

Features of “*Xuất thế*” (Exiting from Mundane World) in Thoughts of Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Thánh Tông, and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm

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Abstract: This paper presents and discusses the features of “*xuất thế*” (exiting from the mundane world” in the thoughts of Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), Lê Thánh Tông (1442-1497), and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491-1585). The three are among great thinkers of *Đại Việt* (Great Việt, i.e. the contemporary Vietnam) in the medieval period. Despite holding different social positions and being all deeply influenced by the Confucian point of view of “*nhập thế*”, or “entering into the [mundane/secular] world”, living the context of the three harmonious teachings as one (*tam giáo đồng nguyên*), they could not avoid the influences of the Taoist and Buddhist stance of “*xuất thế*”. The author carried out the research to find out the feature of “*xuất thế*” of these three people revealed in their works. Owing to the syncretism of the three teachings, they had brilliant accomplishments in their lives, contributing in part to a heroic period in the Vietnam’s history.

Keywords: *Xuất thế*, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, fame.

Subject classification: Philosophy.

1. Introduction

According to common understanding, “*xuất thế*” means to leave the secular life without paying attention to reality or taking part enthusiastically in socio-political activities, and showing an attitude of complete indifference to all things in life. In terms of semantics, it is opposed to “*nhập thế*”, which means to take part in

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building guidelines and carrying out activities in life for the purpose of redeeming people and bringing about social change. From a psychological perspective, “*xuất thế*” is not seen as a negative attitude to life, but rather it reflects a temporary psychological state resulting from certain factors.

Based on the nature of typical religions in East Asia, “*xuất thế*” can be considered a particular feature of the Taoist and Buddhist dogmas. While the Confucian teaching requires men, especially “gentlemen”, to “better themselves first, then manage their own family, next govern their country wisely, and finally bring peace to the world”, the Taoist and the Buddhist teachings advise one to have a pessimistic view of life, such as “*wu wei*” (inaction), beholding moving attitudes (such as loving-kindness or benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity), leaving the world of dust, facing the world with an immaterial mind free from illusions, disregarding fame and social position, letting oneself go, and keeping away from material seduction. On a more extreme level, it is to separate from community, to lead a secluded life in remote mountainous areas like a hermit or leave one’s family to lead a religious life in a temple as a monk.

Reviewing remarkable events taking place in life and in the literary works of Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Thánh Tông, and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, readers can easily understand that each of these three scholars had their own interpretations and experiences, which reflected their views of life and social position. Their thought of *xuất thế* contributed to Vietnamese literature of the medieval period, making it more diversified and attractive, demonstrating the general view on life and state of mind in a religiously harmonious and tolerant society.

From such a perspective, the following methods are used by the author of this paper: accessing the sources of literature, analysing documents, and, combining the analyses to outline the views on life of these three people whose works are typical of Vietnamese literature in the medieval period. Although the Confucian ideology was basically considered the key for setting up strategies and actions to govern the country and reassure the populace, deep in the subconscious, these three scholars always kept their points of view and attitudes in life, which were built on the basis of Buddhist and Taoist teachings.

2. *Xuất thế* in Nguyễn Trãi’s thought

During childhood, Nguyễn Trãi lived in his maternal grandfather’s house and he had a passionate interest in contemplating the charming landscape in Côn Sơn

(part of the current Hải Dương Province), and reading books on Confucian teachings. As a result, after passing his exams and becoming a mandarin, he lived and worked as a Confucian scholar. The Confucian thought processes gradually penetrated deep into the mind of this first-ranking mandarin, regulating his manners/behavior. However, it does not mean that Nguyễn Trãi was not influenced by Buddhist and Taoist teachings. In reality, he had spent several years living as a hermit retiring from the world when the Later Lê Dynasty had fallen in conflict.

In a paper titled “Studying the influence of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thoughts in Nguyễn Trãi’s Chinese-script poems”, Lê Thị Lan briefly described Nguyễn Trãi’s pessimistic view of life: “Despite being indisposed, Nguyễn Trãi embraced the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuang Zhou as a last resort for the purpose of consoling and calming himself over the injustices, ironies, and deadlocked situations in life. It also helped him avoid great disappointment resulting from the fact that he had no way to achieve his ambition of serving society” (Lê Thị Lan, 1998: 33). If readers are fully aware of this, they can realize that the spirit of a Taoist hermit, who preferred to roam the world than to discuss and take part in secular affairs, is sometimes evident in his poems. In the poem “Thu dạ khách cảm” (Expatriate’s feeling on an autumn night), for instance, the mood of a secluded scholar is described in some sentences as follows: “Đáo đầu vạn sự giai hư huyền, Hưu luận Phàm vong dữ Sở tồn” (Eventually, everything is just illusory/ Let’s give up discussing whether [the countries of] Chu and Fan still exist) (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 274) or “Thu phong lạc diệp ky tình tứ, Dạ vũ thanh đăng khách mộng hồn” (The north wind and falling leaves induce the feeling of the traveller in a strange land/ The rainy night and the lamp leads him into a dream). When the living conditions are so terribly lonely and an illusion, one finds it useless to discuss whether the Chu state would be kept or the Fan state would be eliminated as written in Chinese history. This urged him to change his purpose in life and focus on studying the history of his own nation for the sake of deriving new understanding by reviewing what happened in the past and dealing with the contemporary complicated issues in Đại Việt.

“Giấc mộng hoàng lương” (Yellow Millet Dream) is a metaphoric folk tale about a poor scholar on his way to sit the imperial examinations. While waiting for the inn host to prepare a pan of millet for him, he tried to concentrate on some study. However, because he was too tired, he dozed off and had a dream. In the dream, he was awarded the title “doctoral laureate” and became a high-ranking official. He received an extravagant welcome when he returned home to pay thanks

to the ancestors. He married, had children, and enjoyed a life of wealth and comfort with many perquisites and servants. Then, suddenly a strong wind blew, swaying the door shades and waking him up. By that time, the pot of yellow millet had just got ready. He was confused between the reality and his dream. Once he was completely awake, he discovered that the several decades of honor and wealth in the dream actually took place over the course of just a few minutes, which was long enough for the pan of yellow millet to cook. Based on the folk tale, Nguyễn Trãi elucidated the illusion of life by two lines in the verse: “Thế thượng hoàng lương nhất mộng dư, Giác lai vạn sự tổng thành hư” (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 329). (Life is like a dream of yellow millet/ After waking up, we realize that everything was merely an illusion).

“Wu wei” (Inaction) or the standpoint of an unhurried life and avoiding complicated issues in the secular world in Laozi’s philosophy is also a topic in Nguyễn Trãi’s poems. Despite being busy working in the royal court, he thirsted for a leisurely life: “Hi đắc thân nhân quan hựu lãnh, Bể môn tận nhật thiếu tương qua. Mãn đường vân khí triều phần bách, Nhiều chằm từng thanh dạ thược trà.” (It is so pleasurable to have a cushy life with a lot of free time/ The door is closed every day without communicating with others/ Burning cypress wood in the morning to leave cloudy vapor filling the house/ Making tea at night and laying back against the pillow to listen to the sound of pine trees (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 306). This poem expresses quite fully the “wu wei” philosophy, being typical of the poems Nguyễn Trãi wrote when working for the royal court. Reading those lines of verse, one sympathizes with his concern over whether he should keep working for the court or return to his home village to relax and work as a village teacher. In reality, however, he realized it was impossible to have both at the same time: “Lấy đâu xuất xứ trọn hai bề/ Được thú làm quan, mất thú quê”. (As it is impossible to do well in both, enjoying working as a mandarin means giving up the joys of the countryside” (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 432). Eventually, he decided to choose the pleasure of working as a mandarin over the joy of a leisurely life in the countryside, which he could only appreciate in his spare time, devoting his talent and efforts to the country, assisting the king in suppressing enemies, governing the country, and reassuring the people.

Having studied literary works of other poets in the same period, readers can realize that this feeling was not peculiar to Nguyễn Trãi but it was a common psychological state of feudal intellectuals when they were unable to escape from the feudal ideological norms. As a great scholar, Nguyễn Trãi certainly understood the saying: “Quốc gia hưng vong, thất phu hữu trách”, meaning everyone shall be responsible for the prosperity and the failure of the country. At the same time, after

taking part in the system of government, he best realized that “nhân sinh thức tự đa ưu hoạn”, implying that one who has knowledge has many concerns and encounter many dangers (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 343). This is a logically cause-and-effect relationship between “the dedication” and “the talent” as well as “the talent” and “the misfortune”, as concluded reasonably in the verses by Nguyễn Du: “Chữ tài liền với chữ tai một vần” ([The word that means] talent rhymes with [that of] catastrophe) and “Chữ Tâm kia mới bằng ba chữ Tài” ([The word that means] heartiness is worth three times [that of] talent).

After some decades working as a mandarin, Nguyễn Trãi realized that fame and wealth were just fleeting things like a shade on water or a bird in the sky; meanwhile, human emotions and affections were respected forever in the minds of the people. Thus, he decided to “get rid of fame and fortune and live a secluded life” (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 450), when the relationships between him and the King had soured. Eventually, he moved to Côn Sơn to live comfortably as a retired scholar: “Soi gương tóc bạc, già rồi đây/ Theo tục danh hư, nhọc lắm nào” (Looking at myself in the mirror, I have realized that in my old age with grey hair/ It has been really exhausting to pursue vain fame” (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 215). Elderly as he was, he then still returned to work after being invited by the royal court. This brought anguish for the rest of his life with the tragic case of “Lê Chi Viên” (Lychee Garden): “Hoa càng khoe tốt, tốt càng rữa/ Nước chớ cho đầy, đầy ắt vơi/ Mới biết doanh hư đã có số/ Ai từng cải được lòng trời” (The more a flower blooms, the faster it will fall / Do not pour water into a cup until it is full, as it will not be full, after it is full/ It is known that everything depends on destiny/ No one can avoid what the heavens have decided) (Nguyễn Trãi, 1976: 424). As one has to accept one’s destiny, Nguyễn Trãi and all of those who had blood relations with him from three lines, including his spouses, siblings and offspring, were sentenced to death. However, the historical dialectics demonstrate “a blessing in disguise” – with that unprecedented event that happened to Nguyễn Trãi and his beloved resulting in the emergency of a talented and righteous king, who was also the leader of “Tao đàn nhị thập bát tú” (A Literary Society of 28 Stars) that shone brightly in Vietnam’s literary sky.

3. Xuất thế in Lê Thánh Tông’s thought

Describing the dialectical relationship between human beings and their situations, a Vietnamese folk proverb explains that “hard times create heroes and heroes change times”. This is appropriate when talking about Lê Thánh Tông. The

complicated and difficult situation of the royal court of the Later Lê Dynasty in Đại Việt in the mid-15th century resulted in the enthronement of Lê TỰ THÀNH, who had earlier been a “reclusive” prince. Despite his young age, he had an innate ability and a great love for the people and his country devoting all his efforts to its development and the southward expansion, for which he was responsible as the country’s leader. This made Vietnam much larger and more powerful, compared with the previous reigns. It demonstrates that Lê Thánh Tông was well-known in history, first of all, for his contribution as an emperor. Resounding achievements were gained owing to the fact that he knew how to apply governance/rule of law and governance/rule of man in a harmonious way. His literary works were composed on the basis of “văn dĩ tải đạo” (Literary works are created to disseminate moral standards) and “thi ngôn chí” (Poems are composed to show the will of human beings).

Everything Lê Thánh Tông did for the country was not accidental but the sure results of a long process with continual effort and assuming full responsibility. This is reflected in a poem entitled “Quân đạo thi” (a poem about the working principles as an emperor) as follows: “”Đế vương đại đạo cực tinh nghiê/ Hạ dục nguyên nguyên thượng kính thiên/ Chế trị bảo bang tư kế thuật/ Thanh tâm quả dục tuyệt du điền/ Bàng cầu tuần ngải phu văn đức/ Khắc cật binh nhung trọng tượng quyền/ Ngọc chúc điều hoà hàn noãn tự/ Hoa di cộng lạc thái bình niên”. (The great way of functioning as an emperor has been well grasped/ It is to care for the people (subjects) and respect the heavens/ Finding out expedients for prosperity/ Completely giving up indulgence like going out hunting / Promoting talents and praising moral standards/ Taking care of military training and appreciating the generals’ power/authority/ Regulating everything appropriately according to the situation like the seasons of heat and cold succeeding one another/ All the people, including both the majority ethnic group and the minorities, enjoy peace) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 334). The principles were combined with humanity and love for the people according to the Confucian standpoint: “People are fundamental to the country; and food is fundamental to people’s lives”. His governing policy can be concluded briefly by the following sentence: “Tề dân đương dĩ thực vi thiên” (Administering people by taking care of their food) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 431). For a country such as Đại Việt, where farming was the main form of production, the first mission was to take care of people’s lives. This matches the advice given by Confucius that “firstly, make people wealthy, then educate them” and a Vietnamese proverb that reads “only eating can support ethics/morality” (“a hungry belly has no

ears”). This point of view was significant not only to the country at that time but also for policy-making in people mobilization in the later periods. Though having a thorough grasp of the Confucian sense of entering the secular world to save the people and making every effort to take care of national affairs, as a poet, Lê Thánh Tông sometimes fell for the romantic, tragic, and regretful emotions. Thus, the Taoist and Buddhist features of “xuất thế” (exiting from the mundane world” are reflected in a number of his poems. “Đề động Hồ Công” (Inscription Carved in Hồ Công Cave) is quite a good poem describing the moral viewpoint of a person who was at the pinnacle of power but still dreamt of living simply and freely in a natural environment. As to why he wrote this poem, Lê Thánh Tông revealed: “On a day (...) in the first lunar month of the [...] year (1473), I left Lam Kinh by boat and then stopped by the banks of the Lễ River. It was warm with a mild wind and soft sunlight. I felt excited and walked up to Hồ Công Cave. Resting a hand on a white rock and leaning against the green trees, I climbed up. Standing high up and looking out in the distance, I saw the vast landscape of the sky and the sea. At that time, all troubles and worries in the secular world disappeared from my mind, so I composed an impromptu poem to be carved on the cliff for posterity: “Thần chùy quỷ tạc vạn trùng san/ Hư thất cao song vũ trụ khoan/ Thế thượng công danh đô thị mộng/ Hồ trung nhật nguyệt bất thăng nhàn/ Hoa dương long hoá huyền châu trụ/ Bích động tuyên lưu bạch ngọc hàn/ Ngã dục thừa phong lãng tuyết đỉnh/ Vọng cùng vân hải hữu vô gian” (A myriad of mountains were dug and carved by demons and deities/ An illusory house with the high window in the immense universe/ Fame and reputations in life all become illusions/ The [images of the] sun and the moon inside the flask [of liquor] denote leisure / The mountain is decorated with flowers like the dragon’s tears/ A very limpid stream runs silently by the green cave/ I wish to ride the wind to the mountain top/ So as to see high clouds and immense waters) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 193).

Studying the language used in the above-mentioned poem, readers can notice the interference of Taoism and Buddhism. The language used to describe the landscape contains words to indicate the valuables in the real world as well as words that signify the wonderland with the immense sky and sea. Using the same prosody in the poem “Đề chùa Sài Sơn” (Inscription Carved in Sài Sơn Pagoda), Lê Thánh Tông mentioned the fundamental category of the Buddhist outlook in two mathematically “quantitative” lines of verse: “Túc siêu trần thế tam thiên giới, Thủ trích tinh thần chỉ xích thiên” (The foot can reach three thousand worlds/ The hand can seize stars, thinking the sky is so close) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 209).

According to the Buddhist viewpoint, the universe is boundless, consisting of three thousand worlds. The place where human beings live is just one of the worlds. Thus, a human life is extremely tiny and meaningless, compared to the universe.

In the history of Vietnamese feudal literature, “Quỳnh uyển cửu ca” is a special anthology of poems, which express a congenial companionship in the dialogue between Lê Thánh Tông and some of his closest courtiers. Of those poems, “Ngự chế kỳ khí thi” (A royal poem on the strange Qi (Air - Vital force/Energy)) is typical of the thought of xuất thế with the following sentences: “Tây thảo đông chinh hãn mã lao/ Kim yên dao trực Ngũ Lăng hào/ Dật tài dục chiết băng luân quế/ Kiện chí tư cầm Bắc hải giao/ Liêu Thủy tiên nhân thừa hạc khứ/ Hầu Sơn đế tử khóa loan cao/ Đại bàng phần tấn vân tiêu thượng/ Sở sở hùng tư bạt vừng mao” (After quelling the revolts in the north and pacifying the east, the warhorses were exhausted/ The time was spent chasing the cruel people/ With great talent, I would like to seize a cinnamon branch in the moon/ With the iron will, I would like to catch the serpent-like water monster in the east sea/ Like the immortal in Liêu Thủy who rode a stork and flew away/ Like the king in Hầu Sơn who rode a phoenix and flew away/ Like an eagle that eagerly flies up through the clouds/ The heroic stuff is brilliant, attracting other talented people) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 344).

The images described by king and poet Lê Thánh Tông through his poetry reflects actual events mixed with unworldly color, taking readers to a fairyland with words such as the ‘moon palace’, ‘the immortal’, and ‘the phoenix’... As nature is so beautiful that it sometimes looks like “an illusion”, people should live in harmony with nature to balance the mind and promote creativity, providing more motivating forces to undertake tasks in life.

As a king, Lê Thánh Tông had to be serious in dealing with affairs of the country and the people. Like Nguyễn Trãi who relied on “Giấc mộng hoàng lương” (Yellow Millet Dream) to write poems, Lê Thánh Tông sometimes deliberately poeticized life, after being too busy undertaking important responsibilities for the royal court, the people, and the country. As a result, he supposed that: “Đắc tắng khứ lai thời tự mộng/ Cổ kim đa thiếu sự như ma/ Tráng niên tiền cực cư tam trọng/ Bính dạ lưu tình độc ngũ xa/ Thiên kiếp hưu kinh thành nhất xuyên/ Tọa tiền vật sắc trần tâm qua” (Affairs of life are more or less dreams/ Fortune varies, resulting in achievements or losses/ As a talented man, I have to shoulder responsibility for the

country during the day/ While I enjoy reading books at night/ A thousand incarnations pass by quickly without fear/ My mind is filled with natural landscapes) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 374-375). Besides the “flabby and pessimistic” lines of the verse, he also wrote more resolute ones such as: “Tham thiền nhân luyến tâm vi Phật/ Danh lợi đô quy tiểu yết quan/ Lộ chuyển lâm hồi vân duệ lãnh/ Cử đầu nghi nhập Tứ Minh sơn” (Practicing meditation, one wants to attain a Buddhist mind/ Having no interest in fame or fortune so as to rest/ Clothes seems to touch the cloud as the road in the forest is so winding/ Raising my head, I think as if I reached the top of the Mountain of the Four Lit Doors – implying being enlightened and in harmony with the universe) (Lê Thánh Tông, 1998: 384). Herein, we can see the mix of religious and secular thinking. While carrying out the role as king, he had to undertake affairs of the country. In his free time, he came back to his own essence, falling into a deep meditation and avoiding secular affairs.

As the leader of the people, Lê Thánh Tông’s literary works were not completely separated from a political outlook and educational viewpoint. It is the reason why, in his mind, the pessimistic thought of “*xuất thế*” and the enthusiastic involvement in the secular world are attached to each other, leading to achievements in national governance as well as in literature. In this respect, in a research paper entitled “Lê Thánh Tông - đời thơ và những dấu hiệu trữ tình” (Lê Thánh Tông: Poetic works and romantic signs), Nguyễn Hữu Sơn commented that “Lê Thánh Tông separated himself from the secular world in order to keep his mind relaxed in nature ... All seems to lie within the oriental traditional poetic orbit, but we can vaguely see something that shows his particular view. At all times, man desires some privacy, where inner feelings can be expressed freely, while focused on the common values of beauty and humanity. Lê Thánh Tông was not an exception” (Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 1997: 341- 342). Similar traits can be found in the poems of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm in the later period.

4. *Xuất thế* in Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s thought

It is not accidental that Nguyễn Bình Khiêm has been called “Tuyệt Giang phu tử” (Master Tuyệt Giang), while he called himself “Bạch Vân cư sĩ” (The hermit in the Bạch Vân Shrine). Those names stemmed from the places where he stayed, the content

of his poems, and his lifestyle. All those factors combined to create a well-known personality that is somewhat realistic and rather legendary in Vietnamese history.

Nguyễn Bình Khiêm wrote hundreds of poems on various topics such as landscapes, ironies in life, fortune and misfortune, and preoccupation with changes in the universe. Trần Thị Băng Thanh, a researcher on medieval literature, supposes that Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's poems "follow an aesthetic principle aimed at the poetic ambition and are led by a philosophy, which at the same time pays attention to the people's lives, provides teachings, and observes world affairs; first of all, however, it advocates keeping an unhurried and relaxed pace of living, while entertaining the mind in the nature and the idyllic delights and considering relaxation as a lofty pleasure" (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014: 62). To create a particular poetic manner and a leisurely lifestyle and enjoy the pleasure seeming to be granted by the heavens, firstly Nguyễn Bình Khiêm set up his precept of living as follows: "Muốn biết nơi đây vui tuyệt đỉnh/ Chữ nhàn thiên cổ chóchớ buông lời" (In order to realize that it is extremely joyful here, don't forget the need for leisure time) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014: 221).

It is not easy to achieve a leisurely life. According to the law of cause and effect, if one wants such a life, he will have to give up many passions, especially the desire for fame and fortune. As Nguyễn Bình Khiêm was a great scholar, he was psychologically greatly influenced by the expectations of his parents, relatives, and the local community. In the contemporary feudal system, it was very common that when a man became a governmental official, all his family members would receive benefits. Probably due to psychological pressure, he decided to sit the Confucian exams at the age of nearly 40 years old. Owing to his profound knowledge, he won the first prize at the national exams and was appointed to important positions such as Đông Các hiệu thư (Editor at Đông Các Palace) and Tả thị lang bộ hình (Vice Minister of Justice). Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's work as a mandarin surely earned him honor and his family - wealth. However, he did not feel satisfied, because he could neither express his own opinions nor persuade the king to chastise (behead) the sycophantic courtiers. Thus, he wanted to give up his position to enjoy a stress-free life: "Trùng ức điền viên vịnh khứ qui/ Lão lai hưu thuyết sự đa vi/ Xuân hoa thu nguyệt không nhi sắc/ Thế cố nhân tình thị cánh phi/ Trường kiện lão thân na hữu được/ Tự nhàn chân tính bản vô ki/ Tửu đình túy ý cao ngâm túc/ Thời khán giang cầm, Khê điều phi" (Missing the joy of an idyllic life, writing poems like Tao

Yuanming/ At an old age, I stopped talking about things [I am not happy with] / The spring flowers and the autumn moon are Form but [at the same time] Emptiness, All affairs in life can be right or wrong/ Good health is maintained despite old age/ Life was leisurely, as, regarding my inborn character, I am in pursuit of nothing/ Being drunk, lying and singing a song/ Contemplating birds flying by the river and stream) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014:195). The line of the verse “Life was leisurely, when in pursuit of nothing” demonstrates his state of mind, which, on the one hand, reflects his willingness to give up all those things while, on the other hand, shows his dissatisfaction. He therefore thought deeply about the Buddhist karma, particularly the four noble truths, which supposed that the three poisons (trivisa) were the root of all sufferings in life. Giving up desires and ambitions was therefore the quickest way to a leisurely life.

After working as a mandarin for almost ten years, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm realized he needed to resign when he wrote the following lines of verse: “Bãi khước hiêu phiền danh lợi quan/ Khê tuyền trùng ức bạc ngôn hoàn/ (...) / Phú quý hà cầu tam lạc túc, Vương hầu bất sự nhất thân nhân” (Escaping from the circle of fame and wealth in the secular world/ Longing to come back to the homeland to enjoy life by the stream/ Not wishing to be wealthy, I am happy to [just] enough/ Not being bothered by [striving for] social positions, I feel my life is one of leisure) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014: 278). Then, he decided to hand in his resignation and return to his home village, where he had spent carefree leisurely days and opened the “Trung Tân Venue” to provide an education for conscientious students: “Rượu đến cội cây ta sẽ uống/ Nhìn xem phú quý tựa chiêm bao” (As liquor is brought to the stump of the tree, I will drink it/ While considering all wealth in life to be dreamy) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014:1527). Such a living philosophy, which is divorced from reality and is of the pursuit of an easy, unhurried pace of life can only be achieved after thoroughly understanding the Taoist teachings of “xuất thế” and being awakened by the Buddhist “egolessness, impermanence, and causal connection” so as to realize images of human beings in the scenery and vice versa: “Hoa trung ảo xuất Phật trung thân/ Mộ lạc triều khai cự cánh tân/ Sắc tức thị không không thị sắc/ Nhất chi hoán đắc kỉ phiên xuân” (An image of Buddha is vaguely seen in flowers/ Blossoming in the morning and fading in the evening, getting old and then getting new/ Such a form means voidness and such voidness means a form/ A branch has been passed by several springs) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,

2014: 799). In this citation, “form” and “voidness” are two fundamental categories showing the Buddhist outlook that covers “egolessness” and “impermanence” as the essence of all things, which also includes human beings. Since a human being is a tiny universe, it has to comply with the natural law on birth and death.

Continuing the thinking of the two predecessors seeing life as a dream, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm visualized the large road in front of the Trung Tân Venue, considering it a chess match of world affairs; the winner and the loser will eventually be the same; after the match ends, both players will get back all their chess-pieces to prepare for a new game. He wrote: “Nhất điều đại lộ tiếp thông tân/ Thản đặng na hiềm hỗ thế trần/ Cổ vãng kim lai đô thị mộng/ Bất tri lưu đặc kỉ hà nhân” (A large road runs straight to the riverbank/ As the road is wide and even, there is no need to worry about the dust of the world/ Everything coming back or going away is just dreamy/ I don’t know if there are any visitors staying on that road [of life]) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014: 788). To formulate and follow the viewpoint on keeping a peaceful and leisurely pace of life, however, one has to cultivate virtue and morals and contain himself/herself, waiting for future happiness. That is why he wrote: “Chớ dễ ai là Bụt Thích Ca/ Mọi niềm nhân ngã nhẩn thì qua/ Lòng vô sự, trắng in bóng nước/ Cửa thảng lai như gió thổi hoa/... Thanh nhàn ấy ắt là tiên khách” (It is not easy to be Buddha/ Enduring sufferings will make everything blow over/ The mind is pure like the reflection of the moon on water/ Properties that suddenly come [to man] are like flowers swaying in the breeze/... Having a leisurely life means one is an immortal) (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 2014:1497). Over his entire lifespan of almost a century, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm cultivated virtue and talent for the above-mentioned goals, as commented on by Nguyễn Tài Thư in a paper titled “Nguyễn Bình Khiêm - nhà tư tưởng tiêu biểu của thế kỷ XVI” (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm – A typical thinker of the 16th century): “While mandarins fought with one another for the sake of fame and wealth, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm was completely unconcerned with this. Owing to his broad knowledge, talent, and reputation, he could have become a high-ranking mandarin living a wealthy life, but he rejected that. He resigned from his position and returned to his home village to live amongst simple-hearted peasants. It was a pure and honest life. Some criticized his secluded attitude. To be fair, however, there were no other choices for keeping a noble virtue” (Nguyễn Tài Thư, 1993: 364). It was the very path of xuất thế that he learned from Taoist and Buddhist teachings.

Holding the same opinion, Trần Lê Sáng, a Sino-Nom researcher, wrote: “After his resignation, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm built Bạch Vân Shrine, Trung Tân Venue, and Nghinh Phong and Trường Xuân bridges. All these structures reflected in him the image of a Taoist hermit like Laozi and Zhuangzi. We can figure out how it became dangerous for Nguyễn Bình Khiêm after he had resigned and submitted a petition asking for the beheading of 18 power abusing mandarins. At that time, he did not go farway into hiding, but he stayed in his home village. Most probably, he disguised himself as a Taoist hermit like Laozi and Zhuangzi” (Trần Lê Sáng, 1986: 98). Thus, it does not matter whether his decision about resignation or “seclusion” is praised or criticized; it was quite reasonable, righteous, and appropriate for the situation.

Although Nguyễn Bình Khiêm went to his home village, he did not hide himself away from the rest of society and political affairs. After two years, the Mạc Dynasty king conferred upon him the title “Trình Tuyền Hầu” (Marquis Trình Tuyền) in the year of Giáp Thìn (1544) and the post of “Minister of Personnel” and “Tutor of the Crown Prince” with the title “Trình Quốc Công” (Grand Duke Trình) afterwards. That is why he was commonly known as “Trạng Trình”. Some researchers who studied Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s biography have argued that “Trình Tuyền”, which was referred to in the titles “Trình Tuyền Hầu” and “Trình Quốc Công”, stemmed from the previous name of Trung Am Village, rather than deriving from the names of Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao (Vietnamese versions: Trình Di and Trình Hạo), who were two representatives of Neo-Confucianism (School of Principle) in the Song Dynasty in China. For 20 years, from 53 years old to 73 years old, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm did not stay permanently in the imperial city, but he still undertook assignments, taking part in discussing state affairs and accompanying the king to pacify rebellions. He was highly respected by the Mạc Dynasty’s king as a strategist. For important affairs, the king often sent messengers to him, seeking his advice. He was sometimes taken to the imperial city, but he would then return to Trung Am Village. When aged more than 73 years old Nguyễn Bình Khiêm steadfastly resigned and remained in his home village.

Nguyễn Bình Khiêm was one of very few feudal scholars who skilfully combined the fundamental values of the three teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. He had to study hard for exams and his work, memorizing all the Four Books and Five Classics. After his resignation, he went to his home village to live a secluded life according to the Taoist teachings, to quote Laozi: “One will not be ashamed, if

he/she knows when it is enough” and “According to the laws of nature, one should back out, after being successful in gaining expected laurels”. Once back in his home village, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm built the Bạch Vân Shrine and referred to himself as “Bạch Vân hermit”, following the Buddhist way of life. Despite his reclusiveness, he did not completely shy away from society; he still worked as an advisor for the royal court and opened a school. It is the principle of *xuất thế* he learned from the Trần Dynasty kings. In the research paper “Nguyễn Bình Khiêm - người quân tử thời loạn” (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm: An honorable man in the time of disturbances”, Đỗ Lai Thúy regards Nguyễn Bình Khiêm’s resignation as a “deviation from standards“, which was taken as a last resort at that time (Đỗ Lai Thúy, 2005: 268).

5. Conclusion

The three great thinkers in medieval Vietnam, Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Thánh Tông, and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, were notable Confucian scholars with broad knowledge, who understood the Four Books and Five Classics and historical events in both China and Vietnam very well. Confucian thinking, however, only helped them in their administrative work and dealing with affairs of the state. Regarding lifestyle and contemplation of the ways of the world, they were mostly influenced by Buddhist and Taoist teachings of *xuất thế*. This is easy to understand, as Confucianism mainly played a role in public education for the purpose of providing officials for administrative systems. Confucian teachings regulated the standard behaviors such as the Three Subjections and Four Virtues [of an ideal woman], while people were assessed according to the Five Moral Obligations. At the same time, Confucianism required people to comply strictly with the Three Moral Bonds so it did not help relieve psychological pressures at work, which was quite complicated in the feudal governmental apparatus. Meanwhile, Taoism and Buddhism were very helpful in undertaking that function.

The *xuất thế* in the thoughts of the three typical poets contributed lively colors and features to the panorama of the Đại Việt people’s lives in medieval Vietnam. Reading their literary works, one can understand the connection and harmony between the Confucian enthusiasm for improvement by taking part in the

secular world and the Buddhist and Taoist ignorance of fame and wealth while considering that a man's life is so short like "a horse passing the window". The teachings converged in the minds of the three poets, creating the great spirit among honorable men and taking them to top positions of power and reputation. They were greatly admired by people and they exerted profound influence on the moral standards and lifestyles of the next generations. They were bright shining examples not only in their contemporary periods but also in the ones that followed.

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