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LÊ HỮU TRÁC'S ETHICAL THOUGHT IN MEDICINE AND IT'S HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT

Lê Hữu Trác Li Youzhuo (1720–1791), also referred to by his sobriquet Hải Thượng Lãn Ông, was a native of Văn Xá village, Đường Hào district, Thượng Hồng prefecture. Lê Hữu Trác, born into a distinguished academic lineage—his grandfather Lê Hữu Danh possessed a second-rank doctoral title (Tiến sĩ đệ nhị giáp), while his father Lê Hữu Mưu and brother Lê Hữu Kiến attained third-rank doctoral degrees (Tiến sĩ đệ tam giáp) was celebrated not only as a profound thinker but also as an eminent physician of remarkable expertise and exemplary medical ethics. His contributions to medical ethics form a fundamental aspect of Vietnam's traditional medicine, creating a normative framework that is both academic and profoundly humanistic. In the current landscape, where medical ethics encounter various challenges including heightened commercialisation, professional pressures, and an expanding gap between physicians and patients Lê Hữu Trác's philosophy of “taking medical ethics as the root” (“lấy y đức làm gốc”) remains increasingly pertinent. Inheriting and advancing his ideas is not solely a gesture of historical homage but a pragmatic approach to establishing a humanistic medical system—one that prioritises ethical principles and centres on the individual in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Medical Ethics; Lê Hữu Trác; Moral Cultivation; Vietnamese Philosophical Thought.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lê Hữu Trác (1720–1791) is acknowledged as a significant intellectual and cultural figure in Vietnam, as well as a notable physician renowned for his outstanding medical proficiency and great ethical principles. His contributions to medical ethics have imparted lasting "golden rules" to the Vietnamese medical tradition, regulating the interactions between physicians, patients, their families, and colleagues. Lê Hữu Trác viewed medicine not alone as the practice of physical treatment, but as a moral and humanistic endeavor—an art of compassion that seamlessly integrated professional expertise with Confucian ethical values.

A notable aspect of his ethical philosophy is the specification of moral principles and his clear admonitions on professional impropriety. These discoveries led to an initial manifestation of "applied ethics," functioning as a behavioural guide for physicians. His ethical ideas were influenced by the historical and social upheavals of eighteenth-century Vietnam during the Later Lê dynasty—a time characterised by instability that prompted critical enquiries into morality, medical ethics, and the ethical underpinnings of human interactions. Lê Hữu Trác's philosophical perspectives arose as a reaction to humanity's pursuit of a more virtuous existence.

Lê Hữu Trác, through his intelligence, moral purity, and austere lifestyle characterised by simplicity and harmony with nature, amalgamated Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism with the humanistic qualities inherent in Vietnamese cultural traditions. This amalgamation produced a comprehensive, significant, and methodical ethical framework about the conduct norms expected of a physician in diverse relational circumstances.

This study follows the concepts of objectivity, comprehensiveness, historical specificity, and evolution in its methodology. It utilises a blend of historical-logical, analytical-synthetic, systematic, and generalising methodologies, with a specific focus on textual analysis to precisely represent the content and structure of Lê Hữu Trác's ethical philosophy in medicine.

2. THE CONTENT OF LÊ HỮU TRÁC'S MEDICAL ETHICS THOUGHT

2.1. *The Concept and Role of Medical Ethics*

2.1.1. *The Concept of Medical Ethics*

Lê Hữu Trác perceived medical ethics not solely as a set of regulations to adhere to, but as an inherent aspect of moral existence. He perceives medical

ethics as a manifestation of the physician's intrinsic virtue, a practical moral engagement profoundly connected to the therapeutic mission. It amalgamates compassion, responsibility, sincerity, honesty, and selflessness, embodying a humanistic perspective wherein medicine is inextricably linked to ethical obligation.

This conceptualisation transcends the procedural or technical aspects. Lê Hữu Trác perceived ethics as intrinsic to the physician's identity, a notion that contemporary normative ethics increasingly underscores the necessity for professional identity and morality to align.

2.1.2. *The Role of Medical Ethics in Professional and Social Contexts*

For Lê Hữu Trác, medical ethics constituted not merely an adjunct to medical skill, but rather its moral essence—a guiding principle that directs the practitioner in all facets of practice. It regulates the physician's relationship with the profession, necessitating that practitioners conduct themselves with equity, caution, and compassion. A virtuous physician, in his opinion, does not pursue personal advantage, but rather serves with honesty and responsibility.

At the social level, medical ethics fosters trust between physicians and patients while maintaining the public legitimacy of the healthcare system. He thought that ethical medicine is crucial not only for individual care but also for the establishment of a just and humane society.

2.1.3. *Ethical Rebuttal to Technocratic Views*

Lê Hữu Trác provided a critical rebuttal to a dominant notion of his era, asserting that medicine was essentially a "human technique" (nhân thuật) and hence devoid of ethical significance. In his *Thượng kinh ký sự*, he stated: "The concept known as 'the medical way' (y đạo) is exclusively documented in external histories; even the Five Emperors [in ancient texts] merely noted it in conjunction with agriculture..." Medicine is hence perceived merely as a technological craft. Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, volume 1, page 23. He condemned the marginalisation of medicine within Confucian learning and elaborated "Such a perspective resembles forsaking the direct path..." Should only a chosen few endeavours be considered valuable, while others are disregarded? (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 23–24). These excerpts illustrate Lê Hữu Trác's assertion that medicine should be acknowledged as a moral discipline equivalent to classical Confucian scholarship. By affirming its ethical base, he transcends medicine's

technical role, transforming it into a moral vocation.

2.1.4. The Dual Pillars of the Medical Profession

Lê Hữu Trác asserted that medical technique and medical ethics are the two important cornerstones of medical practice. In the absence of virtue, skill is devoid of substance; in the absence of skill, virtue is ineffective. In his perspective, ethics serves as the criterion for evaluating a physician's value, encompassing both clinical efficacy and moral integrity.

This perspective corresponds with current initiatives in global bioethics aimed at re-establishing moral integrity as a cornerstone of medical education and professional advancement. His perspective, although grounded in eighteenth-century Vietnam, anticipates numerous contemporary difficulties in medical ethics, including as professionalism, patient-centered treatment, and opposition to commercialisation.

2.2. The Ethical Conduct of Physicians toward Patients, Their Families, and Colleagues

Lê Hữu Trác's ethical philosophy posits that a physician's moral behaviour should be rooted in profound respect for life and unwavering dedication to altruism. He prioritised the ethical aspect of medicine over all material ambitions, perceiving the physician's position not as a quest for profit or status but as a sacred calling of altruistic service. He stated: "The medical profession is a humanistic endeavour, committed to the preservation of human life... Even in the absence of tangible rewards, one accrues latent virtue" (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, vol. 1, p. 30).

Lê Hữu Trác posits that a physician must transcend personal identity during the healing process. This self-effacement, driven by empathy and accountability, constitutes the cornerstone of medical virtue. He condemned individuals who capitalised on the afflictions of the ill for personal benefit, urging a moral renaissance within the medical field:

"To save others, one must relinquish self; all else resembles ephemeral clouds" (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, vol. 1, p. 10).

Central to his perspective is the physician's unwavering reverence for the sanctity of human life. He dedicated his profession to researching and formulating therapies for both medical maladies and psychological as well as spiritual anguish. For him, genuine healing amalgamated ethical discernment with therapeutic expertise. He asserted: "In the pursuit of medicine, one must comprehensively understand the tenets of Confucian philosophy... clarity, fluency, and perceptiveness" (Lê Hữu Trác,

2008, vol. 1, p. 29).

Consequently, ethical practice necessitates a comprehensive perspective of the individual, recognising the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and moral health. He expressed sorrow at the moral decline of society, noting how gluttony, sensuous excess, and emotional instability undermined human life. For him, the practice of medicine was synonymous with the practice of a virtuous life—anchored in moderation, inner tranquilly, and moral equilibrium.

He cautioned that unchecked impulses, excessive consumption, and emotional extremes all disturb the body's balance. Consequently, moral cultivation—achieved via simplicity, detachment, and mindfulness—served as a method of preventive medicine. He stated: "To foster mental vitality, one must regulate the emotions... When the mind is serene, illness cannot penetrate" (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 417–418).

This ethical consciousness also encompassed the physician's behaviour towards all patients. He championed an egalitarian ethic of caring, asserting that no differentiation should be made between the affluent and the impoverished, the noble and the humble. He advocated for heightened compassion towards the impoverished, perceiving them as the most vulnerable and hence the most worthy of consideration "The affluent have caretakers, but the indigent lack support... we should provide not only free medical care but also financial assistance" (Lê Hữu Trác, 2008, vol. 1, p. 30).

A recurring motif in his writings is the repudiation of favouritism and profit-oriented practices. He warned against taking extravagant gifts, as they may jeopardise the physician's ethics and erode public trust. Treatment, he asserted, must be determined by necessity rather than social standing. In this context, medicine transforms into a moral discipline a domain for fostering compassion, justice, and human dignity.

In gender-sensitive circumstances, he insisted on meticulous propriety. Physicians, particularly male practitioners, were required to maintain an adequate distance, provide transparency, and preserve the dignity of female patients. Ethical vigilance in these situations constituted both a personal obligation and a protection for the integrity of the profession.

Ethical practice necessitates transparent communication. Medical practitioners must articulate the seriousness and outlook of the condition to families with clarity, so averting false hope or misconceptions. In critical situations, transparency preserves both confidence and

integrity.

Lê Hữu Trác promoted humility and camaraderie among colleagues. The physician must honour seniors, assist juniors, and cultivate a culture of learning rather than competition. He regarded collegial respect as essential to the collective progress of medicine.

Critically, he condemned malpractice rooted in greed and deceit. **He detailed eight moral transgressions each undermining the profession's very foundations:**

1. Laziness – shirking effort in difficult cases.
2. Stinginess – giving inferior treatment to the poor.
3. Greed – concealing a fatal prognosis for continued profit.
4. Deception – exaggerating illness to inflate fees.
5. Cruelty – refusing care to protect reputation.
6. Pettiness – allowing personal bias to affect treatment.
7. Lack of compassion – scorning the poor and helpless.
8. Ignorance – practicing without adequate knowledge.

He considered ignorance the most perilous, as it resulted in both personal failure and societal suffering. Consequently, the ethical physician must dedicate themselves to continuous education, introspection, and steadfast moral integrity. Only then is one deserving of the designation “practitioner of nhân thuật” – the art of compassion.

2.3. Methods of Practicing Medical Ethics

Lê Hữu Trác not only defined medical virtue but also suggested specific ways for its cultivation and maintenance. His ethical framework is based on three interconnected principles:

Initially, self-improvement via ethical discipline. The physician must cultivate compassion, humility, and detachment from material desires. These are not merely personal values but essential professional mandates. In his *Y lý thâm nhân*, he articulates a philosophical desire: “I wish the world free of illness and pain, / The old doctor leisurely with poetry and wine” (Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Lê Hữu Trác. 2005, v.1, p. 46).

This depiction of the physician as a sage-healer embodies his conception of ethical medicine grounded in simplicity and tranquilly.

The quest for clinical perfection. Ethical care necessitates proficiency. He stated, “Despite the inherent kindness of the human heart, ambiguous medical theory continues to inflict harm on individuals.”

Lê Hữu Trác posits that a compassionate disposition must be complemented with acute diagnostic acumen, theoretical precision, and relentless scholarly pursuit.

Third, humanistic care. The physician must regard all patients as moral equals, perceiving each life as holy. The patient is not solely a locus of illness, but a fellow human being worthy of compassion and support. He asserted: “If a physician observes a patient in distress and exhibits no concern, that individual is devoid of compassion.” Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Lê Hữu Trác. 2005, vol. 1, p. 30

In conclusion, for Lê Hữu Trác, medical ethics constitutes a practical philosophy manifested in daily conduct, nurtured through personal development, and directed towards the well-being of others. This moral commitment enables medicine to achieve its paramount objective to safeguard life, alleviate pain, and represent the highest ideals of humanity.

3. CONCLUSION

Lê Hữu Trác's ethical philosophy possesses substantial theoretical and practical importance, aiding in the establishment of a holistic professional ethical framework in Vietnamese traditional medicine. His concepts transcend the individual ethical framework of a practitioner, evolving into a foundational value system for the entire medical profession, profoundly anchored in Eastern philosophy and significantly impacting the historical evolution of Vietnamese medicine. This is mostly because to his skill in amalgamating medical practice with traditional ethical principles particularly the Confucian tenet of kindness (nhân). Lê Hữu Trác views medicine as not just a technical discipline, but a “art of humanity” (nhân thuật) a distinguished profession where moral principles and professionalism are inextricably linked.

This illustrates that even within the confines of feudal society, Vietnamese medicine had achieved significant advancements in professionalisation and systematisation, transcending folk traditions to become an organised academic and ethical field. Significantly, Lê Hữu Trác transcended the realm of abstract ethical theory. He converted moral principles into explicit behavioural norms, distinctly delineating right from wrong, and directly associating unethical behaviour with measurable repercussions for human existence. In doing so, he foresaw a paradigm of applied ethics, much before the phrase gained use in modern philosophy.

In contemporary healthcare, which encounters escalating challenges such as the commodification of medicine, the deterioration of the doctor-patient

relationship, ethical quandaries in treatment distribution, and mounting bureaucratic and financial pressures, Lê Hữu Trác's ethical perspective provides significant insight. His adage, "medical ethics is the root," serves as a poignant reminder that scientific and technical progress must never supplant the paramount importance of human conscience. In numerous instances nowadays, where machines and protocols prevail in clinical practice, it is the physician's demeanour, empathy, and ethical awareness that dictate whether patients perceive authentic treatment. Lê Hữu Trác's ethical framework is significantly pertinent in a context where patients require not only medical care but also emotional and spiritual restoration.

Moreover, the professional conduct norms established by Lê Hữu Trác – such as abstaining from avarice, upholding impartiality, eschewing unethical profit, and prioritising compassion can provide a core framework for contemporary medical ethics codes. Remarkably, the flaws he condemned in the 18th century negligence, dishonesty, profit-driven motives, class prejudice, and irresponsibility remain prevalent in various manifestations today. Consequently, revisiting his ideas is not solely a historical pursuit, but an essential measure for ethical

rejuvenation within the health professionals.

His methodology for fostering medical ethics anchored in three foundational principles individual moral growth, perpetual education, and compassionate practice provides a comprehensive ethical framework for contemporary physicians to emulate. In a time when society requires both technical skill and ethical integrity, Lê Hữu Trác's principle that a physician must be "proficient in technique and bright in ethics" (thuần thuật nhi minh đức) continues to serve as a lasting standard for assessing professional quality.

Lê Hữu Trác's perspective on medical ethics constitutes an invaluable intellectual and cultural heritage, pertinent not only to traditional medicine but also to the broader professional ethical dialogue in Vietnam. With a visionary humanistic perspective, well-defined ethical principles, and an elevated understanding of the physician's job, he established the groundwork for an exemplary model of the medical practitioner one that remains inspirational today. Examining, inheriting, and advancing his legacy is both a tribute to history and a pragmatic approach to fostering a more human-centered medicine in the 21st century.

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