



## NGUYEN TRAI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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**ABSTRACT:** “*Nguyen Trai’s political thought*” is vibrant and profound. It can be encapsulated as a synthesis of key viewpoints, centered on several core themes: the spirit of patriotism, the determination for national independence, the emphasis on self-reliance and resilience, and the moral integrity expected of rulers, particularly the virtues of loyalty (*trung*) and filial piety (*hiếu*). He also emphasized the concepts of humaneness and righteousness (*nhân nghĩa*), securing the People’s livelihood (*an dân*), eliminating tyranny (*trừ bạo*), and respect for life (*hiếu sinh*). Notably, Nguyen Trai advanced highly progressive views on the role of the people, affirming that they are the creators of material wealth in society and the principal force in determining the nation's fate. It is precise that this perspective enabled his political thought to become a unifying banner, gathering strength from all directions. Nguyen Trai is thus worthy of being recognized as “a man of complete talent and virtue” [3, p.11]. As observed by later scholars, “one only needs to read the Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu (*Bình Ngô đại cáo*), the military dispatches, and his deliberations at court to find that every word is reworked with profound moral meaning. These words are enduring lessons for his contemporaries and future generations” [3, p.8].

**KEYWORDS:** Nguyen Trai, Politics, Political Ideology,...

### INTRODUCTION

In the face of the enormous and demanding requirements posed by the comprehensive renovation of the country, deep international integration, and the pursuit of national industrialization and modernization, amid increasingly complex and unpredictable regional and global developments, along with the subversive schemes of hostile forces, Vietnam is confronted with both opportunities and challenges, advantages and difficulties in the cause of national construction and defense. In this context, beyond the pressing tasks of building a sustainably developing economy, establishing an effective and progressive political system, and fostering an advanced culture imbued with strong national identity, an especially vital mission emerges: the cultivation and formation of a sound, noble, and resilient political consciousness in every Vietnamese citizen. This endeavor seeks to develop individuals who are “oriented toward truth, goodness, and beauty; imbued with a spirit of nationalism, humanism, democracy, and scientific thought” [2, p.126], and who are “holistically developed in political, ideological, intellectual, moral, physical, and creative capacities, with a strong sense of community” [1, p.114]. Throughout the course of Vietnamese history, many brilliant political figures have emerged, among whom Nguyen Trai occupies a position of paramount importance. As one of the most eminent thinkers of late 14th and early 15th-century Vietnam, Nguyen Trai was not only an outstanding military strategist and distinguished diplomat, but also a great statesman and cultural icon whose thought was remarkably rich and profound. Among his many contributions, his political thought stands out as a particularly significant and enduring legacy. His life and career, and more specifically his political ideology, constitute powerful testimony to his stature as a virtuous and visionary political leader. This body of thought did not arise arbitrarily; rather, it was a historically grounded product, deeply reflective of the profound socio-political transformations that characterized Vietnamese society during the late 14th and early 15th centuries.

## RESEARCH METHODS

“*Nguyen Trai’s political thought*” is analyzed based on the dialectical and historical materialist methodology and is also approached through human-scientific methodology. His political ideas reflect the socio-economic conditions of Đại Việt in the late 14th to early 15th centuries through a lens in which subjective factors of his life are decisive. The data are inherited from and expanded upon research works that have been published in international journals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This article titled “*Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought*” is a research study built upon various prior works. First is the *General History of Vietnam (Complete Edition)*, edited by Trương Hữu Quýnh, Đinh Xuân Lâm, and Lê Mậu Hãn, published by Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2010. With a clear structure in three phases—Vietnam’s history from prehistory to 1858, from 1858 to 1945, and from 1945 to 2000—the authors succinctly present salient features of each period and also integrate analysis of Đại Việt’s socio-economic conditions in the late 14th century. A notable work is *Outline History of Vietnamese Philosophy* by Nguyễn Hùng Hậu, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2010. Organized into six chapters, the author focuses on the foundations and key highlights of Vietnamese philosophy during each distinct era. Particularly indispensable is *History of Vietnamese Thought from the 15th to the 19th Century*, edited by Doãn Chính, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2011. This volume comprises articles on diverse subjects, including “*On Nguyen Trai’s Concept of Benevolence*,” “*Benevolence – the Heroic Idea in Vietnam’s Medieval History*,” “*Contributions to the Philosophical Thought of Nguyen Trai*,” “*Reform Ideas of Hồ Quý Ly*,” and lessons about “*placing people at the root*.” All contributions concisely present the historical context, the premises of formation, and the core content of Nguyen Trai’s worldview. Also significant is *Nguyen Trai and the Epic Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* by Bùi Văn Nguyên, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1999. This work analyzes several themes: (1) Nguyen Trai’s historical setting and life; (2) the origins and development stages of his entire ideology; and (3) his core political thought. The author notably analyzes, evaluates, and extracts values from Nguyen Trai’s thought as well as the enduring humanistic worldview embedded in *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo*, portraying them as shining jewels. Although the works above clarify various aspects of Nguyen Trai’s thought - such as historical and social conditions, philosophical ideas, and humanistic values - they do not specialize exclusively in his political thought. Nevertheless, all these studies serve as essential data for illuminating *Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought*.

## **RUSULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Historical - Social Context for the Formation of Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought**

Vietnamese society in the late 14th century underwent profound and complex transformations that deeply influenced the formation of Nguyen Trai’s political thought. This influence can be observed through three main historical events: *The*

*first event* was the comprehensive decline of the Trần dynasty across all social spheres. At the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century, following the glorious military victories against the Mongol invasions in 1258, 1285, and 1287–1288, and the significant achievements in establishing an independent, autonomous, and powerful Đại Việt, which was reflected in a remarkable development in the economy, politics, society, and culture; nevertheless, by the reign of King Trần Dụ Tông (1341–1369), a period of decline had set in across all sectors of society. Faced with this reality, Nguyen Trai was deeply concerned with how to “consolidate the people's will and stabilize society.” *The second event* influencing Nguyen Trai’s political thought was the rise of the Ho dynasty and Hồ Quý Ly’s reform policies. In 1400, Ho Quy Ly’s (Hồ Quý Ly) forced Emperor Thiệu Đế to abdicate, established the Hồ dynasty, adopted the reign title Thánh Nguyên, and renamed the country Đại Ngu. Before and after ascending the throne, Hồ Quý Ly’s implemented a series of reforms in various domains. *The third event* that profoundly affected Nguyen Trai’s choice of purpose and way of life was the Ming invasion of Dai Viet (Đại Việt). The Ming had long harbored aggressive intentions to invade Đại Việt with a cruel and brutal agenda.

From the issues presented and analyzed above, it is evident that Vietnamese society in the late 14th and early 15th centuries was a period marked by profound upheaval and transformation. Faced with these significant changes, Nguyen Trai stood metaphorically at a crossroads, compelled to reflect, deliberate, and make critical choices. His decisions and responses to these challenges clearly embody a political ideology that consistently places the interests of the people above all else—a principle he ardently advocated. Furthermore, his political thought also reflects the concrete realities of the nation’s heroic resistance against the invading Ming forces.

### **The Reality of Dai Viet’s Resistance Against the Ming Invaders and the Formation of Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought**

*In terms of politics*, the Ming invaders implemented a governing model based on the Northern feudal system. In 1407, after capturing Đông Đô (modern - day Hanoi), the Ming dynasty renamed our country as Giao Chỉ Prefecture, effectively treating it as a subordinate district of China. *Economically*, the Ming regime intensified the ruthless plundering of wealth and exploitation of the Vietnamese people. Even more insidiously, the Ming invaders did not merely control the economic, political, and *social spheres* of Đại Việt, but also imposed cultural domination and oppression. Most of the classical texts, legal codes, as well as books

on history, literature, geography, and military affairs of Đại Việt during this period were confiscated and destroyed by the enemy forces. These brutal and oppressive actions by the Ming invaders ignited a passionate patriotic spirit and deep hatred toward the enemy among the entire Vietnamese nation, including Nguyen Trai. Nguyen Trai asserted that the will of the people is the most steadfast fortress in defending the country, likening the strength of the people to the strength of water. Besides reflecting the reality of the resistance against the Ming invasion, Nguyen Trai's political thought also embodies the nation - building and reunification efforts.

### **The Process of Consolidating and Building an Independent, Unified Đại Việt State After the Victory in the Resistance Against the Ming and the Formation of Nguyen Trai's Political Thought**

After a decade of arduous and glorious resistance against the Ming invaders, the Early Lê dynasty was established. To consolidate and build an independent, unified, and autonomous Đại Việt state, the Lê dynasty undertook comprehensive development efforts across various domains, including the economy, politics, culture, and ideology. *In the economic sphere*, particularly agriculture, after the country was liberated, the people gradually returned to their villages to rebuild communities and restore agricultural production. The state also placed great emphasis on protecting and encouraging agricultural development. *In the realm of handicrafts and commerce*, alongside the recovery and expansion of agriculture, the reconstruction of the capital, market towns, and urban centers received significant attention and developed rapidly. Traditional crafts such as silk reeling, weaving, basketry, blacksmithing, mat weaving, hat making, and bronze casting flourished increasingly in villages and local communities. *Regarding the military*, the Early Lê period was characterized by a strong and well-trained army with considerable combat experience.

In terms of legal affairs, King Lê Thái Tổ promptly initiated the establishment of legal norms and standards. Concerning education and civil service examinations, education during the Early Lê dynasty was emphasized, reflecting the rulers' advocacy for the Confucian tradition. *In the cultural and ideological domain*, the Early Lê dynasty abandoned the policy of religious tolerance known as the "Three Teachings Harmonious" (Tam giáo đồng nguyên), which had been characteristic of the Lý and Trần-Trần dynasties, and shifted toward a policy that exclusively promoted Confucianism and Confucian studies.

It was precisely during the process of consolidating and building the nation that Nguyen Trai devoted all his talent and virtue to serving the country, the dynasty, and the people. It was also under these historical conditions that his political thought was shaped, notably characterized by his patriotism, candidness, and unwavering dedication to the people and the nation. He actively participated in state-building efforts, consistently demonstrating noble qualities and integrity, while openly condemning the decadent lifestyles of corrupt officials and malicious elements that adversely affected both the people and the country. All of these aspects enriched and deepened Nguyen Trai's political thought, both in times of war and peace.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations and the Role of Nguyen Trai's Subjective Agency in the Formation of His Political Thought**

### **The Ethical and Humanistic Values of the Vietnamese People and Their Influence on the Formation of Nguyen Trai's Political Thought**

Regarding the spirit of nationalism, patriotism, and hatred of the enemy, Nguyen Trai inherited and developed the patriotic spirit and the will for national independence into a new, rich, comprehensive, and profound content. In the *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* (Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Ngô), Nguyen Trai affirmed the sovereignty of Đại Việt. It was a country with defined territorial boundaries, rivers and mountains, customs and traditions, a rich cultural heritage, a long history, and heroic figures and talents, long standing on par with the feudal dynasties of China such as the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan. Alongside his deep patriotism and intense hatred of the enemy, Nguyen Trai also inherited the spirit of unity and communal solidarity embedded in the distinctive humanistic traditions of the Vietnamese nation. He recognized the immense power of the people's unity, likening the strength of the people to the power of water: water can propel a boat forward, but it can also overturn it. In addition to patriotism and nationalism, Nguyen Trai's political thought also inherited and absorbed moral values regarding human conduct, ideals, and life purposes; a sense of responsibility and duty toward the homeland and nation; and the spirit of sacrifice for the country and the people that characterize the Vietnamese people.

### **The Humanistic Views of the "Three Teachings" (Tam Giáo) and Their Influence on the Formation of Nguyen Trai's Political Thought**

Through Nguyen Trai's literary works, it is evident that his thought was influenced by Confucianism. This includes ideas such as the "Mandate of Heaven", "Doctrine of the Mean", the "Three Bonds and Five Constants", as well as concepts of "benevolence and righteousness", "loyalty and filial piety", among others. However, Nguyen Trai's Confucianism was a form of "progressive Confucianism", encompassing content that transcended the rigid orthodox Confucian framework, distinct from the scholastic and ossified Confucianism of the so - called "white - faced scholars." Nguyen Trai also absorbed the humanistic philosophy of Buddhism, particularly its emphasis on compassion, joy, and detachment, along with kindness and respect for life. He clearly expressed deep love for humanity, for the common people - "the dark - skinned peasants", "the humble folk" and even demonstrated a boundless love for plants and animals. He condemned and denounced the brutal atrocities of the Ming invaders when they slaughtered all forms of life. Under the influence of Daoism, Nguyen Trai's political thought consistently reflected the spirit, attitude, and philosophy of "tranquility and non-action" (qingjing wuwei), embracing a leisurely, carefree, and self - possessed lifestyle, indifferent to fame and fortune. His adoption of Daoist principles was not a form of escapism or detachment from reality, but rather an acceptance of a pure, serene, and free state of being. In his works, Nguyen Trai frequently mentioned qualities and ways of life such as "leisurely", "ease of mind", "cultivating leisure", "peaceful", "contented with one's fate", and "concealing oneself".

### **The Role of Subjective Factors in the Formation of Nguyen Trai's Political Thought**

Subjective factors had a profound influence on the formation of Nguyen Trai's political thought, which can be summarized in two main qualities: his talent and his virtue. Regarding Nguyen Trai's talent and its impact on his political thought: he was a man of both literary and martial excellence. Guided by his beloved grandfather and father, and endowed with a keen intellect and a strong thirst for learning, Nguyen Trai mastered classical texts and possessed deep knowledge across various fields. With determination and diligence in his studies, by the time he reached adulthood, he had already gained renown as an outstanding Confucian scholar. In August of the year Canh Thìn (1400), under the Hồ dynasty, the first imperial examination for the title of "Thái học sinh" was held in Tây Đô capital. Nguyen Trai sat for the examination and passed, earning the degree of Thái học sinh (equivalent to a doctoral

degree). At just 21 years old, he was appointed by the court as an official at the “Trung thư Ngự sử đài” with the position of chief magistrate. Nguyen Trai thus emerged as an extraordinary figure, excelling in both talent and virtue. His talent manifested through his intellect and character as a statesman and a brilliant strategist. With a profound sense of nationalism, ardent patriotism, deep love for the people, fierce hatred of the invaders, and sharp political insight, Nguyen Trai collaborated with King Lê Lợi in formulating the directions, strategies, and tactics for the resistance war against the Ming invaders, establishing a distinctive system of political ideas and views. His qualities as a statesman and strategic genius were also vividly demonstrated in his efforts to consolidate and build the nation. The core political thought permeating his career was a sincere and ardent desire to build a just and harmonious society, where “in every hamlet and village, there would be no sound of anger or resentment” [3, p.23]. Nguyen Trai was not only a statesman and strategist but also a great cultural figure and thinker. He delved deeply into many different fields and amassed an extensive, rich, and profound body of knowledge addressing various issues related to nature, society, and humanity through his works. Among all his achievements and distinctive cultural contributions, his work in the realms of science, literature, and thought stands out prominently.

In addition to his extraordinary intellectual capabilities, the subjective factor that fundamentally shaped Nguyen Trai’s political thought was his unwavering moral integrity and capacity for independent reasoning. This intellectual autonomy enabled him to critically and selectively assimilate the positive elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, transforming and reinterpreting them into new philosophical categories and concepts endowed with novel connotations and characteristics. Throughout his life and career, Nguyen Trai remained steadfast in his loyalty to the nation, to the people, and to the ideal of *nhân nghĩa* (benevolence and righteousness).

### **3. Core Themes in Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought**

**The patriotic spirit, the will for national independence, and the consciousness of self - reliance and resilience in the political thought of Nguyen Trai**

According to Nguyen Trai, in order to fulfill one’s purpose and ideal of living for the people and the nation, an individual must possess a strong sense of national identity and deep love for their homeland. Nguyen Trai was a fervent patriot; he



resolutely stood up to sacrifice himself in the struggle against foreign invaders, driven by the desire to build a prosperous and powerful nation “free from the cries of sorrow and resentment” [3, p. 23]. For Nguyen Trai, this was an unwavering and immutable commitment - an ideal he pursued throughout his entire life. The spirit of nationalism in Nguyen Trai’s political thought is manifested in his pride in the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese people, his emphasis on national independence, and his advocacy for sacrifice and dedication in the cause of national liberation.

**First and foremost is the spirit of upholding national independence and the affirmation of national sovereignty in Nguyen Trai’s political thought.** Nguyen Trai consistently emphasized the sovereignty of Dai Viet (Đại Việt), portraying it as a nation with clearly defined borders, territories, mountains and rivers, customs and traditions - equal in status to the great dynasties of China such as the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan. Through his diplomatic letters and writings, he strongly asserted Vietnam’s national independence and sovereign identity. The southern dynasties of Triệu, Đinh, Lý, and Trần were placed on equal footing with the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties of the North. Nguyen Trai not only rejected the chauvinistic and conservative biases of the Chinese imperial court—who often viewed the people of the South as barbarians (*Nam man*) and claimed that only the North represented true civilization (*Hoa Hạ*)—but also affirmed the thousand-year-old traditions of the Đại Việt people. At the same time, he firmly refuted the Northern notion that Vietnam was merely a territorial extension of China. If the idea that “the mountains and rivers demarcate the borders” (*núi sông bờ cõi đã chia*) represents a fundamental expression of national independence, then the assertion that “the customs of North and South differ” (*phong tục Bắc Nam cũng khác*) serves as a powerful affirmation of cultural autonomy. According to Nguyen Trai, the customs and traditions of Dai Viet (Đại Việt) - from hairstyles and clothing to marriage rites, funerary practices, ancestral worship, festivals, and communal ceremonies - were distinctly different from those of China. This profound sense of national pride and cultural dignity reaches its zenith in his political thought, underscoring an enduring and deep-rooted Vietnamese identity.

**Secondly, Nguyen Trai’s political thought was grounded in a lifelong ideal of sacrifice for national independence.** During the turbulent years described as “ten years of drifting like a buoy on the waves” (*thập niên phiêu chuyển thân bồng bình*) [3, p. 278], he joined the Lam Sơn uprising and presented the *Bình Ngô sách* (Plan

for Pacifying the Wu). Nguyen Trai collaborated closely with Lê Lợi in devising military strategies, composing political documents, edicts, and literary works to assist in defeating the Ming invaders. He later helped Emperor Le Thai To (Lê Thái Tổ) establish peace and order, and served under Le Thai Tong (Lê Thái Tông) to restore and strengthen the nation. From this period emerged some of his most influential works, such as *Lam Sơn thực lục* (The Chronicles of Lam Son), *Bình Ngô đại cáo* (The Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu), and *Phú núi Chí Linh* (Ode to Mount Chí Linh). His arduous and melancholic years of virtual house arrest under Ming occupation in Thăng Long—enduring a life of “tasting bitterness as food and sleeping on thorns” (*ăn thường nếm mật, ngủ thường nằm gai*) [3, p. 85] - revealed a key tenet in his political thought: a deep, concrete love for the people. This was not an abstract humanitarianism, but a heartfelt empathy and respect for the working masses. Nguyen Trai demonstrated profound compassion for the suffering of the common people and was ready to “brave the deadly swamps,” “cast nets across the seas,” and endure “burdensome taxes and forced labor in the border regions” [3, p. 78], referring to them as the “black-haired people” (*dân đen*) and the “crimson children” (*con đỏ*). He consistently emphasized the role of the *manh* (氓), the farmers, and the *lệ* (隸), the servant classes—those who, from all directions, rallied under the banner of righteous resistance led by Lam Son to drive out the Ming invaders. His political vision was suffused with solidarity and humanism, as expressed in the ideal of “sharing wine together, and living with the soldiers as father and sons” (*hòa rượu cùng uống, binh sĩ một dạ cha con*) [3, p. 79].

Perhaps the most remarkable expression of Nguyen Trai’s nationalism and love for his homeland is found in his commitment to rebuilding and consolidating the nation after the war. In his vision, “the society Nguyen Trai aspired to build was one governed by virtuous monarchs like Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun - rulers who cared deeply for the people and considered their well - being the very purpose of their reign” [3, p. 23].

### **The Concept of Human Moral Virtues in Nguyen Trai’s Political Thought**

One of the core and overarching themes in Nguyen Trai’s political thought is his view on human moral virtues, as reflected in his profound analysis of ethical qualities. Nguyen Trai envisioned an ideal model of rulership grounded in exemplary moral standards, emphasizing virtues such as *loyalty* (*trung*), *filial piety* (*hiếu*),

*righteousness (nghĩa)*, as well as broader political-ethical ideals such as *benevolence and justice (nhân nghĩa)*, *securing the welfare of the people (an dân)*, *eliminating tyranny (trừ bạo)*, and *respect for life (hiếu sinh)*. These moral concepts were not abstract or isolated ideals, but rather deeply integrated into Nguyen Trai's political philosophy. His perspective was diverse and profound, particularly in his focused reflection on the role of the people (*nhân dân*). He regarded the people not only as the creators of material wealth for society, but also as the decisive force determining the fate and future of the nation.

In his political thought, Nguyen Trai devoted substantial attention to the concept of *loyalty (đạo trung)*. For him, this virtue was first and foremost expressed through unwavering loyalty to the sovereign. During a time of political turmoil, while many of his relatives—including Nguyễn Hổ, Nguyễn Sùng, and Nguyễn Thụ—chose to support the Trần royal faction, Nguyen Trai firmly refused to follow suit, remaining resolutely loyal to the legitimate monarch. Nguyen Trai lived through three dynasties and served under six or seven emperors, yet he consistently upheld a coherent worldview and moral compass, asserting: “Among all the virtues under Heaven, nothing is more highly esteemed than loyalty and righteousness; nothing more precious than honor and integrity” [3, p.103]. Having witnessed first-hand the moral decay and indulgence of the Trần dynasty's rulers and officials—factors that contributed to the regime's collapse—Nguyen Trai, in drafting royal edicts for Lê Lợi, sternly condemned greed, corruption, and sloth among the court elite. His criticism of these rulers was not merely political, but deeply rooted in an ethical vision for just governance. Although Nguyen Trai was not officially a subject of the Trần dynasty, his ancestors had long benefited from royal patronage under their reign. Nevertheless, his conception of loyalty was never bound by blind allegiance or *ngu trung* (foolish loyalty); instead, it was a discerning and principled devotion based on moral clarity. Later, when Hồ Quý Ly assumed the throne, Nguyen Trai acknowledged the significant reforms he introduced in the effort to develop and modernize the nation. However, he also did not shy away from pointing out the severe missteps and critical errors committed during Hồ Quý Ly's reign.

In addition to emphasizing loyalty to the sovereign, Nguyen Trai's political thought placed particular importance on loyalty to the nation. He often declared:

“... Since birth, I have cherished honor and valued loyalty and righteousness; I despise petty men and willingly plunge into hardship and danger. Though I have faced adversity and peril, my resolve has never wavered...” [3, p.104].

For Nguyen Trai, *loyalty* (*đạo trung*) was not merely a virtue—it was a guiding principle of life. As a man of letters devoted entirely to the people and the country, “loyalty and filial piety” (*trung hiếu*) shaped his moral compass from youth. It was the inner torment he carried through years of poverty and exile; the iron will that sustained him during the grueling struggle against the brutal Ming invaders; and the ideal to which he remained committed until the end of his life:

“The debt I owe to the nation remains unpaid, and now I am old and pitiable. Throughout my life, I alone have borne the burden of national worry. I have long carried this solitary, forward-looking concern; even when seated and drinking, wrapped in cold garments, I could find no rest” [3, p.285].

Nguyen Trai consistently regarded *virtue* (*đức*), *loyalty* (*trung*), *filial piety* (*hiếu*), *sincerity* (*thành thực*), *compassion* (*hữu ái*), *benevolence* (*khoan nhân*), *justice* (*công bằng*), *diligence* (*cần mẫn*), and *harmony* (*hòa mục*) as fundamental moral values. For him, these were ethical standards to be upheld by all, and essential criteria in the education and selection of talents. As he prescribed:

“From high-ranking ministers and generals to unit commanders and all officials in institutes, offices, and departments—anyone entrusted with military or civil duties must abide by the principle of fairness, work diligently, show absolute loyalty to the monarch, and exhibit complete harmony in their treatment of the people” [3, p.198–199].

It can be said that Nguyen Trai’s political thought demonstrates a creative appropriation of Confucian principles, particularly through his profound expression of filial piety (*hiếu*). His enduring grief and reverence for his parents’ graves reflect a deep-rooted sense of filial duty. For Nguyen Trai, filial piety toward his father was not merely a moral obligation but a life mission - he internalized and fulfilled his father's final exhortation: to save the nation from peril, restore its honor, and avenge his father’s unjust death. Though he lived in extreme poverty - “poor to the bone” - he harbored no regrets or longing for fame or glory. This concept of filial piety in Nguyen Trai’s political thought further extends beyond the family to embrace the

nation and its people. His patriotism was imbued with a profound commitment to saving the country and rescuing its people. He displayed deep empathy for the suffering of ordinary laborers who, in his words, had to “brave malarial jungles” [3, p.78] and “cast nets across turbulent seas” [3, p.78]. He paid particular attention to the plight of the *manh lệ* - the *manh* (氓) being cultivators and the *lệ* (隸) being servants - who rallied from all directions under the righteous banner of the Lam Son uprising to resist the Ming invaders. Nguyen Trai held the people in the highest regard, believing that those who toiled and endured “countless layers of taxes and corvée in remote prefectures” [3, p.78] were the foundational force in both defending the nation’s independence and rebuilding the country in its aftermath.

Alongside the virtues of loyalty (*trung*) and filial piety (*hiếu*), Nguyen Trai's political thought places strong emphasis on other essential moral qualities that individuals must cultivate. Notably, he insisted that even enemy generals should embody the virtue of *trung nghĩa*—a synthesis of loyalty and righteousness. Advocating a foreign policy that was conciliatory and humane toward the people yet resolutely independent in the face of foreign aggression, Nguyen Trai adopted a principled and morally grounded stance.

In his *Letter to Eunuch Son Thọ*, he employed forceful and unequivocal language:

“Among all the principles under Heaven, none is more esteemed than loyalty and righteousness; none more precious than honor and integrity. To hate death and love life, to avoid disgrace and seek glory - these are common instincts of humankind” [3, pp.103–104].

Along with his emphasis on *trung nghĩa*, Nguyen Trai also highly valued the virtue of trustworthiness (*tín*). He wrote:

“Just as the four seasons of Heaven depend on the Earth to flourish, the four human virtues must rely on trust (*tín*) to endure. Thus, the imperial center rests upon the Earth, and the trust of the people and soldiers is what ensures that the work of Heaven and humanity is brought to fulfillment” [3, p.120].

This profound linkage between cosmic harmony and moral governance reflects Nguyen Trai's conviction that trust (*tín*) is not merely a personal virtue but a political

necessity. Without it, no sustainable relationship - between ruler and subject, or between nation and nation - can endure.

Particularly prominent in Nguyen Trai's political philosophy is the principle of *nhân nghĩa* (humaneness and righteousness). For Nguyen Trai, *nhân nghĩa* centers on ensuring the well-being of the people (*an dân*) and eliminating tyranny (*trừ bạo*). It encompasses a boundless compassion for all living beings - not only human life but also animals and even plants and grasses. *Nhân nghĩa* also implies tolerance and forgiveness, even toward defeated enemies. It is expressed in genuine concern for the welfare of both the nation and its people: safeguarding every inch of the land to ensure security, and constructing an ideal society free of warfare and chaos - a world in which the people live in peace and contentment, with "no cries of grievance or sorrow" [3, p.23]. Through Nguyen Trai's writings, *nhân nghĩa* emerges as resistance against oppression and exploitation by foreign invaders, as a commitment to national defense and to the protection of the populace. He viewed *an dân* and *trừ bạo* as foundational expressions of *nhân nghĩa*. In the surviving body of his work, the term *nghĩa* appears 59 times, while *nhân* is mentioned 81 times - a total of 140 references. This frequency demonstrates that *nhân* and *nghĩa* were not peripheral values but central pillars of his philosophical and political worldview. Indeed, *nhân nghĩa* may be regarded as the most profound political, social, and philosophical concept in Nguyen Trai's thought. It was developed on the basis of deep patriotism and a policy of solidarity with the people (*thân dân*), functioning as a unifying banner for national liberation. It inspired military commanders, soldiers, and civilians alike to rally from "all four directions" [3, p.79] and "put an end to endless war" [3, p.72]. Following the restoration of national independence, Nguyen Trai advocated the use of *nhân nghĩa* as the guiding principle for governance - *an dân* through *nhân nghĩa*. This vision was not merely born of the realities of the anti-Ming resistance and the reconstruction of Đại Việt under the early Lê dynasty. More profoundly, it was rooted in a long-standing national tradition - one that emphasized the central role of the people, revered them as the foundation of the state, and honored their contributions in the noble cause of nation-building and defense. These values, enduring through the vicissitudes of history, have long been embedded in the cultural and moral fabric of Vietnamese society.

### **The Emphasis on the Role of the Masses in Nguyen Trai's Political Thought**

In the majority of his works, Nguyen Trai made frequent and deliberate references to the people (*nhân dân*). For him, the relationship between the country and the people, between Heaven and the people, was inseparable and inherently unified. Few thinkers before or after Nguyen Trai - spanning hundreds of years - demonstrated such deep concern and attentiveness to the masses. While it may be too strong to claim that the people occupied the central position in Nguyen Trai's theoretical and literary corpus, it is clear that they held a place of great importance, appearing consistently alongside the core categories of "the nation" and "the sovereign". It can be said that "*in the Vietnamese feudal era, Nguyen Trai made an extraordinary contribution in elevating the concept of people's war—particularly guerrilla warfare—to its highest form*" [3, p.24], by mobilizing and harnessing the collective strength of the populace.

From his emphasis on the role and position of the people, Nguyen Trai's political thought also reflected the historical reality and practical demands of his time. It resonated with the popular and nationalistic movements that surged in the early 15th century, during which to speak of the nation was first and foremost to speak of the people. Nguyen Trai's poetry and prose articulated the most progressive ideas of his era: to speak of the nation was to speak of the people; yet the people, in turn, needed the nation. In order to protect the people, the homeland must be defended. The affirmation of the people's sovereignty over the land of Vietnam and the inviolability of its territorial boundaries were deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Vietnamese people for thousands of years. Through this lens, we clearly see in Nguyen Trai a deep and unwavering love for the people. With steadfast conviction, Nguyen Trai asserted that in order to safeguard the nation, the will of the people was the strongest fortress. He likened the strength of the people to the power of water. According to Nguyen Trai, the people played a decisive role in the rise and fall, success or failure, of dynasties: "*The boat may carry the king, but it may also capsize him*" [3, p.203]. He emphasized that all wealth in society in general, and the rewards granted in the court in particular, stemmed from the labor of the people. Therefore, those who toiled must be respected and cherished: "*To receive royal favors is to repay the farmers who till the land*" [3, p.445]. For Nguyen Trai, the people were the object of deep affection, the guiding principle of action, and the core content of his philosophy of *nhân nghĩa* (humaneness and righteousness).

In sum, the core of Nguyen Trai's remarkably distinctive political thought lies in his profound reverence for righteousness and moral integrity. He consistently upheld justice and humaneness, denouncing and condemning evil, cruelty, and the brutal atrocities committed by foreign aggressors against the Vietnamese people. His deep-seated hatred toward the enemy was articulated through forceful accusations, as seen in his words: *"Phuong Chinh and Ma Ky acted with extreme cruelty, plunging the people into misery. Our world resented them. They exhumed ancestral graves in our villages, abducted our people's wives and children; the living suffered, and the dead bore grievances"* [3, p.135]. From such indignation arose Nguyen Trai's celebration of what is righteous and noble, his advocacy for human resilience and aspiration in life, as well as his boundless compassion, tolerance, and love for all beings - including animals, plants, and nature itself. He firmly rejected the pursuit of fame, wealth, and material gain, embracing instead a philosophy of tranquility, detachment, and inner peace. His outlook on life was refined and virtuous: wholly devoted to the people and the nation, always viewing "the people" and "the nation" as inseparable, while upholding core ethical principles such as loyalty (*trung*), filial piety (*hiếu*), and *nhân nghĩa* (benevolence and righteousness). Nguyen Trai's political thought offers a profoundly meaningful and practical lesson on the cultivation of moral character and the ethical education of individuals in today's age of development and integration - particularly in its emphasis on the role of the masses. This emphasis aligns closely with key ideas found in Marxism - Leninism. His political philosophy truly served as a powerful source of inspiration that mobilized and harnessed the collective strength of the people in the resistance against Ming aggression: *"Raising staffs as flags, the masses from all four directions assembled"* [3, p.79].

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that Nguyen Trai's profound intellect, combined with his compassionate, sincere, and sensitive heart, enabled him to grasp the essence of events, the state of the nation, the sentiments of the people, and even the inner workings of the enemy. From this deep understanding, he developed a uniquely profound political thought of his own. As a result, *"Nguyen Trai was a rare statesman in the Vietnamese feudal era, who remained unwaveringly loyal to his ideals at all times"* [3, pp.23-24]. His political philosophy not only reflected the social realities of Đại Việt in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, but also served



as a unifying banner capable of rallying forces from all directions. To this day, his admonitions remain timeless lessons, continuously passed down through generations. In other words, the study of Nguyen Trai's philosophical thought in general - and his political philosophy in particular - offers us a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the historical development of human philosophical thought. It also plays a crucial role in nurturing theoretical reasoning and striving toward the highest achievements in science.

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