



A Comparative Study of Nguyễn Trãi's *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's *Leisure*

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>The article focuses on clarifying the thematic and artistic values of two representative works of Đường luật poetry in the Nôm script. This is a foreign literary form that was localized in Vietnam, reflecting both cultural interplay and creative transformation between Chinese regulated verse and indigenous Nôm elements. The content of both poems celebrates the beauty of nature and is associated with the image of the reclusive Confucian scholar. However, Nguyễn Trãi inclines toward an engaged spirit, patriotism, and the aspiration for peace, whereas Nguyễn Bình Khiêm advocates a life of composure, leisure, and withdrawal from officialdom. Artistically, both poets combine Sino-Vietnamese and vernacular language, making use of familiar literary allusions while infusing them with originality and a distinct national character. Nguyễn Trãi is remarkable for incorporating six-syllable lines into the seven-syllable regulated verse, while Nguyễn Bình Khiêm breaks the conventional structure of “introduction–elaboration–discussion–conclusion,” thereby expressing a freer poetic style. These similarities and differences stem from their respective historical–social contexts as well as the individuality of each poet’s creativity. The study thus reaffirms the distinctive value of Đường luật poetry in Nôm script and contributes to enhancing students’ competence in reading and interpreting medieval Vietnamese literature.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Reading comprehension, Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation, Leisure, Comparative theory, Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Binh Khiem</p>
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1. Introduction

Tang-style poetry in Nôm script represents one of the pinnacles of medieval Vietnamese literature. Originating as a borrowed form from China, it was creatively indigenized, embodying a unique process of cultural and literary interaction between Chinese and Vietnamese medieval traditions. Among the most influential poets associated with this genre are Nguyen Trai and Nguyen Binh Khiem, whose works exemplify the artistic and intellectual value of Tang-style poetry in Nôm and secure its place within the Vietnamese literary canon.

In the current Vietnamese high school literature curriculum, *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) by Nguyen Trai is included in the *Cánh Diều* and *Kết nối tri thức với cuộc sống* textbooks (2018 curriculum), while Nguyen Binh Khiem's *Leisure* (*Nhàn*) appears in the 2006 curriculum. Despite curricular updates, however,

Tang-style poetry in Nôm continues to present significant challenges for both teachers and students. This difficulty arises from the genre's inherent features: the use of archaic or rarely used vocabulary, classical allusions, and intertextual references, all of which require a profound understanding of medieval history, culture, and literature.

Against this backdrop, the present study undertakes a comparative analysis of Nguyễn Trãi's *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm's *Leisure*. The aim is to provide a comprehensive account of the thematic and artistic values of the two works, highlighting both their similarities and differences in the poets' views on life and society. In doing so, the study contributes not only to reaffirming the distinctive qualities of Tang-style poetry in Nôm but also to enhancing students' interpretive competence in engaging with Vietnamese medieval literature.

2. Content

2.1. Comparative Reading of Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation (No. 43) by Nguyễn Trãi and Leisure by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm

According to La Nham Thin (2001) in *Thơ Nôm Đường luật* (“Tang-Style Poetry in Nôm”), the defining characteristic of this genre lies in “the harmonious combination of vernacular Nôm elements and Tang-style poetics. These two components interact, permeate one another, yet retain a relative autonomy that allows us to distinguish them as separate generic features” [3; 9]. Within this framework, the Nôm elements represent the national, popular, and vernacular—expressed through themes, subjects, language, imagery, structure, and rhythm—while the Tang elements signify the borrowed and refined qualities of Chinese classical poetry: symbolic and conventional imagery, historical and literary allusions, strict prosody, and carefully selected poetic inspiration.

In this study, our interpretation of Nguyen Trai’s *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) and Nguyen Binh Khiem’s *Leisure* is guided by the requirements of the 2018 Vietnamese Language and Literature Curriculum, which emphasizes three domains of reading comprehension: (i) content, (ii) form, and (iii) connections/extension. Accordingly, we examine the two poems in terms of theme, subject matter, dominant inspiration, concepts of humanity and aesthetics; in terms of form, we focus on language, imagery, structure, and rhythm; and finally, we draw connections to highlight the similarities and differences between the two poets within the early phase of Tang-style poetry in Nôm (15th–17th centuries).

2.1.1. Reading Nguyen Trai’s Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation (No. 43) and Nguyen Binh Khiem’s Leisure from the Perspective of Content

First and foremost, Nôm poetry in the Tang-regulated form (*Đường luật*) represents one of the pinnacles of medieval Vietnamese literature. Accordingly, it embodies the general aesthetic principles characteristic of premodern Vietnamese literary traditions. However, Vietnamese poets of Tang-regulated verse persistently sought renewal and innovation, reinterpreting the inherited Chinese model in a distinctly national spirit—marked by tendencies toward democratization and shaped by the turbulent socio-historical conditions of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. Consequently, the aesthetic outlook expressed in Nôm Tang-regulated poetry underwent significant shifts that merit close attention.

A central feature of this aesthetic conception is the exaltation of beauty, which serves as the dominant inspiration for poets. Within this genre, poets directed their

attention primarily toward beauty in nature, in human life, and in art itself. Both *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) and *Nhàn* converge upon the theme of nature. Yet, nature in these poems is not rendered through the grandiose or sublime imagery often encountered in classical Chinese Tang-regulated verse. Rather, it appears as rustic, unpretentious, and deeply imbued with Vietnamese cultural sensibilities.

For Nguyen Trai—whose sensibility was once described by Xuan Dieu as revealing that “the love of nature is a measure of the soul”—the imagery of ordinary, rural life becomes a hallmark of his poetic vision. Everyday elements such as water caltrops, spinach, millet, sweet potatoes, or peanuts recur throughout his verse, reflecting an intimate bond with the rhythms of common life. His *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) presents a vivid summer tableau, animated by light, color, form, and sound, framed within a concrete space and time. Through this depiction, the poem conveys to readers a profound love for, and pride in, the Vietnamese people and their homeland.

In *Bảo kính cảnh giới* (no. 43), Nguyen Trai depicts the vibrancy of summer through images rich in light, color, and sound:

*Cooling off in the long summer day,
Sophora branches spreading in luxuriant shade.
Pomegranate blossoms still bursting red,
Lotus fragrance has already waned from the pond.
Bustling voices at the fishermen’s market,
Cicadas resounding at sunset pavilion
Would that the lute of Shun could sound once more,
So prosperity might bless all regions.*

(*Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation*
(No. 43 – Nguyen Trai)

In contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s *Nhàn* (Leisure) evokes the serene simplicity of rustic life:

*“A hoe, a fishing rod, a bamboo basket,
Leisurely, I care not for others’ pleasures.
I, foolish, seek out quiet retreats,
While the wise throng to noisy crowds
Bamboo shoots in spring, bean sprouts in winter,
Bathing in lotus ponds in spring, in village ponds in summer.
Wine in the shade of trees, I freely drink,
Watching worldly wealth as fleeting as dreams.”*

(*Leisure* – Nguyen Binh Khiem)

The sophora blossoms, red pomegranates, lotus ponds, and bamboo shoots—all simple elements of everyday rural life—when transposed into Nôm regulated verse by Nguyen Trai and Nguyen Binh Khiem, are transformed into emblems of beauty. They embody the beauty of life, of the human spirit, and of the harmony between humanity and nature, thereby creating landscapes

at once plain and refined. Beauty in these poems nurtures a deeper love for life, for nature, and for the homeland.

It should be noted that the theme of nature in Nôm regulated verse is closely tied to the image of the reclusive Confucian scholar. Classical Confucian literati often harbored aspirations of serving the world, but when thwarted in their political careers, they withdrew from the treacherous world of officialdom to seek refuge in nature. Nature thus became an ideal environment for “preserving wisdom and protecting the self” (*minh triết bảo thân*), a poetic dwelling for their existence. In public service, they adhered to Confucian ideals; in retreat, they embraced Daoist thought, choosing a way of life attuned to and respectful of nature. Both Nguyen Trãi and Nguyen Binh Khiem exemplify this archetype of the reclusive Confucian scholar. Their choice to withdraw from the noisy bustle of court and return to the rustic countryside enabled them to compose highly distinctive Nôm poems about nature.

Reading Nguyen Trai’s verses, we discover not only a loyal servant of the dynasty—“his gratitude to ruler and kin beyond measure”—but also a soul deeply devoted to cherishing and protecting the beauty of nature. Summer in his poetry is brimming with vitality; nature is not static but vividly alive. Pomegranate blossoms burst forth like radiant fireworks brightening the veranda, while lotus flowers exude a fragrance that permeates the summer air. Nguyen Trai does not merely observe with his eyes; he feels nature with his heart and soul, listening attentively to the rustic sounds of the countryside—the raucous cicadas, emblematic of the rural summer:

“Cicadas resounding at sunset pavilion.”

(Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation
(No. 43 – Nguyen Trai)

The resonant, bustling sound of cicadas, reminiscent of a musical instrument, evokes a vivid picture of a summer afternoon brimming with vitality. This atmosphere renders Nguyen Trai’s mood unusually cheerful, as the rhythms of nature awaken in him profound emotions and his most sincere, heartfelt reflections. What emerges is a deep love of nature and an abundant love of life.

In the case of Nguyen Binh Khiem, unlike many eminent thinkers and poets of the East who often used nature to express one dimension of their thought or emotions, he approached life with a desire to explore the laws of heaven, earth, and the natural world through his own serene and composed outlook. Trạng Trình described himself as “foolish” so that he might live in harmony with nature. He delighted in the gentleness and tranquility of the natural world, continually aspiring to merge with heaven and earth, with the sacred spirit of rivers and mountains, in

order to preserve the integrity of his virtuous soul. This principle underpinned his profound tolerance and boundless humanism. Nguyen Binh Khiem’s philosophy of life was grounded in a vision of simplicity, close to that of ordinary people. He sought to withdraw from a corrupt and hollow society, returning instead to nature and to a modest, rustic way of life.

The poet Nguyen Binh Khiem discovered life’s value and meaning in humble yet flavorful meals of the countryside, in the freedom to gaze upon the wind and moon, and in the independence to decline the scrutiny, envy, and contention of those entangled in the intrigues of officialdom. In the master of the Tuyết Giang school, the concept of “nhàn” (leisure or reclusion) is fully realized in both body and spirit. He recognized the impermanence of existence, perceiving that the body and material possessions are neither the essence of the self nor its lasting possession, for ultimately nothing remains in the human realm. Thus, his thought embodies a foundational philosophy whose validity resonates with posterity even centuries later. By extolling the pleasures of leisure and the purity of rural life, Nguyen Binh Khiem conveyed to readers a profound impression of the serene and uncorrupted existence of reclusive Confucian scholars:

“In autumn, eat bamboo shoots; in winter, bean sprouts. In spring, bathe in the lotus pond; in summer, bathe in the village stream.” (Leisure)

Nature across the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—constitutes the ideal living environment for the reclusive scholar. With only two lines, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm gracefully praised the generosity of nature toward humankind. People live in accordance with the provisions of each season, consuming what nature offers in its proper time. Particularly in the line “In spring, bathe in the lotus pond; in summer, bathe in the village stream,” Nguyễn Bình Khiêm sketched an intimate, harmonious bond between human beings and nature: a life of tranquility and serenity, almost absolute, in which the poet coexists with nature alone, untouched by any external intrusion.

Thus, the reclusive life of the medieval Confucian scholars Nguyễn Trãi and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm reflects a simple, rustic mode of existence—self-sufficient in cultivation, planting, and drawing water from wells. Though materially frugal, even austere, this life was nonetheless rich and abundant in spiritual fulfillment. Nature not only nourished human beings day after day but also provided a poetic refuge, a sanctuary for cultivating the ideal character and soul. It served simultaneously as confidant, companion, kin, and benevolent neighbor.

2.1.2. Textual Interpretation of *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) by Nguyen Trai and *Leisure* (Nhan) by Nguyen Binh Khiem from the Perspective of Form

The imagery in *Nom* Tang-style regulated verse is at once realistic, simple, and vernacular, while simultaneously retaining the conventional symbolism characteristic of the Tang poetic form. Images in *Nom* Tang verse are rendered through ordinary, everyday scenes—such as the sweltering summer day depicted in Nguyen Trai's *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43)—or the rustic, unadorned portrayal of daily labor in Nguyen Binh Khiem's *Leisure*, where the poet evokes the life of an “old farmer acquainted with the fields”:

*“With a hoe, a mattock, and a fishing rod,
I leisurely wander, unconcerned with worldly pleasures.”*

From the perspective of Tang-style conventions, poetic imagery often carries symbolic and conventional meanings, recurring in formulaic descriptions across premodern literature. Particularly prominent are representations of the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—which served as a vast reservoir of poetic motifs in medieval verse. In *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), summer nature is depicted as intensely vibrant and fragrant, with the lotus flower emerging as a central image. Indeed, the lotus has long symbolized the beauty of Vietnamese villages during summer. In Nguyen Trai's poem, the lotus is evoked at the height of its fragrance: *“The red lotus pond has already released its perfume.”*

As for language, Tang-style *Nom* poetry is primarily written in the *Nom* script and employs many archaisms and Sino-Vietnamese terms. Each word, depending on context, carries subtle semantic nuances, requiring interpretation within the integrity of the artistic whole. In *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), numerous archaic expressions appear, such as “*thuc*” (appearance, form) in *“The pomegranate still bursts forth in varied hues,”* or “*tien*” (from Sino-Vietnamese, meaning surplus, excessive) in *“The red lotus pond has already released its perfume.”* Likewise, “*dang doi*” (shrill, resounding) in *“The cicadas resound at sunset,”* or Sino-Vietnamese terms such as “*ngu phu*” (fisherman) and “*tich duong*” (setting sun). These linguistic features establish the temporal setting of the poem—the late afternoon, as the sun is about to set. Particularly notable is the poet's deliberate use of a series of vigorous verbs (“*piling up*,” “*stretching*,” “*bursting*,” “*overflowing*”), which suggest an unstoppable vitality erupting from within, overflowing in waves of sound, movement, and color. Thus, Nguyen Trai's summer landscape emerges not only visually dynamic but also acoustically resonant, pulsating with life.

Alongside this stratum of archaic expressions, there exists an abundance of vernacular, everyday Vietnamese vocabulary, producing a style at once precise, vivid, and expressive. The most evocative, “precious” words are often native Vietnamese rather than Sino-Vietnamese—for example, “*piling up*” (*dun dun*), “*bursting*” (*phun*), or “*rustling*” (*lao xao*) in Nguyen Trai's poem, or the repeated “*lao xao*” in Nguyen Binh Khiem's *Leisure*. This linguistic tendency—gradually reducing reliance on Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in favor of vernacular Vietnamese—illustrates the process of “Vietnamization” of Tang-style verse, marking its departure from Chinese models toward a distinctively national poetic identity.

In addition to Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, both poets also employ classical allusions drawn from Chinese literature. If Nguyen Trai draws upon such allusions to express ideals of peace and good governance, Nguyen Binh Khiem adapts them to articulate a philosophy of reclusion and moral withdrawal.

In *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), Nguyen Trai writes:

*“If only I had King Yu's zither to play but a single note,
Then the people across the land would be prosperous and content.”*

The allusion to King Yu's zither originates in Chinese mythology concerning the sage-kings Yao and Shun, emblematic of ideal dynasties where the people lived in peace and happiness. King Shun was said to have composed the *Southern Wind* song: *“When the southern wind blows gently, it enriches the livelihood of my people.”* By invoking this symbol, Nguyen Trai expresses his aspiration for an instrument with which to bring prosperity and peace to the people. Such a motif recurs throughout his works, as in *“King Yao and King Shun, their people likewise; such is what I long for”* (*Tu than* 4), or *“My only prayer: to behold an age of peace”* (*Tu than* 10). Through this creative adaptation of a familiar Chinese allusion, Nguyen Trai reorients it toward a humanist aesthetic principle: beauty and artistry in poetry must serve the people, fostering their livelihood and well-being.

Similarly, Nguyen Binh Khiem's *Leisure* (Nhan) contains the familiar motif of the “dream under the sophora tree,” widely used in medieval poetry. He writes:

*“With wine beneath the tree, I drink in ease,
Seeing that wealth and glory are but a dream.”*

This image derives from the story of Chunyu Fen, who fell asleep drunk beneath a sophora tree and dreamt of living in the Kingdom of Huaian, attaining high office and great wealth, only to awaken and realize it was all an

illusion—beneath the tree was nothing but an anthill. The allegory thus conveys the vanity of worldly success. Yet, Nguyen Binh Khiem *Vietnamizes* the allusion, expanding its meaning beyond the rejection of wealth and honors. For him, it affirms the value of living in harmony with nature, embracing a life of leisure, simplicity, and rustic joy, as earlier verses of the poem suggest: “*In autumn, I eat bamboo shoots; in winter, bean sprouts. / In spring, I bathe in the lotus pond; in summer, in the village stream.*” The poem thus articulates a new aesthetic and philosophical outlook: *Leisure (Nhan)* is not mere idleness, but a way of life that renounces fame and fortune, preserves moral integrity, and avoids the corrupt world of politics.

Another formal characteristic of medieval poetry in general, and *Nom* Tang verse in particular, lies in its conciseness and suggestiveness, owing to restrictions of length, prosodic rules, and rhyme. Each word is highly condensed, bearing layers of implicit meaning. To interpret such poetry requires reading the poem as an integrated whole, uncovering the deepest semantic levels encoded in its diction. Consider the lines from Nguyen Binh Khiem’s *Leisure*:

“*Foolish, I seek the place of quiet seclusion;
Wise, they go to the bustling, noisy court.*”

Here, the paired expressions “*place of seclusion*” and “*bustling court*” serve as *yanzi* (key words) of the poem. If the former denotes a realm of tranquility, where the soul finds harmony with nature, the latter represents the noisy, competitive, and corrupt world of officialdom. Nguyen Binh Khiem’s distinction between “foolishness” and “wisdom” is in fact ironic and subversive: by calling himself “foolish,” he affirms a deliberate choice of retreat, while subtly satirizing those who seek worldly power as “wise.” The effect is at once humorous, profound, and imbued with moral critique.

In terms of structure and rhythm, both *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation (Bao kinh canh gioi)* and *Leisure (Nhan)* demonstrate innovations when compared with the Chinese Tang regulated verse (*Tang lu shi*). This is evident in the appearance of six-syllable lines interwoven within the seven-syllable regulated form, as well as in the use of the 3/4 caesura (odd-even division), which creates distinct nuances and expressive effects within the verse.

Nguyen Trai was the first poet to deliberately employ numerous six-syllable lines and to successfully integrate them into the Tang regulated form. In *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), a six-syllable line appears at the conclusion: “*Dan giao du khap doi phuong*” (“The people are prosperous everywhere”). The brevity of the six-syllable line conveys a strong compression of the poet’s emotions. The meaning of the

poem thus extends beyond the joy of perceiving a vibrant summer landscape, resounding with sound and color, to encompass a broader wish for universal prosperity and well-being across all regions. With this innovation, Tang regulated verse in Vietnamese evolved into a creative hybrid form—seven-syllable lines interlaced with six-syllable lines—that resonated with the modes of thought, speech, and sensibility of the Vietnamese people. Nguyen Trai’s introduction of the six-syllable line not only highlights his creativity in developing a distinct poetic voice but also affirms the broader process of nationalizing a borrowed poetic form. The phenomenon of interspersed six-syllable lines, initiated by Nguyen Trai, continued in later works such as *Hong Duc Quoc am thi tap*, *Bach Van Quoc ngu thi tap*, and even the *Nom* poetry of Trinh Can, establishing a stylistic marker of the period in *Nom* Tang-style verse.

If *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) leaves its mark through the incorporation of the six-syllable line, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s *Leisure (Nhan)* distinguishes itself by breaking away from the conventional four-part structure of Tang regulated verse—*de* (opening), *thuc* (development), *luan* (argument), and *ket* (conclusion)—as found in the standard *thất ngôn bát cú* (seven-character eight-line form). Traditionally, the first two lines (*de*) introduce the theme, with the initial line serving as the *pha de* (theme-breaking) and the second as the *thua de* (theme-supplementing). The next two lines (*thuc*) develop the idea further, followed by two *luan* lines that generalize and expand upon it, and finally two *ket* lines that conclude the poem. In *Leisure*, however, Nguyen Binh Khiem breaks this convention: instead of generalizing or expanding upon the theme, the *luan* couplet (lines 5–6) depicts the rustic pleasures of a farmer’s life, marked by seasonal simplicity, naturalness, and a quiet dignity: “*In autumn, I eat bamboo shoots; in winter, bean sprouts. / In spring, I bathe in the lotus pond; in summer, in the village stream.*”

Moreover, both poems demonstrate innovation in rhythmic segmentation when compared with Tang regulated verse, which typically employs 4/3 or 2/2/3 caesuras. In *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), Nguyen Trai divides the lines according to a 3/4 pattern, as seen in:

Thach luu hien / con phun thuc do
(By the pomegranate eaves / flames of red still burst forth)
Hong lien tri / da tien mui huong
(From the red lotus pond / fragrance has already drifted away)

This segmentation shifts the rhythmic emphasis to the latter halves—“*con phun thuc do*” (“still bursting forth in red”) and “*da tien mui huong*” (“already sending away

fragrance”)—thereby intensifying the sense of fullness, fragrance, and vitality in the natural scene.

The closing line, “*Dan giau du khap doi phuong*” (“The people are prosperous everywhere”), is particularly noteworthy. Its compressed six syllables embody the concentrated emotional force of the entire poem. The culmination of Nguyen Trai’s poetic vision lies not in the natural imagery itself but in human life—specifically, the welfare of the people. His wish is not merely for personal joy but for the prosperity and happiness of all, “everywhere.” To fully capture this nuance, the line should be read with a 3/3 rhythm, which reveals the underlying emotional cadence of the poet’s thought.

It is also significant that Nguyen Trai often drew upon Vietnamese proverbs as a unique reservoir of poetic material, incorporating their rhythms into his six-syllable lines. Many Vietnamese proverbs are naturally structured in six words, and Nguyen Trai adapted their cadence into his *Nom* Tang-style poetry. Examples of this stylistic borrowing can be found beyond *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43), such as:

“*Coi re ben, doi chang dong*” (*The roots are firm, the mountain unshaken*) – *Tung*

“*Nhat nguyet soi, doi chon hien*” (*The sun and moon shine, appearing in many places*) – *Tu than* (Poem 34)

From *Quoc am thi tap* onward, Vietnamese *Nom* regulated verse began to take a different trajectory. While still continuing the artistic traditions initiated by Nguyen Trai, the genre evolved in new directions. Two tendencies stand out: the increasing prominence of satirical and critical poetry that mocked social corruption and lamented historical circumstances; and the dynamic, varied, and sometimes radical use of antithetical parallelism (*doi*), which produced striking artistic contrasts characteristic of the age. These tendencies, particularly evident in satirical verse, were further developed by Nguyen Binh Khiem and later reached their apex in the works of Tran Te Xuong and Nguyen Khuyen.

Nguyen Binh Khiem himself was among the rare “pure men of letters” to be ennobled with the rank of *Trinh Quoc Cong* during his lifetime. However, after submitting a memorial to the king calling for the execution of eighteen corrupt officials—an appeal that was rejected—he resolutely resigned from office and retired to his *Bach Van Am* hermitage. There, he lived in seclusion, in the manner of a Daoist recluse, refusing to share the same “boat” with flatterers and sycophants. Rejecting the entanglements of officialdom—the noisy “world of dust” (*hong tran*), with its clamorous officials—he chose instead a life of *nhan* (leisure), as expressed in *Leisure*:

“*Looking upon wealth and glory as but a dream.*”

By renouncing worldly honors, he attained a life of profound ease. The rhetorical opposition of “foolish” (*dai*) versus “wise” (*khon*), “a place of quiet seclusion” versus “the bustling court,” together with the contrasting pronouns “*ta*” (I) and “*nguai*” (others), highlight the difference in lifestyles. For Nguyen Binh Khiem, the countryside—the “place of quiet seclusion”—is the true ideal of life, where bamboo shoots and bean sprouts are authentic sustenance, and where harmony with nature (spring bathing in the lotus pond, summer bathing in the village stream) constitutes the ultimate truth. Wealth and glory, by contrast, are but a fleeting *dream*.

2.2. Interpreting Similarities and Differences through the Close Reading of *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) by Nguyen Trai and *Leisure* by Nguyen Binh Khiem

Through the textual analysis of *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) by Nguyen Trai and *Leisure* by Nguyen Binh Khiem, both similarities and differences can be discerned.

First, both works are exemplary *Nom* Tang-style poems, characterized by the fusion and interweaving of *Nom* elements with Tang poetic conventions, creating a distinctive and unique aesthetic for Tang-style *Nom* poetry. This is evident in their continued use of motifs from Tang poetry and traditional Chinese artistic perspectives, which, however, were elevated by the creative lens of each poet into the pinnacle of verbal artistry. In terms of form, structure, rhythm, and tonal regulations (level and oblique tones), while both poems still adhere to Tang poetics, Vietnamese poets began to innovate—either by varying line length or by disrupting conventional structural patterns. Specifically, Nguyen Trai pioneered the seven-character lines interspersed with six-character lines, while Nguyen Binh Khiem broke away from the familiar four-part structure (*de—thuc—luan—ket*) of the regulated verse form.

Secondly, the two poems were composed at different historical moments, which is reflected in the varying frequency of Sino-Vietnamese and pure Vietnamese lexical usage. Although both belong to the early period (15th–17th centuries), *Nhan* contains a greater proportion of vernacular Vietnamese vocabulary than *Bao kinh canh gioi* (No. 43). This reflects a developmental trend in *Nom* Tang-style poetry, whereby *Nom* elements gradually gained predominance.

The use of classical Chinese allusions (*dien co*) also reveals differences between the two poets. In Nguyen Trai’s poetry, references to virtuous Chinese rulers and loyal ministers convey deep emotional intensity and fervent

longing; his language thus brims with passion and heartfelt urgency. In contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem also draws on ancient allusions, yet his purpose lies in conveying a philosophical outlook on human life. His tone remains calm, measured, and deliberate, with his words resembling the steady carvings of a seasoned artisan. This distinction highlights divergent depths of perception and different foci of concern regarding worldly affairs.

Each poet, with his own fate and artistic disposition, chose and manipulated *Nom* and Tang elements differently. For Nguyen Binh Khiem, *nhàn* (leisure, detachment) became a way of life and a guiding philosophy. His sense of leisure differs from Nguyen Trai's: while both reflect on human existence, Nguyen Binh Khiem's detachment rests upon a systematic cosmological worldview. For Nguyen Trai, however, withdrawal into leisure and serenity was a reluctant choice, a last resort. Thus, even when he sought tranquility, his heart remained burdened with cares and worries. In vivid natural landscapes such as *Canh ngày hè* (*A Summer Day's Scene*), one still discerns underlying sorrow—the lament of a Confucian scholar torn between service and retirement, burdened by the fate of his country.

These similarities and differences stem from broader social and historical contexts, from the absorption of Chinese literary and philosophical traditions, from vernacular folk culture, and from each poet's personal circumstances and creative temperament.

Although Nguyen Trai and Nguyen Binh Khiem both lived in turbulent times, their historical positions differed. The 15th century, Nguyen Trai's era, was marked by profound upheavals: the Hồ usurpation of the Trần dynasty, the Ming invasion, the Lam Sơn uprising, and the founding of a centralized Le dynasty under Le Thai To. As a meritorious official, Nguyen Trai played a crucial role in nation-building. Yet, when stability was established, court politics turned treacherous, factional purges proliferated, and Nguyen Trai himself was imprisoned. Though later released, he was no longer trusted, and corrupt officials dominated the court. Disheartened, he retired from office but continued to wrestle with dilemmas of service and withdrawal. His verses, such as those lamenting his “old loyal heart full of care,” reflect this reluctant resignation.

At this time, Vietnamese literature had yet to achieve notable accomplishments; Sino-Vietnamese remained dominant in written literature, with Buddhist texts constituting much of its heritage. Consequently, Nguyen Trai's poetry contains a higher density of classical allusions and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary than that of Nguyen Binh Khiem.

By contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491–1585) lived through nearly the entirety of the 16th century, reaching the remarkable age of 95. He witnessed dynastic collapse and political chaos: in just four years (1503–1507), six Le monarchs ascended and fell; the Le dynasty disintegrated, the Mac seized power, the Le Restoration emerged, and incessant conflicts between Le-Trinh and Mac factions plunged the country into turmoil. Amid such disorder, Nguyen Binh Khiem entered public service late, at the age of 45, under the Mac regime. Yet the more he served, the more he became disillusioned with corruption and intrigue. Eventually, he retired to the Bach Van hermitage, embracing rustic life, and recorded the tumult of his times in poetry.

In his era, money increasingly permeated social relations, distorting values and fueling opportunism and materialism. Nguyen Binh Khiem's outlook was critical and satirical, yet delivered with calm objectivity, as though engaged in a long dialogue with society. Furthermore, being born a century after Nguyen Trai, he inherited the legacy of *Quoc am thi tap* and other classical Vietnamese works. With the vernacular language now more developed and coupled with his creative temperament, Nguyen Binh Khiem produced a corpus of poems rich in philosophical depth and artistic resonance.

2. Conclusion

Sino-Vietnamese *Nom*-script regulated verse represents a major achievement of Vietnamese medieval literature, enriching the national written tradition while affirming the creative talent of Vietnamese poets. This form of poetry simultaneously inherits the refined aesthetic of Chinese regulated verse and introduces innovative elements that bring it closer to the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. The use of the *Nom* script marked a significant step in the process of indigenizing regulated verse, while also expanding its accessibility to broader audiences in a context where Classical Chinese still held the dominant position.

A comparative study of Nguyen Trai's *Precious Mirror for Moral Self-Cultivation* (No. 43) and Nguyen Binh Khiem's *Leisure* reveals both convergences and divergences. In terms of content, both poems praise the simple, intimate beauty of nature while reflecting the philosophical outlook of reclusive intellectuals. Nguyen Trai evokes the vibrant, life-filled scenery of summer, embedding within it his lofty aspirations and his deep sense of responsibility toward the nation. By contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem chooses the way of “leisure,” immersing himself in nature, shunning worldly fame and fortune, and seeking tranquility and wisdom.

Formally, both works exemplify the *Nom* regulated verse tradition, skillfully combining the plain, vernacular qualities of *Nom* diction with the rigor and dignity of regulated verse. Their poetic language is at once close to the people, rich in national color, yet also imbued with Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, conventional imagery, and classical allusions. Notably, Nguyen Trai experimented with alternating seven-syllable and six-syllable lines, while Nguyen Binh Khiem disrupted traditional structures and pioneered a satirical current within medieval literature. Together, these innovations demonstrate the vitality and diversity of *Nom* regulated verse.

The divergence between the two poets can be traced to their distinct historical circumstances and personal choices. Living in the fifteenth century, Nguyen Trai witnessed the nation's recovery of independence, yet he was later slandered by court officials and forced into reluctant seclusion, all the while haunted by his enduring sense of duty to his country. In contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem, writing in the sixteenth century, observed the decline and succession of dynasties and thus deliberately embraced a life of reclusion, detachment from worldly affairs, and the pursuit of equanimity.

Through close reading and comparison, it becomes clear that *Nom* regulated verse simultaneously carries forward classical traditions and manifests uniquely Vietnamese innovations. It reflects not only the imprint of each era and the individuality of its authors but also the powerful process of indigenization that characterizes medieval Vietnamese literature.

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