

# NGUYEN TRAI'S THOUGHTS ON ETHICS, EDUCATION AND THEIR MEANINGS IN VIETNAM TODAY

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**Abstract** - *Nguyen Trai (1380-1442) was a great thinker in Vietnam around the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries. His ideas in many disciplines arose from the reality of fighting Ming invaders to defend the land and establish the early Le dynasty. Among those principles, Nguyen Trai's perspective on ethics and education is one of the most distinctive, representing patriotism, love for the people, a lifetime struggle for national independence, and people's happiness. The article "Nguyen Trai's thoughts on ethics and education and their meaning in Vietnam today" focuses on the content and characteristics of that thought, drawing its meaning for the duties of training morality and fostering knowledge for Vietnamese people today in order to meet the requirements of the country's industrialization and modernization.*

**Keywords:** *ethical thought, educational thought, meaning, present day, Vietnam*

## INTRODUCTION

Training comprehensive people in virtue, talent, and knowledge is today's top priority for creating a balanced and sustainable growth in Vietnam. To have a sound theoretical foundation for this policy, it is vital to study and comprehend the moral ideals and education of Vietnamese intellectuals throughout history. Nguyen Trai is a typical example of Vietnam's patriotic thinkers from the late fourteenth and early 15 century. His ideological framework, rich in realism and humanism, fulfilled the mission of repelling the Ming invaders and preserving the country's national independence. Nguyen Trai has inherited and blended ancient Vietnamese cultural values with the essential notions of traditional Confucianism, renewing them to meet the needs of our country's reality. Not only was Nguyen Trai's morality and education thought of tremendous importance during his time, but it also has a profound meaning for the cause of moral education and elevating people's knowledge in Vietnam now. As a result, for the conference, the author chose the theme "*Nguyen Trai's thoughts on ethics and education and their meaning in Vietnam today*" as an article.

## 1. PURPOSE AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

**Purpose:** To analyze and clarify the content of Nguyen Trai's ethical and educational philosophy, as well as to inherit and select constructive components of that thought for the establishment of educational policies and moral training for the Vietnamese people in contemporary society.

**Research methods:** To reach the study's goal, this article takes a dialectical materialist perspective while employing specific research methods such as analysis and synthesis, logic and history, induction and deduction, abstraction, generalization, and comparison.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nguyen Trai's ideological system is an inspiration for many scientists in the domains of society - humanities to research and understand in various fields of philosophy, culture, ethics, education, art, military, and so on. Nguyen Trai's typical research efforts on ethical and educational ideas include the following works:

First and foremost, it is *Nguyen Trai's whole collection* from the Institute of History, Social Sciences Publishing House, 2020. From the gathering, editing, translating, editing, and augmenting throughout several editions, this is a very elaborate effort. We observe Nguyen Trai's significant contribution to the cause of Vietnamese literature in the form of eternal epics, rich in battling vigor and filled with



national cultural hues derived from his own political experiences, in this work. He is alive and dedicated to his country.

The following work is *Nguyen Trai - A Great Figure in Vietnam's National History* by Tran Huy Lieu, History Publishing House, 1962. The work highlights Nguyen Trai's significant contributions to the cause of maintaining national independence and territorial integrity. The work specifically addresses Nguyen Trai's pure moral example, as well as his thoughts on morality, education, and its significance in the cause of national creation during the early Le dynasty.

In addition, *Nguyen Trai fought the enemy to save the country* by Nguyen Luong Bich, People's Army Publishing House, 1973 concentrated on examining skills and attributes in this work. Nguyen Trai's morality was described as "both loyal to the country and filial to the people." At the same time, the book discusses the union of national spirit and democratic conscience in the struggle against foreign invaders to safeguard the fatherland.

Furthermore, the work *Nguyen Trai - The mettle and the quintessence of the nation*, published in 1980 by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Social Science Publishing House, is the work of numerous authors who wrote on Nguyen Trai's life, career, and remarkable accomplishments. The analysis of Nguyen Trai's idea of "the people is the root" and the progression in his view of the people is one of the work's noteworthy contents.

Then, the work named *Celebrating 600 years of Nguyen Trai's birth* by the Vietnam Social Sciences Commission, 1982 is a synthesis of many author's articles about Nguyen Trai's life, career and ideological values for future generations. In this work, there is an article referring to Nguyen Trai's views on education aimed at the majority of the people.

Following that comes Vo Xuan Dan's *Nguyen Trai thought in the historical process of Vietnam* by Culture - Information Publishing House, 1996. This is a work that makes extensive use of Vietnamese people's thoughts, including Nguyen Trai's thoughts on ethics and education. It is the inheritance of Confucian doctrine's categories of loyalty, filial piety, humanity, and meaning, combined with the nation's traditional culture.

The doctoral thesis *Political thought of Nguyen Trai* by Nguyen Thi Ung, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, in 2017 is also a thorough analysis of Nguyen Trai's political thought and the meaning of political ideology for the modernization of Vietnam. This essay specifically discusses a feature of Nguyen Trai's political ideology that is centered on humanity and acting for the people.

There are also many articles about Nguyen Trai and his thoughts published in social science and humanities journals such as articles on Nguyen Trai's humanistic thought by Luong Minh Cu and Nguyen Thi Huong, on *Philosophical Review*, No. 11 (198), November 2007; Nguyen Thu Nghia's article on "Patriotism, love for the people, taking the people as the root - the basis of Vietnamese political culture" in *Philosophical Magazine* No. 3 (298), 2017; The article "Concept of "the people", "the country with the people as the root" through the Ly - Tran - Le feudal dynasties and its significance for the construction of socialism in our country today" by Bui Thi Kim Hau, published in *Philosophy Magazine* No. 10 (329), 2018.

The studies on Nguyen Trai's life, career, and ideas shown above are useful resources for researching his educational ethics. However, it is not an in-depth examination of this topic. The author will inherit the study results from the preceding books, systematize, and evaluate them in order to elucidate Nguyen Trai's moral and educational ideas. Draw its significance for the cause of human resource education and training for holistic development in Vietnam today. This article also makes a new contribution to the research of Nguyen Trai's philosophy.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1. Nguyen Trai's thought on ethics

Nguyen Trai lived at the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century when Dai Viet was in decline. The Tran Dynasty was no longer powerful enough to rule the country. Ho Quy Ly's social reforms failed to prevent the country from falling into the hands of the Ming invaders. The Buddhist philosophies of the Tran Dynasty no longer correspond to the actual necessities of society. In such setting, society required a basic philosophy to guide the nation against foreign invaders,



toward the construction of a centralized feudal house in order to re-establish social order. The Confucian concepts of legitimacy, the three moral bonds, and the five virtues proved to be fit for the demands of the kingdom at the time, eventually had a deep influence on social life, and were chosen as the theoretical foundation to construct the Le dynasty. Nguyen Trai's thinking was thus heavily impacted by Confucian ideology. It is also the foundation of his moral reasoning. Nguyen Trai, on the other hand, has chosen, developed, and refreshed it from the viewpoints and basic categories of Confucian ethics to meet the current situation as well as the nation's historic culture. The following basic contents characterize Nguyen Trai's moral thought:

First of all, It must be loyalty and filial. The social relationships are central to traditional Confucianism: king - servants, father - son, husband - wife. In it, loyalty refers to a servant's devotion to the king. Filial love and respect for parents is an emotion, a duty in the parent-child relationship. If orthodox Confucianism's ideas of middle and filial piety remain abstract and a standard of human self - cultivation, but loyalty and filial piety in the Vietnamese national cultural tradition are related with national and national destiny. As a result, patriotic heroes and intellectuals frequently allude to loyalty and filial piety as a tremendous obligation to the country and the people, that is, "debt to the country, enemies of the home" that patriotic intellectuals must not underestimate. Nguyen Trai has assimilated Confucianism in the spirit of the national tradition, and he self-identifies as someone who constantly places a high value on it. The unique aspect of Nguyen Trai's absorption and application of loyalty and filial piety is that it has progressed beyond the framework of classic Confucianism, in line with traditional Vietnamese ethics. He was not "loyal" to any particular monarch or family, but only to those kings who knew how to sacrifice for the sake of the country and the people. He was a Tran family descendent, but he became a mandarin for the Ho Dynasty before coming to join Le Loi because he saw this hero as the essence of patriotism, indomitable spirit, and determination to make sacrifices. for national independence, for the people's right to live. Nguyen Trai absorbed Confucianism not only to "cultivate himself" but also to tackle the country's pressing dilemma at the time: finding a leader with integrity and morality to drive out foreigners. Invade, protect the people, and preserve the country. His commitment was not only to one ruler, but also "to be completely loyal to the country, to work together, to plan to wash the nation's shame" (Institute of History, 2020, p.114), which is a representation of his fatherland's loyalty, with the banner of saving the country and saving the people.

Nguyen Trai inherited traditional Confucianism's filial piety but exercised it in a more progressive manner. When Father Nguyen Trai was exiled to China by the enemy, he went to the location where his father was imprisoned by the Ming army, intending to serve his father during his father's imprisonment, but his father advised him: "You are an educated and talented person; you should find a way to wash the country's humiliation, avenge for me. That is extraordinary filial piety" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 11). Nguyen Trai followed his father's advice and exercised filial devotion in a progressive and humane manner. Filial devotion in Nguyen Trai's concept is a synthesis of Confucian filial piety and Vietnamese cultural traditions to address actual societal issues, namely, intellectuals must learn to prioritize their country's obligation over their affection. The entire family must work together to protect the country and its citizens. As a result, his filial piety was not limited to the family, but also extended to love of the hometown, country, and people.

The category of benevolence and righteousness reflects Nguyen Trai's ethical thoughts. Benevolence and righteousness, according to classical Confucianism, must be the moral norms on which a gentleman must rely in order to cultivate himself. Benevolence is the way to be human, to be wholehearted to others; righteousness means that when you see something worth doing, you do it without thinking about how it will benefit you. Nguyen Trai inherited and merged these two virtues to form benevolence with defined aims and purposes that encompass his entire ideological system. Benevolence and righteousness, according to Nguyen Trai, are not only a norm for self-cultivation, but also for people's peace and avoidance of conflict. He expressed this point of view in the manifesto *Proclamation of Victory*: "The work of benevolence and righteousness aims to bring peace to the people, The work of protecting the country aims to eliminate violence" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 64). The goal of benevolence is to "preserve the world and the country" (Institute of History, 2020,



p. 231). He also used benevolence as a weapon against the invading Ming invaders, denouncing the enemy for acting inhumanely and unjustly against our people: "...committing atrocities, invading our country, exploiting our people, levying heavy taxes, plundering our valuables, and having no peaceful place to live. Is it humane to be that way?" 2020 (Institute of History, p. 89). He also reminded the crown prince that "every great work must take benevolent and righteousness as the root, so the great achievement must take benevolent and righteousness first" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 89). Thus, Nguyen Trai's ideas on benevolence and righteousness, coupled with loyalty and filial piety, are the virtues of patriotism, love of the people, devotion to the fatherland, to the people; safeguarding independence, national sovereignty, and giving prosperity to the people is the objective to approach.

### **3.2. Nguyen Trai's thought on education**

Nguyen Trai's educational philosophy is a special content in his ideological system, reflecting the aim to create "virtuous people" who are aware of "the subtleties of things" and "know the time." understand the right to change" in order to change the fortunes of the country and preserve people's lives. Nguyen Trai believes that in order to "fix people," one must first "fix life's affairs." The individual who "excludes poison, eliminates greed, eliminates tyranny. There are people with wisdom and heroes" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 370). As a result, Nguyen Trai's educational philosophy must develop beyond practicing morality and talent for each individual to serve the country and the people.

Nguyen Trai was a Confucian scholar who was highly informed in the Four Books and Five Classics, although he did not completely embrace Confucianism's educational concept. "Teaching is only for a gentleman or a ruler who governs the people with enough benevolence, courtesy, righteousness, wisdom, faith, and so on, that people from the four directions will send their children to serve them," Confucius stated. (Doan Chinh, 2013, p.153). Nguyen Trai directed education once more to all areas of society. The king must learn to lead the country and care for the people as a man of integrity and decency. The Crown Prince must be trained to shoulder the country's concerns in the future; "how will progress be found if you don't teach from the beginning, command in advance, make you afraid to keep it, and appreciate it?" 2020 (Institute of History, p. 157). Next, he said that mandarins must study and cultivate morality to support the people, not "depend on their riches, despite the misery of the people, just having fun and indulge in wine" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 152). It is valuable that Nguyen Trai also directs educational activities to the people - the force that directly creates material wealth for society. He believes that education improves people's lives, so he advises them to study hard to equip themselves with knowledge and careers. He wrote: "Becoming a successful one thanks to education, Having a full life thanks to hard work" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 384). Nguyen Trai promotes comprehensive education; educate what society needs. Therefore, the content of his education has focused on the issues of "peace of the people", "exclusion of violence", "happiness of the people". To do so, education must train talented and virtuous people to help the people and the country. In the content of education, Nguyen Trai upholds the education of patriotism, love for the people, and respect for the people first. Education helps the king understand the morals of the head of the country, "must be in harmony, respect each other, keep a friendly heart; love the people, think and do benevolent things" (Institute of History, 2020, p.156). Education also helps people with the virtues of diligence, hard work, a simple and thrifty lifestyle. Living close and harmonious with the people, Nguyen Trai deeply understands the role of the people in production and defense of the country. For him, "the great scale and splendor are all the hard work of the army and people" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 151). Therefore, he wants people to know how to appreciate the people's labor, not to live in luxury, to waste and add tax burden to the people. He wrote: "the clothes for warmth, the food for full stomach" (Institute of History, 2020, p. 390). He also believes that education teaches people to be patient, not afraid of hardships, overcoming all difficulties will grow in their will: "If you have difficulties, it is just normal. The more difficult it is, the stronger you will be" (Institute. History, 2020, p. 348).

Following that is the education of family love, which is the obligation of parents to teach their children to be human. Family is extremely crucial in the development of human personality. As a result, Nguyen Trai encourages family members to love and care for one another. From a young age,



parents are responsible for nurturing and educating their children. It is the parents who “shape” their offspring. He stated, “The succession to the throne is a big deal for the country; teaching children is the big deal of the whole world” (Institute of History, 2020, p. 155). When discussing the responsibility of parents for their children in Nguyen Trai’s educational thought, Nguyen Tien Doan wrote: “Raising children without teaching children is the fault of the father. That truth of eternity. Education only has, and will have the power to transform people into more perfection” (Nguyen Tien Doan, 1996, p. 26). Nguyen Trai believes in the upbringing and teaching of parents for the growth of their children. According to Nguyen Trai, the greatest asset that parents leave to their children is not material wealth but knowledge.

In addition to intellectual education, in order to create national unity, form the strength to build and protect the country, education needs to direct people to a proper lifestyle, to unite, love and help each other. People in a country are compatriots, no matter where they were born and raised, they are all people of the same country. They must love and care for each other in order to create sustainable national strength, so he admonished: “Compatriots must learn how to help each other because the northern branch and the southern branch are one and the same” (Institute of History, 2020, p. 372). You have to know how to take the joy of the people you help as your own, and do not treat them as grateful for good deeds. Moreover, educated and wise people will have humble, courteous behavior and easy-to-please speech. He praised the culture of peaceful and polite behavior: “In this world, look at each other for all the beauty. Know both strength and weakness and when to use” (Institute of History, 2020, p. 373).

Thus, along with his ethical thoughts, Nguyen Trai’s educational ideas are important components, closely related and unified in his entire ideological system. In particular, his ethical thoughts show his views on the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and righteousness that intellectuals must practice and cultivate by way of education. And his thought on education shows the way for people to practice those virtues. All are blended to create a person of Nguyen Trai with integrity, meeting the practical requirements of the country, that is, saving the country and building the country.

### **3.3. The meaning of Nguyen Trai’s ethical and educational thoughts in Vietnam today**

Vietnam is carrying out the process of industrialization and modernization in the backdrop of the globe going through the fourth industrial revolution with remarkable achievements, which are having a profound impact on the lives of the majority of people in all countries. Human resources are critical to the achievement of socioeconomic development in this revolution. Furthermore, as Vietnam develops a socialist-oriented market economy, the market mechanism would undoubtedly have a negative impact on social interactions. People are easily swayed by worldly desires, while moral principles and national culture are neglected. As a result, in addition to knowledge education to address the needs of national development, moral education must be prioritized in order to generate human resources for holistic development. Education must produce workers who are both skilled in professional skills and possess the characteristics of Vietnamese patriots, such as a sense of national independence, solidarity, love for their fellow citizens, and hard work. Therefore, the Communist Party of Vietnam affirms that the mission of education is: “Continuing to comprehensively develop human resources, science, technology, and innovation in association with arousing the aspiration for land development. Country, national pride, the will to be self-sufficient and promote the values of Vietnamese culture and people” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021a, p. 220).

We discover that, despite the passage of more than 600 years, the essential values of Nguyen Trai’s thought on ethics and education still have great historical significance. If we know how to inherit, select, and use it creatively, that thought can have a significant impact on our country’s overall human growth today. Nguyen Trai’s moral and educational philosophy can be described as follows:

*Firstly*, in the early Le dynasty, Nguyen Trai’s moral and educational ideas with progressiveness and genuine humanism led to the development of ethical and educational standards for Vietnamese society. It goes beyond the framework of feudal ideology to promote the power of the people and to construct a people-based society. According to Nguyen Trai, “carrying boats and capsizing boats are also people” (Institute of History, 2020, p. 156), individuals play an important role in the creation of a prosperous and affluent society. Therefore, in order to promote this strength and turn it into a



great resource to build and develop the country, it is necessary to invest in comprehensive human development, that is, to educate both ethics and vocational knowledge. Employment for all sections of the society in which the people are the foundation.

*Secondly*, in this day and age, we may implement the essential values of Nguyen Trai's ideology in a flexible and innovative manner to completely educate people. In particular, Nguyen Trai's ideology develops loyalty; that is, loyalty to the Fatherland; filial piety is filial piety to the people. "Loyalty to the country, filial piety to the people" is a vital moral quality for rulers in order to endure in subjection to the country and serve the people. As the Communist Party of Vietnam affirms, education and training must create "a contingent of cadres, civil servants and public employees with high professionalism, creative capacity, good moral qualities, and political bravery, serving people and businesses" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021a, p. 224). In order to accomplish the above task, the Communist Party of Vietnam also sets the direction of "accelerating the implementation of fundamental and comprehensive reform and improving the quality of education and training, with a focus on modernization; and change the mode of education and training, especially higher education and vocational education. Focus on training high-quality human resources, discovering and fostering talents; have outstanding policies to attract and utilize talents and experts both at home and abroad. Building a team of leaders, managers and civil servants with good quality, professionalism, dedication, serving the people" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021a, p. 221).

*Thirdly*, comprehensive human education is the foundation, but it is necessary to reform the methods and contents of education to suit the new situation. During Nguyen Trai's era, Confucian ethical education was consistent with Vietnamese cultural traditions. Today, in addition to moral education, it is necessary to focus on in-depth knowledge training for workers who can meet the requirements of the country's development in the era of the 4th industrial revolution. Therefore, the Communist Party Vietnam Assets defines: "Creating a breakthrough in fundamental and comprehensive innovation in education and training, science and technology, developing high-quality human resources, attracting and utilizing talents, applying strong achievements of the fourth industrial revolution" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021a, p. 37).

## CONCLUSION

Nguyen Trai was a brilliant statesman, cultural figure, and educator of the Vietnamese people in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. That concept, in addition to overcoming the historical problems of his time, left deep historical lessons for posterity. The author has studied and clarified the content of Nguyen Trai's concept on ethics and education using an overview of research works connected to his thought. From there, the author deduces historical implications that can be used to the work of educating and training high-quality human resources, thereby contributing to the success of national construction and renovation in an open trend. As a result, the article contributes to the construction of a theoretical foundation for further research into Vietnam's perspective on ethics and education in the modern era, particularly in comprehensive human education for sustainable development, in which both the individual and society as a whole are affected.

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