

THE CONCEPT OF “NHÀN” IN LÊ HỮU TRÁC AND ITS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

O CONCEITO DE “NHÀN” EM LÊ HỮU TRÁC E SEU SIGNIFICADO HISTÓRICO

Article received on: 11/3/2025

Article accepted on: 2/2/2026

Nguyen Quoc Viet*

*University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7651-8327>
bsviet2012@gmail.com

Cao Xuan Long*

*University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2773-830X>
caoxuanlong@hcmussh.edu.vn

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

Hải Thượng Lãn Ông – Lê Hữu Trác is recognized not merely as a celebrated physician but also as a major thinker of the 18th century. One of the most notable viewpoints expressing his distinctive philosophy of life is the concept of “nhàn” (leisure/serenity), encompassing notions of “lãn” (laziness/indolence) and “lười” (idleness). Based on an examination of his seminal works, such as *Thượng Kinh Ký Sự* (Records of the Imperial Capital) and *Hải Thượng Y Tông Tâm Lĩnh*, this article clarifies that “nhàn” is not merely a tranquil, reclusive lifestyle, but rather a reflective philosophical choice—to abandon fame and power to preserve moral integrity, to nurture the body (*dưỡng thân*) for the sake of cultivating the mind (*dưỡng tâm*), and to practice medicine as a humanitarian mission. Utilizing a comprehensive, historically specific approach, combined with textual analysis (*phương pháp văn bản học*) and analysis–synthesis, this article contributes to a profound elucidation of a philosophical nucleus within the traditional Vietnamese intellectual heritage. In practical terms, Lê Hữu Trác’s concept of “nhàn” serves as an important reminder for modern individuals to slow down, maintain the balance between body and mind (*thân – tâm*), and return to the core values of character, ethics, and compassion.

Keywords: Nhàn Concept. History of Vietnamese Philosophical Thought. Hải Thượng Lãn Ông’s Philosophy of Being Human (*Đạo làm người*).

Resumo

*Hải Thượng Lãn Ông – Lê Hữu Trác é reconhecido não apenas como um médico célebre, mas também como um importante pensador do século XVIII. Um dos pontos de vista mais notáveis que expressam sua filosofia de vida singular é o conceito de “nhàn” (lazer/serenidade), que engloba as noções de “lãn” (preguiça/indolência) e “lười” (ociosidade). Com base na análise de suas obras seminais, como *Thượng Kinh Ký Sự* (Registros da Capital Imperial) e *Hải Thượng Y Tông Tâm Lĩnh*, este artigo esclarece que “nhàn” não é meramente um estilo de vida tranquilo e recluso, mas sim uma escolha filosófica reflexiva — abandonar a fama e o poder para preservar a integridade moral, nutrir o corpo (*dưỡng thân*) em prol do cultivo da mente (*dưỡng tâm*) e praticar a medicina como uma missão humanitária. Utilizando uma abordagem abrangente e historicamente específica, combinada com análise textual (*phương pháp văn bản học*) e análise-síntese, este artigo contribui para uma profunda elucidação de um núcleo filosófico dentro da herança intelectual tradicional vietnamita. Em termos práticos, o conceito de “nhàn” de Lê Hữu Trác serve como um importante lembrete para os indivíduos modernos de que é preciso desacelerar, manter o equilíbrio entre corpo e mente (*thân – tâm*) e retornar aos valores essenciais de caráter, ética e compaixão.*

Palavras-chave: Conceito de Nhàn. História do Pensamento Filosófico Vietnamita. Filosofia do



Ser Humano de Hải Thượng Lãn Ông (Đạo làm người).

1 INTRODUCTION

In the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought, few figures have been both an outstanding physician and a major thinker like Lê Hữu Trác – Hải Thượng Lãn Ông (1720–1791). Born into a renowned scholarly family in Văn Xá village, Đường Hòa district, Thượng Hồng prefecture, with his paternal grandfather, Lê Hữu Danh, being a *Đệ nhị giáp Tiến sĩ*, and his father, Lê Hữu Mưu, and elder brother, Lê Hữu Kiển, both being *Đệ tam giáp Tiến sĩ*, Lê Hữu Trác could ordinarily have pursued the path of imperial examinations and officialdom. Nevertheless, he chose an alternative path—quiet yet resolute: abandoning fame and power, retiring to seclusion (*ẩn cư*), practicing medicine, and living a life of “nhàn”.

The term “nhàn,” which might initially suggest idleness or retreat, is fundamentally a declaration of life (*tuyên ngôn sống*), embodying a deeply philosophical and humanistic concept of existence. His sobriquet “Hải Thượng Lãn Ông,” particularly the character “Lãn” (懶) meaning “lazy,” is not mere self-mockery but an intellectual symbol, a conscious choice made by a sage. He referred to himself as the “lazy old man” (Lãn Ông), being “lazy regarding fame and power,” “lazy regarding authority,” and “lazy regarding useless calculations,” yet he was exceptionally diligent in scholarship, medical ethics, and saving people. This specific “laziness” reflects the spirit of Daoism (*Đạo gia*)—lazy in meaningless struggle, but diligent in self-cultivation (*tu thân*), nurturing the mind (*đưỡng tâm*), and practicing the Way (*hành đạo*).

This “nhàn” concept developed within the volatile socio-historical context of the 18th century. The political and military turmoil, including the decline of the Lê–Trịnh court, the prolonged Trịnh–Nguyễn civil war, and the rise of the Tây Sơn movement, destabilized the traditional feudal order. Amidst deteriorating social morality and a crisis in personal ethics, retreating into seclusion (*quy ẩn*) became a principled path for survival among scholars.

It was under these challenging circumstances that Lê Hữu Trác formulated his philosophical system, highlighted by the concept of the “philosophy of being human” (*đạo làm người*). He prioritized personal ethics, founded on humanity and righteousness (*nhân nghĩa*), elevating the act of saving people above the pursuit of fame, and critically, emphasizing the preservation of the soul’s nobility. The entire system revolves around the nucleus of “*nhàn*.” This is not a singular concept but a convergence of philosophical, ethical, existential, medical, and cultural values.

To approach this concept scientifically and comprehensively, the methodology employed includes: the principles of objectivity, comprehensiveness, and development; combining historical–logical methods with analysis–synthesis; systematic organization and generalization; and specifically, (iv) textual analysis (*phương pháp văn bản học*) of the original works, *Hải Thượng Y Tông Tâm Lĩnh* and *Thượng Kinh Ký Sự*, to accurately reconstruct the philosophy of “*nhàn*”.

Lê Hữu Trác’s “*nhàn*” philosophy—expressed through his writings, lifestyle, approach to healing, self-cultivation doctrine, and interpersonal conduct—possesses profound historical relevance to the 18th century, and remains a source of moral inspiration for modern individuals struggling with the speed, pressure, and crisis of belief inherent in industrial and consumer society.

2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 The concept of “*Nhàn*”

The character “*Lãn*” (懶), meaning lazy, in the sobriquet “*Hải Thượng Lãn Ông*,” may lead to a superficial misunderstanding based solely on its linguistic meaning. However, in Lê Hữu Trác’s thought, this functions as a profound expression of a philosophical perspective, strongly influenced by the Daoist principle of *wu wei* (non-action/non-forcing). This “*Lãn*” denotes being “lazy” concerning worldly conflicts (*thị phi*), fame and profit (*danh lợi*), and ephemeral, useless matters, while remaining utterly “diligent” (*siêng năng*) in practicing medicine, scholarship, and moral cultivation.

Choosing the appellation “Lãn Ông” constituted a conscious, reflective act (*hành vi có ý thức mang tính phân tích*). It served as a subtle yet firm resistance by an intellectual against turbulent political times, contrasting sharply with those who became entangled in the pursuit of superficial fame and profit. The term “nhàn” (閒), used concurrently, is understood not as separate from “lãn” but as the natural outcome of a life balanced between “laziness and diligence”—lazy in seeking celebrity, diligent in studying the moral Way (*siêng học đạo*).

His commitment to this philosophical stance is clearly expressed in *Thượng Kinh Ký Sự* (Records of the Imperial Capital): “I have forsaken the path of fame and rank, rejoicing in the sentiment of clouds and water... I wish to dedicate all my strength to the worthy task, deeply immersing myself in the work of universal love and benevolence (*bác ái tế độ*) as my heart’s aspiration, so that I shall feel no shame looking up at the sky or down at the earth” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 30). Specifically regarding his role as a physician, he stressed the priority of service: “one must first consider the benefit of others, and should not indulge in seeking pleasure, carrying wine to climb mountains, or sightseeing, lest one is absent from home when someone urgently seeks help for a critical illness, thus betraying their hopes and risking loss of life. Therefore, one must understand one’s duty in this work” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 29).

This demonstrates his resolute affirmation of a “tranquil” (tĩnh) lifestyle amidst turbulent (“động”) times. Here, “nhàn” does not signify evasion of social life, but rather engagement from a higher, more ethical posture—preserving inner freedom and living in harmony with nature and one’s conscience.

In summary, categories such as “lãn,” “lười,” and “vô vi” (wu wei) converge upon the philosophical nucleus of “nhàn” in Lê Hữu Trác’s intellectual system. This is not resignation but a consciously chosen life perspective guided by ethical orientation. Lê Hữu Trác’s “nhàn” is a systematic philosophical framework for renouncing superficial fame and profit to achieve inner serenity (*thanh tịnh nội tâm*), living ethically, harmonizing with nature, and aligning with the cosmic order. It manifests profound wisdom in prioritizing core values: self-cultivation, assisting others, and serving life through medical ethics, human virtue, and compassion.

2.2 Core content of the “Nhàn” concept in Lê Hữu Trác’s thought

First: Rejection of Officialdom and Fame “Nhàn” begins with rejecting a life dedicated to official rank. This moral choice was radical—even counter-traditional—in Confucian feudal society, but Lê Hữu Trác pursued his specific ideal: practicing medicine to save people. He wrote: “If one cannot be a great general, one should be a good teacher” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 30). This ideal, while rooted in the Confucian sequence (*Tu thân – tề gia – trị quốc – bình thiên hạ*), prioritizes *tu thân* (self-cultivation) as the ultimate foundation and goal. “Nhàn” thus represents the ideal existential state for the wise: freedom from social bondage, living aligned with true aspirations and moral principle.

He documented his diligent pursuit of medical knowledge: “I have entered the medical field for twenty years, dedicated my heart to seeking the Way, hoping to pursue it to the end without shame... though my knowledge is shallow, my aspiration is deep; I only know to dedicate all my foolishness to sincere exploration” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 28).

Second: Integration into Holistic Health Theory (Dưỡng Sinh) The “nhàn” concept extends beyond ethics into the theories of nourishing life (*dưỡng sinh*) and treating illness. Health is defined as the harmony between the “body” (*thân*) and “mind” (*tâm*), representing the balance between the human microcosm and the natural macrocosm. He asserted that “The sage thoroughly comprehends the principles of Yin and Yang, maintaining harmony among tendons and vessels... thus, internal and external are harmonized, and evil cannot encroach...” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 2, p. 77), and “Deviating from the principles of nourishing life means one cannot fully enjoy longevity” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 138).

Nhàn facilitates internal balance (*quân bình nội tại*). It serves as a method for psychological regulation, moderating desires, and avoiding deep-seated causes of illness such as anxiety and fear. A stable spirit, achieved through *nhàn*, promotes physical health, which in turn nurtures the soul—a comprehensive cycle of self-cultivation (*dưỡng sinh toàn diện*).

Third: A Professional Principle in Medicine Lê Hữu Trác’s “nhàn” concept functions as a crucial professional principle, particularly in the medical field. He strongly

condemned indulgence and laziness regarding the duty to save human life. His admonition that a physician “must first consider the benefit of others” and avoid self-indulgent pleasures (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 29) demonstrates that “nhàn” is not indifference, but rather the highest form of selective commitment—commitment to the right duties. This contrasts fundamentally with chasing profits and false reputation, a path he fiercely criticized in his works. This philosophy remains broadly applicable in modern medicine, where medical ethics must continually accompany updated knowledge. He emphasized the gravity of the medical profession: “The Way of Medicine is the most noble discipline for preserving life, the source for cultivating the tree of virtue... A wise person must clearly understand that human lives rest in their hands... survival or loss is decided in an instant; how can one not be cautious?” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 28).

Fourth: Commitment to Self-Cultivation (Tu Dưỡng) The “nhàn” concept is inextricably linked to self-cultivation (*tu dưỡng bản thân*)—from existential doctrine to specific actions. He affirmed: “As for me, I heed the teachings of the ancients, maintaining a benevolent heart and fully embodying the virtue of loving life” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 30). He mandated 8 virtues to maintain (humanity, clarity, virtue, wisdom, generosity, sincerity, humility, diligence) and 8 things to avoid (laziness, miserliness, greed, ignorance, deceit, narrow-mindedness, lack of virtue) (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, pp. 11–24). Therefore, “nhàn” is a means to achieve “comprehensive character/integrity” (*nhân cách toàn diện*), not an end in itself.

Fifth: Critique of Contemporary Culture Beyond individual morality, “nhàn” functioned as a profound cultural commentary. In an era dominated by the pursuit of fame, “nhàn” offered a gentle yet deep negation (*phủ định nhẹ nhàng nhưng thâm thúy*). Amidst war and chaos, his actions—secluded healing, writing, and benevolence—constituted a rich declaration of counter-argumentation against societal decline. He advised maintaining a noble soul and pure ethics, affirming: “As for me, I heed the teachings of the ancients, maintaining a benevolent heart and fully embodying the virtue of loving life” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 30).

3 HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “NHÀN” CONCEPT IN HẢI THƯỢNG LÃN ÔNG’S THOUGHT

Hải Thượng Lãn Ông’s “nhàn” concept carries profound socio-historical significance, enriching the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought in the 18th century and holding contemporary relevance.

First: A Moral-Humanitarian Response to Social Chaos Amidst prolonged national strife, a disintegrating court, and fragmented public trust in 18th-century Vietnam, the “nhàn” concept emerged as a moral reflection (*phản tỉnh đạo đức*). It offered an inner, purposeful solution to preserve the ethical core when external social values were collapsing. To live “nhàn” meant living cleanly, soberly, and maintaining character amidst decadence. Lê Hữu Trác’s choice of a “fame-less” life stemmed from his realization that fame could not save people, cure illness, or safeguard conscience. Thus, “nhàn” is a vivid manifestation of individual humanism—protecting human value amidst the dehumanization (*vong thân hóa*) of the era.

Second: Synthesis of Major Intellectual Currents Lê Hữu Trác’s “nhàn” concept is the result of a skillful synthesis of three major intellectual currents—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—interwoven with traditional Vietnamese cultural values.

From national culture, he inherited the ethics of compassion, mutual support, love, and protection.

From Confucianism, he derived the principle of “self-cultivation” (*tu thân*) as the core of the philosophy of being human.

From Daoism (*Lão giáo*), he absorbed the spirit of *wu wei* (non-action/non-forcing), embracing a natural life and avoiding useless struggle.

From Buddhism (*Phật giáo*), he assimilated the spirit of compassion (*từ bi*) and the renunciation of desires, living in mindfulness (*chánh niệm*).

This synthesis ensured that “nhàn” did not become a pessimistic retreat, but rather a positive affirmation of “living rightly,” “living sufficiently,” and “living ethically”. He distinguished himself from contemporaries by being an active “practitioner” (*hành giả*)—curing, writing, and engaging in altruistic service with a tranquil heart, not merely a reclusive intellectual (*trí giả ẩn dật*).

Third: A Legacy in Eastern Medical and Ethical Philosophy The “nhàn” concept is not confined to traditional medicine but also constitutes a moral legacy. It underpins the core pillars of Eastern medical philosophy: “nourishing life” (*duỡng sinh*) and “cultivating the mind” (*duỡng tâm*). In professional ethics, it demands that physicians must be diligently focused on learning and saving lives, rejecting “laziness” in their duties. Lê Hữu Trác provided an ideal model of character for Vietnamese physicians and intellectuals: living simply, moderately, honestly, and righteously. His thought remains applied today in medical ethics, mental therapy, and professional training. His caution written over 200 years ago still holds powerful warning value: “The Way of Medicine is the most noble discipline for preserving life, the source for cultivating the tree of virtue... how can one not be cautious?” (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 28).

4 THE CONCEPT OF “NHÀN” IN HẢI THƯỢNG LÃN ÔNG AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL PARALLELS IN WORLD THOUGHT

The notion of “nhàn” (leisure, serenity) in the thought of Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Lê Hữu Trác represents a synthesis of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist wisdom. For Lê Hữu Trác, nhàn is not idleness but a conscious moral choice—a means of preserving integrity and balance amid social turbulence (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, p. 132). His “laziness” (*lãn*) paradoxically denotes diligence in the pursuit of virtue and learning.

In comparison, Laozi viewed *nhàn* as the natural outcome of *wu wei*—acting without forcing, harmonizing with the Dao: “The Dao does nothing, yet nothing is left undone” (Laozi, 2021, p. 85). Epicurus conceived *ataraxia* as tranquility achieved through moderation (Epicurus, 1994, pp. 33–34), while Aristotle placed happiness in contemplative activity (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a–1178a). Unlike these, Lê Hữu Trác’s *nhàn* emphasizes compassionate action, aligning more with Thoreau’s moral simplicity (Thoreau, 1854, p. 212).

Thus, *nhàn* in Lê Hữu Trác is ethical serenity—a state of harmony grounded not in withdrawal but in humanistic engagement.

5 CONCLUSION

Hải Thượng Lãn Ông’s “nhàn” concept—evident in his sobriquet (*hiệu xưng*), self-narratives, and lived conduct—is not merely a personal trait but reflects a philosophical nucleus within his comprehensive system of existential thought (*hệ thống tư tưởng nhân sinh*). “Nhàn” is not indulgence or evasion; rather, it is a chosen life view, structured by ethical principles and rigorous self-cultivation. Specifically, *nhàn* in Lê Hữu Trác’s philosophy serves as the method for practicing the “philosophy of being human” (*đạo làm người*)—a humanistic ethics characterized by compassion, medical virtue, and the spirit of enlightenment (*tinh thần khai sáng*). This thought was not confined to theory but was vividly embodied through his conscientious, cautious, and altruistic professional life (*đời sống thực hành y nghiệp thanh liêm, cẩn trọng, vị tha*).

In the contemporary era, marked by industrialization, modernization, and international integration, which subject individuals to intense material, psychological, and moral pressures, Lê Hữu Trác’s “nhàn” concept holds particular relevance. It stimulates the necessity of returning to core values: living ethically, preserving character, and harmoniously developing the body, mind, intellect, and virtue (*thân – tâm – trí – đức*). This view converges with the national strategic direction concerning the comprehensive development of the Vietnamese person. The Document of the 13th National Congress of the Party emphasized: “Comprehensive human development and building an advanced culture imbued with national identity is the firm spiritual foundation, the important endogenous strength ensuring sustainable national development” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, Vol. I, p. 123).

Viewed through the lens of Lê Hữu Trác’s “nhàn” concept, it is evident that profound traditional values—such as professional ethics, humanistic spirit, and harmony in life—must be continuously inherited, innovated, and promoted. This represents not only a cultural imperative but also a strategic direction for fostering a humanistic medical field, an enlightened education system, and the holistic development of the Vietnamese people in the new era.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean Ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Cao Xuân Long, & Nguyễn Quốc Việt. (2024). The philosophy of being human in Le Huu Trac's thought. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 22(2), 16475–16481.
- Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam (Communist Party of Vietnam). (2021). *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII – Tập 1* (Documents of the 13th National Congress – Vol. 1). Hà Nội: Nxb. Chính trị quốc gia Sự thật (National Political Publishing House Truth).
- Epicurus. (1994). *The Epicurus Reader* (B. Inwood & L. P. Gerson, Eds.). Hackett.
- Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Lê Hữu Trác. (2005). *Hải Thượng Y tông tâm lĩnh*, Tập I (Tập 1 và tập 2) (Hải Thượng's Essentials of Medicine, Vol. I). Nxb. Y học (Medical Publishing House).
- Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Lê Hữu Trác. (2005). *Hải Thượng Y tông tâm lĩnh*, Tập II (Tập 3 và tập 4) (Hải Thượng's Essentials of Medicine, Vol. II). Nxb. Y học (Medical Publishing House).
- Laozi. (2021). *Dao De Jing* (Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Trans.). Literature Publishing House.
- Lê Hữu Trác. (2008). *Thượng kinh ký sự* [Records of the Imperial Capital]. Literature Publishing House.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1854). *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Ticknor and Fields.

Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Viet, N. Q., & Long, C. X. (2026). THE CONCEPT OF “NHÀN” IN LÊ HỮU TRÁC AND ITS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE. *Veredas Do Direito*, 23, e235114. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v23.5114>