

The concept of “DAO” in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy and its current value

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Abstract

The article presents Nguyen Binh Khiem’s viewpoint on the concept of Dao, which plays a central role in Chinese philosophy and Vietnamese philosophy. Accordingly, the authors point out the value of this concept to modern society - a society that tends to promote the role of tolerance, solidarity, and lifestyle of community friendliness, harmony with nature, environmental protection, and respect for ecological ethics. For that purpose, the article will focus on the following issues: firstly, a brief overview of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s life and career; secondly, generalizing the concept of Dao in Chinese philosophy; thirdly, the intension of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy; fourthly, the current value of the concept of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy.

Key words: Dao, Heaven’s dao (Tiandao), Human dao (Rendao), Earth’s dao, King’s dao, Yin – Yang

1 Introduction

Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491-1585) is one of Vietnam’s great philosophers in the 16th century, whose life and career are a shining example that posterity needs to learn. Among more recent works that reflect on his thought that are typically known in Vietnam, the following should be mentioned: In the book “*Nguyen Binh Khiem - philosophical poet*” by Le Trong Khanh and Le Anh Tra (1957) published by Culture Publishing House in 1957, the authors approached Nguyen’s legacy from the perspective of literature and human philosophy, introducing the Confucianist conception of life in the context of a complex contemporary society. The essay “*Nguyen Binh Khiem - the typical thinker of the 16th century*” by Nguyen Tai Thu (1993) has sketched important thoughts such as the philosophical worldview, political, social, and humanitarian principles of Nguyen Binh Khiem, while at the same time pointing out the limitations in those thoughts.

In 1991, on the 400th anniversary of the death of Nguyen Binh Khiem, Hai Phong Historical Council and Institute of Literature (1991) published “*Trang Trinh Nguyen Binh Khiem*,” which collected many articles pointing out the great contributions of Nguyen Binh Khiem to literature and national history. In 1992, the book “*Nguyen Binh Khiem in the history of Vietnamese philosophy*” was published by the Center of Han Nom in Ho Chi Minh City, gathering many articles about the values of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s worldview and outlook on life, highly appreciating his philosophy of harmony and balance in the context of a disorderly contemporary society. The book “*Nguyen Binh Khiem - author and work*” by Tran Thi Bang Thanh and Vu Thanh Huyen (2001) studied Nguyen Binh Khiem from many different approaches and perspectives nascent to literature, politics, and sociology. In his book “*Nguyen Binh Khiem - the poet of life philosophy*,” Nguyen Huu Son (2003) studied the life and career of Nguyen Binh Khiem, emphasizing his philosophy of life. According to the author, in the poetry of Nguyen Binh Khiem, there is a remarkable crystallization and convergence of values of philosophy, literature, painting, and music.

Tran Nguyen Viet (2000; 2002; 2003) has the following articles: (1) “*Human issues in the philosophical thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem*,” *Journal of Philosophy*, No.1, 2000. (2) “*Natural philosophical thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem*,” *Journal of Philosophy*,

No.1, 2002. (3) “*The issue of the Three religions in the thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem*,” Journal of Philosophy, No.1, 2003. According to the author, because of understanding the principles of the “Yi Jing,”¹ Nguyen Binh Khiem has a theoretical basis for studying human origin and nature, from which the human being is understood as the convergence of natural “Qi”. Qi is the origin and the refuge of “Mind.” In the *History of Vietnamese Philosophical Thought*, the authors said that Nguyen Binh Khiem is a philosopher with great influence in the history of Vietnamese thought, who is knowledgeable about “Yi Jing,” inheriting and developing Chinese “Lixue.”²

Thus, there have been many studies on the life and career of Nguyen Binh Khiem but mainly in the field of literature, while the studies on ontological issues in his thought have not been paid attention to. For that reason, we choose the concept of *Dao* in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy as the object of study in this article.

2 Research methods

Studying Nguyen Binh Khiem’s concept of *Dao*, thereby highlighting its current value to the present society in which *there is a tendency to promote the role of tolerance, solidarity, and community-friendly lifestyle, in harmony with nature, environmental protection, and respect for ecological ethics...* are of high practical value, requiring interdisciplinary scientific approach such as Ethics, Philosophy, Literature, Psychology, Sociology. In addition, in the process of approaching the issues, the authors used philosophical, scientific methods such as: The method of unity between logic and history, homogeneity and synchrony, between analysis and synthesis, methods of collating, comparing, and analyzing documents.

3 Content Analysis of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s Legacy

3.1 Background information on the life and career of Nguyen Binh Khiem

Nguyen Binh Khiem was born in 1491 at Trung Am Village, Vinh Lai Town, Ha Hong District, Hai Duong Province (now Ly Hoc Village, Vinh Bao District, Hai Phong city) (Dinh Gia Khanh, 1983: 3-45) His father was Nguyen Van Dinh. However, his being famous did not help him pass the examination. His mother was Nhu Thi Thuc – the youngest daughter of Nhu Van Lan, who was a doctor, and a Minister of Administration. Nguyen Binh Khiem was a well-educated person since birth; both sides of his family had the spirit of learning and acquired profound knowledge.

Growing up in turbulent times, for more than 20 years until attending the exam, Nguyen Binh Khiem skipped 9 university exams. In 1535, at the age of 45, he took the exam and passed the Poinsettia. After that, he was appointed as an official in charge of composing and fixing all documents of the Imperial Court, and then he was appointed to many different positions. Unfortunately, King Mac Thai Tong’s sudden

¹ Yi Jing (The Book of Changes) is an ancient Chinese series, a product of the thinking of many scholars from ancient times to the Song dynasty (13th century). *Yi Jing* records the content of “Bagua” (The Eight Trigrams theory) in which the Universe was originally an infinite chaos, thanks to the movement that turned into Taiji, i.e., the great circle. The force of *Taiji* then is what results in duality represented as *Yin and Yang*. These are then combined into trigrams, which are more yang, more yin, less yang, less yin. Four trigrams are combined into *Eight hexagrams* representing eight natural and social phenomena, such as: Heaven (Father) - Earth (Mother), Water (Middle Sister) - Fire (Middle Brother), Thunder (Big Brother) - Wind (Big Sister), Mountain (Little Brother) - Lake (Little Sister).

² Lixue” (“principle,” or *li* studies): the theory of “Qi,” reflecting the content, nature, the laws of transference of all things, corresponding to the concept of “Material” in Western philosophy. “*Li*” is the concept of pairing with “Qi” corresponding to the concept of “Form” in Western philosophy.

death in 1950 ended the most prosperous phase of the kingdom under Mac Dynasty. This made Nguyen Binh Khiem lose his ambition to execute his political wishes. Once officials in the Imperial Court started to take sides, Nguyen Binh Khiem handed over 18 indictments, but none was not approved. Therefore, he resigned in 1542 after 8 years serving as an official in the Imperial Court. When he returned home, he opened a teaching school, training many good students to become officials to help the King rule the country. On November 28, 1585, he passed away in his hometown at the age of 95. Nguyen Binh Khiem composed nearly a thousand poems and prophecies that predict the demise of the feudal state dynasties of Vietnam. His contemporaries revered him as a military master for making many smart country strategies based on “Wisdom.”

3.2 Generalizing the concept of Dao in Chinese philosophy

To approach the concept of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy, it is necessary to know about the concept of Dao in Chinese philosophy. Dao is one of the basic and popular categories of Chinese philosophy, presenting in all schools of philosophy. However, in the Taoist philosophy, the frequency of using the concept of Dao is the highest with the most realistic meaning. In the book *Dao, Eastern philosophy*, the authors described the content of the Dao as follows: (1) The original meaning of the Dao is the Path, then expanded into the law. The Path here is both concrete (the Path on the ground) and abstract (the Path of life or direction of the striving person’s will). (2) Dao is the Being of all things. (3) Dao is made up of two elements Yin - Yang (one yin, one yang called Dao). (4) Dao is the One - the only one born earlier than everything. (5) **Dao is “Nothingness”** or “Non-being.” Dao is invisible, anonymous, soundless but it is the root of visible things. (6) *Dao is Li or Taiji*. Dao is Li in two ways, both ontological and ethical. When Dao is said as Taiji, it means Dao is the “One,” which is born before all, even before heaven and earth. (7) *Dao is Mind*, which exists in man, defining its nature. (8) *Dao is Qi*, regulating the form of all things. (9) Dao is the right way to be human or Human Dao (Rendao). This is a common notion in Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism. Daoists advocate that Rendao must obey Tiendao (Heaven’s Dao).

Summarizing the above points, it is possible to understand Dao in Chinese philosophy with the following meaning: *Dao is the primordial being*, from which all things are born; Dao is invisible, soundless, anonymous. Dao is like “Soul” in Plato’s philosophy (Protopopova, 2021), “Logos” in Heraclitus’ philosophy (Cavalcante – Cornelli, 2020; Schluderer, 2017), “Form” in Aristotle’s philosophy (Datta, 2020), “Monad” in Leibniz’s philosophy (Nita, 2017), “Absolute Spirit” in Hegelian philosophy (Speight, 2014). *Dao is the nature of the universe*, of all things and their internal structure. *Dao is the universal law* defining the inevitable essential relationship and the stability of things. *Dao is the process of movement and transformation of the world*. *Dao is the Path of life*, defining the political and ethical principles, the human behavior within the natural environment, the treatment between people. Here Dao is similar to Humanism in Western philosophy [Truong Lap Van, 1998].

3.3 The intension of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy

Inheriting the contents of Dao in Chinese philosophy combined with the values of Vietnamese cultural traditions, Nguyen Binh Khiem built his concept of Dao reflecting his own worldview and human outlook. However, due to the historical context of Vietnam at that time when natural science had not been developed, cultural exchange with the outside world was limited, so he could not have access to new knowledge about cosmology, astronomy such as “theory of geocentrism,” “theory of heliocentrism.” Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem recognized the concept of Dao only

in terms of human look, that is, applying the Dao to explain the natural phenomena related to human life *without discussing the issue of the philosophical ontology of the Dao*. Studying his heritage, it is easy to realize that the content of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy contains the following basic points:

(1) *Dao is an indeterminate, invisible entity formed by the two elements "Yin and Yang"*

In the view of the "Theory of Bagua," the world was originally infinite chaos, thanks to the movement that turned into "Taiji."³ The force of "Taiji" then is what emerges from the duality represented as *Yin and Yang*. These are then combined into "Four trigrams," from "Four trigrams" born "Bagua," from "Bagua" creates of all things. Not following this Confucian interpretation, in the poem "Inspiration," which is nearly 300 sentences long reflecting the full conception of life, Nguyen Binh Khiem said:

"Taiji at the beginning of division / Triad⁴ was determined/ Clear and light, then fly to the sky / Dirty and heavy then settle down into the ground / Gathering in the middle becomes human / Congenitally they are a Qi" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1354-1371).

This represents the monism viewpoint that Heaven – Earth – Human being are born from a factor, i.e., "Qi". Due to the movement and transformation of "Qi", various elements in the universe are born. This idea is expressed more clearly in his "Poem of Silkworms" as follows:

"Two yin-yang circulate magically / Silkworm is formed that shows the merits of creation / Turning around in a circle to experience the fate of the sky / Behavior according to the times, that is thanks to many moral efforts / Try to ask where there are small pests? Quietly see that all things have the same root" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1277).

Regarding the operation of Yin - Yang and "Taiji," Nguyen Binh Khiem describes quite clearly in his poem of "*Cold in the Spring Night*":

"A warm sky is easy to feel spring / Reading, not sleeping, relying on the railing alone / If you want to know Yang grows, Yin dissipates / Then look in the tranquil state of Taiji" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1168).

The poem describes the change of weather according to the Spring - Summer - Fall - Winter rule based on the transformation principle of the two elements "Yin - Yang" that make up Dao. This is the law - "Yin grows, Yang dissipates and vice versa," which is not only the law of the weather but also of other social phenomena. In the same idea, in his poem of "Winter wind," he wrote:

"The seasons of the year are circulating, passing and returning / The Northern wind signals the cold winter / Under the high sky, the Conifer trees become more developed with dew / During the long nights, the Apricot trees by the window bring the raindrops / Yin is gone, Yang is back, the thought is extremely good / The wind blows the sky full of air" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1143).

³ "Taiji" includes "Tai" which means "supreme," and "Ji," which means "reach the end." *Taiji* used in this text describes the undivided totality of the early universe, which is recorded in the "Theory of Bagua" of *Yi Jing*.

⁴ Triad is the theory that there are three basic elements in the universe: Heaven - Earth - Humans. If these three factors work in a harmonious way, ie "*clement weather, favorable terrain, and concord among the people*," society will develop quickly and vice versa.

In Vietnamese culture, the Conifer symbolizes strength, withstanding the winter breeze, and the Apricot exhibits slenderness and weakness. The change of weather still obeys the law of transformation of Yin and Yang.

(2) Dao is generally classified into three specific types: Heaven's dao, Human dao and Earth's dao

Heaven's dao is the overarching dao, surpassing Human dao and Earth's dao. Heaven's exists in everything, regulates the operation and change of the weather.

In his poem of "Lunar New Year," he describes how he felt when he woke up in the morning:

"Just one morning, who helped God / Rejoice in the peaceful landscape renews. From the past to present, the joy in peace is never-ending / Heaven and earth's dao are immense, Dao is outside the body of the human being / Dao resides in everything, bringing spring to every home" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1086).

"Lunar New Year" is a special occasion in Vietnamese culture and some Asian countries such as China, Korea, Mongolia, etc.; This is the time to transition from the old year to the new year, the weather changes markedly. This change, according to Nguyen Binh Khiem, is stipulated by "Heaven's dao"; Such a concept is quite appropriate for Vietnamese folk philosophy expressed in the idiom: "Knowing that everything is due to heaven."

As a philosopher of occult idealism, Nguyen Binh Khiem affirms that Heaven's dao regulates Human dao, which means that the destiny of every nation and every human being is determined by God (Heaven). The law of society operates in a cyclical way like the law of nature. Social history is a great circle; From prosperity to crisis, the war is over for sure peace. "*Feelings of the times*" is one of the poems that clearly reflect that Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy of human life. He wrote:

"Life is peaceful and also chaotic / Dao is sometimes upright, sometimes meek / Blessing and blight depends on each other, that is reality / If it is too full, it will be lost, that can be seen as both illusory and real" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1331).

The life of plants, creatures as well as humans has a process of arising, developing, then perishing; when wealth and health are over, the poverty and fades come. This is like "The flowers bloom and then the flowers become rotten / The water is filled and then less / Knowing everything has fate / No one has ever moved Heaven's dao" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1508). "Heaven's dao" is an immutable law, existing from thousands of years to the present; no force can change it. The issue is that people must be knowledgeable to apply it to human life. Being aware of this, Nguyen Binh Khiem advised that "being wise to know that if you want to get promoted, you must try / The comparison is the selfishness of people / Heaven's dao is never wrong" (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1473). It should be noted here that "the view of thanks to Heaven" has been a red thread throughout the entire history of Vietnamese philosophical thought, since the poem of "Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country" by Ly Thuong Kiet (1019 - 1105) or "The Tale of Kieu" by Nguyen Du (1766 - 1820). This is due to historical circumstances as Vietnam is an agricultural country. Its production and life depend on climate and weather that are often unstable.

(3) Human dao is the Dao that exists in the human mind, regulating the psychological state, knowledge, morality and life of each individual

After resigning and returning to his hometown, Nguyen Binh Khiem opened a school and called himself the "White Cloud Hermit." His perception of love and philosophy of human life are described in "Collection of Poems from the Bach Van Retreat." This is a beautiful collection of poems in the history of Vietnamese poetry, in which three

elements, “Wine - Poetry – Philosophy,” are intertwined. He drank wine to write poems and wrote poems to express his philosophy of life, which reflects “Human dao.” He wrote:

“The mountains are vast in the blindness, deep in the purple clouds /
Alone at the house by the river with wine and poetry / A cold pond in
silence, nowhere is not Heaven / Full bright moon is the mind / With the
plan of good, evil should be awakened/ Dao is not outside of people, so
don’t go looking far” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 247).

The argument regarding “Dao in man” is repeated by Nguyen Binh Khiem in nearly 1,000 of his poems. This peculiarity in his poetry emerged because he had been influenced by the Buddhist thought of “Buddha at heart.” In other words, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophical thought is a combination of Confucianism - Buddhism - Taoism developed on the background of Vietnamese cultural identity.

Despite being a great intellectual of his era, Nguyen Binh Khiem did not wish to become an official at the Court. Instead, he was interested in the cause of education, especially moral education. He composed many poems on this theme. For example, in the poem “The love of father and son,” he wrote: “Dao is not only in theory, but also for people / That father and son relationship is the closest” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 776). Here, “Dao” is no longer an abstract philosophical concept but has become a motto to live by, regulating specific human behaviors like the legal norms in the present society.

Among the diverse expressions of “Human dao,” Nguyen Binh Khiem mostly focused on “King’s dao,” which is how a King should act. “The Way of King” is one of his poems with strong political nuance:

“The King’s dao is very delicate / Not only does it nourish the people but
also respects Heaven / Establishing prosperity, protecting the country,
thinking of being an example, inheriting / Keeping a pure heart, little
desire, giving up greed and hunting / Looking for good people everywhere
to grant virtue / Using military power to treat crimes, respecting the
commanders’ assertiveness / The virtue of King makes the four seasons
harmonious / Rich or poor all can enjoy the peaceful time” (Nguyen Binh
Khiem, 2014: 748).

When analyzing the content of the poem, it feels like Nguyen Binh Khiem is no longer a poet but a devoted politician, i.e., a politician devoted to his country. Such observation is actually factual as he was an advisor to many dynasties. The history of medieval Vietnam shows that he gave practical and valuable advice to many contemporary Kings when they requested it. His pieces of advice were later collected and gathered into the book of “Prophecies.”

As a fan of Confucius’ “Theory of righteousness” (551-479), Nguyen Binh Khiem said that the King must be talented and virtuous and must always strive for the people’s ideal:

“The king’s dao is both difficult and easy / Ethical behavior is a
framework for the people / Penal is to improve the good of the people /
Try to constantly improve yourself / Gradually, you will become perfect /
Strive to practice humanity and justice / You can make yourself enjoy
peace” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1354-1371).

Thus, “King’s dao,” that is, the knowledge, personality, politics, and lifestyle of the King are decisive for the destiny of the nation’s history. This is evidently proven by real history.

When applying “Human dao” to life, Nguyen Binh Khiem based his reasoning on the “Eastern Wisdom” and chose “neutralism” as a way of life (Nguyen Thi Tho & Le Cong Su, 2018: 420 - 426). This is understandable because living in a society with many opposing factions and diverse group interests, Nguyen Binh Khiem was stuck between multiple rounds of bullets (to put it figuratively). To protect his life and keep

his personality, he had to live and act in a way aligned with the principle of neutrality. His poem of “Nom 110” is really a living motto: “Followed neutralism / Neither opaque nor transparent” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1546).

The Doctrine of the Mean is one of the specific contents of the original Confucianism reflected by Confucius in the work of “*Doctrine of the Mean*,” which was included in “*Four Books*.” In the book “*Doctrine of the Mean*,” Confucius said: “the effect of ethical behavior is to take harmony as the first but to have peace, you must stand in the middle, reconcile all interests, and conflicts, not extremes and unlinked.” (Cheung et al., 2003: 108) Thoroughly grasping this concept of Confucianism, and combining it with the thought of “Benevolence – Mercy – Cheerfulness - Indifference” of Buddhism, Nguyen Binh Khiem wisely chose the view of neutralism. Therefore, when he could not make merit in the royal court, he returned to his hometown to build Bach Van retreat to live and teach. He followed the Buddhist rules and named himself the “White Cloud Hermit.”

(4) Earth's dao is the third element that constitutes the concept of Dao

Earth's dao is the environment, the source of life to nourish people because according to the Eastern philosophy, “People are the flowers of the Earth;” “Earth gives birth to talents.”

Regarding the role of the “Earth's dao” to human life, Nguyen Binh Khiem depicts quite clearly in the poem of “*Snow Flower*”:

“Lighter than willow, whiter than apricot / six-pointed flower in the moment of blooming / Thanks to the moonlight, it spreads across the world in white layers / Thanks to the wind, it surrounded the beautiful castles. / In Earth's dao, you can experience the destruction and development / Over Thien Son mountain to know the skill of trimming / The phenomenon was born of heaven and earth, it is not a coincidence / There is a lot of snow that predicts a good harvest in the coming year” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1240).

Snow is a product of “Heaven's dao,” yet it inspires “Human dao” and embellishes “Earth's dao.” This demonstrates the views of “Heaven - Human unification” and “Heaven - Earth - Human unity” of Eastern philosophy quite vividly. Accordingly:

“Round is to symbolize Heaven / Square is to symbolize Earth / Moon appears in the air / Goodness of Heaven exists in silence / This great grace is distributed among people to live happily / Like warm jade, it makes pure virtue / *Great dao*, the source is there / For more than three next generations” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 320).

“Earth's dao” is understood simply by common sense as the land, soil, forests, mountains, rivers, and their products. These are essential natural resources for production and life. If a country has a rich “Earth's dao,” it has a chance of becoming prosperous. In the conception of “Oriental Feng Shui,” Earth's dao are also considered as a natural whole of the terrain on which people build houses, palaces, temples, tombs. According to “Oriental Feng Shui,” Earth's dao greatly affect the health, intelligence, and psychology of the people because humans are a component of nature, a “miniature universe.” According to the legend, Nguyen Binh Khiem was a good “Geography Master,” a good “Master of horoscopes,” admired by many fans. This is true because he has a deep understanding of the basic principles of “I Ching” and “Lixue.”

3.4 The current value of the concept of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy

Although Nguyen Binh Khiem has receded into history, his thoughts are still influential today in three basic aspects of modern life:

Firstly, the thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem promotes life in harmony with the natural environment and ecological ethics.

Nguyen Binh Khiem was born in the countryside. Except for 8 years spent in the city as an official, he was happy with leisurely life in the countryside: “Eat bamboo shoots in the autumn, eat soybean in the winter / Shower in the lotus lake in the spring, shower in the pond, in the summer” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 1527). Such natural living conditions formed a philosophy of living in favor of heaven that was a popular way of life for most contemporary Vietnamese intellectuals, including Nguyen Trai, for example.

The reason why he had developed his philosophy of living in harmony with heaven and the environment is that he was influenced by Confucianism and Taoism as well as Vietnamese cultural identity. Influenced by the Confucian ideology of “Heaven – Human unification,” Nguyen Binh Khiem said that because people are born in heaven and on earth, they always have the characteristics of “Triad”; and to have a happy life, people have to abide by the law of Triad; otherwise they have to pay the price. As agricultural lifestyle was predominant in Vietnam (cultivation and animal husbandry), in the mind of every Vietnamese person, “Heaven” was a natural force on par with “Mother Nature,” with great strength, supreme power. People have thus always obeyed, protected, and respected it. It can be said that Nguyen Binh Khiem laid the foundation for a science major that has become popular today - “Ecological ethics” contributing to educating the awareness of protecting the living environment which is seriously degraded and polluted today.

Currently, in the world in general and in Vietnam in particular, the issue of environmental pollution and natural resource depletion are raising alarming signals. “According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, currently there are 615 industrial clusters, but only about 5% have a centralized wastewater treatment system, nearly 300 industrial areas with a discharge of over 2 million m³ / day, 70 % of wastewater has not been completely treated, 23% of FDI enterprises discharge 5-12% exceeding the permitted standard. According to statistics, each year, about 9,000 people nationwide die, and more than 200,000 cases are detected from cancer due to the use of polluted water” (Nguyen The Trung, 2019). Thus, people in the production process without paying attention to the protection of the environment have significant consequences that the Vietnamese society must suffer. At the beginning of March 2019, the Green Creative Development Center (GreenID) of the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations published a report of the Green Peace Organization “On the status of global air quality in 2018.” According to this report, Hanoi ranked second, and Ho Chi Minh City ranked 15th in terms of air pollution in Southeast Asia. “According to the Fulbright University estimates, economic losses in Vietnam due to air pollution (2013) are about 5-7% of GDP, causing premature death for tens of thousands of people. At the 2016 Lagos (Switzerland) Conference, Vietnam ranked 10th in terms of air pollution. According to the Pollution Control Department under the General Department of Environment, Vietnam has about 43 million motorbikes and more than 2 million cars in circulation, mainly using fossil fuels such as diesel and gasoline, which are the major sources of toxic emissions. In the WHO study, outdoor air pollution is considered the fourth leading cause of premature deaths in the world and estimated losses of up to USD \$225 billion annually” (Nguyen The Trung, 2019).

Facing such an alarming situation, attempts are made at harmonizing interests among classes of people, creating a friendly environment with nature, and raising awareness of the urgency to protect the living environment. These are the basic principles of the sustainable development philosophy that the State of Vietnam is trying to work towards. These principles have been aligned by the Communist Party of Vietnam with socialist ideals and goals for implementation throughout the years. This push to harmonize socio-economic interests with the need to protect the environment has

emerged from the socio-cultural reality of the Vietnamese people, which is a combination between modernity and national traditions. Due to the pressure of economic development and outdated, rigid notions, even lack of knowledge about mastering nature and developing the natural environment; as well as due to the weakness in enacting and enforcing environmental laws, Vietnam's natural preservation continues to be badly damaged. To overcome this risk, the application of the philosophy of living in harmony with nature in Nguyen Binh Khiem thought is very important and necessary.

Secondly, Nguyen Binh Khiem's thought calls for coexistence of peace, tolerance and solidarity

Living together in peace, tolerance, and solidarity is the main content in Vietnamese philosophy of life in general and Nguyen Binh Khiem's thought in particular. In poems about human life, typically "Inspired" with 300 sentences, he applied the "Hexagrams" in the "Theory of Bagua" of the "I Ching" book to explain the complex issues of life such as "War – Peace," "Birth – Death," "Rich – Poor," "Blessing – Blight," "Prosperity – Depression," etc.

According to Nguyen Binh Khiem, the spirit of tolerance and solidarity is specifically expressed in the philosophy of being neutral, that is, never being extreme, nor partisan, because such a philosophy of life always helps people become serene and cavalier.

A good example of impartial and tolerant policies regarding social and religious issues comes to us from the author Nguyen The Doanh (2008). In his article about the situation in Kuwait, Nguyen The Doanh says the following: "Kuwait is a small country with 2.5 million people and as Archbishop Caminno Ballin - the Apostolic Administration of Kuwait confirmed that 'the local government responded to all our needs and was very generous to us. The government helped us to move our places of worship and all the administrative and procedural necessary;' 'on major holidays like Christmas or Easter, the government sends security forces to protect the community attending Mass.' And also that, 'Catholics in Kuwait enjoy the right to freedom of worship and without any restrictions'" (Nguyen The Doanh, 2008). Without tolerance, without proper recognition or understanding of the government towards religion, it is difficult in a Muslim country like Kuwait to have such a tolerant and optimistic outlook.

Nguyen Binh Khiem praised a calm, simple and balanced lifestyle, with a political emphasis on being close to the people, loving the people, loving peace, condemning wars and conflicts. If the current leadership cadres grasp Nguyen Binh Khiem's view of life, they will have a healthier lifestyle, being closer to the people, contributing to social progress. Hence we can join Dinh Gia Khanh and argue that "as a great author of Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Binh Khiem is like a giant tree that deeply influenced Vietnamese literature in the 16th century. His heart, his thoughts reflected in poetry have belonged to the fine tradition of the Vietnamese nation and the Vietnamese people. Nguyen Binh Khiem deserves to be regarded as one of the significant contributors to the process of building the quality of Vietnam, the soul of Vietnam" (Dinh Gia Khanh, 1983: 44).

Thirdly, Nguyen Binh Khiem raised the question of "Ethics of Reverence for Life"

Following Buddhism but greatly influenced by the theory of Confucianism and Taoism, there was an integration of the intellect, consciousness, and sentiments in Nguyen Binh Khiem on the notion that life is equal for all creatures in the universe, not only for humans. For that reason, he wrote hundreds of poems describing scenes, praising things, trees, animals as if they were close to human life. Here the poet becomes a humanitarian philosopher and lays the foundation for a "New Ethics" - "Ethics of Reverence for life" which later German philosopher Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) developed in the work: "*Reverence for life*" (Schweitzer, 1979). According to Schweitzer, "Good is what serves to preserve and promote life, evil is

what destroys or hinders life ... The world is a cruel tragedy that halves the will to reach life. One life affirms itself on the price of another, one destroys another ... Ethics of Reverence for life forces us to feel the infinite great responsibility in relationships between people” (Soloviev – Wojtyla – Schweitzer, 2004: 414, 427). Schweitzer’s Ethics of Reverence for life has serious implications for overall health of humans (Afshar – Steensma – Kyle, 2019) as well as an integral socio-ecological thinking (Troizka et al, 2020). Such philosophical ideas are actually deeply rooted in the Buddhist concept of “not killing” and “Vegetarianism” that changes the perception, attitude, and behavior of people towards other creatures.

Nguyen Binh Khiem’s view of “Ethics of Reverence for life” is shown in a realistic way, with specific descriptions in the poem “*Watching big fish eating small fish, gives rise to poetic feelings.*” He wrote:

“Everything is big and also small / No species is not born of heaven / Sages extend their love / Make each one blessed /... Why is the big fish in that river / Based on his strength to eat the small fishes / The pond is empty / Greedy too much ... / The big one, the small one should let each other peaceful / God is filial so you should be careful not to kill each other indiscriminately” (Nguyen Binh Khiem, 2014: 303-304).

This is a poem written in a “read between in lines” style, that is, comparing “the affairs of the fish” with “the affairs of the people.” By the image of “Big fish swallowing small fish,” he means to condemn the wealthy social forces relying on money and wealth to wage wars to invade the weak nations. This is a reminder for each person to look back on himself, to live well with other people and creatures, other countries, and to focus on building a good and harmonious society.

4 Conclusion

Our analysis shows that Nguyen Binh Khiem is more than a poet – he is also a great philosopher of Vietnam. His poetry contains a breath of life as manifested in his philosophy of the creation and movement of the universe, the unfathomable transformation of things. The whole transformation is regulated by a supernatural, infinite, invisible, voiceless entity called Dao. In such a sense, his philosophy can be called “Ethical Metaphysics” simply because Dao, in his thoughts, has become the motto and reason to live for the country in the past, present, and future. In addition, Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy showed that the people need to respect the laws of nature, and harmonize with nature.

In the context of globalization today, the concept of Dao in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s thought has been known not only by Vietnam but internationally. In the West, although science and technology have developed rapidly, and material possessions have become ever more abundant, spiritual life has become increasingly poor and monotonous, giving rise to the phenomenon of a “Homeless Mind.” This perceived emptiness and incompleteness appears to be the cause behind the “Return to the East” movement, whose aim is to find the once-forgotten human values. This movement comprises the philosophy of following Heaven (i.e., heavenly principles), a neutral, unbiased way of conduct in the spirit of tolerance and solidarity to live together in a peaceful context.

Nguyen Binh Khiem has entered history as a sage. Caodaimism has worshiped him as one of the three holy saints. The picture of the Three Saints is worshiped in the Tay Ninh Holy See, created by artist Le Minh Tong in 1947, which depicts a portrait of Nguyen Binh Khiem next to the famous French writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and the leader of the Chinese bourgeois-democratic revolutionary movement Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925). This shows the modern value of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s thought to Vietnam and the world (Nhat, 2019; Nhu, 2021).

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