentary nature in the description: "Rudimentary nature is displayed delicately throughout this epic work. First of all, it can be seen that during the battle between Yang and Yui, representing the Tiang bon and Tong, Siang, Roch, Rong and many others of bon

Briang, the movements that the hero displays his power are: wrestling, pressing, hugging, pushing, hooking, pulling, embracing, tightening, etc. the weapons used from beginning to end, in addition to javelin, reclining moon blade and sword (rarely used), it still has seine, bamboo fish trap, types of rope (usually used and effective). These weapons seem to be quite rudimentary, etc.” [27]; 28-29]

Collecting, translating, publishing and studying the epic Mnong have been interested and studied by Vietnamese scientists in many different contents. The researchers all agreed that: With priceless spiritual values, the epic Mnong has contributed to enriching the treasure of the Central Highlands epic and making the face of the rich cultural identity of a legendary and potential land. In the epic works, the heroic character represents the will, aspiration, quality, talent and strength of the community. The heroic character has the general nature, social ideals and aesthetic ideal of the era which has produced it. The beauty of physical strength, spirit, talent and elite dignity of the community are expressed through the heroic character in the relationship with nature and society. This article studies the hero image of the battle in epic of *Leng toys with Yang's miraculous stone, Pirating ancient gong of Tiang village* in the treasure of the epic Mnong in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in order to realize the features of the conception of the heroic character of the battle in the epic of the people in this region.

2. Content

2.1. Beauty of Appearance

The appearance of the heroic characters in the epic often has a nice stature with a greater caliber than itself. This is very reasonable because it is the physical resonance of the whole community. However, in each community, the epic hero appears in the shaping beauty according to the aesthetic perspective and the own standards of that community.

Mnong people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam have a rich treasure of folk literature such as mythical stories, ancient stories and especially the epic Ot nrong which has oratorio in rhyme style. Ot nrong is a form of singing that tells the ancient stories of the community, which is a collection of Mnong's stories about the universe, the material and spiritual life. The stories are linked in a continuous way, having the same character system. The Mnong people consider the characters in their works as representatives of the ideal qualities described. The world of characters in the Mnong epic is very diverse and rich, in which the heroic characters used by Mnong people are central in the stories. The stories of heroes are very close and friendly with Mnong people like stories of living and production in daily life:

In the morning, telling the stories of fields in the mountains

In the afternoon, telling the stories of firewood and water

In the noon, telling the stories of heroes

In the moonlit night, telling the stories of Ndu, Tiang... [5].

In the epic Mnong, the heroic character appears with different positions. The hero appears as a typical cultural heroic character, representing the cultural power of the whole community. This character is embellished with strange birth, divine origin or associated with natural phenomena, having merit for the creation of the world, teaching how to do work and descending the people the knowledge of culture, society. In addition, in the epic Mnong, historical reality with the struggles of villages is a major content, and images of the hero of battle, valiant man are the central character of the work. The epic Mnong reflects the struggle of the villages to redefine the boundaries, interests and missions of the hero that represent collectives to fight the enemies who are outsiders robbing and destroying the village. The hero with talent and strength has won the victory to create the epic version of the power of the community.

The epic Mnong is attractive to the readers and listeners by the stories of the hero of the battle. They are extraordinary health and talent. The origin of the heroic character is an important part of the content in many epics Mnong and is told in some continuous plots. The strange birth of the heroic characters is a foreshadowing of an extraordinary life. The heroes are surrounded by a halo throughout their lives: from birth, maturity, victories until death. This is the similarity of the epics of different ethnic groups in the world. The hero character Leng in the epic Mnong is the character with the highest concentration of typical qualities of the battle hero. In Mnong, Leng means overflowing water. The name of the character matches the strength, talent and personality of the character. This hero has a strange birth and since he was born a few days old, he is naughty, haughty. When growing up, Leng leaves his home and his mother to catch beautiful women called Bing, Bong after accepting Yang's challenge. When he is hungry, the boy died languidly in the deep forest and is allowed to recast by the gods. Thence, Leng has a strong appearance and stamina that is matchless and becomes the strongest hero of the community.

The hero Leng is portrayed with sturdy, strong beauty:

Leng's body is as hard as a stone

Leng's body is as hard as an iron rod [28]

With “muscular” appearance and “red eyes like fire” of Leng, it reveals the quality of a brave warrior:

“His face is as a hero

His face is full of bravery

His physiognomy is vigorous as tiger, deer” [28]

Leng's clothes are meticulously described, detailed and suitable for the luxurious beauty of the hero character:

Leng rolls his hair with a peacock tail

Peacock tail hair is as big as a flat basket

Leng rolls his hair with a red Handkerchief

Len wears a blue cloak

Leng's neck has thirty glass bead strings

... Color of glass bead string is the same as the color of necklace

Wear ivory earrings suitable with cheekbone [28]

The hero's weapon is portrayed with extraordinary range and the weapon is only for those with extraordinary health to be able to use it:

Leng uses a bush-hook which is as big as bamboo gutter

Leng uses a bush-hook which is as big as Rlap stream
Leng uses a shield which is as big as waterfall level [28]

Or:

The blades of swords are as much as cane leaves
The blades of knives are as much as imperator cylindrical
Cross-bow is as shining as Kring arbalest
The shields are big as a moon [29]

Or:

Their handle of knife is very big, which two people can carry it

Their handle of javelin is very big, which two people can carry it

Cross-bow used to shoot the bird is very big, two people can aim at [[29]; 983]

The hero's actions, styles, and mien are also portrayed with extraordinary appearance. His step is as "light as a baby lion", when he is down the ladder like "a lightning bolt", his strength is "stronger than a hundred people":

Leng's body is as hard as an iron rod

Leng keeps available fire in his body

Leng slaps his thighs to take out the salt

Take in his body with solar fire

Leng shouts, his mouth spits the fire [28]

Or:

They leave as fast as Eng bird

He is as agile as a lion

Stepping down the ladder, he is like a lightning bolt

Blinking eyelids like lightning in March [[29]; 990]

The personality of the hero character is also special, outstanding and consistent, which is different from other normal people. From an early age, in addition to the extraordinary strength, the hero Leng also has different personality features like naughty, pesky.

When playing in the yard, he kills sows

When playing in the yard, he kills the people

Discouragement is like urging Leng to do that

Dissuasion is like pressing Leng to do that [28]

In his mind, he is also a responsible person:

If I escape and disappear

They will come to burn the bon tiang village

I decide to die even if I have to pop off [[28]; 784]

From a young age, the fierce vigour, the desire to become the most elite, the richest man urge a child to become a strong, haughty and fierce valor. After being satiated with the mischievous, destructive games, Leng begins to be curious and concerned about Yang's wealth and then Leng wants to be rich despite Yang's dissuasion. Leng searches Yang's miraculous stone, which holds his life and wealth. Although everyone advises, explains, seduces and intimidates, Leng still refuses to give the miraculous stone back to Yang. When Yang implores Leng to return the stone, but Leng still refused to return, Yang grabs Leng's neck and hit Leng to take back the stone. Leng cries, is constantly as a protest "Leng cries within seven nights and eight days" until Yang challenges:

If Leng wants to be bigger than Yang

Leng catches Bing who is daughter of Jri

Leng catches Bong who is daughter of Jri [28]

With Yang's challenge, Leng leaves his home, crosses the forest to catch Bing and Bong who are daughters of Jri. The hero's personality is intense, violent, extraordinary and sometimes stubborn, outrageous and not in any order or rule. But above all, the community of people here still

love, admire the talent, the strength of the hero because the heroes have always protected the people before the invasion of the enemy.

The standard of appearance beauty of a hero is not only perfection, beauty, but it must be in line with the magnanimous vigor, with the task of protecting the ethnic community. It is also an epic style.

2.2. Beauty of Qualities – Strength, Talent, Wisdom

In addition to the stature of the universe dimension, representing physical strength – the spirit of the community, the epic heroic character is also shining with the beauty of talent and bravery, etc. All are expressed with the great and brave actions of the hero with glorious victories. The epic hero character cannot exist without overcoming all difficulties and challenges to win a resounding victory, get the glorious victories. The hero must have great aspirations, lofty ideals and these ideals also represent the ideals of the ethnic community.

The epic Mnong reflects an important part of the reality of human life at that time which is fighting between the villages occurred continuously. Deriving from social features, the epic Mnong reflect more than 100 battles with various causes such as the characters use philtre, transfer Krasue to each other, the people of bon Tiang village take back the precious objects such as the Ndring musical instrument, Yang takes back the silver tube carved in the shape of human, Leng, Long and Mbong take back the white elephant jar, catch women to be wives, etc. In which, the battles for the cause of kidnapping men and women and the village of Tiang and Rong to take back memorabilia accounts for about 60% [5]. In the battles, the hero expresses his superhuman talent and strength of the gods, can jump far away and be able to fly, transform into many different shapes:

Leng flies through two levels of the sky

Leng flies to find two classes of the moon [[29]; 817]

And:

Leng jumps over the bamboo

Leng jumps over the young forest [[28]; 799]

Or:

"Jumping down the water, Leng and Mbong turn into fish

Ndu Yang who are children of Srat turn into the fish

The fishes fight to each other in the water

In the grass yard, Leng and Mbong turn into mouse

Ndu Yang who are children of Srat turn into the mouse

The mouses fight to each other in the grass yard" [[29]; 950]

The war in the epic Mnong is a collective battle with a lot of talented and powerful characters, "is a fight between two collectives in which the role of the two leaders is not as outstanding as the captain in the the battle described in other writings" [[29]; 26]. The battlefield is a place for the heroes to show their talents, strength, will and bravery. These are the qualities that are always highly appreciated by the people, the martial spirit expresses the aspirations of the Central Highlands people to send them fully into the heroic character. Heroic image Leng has appeared in many works and is built with outstanding personalities. Besides the heroic character Leng, there has many other

hero characters, they constitute the common power of the whole community. The battles in the epic Mnong are the cohesion of the excellent collective, each with each talent, strength to create a common power to win the fighting:

“They gather the whole heroes

They gather the people who are brave

They gather the people who are fearless

A person with good hand will catch grasshopper

A person with good hand will launch the javelin to stab tiger

A person with good hand will use the sword to kill people

Including the people as fast as pythons

Including the people as aggressive as lightning god

Including the people as strong as wild buffalo”

[[29]; 862]

In the fierce battle between the two parties, the heroes of both parties express their talents, bravery to defeat the enemy. Every party has excellent, healthy, good-combat individuals who make the enemy afraid:

“Children of Srat are brave people

Children of Srat are fearless people

An excellent person catches grasshopper

An excellent person launches the javelin to stab tiger”

[[29]; 951]

The battle which is equal on strength and talent is stressful, fierce with “the high sound of the sword cutting to the sky”, revealing the talent and strength of the heroes:

“They slap their thighs to take out the salt

Take in the body with solar fire

They shout, their mouth spit the fire” [[29]; 881]

And:

“They grapple ashore

They grapple and turns many rounds” [[29]; 937]

Sometimes, the heroes resist fiercely, win the battle, causing the enemy to suffer heavy losses, sometimes, the heroes have to step back and flinch, self-conscious:

Many blades of knives point at Leng

Leng alone stands in the middle of the sea of people”

[[28]; 794]

Or:

Leng said that it was very difficult

Their people are as fast as pythons

Their people are as aggressive as lightning god

Their people are as strong as wild buffalo

... Our team cannot win against them [28]

For Mnong people, the gods are forces holding certain powers to human life. The gods in the epic Mnong have a large number and each god has its own position and function: Ting, Mbong who are children of Jri (Banyan tree god), two goddesses of Deh and Dai who are the younger sisters of Ting, Mbong gods have the responsibility for protecting the horizon; Bing and Jong gods who are children of Let take care of the sky; Krong and Dong gods are gods of sound of gongs; Vah and Vanh gods are goddesses of philter; Keng and Kang gods who are children of Unh have the responsibility for protecting the fire, etc. Before the battle, the Mnong people have to worship the gods to follow and bless them:

Leng just walks and prays to gods

Leng just walks and prays to Yang

... I pray to the forest god of Trum tree

I pray to the pond god where the buffalo bath

Pray the gods to help me to bring the rice

Pray the gods to bless Leng

Pray the gods to protect Leng

Or:

I pray to the gods

Pray the three-legged three-handed god

Pray the six-legged three-handed god

Pray the ten-legged nine-handed forest god

Pray the gods to follow me

Pray the gods to protect Sung

Pray the gods to help Tang [29]

Many battles are in conclusive, the hero must have the support of the gods to win. The gods are also ready to prepare for the battle and sometimes the gods of both parties also participate in the battle:

The gods bring the water cloak and frost cloak

Bringing the frost cloak to prevent heat from fire

Bringing the rice to eat in the stream

Bringing the sticky rice to eat in the way

Or:

The gods of two parties have a conflict

Quarrel of the gods culminated

... Let god pushes Tet Klong to his back

Mai god pushes Sung Klong to his back

Krach Krong god uses the tree to continue to the fight

Srem Srai god uses the tree to continue to the fight... [29]

In the fighting in the epic Mnong, the readers and listener can hardly recognize the difference between the two parties. The cause of the war comes from both parties, the action, nature and purpose of the two parties to the battle are the same. At the same time, the relationship of the two parties has a change in roles, sometimes, they are enemies to confront and fight each other very fiercely, sometimes, they become allies to fight other enemies. The battles are very fierce but do not leave the severe and painful consequence, the fierce devastating scene, dead bodies, horses which are sprawled on the battlefield because the winner would beg the gods for participants are revived. The epic Mnong often ends with the victory of the righteous faction before the nonmeaning. At the same time, the epic reflects the historical reality through the previous perspective of Mnong people: The stronger will win against the weaker, the one with the support of the gods will win the victory in the fight.

The social differentiation in the epic Mnong is very primitive, there is no concentration of community power on an individual, the uniquely individual role is unclear, and the collective nature is clearly revealed. The epic Mnong was born in the period of clans – tribe with territorial dispute, property among the villages, the village heads have meaning like cultural heroes like Tiang, Yang, etc. who have a duty to govern and organize society according to a certain institution. In the villages, there must also be talented heroes with extraordinary strength and bravery to be ready to protect the village in the fight with other tribes. In each historical stage, with the frequent wars, the role of the hero of the battle is always enhanced.

3. Conclusion

The heroic epic characters are always present in parallel with beauty, physical strength and talent, bravery, is a

perfect hero and a proud memory of the people of the age. The hero in the epic Mnong is the generalization of the ideal aspirations of strength, talent, bravery of the entire community of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In the epic Mnong, the social power is divided equally for everyone, without the appearance of the model of military leader. The strength of victory in the epic Mnong is the power of the collective, the community. Although recognizing and praising the victories of talented heroes, the decisive harmony of the work has always been the resounding and magnanimous vigor of a whole collective. In the epic, maybe the hero is not the head of the tribe but their strength, talent, beavery contribute to the general of the community, they represent the strength, the aspiration of community and preserve the survival of the community before the enemy.

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