

Nguyen Trai's thought on philosophical ethics and its value for the Vietnamese society today

Thi Tho Nguyen – Cong Su Le

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Abstract

Nguyen Trai is a military strategist, politician, diplomat as well as a philosopher and a big humanist in the history of Vietnamese thought. His thoughts are expressed in many fields and have contributed greatly to the history of Vietnamese thought. In particular, his ethical reflections continue to be meaningful to contemporary society in general and uniquely significant for Vietnam today in particular. This article focuses on clarifying Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics while extracting the value of that his intellectual heritage to the social life in Vietnam today. The article further clarifies the basic contents of Nguyen Trai's ethical thinking as follows: Firstly, the thought of benevolence and righteousness - the core and basic content in Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics; secondly, the so-called 'Three Moral Bonds - Five Constant Virtues,' which are the basic standards and value scales of ethics; thirdly, his notion of 'Tolerance and spirit of solidarity' as these relate to interpersonal human relationships in their endeavor to build a wealthy and happy society; fourthly, Trai's 'Aspiration for peace and love for nature.' From these contents, the article comes to draw the values of Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics for the social life in Vietnam today, such as: contributing to preserving and promoting compassion, promoting tolerance and solidarity, and contributing to the formation and development of ecological ethics.

Key words: ethics, thought of benevolence and righteousness, three moral bonds, Nguyen Trai, five constant virtues

Introduction

Literature Review

In the history of building and defending the country, Vietnam has produced many great thinkers, among whom Nguyen Trai (Nguyễn Trãi, 1380-1442) appeared as a great man, meeting the virtues of a wise man and having the ability to attract a large crowd of followers. He was a military strategist, politician, diplomat as well as a philosopher and a great scholar of culture. Nguyen Trai's thought is diverse, rich and valuable, so it is interesting for many researchers to study it. There have been many articles and scientific works published in newspapers, magazines, conference proceedings, and books trying to analyze, summarize and interpret Trai's legacy for the contemporary world.

In the article *Nguyen Trai, a patriot representing the benevolence and peaceful will of the Vietnamese people in the early fifteenth century*, the author Minh Tranh (1956) analyzed Nguyen Trai's thought on humanity, thereby pointing out the relationship between his patriotism and his analysis of humanity, people and peace. In their book *Nguyen Trai: the genius culturologist and politician* the authors Mai Hanh, Nguyen Dong Chi, and Le Trong Khanh (1957) said that the ethical thought, especially the concept of "benevolence and righteousness," is the foundation for Nguyen Trai to build his political views. Bui Van Nguyen in his article *Discussing the Nguyen Trai's thought of humanity* (1964) initially pointed out that Nguyen Trai absorbed Confucius' - Mencius' thought on humanity which which later penetrated into Vietnam through the book of Song neo-Confucian.

It is necessary to mention books such as Bui Van Nguyen, *Nguyen Trai*, (1980); Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Literature, *Nguyen Trai - vigor and*

quintessence of our nation (1980); Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, *The 600th anniversary of Nguyen Trai's birth* (1982). Three works gathered the writings of many authors on Nguyen Trai's life and career, emphasizing the exemplary character of his life providing desirable attributes of a model human being and deeply affecting the next generations.

Tran Nguyen Viet with his two articles: *Nguyen Trai's thought on humanity in "Quân trung từ mệnh tập"* (2002) and *On the relationship between the three religions in Nguyen Trai's thought* (2005) highlighted Nguyen Trai's thought on humanity as the interference and connection between three ideologies including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. According to this author, it was Lao Tzu's view on "wu wei" and "not fighting" that had embellished Nguyen Trai's life more beautifully when he retired to Con Son to enjoy the nature.

In their book *Contributing to understanding philosophical thought of Nguyen Trai*, Doan Chinh & Bui Trong Bac (2015) offered a careful analysis of attributes of a human being, the people and the nation in the thought of Nguyen Trai, highlighting thereby the values and historical significance of Trai's views. According to these authors, Nguyen Trai has left valuable historical lessons for the contemporary societies when the global problems of our time, especially the danger of war and environmental degradation, pose a considerable threat not only to human life but to the very stability and sustainability of Earth's ecosystems. Nguyen Tai Dong in his book *Summary of the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought* (2016) considered Nguyen Trai's view on the attributes of a human being as the basic foundation on which Trai built other ethical conceptions such as patriotism, national independence, and love for nature.

Research Methods

Studying Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics, thereby highlighting the current value of his thought for the ethical education of Vietnamese people today requires an interdisciplinary scientific approach. The following disciplines should be included: Ethics, Philosophy, Literature, Psychology, and Sociology. Therefore, in the process of approaching the issue, the authors use research methods such as: Text analysis, logic - history, the unity between synchronic and diachronic perspective, analysis – synthesis. These research methods are applied in a consistent dialectical way by the authors to provide a comprehensive and specific research approach suitable for the task at hand.

The Main Features and Importance of Nguyen Trai

Nguyen Trai – pen name of Uc Trai (1380 - 1442), lived under the Ho and Le So dynasties in Vietnam. After passing the imperial examination in 1400, Nguyen Trai worked as a mandarin under the Ho dynasty. Raised mainly by his grandfather, Tran Nguyen Dan in his country residence at Con Son, and having been influenced by his father, Nguyen Ung Long, who despite his plebeian origin got a chance to marry an aristocrat and serve at the royal court, Nguyen Trai inherited his father's acute sense of justice, and his grandfather's resilience, and unyielding sense of patriotism. In his poem entitled "For a Friend" he writes:

"Your poverty and infirmity make me feel pity. Like me, you must be crazy. Like me, you're exiled from our motherland and have read only a few sentences out of books. Our knowledge is so poor, what can it be used for? But we're wealthy in just hanging around. I hope someday to return to Nhuy Khe, with my palm hat and hoe, to work on spring planting" (Nguyen, 2010: 2).

When Ming's forces invaded Vietnam, his father Nguyen Phi Khanh, surrendered and was arrested in China. Nguyen Trai decided to accompany his father. Arriving at Nam Quan gate, his father asked Nguyen Trai to stop following him and to cleanse his

country of its humiliation and to avenge his family. After Dai Ngu fell under Ming dynasty domination, Nguyen Trai participated in the Lam Son revolt led by Le Loi against the Ming aggression. He became a strategist of Lam Son insurgent army in planning as well as drafting the new general's pronouncements to his countrymen as well as diplomatic documents that were to be sent to the Ming army. In 1442, the whole family of Nguyễn Trãi (him included) was executed in the Le Chi Vien case that was staged by his enemies at the court, most of whom had been driven by sheer envy. Thus the words of his poem "Written on a Sword" appear to have prophetic value: "The country's shame is over – a thousand years for the full cleansing. Kept as you are in a golden case, you're always rewarded. But when the country's rebuilding is done, *Who will care about heroes like you?*" (Nguyen, 2010: 18). In 1464, Le Thanh Tong King issued a royal proclamation to vindicate Nguyen Trai.

Regardless of his tragic end after the death of Le Loi (1433), Nguyen Trai was a great strategist and scholar of culture, one who made a great contribution to the development of Vietnamese literature and ideological history. He is one of the 14 most representative national heroes in Vietnamese history. His life and work is an example of the uniqueness of the Vietnamese historical and cultural experience in contrast to the overwhelming influence of Chinese culture and politics. A major historic landmark in the Vietnamese identity and self-confidence formation was the writing of the famous *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* poem (written in the spring of 1428, the title literally means: Great proclamation upon the pacification of the Wu) which proclaims the victory of the Vietnamese army led by Le Loi (1384/5-1433) over the Chinese army during the reign of Ming dynasty. It is noteworthy to quote some of its lines:

"Our Great Viet is a country where prosperity abounds. Where civilization reigns supreme. Its mountains, its rivers, its frontiers are its own; its customs are distinct, in North and South.

Trieu, Dinh, Ly and Tran created our Nation, whilst Han T'ang, Sung and Yuan ruled over theirs.

Over the centuries, we have been sometimes strong, and sometimes weak, but never yet have we been lacking in heroes. Of that let our history be the proof." (Smith, 1968: 9)

Nguyen Trai was the author of this literary jewel. He "not only played a decisive role in the war for independence but ... was the leading intellectual in Vietnam and its most talented man of letters" who addresses clearly and eloquently "the question of a separate national identity for Vietnam" (O'Harrow, 1979: 159). It is not only what he says but also and foremost how he says it that distinguishes Nguyen Trai as an intellectual and master of poetic language. We may justifiably argue that the "contemporaneity of emotion and language in his poetry represents a significant difference with the more objectified Chinese poetry of his time," (Nguyen, 2010: xi) making his pronouncements more existentially suggestive and experientially relevant. Nevertheless, it is above all this "tradition of successful resistance to a foreign power," the establishment and reinforcement of which we may arguably trace to Nguyen Trai, which "once established over time, also begets a gradual consciousness of a nation's individuality" (O'Harrow, 1979: 160).

A distinct national identity and self-confidence as independent nation was actively promoted during the rule of Le Loi (Lê Lợi, ruled between 1428-1433), the founder of a new dynasty which was to rule Vietnam until 1789. As the new ruler's right hand and chief strategist, Nguyen Trai played arguably the most significant role in it. Among other things, he insisted that in all political struggle the rulers must remember that, when seen from a long-term perspective of stability and prosperity, it is better to "win hearts and minds" of the people than subdue them by force. Or, as Nguyen Trai famously said, "It is better to conquer hearts than citadels" (Duiker, 1998: 184). In

addition, Trai was a master negotiator, able to gain time and strike back at the most opportune moment. “Many of his works on strategy, such as *Quan Trung Tu Menh Tap* (Writings Composed in the Army), *Binh Ngo Sach* (Book on Defeating the Wu), and *Bai Phu Nui Chi Linh* (Essay on Chi Linh Mountain), have become classics of Vietnamese literature,” while the “*Binh Ngo Dai Cao* (proclamation on defeating the Wu), written after victory, became Vietnam's declaration of independence” (Duiker, 1998: 184).

As a good Confucianist, Nguyen Trai emphasized the core Confucian values of integrity, righteousness, and purity of purpose. As he was able to implement these values into his own life and decision making, Trai became ‘a thorn in the flesh’ of many of his bureaucratic contemporaries at the court. Their jealousy and resentment finally led to his demise. Nguyen Trai decided to retire after the death of Le Thai To. Yet, even this seclusion from high politics did not save his life and the lives of his family members. The new emperor “died mysteriously in 1442 after a short visit to Nguyen Trai's retirement home in Hai Hung Province,” which cast a shadow of suspicion on him and caused that Nguyen Trai ended up being “accused of regicide and executed along with his entire family. Twenty years later his name was rehabilitated by Emperor Le Thanh Tong” (Duiker, 1998: 184).

His life was intertwined with many turmoils and uncertainties, which Nguyen Trai reflected in many of his poems. A good example is his poem entitled “To a Friend”:

“My fate naturally has many twists and sharp turns,
So in everything I trust in the wisdom of Heaven.
I still have my tongue—believe me, I am able to talk,
Even though I'm still poor and, as we know, pathetic.
Never to return, the past flies too quickly and the time is short,
But, wandering in this cold room, the night is far too long.
I've been reading books for ten years, but I'm poor from clothes to bone
From eating only vegetables and sitting without a cushion” (Nguyen, 2010: 6).

Basic Features of Nguyen Trai's Ethical Reflections

Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics was influenced by many distinct cultural traditions in which the thought of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were foundational, and the Vietnamese national identity was the mainstream. The authors of this article summarize Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics using four distinct concepts/principles that can be found in his intellectual reflection: the concept of humanity; the concept of “Three Moral Bonds and Five Constant Virtues”; Tolerance and solidarity; Love of peace and nature. These four concepts deserve a closer analytical scrutiny.

(1) Benevolence and righteousness, the core and basic foundation of Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics

Nguyen Trai was born in the context of a chaotic society where people were miserable, and the country was devastated and exploited by foreign invaders. He laments the gross injustice which he witnesses being inflicted upon his countrymen in his poem “Lamenting Injustice” with these powerful words:

“I have been floating along and sinking for fifty years./ Now I am forced to leave behind the creeks and stones of my old mountain./ Pride is untrue, but misfortune is real; it's so dramatic and humorous./ People tell many lies, but they hate an honest person; it's such a pity./ I can't escape being myself: I know that's my karma./ To remain an intellectual: it's all the fault of the sky./ In prison, my defense is written on the document's back when there is no crime./ How can I possess it and still hand it through the golden crescent door?” (Nguyen, 2010: 30).

To save the situation, Nguyen Trai was convinced that the most effective measure would be to uphold the ideals of benevolence and righteousness. *Benevolence and righteousness*, according to him, *are the basis, the standard of how to treat others and*

the principle in handling work. This principle he applied to himself, too, which makes him all the more noteworthy. As Trai admits in one of his poems entitled “Written on Impulse,” “Since I was born, impulsiveness has been my real illness, more serious and incurable with each passing day.” So he exhorts himself to shape his own character to overcome his inclination to impulsiveness: “It’s time for a little reform, so I offer charity easily. *Building good character is more than reading books*” (Nguyen, 2010: 21).

In a letter to one of the generals of the Ming Dynasty, Phuong Chinh, he wrote: “Attributes of a general is to take benevolence and righteousness to be the root, bravery to be the wealth. ... For one to make a difference, one must take benevolence and righteousness as its root, so it is important to take benevolence and righteousness as the head” (Nguyen, 1976: 105-106). This way of thinking was later reflected in the famous poem “Binh Ngo Dai Cao,” which we mentioned above, with the immortal sentence: “The benevolence and righteousness remain at peace” (Nguyen, 1976: 77). *Benevolence and righteousness are the spiritual power, creating advantages, taking the weak to win against the strong, the few to fight against the many.* In the immortal poem which can be considered as a “Declaration of Independence” for Dai Viet, when summing up the resistance and experience of the war years, Nguyen Trai wrote: “Take the ferocious, the righteous to win. Get the people to replace violent media” (Nguyen, 1976: 79). By applying this clever and flexible strategic motto, the resistance against the Ming army of Lam Son insurgency led by Le Loi and advised by Nguyen Trai resulted in a great victory. It was a victory with the spiritual strength of a people who always appreciated human kindness.

There are great examples of this kind of benevolent, humanistic behavior: “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.” (Thu, 1993: 55) Tolerance and benevolence, even to one’s enemy at appropriate times, can yield a change in people’s hearts and win their affection and reverence. So we read in the following lines:

“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” (Thu, 1993: 69).

Although he appreciated the benevolence and righteousness, Nguyen Trai did not overlook the material value. He was convinced that if the material life is ensured, the social order will be stable, the people will be enthusiastic to follow the authorities and the army will be ready to fight the enemy. Benevolence and righteousness constitute a red thread throughout the whole content of Nguyen Trai’s thought in general and his conception of ethics in particular. In every circumstance, whether at war or in peace, he always raised the banner of the benevolence and righteousness, considering it the source and foundation of ethics, the motto for the rulers’ endeavors to win the hearts of the people. This was to be the way to a peaceful and happy life on the individual as well as social levels.

(2) “*Three Moral Bonds and Five Constant Virtues*” as the basic standards and the value scale of ethics

According to traditional Chinese Confucianism, there are three foundational *Moral Bonds* characterizing the three human relationships: (1) “Trung” (ruler - ruled), (2) Hiếu (parents - children), (3) Tiêt (husband - wife). In addition, there are five *Constant Virtues* or basic qualities that each person needs including: (1)

benevolence/humaneness, (2) proper rite, (3) righteousness, (4) wisdom, and (5) faithfulness/integrity (Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín). Three Moral Bonds and Five Constant Virtues are the golden mold and the jade ruler, comprising the value scale of virtue. In keeping with the historical circumstances of Vietnam at that time, Nguyen Trai did not inherit and mindlessly propagate a dogmatic Chinese Confucianist thought but added instead some new categories, such as “Dũng”, “Thời” and “Thế” (Bravery, Time and Strengths). Besides this unique version of indigenous Confucianism, “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).” (Nguyen, 2017:102) He wrote the following words in his letter exchange with Wang Thong: “A good soldier is in knowing the time [appropriate timing] and strengths. Having good timing and knowing one’s strengths, the loss becomes a gain, the small turns out to be big; but losing time and strengths, the strength turns out to weakness and peace becomes a danger” (Nguyen, 1976: 132). In his letters to one of the enemy generals, Nguyen Trai clearly analyzed the time and the strengths. He came to affirm that the failure of the Ming army was unavoidable, being in line with the fate of heaven and human heart. When it came to “understanding time,” Trai also liked to emphasize that it is “the majesty of extraordinary people that they understand time” (Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, 1976: 131).

In the system of Three moral bonds, Nguyen Trai focused on the concepts of “Trung” (loyalty) and “Hiếu” (filial piety). He became convinced that as the king is the head of the country, so the subjects must be loyal to the King. However, the term “Trung” here is not some kind of “foolish loyalty.” So if the king asks the subjects to die and the subjects do not die, this does not automatically make them disloyal, as in traditional Chinese Confucianism. “Loyal to the King” here is synonymous with “patriotism,” which means putting the country’s interests above the King’s interests.

When it came to Nguyen Trai’s personal example, these principles were far more than noble theories; his life was an example of virtue and loyalty to the country. When the Tran dynasty died out, Trai changed his loyalty to Ho’s dynasty; when the Ming army invaded Vietnam and the Ho court was arrested, he did not give up on the fate of his nation but found his way to the rising national resistance leader, Le Loi, helping the new master to rebel against the invaders to gain victory. When Le Loi became the King, he remained a Nguyen Trai embodied the model of loyalty to the interests of the country. When Le Thai Tong, the new king of Vietnam, took over in 1433, after the death of Le Loi, the imperial court convulsed in internal intrigues and corruption. Nguyen Trai would have nothing to do with this so he decided to retire and move to Con Son. Nevertheless, in spite of his seclusion from high politics, he kept thinking about the situation of his country. In 1440, when his age was high and his body weak, Le Thai Tong invited him to work as a mandarin. Nguyen Trai did not refuse the offer but tried to bring some strength and order to the country.

Besides Trung, Hieu (filial piety) is a traditional value accompanying the Vietnamese people through the ups and downs of history. Despite the economic difficulties, war, and natural disasters, the Vietnamese People have always kept their lifestyle of filial piety. The connotation of the concept of “Hieu” in Nguyen Trai’s thought also differs from “Hieu” in traditional Chinese Confucianism. It is understood by the piety of the People, i.e. “great piety,” which refers to the people and the country rather than the “small piety” oriented towards one’s parents like in traditional Chinese Confucianism. Having been brought up by such a modified concept of “Hieu,” which was comprised of “small piety” and “great piety”, Nguyen Trai did not go with his father when his father was arrested and taken to China by the Ming army, but decided to stay in Thang Long citadel. He used his time there to comfort and encourage the locals to maintain their resolve to cleanse their country of its humiliation and to avenge their families. He himself was strengthened and encouraged by his father’s words: “I observe the

signs of Heaven [and they tell me] that twenty years hence, *a true lord* will rise up in the West. Thou must steel thy heart and follow him, to cleanse the nation's shame, to avenge me; truly, that is the greatest of filial piety" (O'Harrow, 1973: 163).

Although it is not quite clear who this "true Lord" might have been, it is reasonable to believe that Nguyen Trai's father was alluding here to Le Loi, a member of the third generation of an exceptionally prominent clan in Thanh-hoa. After several mildly successful or unsuccessful campaigns against the Ming dynasty's occupation, "Le Loi raised an army of revolt again in 1418. The final result of this rebellion was the ouster of the Chinese after ten years of war and the founding of a new independent Vietnamese dynasty" (O'Harrow, 1973: 164).

In the system of *Five Constant Virtues*, Nguyen Trai focused primarily on the concepts of "Nhân" (benevolence) and "Tri" (wisdom). He also developed creatively the concept of "Dung" (bravery). According to him, "Nhan - Tri - Dung" is the "golden standard" to assess human personality. This is so because a benevolent person can love others and be compassionate, having the wisdom to be able to distinguish the right from the wrong and being brave enough to dare to condemn the wrong and protect the right. This kind of understanding of the term prompted him to delineate the agenda for achieving personal integrity: "Destroying cruelty, destroying greed, destroying tyranny / Having benevolence, having wisdom and having a hero" (Nguyen, 1976: 440). For Nguyen Trai, a "hero" must be a person who shares all three qualities – "Nhan," "Tri" and "Dung" – having all three qualities affected and developed in a dialectical relationship and mutual regulation.

Yet there is one more thing that needs to be emphasized – the last of the five virtues, i.e. faithfulness (Tin). One of the main reasons why Le Loi's campaigns had difficulties and were not always successful was the lack of loyalty especially among his army lieutenants. Le Loi found it difficult to secure personnel who would be not only loyal (faithful) but also capable in performing their military duties. In fact, Nguyen Trai reflects on this in the Binh Ngo Dai Cao with these words: "At my side, alas, worthy men were as rare as stars at dawn, as autumn leaves of green" (O'Harrow, 1973: 164).

(3) Tolerance and solidarity - the glue that holds and molds the relationships among people and builds a prosperous, happy society

Tolerance and solidarity are unique among the traditional moral values of the Vietnamese People. From the dialectical point of view, tolerance is the source, the basis of solidarity and solidarity gives more strength to promote and reinforce tolerance (Song et al., 2017; Cai et al., 2017; Prokhorov – Chernov – Yusupov, 2017; Baklashova – Galimova – Baklashova, 2017). According to Nguyen Trai, tolerance, generosity, requiting evil with good, and forgiving the evil deeds of the people are the strengths of the so-called "Mindfulness" strategy. Officials and rulers acting accordingly are able to influence the people's hearts directly. Therefore, when the Ming enemy lost the battle, Nguyen Trai opened a lifeline, providing enough food for them to return home. This action had made a historic mark, impacting greatly the thinking of those who had lost the battle about the kindness of the winners (Vasyagina – Kalimullin, 2015). This has become a national tradition in the later fights against foreign aggressions. It directly in line with Nguyen Trai's insistence on subordinating military action to the political and moral struggle, in which situation it is "better to conquer hearts than citadels" (Duiker, 1998: 184). This principle was used by Northern leaders to help defeat the French and the Americans in the 20th century.

When speaking of solidarity, Nguyen Trai used a vivid example. According to him, solidarity between the members in a community is like the harmony between musicians in an orchestra, in which all musical instruments must be harmonized so the

music is soft and melodious. So he writes: “The base of a rite and music are the agreement amongst its instruments. 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 rhythm, 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 society of no animosity. That is the base of music.” (Thu, 1993: 19) Similarly, social life also needs to be sociable in which all benefits need to be proportional and there is consensus from top to bottom. This constitutes the much-needed fertile soil for a peaceful society. Social discord carries the risk of a much more serious societal disorder. As Trai so aptly observes, “When one is hungry and cold, one pays no attention to courtesy.” (Nguyen, 2017:100) In the letter to Le Thai Tong, Nguyen Trai wrote: "Peace is the root of music, the sound is the beauty of music. I hope you will love and take care of all people, so that every hamlet and village does not have any sound of resentment, that is, to keep the original music" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1992: 113).

Overall harmony is also built on agreement and solidarity, as well as mutual tolerance. Envy and jealousy, on the other hand, destroy harmony. Furthermore, harmony grows out of humility, as Nguyen Trai says: “everywhere you might look, humble is good; but in arguing, no one could win” (Nguyen, 1976: 426). Thus, he exhorts even the king himself to consider the wellbeing of the people above all else if he wishes to create a stable and harmonious society:

“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 enjoyment 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” (Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, 1976: 202).

Nguyen Trai thus became dangerous and inconvenient in the eyes of the new aristocracy after the defeat of the Ming dynasty’s armies, since his “humanism and justice now acted as a means to limit their indulgences” and extravagant, selfish behavior (Nguyen, 2017: 101). This led finally to the demise of his family and himself in 1442.

(4) *Desire for peace and love for nature in Nguyen Trai’s thought on ethics*

“Henceforth our country is safe.

Our mountains and rivers began life afresh.

Peace follows war as day follows night.

We have purged our shame for a thousand centuries,

We have regained tranquility for ten thousand generations” (Cawthorne, 2017: 24).

Nguyen Trai believed that peace, prosperity, and living in happiness are the common desire of all people, the earnest aspiration of all social classes. As he noted on one occasion, "Heaven loves life, people's hearts hate rebellion" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1980: 47).

Nguyen Trai is one of the few leaders in history who has written many letters to enemy generals; his letters were later gathered into a book called "Quan trung tu menh tap". Although the words and lengths of each letter are different, their purposes are the same: to offer an analysis of the time and advantages of battle, comparing the forces and advising the enemy general to withdraw or to surrender to the Lam Son insurgent army. In his letter to Vuong Thong, Nguyen Trai wrote: “Warriors are violent things, fighting is dangerous; so the prosperity or death of a country, the people living or dying, are all related to that” (Nguyen, 1976: 152). In the letter to Hoang Phuc, he wrote: “We are reluctant to use the troops” (Nguyen, 1976: 162). It can be said that

love of peace and the condemnation of war is a message that Nguyen Trai wanted to send to his enemies as well as posterity. He often emphasized that using weapons was a reluctant job, so it was much more important to keep peace when there was still an opportunity. This can be clearly seen in the following poem that stresses the building of lasting peace “through culture, not war”:

“Destroyed *kinh* at North Sea in the past. We are currently at peace but have to drill our troops. Flags and banners are fluttering, as if to join the clouds. Big and little drums raging and shaking the ground. All our weapons are lightning, and the troops dangerous tigers. Thousands of ships are lining up as *quan* and *nga* fly. But if the King, in his heart, wants security, stability, and wealth, He should build peace through culture, not war” (Nguyen, 2010: 17).

After reading two volumes of the poem “Uc Trai thi tap” and “Quoc am thi tap,” one can sense that Nguyen Trai was born to write poetry, not to do military or political work. His poetry represents, among other things, a genuine love of nature. Under his description, nature seems to be in harmony with people's hearts. Based on the principle: “writing is to convey morality,” he wisely borrowed natural scenery to describe people, and for him, the description of the scenery is to reveal the feeling of a man who is worrying about being unfulfilled. He wrote: “In the middle of the night, leaning against the sky to watch the universe / Based on autumn wind, being inspired riding cetacean” (Nguyen, 1976: 318). “The universe looks out of the sea / Laughing at people in the middle of green clouds” (Nguyen, 1976: 320). In a similar poem Nguyen Trai expresses his love for nature claiming that even royalty is “filled with such bright light” of the surrounding scenery – a gift to a weary soul to enjoy in times of peace:

“On the highest peak of the Yen Tu/ the fifth *canh* had just begun, but the sun was blazing./ The panoramic view passed all the way to the blue sea./ Talk and laughter resounded within pure blue clouds./ Jade bamboo lances surrounded the gate for a thousand acres./ On the rocky mountain the creek flows: pearls suspended in the air./ Today the king, Nhan Ton, still leaves his trace by his temple/ eyes filled with such bright light” (Nguyen, 2010: 26).

In his artistic creation, the poem “*Con Son ca*” (*The song of Con Son*) deserves to claim the leading position in terms of ideological value and art of words. In “*Con Son ca*”, natural scenes appear with streams flowing like a sound. The flat slate is covered with a smooth, green moss. Pine forest and bamboo forest are vast and fresh green. Through ingenious description of Nguyen Trai, *Con Son* scenery appears with its own features, not mistaken for any other beautiful scenes. We see in his poetry that there is both music and painting, both joy and sadness, heartlessness and pre-emptiness before the change, with a mind that does not care about fame. He wrote:

“At *Con Son* a stream sings night and day/ My accompaniment, my guitar/
At *Con Son* the mossy stones are washed by rain, for me my bed of ease/
Pines on the mountainsides, drop a green carpet where they stand, I may lie down where I please/ There the wild bamboo makes miles of green/ Safe in their shade I sing my verse/ Why then, my friend, do you not return? Why wander in the world of dust” (Nguyen, 1976: 377).

According to some researchers, “*Con Son Ca*” was composed during a peaceful time when Nguyen Trai was fed up with competing for power in the court, and he gave up his post to *Con Son* in hiding. For most of his life, he took care of the people and the country, but in the last years of his life, Nguyen Trai had to live confronted by the envy and jealousy of the royal court adulators. Therefore, when he returned to *Con Son*, he was like a bird escaping from a cage and felt that he was free in the sky. Only at this time could he finally live the life he wanted and had free time to think about

life in accordance with Buddhist philosophy and Taoist principles. The poem is not only a pure description of scenery; it was rather through that description that the author wanted to reveal the conception of life of a person whose character was shaped against the background of interactions between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His highly cultured character results in a tolerant, noble lifestyle and a brilliant personality which became a high asset for his contemporary society.

The Contemporary Value of Nguyen Trai’s Ethical Thought for Vietnamese Society Today

Today, Vietnam is undertaking industrialization and modernization, developing a market economy and international exchange and integration. This context has resulted in certain successes in the material life, but has degraded many spiritual values and principles of morality. We witness a serious ecological imbalance, destruction of the living environment, broken relationships, and rising corruption, to name but few. In such a context, Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics can bring valuable lessons to preserve and promote traditional moral values and stimulate modern approaches to values, thus helping Vietnam move quickly on the path of development and integration.

(1) Firstly, Nguyen Trai’s thought on ethics contributes to preserving and promoting compassion in the present conditions of Vietnam.

Compassion and humaneness are precious qualities of people which have been, at the same time, traditional ethical values of the Vietnamese nation. These two arguably belong among the most tangible manifestations of love among people living in various social bonds. However, in the current conditions, due to economic profits and newly acquired lifestyles impacting the individual and social life of the people, there is a growing number of people showing signs of declining charity, or even being emotionless, filled with sadness and crushed under the burden of difficulties experienced by other people in the community. The notion of humaneness thus becomes unimportant to them.

Being confronted by this new situation, a thoughtful return to Nguyen Trai's idea of humanity might provide us with a potent moral resource for re-learning the necessary lessons to preserve and promote human compassion, to cultivate ethical standards and desired lifestyle for people, especially for the young generation. Some of this is reflected in the current charity practice in Vietnam.

Country	Subregion	% of the population donated money	% of the population doing charity	% of the population helping strangers	Index of charity practice
Vietnam	Southeast Asia	17	6	32	18

Table 1: The index of charity practice in Vietnam – CAF according to CAF World Giving Index 2016 survey (Tran Nhan Tong Institute, 2018: 344)

(2) Secondly, Nguyen Trai’s thought on ethics has the potential to contribute to stimulating tolerance and solidarity

Tolerance and solidarity are ethical qualities that are extremely important and have great practical value in the context of the current conflict (regarding territory, religion, ideology) today. Therefore, research on Nguyen Trai's viewpoints of tolerance and solidarity will help guide people to achieve good things for themselves and other people. There is a basic national and social cohesion among the people, which helps them maintain their resolve to build the country, to build a peaceful, prosperous and happy society. People seem to desire developing and internalizing these good values with the common aim to build a society in which there are no conflicts, or war. A society that is bound by tolerance, altruism, and generosity thus remains a stimulating

ideal with the potential to shape the moral vision of a critical majority of Vietnamese citizens. The lessons learned from history, including Nguyen Trai's lesson of benevolence, tolerance and solidarity, will be fundamental elements to raise motivation and cultivate the necessary skills and traits in human character.

(3) *Thirdly, Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics has the potential to contribute to the formation and development of ecological ethics*

Ecological ethics is a special form of social ethics, which expresses the relationship between people and nature. Ecological ethics includes the views, concepts, ideologies, feelings, principles, norms and adjustments of human behavior in the process of natural transformation and preservation to serve human life. In order to protect the cleanliness of the living environment towards sustainable development, ecological-ethical education for the people is necessary in Vietnam today.

In contemporary Vietnam, the environment is experiencing serious changes due to pollution, industrialization, but also climate change and the corresponding sea level rise. According to data provided by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, if the sea level rises by 1m, it will seriously affect agricultural land as well as people's lives in Vietnam.

Region	% of the area submerged deeper than the sea level	% of the population is affected
Mekong Delta	39	35
Central	20	9
Red River Delta	10	9

Table 2: Scenario of climate change, sea level rise for Vietnam (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2011: 52)

Nguyen Trai's example of love for nature in the form of his philosophy of living in harmony with nature, combined with a unique mix of indigenous Confucianism and elements of Buddhism and Taoism, may serve as an appealing resource for the shaping of moral vision and healthy patriotism (including an 'ecological patriotism') that contemporary Vietnam needs so much. Trai's thought is an inviting reminder for everyone to be responsible for nature in the process of natural exploration, extraction of resources, and natural preservation. Due to an increasingly reckless human impact on nature the living environment is threatened and the natural environment is being changed in a way that is not conducive to human long-term wellbeing. Unless we can recover some of the traditional reverence for nature, so typical for Nguyen Trai and many others who preceded or followed after him, the love of nature and the philosophy of living in harmony with nature remains only a distant ideal, an unreachable goal trampled by consumerism and corporate (reckless) exploitation of human and natural resources. Could it be that by reading Nguyen Trai's beautiful poems one would develop his vision of humanness and internalize the much-needed ecological sensibility?

Conclusion

Nguyen Trai was a thinker, poet, politician, strategist, and national hero in Vietnamese feudal history. Notably, his thinking and character were a combination of tradition and modernity, of reason and affection, theory and practice. He was a man born to act at a time when such men were desperately needed. His legacy is rich and diverse, encompassing poetry, history, geography, ethics, philosophy, military strategy and statesmanship. His era did not give him much free time to compose his beloved poems and the unjustness of fate did not let him live more to write. However,

what he wrote down was imbued with human love, with beautiful humanity, leading people to three eternal values: Truth, Good, and Beauty. He not only had an admirable personality that boasts with tolerance for those who have gone astray, nobility in dealing with enemies, and a deep care for the common people; he also had a poetic heart and the gift to transcend the mundane reality of this world in his vision of beauty, peace, and prosperity.

In modern Vietnam, therefore, Nguyen Trai is viewed as one of the truly great figures in Vietnamese history. His ideas related to formulating a strategy to defeat the Ming were not only respected and admired; they were consciously imitated by leading strategists of the Communist Party in their own struggle for national unification against the French and the United States. Although few of his writings have survived, he is considered one of the foremost writers in Vietnamese history and a pioneer in the use of Chu Nom (the written form of the spoken Vietnamese language). Above all, his integrity, his sense of loyalty and humanness, representing the best elements of Confucian humanism, have won him the respect and admiration of generations of Vietnamese (Duiker, 1998: 184). Much of what was true in Nguyen Trai's time remains true even today: "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 backwardness and hindrances" (Nguyen, 2017: 105).

Studying the thought of Nguyen Trai in general, his thoughts on ethics in particular, in the context of modern society, shows his human values and depth of thought which remains inspiring until the present. Assessing Nguyen Trai's dedication to the history of the Vietnamese nation and the development of human values, the UNESCO recognized Nguyen Trai in 1980 as a world cultural celebrity.

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Thi Tho Nguyen, PhD.
Hanoi National University of Education
136, Xuan Thuy Street
Cau Giay, Hanoi, 100.000
Vietnam
thodhsp@gmail.com

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Cong Su Le, PhD.
Hanoi University
Km 9, Nguyen Trai Street
Thanh Xuan, Hanoi, 100.000
Vietnam
sulecong@yahoo.com