

# **SOME PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS ON HUMAN NATURE BY THE GREAT PHYSICIAN HAI THUONG LAN ONG LE HUU TRAC**

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## **Abstract**

*Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac was a talented physician, outstanding poet, writer, and philosopher of the Vietnamese people in the 18th century. With progressive thoughts about human life in the practice of medicine, he presented it through his medical writings. He researched deeply and learned about human nature, both physical and mental, both natural and social. Inheriting and promoting knowledge in classic medical works and the practice of "treating diseases to save lives" for him to use as a starting point to into medical research. He pointed out the relationship between theory and practice, the nature of human cognitive processes in general, and the medical awareness of physicians in particular. He promotes human values by valuing the values and lives of patients, which is the duty, responsibility and goal of a true physician. Humanitarian ideology in the medical profession is a major content in Hai Thuong Lan Ong's ideology, which is the heart of loving people and loving patients very deeply. Hai Thuong Lan Ong was one of the first people in the Vietnamese ideological history to raise the issue of comprehensive human research associated with the development of Traditional Medicine.*

**Keywords:** *Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac, philosophical thought*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac (1724-1791) was a talented and outstanding physician and he was also a poet, writer, and philosopher of the Vietnamese people in the 18th century. He was born into a family with a tradition of academics in the Later Le Dynasty in 1724 (the year of Giap Thin) in Co Lieu Huong village, Lieu Xa commune, Thuong Hong district, Hai Duong town, now Van Xa village, Lieu Xa commune, Yen My district, Hung

Yen province. He died in the Tay Son Dynasty, the fourth year of Quang Trung (1791), on the 15th day of the first lunar month, Tan Hoi year, at the age of 67 in Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province. [1],[2],[4]

He grew up at a time when society was heavily influenced by Confucian ideology, so he initially chose the path of academic examination according to family tradition. Having gone through a military career, but after life events,

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\* Date received: 25/09/2024

\* Date accepted: 15/12/2024

he was determined to choose to pursue a career in medicine, which was not yet highly regarded in our country. With a love of learning and seeing the usefulness of curing and saving people, he was determined to study medicine. He persevered in self-study, reading many medical books and gaining valuable experience in his practice.

With a heart of love for the sick, his own efforts helped him to progress in medical theory, medical skills and medical ethics. His persistent and tenacious efforts in his career and his noble heart helped him become a talented and virtuous physician. [3],[4],[5]

There have been many studies and articles written about Hai Thuong Lan Ong as a physician, poet, culturalist and the work Hai Thuong Y Tong Tam Linh with in-depth content on medical ethics, medical theory and medical techniques. In this article, we will analyze in depth to clarify more about Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac as a philosopher of 18th century Vietnam.

The feudal regime of Vietnam in the 18th century was in a period of serious crisis in terms of politics, economy, culture, including cognition and spiritual life. Appearing in that context, Hai Thuong Lan Ong with his progressive thoughts about humans, his cognitive ability and practical

experience through medical theory, he put forward very remarkable philosophical views about humans, about human life in the medical profession. [6]

## **II. HAI THUONG LAN ONG WITH PROGRESSIVE IDEAS ON HUMAN LIFE IN THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE**

Hai Thuong Lan Ong discussed a lot about human beings from the perspective of human life and there he expressed many progressive philosophical ideas, especially through his medical works. In the Eastern philosophical tradition, philosophical ideas about human life are first expressed through the concepts such as the "*human morality*" and the "*purpose of life*". [6]

Living in a period when Vietnamese feudal society was going through many changes, Confucianism no longer held a unique position for thinkers, Buddhism and Taoism were the spiritual support for many scholars. Thinkers of this period, when discussing human issues, often appeared to be stuck, seeking a place to "hide" or give up on reality. Lan Ong inherited Lao Tu's concept of "wu wei" (non-action) by promoting the word "Leisure" but unlike them, it was "Leisure" with fame and military power, but he was not "Leisure" with the role of a physician. His "Leisure" had the

same features as Buddhism with its leisurely serenity, but always determined responsibility in the act of saving lives. Inheriting those ideas, but Hai Thuong Lan Ong refined and built a new morality to have a basis for perception and action. Although he lived in seclusion, he always thought about saving the people and the country, but in a different way from the Confucian scholars of his time, he was a doctor "treating illnesses and saving people". He refused all fame and fortune to pursue medicine, with the aim of bringing the best benefits to the majority of people. And he also saw that medicine was not a trivial profession as people often thought, it was thanks to medicine that he was saved. He realized the truth: it was not necessary to be an official or a general to be good, being a doctor was an ideal of life in terms of saving people and was suitable for his aspirations and circumstances at that time. From then on, he decided to enter the medical profession with the determination to learn and improve himself to bring the medical profession on par with the desires of society. The "*human morality*" or "*purpose of life*" that Lan Ong chose had reached the peak of human values at that time. [6]

The medical profession is related to protecting human life, so Hai Thuong Lan Ong believes that a physician must have extensive knowledge and a deep understanding of humans. Scientific research on humans or the need to reach a comprehensive philosophical concept of humans is necessary for every physician. Therefore, he has drawn on experience and learned from the ancients to fully acquire knowledge: "*I am a Confucian scholar, determined to pursue the medical profession, reading books and prescriptions, I keep the meaning in my heart, thinking carefully about all the precious heritages left by the ancients, searching for the truth, the main thing is to make the medical theory clear to the end. Therefore, I am not ashamed of my incompetence, regarding the theories of my predecessors, if I see something I do not fully understand, I read it, read it over and over again, and take notes...*" (Dao luu du van). [1],[2]

He was one of the first people in Vietnam to thoroughly apply the theory of Yin and Yang and the five elements to systematically study and explain human beings in many aspects: from physiological functions to pathogenesis, from diagnostic functions to methods of disease prevention and treatment. He delved deeply into the study of human nature, and at the same time he also

knew how to systematically present those ideas in his writings. [6]

The moral ideology of human life of Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac is the ideology of serving people. This is one of the important, core values throughout his career, reflecting the profound human value of serving both the physical and spiritual aspects of people. When studying the relationship between physical factors and spiritual factors, he believed that these two factors are related to each other. Therefore, in addition to the policy of nourishing essential energy, internal organs, and enhancing the body's resistance (physical factors), he also discussed deeply about nourishing the spirit. In Dao luu du van, he devoted a chapter "*On nourishing the spirit*", arguing that in addition to taking "*essence and blood as the most important*", it is necessary to pay attention to "*spirit*": "*In the human body, from the physical form to the meridians, there is no place that does not focus on the spirit*". According to him, if the illness is not serious, one should use medicine to "*calm the spirit, store the spirit and warm the spirit*". If the illness is serious, one should seek the "*true spirit*", using the methods of "*Nourishing Fire in Water, nourishing Water in Fire*" to keep the "*true spirit*" full. [1],[2]

According to him, humans have both a natural life and a social

life. Hai Thuong Lan Ong deeply analyzed the natural aspect of human nature, which is being close to nature, in harmony with nature and "*following nature*". In terms of medicine, if humans live against the laws of nature, diseases will arise, so according to him, humans must always obey and adapt to the laws of nature. In terms of society, he affirmed that human nature is not inherent from the beginning, but on the contrary, that nature can change according to the circumstances and living environment of the human being. His profound understanding of humans in both the natural and social aspects helped him have comprehensive knowledge when treating patients every day. Although there are still certain limitations, basically, his thoughts above are completely materialistic and progressive. [6]

This is also the most distinctive feature of his philosophical thought, which is a meticulous study of man as a complex system based on a simple materialist stance and dialectical thinking...[6]. He inherited and developed knowledge from classic medical works and the practice of medicine "*treating and saving people*", taking the patient as the center, considering it as the starting point to delve deeper into medical research.

### III. THE ROLE OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE COGNITION PROCESS OF THE PHYSICIAN

Hai Thuong Lan Ong mentioned the issue of human cognition through the cognitive activities of the physician. Human cognition is a complex process, it is the interaction between the human brain and the outside world, so medical cognition is not easy.

He believes that there is a special relationship between the physician's perception and clinical practice. In that relationship, if a physician wants to avoid clinical mistakes, he must avoid mistakes in perception, first of all, in the perception of medical theory. Therefore, when having a correct perception of theory, the physician will make effective treatment decisions in clinical practice. According to him, theory is a system of knowledge and ideology that reflects the practical life experience of people, and medicine also has its own system of theory, also known as medical theory. Medical theory is the result of the physician's cognitive activities, summarizing the treatment practices of the ancients into medical principles, which later physicians often rely on to practice clinically [6]. From the above point of view, he affirmed: "*The medical*

*profession needs the Internal Classics, just like Confucian scholars need the Five Classics*", which is the deep origin of medical theory. He considered the theoretical knowledge in books as the starting point in his perception. The medical profession is very difficult, so a doctor must first understand the theory of medicine. For himself, he always determined to constantly study to improve his theoretical knowledge, and at the same time, through writing books and teaching, he wanted future doctors to see the role of theory. This proves that he is an excellent medical theorist. [6]

In the "Van khi bi dien", he quoted the sentence: "*Three times cutting your hand makes you a good doctor*". Although he highly valued theoretical knowledge, Hai Thuong Lan Ong still valued the practical role in the activities of a physician. He pointed out that the practical value of the profession is the decisive factor in the position of the profession in society. According to him, medicine is a noble profession in society, because it originates from the interests and needs of caring for and protecting the health of the people, so it plays a great role in the development of society. Practice always plays a decisive role with theory, the physician must base on clinical practice to apply

theory appropriately for the treatment process to be effective. Understanding the decisive value of practice over theory, he always used practice to test his perception. The practical problems he encountered in his practice were also demonstrated through the *Y Duong An* (Cases of Successful Treatment) and *Y Am An* (Cases of Failed Treatment), where he recorded both successful and failed treatments.

Hai Thuong Lan Ong had a completely correct perception of the nature of human cognition in general and the medical cognition of physicians in particular. His thoughts on the relationship between theoretical cognition and practical activities of physicians are still valuable today.

#### **IV. HAI THUONG LAN ONG WITH HUMANITANISM IN THE MEDICINAL PROFESSION**

Humanitarianism promotes human values, more specifically happiness, freedom and fairness in sharing benefits among individuals in society. In the development of the history of Vietnamese thought, the idea of humanitarianism is a fine tradition passed down by our ancestors through the ages, expressed in the idea of "*patriotism, love for the people*" or "*Dao of Benevolence and Righteousness*". These ideas rarely appear in specific professions such as medicine. However, Hai Thuong

Lan Ong's profound expression of humanism in his medical works is perhaps a special and rare thing in history. As a physician, he understands that promoting human values must first be demonstrated through respecting the values and lives of patients, which is the duty, responsibility and goal of a true physician. [6]

According to Lan Ong, the medical profession is not simply equipped with professional knowledge and skills, but also requires a professional ethics, and he calls it "*Dao of Medicine*". The medical profession, if understood in the usual sense, is just a profession to "work, live" and is a means to pursue personal interests. "*Dao of Medicine*" is a great ethics, a humane art, the "art of saving human lives", closely associated with the ideals and humanity of the physician [6]. In the *Y Huan Cach Ngon* (Medicine Aphorisms), he summarized this content with the saying: "*Dao of Medicine is a humane art that specializes in protecting human lives, must worry about people's worries and enjoy people's joys, only take saving people's lives as one's duty, should not seek profit or boast about achievements*" [1][2]. This is a very important thought of Hai Thuong Lan Ong when conceiving the meaning and purpose of the medical profession. Rarely did

previous thinkers raise the issue of considering the medical profession as a “Dao of Medicine”, in which the physician must know how to sacrifice his own interests and consider the interests of the patient above all else. “Dao of Medicine” is not only limited to the scope of pure medical knowledge, but requires the physician following the “Dao of Medicine” to have philosophical knowledge about nature and society, and especially knowledge and deep understanding of people. He understood that “Dao of Medicine is a very noble study of protecting life, and is the key to cultivating virtue. A person with full knowledge cannot unknow about it”. The concept of the medical profession, what he called the “Dao of Medicine” of the physician contained profound humanistic philosophies not only in his time, but also had great significance in forming a new concept for modern medicine today.

Imbued with the humanitarian ideology in the medical profession, Hai Thuong Lan Ong always required a true physician to have both solid professional knowledge and to establish for himself correct ethical standards. This is the true meaning of “Dao of Medicine” and is also the foundation and core value for building and developing the medical profession. In his

works, in addition to widely mentioning medical issues in general, he also focused on discussing the medical ethics of physicians [6]. Especially in Y Huan Cach Ngon, he proposed nine commandments to teach physicians that are still inherited by today's generations of physicians and continue to promote the ethics of revolutionary physicians in the new era. He was the first person in the history of Vietnamese medical thought to systematize and specify the standards of medical ethics of physicians in their relationships with patients, with their profession, with colleagues, teachers, students and with society...

He advocated building a medical system for the benefit of the poor. Another unique feature in the system of humanitarian values in the medical profession of Hai Thuong Lan Ong is the idea of building fairness in medical examination and treatment and building a medical system for the benefit of the majority of people. At that time, society was clearly divided. He witnessed the health of the rich being overly cared for by doctors, while the majority of the poor were often neglected when they were sick. Returning to the countryside and living with the people, he understood the miserable circumstances of the poor. He himself had a sense of self-

awareness in identifying the objects of service in the social conditions of that time: children of fishermen, fishermen, the poor, orphans, widows, etc. Therefore, when treating the poor, he often tried to give remedies that had uses and prices suitable to their own circumstances. He recommended using traditional medicine that is both simple and easy to find, the less ingredients the better, as in the book “Hanh gian tran nhu” (Simple and easy to use remedies), he recorded 2,210 simple remedies drawn from previous medical literature and partly collected from the people to treat many types of diseases suitable for the poor. He also compiled the book “Bach gia tran tang” (Precious remedies for every family), which listed 644 experienced remedies, with the aim of helping people, including the majority of the poor, have the conditions to research and use them. [1],[2],[6]

As a physician and a thinker with a deep humanitarian heart, he believed that caring for women and children meant caring for the origin, present and future of the health of the nation. Not every physician realized this in his time, which is why his thoughts have special value. This is the development of humanitarian thoughts in the medical profession, for the health, for the progress of women and the

development of children. In the feudal society, women were victims of many oppressions and injustices such as the ideology of "*male superiority, female inferiority*", the bad custom of "*early marriage*" ... [6]. With profound knowledge and thoughts, he paid special attention to women and wrote books specifically for improving the quality of life or caring for and protecting women's health such as: Nu Cong Thang Lam, Phu Dao Xan Nhien, Toa Thao Luong Mo, Bao Thai Than Hieu Toan Thu, Ve Sinh Yeu Quyet... Lan Ong's thoughts on women in general and women's health in particular were extremely progressive, showing his deep concern for the health and status of women in contemporary society.

As a compassionate physician and a Confucian scholar imbued with the philosophy of humanity, Hai Thuong Lan Ong also paid special attention to the health and development of children. He believed that "*Infants are like tender buds that need to be nurtured, tended, and preserved*" (Ve sinh yeu quyet - Essentials of Hygiene), children are the future of society, so caring for children is also caring for the future development of society [6]. As a clinical physician, he generalized that treating children is very difficult: "*Treating ten men is not as difficult as treating one woman, treating ten*



*women is not as difficult as treating one old person, treating ten old people is not as difficult as treating one baby, because children are in pain and cannot speak, they can only cry, so there is nothing more difficult than diagnosing and treating them"* (Au au tu tri). Therefore, he considered pediatric diseases to be his most favorite with the following books: Au Au Tu Tri, which specializes in pediatric diseases, or measles diseases in Ma Chan Chuan Thang, and smallpox diseases in Mong Trung Giac Dau. Among these books, Mong Trung Giac Dau was compiled by him most elaborately, consisting of 10 volumes (Giap, At, Binh, Dinh, Mau, Ky, Canh, Tan, Nham, Quy). We can clearly see that Hai Thuong Lan Ong's viewpoint on children's diseases is both scientific and deeply humanistic, demonstrating his concern for the health and development of children. The above shows that Hai Thuong Lan Ong's viewpoint is extremely progressive, far ahead of its time and close to and consistent with the principles of modern medical disciplines such as physiology, nutrition, pediatrics, etc. [6]

Humanitarianism in medicine is a major content in Hai Thuong Lan Ong's thought, which is the love for people, the love for the sick very deeply. Hai Thuong Lan Ong stands on the progressive materialist position, using correct scientific

thinking methods containing many spontaneous dialectical elements to comprehensively consider people. Although there are certain limitations, basically his thoughts have many positive and progressive meanings, marking a new qualitative development step in the history of thoughts of that period in the perception of philosophical issues related to people. [6]

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac is a bright star in the history of traditional Vietnamese medicine. His life, medical career and writings have left posterity a huge legacy in the fields of medicine, literature, science, philosophical thought, etc. Hải Thượng Lãn Ông is one of the first figures in the history of Vietnamese thought to raise the issue of studying humanity in a comprehensive manner, indicating the correct path in the understanding of physicians. His progressive worldview regarding the ideals of life and humanitarian thoughts reflects a profound love for people and a deep compassion for the sick.

On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Hai Thuong Lan Ong's birth (1724-2024), those working in traditional medicine in particular and health care in general always remember and show gratitude for the merits, knowledge and thoughts that he left for posterity. Researching and developing

his knowledge and ideas further shows the suitability of the policies and guidelines for developing Vietnamese medicine with a socialist humanitarian nature to carry out the task of caring for and protecting people's health.

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