

THE THOUGHTS OF NGUYEN TRAI- A VIETNAMESE STATESMAN IN THE 15TH CENTURY

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Abstract

Nguyen Trai is one of the fourteen Vietnamese national heroes, a great thinker of the 15th century and one of the three Vietnamese world cultural celebrities. He made a major contribution to the literary production and thought system of Vietnam. His thought is found and systemized from his literary works by Vietnamese modern scholars. They are divided into principal fields involving national independence, military strategy and politics, philosophy as well as humanism and justice. All of these were influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and local patriotism. Vietnamese people see him as a bright example for the country's younger generation. Some parts of his literary work are taught at schools. His life and work has become a source of inspiration for culture, art creation and academic research in Vietnam today.

Keywords: *Nguyen Trai, Vietnamese national heroes, national independence, humanism, patriotism, military strategy*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

National heroes or statesmen and women in Vietnam have to meet one or more of the five following criteria: being a pioneer or leader of a victorious struggle against foreign invasion, being a king who made a great contribution to building and protecting the country; or being a master military strategist; an outstanding politician, or being an eminent literati or intellectual (referred to in Vietnam as a culturalist).¹ There are 14 Vietnamese national heroes.² Nguyen Trai is one of these remarkable statesmen of the 15th century. He was one of the key players behind

¹ According to the article number 2296 BHTTDL- MTNATL of Vietnamese Culture Sport and Tourism Ministry, dated 21st June 2003 about building hero and celebrity monuments in Vietnam. Retrieved from <http://www.bvhttdl.gov.vn/vn/print/tintuc-sukien/quy-hoach-tuong-dai-quoc-to-hung-vuong-va-danh-nhan-anh-hung-dan-toc.html> , translated by Nguyen Thi Chiem

² Here is the list of 14 Vietnamese National heroes: National Father Hung Vuong, Trung sisters, Emperor Ly Nam De, King Ngo Quyen, Emperor Dinh Bo Linh, Emperor Le Hoan, Emperor Ly Cong Uan, General Ly Thuong Kiet, Emperor Tran Nhan Tong, General Tran Hung Dao, Emperor Le Loi, Nguyen Trai, King Nguyen Hue and President Ho Chi Minh.

the Lam Son uprising.³ He wrote the propaganda that inspired the Vietnamese people to back the uprising as well as to persuade the Ming military generals to surrender. Today he is respected as a Vietnamese cultural and national hero.⁴

He was famous for his thoughts on national independence, military strategy and politics, philosophy as well as humanism and justice. Trai's thoughts on *national independence* could be considered as contributing to the development of Vietnamese's national ideology in the 15th century as the country had to confront many foreign invasions until then.⁵ His *military tactics and politics* were important because they were successfully applied during the Lam Son uprising against the Ming. Lam Son uprising was one of the greatest people's movement which marked a high point in the national history of Vietnam in the 15th century. It enriched the national independence thought. It motivated Vietnamese' thought on unity strength and the people's movement.

Researchers who work on the national heroes of Vietnam, receive special privileges from the Vietnamese Communist government because the government expects results from those researches to help "...build a nation's pride (against feelings of inferiority that had developed in relation to other Civilizations).

In this paper, firstly, I will review some 20th century literature on Nguyen Trai's work and thoughts. Then, I provide a short methodology followed by my findings. I discuss Nguyen Trai's biography, work and thoughts. About Trai's biography, I outline his early life, role in the Lam Son uprising, and his position in the successive governments of the Le Dynasty. I further list all the remnants of his writings and then discuss his thoughts into three main domains: **military strategy, politics, philosophy humanism and justice.** Nguyen Trai wrote his thoughts

³ In 1418, Le Loi, a wealthy and brave philanthropist in Lam Son (a place in Tho Xuan, Thanh Hoa province) gathered people to revolt against the Ming. This uprising is called the Lam Son uprising (Truong Huu Quynh, 2003, p.283)

⁴ The other two are the literalist Nguyen Du and President Ho Chi Minh

⁵ In its very first nation under the name Van Lang, Vietnam had to manage to regain control from the Qins in VII-VI century BC. However, from 179 BC to 938, once again it succumbed to the foreign rules which were series of Chinese dynasties such as the Han, Wu, Jin, Southern Ji, Liang, Sui, Tang and Southern Han (Nguyen Tai Thu, 1993). These foreign invaders made a lot of effort to assimilate Vietnamese into Han by popularizing Han culture, language and Confucianism over the folklore knowledge. Anyway, throughout that over millennium, the Vietnamese ancestors did a lot of rebellions and struggles against those out-side forces and had some independent governments under Trung sisters, Anterior Ly, Khucs, Duong Dinh Nghe. The turning point was Ngo Quyen's victory over the Southern Han in 938. Then about five centuries of sovereign power in Vietnam began with successive dynasties: Ngôs, Đinhs, Prior Lês, Lýt, Trầns, Hòs, Posterior Trầns. Till the ending of 14th century, a civil war happened inside the country. Hence it was opposed to a military intervention from the Ming dynasty, followed that it was about twenty years of the Ming's rule. (Truong Hữu Quýnh, 2003, pp. 44-337)

down in prose and in poetry political documents and letters to the enemy as well as other official writings.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Nguyen Trai's works has been a major concern of Vietnamese scholars which received encouragement from the Vietnam Communist Party. The Party implemented a policy on how to set and develop an identified and advanced national cultural heritage. It launched the motto: "Cultural heritage is an invaluable asset. It is the core of national identity and basis for creating new values as well as cultural exchanges. It makes ethnics cohesion. We have to conserve and promote our traditionally cultural values (both elite and folklore knowledge), revolutionary culture as well as tangible and intangible culture".⁶ Below are just some of his books and articles:

Vietnam Social Science Commission, Institute of History (1976). This is the collection of Nguyen Trai's remnant works which were compared, translated and annotated from his writing in Sino-Chinese and Nom. I will use this document as reference for my discussion.

Thu, Nguyen Tai (1993). Thu wrote a chapter about Nguyen Trai thoughts. He divided Trai's thought into three fields: the concept of nation and national independence; thought of humanism and views on a man's role; and his dedication to Vietnamese ideological theory.

Giau, Tran Van (1962). Giau praised Nguyen Trai as a great statesman and a talented strategist who developed ideas for the people and guerrilla warfare. Giau said Nguyen Trai was an excellent writer who created patriotic literature works and used it for politic purposes in the war against the invaders as well as rejected the injustice of the ruling elite. Above all, Giau said Nguyen Trai was a profound thinker who developed his thought into a theory and ideology. He listed out Nguyen Trai's thoughts including patriotism, populism, humanism and justice, peace policy and respect for the sovereignty of its neighbors. He concluded that Nguyen Trai's thoughts were advanced beyond the ideology in his time.

⁶ The fourth task in the decisions of fifth meeting of the Communist Party's Central committees (session VIII) about setting and developing an identified and advanced national culture. Translated by Nguyen Thi Chiem. Retrieved from http://dangcongsan.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30579&cn_id=124001.

Giau, Tran Van (1967). This time Giau made a comparison of Nguyen Trai's patriotism with his contemporary writers such as Ly Tu Tan, Nguyen Mong Tuan and Nguyen Truc. He said that the literary works of all four were profoundly patriotic, charming and various. Those works could ignite the spirit of national pride, love of country, hatred of enemy. In addition, all four were sincere to the people, uphold justice and utopia. But Nguyen Trai was the only one who was concerned with the question of how to achieve a utopia for society, while the rest just mentioned it as a dream.

Giau, Tran Van (1980). He debated on the issues around ideas of Nguyen Trai's thoughts. First, origin of Nguyen Trai's thoughts, Giau implied that it derived from the convergence of three religions: Confucianism-Buddhism-Taoism. But he said Nguyen Trai's thoughts went beyond those philosophies connecting them to traditional patriotism. Second, Nguyen Trai's thought of humanism and justice had deeper meaning which taught people to avoid killing and to love each other. Giau tried to drive Nguyen Trai's humanism and justice to serve the duty of saving the country from its enemy and to protect the peace as well as to develop the country further. Third, Nguyen Trai's thought sometimes inclined toward Taoism. Giau argued it was only temporary because Nguyen Trai would go back to the world immediately to serve his king and country whenever he was asked for.

Giau, Tran Van (2006). Giau argued that Nguyen Trai's military tactics against Ming's was concerned in ending the war, Nguyen Trai chose a neutral and humane way without killing the enemy's soldiers.

Chinh, Doan (2009). Chinh pointed out Nguyen Trai's philosophical thoughts in three sections: 1 / His stance on destiny, cosmos and the role of the human being; 2 / Thought of Nguyen Trai for humanism, especially ideas about citizens and their roles; 3 / Nguyen Trai's view of chances and conditions.

Luu, Tran Hong (n.d). Luu compared Nguyen Trai's national concept with other writers' like Ly Bi, Tran Quoc Tuan, Le Van Huu and Stalin to see how Nguyen Trai contributed to this matter.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this manuscript is descriptive and critical analysis. Material resources include both books, e-books and websites. As an important statesman, Nguyen Trai's works and

researches on his works could be easily reached in various websites. The cited websites belong to organisations and offices of Vietnam government and universities.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Nguyen Trai's biography

Nguyen Trai, also known as Uc Trai, was born in 1380 and died in 1442 in Chi Ngai village, Phuong Son (today known as Chi Linh, Hai Duong, northern Vietnam). His father was Nguyen Ung Long, a poor Confucian intellectual. His mother was Tran Thi Thai, the third daughter of a nobleman and also a high mandarin in Tran's dynasty. Nguyen Trai was the oldest of five siblings. In 1385 he followed his mother and grandfather to settle down in Thanh Hu cavern, located in Con Son mountain (Chi Linh, Hai Duong). After his mother and grandfather passed away, his father took all five siblings to Nhi Khe and trained them in Confucianism. In 1400, Trai took the exams and won a doctorate title, shortly after he was appointed to the service of Provincial administration as deputy head administrator by King Ho Quy Ly. In 1407 the Ho dynasty collapsed. Dai Ngu (Vietnam) then was colonized by the Ming. Nguyen Trai's life after 1407 is still a mystery. Nguyen Trai then joined the Lam Son insurgents in 1416 or 1420 (Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, Institute of History, 1976, p. 14).

Nguyen Trai's function while serving in the Lam Son army involved devising strategies and writing letters. Since June 1423 Nguyen Trai had been in charge of all correspondence between Lam Son and Ming as well as other parties. At the beginning of 1428, though not crowned yet, Binh Dinh Vuong⁷ already gathered a big meeting for all the generals and soldiers to reward them for their contributions to the fight. Nguyen Trai was offered the privilege of owning the new emperor's last name and awarded a position called "Quan phuc hau" (a madarin who contributed to the Lam Son uprising), then "Nhap noi hanh khien" (a mandarin who is in charge of all the paper works).

Soon after forming, the Le dynasty began to suffer from internal conflicts which led to a series of betrayal cases concerning loyal officials. It is not clear if Nguyen Trai was a victim of these accusations, but according to some contemporary historians he was imprisoned when he was 50 years old. Later on he was proved innocent and released, but had to return his bestowed last name Le and was no longer trusted. During Le Thai To's reign, Nguyen Trai still served the

⁷ Another name of Le Loi

monarch but did not get involved in any important political affairs except for composing royal proclamations as well as doing his duty as a scholar in the Royal Academy.

The successor to King Le Thai To, Le Thai Ton nominated 156 people as his royal officials including Nguyen Trai. Trai was then appointed to teach the King in Kinh Dien building. In 1435, Trai disappointed with the Le Thai Ton's dynasty, retired and came back to his grandmother's home in Con Son (in Hai Duong Province) only to be recalled by Le Thai Ton for years later.

On September in 1442, the young king Le Thai Ton traveled outside and passed by Trai's place to visit Con Son pagoda. One of Trai's wives or concubines named Nguyen Thi Lo, followed the king. The king became ill and died on the way back to his palace in Dong Kinh. Nguyen Thi Lo was arrested. The nobles at the courts, who had hated Nguyen Trai blamed Nguyen Thi Lo of killing the king and tortured her to reveal that the king's death was due to was Nguyen Trai's conspiracy. Hearing of the king's death, Nguyen Trai innocently went to Dong Kinh and was arrested. Both were sentenced to death for regicide as well as their extended families.

In August 1464, after 22 years of unjust rule, King Le Thanh Tong pardoned Nguyen Trai and Nguyen Thi Lo, posthumously awarded him a title. He also stopped the persecution of his family. Trai's only surviving child Nguyen Anh Vu (Vo) was appointed to be the head of a district where he lived. In 1467 Le Thanh Tong ordered Nguyen Trai's paper writings to be collected and preserved into a manuscript.

4.2 The remain of Nguyen Trai's whole-life works

Much of the works of Nguyen Trai were destroyed by the Le Dynasty after his death. But subsequent to 1467, the remainder of his works that survived was re-collected. The remaining works are :

- Bình Ngô đại cáo (Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu⁸ or Cáo bình Ngô) This was an announcement in 1428 after the order of Lê Lợi to proclaim the pacification of the Ming Dynasty⁹ and affirm the independence of Dai Viet¹⁰ to its people.

⁸ Wu used to be one of the states belonged to the Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period. (Lin Yu Lian, 2008, p.632).

⁹ The Ming dynasty ruled China from 1368–1644. (Lin Yu Lian, 2008, p.45).

- Ước trai¹¹ thi tập: Sino-Chinese poetry collection
- Quốc âm thi tập: Sino-Nom poetry collection
- Quân trung từ mệnh tập: Military letters to Ming's Generals and other statements written under the King's order
- Dư địa chí : A Vietnamese early geographical record
- Lam Sơn thực lục: A biography of Le Loi and a detail of Lam Son uprising in Lam Son mountain
- Văn bia Vĩnh Lăng: Vinh Lang epitaph
- Phú núi Chí Linh: The oldest book tells about the life of King Le Thai To and details of incidents during the Lam Son uprising against the Ming from year 1418 to 1428
- Chuyện cũ về Bạng Hồ tiên sinh – An old story of Bang Ho (Nguyen Trai's grandfather)
- Some reference articles, written statements under Le Thai To and Le Thai Tong dynasties (1433 - 1442) such as to educate the Prince, prohibition on elite extravagance, greed and slothfulness ...(Ibib. p.8).

Nguyen Trai's writings are highly venerated in Vietnam and are taught in schools to all ages. His writings are believed to contribute to the moulding of the individual in society.

4.3 Nguyen Trai's thoughts

Nguyen Trai's work included poems, proses, political documents and military letters during the Lam Son uprising and other writings which he wrote when he was a mandarin during the Lê dynasty. Records of Nguyen Trai's thoughts were not his own work. They are the result of research and translation of Vietnamese scholars in the present. I have reviewed some of those records and represent them in this article with some of his thoughts on military strategy, politics, philosophy humanism and justice.

4.4 Nguyen Trai's thoughts on military strategy and politics

In his military writings, Nguyen Trai had to clarify the definitions of nation and national independence to achieve the first goal of resistance against foreign invaders (Thu. 1993). The Ming took for granted that Dai Viet was just a small and weak country which used to be a former district of China under the Han, Tang dynasty and that it was their right to control it

¹⁰ Dai Viet (The great Viet) is the official name of Vietnam from 1054 (Quynh, Truong Huu, 2003, p.122)

¹¹ His signature name is Uc Trai

again. Nguyen Trai understood that it was not only victory in the battlefield that was needed but also to confront concepts and ideas about Dai Viet Nations. Nguyen Trai argued against the aggressors and affirmed that Dai Viet was a sovereign country. He listed out the factors in support of this, in terms of *territory, culture, tradition and national history*.

Territory was the first factor that Nguyen Trai mentioned. He insisted on the authenticity, integrity and inviolability of the territory of Dai Viet.

In your old history, your empire territory had only 9 administrative units, but Jiao Zhi¹² was excluded. It meant that Jiao Zhi clearly did not belong to China. Another proof was after your Emperor suppressed Jiao Zhi, he sent people to find Tran descendants to return them the right to rule. That meant once again Jiao Zhi was not a part of China (Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, Institute of History, 1976, p. 181).

Culture was the next factor. Dai Viet's ideological theory was also Confucianism. Dai Viet had its own dynasties rule the country paralleled with the dynasties of China.

“Dynasty to dynasty - Triệu, Đinh, Lý, Trần continued to build and rule the country”

Parallel with Han, Eastern Wu, Liu Song, Tang dynasties, so did them in theirs (Ibid. p. 77).

He confirmed Dai Viet's *customs and traditions* were completely different from China's:

The customs and traditions in the South are different from the North's (Ibid.p. 77).

Nguyen Trai made a big contribution to the *national independence thought*, which could be considered Vietnam's main goal, expectation, and action at that time.

Secondly, he used mental tactics – (*Đánh vào lòng người*) ‘touch to heart’ tactic which were ‘touch to the hearts of his common people’ and ‘touch to the hearts of the enemy’.

‘Touch to the heart of his common people’ tactic meant to change their mind and make them conscious and brave to fight for their country or at least supply food and necessities for

¹² Or Giao Chỉ (in Vietnamese)

Lam Son insurgents instead of paying tax and doing military duty for the foreign rulers. To do so, Nguyen Trai insisted that a leader should respect the mass population. He found that the population was the main force to save their country. To 'touch to the hearts of them', the leader should have humanism and justice. He should work with equality and fairness. He also should assure unity and sharings. According to him, there is duty and there is benefit.

Using gold to recruit soldiers, kill the elephants to feed them

Everybody loved the king and willing to sacrifice their own lives for him (Ibid.p. 85).

'Touch to the heart of the enemy' was how to deal with the enemy through more peaceful means. Nguyen Trai wrote letters and sent them to the Ming's Generals for explaining to them why the Vietnamese had to defend themselves. He also told them that their occupation and rule over his country led to wars and wars brought death to soliders, their families and common people. He used facts to let them see that Lam Son fighters were strong enough to fight them off... Thus, he recommended the termination of the war and peace for both.

I often heard that military actions are launched to protect people, not to hurt people; quelled to not to be killed but did not mean kill more. So it is said that military action is the inevitable choice ". Thing that can be avoided should be avoid. (Ibib.p.62).

At the same time, he lobbied with the enemy's alliance or their generals one by one.

You are the Xi Yuan, a civilized ethnic. Because of Ho dynasty's immorality and fierce Wu army, some of your people were captured or forced to work for them. You had no choice. I know you do not mean to follow their orders (Ibib.p. 162).

He applied a kind of guerrilla warfare to fight the stronger enemy.

" We chose the skilled soldiers and concealed positions to defeat one by one of the enemy's army force; Then march one of ours to stop the other force which carries its war supply to cut off their food" (Ibib.p. 80)

" We robbed the enemy's war-supply store to feed our own soldiers" (Ibib.p. 85).

At the time of being defeated, he used the tactic of détente and reconciliation.

Heal the wounded and gather the remain, treat them well

Inside continue to produce weapons, outside pretend to détente (Ibib.p.86)

At the time of triumph, he chose a peaceful and tolerant method.

“ For the sake of long-term relationship between two countries,

Free ten thousands of surrendered soldiers

Recall the peace both countries used to share

Stop war forever and forever” (Ibib. p.80).

Because of Nguyen Trai’s “touch to heart” tactic, in February 1427, Ming Generals one by one surrendered. Until the end of 1427, the entire enemy did the same and withdrew home.

In Nguyen Trai’s political thought the people were very important. He considered them to be the base of society or the force which had the decisive role to support or depose a dominating dynasty or a king. He gave a historical fact to prove his idea, such as: Tran dynasty collapsed because the people disgusted them; Ho dynasty was taken over by Ming invaders because the people resented them ; Ming rulers lost the control because the Vietnamese people abhorred them. In contrast, the Lam Son uprising succeeded because of people’s trust and support. He insisted that all policies of the court must be based on the people’s wish and need.

People support a leader who is humane to them. They can either row the boat for their chosen leader or capsize it” (Ibib.p.203).

For him, a good leader should know how to deal with the relationship between the small and the big things, the near and the far targets, the short-termed and long- termed benefits. He first advocated a combination of both. If not, the big job or long-term benefits should be given priority:

Not because of small one so damaging the great work, not because of short- minded way so forgetting the broad-minded way of view (Ibib.p. 73).

He urged the leader to think before acting and to try to anticipate problems.

The success is hard but failure is easier, therefore one should be careful at the very beginning to prepare any case. While enjoying the peace, one still has to look out of any danger of war which may originate from the existing peace. When

enjoying happiness, one also has to be not arrogant. If one could do all of those, he would be consistent (Ibib.p. 74).

4.5 Nguyen Trai's thought of humanism and justice

Nguyen Trai's thought of humanism and justice showed in his populism, patriotism and as well as desire for peace. Humanism and justice were most talked about in his works. According to him, humanism was the source of strength. (Thu, 1993). He applied the thought throughout his political propaganda, military tactics and policies to develop the country.

To plan for change, one should base one's ideas on humanism and justice first. When fulfilling these conditions, everything would be perfectly completed (Ibib. p.108).

First, the prominent characteristic in Trai's humanism and justice was populism. According to him, to save the country, one had to save the people first. He found that it was the people who suffer most from the oppression and exploitation of foreign invaders.

Practice humanism and justice to bring peace and stability to people (Ibib. p.77).

Second, he confirmed that love, sincerity and tolerance could bend people's hearts or mislead men's minds into the right ways.

“When Hoa Ying General led his army to help his side, the King took advantage of the victory and marched on to fight. The invaders lost the battle, ran away into their Western citadel and left their own family members outside. Our king captured them but did not kill anyone but freed them all then (Ibib. p.55).

More

“Revenge is normal. But preferring no execution is a morally correct way of action. And if one takes the advantage of time when the losers already surrendered to kill them all, one would suffer from a cruel sin. If one can stop a temptation for revenge and avoid a massacre, one will be praised and heard as one who is a person of peace. This is the greatest act of humanism” (Ibib.p.69).

Third, he saw peace as positive for both sides in war and saw war as bad for both parties.

“I wrote to you many times before without hesitation, because I think fights are cruel and dangerous. A country's apogee or decline, its people survive or die, are

all decided by war or peace. But you still ignore this whether you never think of it or have no idea of how to resolve it” (Ibib.p.152).

And if he had to choose violence, it was just inevitable.

“People wish peace as when they are hungry and need food, thirsty and need water” (Ibib.p.172).

Futhermore, he wished it not only for his own Vietnamese people but also for the invaders’.

“If it could be like that, it would be not only be lucky for our Jiao Zhi people, but also many kingdoms in the area” ” (Ibib. p.114) .

And when a country gains its freedom, peace and stability this would be important to its all citizens. He compared factors in a such society as an orchestra which included many instruments. If an orchestra needs to conduct a beautiful melody, all the instruments should be played in right the tunes and notes and only a beautiful melody could bring sastisfaction. The same for society. Only when the people there had got both responsibiliy and benefit, it would recieve peace. And when people have stability in their lives, they will be happy to contribute to the country’s development.

“The base of a rite and music are the agreement amongst its intruments. I obeyed my Majesty King to create it for your court. I dare not to not try my best. But due to my short and little knowledge of notes and rythm, it’s hard for me to produce a good one. Please listen to my words that if my Majesty King loves his people and worry for them; build them a scociety of no animosity. That is the base of music ” (Ibib. p.19).

He also pointed out that material life is the base of a society, a condition for men’s existence. If only it was assured, society would be in right order as well as only when a man’s belly is full, he obeys morality.

“When one is hungry and cold, one pays no attention to courtesy” (Thu, 2003) .

Therefore, he intended to let half the army go home after the war.

“Do practice hard. When you chase off all the enemy, half of you can go home to plant your field” (Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, Institute of History, 1976, p.143).

His humanism was based on a very reasonable material acknowledgement.

When the war ended, Nguyen Trai built out ways to make the country prosperous and its people happy so that " *even in rural villages, there is no voice of anger resentment and sorrow.*" He wishes to build a utopia in which the king always pays all his attention to his people's lives, considers people's happiness as his target. When he was in charge of the King to send a letter to teach the Crown prince, Trai wrote the following:

"Now you know my lifework about how to reach success. So when you ascend to the throne, remember to protect and continue it. In your management and control of the country and army, you should be a good example, work hard and try your best, do not prefer joyment and comfort. To your royal kinship, you would rather pay your respect and unite with all of your relatives. To your people, you should love, care and tolerate them at any case" (Ibib. p.202).

He always fought against harassment of the mandarins in the court, always denounced them. Even though those mandarins gave their reasons for collecting high taxes from the people because of serving the King's and the court's benefit, Trai straightly argued back.

- "Thuc Hue is a very mediocre guy. He is greedy. He has a core position in the court, but when he speaks to the King he just suggested how to force people to pay more taxes for the treasury, to please the King" (Ibib.p.18).

During the Tran Dynasty, the rulers did not care for the people's misery. The subsequent Ho dynasty counted on their power to treat people badly. Ming invaders plundered and massacred the Vietnamese. Nguyen Trai's ideas of humanism and justice was an encouragement to make them fight the enemy to save their country. After the victory, the resistance leaders became their rulers and they in turn exploited the people for their own personal enrichment. Nguyen Trai's humanism and justice now acted as a means to limit their indulgences, helping to stabilize society. His thoughts become a strategy to promote the development of contemporary society. And from the 15th century onwards, political thinkers often discussed their views about humanism through the ideas of humanism and justice through the ideas of Nguyen Trai.

4.6 Nguyen Trai's philosophy

Nguyen Trai's philosophy is an integral part and a corner stone in Vietnam's philosophical history. It was largely influenced by Confucianist ideas on destiny, ethics, the three cardinal relations (sovereign- subject; father-son; husband-wife); the five constants (humaneness;

righteousness, proper rite; knowledge; integrity) and humanism. Yet it was adjusted to respond to the practical situation of Vietnam's society during the late 14th to early 15th century. In addition, his philosophy was also premised on Buddhist philosophy on altruism, mercy, and philanthropy; and Taoist concepts of Wu and Yu (being and non-being), Te (the virtue of integrity); Wu-Wei (living in harmony with nature). However, his background in education was the most important factor that determined his philosophy. He was born into a Confucianist family, where he could learn from his father Confucianism knowledge and the ideal of patriotism. His philosophy was developed by filtering the ideals from various religions and philosophies of his time, thus transcending the boundaries of feudalism.

His stance on destiny and cosmos.

Nguyen Trai was influenced by Confucian ideals on Tian (heaven) and cosmos. Confucius believed that Tian was a transcendent force but possessed power and will to create social and natural order and human fate, which was referred to as heavenly destiny. In his works, Nguyen Trai mentioned cosmos, heaven and earth, especially in *Quan Trung tu menh tap* and *Uc trai thi tap*. There he wrote:

“I hear that heaven (Tian) does not protect any particular one, earth does not support any particular one, and the moon does not shine on any particular one”;
“Deceiving heaven and cheating the king, saying that the Tian is so far away; yet it is hard to escape from heaven's arms” ...(Ibib.p.114).

Nguyen Trai was also convinced that human fate was governed by Tian:

It is hard to escape from my fate as it is destiny;

Not been able to give up the scholarship as it is assigned by the Tian (Ibib.p.31).

Nguyen Trai's worldview is rich and diverse. Somewhere he mentioned heaven, earth, high mountain, long river, wide ocean; somewhere else he referred to as cosmos. Cosmos in his view was neither abstract nor materialistic, but the creator of all living things.

This is novel compared to the Confucian ideal of destiny. In his view, nature has the heart of a parent:

“I hear: The nature heartfully loves her creatures, just like the way parents love their children. Ultimately, it is the ‘heartfeltness’ that matters” (Ibib.p.124).

Nguyen Trai attributed the fate of a nation, a king, the prosperity or poverty, success or failure to destiny; all governed by heaven. For a king to be supported by heaven, he must be humane, patriotic, and philanthropic. However, he also believed that fate is not fixed but evolving, that 'every cloud has a silver lining'. Therefore, he always stayed calm, not becoming distressed in failure or conceited in success. He said that if one follows heaven's will, he could reverse the situation; if not, he would harm himself.

"I often hear that the ups and downs of the time is attributed to the Tian; the success or failure of a work is attributed to the actor" ...(Ibib.p.173).

Nguyen Trai believes that heaven has an benevolence for all living things and its own ethics, which are consistent with people's desires for happiness, prosperity, and peace. He applied it to nationalism and people, to convincing the enemy and Viet soldiers that

"The Tian adores life, people hate fighting" ...(Ibib.p.170).

Nguyen Trai's view of the heaven that it was not as a transcendental and mysterious body but an objective element, of law and time. "Time" is a concept that is commonly found in Nguyen Trai's works. Time refers to chance or moment. Time and moment refer an inevitable trend, an irreversible upward path of history. Like other masters, Nguyen Trai emphasized timeliness; the favorable moment for decisions to be made, when people's actions could gain unexpected success. However, he also warned against the act of passively waiting for the right moment to come and suggested that people should proactively look for it. On the one hand, this involves surveying what is going on to spot the upcoming favorable moment. On the other hand, this requires preparing resources to proactively respond to the challenge, or to be in a position to act; otherwise, we will miss the chance and fail to respond. Being in a position to act will enable transformation and enhance power.

In the right time and position, failure will turn to success, small will grow big; missing the right moment and not being in a position, strength will become weakness, and peace will turn to chaos. Such a change can take place in a moment" (Ibib.p.132).

In his view, only people with progressive worldviews, representing a class, could understand those concepts of time and position.

Time! Time! Kinh Thu has it that "Those who are ahead of the right time, kill; those who are behind the right time, kill". Therefore, dignified people treat people

based on time. Yet so far, lay people do not understand time; only extraordinary people do. The Majesty of extraordinary people is that they understand time (Ibib.p.131).

Nguyen Trai's view of man's roles

Nguyen Trai posits that the roles of man is to cultivate himself and to help the king save his people. These are two virtues of a dignified person in Confucianism. In his time, there existed such religions as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Buddhism was being weakened and giving way to Confucianism. Nguyen Trai took Confucianism as the premise for his view of man's virtues as it was the most down-to-earth religion. The most popular version of Confucianism was Tong' Confucianism then. Besides, he came from a Confucian family; his grandfather used to be a confucian, being a mandarin in Tran's dynasty. Like other confucians, he observed Constants and Five Cardinal Relations. Five cardinal relations dictate five relations between father-son; sovereign-subject, husband-wife, adult-child, and friend-friend. Nguyen Trai, however, broke away from the hierarchical relations in Confucian thought to emphasize the most two important ones: sovereign-subject, and friend-friend.

In sovereign-subject in a feudal society Nguyen Trai thought that the subjects must be loyal to the sovereign and live up to that loyalty.

Wholeheartedly paying tribute to the discerning sovereign, and supporting the noble course.. (Ibib.p. 408).

In friendship, Nguyen Trai thought that we should give greater share to friends in order to maintain good friendship. Some of his friends were veteran mandarins, others were novice intellects trained in Le dynasty. They were patriotic, persistent, and loyal on the one hand. On the other hand, they were feudalists living in the beauraucratic society which easily gave rise to conflicts in privileges, greed and jealousy. Such conflicts inevitably endangered the whole governing class as well as the stability of a country. Therefore, he called for their altruism, self-sacrifice, and decency.

Among numerous virtues that a person needs to cultivate, according to Confucianism, three most canonical ones are humanism, intellect and bravery.

"I'll tell you, Phuong Chinh, you bastard, as a commander-in-chief, you should take humanism as your first principle; intellect and bravery as possessions." (Ibib.p.105).

He added that those three virtues did not just mean being able to tell and be able to do, by participating in practical activities, serving the practical needs, and fighting against cruelty.

Eliminating greed, and cruelty. Being humane, intellect and brave (Ibib.p.440).

These are among five constant virtues. He did not mention ‘propriety and righteousness’, which were supposed to constrain and hold back the proactiveness of people. The reason why he emphasized on those three virtues was that they were responsive to the developmental needs of the time. Humanism was requisite if people wanted to be victorious and build a new dynasty; intellect was necessary for a society to be prosperous; bravery was important for people to get rid of backwards and hindrances.

Hence, Trai’s view of man’s roles in society developed some of the similar concepts in Confucianism. People had to struggle to win back and protect their country’s sovereignty and territory as well as build the nation. However, at that time, the Le dynasty was consolidating the country’s control in the direction of central collective power which made selfishness in society increase. More and more people became morally degenerate shunning whatever advice they received from him.

When being treated like that, his phase of thought sometimes tended to Taoism.

"Life is just as a dream. Human fate is decided by heavenly destiny" (Ibib.p.282).

But later, he again turned back to Confucianism. He contemplated about the success in the war against the Ming and found out that his morality and education had been experienced clearly. It did help Le Loi regain the country’s control. In a centralized society Confucianism was the chosen political doctrine to protect the individual and family.

5.0 CONCLUSION

I have just represented here all the main contents of Nguyen Trai’s thoughts which were rediscovered by present Vietnamese scholars. Briefly once more, his thoughts could be defined into three core parts: military strategy and politics, philosophy as well as humanism and justice. I come to a conclusion that his thought on humanism and justice had an influence over his ideas concerning military strategy, politics and philosophy. Despite the fact that the Le ruling class were despotic and tried to hinder the development of Nguyen Trai’s personal talents, Nguyen Trai thought has come down to us through the ages because of his humanism and love for humanity.

Nguyen Trai was educated within Confucianist thought as well as was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, he developed his ideas from these philosophies in a style “suitable to his own country” (Giau, 1980). In addition, most of the Vietnamese modern social science and humanity researchers emphasized patriotism as one more decisive factor to Trai’s thoughts and is today carefully used by contemporary governments’s ideology in of promoting the Communist Party’s ideals.

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