



## NGUYEN BINH KHIEM'S THOUGHT AND THE BUILDING OF ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE CURRENT PERIOD

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### **Abstract:**

Ecological disasters have affected all countries and regions around the world. It hinders the process of social modernization, and threatens the survival of all mankind. In that context, the building of ecological ethics becomes one of the urgent and practical needs to contribute to environmental protection, ensuring sustainable development. Researching the history of Vietnamese thoughts in the 15th - 16th centuries reveal that Nguyen Binh Khiem is one of the typical thinkers whose moral philosophy is not only valuable for that historical period, but there are still many values for all areas of today's social life, including the area of ecological ethics. In this article, the author focuses on analyzing his three typical thoughts, including: thought on loving peace; thought on nature, thought on the relationship between man and nature; the philosophy of living in harmony with nature, thereby drawing the value of these thoughts for the issue of ecological ethics building in the current period.

**Keywords:** ecological ethics, Nguyen Binh Khiem, natural philosophy

### **Introduction**

Looking at social production from the dawn of human history to the present day, we have witnessed spectacular developments in the human's level of conquering the nature. The human impacts on the nature are expanding in scope, increasing in level. However, under the support of modern science and technology, those impact are increasingly worsening human's environmental conditions. Many human's resource exploitation activities have exceeded the stamina and resilience of the natural environment. The environment in many places has been alarmingly devastated. Human beings today are facing more and more serious environmental problems, even global ecological disasters, such as: environmental pollution, natural disasters, climate change, epidemics, depleted natural resources, ecological imbalance, biodiversity loss. Due to the global ecological environmental problems that are threatening the survival of all mankind, the building of

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ecological ethics becomes one of the urgent and practical needs which are set out towards the reasonable exploitation and use of natural resources and environmental protection for sustainable development.

In that context, the study of the moral philosophy of Vietnamese thinkers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries aims to promote the valuable truths of those philosophies for today's society, including the ecological-ethics building is a very meaningful activity. In this article, the author focuses on studying the thoughts of the scholar Nguyen Binh Khiem on the nature, on the harmony between man and nature ... thereby, draw the value of these thoughts to the building of ecological ethics in the current period.

### **Research History**

Nguyen Binh Khiem is a great personality, a great intelligence. His life and career are a good example for us to learn and follow. Therefore, the research on Nguyen Binh Khiem attracts the attention of many scholars. In the field of philosophy, there have been some typical research projects on Nguyen Binh Khiem such as: *The History of Vietnamese Thoughts*, Episode 1 of Nguyen Tai Thu (1993) has outlined the most typical thoughts of Nguyen Binh Khiem, such as: philosophical worldview, political & social thoughts, human religion; at the same time, he also pointed out the limitations and causes of those limitations in Nguyen Binh Khiem's thoughts. In 2003, author - Nguyen Huu Son compiled the book - *Nguyen Binh Khiem - Poet of life philosophy* (Youth Publishing House - Association of Researching and Teaching Literature in Ho Chi Minh City). In this work, in addition to studying the life and the career of Nguyen Binh Khiem, the author also points out a number of philosophies expressed through his poetry. Nguyen Ba Cuong's doctoral dissertation (2011) on "Human issue and human education in thoughts of Nguyen Trai - Nguyen Binh Khiem - Ngo Thi Nham" has had a deep research and has given the evaluation of the educational ideology of Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Ngo Thi Nham.

In addition, there are a number of articles published in the specialized scientific journals about different aspects of Nguyen Binh Khiem's thoughts, such as: the article "Some issues of Nguyen Binh Khiem's ethical thought" by Cao Thi Thu Hang, published in *Philosophy Journal* No. 2 in 2000; Author Le Van Tan with the article "Nguyen Binh Khiem and Bạch Vân am quốc ngữ thi tập: forms of expression on seclusion" published in the *Science Journal of HCMC University of Education*, No. 7 (73) in 2015.

The works of previous researchers have shown the contributions of Nguyen Binh Khiem in many fields, such as: the field of philosophy, the field of ethics, the field of literature, the field of politics. The ideological system of Nguyen Binh Khiem contains many profound ethical thoughts and philosophies. They are valuable not only for the historical period of the fifteenth - sixteenth centuries, but also for many fields of social life today, including ecological ethics. Through his poems, he expressed his unique thoughts on the nature, on the relationship between man and nature, on his passionate

love of nature. More importantly, he not only had the description of nature, but also used his own life to realize that love of nature. He was attached to the beautiful nature of his homeland, and lived a life being simple, peaceful, leisurely and free. Therefore, the study of Nguyen Binh Khiem's ethical thoughts and philosophies, especially the thought on the nature, on the relationship between man and nature not only shows his great contributions to the history of Vietnamese philosophical thoughts, but also actively contributes to solving problems about the environment and ecological ethics in the current period.

## Research Contents

Nguyen Binh Khiem was born into a large intellectual family of the fifteenth - sixteenth century, which was considered to have reached a high level of contemporary wisdom. He was proficient in astronomy, geography and won the human heart He left behind for the next generations a huge valuable treasure of poetry in many fields. Nguyen Binh Khiem's works have many different contents, reflecting not only his concerns about life and the times but also the human relationships with nature, including thoughts that have profound implications for the building of ecological ethics in the current period.

According to researcher Pham Thi Ngoc Tram, ecological ethics as well as social ethics, *"includes a system of viewpoints, thoughts, emotions, principles, rules, standards... to regulate and adjust human behaviors in the process of the natural transformation to serve human life, the existence and constant development of society, in certain socio-ecological conditions."*<sup>ii</sup>.

Ecological ethics is shown in the following: human acts affecting nature to exploit the use value of nature must ensure the regenerative and self-healing capacity of natural objects; For non-renewable resources, such as fuels, minerals... it must exploit and use them appropriately, avoid the waste and the exhaustion of resources. The ultimate ecological goal of social production is to ensure a harmonious coexistence between society and nature, between the interests of man and the interests of natural objects. This standard requires human a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the nature, especially its laws of existence and movement. Besides, it is also necessary to master the basic principles of the relationship between man, society and nature, human obligations and responsibilities in the rational exploitation and use of natural resources and environmental protection for the sake of sustainable development of modern society.

In that sense, even in the thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem - a thinker of the fifteenth - sixteenth century, a period that did not have such serious and global ecological problems as today - there are very valuable viewpoints on ecological ethics.

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<sup>ii</sup> See: Pham Thi Ngoc Tram (2005), "Ecological ethics and human's sustainable development", *Philosophy Journal*, No. 12 (175).

**Firstly, the thought of loving peace.**

Nguyen Binh Khiem clearly expressed his desire for people to be at peace because he felt the extreme pain of the villages suffering from starvation and war separation. He lamented people when he saw the scene of “*people fled to find safe places; they were wretched, drifted, carried each other, had no place to stay*”<sup>iii</sup>. Not only has it caused people to be separated and have no place to live, the war has also caused more tragic consequences, those were, taking the lives of so many people, making the blood flow into rivers, bones piling up like mountains: “*Feeling sad when the two enemies kept fighting. Everywhere, blood flows into rivers, bones piles up like mountains. I don't know why they must chase fish to the abyss, chase birds into the bushes like that!*”<sup>iv</sup>. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem dreamt of a peaceful and prosperous life like the Tang and Yu dynasties.<sup>v</sup>. He knew that time could not be easily returned because the rift, the division of powers in the country at that time could not be healed. But because he loved the people, because he loved the country, he also wanted to bring all “his old age and limited capacity” to tried hard all day and night to do something for the country to avoid the disaster of war.

Analysis of Nguyen Binh Khiem's thought of loving peace, opposing war in terms of ecological ethics (in modern language) shows that it is a profound human ecological ideology. We need to affirm that all human activities towards building ecological ethics, protecting and improving the ecological environment..., then the ultimate goal is also for human beings, for protecting their own survival as a link, a part of the ecosystem. Therefore, all acts of harming to humans (first of all, to harm to human biological bodies) are contrary to ecological ethics. Nguyen Binh Khiem opposed the war, because the war caused the scene “*blood flows into rivers, bones pile up like mountains*”, which was a brutal interference with human life, and was the human destruction from within its biological nature. That thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem becomes more and more valuable in this day, when the weapons that people use in war are more and more modern and dangerous. It is not only ordinary guns, ammunition, but also atomic bombs, chemical toxins, biological agents such as bacteria, viruses used to cause disease in humans. Therefore, the damages caused by war to people and the environment can be so enormous and serious that they can “destroy ecology”. If the human race cannot live peacefully, if they wage war and start rioting, it is crazy to hope that they can solve the ecological conservation problem seriously.

The consequences that Vietnam has been suffering from the war caused by the American imperialist are typical evidence of the harmful effects of the war. That war not only destroyed the environment, but also seriously affected people. They were not only direct effects, but also traumatic sequelae for many future generations. Facing these

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<sup>iii</sup> Dinh Gia Khanh (1962), *Anthology of Vietnamese poetry in the tenth -seventeenth century*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, p.497

<sup>iv</sup> Dinh Gia Khanh (1962), *Anthology of Vietnamese poetry in the tenth -seventeenth century*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, p.503

<sup>v</sup> Dinh Gia Khanh (1962), *Anthology of Vietnamese poetry in the tenth -seventeenth century*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, p.479

losses, we see more clearly Nguyen Binh Khiem's dissatisfaction before the chaotic war scenes as well as how meaningful he always wishes people to live a peaceful and prosperous life. His thoughts are not only the expression of progressive ecological thinking, but also a profound humanistic spirit.

**Secondly, the thought on nature, on the relationship between man and nature.**

Nguyen Binh Khiem's worldview was deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The active nucleus of his conceptions of the world was the materialistic and dialectical element. He thought that everything (including human) was born naturally, due to the combination of yin and yang. He said the heaven gave birth to all creatures, but the heaven in his conception was the natural world, not a supernatural force, not a god that came with some personality. That meant man was only part of the nature. He also said that the heaven's will of birth was not unfair, all species were the same, it meant, humans were equal to all species, all other living beings must be respected as humans. Not only considering man as a part of nature, Nguyen Binh Khiem also showed his dialectical thinking when analyzing the relationships with interactions, ties, and mutual regulations between nature and man, between heaven and man. He said: "*heaven and human relations fit together*"<sup>vi</sup>.

Nguyen Binh Khiem's viewpoints of the world and people are of great significance in ecological ethics education. The concept of the heaven in his thought can be understood as the ecosystem. The heaven created humans when creating the universe of creatures. That both implies that man must obey the heaven, obey the movement laws of nature, and imply a dependent equality in the ecosystem, which requires establishing an ethical relationship between people and the universe. An ecosystem is not only a self-created system but also an interdependent community in which different species coexist in harmony. Humans also need to coexist harmoniously in the ecosystem because humans have the same origin with all other; and humans are created equally with those creatures. Only when people are aware that they are only one part and equal with other parts of the ecological system, can people have proper attitudes and behaviors with the ecological environment. According to F. Engels's point of view, man is not a lord with infinite power over nature, standing above nature and in opposition to nature, but only a part of nature and subject to it. Therefore, man cannot treat nature with the attitudes and actions of those who stand outside of the nature, not take into account or defy its laws.<sup>vii</sup> It can be said that Nguyen Binh Khiem's viewpoint, which is similar to that of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, gives us an instruction that man must obey the heaven, following the laws of the nature, living in cooperation with nature, not depriving it. Besides, human is only part of the symbiotic and unified ecosystem. If human

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<sup>vi</sup> Quoted: Nguyen Tai Thu (1993), *The History of Vietnamese Thoughts*, Episode 1, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p.353

<sup>vii</sup> K. Marx and F.Engels (1994), *Full*, p. 20, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p.654. Electronic version, last accessed August 20, 2020 at: <http://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/c-mac-angghen-lenin-ho-chi-minh/book/ph-angghen/tac-pham/c-mac-va-ph-ang-ghen-toan-tap-25-phan-i-284>

interventions to the ecosystem break any link in the entire ecosystem, it also means that people are breaking the unity of the system, and of course, man will have to receive negative effects as nature's "revenge".

**Thirdly, the philosophy of living in harmony with nature.**

Nguyen Binh Khiem lived in the downturn of the Vietnamese feudalism: economic stagnation, corrupt bureaucrats, reversed moral principles, degrading-social morality, constant war, miserable people. With the thought of loving people, he always actively fights against corrupt bureaucrats harming to the state & the people, and also strives for a peaceful society and the full-life people. He opposes the arbitrariness and advocates the implementation of the "moral rule" line, taking humanity to win over people: "*Philanthropist can not be defeated/ There is no need to persevere in pursuing war*"<sup>viii</sup>. But under the rotten feudal regime, Nguyen Binh Khiem's aspirations did not come true. Being powerless before the chaos and turmoil, he went into retreat, lived leisurely with the philosophy of living in harmony with nature. Nguyen Binh Khiem showed his deep love for nature, immersed himself in the beautiful nature, appreciated the nature, found values from the most simple things of nature and lived according to the nature of heaven and earth. To live in harmony with nature, he advocated that humans should use natural resources fairly and in a limited manner. He opposed vandalism that robbed the ecosystem to meet human's private purposes.

All creatures in the ecosystem (including humans) are born by the heaven and endowed with intrinsic values. In which, animals are less intelligent and sensitive than humans, but they also show some perception and emotional recognition of their fellow; they are superior to other creatures on earth. They also have the ability to feel pain, so human needs to show compassion, mercy towards them. To appreciate the intrinsic value of animals, Nguyen Binh Khiem advised humans not to kill animals much.

For activists for animal rights, if animals are capable of feeling the same pain as humans, they deserve to receive basic protection of the right to life. Humans should avoid killing animals. Besides, humans can survive by vegetarian food, unlike carnivores that have no other choice. Therefore, humans should not kill or take away the life of animals. Contrary to that viewpoint, Nguyen Binh Khiem did not object to the use of instrumental values of animals. Humans are allowed to eat meat (not all animals, of course) in addition to grains and vegetables. That is a natural way of existence that humans have been following since the birth of man. Human's consumption of some animals does not mean a crime with life. On the contrary, it shows respect for the order of the ecosystem. In essence, the human's killing and eating other animals is the result of man obeying nature's selection and evolution. The behavior Nguyen Binh Khiem criticizes is that people are incapable of moderating their own desires and they are overexploiting ecological resources for their own benefit.

In the poem *Thị võng nhi*, Nguyen Binh Khiem admonished the animal catchers:

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<sup>viii</sup> Dinh Gia Khanh (1962), *Anthology of Vietnamese poetry in the tenth -seventeenth century*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, p.496

"Loài chim loài cá đều là vật nhỏ,  
Nhưng để cho chúng sống hay là chết là do cái ý niệm của ta.  
Chim nào muốn lên trời thì bay lên cao,  
Chim nào muốn xuống đất thì bay xuống thấp;  
Hoặc muốn sang bên hữu thì bay sang hữu,  
Hoặc muốn sang bên tả thì bay sang tả.  
Chỉ trừ loài nào không theo mệnh lệnh,  
Là mắc vào lưới của ta.  
Nếu không sẵn tấm lòng yêu loài vật,  
Thì mấy người đã hiểu rõ đức hiếu sinh đó.  
Người xưa nuôi chim sẻ được sự trả ơn,  
Phóng sinh rùa được thoát tai vạ.  
Vậy nay có lời ân cần khuyên nhủ những người làm nghề chài lưới,  
Sát sinh nhiều là một việc rất không nên"<sup>ix</sup>

*("A fish, a bird are small creatures,  
But their lives or death is due to our own ideas.  
Any bird, that wants to go to the sky, will fly high,  
Any bird, that wants to enter the ground, will fly low;  
Or if wanting to go to the right, then fly to the right.  
Or if wanting to go to the left, then flying to the left.  
Except for animals species which do not follow orders,  
Are caught in your net.  
If being not willing to love animals,  
How many people have understood that mercy?  
The ancients raised sparrows to get repayment,  
Released the turtle to escape the calamity.  
So now there are kind words to advise those who catch animals by net,  
Killing much is a very bad thing.")*

In this poem, Nguyen Binh Khiem borrowed the legend of Chen Tang king to advise people not to kill much: Cheng Tang king of Shang Dynasty, when he went out on the street, saw someone using a bird-catching net with all four sides, the king opened three sides, covered only one side and read six verses (*Tòng thiên cao giả cao/ Tòng địa hạ giả hạ/Hoặc dục hữu giả hữu/ Hoặc dục tả giả tả/ Thủ ngoại la ngô võng /Duy bất dụng mệnh giả*) that means opening a life path for birds.

Nguyen Binh Khiem clearly demonstrates moderation and modesty in the life of a Confucian scholar. Philosophy of living in harmony with nature in his thoughts has great significance in forming the human ecological consciousness, and awareness of protecting human natural environment. Humans must have access to ecological

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<sup>ix</sup> Dinh Gia Khanh (1962), *Anthology of Vietnamese poetry in the tenth-seventeenth century*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, p.491

resources in order to survive, however, humans need to follow the nature of the ecosystem, and should not deplete the wealth of heaven and earth to meet the private purposes. At bad times of the year, human's consumption of food and drink also needs to be moderate to reflect the difficulties that heaven and earth went through when giving birth to all creatures. Under current conditions, this is a basic and most effective strategy for ecological conservation: Interfering with, and disrupting natural ways of ecosystems as little as possible. As long as man does not disturb the ecological environment, the supreme blessing of heaven to produce life will be born naturally and ceaselessly.

## **Conclusion**

In Nguyen Binh Khiem, although we have not seen a ideological system of ecological ethics (as it is now called), many of his thoughts can become the theoretical basis for building ecological ethics in current period. The thoughts on loving peace, the thought on nature, the thought on the relationship between man and nature, the philosophy of living in harmony with nature by Nguyen Binh Khiem show that ecological thinking appeared early in the thinkers, when ecological environmental problems have not yet become global and serious problems. Nguyen Binh Khiem has always dreamed of a peaceful, war-free society because he felt sorry for the scene: people were separated, blood flowed into rivers, bones piled up like mountains. War is man's brutal intervention in man's own life - that is the highest achievement of the ecosystem and is the blessing of heaven. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem's thoughts of striving for peace is an expression of the lofty humanistic thought. Considering man as the product of heaven, as a result of the yin and yang harmony, a part of nature and being born equal to all things, Nguyen Binh Khiem advocated that man must obey heaven, i.e. obey the movement laws of the natural world; live in harmony with nature, and we should not deplete the heaven and earth's wealth to meet our own personal purposes. With such viewpoints, Nguyen Binh Khiem demonstrates a deep understanding of nature, the relationship between man and nature, human obligations and responsibilities in exploiting nature to ensure that harmonious co-existence between man and nature.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## **About the Author**

Nguyen Thi Nhu was born at Thai Binh province in Vietnam, on September 11, 1984. The author's educational background is follows: Doctor of philosophy, Department of philosophy at University of Social Sciences and Humanities which belongs to Vietnam National University in Hanoi in 2018. Her work experiences: Teacher, National Academy of Education Management, Hanoi, Vietnam (2010 until now). Publications: *Vietnamese Confucianism in the Ly - Tran dynasties*, VNU Press, Hanoi, 2019. Current and previous



research interests are in the areas of philosophy, thought of Vietnamese Confucianism in the Ly - Tran dynasties and teaching methods.

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