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A Lotus of Everlasting Fragrance

Nguyen Trai, 1380-1442

> Mud fails to touch and soil its perfect hue.
> A gentleman lives up to its proud name.
> Wind wafts its scent on quiet moonlit nights.
> Its wealth is purity, unmatched by all
>
> —"The Lotus," Nguyen Trai[1]

In 1988-89, my wife and I went to Viet Nam on assignment for the *National Geographic Magazine* to write an article on my hometown of Hue[2] and to update information about the reunified Viet Nam.

The majority of people we met—friends, relatives, officials—preferred not to talk about the "American War," but when pressed for an opinion, they agreed that the US bombing of the North a few days after Tet was the "most difficult challenge to their determination to resist foreign aggression." One ended with: "lay nhan nghia thang bao tan; dem chi nhan thay cuong bao" ("it became possible to overcome violence with righteousness, to displace tyrannical force with humanity"), quoting from one of the most widely-known and celebrated pieces of Vietnamese literature, the Binh Ngo Dai Cao (A Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu). The Binh Ngo Dai Cao was written in 1428 by Nguyen Trai, following the victorious Vietnamese war of national liberation against the Chinese Ming (or Wu).[3]

In an interview, Vu Ky, personal secretary to President Ho Chi Minh since the 1940s and Director of Ho Chi Minh Museum, told me that President Ho Chi Minh "visited" Nguyen Trai in Trai's home village of Con Son.[4] Vietnamese historians interpreted President Ho Chi Minh's pilgrimage as a traditional way to "consult" an historic figure in a new historic situation, to meditate over past crises, to learn relevant lessons for the burning present. It was also an appropriate political gesture, a kind of modern "photo opportunity."

In the crowded pantheon of Vietnamese heroes and heroines, Nguyen Trai stands very high in the esteem, admiration, and veneration of Vietnamese of all classes. His thoughts and poems are still taught in schools, considered relevant to national and personal problems by a population who still adores him as a "Lotus of Everlasting Fragrance."[5]

During the spring of 1965, President Ho Chi Minh and his government faced an unprecedented reality: the awesome power of the United States Air Force. US bombing of North Viet Nam began February 7 (Operation Flaming Dart) and continued with the more sustained Operation Rolling Thunder, which started February 24, 1965. The justification: to punish the Viet Cong's daring attack on US billets in Pleiku while President Johnson's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, was visiting Saigon.

The Pleiku assault was the first military confrontation between the United States and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV). Ten years later, in the same area, the Viet Nam People's Army under the command of General Van Tien Dung mounted a massive general offensive that in less than two months (March 4-May 1, 1975) ended the Second Indochina War and brought about the territorial reunification of Viet Nam.[6]

The strategic use of air power, whatever its apparent justification, was to back the US policy of negotiating from strength with Hanoi. Washington's hope didn't materialize for a militarily stronger and politically more stable South Viet Nam after the US-supported November 1st 1963 *coup d'etat*. To the leaders of the DRV, the US air offensive changed the basic nature of the war, from a so-called "special war" with limited objectives to a "destructive war of aggression," according to General Vo Nguyen Giap, victor at the battle of Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War. In 1965, Giap was Minister of Defense and Vice Chairman of the National Defense Council headed by President Ho Chi Minh himself.

General Giap described the American War's turning point in his 1975 book:

> [The US bombing] was for us an entirely new form of people's war, the whole people fight against the enemy air force and navy, the whole people carry out defense and participate in efforts to maintain communication and transportation: They are working and fighting at the same time, protecting the rear and serving the front.[7]

President Ho Chi Minh surely shared General Giap's analysis of the US bombing and the difficulties facing his people. Like most history-conscious Vietnamese, President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap would look into their rich history, their past experiences for possible solutions to current problems. General Vo Nguyen Giap thought of the Vietnamese war of national liberation against the Ming Chinese occupation in the 15th century. He wrote:

> Le Loi began his uprising in Lam Son with some 2,000 insurgents. The uprising developed into a war of liberation. The insurgents were organized into an army, and when victory was won, this army numbered over two hundred thousand with increasingly perfect organization as it was able to inherit and develop the experiences of the previous Ly and Tran dynasties.[8]

Nguyen Trai (Le Loi's principal strategist and chief advisor) also conducted "attacks on the minds, i.e. propaganda work among the enemy, persuading the enemy to surrender in many cities."[8] For President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap, a professor of history before he joined the 1945 Revolution, Nguyen Trai could and would provide useful lessons needed for victory.[9]

Nguyen Trai was born in 1380 in Thang Long (Soaring Dragon, Hanoi's old name). His father, Nguyen Ung Long, also known as Nguyen Phi Khanh, received the highest academic degree of Doctor of State at the unprecedented young age of 19. Prince Tran Nguyen Dan, a chancellor at the Court of the reigning Tran dynasty (1225-1400) invited the young scholar to tutor his daughter Tran Thi Thai. The talented instructor and the beautiful princess fell in love with each other. Prince Dan tolerated the relationship, but the King condemned it and refused to grant Nguyen Phi Khanh the high position at court usually reserved for a man of such achievement.

Nguyen Trai didn't suffer from this royal punishment and he spent the best years of his early life in Con Son (about 40 miles east of the present Hanoi) with his

maternal grandfather, Prince Tran Nguyen Dan, a respected intellectual and poet in his own right.

Viet Nam (then called Dai Viet or Great Viet) was facing a domestic crisis and serious threats both from its neighbor to the south, the kingdom of Champa, and to the north, the Middle Empire of China. In 1382, a powerful Champa army that had failed for centuries to stop the relentless Nam Tien (the Vietnamese March to the South) approached the capital. Champa was defeated after fierce battles led Le Quy Ly, an ambitious but capable high official of the court. The main threat, however, came from China. The Chinese Ming dynasty was extending its power and influence southwards and to "the four seas."

Yong Lo (1403-1424), the third Ming Emperor, personally led expeditions against Mongol tribes, extending his reach in Manchuria to the Amur River. His admiral, the eunuch Cheng Ho, commanding a fleet of 62 ocean-going junks, each 440 feet long and 180 feet wide and carrying 27,800 officers and men bearing gifts of gold and silk, called on neighboring countries in 1405. His armada, the largest in the world at that time, returned triumphantly two years later.

This expedition was the first in a series of voyages to Asia and Africa, known as expeditions of the "pao-ch'uan" or "jewel ships" since one of the aims was to bring back gems and precious objects to the Ming Court. The major objective, however, was political: to show the Chinese flag, to advertise the might of the Chinese navy, to project the greatness of the Chinese civilization.

For the Greater Dragon (China) no greatness was complete without the subjection of the Smaller Dragon (Viet Nam). From his nine-dragon throne, Yong Lo was waiting for a pretext to send his armies southwards. The pretext came when his intelligence service informed him that Le Quy Ly had usurped the Tran throne. Yong Lo

immediately sent his elite units to escort a so-called legitimate heir of the Tran dynasty back to Viet Nam. The escort turned out to be a powerful invasion army. In 1407, the invasion succeeded. Viet Nam became the Giao Chi province of the Chinese empire. Vietnamese officials, prominent scholars, and poets were rounded-up and exiled to China. Among these was Dr. Nguyen Phi Khanh, Nguyen Trai's father.

Nguyen Trai who had himself received his Doctorate of State in 1405, at age 20, volunteered to accompany his father into exile. But at the China-Viet Nam border, his father ordered him to return to liberate the country and avenge the family. Nguyen Trai went underground, visiting whenever possible his grandfather Prince Tran Nguyen Dan at his Con Son farm.

Since its existence as an independent state in 968 after a thousand years of Chinese colonization, Viet Nam had successfully defeated all attempts of conquest from the North, in particular the three massive attacks by the Yuan (Mongol) Chinese in the 13th century. This time it was different. Viet Nam was occupied and governed by Chinese military authorities.

Yong Lo pursued a systematic program to destroy Vietnamese identity and culture. The brutality of Chinese rule provoked spontaneous uprisings, quickly suppressed. There was no organized national independence movement until 1416. On February 7 of that year—the second day of the first month of the Year of the Monkey, while the Vietnamese people were celebrating without much joy their traditional Tet (New Year) holiday—a group of eighteen men met in the forest of Lam Son in Thanh Hoa province, south of the capital. The leader was Le Loi, a land-owning farmer. His principal adviser and chief military-diplomatic strategist was 36-year-old Nguyen Trai, who came to the meeting with the Binh

Ngo Sach, his book of strategy for the pacification of the Wu.

The 18 patriots took an oath to stay together until final victory. After six years of organizing-fighting-organizing, Le Loi retreated to a liberated zone in the mountains of Chi Linh and sued the Chinese for a truce. Nguyen Trai, on behalf of Le Loi, corresponded with the Chinese authorities, argued for the Just Cause of the Vietnamese, for justice and humanity. He quoted Chinese moral and ethical principles, praised Chinese sages and wise rulers of past dynasties, challenging his opponents to live up to their Confucian culture.

In 1424, Emperor Yong Lo died after he returned from a successful expedition against the Mongols. Predicting a period of instability in China, Nguyen Trai prepared for an offensive against the enemy, intensifying political work in the population and strengthening the army. He conducted attacks against isolated Chinese garrisons in the outskirts of the capital and in major cities, forcing the Chinese to retreat into fixed positions. This guerilla strategy worked well and the occupation Chinese authorities asked for reinforcements from Peking.

The Chinese emperor sent a powerful force made of 100,000 soldiers and 5,000 horses, commanded by a top general, Wang Tong. Alternating ambushes with large-scale mobile operations, Le Loi-Nguyen Trai national liberation troops inflicted heavy losses on the Chinese at the battles of Tot Dong and Ninh Kieu, west of the capital. Wang Tong withdrew his main units to the capital. Vietnamese soldiers encircled them. Nguyen Trai now applied the full strength of his "offensive of the heart." He wrote, of course under Le Loi's orders, letters to Wang Tong trying to convince him that he was losing the war. At the same time, he promised the Chinese an

honorable and comfortable retreat back to China where they belonged.

Nguyen Trai's correspondences are still preserved in the collection Quan Trung Tu Menh (Letters to the Army). In the 12th month of the year 1426, Wang Tong and his political commissar Shan Shou agreed to negotiate the terms of withdrawal. Nguyen Trai, who was then 46 and in the prime of his physical and intellectual vigor, conducted the negotiations for the Vietnamese side. Le Loi named him, in 1427, Minister of Interior in charge of confidential matters. The new position increased his power and credibility at the moment when Wang Tong stalled, in futile hope of reinforcements from his Emperor.

Nguyen Trai worked to not make the Chinese feel they had lost face and called upon their humanistic qualities instead. Finally, in the 12th day of the 12th month, or the 29th of December 1427, Wang Tong accepted the terms of orderly withdrawal with the "solemn oath of eternal friendship." The Vietnamese side released 100,000 Chinese prisoners of war and provided them with enough food and transportation for their comfortable return home.

The 20-year-long Chinese occupation ended, and Viet Nam recovered its independence. Le Loi became King Le Thai To in 1428. Nguyen Trai was charged with writing, on behalf of his Emperor, the Binh Ngo Dai Cao (A Great Proclamation Upon the Pacification of the Wu.)[10] The Proclamation has remained a masterpiece of Vietnamese political and cultural literature, a declaration of the Vietnamese concepts of war, peace, culture, and humanism, starting with a paragraph which defined the essence of Nguyen Trai's humanistic-populist philosophy:

> I have indeed heard that acts of humanity and justice aim essentially at attaining peace for the people and that military strength established for the protection of the people has no more urgent function than to eliminate violence.

In other words, Trai affirmed that the principal mission of the armed forces is peace. He then defined the national characteristics of Dai Viet (Great Viet, the name of Viet Nam then):

> Our state of Dai Viet is indeed a country wherein culture and institutions flourished. Our mountains and rivers have their characteristic features, but our habits and customs are not the same from north to south. . . . Although we have been at times strong and at times weak, we have at no time lacked heroes.

He described the sufferings his people endured under the Chinese Ming occupation, and the difficulties of organizing various insurgent centers into a national liberation army. He talked of the bonds between commanders and soldiers, of the use of guerilla warfare and, more importantly, of psychological warfare: "We attacked them with psychological weapons, we subjugated them without giving battles."

He also expressed deep concern for his soldiers:

> I myself had no higher concern than the security of our army and my only wish was that the people should finally find some rest. My attitude not only reflects my profound and provident thinking, it reveals a pattern of

> conduct that has never before been seen or heard in history.

He was convinced that "finally, it became possible to overcome violence with righteousness, to displace tyrannical force with humanity," the phrase my friends in Hue were still quoting in 1989.

In 1429, Nguyen Trai wrote the "Request for Investiture," a formal petition by King Le Thai To of Viet Nam to be recognized by the Son of Heaven, Emperor of the Middle Empire, albeit an emperor whose armies were defeated. Once the Request was granted, the normalization of relations between the two countries would proceed and the terms of the Viet Nam tribute to China discussed. (After 1975, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam followed a similar route for recognition from the United States. With China, the process required one year. With the US, over twenty.)

Free of most state duties, Nguyen Trai devoted his energy writing the history of the movement of independence which started in the forest of Lam Son. The book, titled *Lam Son Thuc Luc* (*True History of the Lam Son Insurrection*), provided readers with an objective account of the war, free of chauvinistic aggrandizement.

Then came the death, at age 51, of Le Loi, Trai's king and comrade-in-arms. Nguyen Trai, then 53, composed the commemorative stele for Le Loi's tomb at Vinh Lang. With the passing of Le Loi and the increasing insidious attacks by the courtiers who feared his intellectual superiority and his integrity, Nguyen Trai resigned from all public functions and retired to his grandfather's farm at Con Son, far away from intrigue and jealousy. But in 1442, he was recalled to the capital to preside over the examinations for Doctors of State. When the examinations were over, he returned again to Con Son to spend the rest of his life with nature and with Thi Lo, his intel-

lectual concubine, a poet and literary counselor at the court.

In the 7th month of 1442, when the new monarch inspected his troops at the famous fort of Chi Linh, he used the opportunity to stop by Con Son to pay a courtesy visit to Nguyen Trai. On his way back to the capital he was accompanied by Thi Lo. While stopping at the Garden of Litchis, the King suddenly died with Thi Lo at his side. The anti-Nguyen Trai clique at the court accused Thi Lo of regicide. Nguyen Trai was accused as a co-conspirator. Both were condemned to death and executed on the 16th day of the 8th month (September 19, 1442).

The nation mourned the death of an hero and exceptional intellectual. People believed that Trai's death was caused by the intrigues of the officials at court. Twenty years later, a new king, Le Thanh Tong, rehabilitated Trai and ordered a search for all Nguyen Trai's literary works, to which were added poems by his father and grandfather.

To understand the life and time of Nguyen Trai as well as his extraordinary achievements as military strategist, diplomat, statesman, poet, and man of culture, one has to bear in mind the following characteristics of Viet Nam as a people, a nation, a state, and a culture: First, Viet Nam is not a gift of Nature, God, or Heaven. It is the collective work and sacrifice of a people, the Viet, who underwent more than a thousand years of diaspora from the Yangtze River in China and a thousand years of colonization by China before it settled as a definite nation in the delta of Song Hong, the Red River of northern Viet Nam, the cradle of Vietnamese culture and civilization. This small piece of land was periodically threatened by devastating floods. Just to survive, the Vietnamese had to build thousands of miles of dikes along the River and its

tributaries. (When I watched on TV the battle of my fellow Americans against the flood of the Red River in North Dakota in the summer of 1996, I was moved to tears as I thought of my ancestors in the Red River in Hanoi.)

As if flood, hostile environment, and savage animals were not enough of a test for the Vietnamese, geography made them neighbors of the Chinese. To paraphrase a comment about Mexico and the United States: "Poor Viet Nam, too far away from Heaven, too close to the Middle Empire."

To exist as a specific human community with a specific culture, the Vietnamese have had to maximize the effects of their bodies and brains to enable them to find the most effective means to arrive at Giu Nuoc (defending the country) and Dung Nuoc (building the country). Significantly enough, the word "Nuoc," or "water," in Vietnamese, means also "country."[11]

To safeguard their independence, all Vietnamese, since their country became an independent state in the 10th century, have had to fight back foreign invasions. At the same time, they have had to find more space and more resources. The Nam Tien (March to the South), started in the 10th century and ended only in 1780 at the tip of Ca Mau peninsula in the extreme south—about 800 miles in 800 years.

The Nam Tien was accomplished by force of arms as well as by dynastic marriage and diplomacy. At all times, it was the result of tenacious labor by Vietnamese peasants and Vietnamese soldiers, who themselves were recruited from the peasantry. With so much blood, tears, brain, and muscle invested for such a long period in order to survive in an environment of their own making, the Vietnamese consider territorial integrity, the value of ancestral land, "each inch of land is an inch of gold," as non-negotiable.

The First Indochina War against France broke out in 1946 when Paris refused to recognize Nam Bo (southern part of Viet Nam) as part of Viet Nam. The Second Indochina War was unavoidable when Hanoi was convinced that the United States was attempting to build a separate Viet Nam in the south, despite the fact that the constitutions of both "North" and "South" Viet Nam affirmed in Article I [Geneva, 1954] that "Viet Nam is one country and territorially indivisible."

Second, the 1,000-year-long colonization by China interrupted by frequent uprisings—the best organized in 40 AD, and led by two women, the Trung sisters—resulted in the "sinization" of the colony, a phenomenon comparable to the Romanization of Europe in the beginning of the Christian era. If the Romans were determined in making their subjects Roman, the Chinese were attempting to educate each of their dependents to be a "quan tu," a civilized man in the Chinese model, literally, a "son of the Emperor."

The Chinese worked to convert Viet Nam into a cultured society in the Chinese model. The pillars of that society would grow from the three currents of religion and philosophy: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism which flowed into the hearts and minds through the Chinese written language. Since 10th-century independence, Buddhism occupied an important place in the life of the Vietnamese. By the time of Nguyen Trai, in the 14th century, Confucianism became practically a state doctrine, tempered by Taoism.

What are the essence and meaning of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that emerged in China around the 5th century BC? According to Thomas F. Fang: "To the Confucians, the individual should be ceaselessly edified; to the Taoists, he should be constantly liberated; and to the Buddhists, he should be perpetually purified."[12]

As a Doctor of State, Nguyen Trai should have mastered all foundations and interpretations of Confucianism, the basic source of knowledge for imperial examinations from which the mandarinate was recruited. Education, or more precisely, the learning of Confucian classics, was the only path to the Vietnamese Dream. The first examinations were held in 1075 and the last took place in 1919, when the practice was abolished by the French, who colonized Viet Nam in 1884.

My own father was a laureate of the 1919 exams. Very few of the candidates passed the difficult tests, perhaps a hundred out of several thousand. In fact, from 1075 until 1919, only about 2,000 doctoral degrees were granted. A scholar who failed returned to his respective village to learn more for his next chance while earning his living as a teacher. As such, the scholar became the intellectual and moral authority of his community. In his village, his classical learning was integrated, humanized, and fortified by older foundations of Vietnamese civilization. The scholar-in-residence dispensed to the villagers the Confucian edifying morality, the Buddhist purifying compassion, and the Taoist liberating sense of humor and irreverence. In turn, the peasants indirectly and concretely helped him integrate, humanize, and authenticate his academic knowledge by sharing and laughing with him the treasure of traditional oral literature, in particular ca dao (Folk Song or Poetry).

More than any other form of expression, ca dao is the manifestation of the Vietnamese joy of life, respect for beauty and love, communion with nature and animals, and the need for an occasional liberating "laughter at your own laughter." For centuries, across generations and social classes, it has been the sustaining spiritual force for the independence fighter, the men and women who walked the Ho Chi Minh trail and built the Cu Chi tunnels. During the Second Indochina War, millions

were spent by various US intelligence agencies and think-tanks to find the way to the "hearts and the minds" of the Vietnamese people. They found it nowhere.[13] Anyone who wishes to know the hearts and minds of the young men and women who built the Ho Chi Minh trail must listen carefully to them: *Tieng Hat At Tieng Bom* (The Sound of a Song Outsoars the Sound of Bombs).

Nguyen Trai's life and works were concrete examples of the process of edification, purification, liberation, and integration with the peasant masses that determined, animated, and, above all, humanized his active life as a military strategist, poet, scholar, diplomat. What distinguished him from all military leaders and statesmen before him was his genuine, constant concern for the well-being of his soldiers. He even extended that concern to the enemy.

By edifying the dignity of the Chinese commanders, he convinced them that his "campaign of the hearts" was sincere and not a ruse to lure them to negotiate for an early withdrawal. His "campaign of the hearts" carried out in correspondence with Wang Tong, the Chinese military commander, would have failed or have been suspect without the skill of his written communication in which he balanced the *Ly* (Reason-Logic) with the *Tinh* (Feeling-Compassion).

Tinh and *Ly* are traditional elements in the Vietnamese way of human conflict resolution. A successful solution is the one which is *Hop Tinh* (conform to Feeling) and *Hop Ly* (conform to Reason). One can see this aspect in many ca dao.

For Nguyen Trai, literature and culture were successful weapons for war and essential instruments for reconciliation and healing—for peace. When peace returned and the independence of Viet Nam restored, Nguyen Trai continued to serve his king and his people with the same dedication and integrity he displayed during war-

time, but with even stronger insistence on humanity and justice. He saw the importance of the contribution by common men and women in rebuilding the country, a work that required the participation of the whole nation, now purified from the horrors of war. But purification, from the Buddhist understanding and teaching, means the realization of the root cause of human suffering: craving for wealth, power, and material gratification.

Trai began to see the arrogance and the corruption among officials of the court he served. In his edict addressed to people of talent, the Cu Hien Chieu, he invited them to come out of the villages to serve government, thus bringing a new vitality to a tired and ineffective bureaucracy. He dared to "speak truth to power." He advised the crown prince:

> Follow every principle that teaches you how to discipline yourself and govern your country. Keep harmonious relations with your neighbors and be cordial to them. Remember to be generous to the people. Do not bestow rewards merely out of personal inclinations. Do not penalize someone out of personal rancor. Do not pursue wealth for a lavish life: keep away from beautiful women to avoid debauchery. Whether it be to promote a talented man, to receive criticism, to develop policy, or merely to pronounce a single word or make a single gesture, keep the (Confucist) rule of the Golden Mean. Follow the classical principles, and you will answer the will of Heaven and satisfy the rituals. To hold in esteem those who possess the virtue of humanity is to be *assured of the consent of the people who bear the throne like the ocean*

which carries the ship but can also overturn it.[14]
(emphasis mine)

The comparison of people as water and the throne as the ship is exceptionally poetical, profoundly Taoist, and quintessentially Vietnamese. As mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese popular word for country, nation, is *Nuoc* or water. For Taoists, the three most powerful forces in nature are woman, child, and water because they are soft in appearance, but potentially strong in essence. Nguyen Trai's advice to the crown prince demonstrated his deep faith in the power of the people, the men and women who were instrumental in the liberation of Viet Nam from the most humiliating experience of Chinese rule.

Trai was, and is, venerated and admired by all segments of the Vietnamese population and is more popular now than ever. In a brilliant essay: "*Nguyen Trai Nguoi Dat Nen Mong Cho Mot Nen Van Hoa Viet Nam*" (Nguyen Trai, the One Who Laid the Foundations for a National Culture), Professor Phan Ngoc of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies lists the following reasons: Nguyen Trai was the first Vietnamese who realized the extreme importance of national culture in the mission of *Giu Nuoc* (defending the country) and *Dung Nuoc* (building the country). Nguyen Trai believed that only with a Vietnamese culture could the nation maintain its independence and its people be happy. He promoted the *Tam Cong* (attack from the heart) as a strategy for winning war and keeping peace through "negotiating while fighting and fighting while negotiating." Nguyen Trai created the first geography book of Viet Nam, the *Dia Du Chi*, showing the whole face of the country, its physical features as well as its historical development. Patriotism moved from an abstraction to a concrete national faith. Nguyen Trai relied on and effectively used history as a conduit for political education. His collection of 250

poems in the *Quoc Am Thi Tap*, was not only a native Vietnamese work, but also a first-class work of world literature. Nguyen Trai's humanism, naturalism, and belief in the possibility of "overcoming violence with righteousness, in displacing tyrannical force with humanity" have become a contribution to the universal aspirations of humankind.[15]

In 1980, the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) celebrated and commemorated the six centuries since the birth of Nguyen Trai. The Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Amadou Matar M'Bow wrote for the occasion:

> The commemoration of the 6th century of Nguyen Trai was part of the efforts of the Organization to incorporate into the universal heritage the best representative of each national culture. Our era is in fact the first in history to consider the totality of the spiritual and the material, literary or artistic of the world as an indivisible heritage that belongs to the whole of humanity. . . . Specialists of Nguyen Trai's writings believe there is no separate choice to make from his work: each part of his precocious encyclopedical mind is found in others: the poet is not isolated from the diplomat, the philosopher from the politician, the moralist from the man of action. His life and his work, his acts and his thoughts, within the context of the 14th century in Viet Nam, evolved and matured together to a common accomplishment.[16]

In a speech at Amherst College on October 26, 1963—one month before his assassination—President John F. Kennedy remarked: "When power leads man to-

ward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." The post-Cold War era remains beset by arrogance of power and corruption manifested in ethnic conflicts, state-sponsored terrorism, and chauvinistic nationalism. Soon, we will enter the second millenium and start the twenty-first century. President Kennedy's belief in the cleansing power of poetry, and the Vietnamese poet-statesman Nguyen Trai's faith in righteousness and humanist culture as weapons against violence and tyranny, can be a source of inspiration for our continuing work toward "Peace on Earth and Goodwill toward Man." ❑



[Nguyen Trai]

Notes

1. Translated by Huynh Sanh Thong. New Haven and London: *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, Yale University Press, 1979, 123.
2. The article: "Hue, My City, Myself" was published in the November 1989 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. It was reprinted in *"From the Field: a collection of Writings from National Geographic,"* an anthology of 82 best articles among 8,000 published in the magazine since 1888.
3. The best translation of the Proclamation is by Truong Buu Lam in: *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention, 1958-1900.* Yale University Southeast Asia studies, Monograph Series, No. II, 1967, 55-62.
4. Con Son, Nguyen Trai's home village is located about 43 miles east of Hanoi. In his memoir; *Bac Ho Viet Di Chuc,* published in Hanoi in 1989, Vu Ky mentioned President Ho Chi Minh's "visit" to Nguyen Trai.
5. Vietnamese see "The Lotus" as a self-portrait of Nguyen Trai. Because of its "purity," the lotus is also a "Buddhist flower."
6. For an account, see *General Van Tien Dung: Our Great Spring Victory*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.
7. Vo Nguyen Giap, *To Arm the Revolutionary Masses, To Build the People's Army*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975, 125. For an understanding of the mobilization efforts mentioned by General Giap, see Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Viet Nam Strategy for Survival*, Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books Publishers, 1972.
8. Giap, 63-5.
9. Stanley Karnow noted in *Viet Nam: A History*, New York: Viking, 1983, 50, that Nguyen Trai "set down the Vietnamese strategy in an essay that shows remarkable similarity to the twentieth-century Communist doctrine of insurgency. Subordinate military action to the political and moral struggle; that is, 'better to conquer hearts than citadels.' "
10. See note 3.

11. See Nguyen Khac Vien, "Water, Rice and Men," *Tradition and Revolution in Viet Nam*, Berkeley, CA & Washington, DC; Indochina Resource Center, 1974.
12. C.A. Moore, ed. *The Status of the Individual in the East and West*, Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1968, 24.
13. Perhaps one lone American detected it: John Balaban, who in 1971-72 traveled the dangerous countryside to tape and translate ca dao and who later published them in his *Ca Dao Vietnam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry*.
14. qtd. in Nguyen Khac Vien, 35.
15. Phan Ngoc. *Van Hoa Viet Nam va cach tiep can moi* (Viet Nam culture and new approach), Hanoi, 1994, 140-153.
16. *EUROPE* (a French literary magazine since 1923), May 1980, 3 (translation mine).