

Le Huu Trac in the inner transformation of 18th century scholars

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Abstract: *Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac is considered a “true hermit” in the Chinese conception of recluses. Studying his transformation from “social involvement” to “reclusion” helps us visualize more clearly the portrait of a typical intellectual in an era with many favorable factors that fostered a growing class of reclusive Confucian scholars. It appears that Le Huu Trac did not experience the inner state of intense and painful conflict like other reclusive Confucian scholars in history. He followed his own path: a recluse who did not seek pleasure in wine and poetry, a man who rejected fame and fortune, yet earned eternal reputation as a healer for the poor and a renowned physician in the history of the nation. Furthermore, he was also a writer and thinker, leaving his own mark on the history of Vietnamese literature and thought in the 18th century.*

Keywords: Great Physician, Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac, Reclusive Confucian Scholar, Thinker, Writer, 18th Century

1. Introduction

The 18th century was a notable period in Vietnamese history, a time when the nation was free from foreign invasions and temporarily free from civil war, yet still marked by widespread disorder. In turbulent times, heroes emerge; yet such chaos also created opportunities for scholars to advance and achieve success through non-traditional means. During this period, one could observe diverse shifts in the inner lives among scholars: some eagerly sought a lord to serve and defend, others frequented the imperial

court, bearing the “majestic dignity of high-ranking officials”¹; there were those who braved the battlefield of swords and spears, facing the hardships of war, prepared to die on the battlefield; and there were also those who lived in a tranquil and serene life, temporarily withdrawing from worldly affairs... Every choice seemed to embody its own form of wisdom, guided by the personal direction and vision of each individual. It was in this particular context

¹ Nguyen Huu Chinh’s words about Truong Luong in “Truong Luu hau phu” (An Ode of Truong Luu Marquis) (Tran Ngoc Vuong, 1999: 186).

that Le Huu Trac found his own path, from “social involvement” to “reclusion”.

2. The choices of the 18th century scholars

In the 18th century, across the country, from Dang Trong (the Southern Realm) to Dang Ngoai (the Northern Realm), from the lowlands to the highlands, from the royal court to the frontier provinces, there were countless instabilities and uncertainties. Purges and strife between feudal factions constantly occurred in both the Northern and Southern regions. Anti-government rebellions broke out time after time. The Vietnamese feudal system fell into severe crisis. In the North, the dual power structure persisted, with the Trinh Lords’ administration operating alongside the Le dynasty’s royal court. It must be acknowledged that, during the initial phase of experimenting with this unique dual-executive system, there were, to some extent, shared interests that connected and united the Le kings and the Trinh lords on multiple fronts. The relationship between King Le Than Tong and Lord Trinh Trang, in particular, could be considered a typical example of a harmonious relationship and close cooperation in governance at that time” (Phan Huy Le, 2012: 326). Sharing the same homeland, they relied on each other to build their power and were bound by strong marital ties (as crown princes of the Le dynasty were often arranged to marry princesses from the Trinh lord’s family). Notably, the influence of Confucian thought on political power and the monarch’s throne created a dynamic state: “The Le survives, the Trinh stands; the former falls, the latter perishes” (Nguyen Binh Khiem). However, over time, as the situation of “The Lord bearing the burden while Le king enjoys the pleasures”¹ persisted, the

balance of power gradually shifted entirely to the Trinh lord’s administration. By the 18th century, the Le king reduced to a mere shadow on the throne (a puppet king), and even some of the successive Le kings were persecuted (such as Le De Duy Phuong and Crown Prince Duy Vy...).

As questions surrounding *legitimacy* and *rightful authority* grew ever more pressing, the hereditary power of the Trinh lords, alongside and often overshadowing the royal throne, became both the cause and the driving force behind the ambitions of those who nurtured dream of “Swaggering across a borderland/No less than a solitary ruler, no less than a mighty king!”². It can be said that the very existence of the Lordship incited numerous uprisings by “heroes and exceptional talents from all corners of the land”.

Observing the historical developments of East Asia in general, and that of Vietnam in particular, one may discern a pattern: Whenever the legitimate imperial court grew feeble and could no longer command authority, while none of the competing forces among the existing powers were able to establish a new legitimate dynasty, and the traditional hierarchy of values was overturned, it was precisely at such times talented scholars would vie to assert themselves and create a new value system. According to Cao Tu Thanh (2007: 275), Vietnamese intellectuals in the 16th and 17th centuries “took a significant step forward in their political attitude - for them, the state became merely a means to demonstrate their talents in governance and nation-saving”. Typically, Nguyen Binh Khiem, with a mere wave of his hand pointing towards “Cao Bang province, though small, can shelter dynasties”, turned the

¹ The words of King Le Hien Tong (source: Ngô gia văn phái - Writers of Ngo family, 1978).

² The words of Tu Hai in *The Tale of Kieu* (Nguyen Du, 1996: 192).

Mac dynasty into a autonomous regime that lasted seven more generations. It was also Trang Trinh who, with his famous counsel, “The Hoanh Son range can provide a safe haven for ages”, laid the foundation for a lordship and a royal dynasty that, though it sometimes faltered and seemed close to extinction, ultimately endured for several centuries. Furthermore, it was this Master Tuyet Giang who advised the Trinh Lords to “worship Buddha and enjoy the offerings” (a metaphor for wielding power without bearing the burdens of the throne), thereby giving rise to an unprecedented dual executive model in Vietnamese history (see also Tran Ngoc Vuong, 2010). Meanwhile, Dao Duy Tu, denied significant opportunities in the North due to his humble entertainer background, took it upon himself to journey thousands of miles south in search of a worthy lord to serve, ultimately forging a heroic legacy. By the 18th century, Confucian scholars, who had long pursued a only one ideal - to study, pass the examinations, and serve the king and country - now faced a myriad choices. Each carved a distinct path, striving for survival and success, and no two alike.

Contemporaneous with Le Huu Trac were figures such as Ly Tran Quan, who chose to bury himself alive for failing to protect his lord. Yet there were also men like Nguyen Huu Chinh, who switched sides - first serving the Trinh Lords, then assisting the Tay Son, before plotting against them, seeking to establish his own power base, as the Trinh Lords once had. Ultimately, he was merely a shattered firecracker under the wheels of history: “The louder it cracks, the more it scatters” (*Cái pháo - a firecracker*, thivien.net), as he himself once wrote in verse. There were men like Ngo Thi Nham and Phan Huy Ich, who were highly valued

under the Trinh Lords but later eagerly answered the call of the Tay Son uprising. Likewise, Bui Duong Lich, who embraced a mindset of “drifting with the tides”, pledging his loyalty to whichever dynasty rose to power. There were figures like Chieu Li (Pham Thai), who roamed far and wide seeking like-minded allies to join him in resisting the Tay Son, only to be hunted down and forced into reclusion. After years of wandering and personal heartbreak, he fell into heavy drinking, composing melancholic and disillusioned poems and writings, and passing away before reaching the age of forty. Closest in time was Master La Son, Nguyen Thiep, who who abandoned the imperial examinations and withdrew deep into Mount Thien Nhan, where he quietly immersed himself in the path to immortality. Yet, from time to time, his poetry still echoed with lingering yearnings. Such varied paths reflected the inner conflicts faced by Confucian scholars during that period.

3. Le Huu Trac between social involvement and reclusion

Le Huu Trac (1724¹-1791) was born into a distinguished scholarly family from Lieu Xa village, Duong Hao district, Hai Duong prefecture, now part of Yen My district, Hung Yen province. Between the eighth and tenth generations, the Le Huu lineage produced six scholars who attained the titles of *Hoàng giáp* (known second-rank doctorate) and *Tiến sĩ* (as first-rank doctorate), achieving both high academic honors and esteemed positions

¹ Regarding Le Huu Trac’s birth year, some sources state 1720 and others 1721. In this work, we follow the information provided by Le Huu Quan, a 16th generation descendant of the Le Huu family in Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province, as cited in *The Stele of the Le Huu family* (1994), The Gioi Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 155.

within the Hau Le court. Le Huu Danh, his grandfather, a second-rank doctorate degree holder, was renowned for his benevolence and kindness, earning him the affectionate nickname “Bo Phat” (Father Buddha). Le Huu Hy, his uncle, passed the first-rank doctorate examinations and was appointed *Giám sát ngự sử* (Imperial Censor). His father, Le Huu Muu, also distinguished himself early in life, rising to the position of *Thượng thư* (Minister). His uncle, Le Huu Kieu, once held ministerial posts across four major ministries, namely Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of War, and Ministry of Rites and was appointed Grand Chancellor (Prime Minister) three times by the king. He was also a tutor to the king and to prominent scholars such as Dang Tran Con and Le Quy Don... (*The Stele of the Le Huu family*, 1994: 156-157).

Born into such an aristocratic family, Le Huu Trac’s future seemed already predetermined - a path of scholarly pursuit, passing the examinations, entering officialdom to manifest the great Confucian and Mencian ideals of “self-cultivation, regulation of family affairs, good state governance, and ensuring peace to all under heaven”. Yet, the young scholar turned instead to study military strategy and joined the army. Perhaps it was the stirring atmosphere of that chaotic era, with a spirit that spurred men to break free and assert themselves “beyond the constraints of convention”, that inspired Le Huu Trac a burning resolve to embody the “heroic ideal of manhood” amidst the “boundless battlefields”. However, just as he began to earn recognition and as the path to a brilliant military career - perhaps even the prospect of becoming a renowned general in Lord Trinh’s army - appeared within reach, Le Huu Trac abruptly withdrew

to his mother’s homeland in Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province, to “bury his name and conceal his trace”. Although some interpretations suggest that Le Huu Trac once experienced the hesitation of a loyal subject, torn between allegiance to the Le dynasty and Lord Trinh: “The affairs of the world remain unfinished,/Whether to side with Qin or with Han, neither road taken...” (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1983: 98) - a dilemma that might have led him to return to his mother’s homeland, leaving behind his burning aspirations to roam freely across limitless horizons of his youth: “Ten years honing a single sword,/Its radiance flashing ten thousand feet high/Thunder and clouds stir across the skies...” (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1971: 186) - yet, fundamentally, his state of mind showed few signs of deep inner conflict. Writings and poetry by Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac suggest that every turning point in his life - whether abandoning scholarly pursuits for a military path or later leaving behind rank and title to seek refuge in the countryside - occurred with a natural ease, much like his calm and unhurried demeanor.

Returning to his mother’s homeland, Le Huu Trac initially devoted himself to reading, caring for his elderly mother, and raising his relative’s orphaned child, “Though preoccupied with endless tasks and duties, without a moment of leisure”, thus, “sharpening the sword, reading books, and pursuing lofty ambitions became increasingly difficult to achieve” (*Preface to Y tông tâm lĩnh - Understandings of medicine*, cited in: Physician Dinh Cong Bay, 2016). After catching a severe cold and having suffered from illness since his time in the military, his health gradually weakened, and despite two years of treatment, he found no relief. By chance, he met the physician Tran Doc,

from Nghe An, an esteemed scholar with extensive knowledge, who cured him. During his treatment, in his spare time, he often read the *Phùng thị cảm nang*¹ (*A medical handbook by Feng Zhaozhang*), gradually grasping its profound insights. Recognizing Le Huu Trac's aptitude, Master Tran Doc, entrusted him with his full knowledge of medicine. Gifted with intelligence, he quickly understood the medical theories and discovered a passion for medical books. Realizing that the medicine could not only benefit himself but also help others, he was determined to pursue it. In Huong Son district, he built a house near the forest and adopted the pen name "Hai Thuong Lan Ong" - "Hai Thuong" combining the first characters of Hai Duong province and Thuong Hong prefecture, his father's homeland, as well as the Bau Thuong, his mother's birthplace; "Lan Ong" meaning the lazy old man. By adopting the title "Lan Ong", Le Huu Trac declared to the world the path he had chosen: A life of seclusion.

Viewed as a whole, the distinguishing characteristic that sets recluses apart from other scholars-officials is that they did not participate in official affairs, rejected courtly robes and ranks, and showed little concern for the obligations of a loyal servant. Following the Confucian teachings, "in troubled times, one withdraws into seclusion", they chose a life apart, avoiding involvement with both the government and the great majority of scholar-officials - whom they regarded as "seeking fame and chasing after the illusion of glory". They described themselves as "clumsy, lazy, and incompetent", even "ignorant", and used these attributes to create their own their

pen names (*Chuyết ông, Lãn ông, Ngu ông...*) (see also Tran Ngoc Vuong, 1999: 39). In this sense, the two words "Lan Ong (lazy old man)" in Le Huu Trac's pseudonym affirm his self-liberation from the constraints of fame and power.

Among the many reclusive scholars during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries - a particular period in history, when the ruling dynasty was sometimes considered illegitimate, or when the court was dominated by powerful officials - creating a favorable climate for the rise of reclusive scholars both in the North and the South, such as Nguyen Hang, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Nguyen Du, Ngo The Lan, Nguyen Thiep..., Hai Thuong Lan Ong, however, took his own distinct path.

Although he often mentioned the saying "Longing for leisure, I was deeply immersed" (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1971: 188), Hai Thuong Lan Ong did not vanish into a secluded world beyond reach, nor did he seek rustic pleasure in the countryside, nor turned to the teachings of Lao - Zhuang, or Zen Buddhism as the ultimate refuge for his spiritual life. For Le Huu Trac, seclusion meant returning to a life in harmony with the purity of nature, avoiding the temptations of power and fame offered by the ruling class. Occasionally, he would enjoy moments of quiet elegance: "In my leisure, I would play the guqin" (to be content with poverty and happy in virtue) (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1983: 100), or "sit in deep tranquility" and listen to "the sound of a falling flower", letting his mind become even more at ease. However, the most important thing was never to turn away from the world. The pursuit of leisure, for Le Huu Trac, could only be found within life itself, right in the very place where he lived and existed: "An old monk finds leisure amid clouds and streams,/Just as a doctor finds ease within

¹ The book was written by the renowned Chinese physician, Feng Zhaozhang (馮兆張).

his own chamber” (*Xuân nhật nhàn hứng* 2 - A leisurely inspiration on a spring day) (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1983: 100).

According to Nguyen Hue Chi (1983: 100), Le Huu Trac “managed to reconcile the contradiction between, on one hand, the desire for seclusion and “retreat to the mountains”, and on the other, the acceptance of responsibilities demanded by life”. While many of his contemporaries, disillusioned with fame and power, withdrew from political affairs, often sought liberation in the metaphysical Nirvana of Buddhism or the illusion of immortality in Taoism, Le Huu Trac, by contrast, regarded such pursuits as a “grave mistake” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 25). He sought leisure in a different path: Practicing medicine - a path that appeared serene but in reality required constant effort. Holding the belief that “Isn’t mastering medicine better than cultivating Taoism or Buddhism?” (“Preface” to *Y tông tâm lĩnh*) (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1971: 190), Le Huu Trac “diligently studied medicine for twenty years, enduring hardship in pursuit of mastery, determined to attain a thorough understanding so as to avoid any sense of shame [...]. He used *Neijing* (*Classic of Internal Medicine*) as his foundation, the *Feng Zhaozhang’s Medical Handbook* and *Zhang Jingyue’s Complete Medical Book* as his outlines, while combining insights from the works of his predecessors - either interpreting meanings, clarifying ambiguities and doubts, or supplementing gaps and omissions, or contributing his own experiences and realizations. Over more than ten years, with steadfast determination and wholehearted dedication, he gradually uncovered the key principles and finally compiled them into a written work...” (Preface to the first volume of *Y tông tâm lĩnh*) (Pharmacist Do Duc Loi, 1971: 96). Throughout his life, he devoted himself to

the practice of medicine to serve others, though he occasionally made mistakes, some even serious: “It was only between the ages of 30 and 40 that I that I truly knew how to practice medicine; from 40 to 50, I made fewer mistakes; and only between 50 and 70 did I finally stopped making them...” (Do Duc Loi, 1971: 96). At times, the beautiful scenery of nature remained an inevitable “debt” for the poetic recluse, who would suddenly be moved, immersing himself in the vastness of nature:

“The moon urges oars to break the waves,
In the stillness, joy grows stronger.
Mist makes blossoms fresh and bright,
While autumn leaves the mountains worn
and bare”

(*Dạ nguyệt hành chu - Night sailing under the moon*) (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1979: 18-19)

But he would soon awaken:

“Still dreaming of wine and strings.
For the sake of others, let it go”

(Nguyen Hue Chi, 1979: 18-19)

In spite of life’s many upheavals, he was still:

“Glad that my healing skills endure,
Though life’s tribulations, they never left
my hands”

(Nguyen Hue Chi, 1979: 190)

Le Huu Trac once remarked: “The medicine is a benevolent art of saving a life; a physician must regard helping others as a virtuous duty”. He further noted, “Upon deep contemplation, I realized that a physician is the one who safeguards human life. Life and death rest in our hands; fortune and misfortune lie within our grasp. How could anyone, with insufficient knowledge, lacking virtue, a narrow mind, and careless actions, dare to recklessly pursue such a noble profession?”, “Having pledged to devote my life to medicine, I have always sought to perform every good deed within

this profession, to produce insightful and comprehensive medical writings, and to achieve profound expertise and leave a lasting mark upon the field of medicine” (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1979: 191). It was for this reason that Nguyen Hue Chi believed Hai Thuong Lan Ong’s distinctive trait lay primarily in his being a “man of action”. Le Huu Trac did not immerse himself in the “sighs” of his era, nor was he preoccupied with sorrow over the troubles of the age. He was neither burdened by thoughts of loyalty to the king or the ideals of governance and peace, nor was he troubled by the notion of “the first to worry before the common people were worried, and the last to enjoy after the people were happy”, or seek to build an idealized society of “Emperors Yao and Shun, and their people”. Instead, his compassion turned toward the laboring people. In his medical manual *Y huán (Medical teachings)*, he left this reminder: “When visiting the sick in impoverished households, widows, or orphans, a physician must show special care and concern. Because the wealthy will always find physicians, while the poor cannot afford to invite a good one. Then, why hesitate to open our heart, even for a moment, to help them live a full life? As for the filial children and virtuous daughters-in-law who fall ill due to poverty, not only should they be provided with medicine, we must also offer them material support within our means. Since with medicine, without food, they would still perish. To truly fulfill this vocation, a physician must care for the fullness of life for others - only then can it be called the “art of saving a life” (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1979: 200). This passage reflects a true physician’s profound compassion. Clearly, when it came to practicing medicine to save lives, Le Huu Trac never shied away. The so-called “Lazy old man”

was simply indifferent to the pursuit of power, fame, and fortune. He recalled the moment when he was summoned to the capital to treat Crown Prince Trinh Can: “Realizing how serious the situation was, I was overwhelmed with fear and remained dazed for half an hour” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 15). That entire night, “he tossed and turned, unable to sleep, as the burden weighed heavily on his heart”. The reason for his sleeplessness laid in this reflection: “A tree in bloom will be plucked; one who holds an empty reputation will be entangled by it” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 15). A scholar with talent and reputation, summoned to court by the lord, yet compared himself to “a blossoming tree fated to be plucked”! Thus, to him, “fame” had become a “burden”, not merely because it drove people to struggle and exhaustion, but more crucially, because empty fame left one at the mercy of others, stripping away one’s freedom:

“For fame and fortune, how many fall,
Ashamed before the mountains and rivers”
(Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 109)

In his perception, shared by many scholars of his time, the pursuit of fame and fortune was a stage where honor and disgrace walked side by side, just as laughter and tears intertwine in this secular world.

4. Conclusion

It appears that Le Huu Trac did not experience the inner state of intense and painful conflict often found among other reclusive Confucian scholars in history. Every choice and turning point in his life unfolded gently and effortlessly, as if in harmony with nature. From an eager young man hoping to fulfill his family’s “lifelong ambition”, Le Huu Trac suddenly grew disillusioned with fame and fortune, turning his back on the “hustle and bustle of officialdom”. Choosing the life of a

lazy, naïve man, content with the flowing streams, wildflowers, the bright moon above the green mountains, living in quiet seclusion, preserving his noble essence, Le Huu Trac, however, actively re-engaged with the lives of the poor and humble villagers, becoming a devoted physician. From a renowned physician, Le Huu Trac became one of the prominent writers of 18th-century Vietnamese literature. It seems that in every role he undertook, he held a truly special position. The consistent feature that shaped the portrait of Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac across all fields, lies in his life philosophy that “the aspirations of each scholar are different” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 100). For him, the “the joy of serene leisure” led him to “disregard the fame and wealth of the mundane world” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 101), because, ultimately, “Only a good reputation endures./ Wealth and false glory are but fleeting” (Hai Thuong Lan Ong, 1971: 89) □

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