

## Political - Social Philosophy of Nguyen Binh Khiem and its Significance for Vietnam in the Current Era

*Filosofia Política - Social de Nguyen Binh Khiem e seu Significado para o Vietnã na Era Atual*

Nguyen Thi Tuong DUY

Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade,

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: [duyntt@huit.edu.vn](mailto:duyntt@huit.edu.vn)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3241-7845>

### ABSTRACT:

Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491–1585) was a philosopher and one of Vietnam's greatest cultural figures of the 16th century. He was distinguished not only for his contributions to culture and education but also for his profound philosophical thought, particularly his political and social views. He was one of the leading intellectuals of the Later Lê dynasty. His thoughts have greatly contributed to the formation of political and social viewpoints in feudal Vietnam, leaving valuable lessons for the ongoing development of the country. Through his literary works, poetry, and practical activities, as well as his conduct, we can discern his deep political - social ideas. The first thing is his vision was of a peaceful society, one in which harmony prevailed both at the top and bottom of the social order, in which people respected and upheld moral principles. This would be a society of peace and prosperity, a foundational condition for the strength and thriving of the nation. Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought is also expressed through ideas such as the concept of securing the people's welfare, placing the people at the center; the critical spirit against and condemnation of feudal warfare. Studying Nguyen Binh Khiem's political - social thought provides a foundation for accurately recognizing the distinctive characteristics and value of his ideas in the development of Vietnamese national thought, as well as their relevance to the ongoing process of building Vietnamese society today.

**KEYWORDS:** Nguyen Binh Khiem, philosophy, political-social thought, Vietnam

RESUMO:

Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491–1585) foi um filósofo e uma das maiores figuras culturais do Vietnã no século XVI. Distinguiu-se não só pelas suas contribuições para a cultura e a educação, mas também pelo seu profundo pensamento filosófico, particularmente pelas suas visões políticas e sociais. Foi um dos principais intelectuais da Dinastia Lê Posterior. Os seus pensamentos contribuíram grandemente para a formação de pontos de vista políticos e sociais no Vietname feudal, deixando lições valiosas para o desenvolvimento contínuo do país. Através de suas obras literárias, poesias e atividades práticas, bem como de sua conduta, podemos discernir suas profundas ideias político-sociais. A primeira coisa é que a sua visão era de uma sociedade pacífica, na qual a harmonia prevalecesse tanto no topo como na base da ordem social, na qual as pessoas respeitassem e defendessem os princípios morais. Esta seria uma sociedade de paz e prosperidade, uma condição fundamental para a força e prosperidade da nação. O pensamento político de Nguyen Binh Khiem também se expressa através de ideias como o conceito de garantir o bem-estar do povo, colocando o povo no centro; o espírito crítico contra e a condenação da guerra feudal. Estudar o pensamento político-social de Nguyen Binh Khiem fornece uma base para reconhecer com precisão as características distintivas e o valor das suas ideias no desenvolvimento do pensamento nacional vietnamita, bem como a sua relevância para o processo contínuo de construção da sociedade vietnamita hoje.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Nguyen Binh Khiem, filosofia, pensamento político-social, Vietnã

## 1. Introduction

Nguyen Binh Khiem was a philosopher, politician, educator, and thinker in Vietnamese history. His ideas had a particularly significant influence in the 16th century. Both during his time and in later historical periods, Nguyen Binh Khiem received high praise for his contributions. In his work, *Vu Trung Tuy But*, Pham Dinh Ho described Nguyen Binh Khiem as “the essence of the nation's land molded into one”. Phan Huy Chu, in his *Chronicle of the History and Regulations of the Dynasties*, regarded Nguyen Binh Khiem as “a rare genius, whose name will endure through the ages”. Nguyen Binh Khiem was also deeply concerned with education, being considered one of the masters of Vietnamese education. He was a sage capable of providing profound insights into human existence, and world affairs, and elevating them to the level of philosophy. He played a crucial role in advancing Confucianism in Vietnam to a new phase - the period of Ly learning.

In particular, Nguyen Binh Khiem was a philosopher and a strategic politician who actively engaged in serving society. He possessed a benevolent heart, deeply concerned with the fate of the people, worrying for the nation before others and finding joy only after peace was restored. He exemplified a new way of intellectual engagement during times of turmoil.

Born into a family renowned for its scholarly achievements, with his mother being the youngest daughter of a high-ranking minister during the reign of King Le Thanh Tong, Nguyen Binh Khiem was carefully educated from a young age, excelling in both physical and intellectual development. At the age of four, he was taught the Classics and Nom poetry by his mother. As an adult, he received guidance from the prominent scholar Lương Đắc Bang. In 1535, during the reign of King Mac Đàng Doanh, the most prosperous period of the Mac dynasty, Nguyen Binh Khiem decided to take the imperial examination and passed with the highest honor, becoming a Top Scholar. Following his success, Nguyen Binh Khiem was appointed to various government positions and granted the title Duke of Trĩnh Tuyẽn, later upgraded to Duke of the Nation, earning him the popular title *The Trĩnh family's top scholar*.

For nearly 20 years (from the age of 53 to 73), Nguyen Binh Khiem did not reside permanently in the capital but continued to perform his duties in the administration. He was well-versed in the *I Chĩng* (Book of Changes), and understood the *Thỏi Ất Thỏin Kĩnh* (the essence of heavenly wisdom), enabling him to predict the weather, fortune, disaster, and even political developments. Historical records acknowledge Nguyen Binh Khiem as a visionary strategist and a master of foresight. His forecasts contributed significantly to stabilizing politics, reducing warfare, and laying the foundation for the stability and development of Vietnam in the 16th century. Specifically, after the fall of the Mặc dynasty in Thang Long, he advised the Mac rulers to move to Cao Bang, which enabled the Mặc family to survive for three generations. He also advised Trĩnh Kiem to “keep the temple and worship Buddha to receive the blessings”, suggesting that he find a member of the Le royal family to restore the throne. The Trĩnh family followed this advice, eventually securing their control of the country while still professing loyalty to the Le dynasty. In the case of the Nguyen family, after the death of Nguyen Kim, his eldest son, who was Nguyen Uong, was assassinated by Trĩnh Kiem. In this perilous situation, Nguyen Hoang (Nguyen Kim’s second son) consulted Nguyen Binh Khiem, who gave the cryptic advice: “A stretch of Hoanh Son can provide refuge”. Thanks to this advice, in 1568, Nguyen Hoang was granted permission by the Trĩnh family to govern the region of Thuan Hoa, eventually laying the foundation for the Nguyen family's rise to power in the south.

It can be asserted that Nguyen Binh Khiem’s political foresight and advice were not merely reflections of his deep understanding of the contemporary social reality, but also encapsulated profound

lessons on statecraft, political leadership, and social reform. His predictions were not just about the shifting of political power; they also reflected his far-reaching vision regarding societal development, the maintenance of national independence and self-reliance, and the risks posed by the decline of political institutions. Although he lived in the 16th century, his political -social ideas remain deeply relevant and influential for modern leaders and politicians in the tasks of nation-building and national defense. His thought underscores the importance of upholding ethics in politics, maintaining social harmony, and fostering strong relationships between individuals, families, communities, and the nation. These core elements are essential for a prosperous and sustainable society.

## 2. Literature Review

Nguyen Binh Khiem left a profound mark on Vietnamese history in the 16th century. He was like a towering tree, casting the shadow of his ideas over that century. His character, talents, and contributions to both theory and practice have been acknowledged by history. Among his contributions, his political thought has garnered significant attention from academics and researchers, particularly in the contemporary context, as Vietnamese society seeks lessons from the past to build a stable and prosperous future.

The seminar “Nguyen Binh Khiem in the History of National Culture”, organized by the Institute of Social Sciences and the Department of Culture and Information of Ho Chi Minh City in 1991, was held to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s birth. The seminar focused on analyzing Nguyen Binh Khiem’s political stance during the chaotic times, emphasizing his views on society, the negative impact of money on human nature, and the changing relationships between people. A valuable aspect of the seminar was its clarification of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s patriotic spirit and his concern for the fate of the nation until the end of his life. Overall, the seminar provided essential data that helped later generations gain a deeper understanding of his life, thoughts, and character.

In the article “A correct understanding of Nguyen Binh Khiem and the Mac Dynasty” in the seminar *Nguyen Binh Khiem in the History of National Culture*, held by the Institute of Literature in 1991, researcher Tran Khue emphasized that Nguyen Binh Khiem's participation in fighting to assist the Mac King and protect the people was for the greater good. This also proves his commitment to implementing the “royal way” to stabilize society.

The work *Nguyen Binh Khiem in the History of National Cultural Development*, edited by researcher Tran Khue, and published by Da Nang Publishing House in 2000, outlines the influence of the social and historical conditions of the 16th century on the formation of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s political and social ideas. The authors provide details that clarify the relationship between Nguyen Binh Khiem and the

ruling feudal dynasty of the time - the Mac Dynasty - as well as the historical role of this dynasty in Vietnam's national history.

*Nguyen Binh Khiem, His life and works*, written by Tran Thi Bang Thanh and published in 2001, is a compilation of Nguyen Binh Khiem's poetry and works, alongside an account of his life and background. It also clarifies the historical events that influenced his methods of political engagement. The book covers topics such as Nguyen Binh Khiem in the complex and turbulent 16th century; his thoughts and character; his poetry; and assessments of Nguyen Binh Khiem by contemporaries and modern scholars.

In *The Political Thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem through his writings and sayings*, by Phan Dinh Tuan, published in 2015 by the National Political Publishing House, the author analyzes Nguyen Binh Khiem's writings and sayings, focusing on his views on ethics in leadership, the qualities a leader must possess to build a strong nation, the principles of transparency in state management, and his advocacy for serving the people - all reflected in his works.

*Nguyen Binh Khiem's Political Thought: Lessons for Today's Era*, by Nguyen Hong Son, published in 2019 by the University of Hanoi Publishing House, not only studies Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought but also offers practical lessons for modern leaders. The author delves into his views on ethics in leadership, state governance, and responsibility toward the people. These views emphasize essential elements for building a just governance system for the common good.

In summary, many researchers and seminars have been organized to study the profound and comprehensive political thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem, achieving significant preliminary results. However, there remain gaps that need to be filled to fully and systematically understand his political philosophy. This research aims to address these gaps by analyzing and clarifying his political ideas, such as his thoughts on a peaceful and prosperous society, the concept of "people-centered" governance, his critical stance against feudal warfare, and his commitment to the "royal way" in governance.

### **3. Research Methodology**

To study Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought accurately, objectively, and comprehensively, this research applies a variety of scientific methods, each serving a specific purpose.

The historical method situates Nguyen Binh Khiem's thoughts and actions within the historical context of 16th-century Vietnam. This method faithfully reconstructs the historical-social environment in which Nguyen Binh Khiem lived and engaged in practical activities.

The analytical and synthetic method is used to systematize primary sources to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought.

To ensure the accuracy of the data, the textual analysis method is applied to examine the original works and compare different versions, ensuring objectivity and consistency in analyzing Nguyen Binh Khiem's political philosophy.

The core of this study is the dialectical materialist method, guided by the principles of comprehensiveness and historical specificity.

By applying these methods, the research clarifies Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought, providing an objective assessment of his political philosophy. The findings offer valuable historical lessons that contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of national thought.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. The philosophical foundation leading to the formation of political-social views in Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's philosophical thought

The philosophical foundation that led to the formation of political-social views in Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's thought was built upon the assimilation, integration, and creative application of three major Eastern philosophical traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This synthesis not only reflects the characteristics of medieval Vietnamese philosophical thinking but also demonstrates Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's strategic vision and ability to adapt flexibly to the profound political and social upheavals of the 16th century.

First, in terms of ontology and epistemology, Confucianism played a fundamental role in Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's political philosophy. He was deeply influenced by the concept of "Mandate of Heaven" (天命), which held that the fate of society and the nation was closely tied to the will of Heaven, and that rulers had the responsibility to uphold the Way of Heaven to maintain order and stability. Within this ideological framework, the principle of "rectification of names" (正名) was central, asserting that every individual in society must act in accordance with their assigned roles, and that rulers should govern primarily through "moral governance" (德治). Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm advised rulers that to maintain peace and order in the world, they must first uphold moral integrity and practice benevolence to win the people's hearts. This notion was not only normative but also highly practical, as he repeatedly petitioned the Mạc rulers to prioritize the well-being of the people and avoid oppressive policies that could lead to turmoil. However, in the face of historical turbulence, when Confucian concepts of legitimacy became uncertain due to the decline of the Lê dynasty and the rise of the Mạc dynasty, Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm did not rigidly

adhere to Confucianism but instead incorporated Daoist elements into his thought. He adopted the Daoist principle of "non-action" (無為, wúwéi), viewing it as a flexible political strategy that emphasized not forcefully interfering with society but rather following the natural order to avoid unintended consequences. This perspective did not signify political passivity or withdrawal from public affairs but rather a profound understanding of historical dynamics, in which excessive intervention and coercion could lead to negative repercussions. In many of his poems and prophetic verses, he encouraged wise individuals to act according to circumstances—when conditions were unfavorable, it was wiser to preserve oneself and wait for the right moment to act. This Daoist perspective ultimately influenced his decision to retire from politics when he recognized the inevitable decline of the Mạc dynasty, embodying a balance between action and retreat, engagement and withdrawal, as advocated by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Additionally, Buddhism contributed to the shaping of Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's political and social philosophy, particularly through the concepts of karma (因果) and impermanence (無常). He believed that the rise and fall of dynasties were not solely determined by political or military factors but were also the inevitable consequences of their moral conduct. This view provided him with a visionary approach to history, emphasizing that a stable and enduring state must be founded on virtuous governance and benevolent policies, while injustice and tyranny would ultimately lead to destruction. This belief is evident in his prophetic writings, where many of his predictions about the decline of various ruling houses were not merely political analyses but also reflections of his deep understanding of the law of cause and effect. Furthermore, the influence of Buddhism allowed him to maintain a composed and serene attitude in the face of political chaos, resisting the temptations of power and fame while preserving the integrity of a true philosopher.

In conclusion, Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's political and social thought represents a harmonious synthesis of three major philosophical traditions: Confucianism provided the ethical foundation and principles of social organization, Daoism contributed a flexible and adaptable approach to political action, and Buddhism fostered a deep awareness of karma and historical inevitability. This integration not only created a uniquely holistic intellectual system but also reflected the distinct characteristics of Vietnamese philosophy, where different traditions were not isolated but continuously adjusted to fit practical realities. Thanks to this synthesis, Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's thought was not only relevant in his time but also became a lasting political-philosophical legacy with a profound influence on Vietnamese intellectual history.

## 4.2. The thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem on building a just and prosperous society

The history of Vietnam from the late 15th to the 16th century was marked by intense and brutal conflicts between feudal factions. The Le Dynasty, under the reigns of King Le Uy Muc (1505–1509) and Le Tuong Duc (1509–1516), was in a state of deep crisis. Society was desperate under the rule of tyrannical and corrupt kings.

The political and social turmoil, along with deep internal instability, created a fertile ground for the Mac family to overthrow the Le dynasty in 1527. This power shift marked the beginning of a prolonged period of chaos in Vietnam's history. Wars followed one after another: the civil war between the Southern and Northern Dynasties lasted for 50 years (1546–1592), followed by the Trinh - Nguyen War, which lasted for half a century (1627–1672). The nation was engulfed in bloodshed, and the suffering of war tore at the hearts of the people. Throughout his nearly ninety-five years of life, Nguyen Binh Khiem not only witnessed this turbulent period but also grappled with the tension between the collapse of reality and the yearning for a more perfect society. He lived in a world where dynasties were in decline, and traditional values were eroded by the manipulation of the ruling class. Those in power, under the guise of emperorship and benevolence, exploited noble ideals to conceal their brutal actions, stripping the people of their right to life and rendering hopes for justice hollow.

Society was trapped in a state of stagnation and darkness, no longer a harmonious and unified entity but rather a machine that was falling apart piece by piece. People were adrift amidst an undefined conflict, living in poverty, stagnation, and despair. This was a period of spiritual crisis, where individuals could no longer find peace within themselves and had little hope for a just and prosperous society. Like a vicious cycle of fate, people in such a world were pushed into hopelessness, with no way out, while moral values, justice, and truth seemed to have been forgotten. This grim reality fueled Nguyen Binh Khiem's intense longing for a just, peaceful, and prosperous society. His vision of such a society is clearly outlined through the following core principles.

*The first, the vision of a society in which all citizens live peacefully within a harmonious family structure. A society where, above, the king is wise, below, the subjects are loyal, and the people live in unity and prosperity.*

Nguyen Binh Khiem's involvement in government affairs was brief, as the feudal regime of the Mac Dynasty gradually descended into decline. Continuous civil wars, from the Mac-Trinh conflict to the Trinh - Nguyen struggle, brought great hardship to the people.

When Nguyen Binh Khiem became an official in the Mac court, he could not help but see the imminent difficulties facing the regime. Yet, he still held faith in the possibility of its revival. However,

in the end, he had to resign with a heavy heart, frustrated by his inability to help the people and the nation. He retired to his homeland, Trung Am village, where he found solace in rural life - playing chess, gazing at the moon, enjoying wine, and fishing.

The grim social reality before him, full of tragedy and darkness, only strengthened his longing for a prosperous society, reminiscent of the reigns of Emperor Nghieu and Emperor Thuan. Having lived through most of the 16th century, Nguyen Binh Khiem had once experienced such a peaceful and prosperous time. This memory deepened his sorrow and yearning for a society akin to that golden era of Nghiêu and Thuần, when subjects were loyal, and rulers were wise, just, and virtuous.

The society Nguyen Binh Khiem dreamed of had once existed, albeit briefly - a time when people did not pick up fallen valuables, when there was no need to lock doors at night, in a world of peace. In such a society, the economy was prosperous, the people had the opportunity to work, and everyone lived a life of plenty, with enough food and clothing. In this society, no one was poor or lacking. People were content with their material and spiritual well-being, and greed, envy, or malice had little room to take root.

*Next, society ensures fundamental human rights, particularly individual freedom.*

The ideal society that Nguyen Binh Khiem envisioned is one where individuals live with sincerity, harmony, and mutual respect, thus forming a compassionate and interconnected community. This is not only a society where people adhere to noble ethical values but also a space worth living in, where individuals have a clear understanding of what is good and what is bad and can distinguish between right and wrong. The life of each individual in such a society is built upon the foundation of integrity and self-discipline in maintaining and promoting ethical values, steering clear of the selfish temptations of personal gain and material greed. In this society, people are not blinded by money, nor caught up in self-serving calculations, but live with a pure heart and a deep sense of responsibility towards the community. This reflects Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy of a prosperous era, where society is not only materialistically prosperous but also spiritually fulfilled, just, and harmonious. This is the model of the reigns of Emperors Nghiêu and Thuần that Nguyen Binh Khiem desired - a time when power and morality go hand in hand, a society in which both individuals and human rights develop in harmony, stability, and prosperity.

In general, the model of society that Nguyen Binh Khiem aspired to build (though it never materialized during his lifetime) was also the dream of the masses. A peaceful society, united, where harmony exists between rulers and subjects, and where people respect and uphold traditions. This is the

core element that strengthens and fortifies the nation, ensuring the preservation of national sovereignty and territory.

However, the longing for a golden age reminiscent of the times of Nghieu and Thuan also shows that Nguyen Binh Khiem could not transcend his era. He remained bound by the cyclical nature of the feudal system and always hoped that it could reform itself. This suggests that he was still a proponent of maintaining and protecting the feudal order. He strongly criticized any actions that threatened the survival of the regime, especially when such actions stemmed from the greed, selfishness, and immorality of individuals. While he did not wholly deny the desires and aspirations of humanity, he demanded that these be regulated so as not to harm the feudal order.

### **4.3. The thought of stabilizing the people, considering the people as the foundation - A core political principle in Nguyen Binh Khiem's strategy for governance**

Living through most of the 16th century, Nguyen Binh Khiem was a person of profound knowledge who was highly respected by the Mac Dynasty, but throughout much of his life, he did not indulge in wealth or fame. Instead, he lived a simple and modest life as a reclusive Confucian scholar in the countryside. His years of seclusion in the rural village were so long that both the elderly and children became familiar with his name. It was in this favorable environment that Nguyen Binh Khiem witnessed the suffering of the people and came to understand their sincere desires. At the same time, he also recognized the noble qualities of the people, which contrasted with the greed and self-interest of the wealthy elite. Nguyen Binh Khiem also understood the crucial importance of the people's strength for the survival and development of the nation. This understanding was a key element that shaped the humanistic aspect of his political philosophy.

When speaking of the people, Nguyen Binh Khiem was very clear in his thinking: “The people are the root”, and the people are subject to be served. All policies, measures, and laws should be aimed at serving the people and ensuring that they can live in true peace. He viewed the power of the people as a force akin to water, which must be united through moral leadership to create a lasting strength for the nation. He emphasized that those in power must understand: “The livelihood of the people is the most critical aspect of royal governance, and the lives of the people are of the utmost importance”; “In the present day as in the past, never underestimate the importance of the people” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 1997: 304).

Throughout his life, Nguyen Binh Khiem witnessed many prolonged struggles for power and territorial disputes, but in the end, no side achieved victory, and no faction could unify the country. He recognized the cause that the feudal groups could not see: the power of the people, and the strength of the masses. Historically, the people have always been the foundation of the nation; only with the people can a country exist, and with a country, there can be a ruler. The will of the people is the will of heaven. He wrote: “Throughout history, the nation has always considered the people as the foundation; it is clear that the nation's success depends on the people's support” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 1997: 328). Or, “Respect the people, and rebellion will not arise” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 336). In these statements, Nguyen Binh Khiem emphasized the idea that the people are the root, the foundation, and the driving force of history. As long as the people are sustained, the nation will endure.

“The people as the foundation” is a manifestation of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s patriotism and deep care for the well-being of the people. His background and the education he received shaped his life’s work and commitment to serving the people and protecting their interests. For him, the most important priority was the well-being of the people, with the interests of the king coming second. The interests of the king must be aligned with the interests of the people, and the welfare of the people must serve as the foundation for the prosperity of the dynasty and the enduring strength of the nation.

Nguyen Binh Khiem's concept of “the people as the foundation” goes beyond an understanding of the central role the people play in political structures; it is also realized through the idea of stabilizing the people – a core principle in his governance strategy. He recognized that the stability and prosperity of the nation are inseparable from the stability of the people's lives. Only when the people are peaceful and well-fed can the government be stable. The idea of “stabilizing the people” is not simply a social welfare policy, but a political principle where the legitimacy of the dynasty, the authenticity of power, and the longevity of the nation all depend on the people. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem advocated for a governance model in which rulers measure the success or failure of their reign by the well-being of the people, uphold the virtuous rule, reduce excessive taxation, limit oppression and exploitation, and build a harmonious society. In this society, the state would not only be an instrument of power but also an institution protecting the interests of the people. According to him, a government that distances itself from the people and is tyrannical or corrupt will inevitably sow the seeds of its downfall from within, for “the people are the ones who carry the boat, but they are also the ones who overturn it.” Thus, “stabilizing the people” is not just an administrative task but the foundation that determines the legitimacy of the regime and the sustainability of the nation.

First and foremost, ensuring people's well-being means guaranteeing their material life is secure, prosperous, and sufficient.

In Nguyen Binh Khiem's political philosophy, he emphasized that the people can only be at peace when their basic needs are met, and their lives are guaranteed. For a dynasty to endure, it must first help the people escape from poverty and hardship. Therefore, economic stability is not just about managing national finances but is a core principle of governance that determines the legitimacy and authenticity of the ruling regime. Nguyen Binh Khiem understood clearly that a strong economy is the foundation of a stable society. When people's lives are full of suffering, hunger, and increasing inequality, it inevitably leads to social conflicts, creating conditions for unrest and rebellion. This is why he affirmed: "When the granaries are full, the world will be peaceful; when the people's hearts are at peace, the country will thrive" (Đinh Gia Khanh, 1997: 310). Here, he underscores the causal relationship between the prosperity of the people and the stability of the nation. A government that wants to maintain the people's loyalty must first ensure that the people have enough food, clothing, and a stable life free from oppressive taxation and forced labor. If the economy is in decline and the people suffer, no regime can avoid its eventual downfall.

Nguyen Binh Khiem placed special importance on agriculture, considering it the backbone of the national economy and the foundation for ensuring the people's well-being. He understood that if agriculture is strong, the people will have land to cultivate, access to productive resources, and sufficient food, thus preventing social disarray and the dispersion of the people. He advocated for reducing heavy taxes and high levies to prevent the exploitation of the poor; for developing agriculture as the economic foundation, ensuring the people would not abandon their lands and wander in search of a livelihood, thus avoiding social instability; and for promoting self-sufficiency while minimizing dependency on exploitative trade, ensuring the people could sustain themselves without being subjected to economic volatility.

In Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought, stabilizing the people is not merely about ensuring economic well-being, but must also go hand in hand with the construction of a solid political foundation based on justice and democracy. He understood that the stability of the nation originates from the people's trust, and to secure the people's peace, there must first be a transparent, just political system that places the people's interests at the forefront.

Nguyen Binh Khiem believed that for a country to prosper, it must first have a stable political system, meaning the government must be legitimate, and ethical, and implement fair policies. In the context of Vietnam during his time, when war and turmoil were prevalent, the court was in decline, the

government was corrupt, and the people were trapped in a cycle of violence, he realized that without a stable system, “stabilizing the people” would be impossible.

The political stability Nguyen Binh Khiem referred to was not a superficial stability achieved through oppression or violence, but a true stability grounded in the people's trust - where the people have faith in the government and are not oppressed by the abuse of power. The people must live in a society with order and discipline. He emphasized: “When the rulers are harmonious, the people are united, and governance is peaceful, the people will be at ease, and the nation will endure” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 1997: 312). Here, he reminds us of the dialectical relationship between the stability of the government and the people's lives. If the government is not legitimate and manipulated by corrupt officials, the people will lose their trust, leading to disorder and long-term instability.

#### **4.4. The critique and condemnation of feudal war**

The attitude of critique, hatred, and condemnation of feudal warfare is a defining element of Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought, adding a distinctly humanistic layer to his ideas. He condemned the divisive, extreme nature of feudal wars - wars that represented the delusional ambitions of the powerful, which dragged the country into calamity, splitting it into fragments. He was deeply pained by the endless wars that brought about chaos, resulting in “heads rolling and blood flowing”. Feudal factions fought for territorial dominance, ruthlessly exploiting the people to build fortresses and recruit soldiers, all to meet the demands of war. The continuous conflict caused fields to be left fallow and production to stagnate. Fathers and sons, husbands and wives took turns being conscripted into forced labor or military service, leading to widespread starvation and misery. As Nguyen Binh Khiem lamented, “The fields have dry rice sprouts; the granaries are empty; the suffering of the impoverished peasants is expressed in their wailing; the land is full of hunger and malnutrition” (Institute of Literature, 2014: 1304).

In times of war, the working people bore the heaviest burden, suffering immense losses and enduring hardship. War forced the people to: “...drag their wives and children, leaving the young behind; the sick and old rolled into ditches; the dead from starvation lay at the village gates; it was no different from birds losing their nests; like fish with blood flowing to their tails. At that point, it was the end; the people's lives were utterly impoverished” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 319). Nguyen Binh Khiem even heard the “sound of lament carried by the western wind, echoing through the secluded chamber, where the lonely woman sleeps alone; suddenly feeling the cold seeping through the curtains, only then realizing the human sorrow of separation” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 273).

Nguyen Binh Khiem, in his deep hatred of war, exposes the absurdity and cruelty of it. According to him, war brings no benefit at all; rather, it floods the land with rivers of blood and mountains of bones. War, he states, is like a blazing fire that burns everything, including precious stones and jewels. The cause of this devastation lies in the ambitions of those who seek to pursue war. These individuals are those who: “use their homes as firewood to burn, slaughter their plowing oxen for food, steal what does not belong to them, and rape women who are not their wives” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 306).

Nguyen Binh Khiem also exposes the corruption of the ruling officials, the cruelty of the wealthy, and the hypocritical nature of the ruling class. He provides concrete examples of their behavior, such as: “In the court, they fight over fame; in the marketplace, they fight over profit; they boast about their nobility, living in grand mansions, and flaunt their wealth with elaborate feasts. When they see people starving on the streets, they do not give a single coin to help, and when they see someone lying in the fields at night, they refuse to offer even a handful of straw to shelter them...”, “...When they attain high status, they become arrogant; when they grow rich, they indulge in luxury, decorating their homes with opulence, carvings, and paintings. Their excess is extreme - they burn candles instead of using firewood and smear their walls with sugar paste. They drink heavily, gorge themselves on food, wear light leather clothing, and ride fat horses... Their eyes are blinded by greed, as though mad or intoxicated” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 334).

The crimes of these individuals are likened by Nguyen Binh Khiem to rats gnawing away at the people's wealth, harming the people and the nation. In times of turmoil, with schemes and treachery, these people, relying on their power and authority, hide behind temples, palaces, and other sanctified spaces - places considered sacred and untouchable - using these havens to exploit and consume the people's resources. Nguyen Binh Khiem compares these tyrants to large fish that, by their strength, devour the smaller fish.

Not only does Nguyen Binh Khiem expose the cruelty and hypocritical “virtue” of the oppressive ruling class, but he also makes it clear that, with such crimes that provoke both divine and human wrath, these people are destined to be punished. He warns that those “big fish” who violate the natural principle of compassion, using their strength to devour the smaller, weaker creatures - driven by insatiable greed - will inevitably bring disaster upon themselves. He writes that “once the great net is cast”, even the toughest, most powerful individuals will have nowhere to hide. As for the “rats having lost the favor of the people, they will certainly be killed by the people, their bodies exposed in the royal court, and vultures and crows will peck at their flesh” (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 304).

In addition to highlighting the grim consequences awaiting these immoral rulers, Nguyen Binh Khiem emphasizes that virtue is the most important and effective tool for winning people's hearts. Virtue is everlasting. He writes: "What cannot die is the heart of the people, what cannot be lost is the will of Heaven. Therefore, beginning from the root of virtue and stopping at the pinnacle of governance, those who understand the ultimate joy are those who pursue goodness" (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 320). Hence, even though he expresses hatred for tyrants, Nguyen Binh Khiem feels sympathy for their inevitable downfall. He advises: "Let the big and the small leave each other in peace" (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 321). This also reflects his magnanimity and tolerance.

Studying Nguyen Binh Khiem's thoughts reveals his intense opposition to and criticism of feudal wars and the conspirators behind them. He mocks those who are obsessed with fame and endlessly quarrel for power, throwing society into chaos. He is weary of seeing enemies ruthlessly kill innocent civilians and feels regretful for not being able to end the violent conflicts himself. There are moments when he expresses his unreserved longing for the Mạc dynasty to take military action to quell the chaos. Despite his advanced age and frail health, Nguyen Binh Khiem is ready to follow the king's orders and go to distant regions like Tuyen Quang to eliminate figures like Vu Van Uyen and Vu Van Mat. His willingness to endure difficult conditions, not for the survival of the dynasty but for the welfare of the people, shows his commitment to justice and his deep empathy for the suffering of the common folk.

Nguyen Binh Khiem's criticism and hatred for unjust wars are always illuminated by a singular light - his deep reflection and concern for the fate of the country and the people. He is deeply sympathetic to the plight of the poor, who suffer from famine and cold, and he urges the ruler to be mindful and compassionate, to reduce the exploitation of the people, even by a little. His wish is for a leader to rise, motivated by a sense of justice, to destroy the cruel and brutal forces. Out of concern for the people and the nation, Nguyen Binh Khiem expresses a desire to become a great clam, with its head under the sky and its feet as the pillar supporting the earth, wanting to "help the world rise, restoring the kingdom and the imperial capital" (Đinh Gia Khanh, 2005: 320).

## 5. Conclusion

The political-social views of Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy have made significant contributions to the formation and development of Vietnamese thought, particularly in addressing and resolving social and political issues during the feudal period. His views on leadership ethics, the vision of a peaceful and prosperous society, and the principle of placing the people at the core, not only hold historical value but can also be applied to building and developing modern societies. Nguyen Binh Khiem's political-social

philosophy reflects a synthesis of power and morality, remaining a source of inspiration and valuable lessons for leaders and intellectuals in today's era.

In inheriting Nguyen Binh Khiem's political thought in the current context of Vietnam, three core areas need to be focused on:

*First, sustainable economic development and ensuring social welfare*

Applying Nguyen Binh Khiem's political-social thought in the modern context requires a dialectical unity between economic development and ensuring social welfare, with people as the central subject in all developmental processes. Social welfare and well-being are not only a consequence of a strong economy but also the foundation for ensuring the internal stability of the political and social system, creating harmony between material growth and social equity. Vietnam is also moving toward a development model that is democratic and equitable, centered around people. Therefore, linking economic development with social welfare is not just about the mechanisms of state protection and intervention to shield individuals from economic and social risks, but also about reflecting the organic relationship between the state and the people. When social welfare is guaranteed, not only are the material and spiritual lives of the people improved, but it also strengthens the credibility and legitimacy of the state's power. This enhances the public's trust in the leadership of the ruling power because a political system can only maintain its sustainability when it serves the majority's interests.

*Secondly, building a rule-of-law state, prioritizing the people, and placing the people at the center.*

Ensuring the rights and interests of the people, especially in improving their material and spiritual lives, is not only a development goal but also a standard by which the success of the national development strategy is measured. Therefore, the construction of a rule-of-law state to enhance the people's sovereignty based on the supremacy of the law is a key factor that helps Vietnam achieve political and social stability and sustainable development in the process of international integration.

In the current context, as the country is undergoing rapid integration and development, the spirit that Nguyen Binh Khiem emphasized regarding the construction of a peaceful, fair society for the people, as well as the fundamental role of the people, has become increasingly important and practical. Therefore, the construction and consolidation of the Socialist Rule-of-Law State of Vietnam - a state of the people, by the people, and for the people - is not only a political task but also a philosophical issue, reflecting the inseparable connection between political power and the people's sovereignty.

*Thirdly, emphasizing the ethics and responsibility of leadership cadres.*

In the current context, enhancing the ethics of leadership cadres is a crucial factor, not only in exercising power but also in maintaining political stability and ensuring sustainable development.

Leadership ethics is not just an individual matter; it is a pressing requirement for the entire political system. A clean and honest government will create a favorable environment for economic development and ensure social justice. Building a team of ethical leaders is one of the solid foundations for a strong, integrated nation, capable of developing in an increasingly complex world today.

The ethics of leadership cadres are demonstrated through qualities such as dedication, integrity, fairness, intelligence, and responsibility. These are not only personal values but also essential components of effective leadership, reflecting the uprightness and capability of leaders in governing and managing the country. Leadership ethics determine the quality and effectiveness of political, economic, and social decisions. If a leader lacks ethics and does not prioritize the national interest above all else, it can lead to wrong decisions, corruption, and the pursuit of personal or group interests, which will have serious consequences on societal development and the public's trust. On the other hand, leaders with good virtues will build trust and unity within society, guiding the country through challenges and safeguarding the people's rights, while fostering a stable political environment for sustainable development.

Leadership cadres must not only have good ethics but also the ability to address economic management, and social governance, and ensure fairness and harmony within the community. In other words, a cadre must possess both virtue and competence, as well as vision and capability. This will lay the foundation for building a strong rule of law state, where all power originates from the people and is used to serve their interests. In the current phase, it is especially important for preventing corruption, and waste, and creating a transparent civil service, thereby enhancing the people's trust in the political system. The ethics of leadership cadres are the decisive factor in ensuring the legitimacy and effectiveness of state power.

In the current context, as Vietnam undergoes deep international integration, the search for and application of solutions to address global challenges such as climate change, and international economic competition, as well as internal issues such as embezzlement, waste, and corruption, continue the spirit and strategies for governance that Nguyen Binh Khiem initiated. These efforts not only reflect a sharp leadership approach but also demonstrate a profound vision for the sustainable development of the country in an ever-changing world. In this process, Nguyen Binh Khiem's political-social thought still holds a certain position and continues to be an enduring source of inspiration for generations of Vietnamese. These values not only form the foundation for building an independent and prosperous nation but also serve as a guiding compass leading the Vietnamese people on the path of integration and development in the context of globalization – a space where changes and challenges are inevitable.

## References

- Đinh Gia Khanh (Ed.) (2005). *The Poetry and Prose of Nguyen Binh Khiem*, Hanoi, Literary Publishing House.
- Đinh Gia Khanh, Bui Duy Tan, Mai Cao Chuong (1997). *Vietnamese Literature* (17th Century - Early 18th Century), Hanoi, Education Publishing House.
- Tran Khue (2000). *Nguyen Binh Khiem in the History of National Cultural Development*, Da Nang, Da Nang Publishing House.
- Nguyen Hong Son (2019). *The Political Thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem: Lessons for Today's Era*, Hanoi, Vietnam National University Publishing House.
- Tran Thi Bang Thanh, Vu Thanh (2001). *Nguyen Binh Khiem as a Writer and His Works*, Hanoi, Education Publishing House.
- Phan Đình Tuan (2015). *The Political Thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem through His Will and Poetry*, Hanoi, National Political Publishing House.
- Institute of Literature (History Council of Hai Phong) (2014). *The Poetry and Prose of Nguyen Binh Khiem - Bạch Vân Am Thi Tập, Complete Works*, Hanoi, Literary Publishing House.
- Institute of Literature (History Council of Hai Phong) (1991). *The Trinh family's top scholar- Nguyen Binh Khiem: Proceedings of the Scientific Conference on the 400th Anniversary of His Death*, Hanoi, Literary Publishing House.
- Institute of Social Sciences (Ho Chi Minh City Department of Culture and Information) (1991). *Nguyen Binh Khiem in the History of National Cultural Development – Conference Proceedings*, Hanoi, Center for Han-Nom Studies.



DUY, Nguyen Thi Tuong. Political - Social Phylosophy of Nguyen Binh Khiem and its Significance for Vietnam in the Current Era. *Kalagatos*, Fortaleza, vol. 22, n. 2, 2025, eK25029, p. 01-18.

Received: 03/2025  
Approved: 04/2025