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# The Tao of Being Human in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's Thought

**Nguyen Thanh Thuy Trang**

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

**Abstract**---Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822 - 1888) was one of the great thinkers of Vietnam at the end of the 19th century. In the thoughts he left behind, the concept of human morality is an extremely profound and exemplary content. The Tao of being human in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought can be conceptualized into main contents as follows: ideas of patriotism, love for the people and deep hatred of the enemy; loyalty - filial piety; a love-hate life attitude that is clear-cut and timely; establish virtue, do good deeds and be useful to the world.

**Keywords**---Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought, human, loyalty, filial piety, establish virtue.

**Introduction**

Nguyen Dinh Chieu is known not only as a patriotic writer, poet, and scholar but also as a thinker with profound knowledge and profound knowledge in many fields; especially political ideology, ethics, literature and medicine. Throughout his life, Nguyen Dinh Chieu always devoted himself to labor and creativity without rest and left the Vietnamese people a treasure trove of poetry with a very unique Southern style, of great stature both in terms of art and ideological value. We can mention typical works such as: Luc Van Tien, Duong Tu - Ha Mau, Ngu Tieu medical questions and answers, Running away from the enemy, Tributes for martyrs in Can Giuoc, Tributes for martyrs at the death battle of Luc Tinh,... Nguyen Dinh Chieu's works and thoughts are expressed with rich and unique content and style, and one of the outstanding contents is his concept of human morality.

**Literature Review**

Nguyen Dinh Chieu devoted his entire life and literary career to missions: for the people, for the country. He has always been the pride of Vietnamese national culture and literature. In a very respectful position, Nguyen Dinh Chieu is focused

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**Corresponding author:** Trang, N. T. T.; Email: [nguyenthathuytrang@caothang.edu.vn](mailto:nguyenthathuytrang@caothang.edu.vn)

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on learning and researching through many projects in different fields. It is necessary to mention that the research work with the most outstanding and voluminous contributions on Nguyen Dinh Chieu's background, life, career and works is Nguyen Dinh Chieu Complete Works, including two volumes authored by Ca Van Thinh.

Most notably, it is impossible not to mention a work that has been researched extremely meticulously and excellently in this direction of research: *The Way of Being Human from Ly Thuong Kiet to Ho Chi Minh* by Tran Van Giau (Giau, 2006). The researcher has published a work that has greatly contributed to the study of human ethics and views on life in the traditions of the Vietnamese people since the period of building and defending the country through the main ideas of the Vietnamese people. Ancient Vietnamese people with mythological colors and legends to the period of feudal dynasties, fighting against foreign invaders in history and throughout became a solid foundation for the leadership of the modern Communist Party of Vietnam.

Overall, the above mentioned works have focused on affirming the core point that: from ideology in general to the concept of human morality in particular, Nguyen Dinh Chieu's contents are outstanding, both thorough and comprehensive. influenced his perspective on literary creation and was expressed in both his thoughts and actions.

### **Methods**

This study is based on the point of view of dialectical materialism; historical materialism; Ho Chi Minh's ideology and the guidelines of the Communist Party of Vietnam on human ethics. The article focuses on understanding and researching The Tao of being human in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought through his poetic works from 1850 to 1888. Systematization techniques will used throughout, analysis and evaluation, deduction and induction, contrast and comparison, logic and history,... to research and present.

### **Results and Discussion**

The Tao of being human is a motto of life and has become part of the philosophy of life to answer the question: How should people live properly (the Tao)? The Tao means the way or the path. So “The Tao of being human” must first be principles and criteria originating from the soul, regulating each individual's personality and behavior in life and all relationships with nature and society.

As a form of social consciousness, the concept of the human path in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought is influenced and absorbed from the thoughts of previous generations. These are passionate patriotism, self-reliance, the spirit of fighting against foreign invaders, indomitableness, solidarity, close community attachment, community awareness, respect, love, intelligence, and need. diligence, creativity, especially the lifestyle of the Southern people with simplicity, arbitration, tolerance, generosity, straightforwardness, honesty,... has been forged in the process of fighting to build and protect Country. On the other hand, he also absorbed and selected the moral and political values of Confucianism, Buddhism,

and Taoism in accordance with the conceptual and psychological characteristics of the land and people of the South. Especially the ideas of humanity, patriotism, loyalty, filial piety, etc. of Confucianism; kindness, compassion, equality of all living beings, the Buddhist law of cause and effect; joy in the seclusion, silence, and beauty of Taoism. All of those ideas and values have been absorbed, refined and developed by Nguyen Dinh Chieu to form new contents in his concept of being human.

*First of all in The Tao of being human in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought is ideas of patriotism, love for the people and deep hatred of the enemy.* The war of invasion by the French colonialists caused so much suffering to the people at that time: "The people fell into water and fire; The enemy pressed fat and oil with all their might." Nguyen Dinh Chieu always carries the greatest sadness in his heart: how he contributed to the common fight of the nation as he constantly mentioned the pain of "loss of country". Therefore, in only 26 poems and orations, the word "people" appears 32 times, the word "country" appears 43 times. He directly attacked the enemy who robbed the country and the people who followed the enemy. Nguyen Dinh Chieu recounted the crimes of the enemy and exposed the deceitful tricks called "civilization" and spreading civilization. Faced with that situation, the more the people fell into poverty and pain, Nguyen Dinh Chieu became even angrier, the art of judging the ruling class at that time was helpless and the people were "in misery" and "falling into a cave",.... He realized that: when the country craves chaos, the only people who suffer the most loss and pain are the people. They are people who need to be protected. At this point, his progressive ideas about peasants have been raised to a new level. In particular, through his poetry, Nguyen Dinh Chieu shifted from praising friendship and fidelity to mainly praising the spirit of the virtue and righteousness of those who sacrificed their lives to save the country; always concerned about the destiny of the country and worried about the lives of the people in the chaos of war. Even if people's resistance temporarily failed, the invaders raged, he still firmly sided with the people and the country. And, for those who have lost their way to follow the enemy's direction, Nguyen Dinh Chieu advised them to return to the "righteous way" with the earnest words: "It is not worth living following heretical gangs and throwing away the altar to worship the ancestors, which are sad to look at; It is not worth living as (French) policemen who share cheap wine and gnaw the toast and bread, which are very ashamed" (Chieu, 1976, p.253). According to Nguyen Dinh Chieu, "it is better to die for the righteous cause of the ancestors than to live under the French's barbarian ruling. Living like that is very miserable" (Chieu, 1976, p. 253)

*Second, loyalty - filial piety.* Nguyen Dinh Chieu was originally from a Confucian family and imbued with Confucian thoughts, so he was more or less influenced by the Confucian thought of loyalty. First of all, the word "loyalty" in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's conception of way of being human, which comes from the story of Lac Van Tien to patriotic poetry, has been continuously developed. If the Luc Van Tien story is a song of praise for fidelity/faithfully through the successful depiction of the characters Kieu Nguyet Nga and Luc Van Tien, patriotic poetry is seen as the development of loyalty to the national sphere and gradually free from the influences of feudal institutions. Fidelity is loyalty to homeland, country, "must follow one side". Nguyen Dinh Chieu also expressed the thought of loyalty to the

king” but it is a conditional “loyalty to the king”, loyalty to righteousness, and loyalty to the country. Thus, Nguyen Dinh Chieu strongly criticized irresponsible puppet kings. The climax point can be seen in Kieu Nguyet Nga's drowned-herself action that sounds like a warning the bell for resistance to the blind “loyalty” and is the denial of “loyalty” to the ignorant lord. At that time, Nguyen Dinh Chieu, although on the surface, emphasized the “the king and subjects relationship”, the spirit of loyalty to the king, but in fact he emphasized the thought of patriotism and the love for the country. As a Confucian scholar living under the Nguyen Dynasty - a period in which Confucianism was highly valued in Vietnam, but he had a very progressive moral conception and that was also the step that marked the fall of the contemporary orthodox thought.

Talking about the term “filial piety”, Nguyen Dinh Chieu said that it is ungrateful to the parents when the parents fall seriously ill and (their) son is not available to take care of everything and/or when his parents die and he is not available. So, when receiving the news of his mother's death, Nguyen Dinh Chieu had to quit the exam and hastily returned to the South to mourn his mother. But according to Nguyen Dinh Chieu, the relationship between parents and children is not purely rational, one-way relationship but a two-way relationship. Children love and respect their parents. Parents love and sympathize with their children. And clearly, the filial piety expressed through the conception of Nguyen Dinh Chieu is right the ethics of the Vietnamese nation. Those are the common morals that are noble in the lives of the people, it is no longer the heavy, closed ideology of China or conservative Confucianism.

Along with the above thoughts, in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's conception of way of being human also highlights the concept of rightness/faithfulness. Although he lived in the dark time of the society, was blind by sickness, suffered due to poverty, he always maintained a clean, simple life and temperament of a true feudal intellectual. Nguyen Dinh Chieu was courageous and decisively refused all the favors and temptations of the enemy. Even though the fortunes of nation were going down, the resistance war of the nation sometimes receded, and someone was willing to leave the people and the country to follow the enemy in order to hope for the more and more leisured life, but he still kept his whole heart for the people and for the country. For everything such as fame, money, fields, houses - which are very attractive to people, Nguyen Dinh Chieu has overcome everything to preserve his honor and temper. He was well aware of the purpose of educating and spreading the idea of humanity and morality of the Vietnamese people. It is the determination to help people in need who are bullied; seeing the good deed but not doing is not courage, because as being human, it must be brave; wholeheartedly doing the good deed means for the right reasons, not to charge more for oneself or expect a return; considering the good deed in life is heavier than money, fame and wealthy.

*Third, about a love-hate life attitude that is clear-cut and timely of Nguyen Dinh Chieu.* He always clearly discerned between the right and the wrong/evil and minded that every human being must at least have clear attitude toward love and hatred and the feeling for the righteous. As human being, we can not be indifferent to life. He always took the people as the standard of “love-hatred reasoning”. He thought that whatever for the interests of the people, or for the

sake of the people, it is worthy to love. Therefore, for Nguyen Dinh Chieu, whether a contemporary intellectual who establishes his position in mandarin or a sage who returns to live in seclusion, he should aim for the right recognition of (the relation between) the good - bad, the right - wrong in order to not be ashamed as being virtuous and righteous. With that notion, Nguyen Dinh Chieu has lived in a way not for wealth or fame, to hide the truth or to let himself fall in an unrighteous lifestyle. What deserves to be loved is to be pity true and earnest. What is obnoxious must be clearly divided, but if hated, "hate guts, hate in mind". He hates "frivolous work", hates those who are unfaithful and unrighteous. He hates the man who "loves lies" and sees what does not harm himself, he does not bother. In the times of turmoil, Nguyen Dinh Chieu said that the choice of hiding is not only to leave the world of shifty, not to let himself go into the ungratefully world, not to love lies, or to be henchmen for the enemy, but also shows the helplessness of an intellectual before the decay and decline of the contemporary feudal regime.

*Finally, establish virtue, do good deeds and be useful to the world of Nguyen Dinh Chieu.* He thought that even though his destiny was in the darkest situation, he still decided to bring light and hope to everyone. The day of war has not yet come, in the poem Luc Van Tien, Nguyen Dinh Chieu had a time when he could dream of being a Mr. Tieu living leisurely among the green mountains and blue water. By the time the fire of war broke out, that dream was gone. Life is more painful and darker now than ever. But Nguyen Dinh Chieu did not want to escape from life, did not accept the idea of evading that bitter reality, but used his own strength and conditions to switch to teaching, spreading medical techniques, and making medicine. The war spread, Nguyen Dinh Chieu also played a pioneering role in fighting on the ideological and political fronts with poems, eulogies, and heroic orations. Blind like Nguyen Dinh Chieu, although he could not hold a gun, sword or spear, he still did not go far from the front of the smoke and fire line. Until the enemy occupied the area, he followed and gradually withdrew there with the insurgents. On the contrary, many bright-eyed and healthy people still want to stay away from the battlefield and avoid responsibility. That action became a declaration of a wonderful moral lesson of Nguyen Dinh Chieu: even if blind or handicapped, we are determined to win, determined to overcome destiny and determined to become a person of great talent, useful for people and life:

"Please don't be ashamed of God,  
With the person standing shamefully born in life.  
Please don't change the sky,  
Don't run away from life when it's over" (Chieu, 1976, p. 217).

However, born into life, in addition to efforts to become a useful person in life, everyone also wants to make some merit to contribute to building the homeland and serving the country. That is completely legitimate, ethical, and nothing to criticize. But on the contrary, what makes public opinion oppose is vanity, deceit in order to appropriate the efforts of others or doing good deeds to seek fame while not being virtuous and talentless. In his opinion, Nguyen Dinh Chieu believes that establishing virtue and doing good deeds to help others comes entirely from the heart, not from having much but being unjust or praying for good reputation for yourself. For example, people who are dishonest, deceitful,

have excess money to make offerings, worship, and give alms to feel secure about their "greedy and wrong" life. That is not the act of "accumulating good and multiplying blessings" but rather accumulating evil, so it will receive contempt and resentment from people. Therefore, as a human being, we must not only worry about establishing fame and career, but also know how to do good and establish virtue for others and ourselves.

## Conclusion

The Tao of being human in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's thought can be conceptualized into main contents as follows: ideas of patriotism, love for the people and deep hatred of the enemy; loyalty - filial piety; a love-hate life attitude that is clear-cut and timely; establish virtue, do good deeds and be useful to the world. It is an inevitable theoretical product formed in the process of the society aspiring for progress. He created a wave of "living and following" moral examples through outstanding characters or his teachings/instructions by working hard to build and popularize standardly ethical value system deeply and widely into human awareness and life. In this way, he contributed to encouraging strongly the patriotic movement, the resistance against French colonialism in the late nineteenth century. In his concept of human morality, if certain limitations are ignored, it is still a practical and useful historical lesson for the cause of education, perfecting morality, and cultivating human morality. for people in today's Vietnamese society. Just as Tran Van Giau once commented: "From the life of Nguyen Dinh Chieu, several principles of a human way of being that have both historical and traditional significance emerge" (Giau, 1983, p. 6).

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