

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NGUYEN BINH KHIEM ON FAMILY ETHICS

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Abstract: *This paper aims to demonstrate that within the intellectual legacy of Nguyen Binh Khiem, several poems and writings exist that embody a philosophical discourse on family ethics in the form of familial moral teachings. This ethical philosophy is grounded in the Confucian principle of central uprightness, and the necessity of returning to the innate moral nature of humans an idea rooted in the syncretism of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism). Simultaneously, this study highlights some values and limitations of Nguyen Binh Khiem's family ethics in the context of contemporary Vietnamese society.*

Keywords: *Philosophy, filial piety, fraternal respect, family ethics, Nguyen Binh Khiem.*

Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491–1585), a renowned Vietnamese thinker of the 16th century and a senior official of the Mạc dynasty, left a significant intellectual legacy. In 2013, building upon previous compilations, the Institute of Literature, under the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, published a comprehensive volume titled “Nguyen Binh Khiem’s Poetry and Prose”, spanning over 1,600 pages. Although extensive, this compilation still falls short of the thousands of compositions noted in the *Bach Vân Am Thi Tập* (White Cloud Hermitage). Over time, many of his works have been lost, making it impossible for posterity to recover all of them. Nonetheless, from the extant texts, scholars today can analyze and systematize his philosophical thought, one that is rich

in both theoretical depth and practical wisdom reflective of his era.

Revered as the “*Master of Li (Principle) of An Nam*”, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy encompasses cosmology, human conduct, and, in particular, reflections on interpersonal behavior, both within the family and in society. His treatment of interpersonal relationships was elevated to a life philosophy, the relevance of which remains instructive today.

Philosophy, as distinguished from formal philosophical systems, differs in its level of logical exposition and its capacity to delineate universal laws of phenomena. Philosophical thought in this context is better understood as the reasoning that is validated by cultural

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context and retains its value over time. The philosophy of a particular era or nation may not always be accepted by others, underscoring that philosophy is subject to the psychological, cultural, and intellectual frameworks of a specific community. As Engels remarked in his *Anti-Dühring* on moral dichotomies such as good and evil: “In this domain, ultimate truths are exceedingly rare. From one people to another, notions of good and evil vary so extensively that they often contradict one another” (C.Marx and F.Engels, vol 20 1995: 135). Meanwhile, philosophy does not stop at being proclaimed as “love of wisdom” (Pitago), or higher, as a science of the most universal laws of nature, society and thinking, but needs to be identified as a special kind of systematic worldview which reflecting the relationship between human beings and the world around them through intuition, reflection, reasoning, and analysis.

Concerning the moral philosophy in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s thought, we find there a synthesis of Confucian moral standards, sympathy and sharing of the sufferings of the mortal in the spirit of Buddhism and, in particular, the national element with the way of life and the style of thinking from a thousand generations are expressed as an important factor in the formation of moral values. Particularly in the context of family ethics, Nguyen Binh Khiem primarily emphasizes Confucian ethical standards and national factors, considering them the most relevant arguments in the orientation to establish a moral foundation. For people

from the “initial steps” to contribute to the harmonization of social relationships. The key question is, which principles underpin Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophical idea of family ethics? What role do the cultural continuity of the three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism) and national factors play in the formation of family ethics? Does this philosophical thought still contribute to the building of Vietnamese ethics today?

First and foremost, in order to achieve a harmonious society, Nguyen Binh Khiem argued that moral education must begin within the family and conform to the ethical norms of Confucianism. In other words, the cultivation of virtue at home should be based upon a clear understanding and consistent practice of the “Dao” (Way). According to Confucian thought, the Dao is the pathway through which all human relationships are actualized it is both a method and an end. The Dao is not something distant; rather, if one genuinely seeks it, the Dao will manifest itself.

However, Nguyen Binh Khiem did not exclusively emphasize Confucianism. He believed that moral education aligned with the spirit of the era must arise from the synthesis of the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As such, he associated the Confucian concept of the Dao with the Buddhist notion of “Buddha-nature”, asserting that the Way resides within each individual. He wrote:

“Ư thiện ác cơ liêu cảnh ngộ,
Đạo phi thân ngoại mạc tha tâm”.

(“One must be alert in matters of good and evil,

The Way lies not outside oneself seek it not elsewhere”.)

(*Ngũ Hứng Quán Trung Tân Poem* 41: 247)

These lines evoke parallels with Trần Nhân Tông’s poem *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo*, wherein the founding patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Zen school stated:

“*Gia trung hữu bảo hưu tâm mịch,
Đồi cảnh vô tâm mạc vấn Thiền*”.

(“In your home lies a precious treasure seek not beyond,

Face the world with a still mind no need to inquire about Zen”.)

Despite the philosophical proximity, a key difference arises in their attitudes. Nguyen Binh Khiem, as a Confucian scholar concerned with social affairs, emphasized self-cultivation in service to society “worrying before others, rejoicing after others”. In contrast, Trần Nhân Tông, as a Buddhist monarch, viewed spiritual realization as an inward treasure accessible through detachment. Both, however, concurred that moral conduct begins from within.

For Nguyen Binh Khiem, the function of the Dao is to awaken human awareness to the consequences of moral actions what is good must be promoted; what is evil must be avoided. Family-based ethical education thus requires a continual moral alertness, whereby parents and elder siblings regularly guide children toward appropriate behavior. In his *Trung Tân Quán Bi Ký* (Inscription at Trung Tân Pavilion), he proclaimed:

“Do not say a small good deed is too

trivial to perform;

It shall lead and direct you.

Do not say a small evil deed can be dismissed;

Be mindful of all your actions”.

Such moral vigilance acts as a gateway, preparing individuals for society with a foundation in ethics. As he asserted:

“*Gia nhân nhất chính quốc nhân chính*”.

(“If the people within a household are upright, the nation’s people will also be just”.)

(*Đạo vợ chồng [On Spousal Ethics]:* 760-761)

Concerning the relationship between father and child, he wrote:

“*Cận thủy tự gia tư tức pháp,
Viễn chung ư quốc khả hưng nhân*”.

(“(We need) to begin with the family there lies the rule of governance;

Extend to the nation and benevolence shall rise”.)

However, the concept of *Dao* (Way) that Nguyen Binh Khiem put forth has a broader meaning than the aforementioned way. It is the “đạo trung” (the middle way), which he saw as a “golden mean” that is both ideal and extremely accessible. Its “ideal” nature lies in the fact that people “pursue” this đạo as an aspiration to reach the most refined point. By reaching this “golden mean”, a person practicing this đạo will avoid inadequacy. This can only be achieved by a sage, while for a common person, approaching the “đạo trung” is understood as approaching the good and reasonable things that already exist in

their daily lives that is, in their conduct toward themselves and others through “upright virtues”. He firmly asserted the accessibility of “đạo trung”, stating that all phenomena and objects inherently contain a predetermined “đạo trung”. This predetermination is not mystical but natural: “*Vật tất mạc phi trung sở giáng*” (Every object, without exception, is bestowed with the middle way by heaven) (National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, The Three Bonds and Ceremonial Music: 778-779).

Considering that “đạo trung” exists within every object and person, Nguyen Binh Khiem took a new step forward by using it to explain moral standards. He wrote: “...Loyalty to the king, filial piety to parents, affection for siblings, harmony with a spouse, and trustworthiness to friends, that is loyalty” (...) “loyalty means goodness, *tân* means to return”... “serve your parents with utmost filial piety. Serve the king without deception. Be affectionate to your elder brother and respectful to your younger brother. When the husband initiates, the wife follows” (National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Stele Inscription for Trung Tân Inn: 125-126). In Confucian moral standards, “Nhân” (benevolence) is the highest and most encompassing virtue. Nguyen Binh Khiem, however, equated “*Trung*” (loyalty) with filial piety, brotherly affection, respect, and compliance in moral relationships.

Thus, according to Nguyen Binh Khiem’s view, the principle of moral

conduct among family members is to follow the đạo with its more specific meaning “đạo trung”. Here, trung is both “*trung dung*” (the middle way), which helps people avoid inadequacy, and “*trung thú*” (benevolent loyalty), which is when a person uses their own heart to treat others with kindness. He applied this principle to the relationships among blood relatives, including father-son, husband-wife, and siblings, viewing them as the foundation for broader human relationships in society.

Second, it would not be sufficient if we were to absolutely assert that Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy of family ethics originated solely from Confucianism. In reality, all moral-instructive doctrines share the common goal of restoring a person’s original, innate nature. Confucianism calls this the good nature bestowed by heaven, and its recipient is the very “infant heart” the pure and innocent heart of a newborn child. It is only later, through contact with “material desires”, that a person’s nature changes. Zen Buddhism also confirms that a person, being swayed by greed, hatred, and delusion, loses their true heart, causing it to fall into an abyss of illusion, or a deluded mind (*vọng tâm*), which leads to deluded thoughts (*vọng niệm*). Daoism considers the pure, unadorned nature of a person to be the most precious, with all worldly transformations only corrupting it. Therefore, Daoism calls on people to return to this simple nature through the practice of “*vô vi*” (non-action), which means imitating the Dao, not doing nothing at all. Imitating the

Dao and following the laws of nature, according to Daoist principles, is also a form of self-cultivation. However, this method of cultivation differs from the views of Buddhism and Confucianism. Ultimately, returning to one's origin is the common demand of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism for a person to become good-natured, even though the methods of the three doctrines differ. Nguyen Binh Khiem wrote:

*Tính tốt thực sự có gốc rễ từ lòng hiếu
đễ và từ ái,*

*Dạy người chỉ là trở lại tính ban đầu
của mình.*

(Goodness is really rooted in filial piety and brotherly affection,

Teaching people is just a return to their original selves.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Congratulating the Confucian Instructor of Từ Sơn District: 560).

Indeed, filial piety, brotherly affection, and compassion are surely the roots of good nature. A person with a good nature is undoubtedly beneficial to society. Under the feudal system, a person of good nature knows how to maintain the middle way, understands that trung is “goodness”, and knows when to stop correctly without being biased. Therefore, a good-natured person is also a steadfast person in the spirit of being “loyal to the king and patriotic”. Thus, teaching people is about teaching them to be steeped in the roots from which they are born and grow. Suppose Confucianism warns people against the temptations of material desires to preserve their original good

nature bestowed by heaven. In the event that such temptations infect them, they must know how to overcome them step by step to make “heavenly principles” triumph over “human desires”, then Buddhism calls on people to return to their “homeland” (Tran Thai Tong) or their “old home” (Tue Trung Thuong Si). This return, according to Nguyen Binh Khiem, requires an educational orientation.

Nguyen Binh Khiem had a very deep understanding of the “ways of the world” and “the human heart”, which is why he emphasized education to, on the one hand, restore the nature bestowed by heaven and, on the other hand, provide a precise direction so that people do not lose their way. This is symbolized by the name he gave to the inn in his hometown: “Trung Tân”. The meeting of Confucianism and Buddhism here serves as a warning to people, so that they do not fall into inadequacy on the path of life. Trung (middle) is rectitude, not being biased or deviant; Tân (shore) is the place that takes people to the other side of the river (đảo bĩ ngạn). The combination of these two words creates a wonderful metaphor for education:

Hiểm mạc hiểm thế đồ,

Bất tiễn tiện kinh cửc.

Nguy mạc nguy nhân tâm,

Nhất phóng tiện quỷ vực.

(Nothing is as dangerous as the ways of the world,

If you don't prune it, it becomes a thorny thicket.

Nothing is as precarious as the human heart,

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Just let it go, and it becomes a den of ghosts.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Poem 60: 287-288).

Stating the importance of moral education for people to walk the right “path of life” and be steadfast in their “human heart”, Nguyen Binh Khiem proposed the measures of “pruning” and “preventing letting go”. This can only be effectively achieved when people are largely dependent on the teachings of senior family members. These teachings can be based on traditions and experiences accumulated from various sources, including books, personal lifestyles, customs, and other sources. He considered all of these to be the source for the formation of a person’s character:

*Đạo mạch uyên nguyên tại,
Dư ba cập tử tôn.*

(The deep source of morality remains,
Leaving a lasting influence on one’s descendants)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, A Playful Work, Poem 2: 320)

According to Nguyen Binh Khiem, the influence of experienced people who understand right from wrong and know how to behave correctly both at home and in society is very important. Especially for those who are highly educated, their role is not only significant in educating their own children but also in spreading their influence throughout society through popular verses, proverbs, and even literary works that remain valuable today, such as Nguyen Trai’s *Bảo Kính*

Cảnh Giới and Le Thanh Tong’s *Thập Nhị Huấn Điều*. He wrote:

*Tân thân tại niệm càn khôn lão,
Thi lễ truyền gia phụ tử đồng.
Nhữ bối vị ung khi ngã lão,
Suy trì do khả huấn nhi đồng.*

(Loyalty to the king and filial piety to parents are matters always etched in the heart, enduring with heaven and earth.

The family tradition of poetry and ritual is preserved in common for both father and son.

You should not disdain my old age,
Though my body is weak and slow, I can still teach children.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, A Self-Account on New Year’s Eve, Poem 159: 486-487).

Nguyen Binh Khiem always hoped that his descendants would adhere to the principles summarized in the ancient instructional texts, especially the Book of Odes and the Book of Documents. These are the wellsprings of experience that Confucians always valued. He did not expect his children and grandchildren to be child prodigies, but he wanted them to stand out from their peers through the moral lessons in the Confucian classics:

*Thi thư di trạch uyên nguyên tại,
Huynh đệ liên chi hữu ái đồng.
Cố hữu kì đồng phi sở vọng,
Thần hôn vọng nhữ xí hoàng đồng.*

(The legacy of the Book of Odes and the Book of Documents remains in a profound current,

Brothers are like connected branches, sharing a deep affection for one another.

The existence of child prodigies from

antiquity is not what I hope for,

Morning and night, I only hope you stand out among your peers.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, A Self-Account, Poem 3: 502-503).

According to him, family moral education should not only be based on the Book of Odes and the Book of Documents, but also requires a strict distinction between the environment and relationships among people, from within the family to outside society. It must follow the hierarchy defined by the Three Bonds (*tam cương*): sovereign-subject, father-son, and husband-wife. If a family has harmony in these relationships, it will surely have enduring blessings. He wrote:

*Thị đạo sơ phi gián hiển vi,
Cận nhi cư thất lý tông suy,
Biệt nghiêm nội ngoại tam cương tự,
Hòa mục môn đình vạn phúc cơ.*

...

*Gia nhân nhất chính quốc nhân chính,
Kiến cực duy hoàng căn tự di.*

(The way of husband and wife is not initially subtle and clearly unmixed,

From a close place within the house, one can infer the Way of Heaven.

Distinguish strictly between inside and outside; only then are the ranks of the Three Bonds defined.

Harmony within the family is the foundation of all blessings.

...

When the people in the family are morally upright, the people in the nation will also be righteous,

Only the king establishes the standards; one should reverently follow

the constant Way.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, The Way of Husband and Wife: 760-761).

Referring to the relationship between father and son, Nguyen Binh Khiem emphasized that its practice is essential for expanding the father's compassion and the son's filial virtue. This contributes significantly to the formation of social morality:

*Đạo bất hư hành chỉ tại nhân,
Nhữ vi phụ tử tối kỳ thân.
Khoách sụng cố hữu từ trung đắc,
Cảm phát hương nãng hiếu thương tuần.*

*Cận thủy tự gia tư tức pháp,
Viễn chung ư quốc khả hưng nhân.*

("The Way is not practiced in vain but only for the sake of people,

The father-son relationship is the most intimate of all.

Expand the inherent compassion and obtain it within your heart,

Be inspired by good qualities and follow the virtue of filial piety.

From nearby, it starts in the family, and from there, it is enough to establish national law.

From afar, it ultimately makes the whole nation rise with humanity.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Father and Son Have Affection: 776).

As a Confucian scholar, being poor but finding joy in the *Dao* was a characteristic of people like him. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem worried

that if his children were not more capable than he was, their good fortune would not last, and their livelihood would also be limited. Worrying for one's children is an unending parental responsibility, but Nguyen Binh Khiem seemed to focus more on equipping his children with knowledge of the "Dao":

Gia bần dục vị doanh sinh kế,
Cánh khùng nhi tôn vị tất hiền.

(Being poor, one wishes to seek a livelihood,

But I also fear that my descendants may not be capable.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Scholar: 696).

In our opinion, this is also why he did not approve of worrying about providing material wealth for his children, as material wealth does not create the good-natured people he always wished for:

Nhi tôn tự hữu nhi tôn phúc,
Hà tất khu khu mại mĩ điền.

(Children and grandchildren have their own blessings,

Why bother meticulously buying good land?)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Nom Poem 48: 260-261).

Thus, in his philosophy of family ethics, Nguyen Binh Khiem revealed his mindset regarding his responsibility toward his children:

"Sweep the scholar's gate to await guests,

Plant the tree of virtue for your children to eat".

(National Center for Social Sciences

and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Nôm Poem 94: 1537).

At the same time, he also clearly stated that a father must be a shining moral example for his children to follow. Only then can the family's standing and tradition be sustained:

"Where does a house leak? The roof leaks.

The path of a leaking roof is so fragile".

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Nôm Poem 112: 1547).

Regarding the brotherly relationship within the family, Nguyen Binh Khiem wrote:

*Huynh nghi hữu ái đệ nghi cung,
Hữu tự thiên luân kim cổ thông.
Như thủ túc thân tình nghĩa đố,
Nhược kinh trần mậu bản căn đồng.*

(Elder brothers need to be loving, younger brothers need to be respectful, From antiquity to the present, the divine order has been arranged.

The bond of affection is close, like hands and feet,

Like lush branches and leaves that share a common root.)

(National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy 2004, Brotherly Affection: 766-767).

In conclusion, the philosophy of family ethics in Nguyen Binh Khiem's thought is a crystallization of the classics of the Three Religions, in which Confucianism played a leading role in establishing moral standards for father-son, husband-wife, and brother-sister relationships. From a distant perspective, he drew

from the Book of Odes and the Book of Documents; more recently, he drew from the Three Bonds; and especially, from the practical experience of life, which he called the “ways of the world” and the “human heart” of his era. As a person who participated in state affairs, he recognized the importance of family ethics, viewing it as the foundation of social morality. In the human relationships defined by Confucianism, such as “human bonds” according to Confucius, the “Five Bonds” according to Mencius, and the “Three Bonds” according to Dong Zhongshu, we consistently observe that the number of such pairs is greater than that of others. However, due to the stereotypical nature of these human relationships following the Confucian spirit, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy of family ethics also has some limitations that need to be addressed in the current context. We cannot expect an eternal philosophy from him, as he lived under a feudal system that was supported by a Confucian ideology. The principles of “*phu xuong phu tuy*” (the husband initiates, the wife follows) and “*phu vi tu cuong*” (the father is the guideline for the son), like yin belonging

to yang in the Three Bonds, may have been suitable for the feudal system, but today they need to be overcome. On the other hand, Nguyen Binh Khiem, like many other contemporary Confucian scholars, focused primarily on moral education for their descendants, rather than their comprehensive development, to be fully capable of contributing to the nation and, through that, bringing honor to their parents and grandparents.

Nguyen Binh Khiem did not leave behind a specific heritage similar to a Gia huấn (Family Instructions) to educate people. Still, as a philosophical poet, he integrated his philosophy of family ethics into some of his Chinese-character poems (*Bạch Vân Am Thi Tập*) and chữ Nôm poems (*Bạch Vân Thi Tập*). This provides readers who love his poetry with a better opportunity to understand what he referred to as the “ways of the world” and the “human heart”. The ultimate goal he wished to achieve in his philosophy of family ethics was for his own family members, as well as all other families, to become good-natured people who are beneficial to society.

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