

**THE GREAT POET NGUYEN DU FROM THE CHOICE OF AN ARTIST  
IN CHAOS TO THE HUMANISTIC VIEW OF LIFE AND THE RELAXED  
INSPIRATION IN POEMS WRITTEN IN HAN (CLASSICAL CHINESE)  
OF NGUYEN DU**

Le Van Tan<sup>1</sup> and Nguyen Thi Huong<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Graduate Academy of Social Science, Vietnam Academy of Social Science

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**ABSTRACT**

Nguyen Du (1765 - 1820) is a great poet of Vietnamese Medieval Literature. Apart from the prestigious “Doan trung tan thanh” and Nom works, he had 3 poetry collections with 249 poems. Through these works, the poet expressed and concealed his thoughts of life and the destiny of a talented scholar who had suffered from bitterness and shame. During his life, there were moments when he was mentally and physically fatigued. Then Nguyen Du went with the nature, village life as a way of eluding from thoughts and keeping his nobility created the inspiration of the relaxation in his poems written in Han.

**Key words:** Nguyen Du, Medieval Literature, Poems written in Han, relaxation.

**1. Introduction**

The great poet Nguyen Du, the grand person of Medieval Literature, the honor to any national literature, was a talented author in the past, but the spiritual values which he left always live forever. In every single period of history, situation or fate, we again found in Nguyen Du the experiences containing profound, fleshy meanings. Due to such reasons, Nguyen Du, along with his spiritual works still lives in the Vietnamese spiritual life through years and will continue to accompany through the full length of the motherland, the country to the next generations.

Nguyen Du was born in a family with a tradition of academy and literature. His farther Nguyen Nghiem (1708-1775) and his step-brother Nguyen Khan (1734-1786) were both well-known for their talent and intellect. Nguyen Du's mother, Tran Thi Tan (1740-1778), was famous for her beauty, amorousness and her talent of chorus singing. As a result, Nguyen Du's personalities and qualities were enormously influenced by these three people. Unfortunately, his parents passed away when Nguyen Du was so little that his initial orientation for a career was somehow

unfinished. In 1782, Nguyen Du started entering contests with aspirations of establishing fame and career as well as looking for opportunities to realize the dream of those medieval artists. In 1783, Nguyen Du took part in the Regional Civil contest in Son Nam and passed the Three Tests, got married to the daughter of Doan Nguyen Thuc and was appointed "Captain of Strong defense army" of his Ha foster-father in Thai Nguyen. It can be said that if it were in a different situation and time of history, this beginning would signal a smooth career for artists like Nguyen Du. Unfortunately, the choice of an individual is not always in line with the course suitable with the choice of history, and the aspirations of serving the country and saving the people once burning like forest fire in the predecessor's time (such as Nguyen Phi Khanh, Nguyen Trai) was gone at the time of Nguyen Du. Times, together with the severity of the society, pushed the poet into a different view. This article focuses on discussing Nguyen Du's choice of career humanistic view of life and the relaxation inspiration.

## **2. The choice of the scholar in the chaos**

In the medieval period, any artist who studied Confucianism had a burning desire to bring his talents and dedication to serve the dynasty, the country, and its citizens. But different people had different paths. Some succeeded; some failed; some had the opportunity; some did not. There were people who could "burn out"; there were people who stopped in halfway, getting so tired that they lingered and hesitated. There were both objective and subjective reasons but it was not always easy to be thoroughly explained. Looking at Nguyen Du's career, we have a feeling that Nguyen Du followed a certain dynasty. In 1789, when Nguyen Hue went to the North to defeat the Qing army, the most Bac Ha artists followed Xishan (Ninh Ton, Ngo Thi Nham, Doan Nguyen Tua etc.). Nguyen Du fled to his wife's town in Thai Binh. In the winter of 1796, Nguyen Du followed Lord Nguyen Anh to Gia Dinh but was captured by Duke Nguyen Than and had been imprisoned for 3 months in Nghe An. After being released, he lived in Tien Dien.

Obviously, the "anger" and "a little bit of psychology" above have been seen in the very high sense of talent, personality as well as the aspirations of people in that situation. It is difficult to clearly comment on Nguyen Du's attitude towards Tay Son. Did he want to wheel the time back or look forward to another change? Skepticism of the thought of Le dynasty was real.

*The once fine moon shone the new house,  
It is still Thang Long, the capital of the kings before.  
Roads lost their old traces,  
Music has become a different, new mixed sound.  
Prosperity has still been the bait to the dispute for thousand years,  
childhood friends, some passed some living.  
Stop lamenting about the floating life,  
My hair has turned white...*

There is the feeling that the former dynasty did not send the poet to the extremes of consciousness, although he still hoped for another change. He was aware of the inevitable collapse of the game but still wanted a different view. It was the reason from that time until his death that there were times when he neglected his work, felt unhappy, and even thought of death.

"Nam trung trung tam" and "Bac hanh cu lục" shows that Nguyen Du had a sober vision of the political class at that time. He saw the place just a fame. The real one was not used as the experience of 10 years of ups and downs, and his mind was not without fatigue, the great poet had only one choice, which was to conquer a pure heart. And this was also the time he approached Taoism, Buddhism to self-soothe and comfort. These also were the "fulcrum" to lull his heart in the human realm full of darkness.

The career path of Nguyen Du in a turbulent era with many difficulties that history did not select him as an executive director - enter the world (like many other scholars at that time). Reading 249 poems written in Han, we can see that Nguyen Du was unlikely to have a bit of excitement to the ideal practice that an artist like him must have mentioned sometimes. It is not true to say that he has no talent for that choice and if to say "if only" there had been another option, it would have been non-dialectical. We assume that Nguyen Du's choice of life represented a selected direction of scholars in chaos for his position where his name would be forever reminded as a different status: the status of a great humanistic writer with non-realistic look of optimism, from the Han poetry to the masterpiece "*Doan Truong Tan Thanh*".

### **3. To the humanistic view of life**

Obviously, when Confucian way and ideal of practice no longer had the opportunity to fire up in the heart of Nguyen Du, the poet directed his attention to other problems of society and of individual identity. In poems written in Han, we found Nguyen Du had deep humanistic view about life in general. This humanistic view was towards different classes of society, contributing significantly to make up the richness of poetic imagery system Han Nguyen Du.

First of all, from the experience of the luxurious life in imperial palaces, as well as the later practical observations. Nguyen Du had a realistic, critical view on corrupted officials, oppressors, exploiters who trampled on the human rights. However, the way the poet expressed this content was quite gentle, sometimes implied, and indirect. These verses were not largely found in poems written in Han by Nguyen Du:

*Tay Son soldiers were completely drunk  
Having fun all the night without resting  
People sitting on both two sides continuously gave rewards  
Money was totally disregarded*

*(The song of the double-stringed lutenist in Long Thanh)*

Meanwhile, the author often saw the current situation to contemplate the past and looked at the ruins of today to regret the golden age of the past. If we put the nostalgia of the former dynasty aside, it is clear that in such correlation, Nguyen Du's works revealed a gentle tone of criticizing the contemporary dynasty:

*Hometown in fire attack, I was thousands of miles away, tears streaming down,  
Friends, relatives are left with rows of letters under lights.  
Desolated autumn night, quiet arowana,  
The profound nostalgia has not been suppressed.  
(Drive sadness away)*

Since then, Nguyen Du entrusted his hopes on a change on the occasion of seeing his friend off for coronation, though he himself admitted that his hope was nothing for sure:

*His plain character will perform on political affairs,  
For the sake of people, God's allowed him to be free.  
See the Red Mountain in the North, find out the virtue star,  
From the distant sky, I toast for my hometown.  
(Seeing Ngo Nhu Son off to be province official of Nghe An)*

The poet's humanistic look of life continued to be expressed and shown more clearly in his empathy for individuals, destitute lives, and lower class – people at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. This empathy went beyond national borders to reach out to people in general. This is the poem expressing the poet's emotions on his way with a cart driver caught on the road:

*Going to Ha Nam in August in autumn,  
The heat still remains.  
On the way there is no cool breeze,  
Riders are going under the scorching sun.  
Long distance, the fatigued horse is rearing,  
Looking out of sight, loss of pink bird flying.  
Where is the cart driver from?  
Look at each other, see each other as hard as.  
(Sun on the way to Ha Nam)*

Finally, we cannot fail to mention the poet's humanistic view. It can be said that the majority of Nguyen Du's Han poems were works expressing concerns, thoughts and states of extreme

emotion of the poet toward human life. In many of his poems, the poet mentioned his sick image and loneliness in mid-life with loads of ups and downs, fatigued body, white-hair.

The loneliness, depression, boredom in the poet must have had its roots from the sense of a talented person with many impossible aspirations but unable to do anything. Especially when being sick, Nguyen Du confided in a poem touchingly, toward the illusory nothingness of human life:

*With lots of sickness, or sadness, I cannot have a relaxed mind,  
Ten weeks lying stoopingly by the banks of Que Giang River.  
Ghosts get into the house to catch my soul,  
Hungry mice climb on bed to gnaw my books.  
literature never bears the karma,  
I cannot let the dust appear in a clean place.  
Under the tri-bar window, the singing is absent,  
My spirit gradually goes into the nothingness.  
(Sickness)*

From the awareness of reality as well as the nature and identity, Nguyen Du chose a path of his own during the country's chaos. The desire to live according to the ordinary meaning of scholars was forever gone and could not burn again, so that was the time when the artist turned his concern to reality, society, and life in a perspective which was against fame and the government; he showed his sympathy with tragic fates and himself.

Could that view and feeling help the poet relax? Or did it again make the poet more depressed with problems of the world? Maybe, in some cases, Nguyen Du directed his daily emotion to the nature and the leisure (as shown by many others poets before and after him); those were the moments when the poet was liberated from his inner sorrow in the wild rotation of the world.

#### **4. The relaxation inspiration: a way of liberating the depression in the soul**

“Relaxation” here means leisure or the state of being relaxed. In philosophical perspective, the relaxation inspiration of scholars in the medieval time was clearly influenced by the flexible behavior of Confucianism and the philosophy of freedom. They were freed from social restraints and illusions, and they headed towards the nature, self-pleasing, living in accordance with nature, in harmony with nature according to Taoism. This ideal partially contained the ideology of escaping from the world, being close to and integrating with the nature initiated by Buddhism.

Of course, the behavior toward the relaxation in each poet was different. i.e. there were those who pushed the relaxation up as a philosophy of life when they lived at a certain stage of life or their whole lifetime (as for the type of reclusive scholar authors with typical names such as Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Hang, Nguyen Binh Khiem, etc.); there were also poets considering poems

as just a way to relieve the sorrow, the moments of rest, recuperating after work or other daily tasks. If we follow the second direction, according to our survey, most of the medieval poets geared to the relaxation, of course the expression of each person was different. Hence, we assume that the formation of the type of relaxed authors and a stream of relaxation poetry in Vietnamese medieval literature with the signature on both aspects of content and art should be investigated as a specialized topic.

Relaxation inspiration in Nguyen Du's Han poems followed the second direction as mentioned above, but there were some unique implications and ways of expression. Regarding the frequency, ten difficult years (1786-1795), at the foot of Red Mountain (1796-1802) and being a mandarin in Bac Ha (1802-1804) was a period that the author mentioned the relaxation most because that was the time when Nguyen Du experienced and witnessed the "shock" of the current political regime for his family. It was also the time when the poet had least hope left, looked forward to a new stage in which he had the opportunity to take on, though consciousness of the incompetent, the fatigue strength of old age were mentioned a lot:

*On Hoang Mai bridge, red-tinged shadow of the afternoon.  
Under Hoang Mai Bridge, the water flows East.  
Sap floats, sinks outside,  
In the river-mid, mountain atmosphere radiates down.  
Fishers lying heads on a raincoat pillow in the isolate ship in the moonlight,  
The baby goes on the usual way, fluting in the wind.  
on this vast land, where there is no beauty,  
why do you have to be too hasty? (  
(In the afternoon standing on the bridge Hoang Mai sightseeing)*

In the space of a bright moonlit night, facing the lamp on the wall, the poet felt his peace, the karmic obstacles would finally pass away as the dust of time:

*... Bright full moon is shining down on the water pond,  
The cold inside wall lamp is flickering in the breeze of all trees.  
Though being old, I still do not know how clumsy I am in livelihoods,  
Karma's gone, realized the ancient heart in relief.  
Be friends with fishers years to years,  
Laughing haughtily in the smoky lake and grass.  
(Night in the neighborhood) .*

During this period, there are totally six poems in which Nguyen Du directly mentioned the relaxation, including: Khai song (Open the window), Doi tuu (Sit drinking), Liep (Hunting), *Mo xuan man hung* (The inspiration in late spring), *Dong Lung giang* (Dong Lung River) and *Lang Son dao trung* (On the way to Lang Son). These moments of relaxation, leisure really played an

important role in the poet's life, helping him balance the emotions in life, mingle with the village life, and get deer to be friends

Since then, Nguyen Du sought for the way to deny vanity; fame was considered only breeze; loneliness and sorrow of human life would go despite knowing that everyone has to go through their "the debt":

*... Fame in life is birds soaring through,  
In the deserted courtyard, weather following the birds to change ...  
Illusory fame will dissipate all in the end,  
Cannot compare with the early fairy ideology.  
(The inspiration in late spring)*

During the ten-year period of difficulty, at the foot of Red Mount and being a mandarin in Bac Ha, Nguyen Du mentioned relaxation a lot; many poems expressed the author's inspiration towards nature. There was a space near the ground which attached to the village, landscaped countryside with village roads, buffalo lying in the shadow of the moon, white stork flocks, and the looming shadow of farmer, woodcutter. Under the direction of this emotion, for other poets, that would really be the moments they let their soul free with the external world to the end (we are not referring to the type of reclusive scholar authors abound in this place); then in Nguyen Du, the moment seemed not to be long stagnated. It came quickly and disappeared quickly because soon after that was a feeling toward life, and social life of the poet. That is why Nguyen Du's verses when being read up still express the lump aftertaste, bitterness of an identity, a life of many talented people, many aspirations that most respectable, hard. A desire to relax was so easy for others but for the poet, it was so difficult, so choking:

The time when Nguyen Du was working for the Nguyen dynasty and as an ambassador to China, though political work consumed much of his time, as well as the time and space permits, Nguyen Du oriented his feelings toward nature, everyday life of society. At such moments, the seemingly concern about the North, the nostalgia of Thang Long and countryside in foothills of Hong Mount always inspired him, kept him away from a stable mind:

*The girls whom I have known now have children,  
My former friends are grandfathers.  
I couldn't sleep all night and felt so blue,  
I heard the sound of the flute and see the clear sky with the full moon.*

Being a mandarin with a depressed mood and boredom, Nguyen Du felt like he was imprisoned. He oriented his heart up to the sky, looking at the moon cloud freely flying, cheered his own

feelings. The words contained sorrowful affair of a romantic esteem which seems like only want to find the old days, or another dimension to reality, but also too far away:

*Having located at Giang citadel for three years,  
Looking to the north home is at the horizon.  
In Nhat Le or Cam Son I'm still a guest,  
White clouds, red clouds constellation, autumn looking,  
This body is an object in cage .  
Cannot find the once liberal freedoms ...  
(Early fall improvisation)*

Working with that "isolated" mood, certainly, Nguyen Du was unable to fulfill the duties of a mandarin from the official view. Perhaps that was why he was often being scolded by his superiors: "When being a mandarin, he was often criticized by the superiors, so he was angry and frustrated". There was a time, a place when the poet found Taoism, Buddhism but all halfway because he never got away from the normal life. If looking to the elegant pleasure of scholars such as drinking, reciting poetry, and enjoying nature etc., but the poet never traveled to the ends of such emotions. Excitement about relaxation for the moon, the cool wind, in the place of pine, listening to the hissing sound calling to the hometown intermingled with teary feeling of an elderly artist who was white-haired, sick, useless and had oads of other sorrow rushed into. Studying two poems "Nam trung tap ngam" and "Bac hanh tap luc", we found that only in 04 Nguyen Du mentioned relaxation but in all four cases, the romantic subject did not feel fully relaxed. They are *Thu chi* (Thu came), *Da toa* (Sitting night), *Tong Ngo Nhu cong xuat tran Nghe An* (Setting Tong Ngo Nhu out to be the mayor in Nghe An) and *Que Lam cong quan* (Que Lam official shop). In some other poems, the poet did not directly mention relaxation but sending his inspiration to trees and scenery along the paths that Nguyen Du had the opportunity to go through:

*Thien Thai Mountain in eastern of the citadel,  
Separated by river as if there were no crosswalks.  
Fall, ancient temple filled under gold leaf,  
the old monk in white clouds.  
Feeling pitiful for myself, white-haired but still busy,  
The green mountains do not put their loyalty, faith.  
Remember visiting this place last year ,  
I still saw the bell of Canh Hung time.  
(See Thien Thai pagoda).*



Elsewhere, on his way, in a boat mooring night in Tam Giang, when contemplating the journey full of tire (mandarin from 1802 to 1813), among rivers, mountains, seemingly emotion, the spirit of the poet somehow reached mystery of philosophy of the normal world:

*... Gibbons are singing on treetops as if there were no roads,  
Dogs are barking in the woods, knowing that there are people.  
Clouds and mountains are all around, only people getting old,  
Being in the same boat, Vietnamese and Ho people are all close.  
In the last ten years I forget the road to the old village,  
How can the old country come in the dream?  
(Night mooring in Tam Giang river mouth).*

But, for the poet, he apparently never wanted to be a religious man with the true sense of it. Though he set foot in the place of the monastery, the poet, sooner or later, "crossed the line". Nguyen Du only saw the Buddhism as a temporary solution in certain situations to defuse emotional wounds, to see himself in the middle of the chaos, but then he himself confessed, in spite of reading books thousands of times, that he would not find anything clear at all, of course, not in the awareness of the reader:

*I have read the Diamond Sutra thousands of times,  
The so-called profound significance is largely unclear.  
When coming under this classification station,  
I realized "non-word" Bible is the true Bible.  
(Stone station "Bible classification" of Prince Chieu Minh of Luong dynasty).*

## **5. Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the content of Nguyen Du's poems written in Han are varied, diverse, and more or less complex in which the relaxed inspiration is an expression of concern. Perhaps the demarcation point as well as its own mark in the direction of this great poet was in the stream of relaxation in medieval poetry. It was the feeling of fate, concerns about life, people in general in contemporary society that never "give up on" him, making each word sung in the emotional and touching poems.

In addition, for other scholars, the concern, even when clearly stated like "Every night I stay awake concerning public issues" (Nguyen Trai) or hidden like "I feel ashamed when thinking about Dao" (Nguyen Khuyen) expressed the awareness of their talent and enthusiasm for politics and times though they had to ignore the reality. However, for our great poet, Nguyen Du, that emotion, that feeling not only slipped through what is considered to be specific but also expressed how great his affection was towards life and mankind. That is where Nguyen Du wrote

his name in the medieval poetry flows in particular and in our national poetry in general. Even without "Nam am tuyet cu", he has forever immortalized in the reader's heart through many generations.

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