



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Philosophy of Being Human in Le Huu Trac's Thought

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ABSTRACT

How to be human is a central focus in the system of thought of Le Huu Trac (1720 - 1791). With wisdom, compassion, dedication, and a sense of being considerate of others, he embodied the principles of being human through not only profound viewpoints but also abundantly practical activities in his medical career. His way of being human, which includes an appreciation for harmony with nature, kindness to others and nobility in the soul, not only has historical value but also is relevant to the present. This article applies a handful of research methods, notably textual analysis, to accurately and objectively reflect Le Huu Trac's thought.

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INTRODUCTION

Le Huu Trac (黎有卓) (1720 - 1791), also known as Hai Thuong Lan Ong (海上懶) was born into a long-standing scholarly family in Van Xa Hamlet, Duong Hao District, Thuong Hong Prefecture (LeVan, 1989). His grandfather, Le Huu Danh, earned a second-level doctorate, while his father, Le Huu Muu, and his older brother, Le Huu Kien, both received third-level doctorates. Le Huu Trac is renowned not only as an excellent physician with talent and integrity, but also as a great writer and thinker of Vietnam.

In terms of ideas, he left numerous great contributions to the nation, including his philosophy on how to be human, which is evident throughout his medical career, medical ethics, and virtues. These perspectives, aimed for people to have better lives, emerged from the socio-historical conditions of the Later Le Dynasty in the 18th century, when various upheavals raised issues about morality, life views, and relationship behaviors. With his wisdom, moral compass, and lifestyle that is tranquil, simple and in harmony with nature, Le Huu Trac seamlessly combined fundamentals of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism with humanistic values of Vietnamese culture to form specific, profound, and systematic views on the principles of being human in society.

METHODOLOGY

Regarding research methods based on Attia and Edge (2017) source, our approach is based on the principles of being objective, comprehensive, historical-specific and developmental; while combining with historical-logical perspective, analysis and synthesis, systematization, generalization, and, especially, textual analysis, to properly reflect Le Huu Trac's thought on how to be human.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Le Huu Trac's comprehensive, unique, and systematic view on how to be human is inextricably linked to his job as a physician, as well as his everyday life.

In terms of concept, he believed that the philosophy of being human refers to "the Way", "the principles", "the work" and "the standards" that he applied first of all to himself, then to people around him in order to build societal peace and bring happiness to everyone.

He explained: "The Way leads to "governance". The Classics advised: "Hold on to your will and maintain integrity". It is also said that: "Cultivate oneself, cultivate one's family, govern the country and bring peace to the world" are the standards for both civil and military authorities to strive for in order to maintain proper human interactions. A monarch who successfully governs his country while also bringing peace to his people is a virtuous and benevolent one. Those with excellent methods of government are also remembered by history" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.23).

The goal of Le Huu Trac's thought on how to be human is to achieve peace and happiness in life; therefore, he made significant efforts to establish a route to happiness for himself and those around him. In his opinion, to enjoy tranquility and contentment, each person must conduct well in three basic relationships, namely: the relationship between man and nature; the relationship between man and society; and the relationship with man himself. In which:

First, regarding nature, Le Huu Trac believed that humans must live in harmony with and respect nature, since all phenomena and existence, including humans, are created by the combination and transformation of yin and yang. He explained:

"Yin and yang in the four seasons are the origin of everything. (The four seasons alternate, yin and yang change, and heaven and earth are in harmony with each other, giving birth to and sustaining all existence. Yin and yang in the four seasons are the origin of all things, and everything stems from them.)

Yin and yang are also the source of life and death. Going against them causes harms, whereas conforming to them prevent diseases from emanating" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 2, pp.75-76).

However, he also felt that humans are wiser than any other beings, because within a person is hidden a miniature world: "Although yin and yang constantly change and the creation ceaselessly transforms, there is only one truth that they represent" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, Vol.1, p.161).

He wrote: "Humans are wiser than all other beings. Talented and intellectual people are gifted by creation with positive attributes to live in harmony with heaven and earth. The earlier universe began as an absolute mass of mingled gases, which gave birth to two forms (i.e. yin and yang), and from which produced the four phenomena that are continually changing" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.156).

As a result, he believed that in order to live peacefully and happily, humans need to grasp the laws of nature and act accordingly. He wrote:

"Learn to understand the solid yet contradictory law of yin and yang as well as the clues of nature's growth and decay. Without comprehending the interconnections of the five elements, one will not know that the extreme of adversity is the beginning of good fortune" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.158).

Second, as a result of his work, Le Huu Trac dedicated great attention to and established norms and principles of conduct in the relationships between physicians and patients, patient families, and colleagues. First of all, he disputed the idea that a physician's principles are only tactics to deal with people in the sphere of healthcare, and hence are not addressed in classic Confucian writings, but only referred to by non-official historical records on standards of the profession.

He wrote: "The term "medical ethics" are only referred to in non-official history; it is classed alongside agriculture in the Annals of the Five Emperors, and is unknown elsewhere. As a result, Confucian scholars devote their lives to studying literature in order to excel in imperial exams and secure a position in the court. Meanwhile, medicine is only a mere profession; even if it is given more importance, it can only be viewed as a method of dealing with people. Most of the time, medicine

barely stands shoulder to shoulder with other philosophies" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, Vol. 1, p.23). He then commented: "Having such a viewpoint is no different from leaving thorns to sprout up on a straight course, or straying from the right path to set foot on a distorted one. In this colossal universe, the Way can be found anywhere, and it is associated with an indescribable amount of details. It is impossible that only one thing or profession is useful!" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol.1, pp.23-24).

According to Le Huu Trac, there are numerous regulations applied to the way of being human in the medical profession, including certain guidelines for physicians to communicate with patients and their families, as well as how to view the profession. He believed that medical ethics were more valuable than any material interests, and he always put his patients' lives first. He wrote:

"Medicine is the art of caring for human life. [A physician must] share his patients' worries and joys, take saving people as his duty, and avoid discussing profit or merit. Even without tangible rewards, he might still accumulate hidden merits for himself. There is a proverb that goes: "If a family has three generations working in the medical profession, there will be someone from that family who will become a high-ranking official in the future". Isn't it because of the profession that one achieves a high position?" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30).

He sharply attacked physicians who prioritize their personal interests, valuing patients based on financial strength while ignoring others' misery. He emphasized: "When a physician focuses on saving a patient's life, everything else is just a drifting cloud" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.10). That exemplifies the noble personality of a person who lives by an ideal and so achieves immense delight in life.

One of the defining characteristics of Le Huu Trac's thought on how to be human is his emphasis on saving people's lives. Since he cherished human life and health, he dedicated his life seeking treatments to heal both the body and the mind.

He reminded himself: "When learning medicine, you should also comprehend Confucian teachings. Once you've mastered them, learning medicine will be easier. In your spare time, read the books written by ancient masters in medicine, paying close attention to every detail to precisely and clearly gain knowledge. Once that knowledge is engraved into your mind, and you completely understand them, your hands will work smoothly without deviations" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29).

Furthermore, the fact that people themselves shorten their lives by indulging in frivolous pleasures and wasting their spirit and energy, resulting in mental strain, exhaustion, and early death, also constantly kept him tossing and turning. In his opinion, to ensure long life expectancy, humans must keep their minds serene and tranquil, and adhere to the guideline and credo of medicine: "to take from what is too much and to give to what isn't enough". Too much or too little of the five flavors (sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty) can be hazardous to the body. All five emotions (joy, anger, anxiety, fear, and sadness) can have adverse impacts on people's hearts. The six climatic energies (wind, cold, heat, moisture, dryness, and fire), whether too severe or too mild, also harm the essence of human. If the five flavors, five senses and five elements are too excessive or too lacking, they will hurt the body and the mind. Fame and profit, love and money, and lusts are things that people struggle to cut themselves away from. That's why he said:

"When the mind is preserved, calmness comes naturally; so, on the inside, our spirit is prosperous and steady, leaving no doors for illness to creep in. By forsaking greed, everything is easy to be accomplished. As a result, you will feel comfortable about eating only regular foods, wearing casual clothes, remaining happy, and not discriminating based on a person's social level. From there, all of your likings will not tire your sight, and the wrong things will not fascinate your heart. Whether a person is brilliant or clumsy, if he has nothing to worry about, he is on the right track to staying healthy. Thus, he can live to be a hundred years old without his motions deteriorating. It is because he maintains his morality, hence no diseases can hurt him" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol.1, pp.417-418).

He also advised people to try to calm down and focus on their "breathing", to manage and regulate their respiration, and to live their lives to the fullest without lamenting the past, seeking things in the present and wondering about the future. Be diligent in the moment, contemplate and ponder things in each and every breath, minute, hour, and day, and immerse oneself in this heaven and earth to strengthen both body and mind. Once the mind is at peace, there is nothing to extinguish or abandon. All is not holy, mortal, good, or bad. One will reach the state of cessation of all explanations,

reasonings and searches, and only focus on the contemplation of their breathing to attain mindfulness, calmness, nothingness, serenity, and freedom.

In particular, Le Huu Trac stated that a physician must have a forgiving heart and not discriminate against his patients based on their background or whether they are rich or poor. He even believed that physicians should pay greater attention to disadvantaged families who cannot afford treatment and healthcare. He explained:

"When you see a destitute and lonely patient, pay special attention. The wealthy have no shortage of caregivers, whereas the impoverished lack the wherewithal to seek out a well-known physician. So don't hesitate to wholeheartedly assist them in regaining their lives. For individuals who have filial children and a good wife but fall ill due to poverty, in addition to giving them medicines, you should strive to aid them as much as possible, because medicines cannot function if they are hungry. Supporting them to live on is the ultimate art of treating others. Meanwhile, there is no reason to lament if they are players who burn their fortune and contract diseases" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30).

He steadfastly returned expensive presents and benefits to wealthy families that expect to be treated first. In his opinion, if numerous patients arrive at the same time, those with more serious ailments will be prioritized, regardless of their socioeconomic status. According to Le Huu Trac, curing people involves not just the application of medicine, but also the salvation of humanity, in which compassion and sacrifice come first.

He wrote: "After the patient has recovered, do not demand excessive payment. If you receive valuable items from them, you will feel apprehensive when you meet them; not to mention that the wealthy tend to oscillate between happiness and anger. If you ask for credit from them, you will almost certainly be humiliated; if you please them for personal benefit, you will face far worse results. Therefore, if you voluntarily pursue this noble career, you must cultivate a noble attitude" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30).

Regarding patients: A physician must see his patients equally to treat them fairly. Also, he must always keep himself upright and respectful to treat his patients, avoid evil thoughts and devote himself to caring for them as if they were his own relatives. Le Huu Trac wrote:

"Women, nuns and widow must always be accompanied by someone when you see them to avoid suspicion. Even when you perform a medical check-up on prostitutes, you must also maintain your composure and perceive them as children from well-educated families. Do not be harsh to them, or you will be regarded as improper and face the consequences of being indecent" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29). In particular, he also stated: "When confronted with critical conditions, it is natural to want to devote your efforts to the treatment, but it is also vital to explain the situation to the patient's family [before] handing them the prescription. Because they have to spend money on medicines, if your prescription works, they will be grateful; if it does not work, they will not [become] doubtful and blame you, and you will not feel ashamed [of what you have done]" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29).

Regarding patients' families, according to Le Huu Trac, when someone comes to seek a physician, the physician only needs to consider the severity of the patient's sickness and the need for immediate treatment to determine who to treat first. Such priority should not be dependent on their wealth or personal background. He wrote:

"[If at the same time] many families ask you to come, you should prioritize where to go first based on the severity of the patient's condition. You should not prefer going to the wealthy over the poor, or prescribe medicines based on their socioeconomic standing. If your heart is not sincere, you will not achieve the results you desired" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29).

Regarding colleagues: according to Le Huu Trac, physicians need to keep their learning attitude, be modest and not arrogant, and to listen to others to enhance their work quality and help patients.

He wrote: "When meeting people in the same profession, be humble, kind, and decent; avoid underestimating or disregarding them. Be respectful to the elderly. Appreciate the highly educated as you do masters. Stay humble in the presence of the arrogant. Guide the immature and

inexperienced. Being able to maintain such a virtuous heart is a great blessing" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29).

Furthermore, he chastised physicians who lack a sense of ethics and consistently prioritize their personal interests, resulting in repressive and non-standard conduct toward patients and their families. He wrote: "Nowadays, I frequently witness physicians taking advantage of people whose parents are in critical condition, or putting further strain on those who are already suffering. They inflate an easy-to-treat condition into a difficult-to-cure, or even untreatable one, deceiving others for personal gain. That's a horrible intention. They are eager to benefit off the rich, yet cold and apathetic to the poor's life and death. Alas, they are turning the art of interpersonal connection into a sham, sacrificing charity for selfish gain, making the living lament and the dead bitter. That is unforgiveable." (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30).

Third, the way of being human in connection to oneself is a critical and vital component in Le Huu Trac's principles of being human. First and foremost, his pseudonym, Hai Thuong Lan Ong, expresses his philosophy of living leisurely without regard for fame. "Hai" and "Thuong" are the two first words in the name of Hai Duong Province and Thuong Hong Prefecture, respectively. Meanwhile, "Lan" means lazy, implying that he viewed himself as someone who is too sluggish to seek recognition - a manner laced with Taoism's concept of non-action. He also highlighted the importance of self-cultivation, particularly mental adjustment, in order to obtain purity and serenity. He advocated living a modest life, giving up material wants and ambitions for fame and profit. He wrote:

"I have steered away from fame and glory to lead a life as free as the cloud and as stable as the water. The ancients said: "If you can't be a good general, you can still be a good teacher." Therefore, I want to focus all of my energy on helping others and doing what is worthwhile in order to have peace in my heart and feel no shame while living on earth and gazing up at heaven" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30). In particular, he felt that "as a physician, you should think for others and refrain from doing as you wish. If someone reaches you for assistance with a serious disease while you are not at home but touring the mountain with a gourd of wine, you will not be able provide the necessary care, thus putting their life in jeopardy. As a result, understanding one's responsibilities at work is essential" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.29).

He added that maintaining a good character and upholding moral principles is essential for everybody living in society. He told himself: "For my part, I adhere to the teachings of the ancients, maintain my compassion, and cherish life to the fullest" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.30).

Specifically, Le Huu Trac's philosophy of how to be human places a strong emphasis on maintaining balance between the body and the mind. Based on his observations of the world and people, Le Huu Trac developed a theory about how to give people a decent life. He was concerned about the need for people to achieve the state of balance between their inner and outside selves, i.e. between their bodies and minds. He asserted that individuals must follow the laws of the cosmos in their daily lives. It implies that the body needs to promptly adapt to the yin and yang circulation, the changing of the four seasons, and the eight solar periods. Illness will develop if the body becomes unbalanced and unable to keep up with the universe's rhythm. He wrote:

"The sages (the talented) understand that yin and yang keep the veins and the ligaments in balance, the bone and marrow steady, and the blood flowing in the proper direction. As a result, if both the inside and the outside are regulated, then our eyes and ears will be clear, our energy will grow strong, and illness will be prevented" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 2, p.77).

Therefore, just as four seasons come and go in order, the five organs must also function in accordance with their roles. The balance between body and mind found in medicine is comparable to the attainment of "the Mean" in Confucianism, the serenity of Buddhism, and the nihilistic calmness of Taoism. In short, a balanced mind does not cause illness to the body; on the contrary, when the body is ill, the mind becomes restless as well. People are unable to break free from this vicious cycle, which causes them to suffer.

Le Huu Trac argued that morality must constantly be upheld by all people, especially by physicians. Treating illnesses and saving lives—not for financial gain, celebrity, or fame—is the noble goal and ethical code of medicine. According to Le Huu Trac, the medical profession is "a noble art to preserve life, and a great clue to true morality", and that "as a physician, you should think about helping

people" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.26). Therefore, humans in general and physicians in particular must always cultivate themselves and adhere to eight words, namely: benevolence, wisdom, virtue, knowledge, nobility, honesty, modesty and diligence. Additionally, there are eight sins to avoid: laziness, stinginess, greed, ignorance, deceit, meanness, and immorality (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.11-24).

Furthermore, Le Huu Trac expanded the role of physicians beyond just treating remarkable cases or developing effective medications. Instead, he encouraged them to dedicate themselves to lifelong study and personal development in order to cure more illnesses and more people. An outstanding physician, in his opinion, never stops learning new things and never feels content with what he already knows.

He wrote: "For twenty years of being a physician, I have dedicated myself to learn the profession, and I hope to pursue it to the end so that I will not be ashamed of myself. I was not born with sufficient intelligence, and I have no mentors, so my learning journey is lonely and still lacking. I desire to wade through the sea of knowledge to understand the basic foundation of everything. My knowledge is limited, but my will is strong, and all I know is that I must put everything I have into learning and understanding more deeply in order to make up for my shortcomings" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, Vol.1, p.28).

This philosophy of his is still widely applied in modern medicine, where medical ethics is always accompanied by updating knowledge for the betterment of one's work.

He wrote: "Medicine, which is a highly noble science of protecting life, is the focal point for cultivating the virtuous tree that no knowledgeable men are ignorant of. A wise man cannot fail to understand that a person's life is in his hand, that their wellbeing depends on the judgment of the tip of his fingers. As there is only a thin line between life and death, exercising caution is just" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.28).

Happiness, according to Le Huu Trac, is the ultimate goal of life. To be happy means to have five blessings: longevity, wealth, soundness of body and serenity of mind, love of virtue, and a peaceful death in old age. A person's life is unhappy due to six occasions of suffering: misfortune shortening the life, sickness, distress, poverty, wickedness, and weakness. Living a long and healthy life is a huge blessing for an individual. A person who is ill has lost over half of their happy life. Le Huu Trac recognized that people must endure a great deal of bodily and emotional pain. Their suffering is the result of being carried away by the waves of wealth and fame, love and hate, happiness and rage, greed, ignorance, and hatred, which disturb their minds and keep them from preserving their inner peace and balance. In the meantime, the human body suffers because it is impermanent, meaning it is subject to the rules of birth, growth, old age, illness, and death. As a result, he placed a great deal of emphasis on preserving health via the cultivation of both the body and the mind. This approach teaches people how to nurture a pure mind, self-reliance, and healthy physique following the laws of heaven and earth. He wrote: "One cannot fully enjoy life without adhering to the principles of nurturing life" (Le Huu Trac, 2008, vol. 1, p.138). The term "nurturing life" was given rise by Taoist philosophy (Herman, 2013; Kohn, 2019), then adopted by the medical community and became the most significant category in traditional medicine for illness prevention. Le Huu Trac believed that human life is limited while knowledge is limitless, and that it is futile to pursue the infinite with the finite. Therefore, he advocated cultivating both the body and the mind to live contentedly in the limited and transient mortal existence.

3.CONCLUSION

Le Huu Trac's philosophy of being human is demonstrated not just in his kindness and generosity, but also in a variety of ways throughout his life and actions. He left behind a shining example of benevolence, devotion, and selflessness. In today's modern world, his life philosophy—which encourages kindness, nobility of the soul, and harmony with nature—remains valuable for medical ethics. Le Huu Trac's approach to how to be human is a well-proportioned blend of knowledge, modesty, responsibility, and compassion. Without considering personal gain, he lived and worked with the admirable intention of assisting others and the community. This is the fundamental principle that establishes his reputation and virtue in the annals of medicine, literature, and philosophy.

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