FROM "MUU PHAT TAM CONG" TO THE ART OF WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS IN TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

TỪ "MƯU PHẠT TÂM CÔNG" ĐẾN NGHỆ THUẬT THU PHỤC NHÂN TÂM TRONG HOẠT ĐỘNG CHÍNH TRỊ TRUYỀN THỐNG VIỆT NAM

Tran Nguyen Si Nguyen*

People's Police University, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: singuyendhcs@gmail.com

(Received: August 03, 2026; Revised: October 07, 2026; Accepted: October 23, 2026)

DOI: 10.31130/ud-jst.2026.24(10).537E

Abstract - In Vietnamese political history, closeness to the people, the search for worthy men, and the handling of adversaries constitute three dimensions of the art of winning hearts and minds, distinctively crystallised in Nguyen Trai's maxim *muu phat tam cong*. Drawing on dialectical and historical materialism, combined with textual analysis and historical-logical methods, this article examines the foundations and three dimensions of this art: winning the people's hearts to consolidate political power, winning the scholars' hearts to attract talented individuals, and winning adversaries' hearts to reduce confrontation. The study identifies the values and historical limitations of this legacy, clarifies the national roots of the principle that "the people are the root", and suggests methodological implications for strengthening the "people's hearts-and-minds posture", attracting and employing talent, defending the Fatherland, and conducting foreign relations in the present period.

Key words - Traditional art of political activity; *muu phat tam cong*; winning hearts and minds; people as the root; Nguyen Trai

Tóm tắt - Trong lịch sử chính trị Việt Nam, thân dân, cầu hiền và xử lý đối phương là ba phương diện của nghệ thuật thu phục nhân tâm, kết tinh trong mệnh đề "mưu phạt tâm công" của Nguyễn Trãi. Dựa trên phương pháp luận duy vật biện chứng, duy vật lịch sử, kết hợp phân tích văn bản, lịch sử và lôgíc, bài viết làm rõ cơ sở hình thành và ba nội dung của nghệ thuật này: thu phục dân tâm để củng cố quyền lực, thu phục sĩ tâm để quy tụ hiền tài, thu phục địch tâm để hạn chế đối đầu. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra giá trị, giới hạn lịch sử của di sản ấy, góp phần làm rõ cội nguồn quan điểm "dân là gốc" và gợi mở phương pháp xây dựng "thế trận lòng dân", trọng dụng nhân tài, bảo vệ Tổ quốc và đối ngoại hiện nay.

Từ khóa - Nghệ thuật hoạt động chính trị truyền thống; mưu phạt tâm công; thu phục nhân tâm; dân là gốc; Nguyễn Trãi

1. Introduction

Building the country hand in hand with defending it is the law of existence and development of the Vietnamese nation. Constantly confronted by invading powers of far superior military strength, in circumstances of "opposing strength with weakness" and "meeting the many with the few" [1, p. 79], our forebears distilled a distinctive art of political activity. The depth of that art lay not in troop strength or fortifications, but in an early recognition that the root of power is the human heart: to defend the country is first of all to hold the hearts of the people, and the highest victory over an enemy is the victory won within his heart. In the *Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Ngo*, in the passage on the Ming armies of Vuong Thong and Ma Anh driven into an impasse, Nguyen Trai writes: "The enemy, at the end of his wits and his strength, waited for death with bound hands; we attacked by stratagem and struck at hearts, and won without fighting" [1, p. 80].

According to the *Vietnam Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, *muu phat tam cong* means "attacking by stratagem and striking at people's hearts" – a military idea of Nguyen Trai set out in the *Binh Ngo sach* (Strategy for Pacifying the Ngo) and successfully applied in the Lam Son uprising. Founded on "great righteousness and supreme humanity", this idea combined military offensives with negotiation and the subversion of enemy morale, acting upon the thinking, spirit and psychology of the adversary so that "without fighting, the enemy must submit" [2, p. 687]. Although it belongs to the domain of military art, its core is the use of moral persuasion and conviction, in place of coercion, to win people's hearts. The same logic is present in the way our forebears conducted themselves towards the common people and the scholars. The article therefore uses *tam cong* (striking at hearts) in a broad sense, as the researcher's generalisation, to identify an art of winning hearts and minds that existed before Nguyen Trai and continued to be inherited after him; *muu phat tam cong* is the distinctive crystallisation of that art rather than its point of departure.

This intellectual legacy has attracted scholarly attention at home and abroad from several directions; in terms of their direct relevance to the topic, the studies can be grouped into four clusters. *The first cluster studies Nguyen Trai's strategy of striking at hearts*: Nguyen Luong Bich analyses *muu phat tam cong* chiefly within the framework of military art and the subversion of enemy morale [3]; Pham Van Dong portrays Nguyen Trai as a national hero accomplished in both letters and arms [4]; Vo Xuan Dan studies Nguyen Trai's thought, including his ideas of humanity and justice and of bringing peace to the people, in the course of national history [5]. In these works, *tam cong* is understood mainly as a military and enemy-subversion strategy particular to Nguyen Trai. *The second cluster examines the ideas of the people as the root and of*

closeness to the people: the general histories of thought by Nguyen Dang Thuc [6], Nguyen Tai Thu [7], Nguyen Hung Hau [8] and Doan Chinh [9] present Vietnamese political thought along the succession of dynasties and their eminent figures, including the idea of closeness to the people; Tran Dinh Huou examines the influence of Confucianism on the nation's cultural and political tradition [10]; Tran Van Giau establishes patriotism as the red thread running through the nation's traditional system of spiritual values [11]. *The third cluster concerns the search for worthy men and the employment of talent*: Hoang Xuan Han reconstructs Quang Trung's repeated overtures to the Master of La Son [12]; A. B. Woodside compares Vietnamese institutions of government, including the examination system and the recruitment of officials, with the Chinese model [13]; O. W. Wolters advances the thesis of the authority of "men of prowess", who gathered followers through personal prestige, in traditional Southeast Asian politics [14]. *The fourth cluster deals with foreign relations and the handling of adversaries*: Hoang Xuan Han reconstructs the diplomatic and political career of Ly Thuong Kiet [15]; B. Womack analyses Sino-Vietnamese relations in history as a relationship of asymmetry in the balance of power [16].

Taken as a whole, these works supply a documentary basis and many important interpretations; yet the three themes of closeness to the people, the search for worthy men and the handling of adversaries are still commonly examined as relatively separate subjects. Within the sources available to the author, no study has yet brought the three dimensions of the people's hearts, the scholars' hearts and the adversary's heart into a unified explanatory framework. Addressing this gap, the article argues that in Vietnamese political history, closeness to the people, the search for worthy men and the handling of adversaries can be identified as three interrelated dimensions of the art of winning hearts and minds, corresponding to winning the people's hearts, winning the scholars' hearts and winning the adversary's heart.

In this article, the concept of "traditional Vietnamese political activity" is derived from the general content of politics and political activity and is then made concrete in accordance with the historical conditions of Vietnam. V. I. Lenin wrote: "Politics is participation in the affairs of the state, the direction of the state, the determination of the forms, tasks and content of the activity of the state" [17, p. 404]. From the standpoint of power relations, the Institute of Political Science states: "Politics is the relationship among classes, states, nations and social forces in winning, holding and exercising state power" [18, p. 8]. On the basis of these conceptions, political activity can be identified in two basic aspects: activity connected with establishing, organising and exercising state power; and activity that handles the relations among political actors, social forces and states in connection with political power and interests. Placed in the conditions of monarchical Vietnam, the article uses the concept of "*traditional Vietnamese political activity" to denote the activities of political actors in establishing and exercising power, organising and administering the state, rallying social forces, defending the country and handling relations with external powers*. The scope of the study is limited to the period of the independent monarchy, from the tenth century until the French colonial invasion of 1858.

The article proceeds from the methodological standpoint of dialectical and historical materialism, with the following specific research methods: the textual method, used to examine and collate the original wording of ancient sources (imperial edicts, exhortations, proclamations, diplomatic correspondence and dynastic annals) so as to establish primary evidence for each argument; the historical and logical method, used to retrace the movement of the idea of winning hearts and minds across the dynasties and to draw out the theoretical points that run through it; analysis and synthesis, used to expound the content of each dimension and then generalise it into a common principle; and comparison, used to set the Vietnamese tradition against ancient Chinese political thought in order to bring out its distinctive features.

2. The scientific foundations and content of the art of winning hearts and minds in traditional Vietnamese political activity

2.1. The scientific foundations on which the art of winning hearts and minds was formed

The first foundation is historical and practical, namely the social existence that gave birth to this art. Wet-rice civilisation obliged the Viet to join forces in controlling floods, building dykes and combating drought, which produced a tightly knit village community and the distinctive linkage of household - village - country; the fate of each household was fused with the fate of the community according to the maxim that "when the country is lost, the home is ruined". At the same time, occupying a perilous geopolitical position and constantly coveted by expansionist powers, our nation had to wage some twenty large-scale wars of national defence and hundreds of uprisings, with nearly twelve centuries of resistance to foreign invasion [19]. In such an unequal balance of forces, seeking to defeat invading armies many times its size, the nation could not rely on the court's military forces alone but had to rely on the strength of the entire people in arms. It was this condition of survival that made the hearts of the people the central question of every political calculation, and the art of winning hearts and minds emerged as a historical necessity, not as an optional preference of those who held power.

The second is the national tradition of communal solidarity, patriotism, humanity and justice, and commitment to a just cause. Before and alongside the influence of imported doctrines, the Viet possessed a profound communal consciousness crystallised in the founding myth of a people born of one womb and in the folk ethic of loving others as one loves oneself. From this communal consciousness, patriotism was bound up with love for others and devotion to righteousness, values that Tran Van Giau counts among the nation's traditional spiritual values [11]. In that tradition, humanity and justice

did not stop at personal virtue but were tied to the just cause of national defence: the struggle for independence and for the peace of the people was a just struggle, and a just cause was the condition for gathering human hearts. Buddhism under the Ly – Tran, with its spirit of compassion, tolerance and engagement with the world, permeated the governing style of enlightened monarchs: Tran Thai Tong recorded the counsel of the National Preceptor that one who is a ruler of men "must take the will of all under Heaven as his own will, and the heart of all under Heaven as his own heart" [20, vol. II, p. 29]. A polity that takes the heart of all under Heaven as its own heart had, by its very nature, already placed the human heart at the centre of power before it received any bookish formula from outside.

The third is the selective assimilation and transformation of suitable elements of Eastern thought. In the classical treasury of military science, striking at the human heart was regarded as the highest level of the art of war. In the chapter "Attack by Stratagem", Sunzi holds that "the best thing of all is to take the enemy's country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good", since "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" [21, p. 17]. The *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, in Pei Songzhi's commentary quoting the *Xiangyang ji* (Records of Xiangyang), records Ma Su's counsel to Zhuge Liang: "attacking hearts is the superior course and attacking walled cities the inferior; waging war by psychological means is superior, waging it by troops inferior" [22, p. 2024]. These propositions were received in Vietnam not as ready-made models but were selected in accordance with the nation's need to defend the country. Nguyen Trai uses the term *tam cong* to describe how the Ming troops were brought to submission, while placing "bringing peace to the people" at the head of the cause of humanity and justice [1, pp. 77, 80]; in his thought, striking at the hearts of enemy troops and holding the hearts of the people thus belong to one and the same line of conduct rooted in humanity and justice. This connection is the ground on which the article extends *tam cong* into an analytical concept, as stated in the Introduction.

Alongside military science lies the philosophical depth of the two ways of establishing political order defined by the Confucian classics. In the chapter "Gongsun Chou I", Mencius writes: "He who subdues others by force does not subdue their hearts – their strength is simply insufficient; he who subdues others by virtue wins their inner delight and their sincere submission" [23, p. 65]. The *Analects* (chapter "On Governance") likewise records Confucius contrasting two effects of rule: govern by decrees and punishments and the people will merely avoid offence without any sense of shame; govern by virtue and ritual propriety and they will feel shame and correct themselves [24]. Submission produced by coercion lasts only as long as the coercion is present; submission produced by moral persuasion sustains itself. In the familiar categories of Eastern philosophy, the heart is the root and force the branch, the heart is substance and force its function: force can hold a person's body, only the heart can hold a person's heart. In the chapter "Regulations of a King", Xunzi quotes an old text: "The ruler is the boat, the common people are the water; the water bears the boat, and the water overturns it" [25, p. 255]. On that image, the hearts of the people are not an instrument in the hands of the ruler but the very medium in which power exists: a boat cannot move outside the water, and power cannot stand outside the human heart. The conception of the legitimacy of power is likewise traced to a single source: "Heaven sees as my people see, Heaven hears as my people hear", the proposition from the "Great Declaration" chapter of the *Book of Documents* cited by Mencius in the chapter "Wan Zhang I" [23, p. 94], which shows that in Confucian political thinking the Mandate of Heaven has, in the end, no voice other than the voice of the people. Absorbing these rational kernels and testing them in the blood of dozens of wars of national defence, our forebears applied the spirit of "attacking hearts" to governing and defending the country, expressing it in three dimensions bound to the ruler's three fundamental relationships: with the common people, with the scholars and with the adversary.

2.2. The content of the art of winning hearts and minds in traditional Vietnamese political activity

2.2.1. Winning the people's hearts: the root of power and the strength of national defence

The first dimension, which is also the foundation of the other two, is the winning of the people's hearts. In the Vietnamese tradition, the will of the people was regarded as a ground for founding decisions of state rather than remaining an admonition on the page. Ly Cong Uan moved the capital to Thang Long in the spirit of "obeying the mandate of Heaven above and following the will of the people below" [20, vol. I, p. 229], placing the people's will on a par with Heaven's mandate among the grounds of a momentous political decision. Ly Thuong Kiet opened his famous proclamation with the principle that "Heaven gives birth to the people; a worthy ruler brings them concord. The way of ruling the people lies in nourishing them" [20, vol. I, p. 320]. These two texts show that to hold power is conceived first of all as the duty of "nourishing the people", and the righteousness of the ruler is measured by the livelihood of the hundred families.

Under the Tran, winning the people's hearts was raised into a conscious national policy of defence. Facing the Mongol-Yuan threat, the court convened the Dien Hong assembly, asking the village elders for their counsel on fighting the invaders and thereby turning the will to resist into the consensus of the whole people [26]. Tran Quoc Tuan summed up the causes of victory in the formula "ruler and subjects of one heart, brothers in concord, the whole country lending its strength" [26, p. 79]; and when Tran Anh Tong asked him for a long-term policy, he left these heartfelt words: "Ease the strength of the people so as to strike deep roots and firm foundations – that is the supreme strategy for keeping the country" [26, p. 79]. To ease the strength of the people is not simply to grant tax relief; it is a whole way of thinking about the durability of power: the strength of the people is the repository of economic and defensive potential, so that to nurture it is to cultivate the root from which the country's power grows. The image of deep roots and firm foundations says exactly this: power

does not stand upon the people as a citadel stands upon the ground, but lives by the people as a tree lives by its roots.

Nguyen Trai raised the traditional idea of the people as root to a new height. At the opening of the *Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Ngo* he set out the ultimate end of all political action: "The essence of humanity and justice lies in bringing peace to the people" [1, p. 77]. From the failure of the Ho he drew a searching negative lesson: the Ho had high walls and deep moats, numerous troops and strong generals, yet the hearts of the people were estranged and a vexatious administration made the people resentful, so that the dynasty's fortunes collapsed swiftly before invasion [1, p. 77]. That reflection crystallised in a line of his poem *Barring the Sea*: "Only when the boat capsizes does one believe that the people are as water" [1, pp. 280–281]. The word "believe" carries a stern warning: the truth that the people are water is usually acknowledged by those in power only when it is too late. The lesson of the Ho also shows the need to distinguish the people's attachment to a particular dynasty from the enduring existence of the nation. A dynasty that loses the hearts of the people collapses, but the people's power of resistance does not vanish with it; it finds support in a new leading force that knows how to gather human hearts, as the Lam Son insurgents later did. The current of thought on the people as root was carried on by Nguyen Binh Khiem, Le Quy Don and Ngo Thi Nham [7], [27, p. 45]; in Ngo Thi Nham, even the will of Heaven is referred back to the hearts of the people: "when the hearts of the people are revived, the will of Heaven can be turned" [28, vol. I, p. 574]. In the traditional conception, then, the hearts of the people are the measure of the durability of a government: with them the weak becomes strong and the few become many; without them, high walls and deep moats are useless.

The idea of closeness to the people was not only voiced as a moral principle but also entered into organisation and policy. The practice of *ngu binh u nong*, literally "lodging troops in agriculture", was a policy that combined military affairs with agriculture, under which soldiers were assigned to take part in labour and production in their localities for set periods [29, p. 22]. After each period of warfare the court's first act was commonly the remission of taxes in order to restore the strength of the people. The persuasive power of a ruler also lay in political sincerity. In the "Proclamation to the Officers and Men", Tran Quoc Tuan bared his heart before the army: "I often forget to eat at mealtimes and strike my pillow at midnight; my entrails feel cut through and my tears flow without ceasing; I rage only that I cannot yet tear the enemy's flesh, flay his skin, eat his liver and drink his blood" [20, vol. II, p. 391]; that very sincerity moved tens of thousands of hearts, turning the commander's anguish into the will of an entire army. Nguyen Trai, for his part, even at the heart of the court held to the thought that "the emoluments I eat are all owed to those who plough and plant" [1, p. 445], hoping to govern so that "in the remotest hamlet and the quietest village not a single voice of grief or resentment is heard" [1, p. 19]. In this conception the hearts of the people are not an abstract mass of sentiment; they are present concretely in the bowl of rice and the shirt on the back, in the sounds of grievance or of rejoicing in the remotest hamlet.

The strength of the people's hearts revealed itself most fully in the country's hardest hours. The Lam Son uprising arose in remote mountains and forests with no more than a few thousand troops and provisions insufficient for a few weeks, yet by rallying hearts around a great cause it grew without cease: "Raising staves as banners, the people of the four quarters gathered; mixing wine to drink together, the soldiers were of one heart as father and son" [1, p. 79]. That army "of one heart as father and son" is an early image of people's war: its forces came from the people, its provisions were supplied by the people, its intelligence was made clear by the people. What the ancients called "the timing of Heaven, the advantage of terrain, the concord of men" is decided, in the last analysis, by concord among men; and such concord does not arise of itself – it is the fruit of a persistent art that takes bringing peace to the people as its root, trusting the people as its habit and nourishing the people as its long-term policy.

2.2.2. Winning the scholars' hearts: gathering the nation's vital energy

The second dimension is the winning of the hearts of the scholars, the men of talent and virtue, the stratum that serves as the load-bearing pillar between the ruler and the common people. To win their hearts is to command the body of people who organise, educate and lead society; the art of employing men is therefore an inseparable part of the art of winning hearts and minds. The core principle here is to employ men according to their talent, without regard to their origins. The Tran took care to choose men with a talent for command to lead their troops [26]; Tran Quoc Tuan enjoined that one must "select and employ good generals" and must "build an 'army of fathers and sons' before it can be put to use" [20, vol. II, p. 397]. Thus, alongside the princes and marquises, men of commoner origin and even household servants such as Pham Ngu Lao, Yet Kieu and Da Tuong became able generals. Phan Huy Chu later observed that the Tran employed men fairly, choosing them by talent alone and without being bound by their origins [30]. Employing men without regard to their origins was thus also a way of broadening the dynasty's support in the hearts of its subjects.

The understanding of the role of talent was raised to the level of doctrine in the fifteenth century, when Than Nhan Trung, at the command of Le Thanh Tong, composed the stele inscription honouring the doctoral laureates: "Men of talent and virtue are the vital energy of the nation. When that energy flourishes, the country is strong and prosperous; when it declines, the country is weak and lowly" [31]. By likening talent to "vital energy", the fundamental force that sustains the life of a body, the proposition places the rise and fall of the nation in direct relation to its men of talent. It also implies a conception of the scholars' responsibility for the survival of the country: as the "vital energy" of the nation, scholars are not only to be valued and employed but must also shoulder responsibility for its destiny. To gather men of talent is therefore to gather the intellect, integrity and sense of

responsibility of the scholar class. And such men cannot be gathered by the compulsion of authority; they can be won only by sincerity of heart. The search for worthy men is, in substance, *tam cong* in the broad sense, directed at the scholars. The exemplary case is Quang Trung – Nguyen Hue's courtship of the Master of La Son, Nguyen Thiep: three times he sent envoys with letters of humble invitation, three times he was refused, and still the king did not relent, his letters growing ever more earnest in entreating the Master to come forth for the sake of the realm and its living people, so that the king might have a teacher to revere and the age a man to rely upon [12]. The edict on seeking worthy men (drafted by Ngo Thi Nham in the king's name), promulgated after his accession, acknowledged the shortcomings of the court's early administration and humbled the sovereign before the scholars of the realm: "A single pillar cannot support a great house; the counsel of one man cannot found an age of good order... in a hamlet of ten households there must surely be someone loyal and faithful" [28, vol. II, p. 629].

This practice of seeking worthy men had a wide radiating effect: to win over a scholar of such standing as Nguyen Thiep was to help breach the rampart of misgiving in the hearts of the literati of the North, still deeply attached to the legitimacy of the Le. The successive collaboration of eminent scholars such as Ngo Thi Nham, Phan Huy Ich and Tran Van Ky with the Tay Son shows the practical efficacy of winning hearts through sincerity. The hearts of the scholars are thus the crucial intermediate link: through them the virtue of the ruler reaches the common people; lose them and the ruler stands isolated in the midst of his own country.

Selection was not the end of it: our forebears deliberately created symbols that would nourish the spirit of the scholar class over the long term. Le Thanh Tong had steles erected at the Temple of Literature bearing the names of the doctoral laureates, for a purpose the inscriptions themselves state plainly: so that scholars, beholding them, might be stirred to admiration, cultivate their reputation and integrity, and strive to assist the sovereign [31]; the stone stele became the nation's pledge of honour to its scholars for all time. Conversely, the ruler had to know how to blame himself before blaming others: in his third letter of invitation to Nguyen Thiep, Quang Trung frankly admitted that the early administration was in many respects rigid and vexatious, then took the fault upon himself for not yet knowing how to seek worthy men to assist him [12]. Such humility on the part of a sovereign towards a scholar in no way diminished his authority; on the contrary, it was an effective means of breaching the rampart of misgiving. Later, having come out to serve the Tay Son, Nguyen Thiep headed the Sung Chinh Academy, devoting himself to translating books and to reviving the Nom script and national letters [12]: the sincerity of the search for talent was repaid by the very vital energy it had gathered.

2.2.3. Winning the adversary's heart: "without giving battle, the foe submits"

The third dimension directs the method of striking at hearts at the adversary himself, in war as in diplomacy. In 1075, when attacking the Song's logistical bases in order to "strike first and control the enemy", Ly Thuong Kiet issued the *Proclamation on the Campaign against the Song*, declaring that the army came only to remove the officials who had devised the "green-sprout" and "labour-service" measures that impoverished the hundred families, and that its purpose was "to rescue the multitude from drowning" [20, vol. I, p. 320] – to such effect that in many places the Song population brought oxen and wine to feast our troops [15]. After the victory at Nhu Nguyet, with the advantage in his hands, he took the initiative in sending envoys to negotiate peace, so that the realm was preserved without further loss of troops or bloodshed [15], opening a way for the Song army to withdraw with honour and for relations to be restored early. Throughout the three resistance wars against the Mongol-Yuan, the Tran fought with tenacity while continuing to receive envoys with due ritual and to write in a deferential tone without submitting; Phan Huy Chu remarked that in receiving the Yuan envoys the Tran, whether firm or yielding, always held the advantage, checking the designs of the North while adding to the renown of the nation's culture [30]. The Ly and the Tran thus safeguarded independence by firmness and opened the way to amity by flexibility.

With Nguyen Trai, striking at the heart of the adversary became an entire system: dozens of letters in his *Collected Diplomatic Correspondence from the Army* analyse in turn the state of the times and the logic of rise and fall for the Ming generals, using the brush in place of the blade to bring down one citadel after another, in keeping with the spirit of "using great righteousness to vanquish savagery and supreme humanity to replace brute violence" [1, p. 79]. Quang Trung, before shattering the Qing army, had already calculated the move that would follow victory: once defeated, the Qing would surely seek revenge, so that someone skilled with words would then be needed to put an end to the war [32]; and indeed, after the great victory of the year Ky Dau (1789), he at once sent an envoy to request investiture and to restore amity. Set against these examples is the lesson of Le Chieu Thong, who brought two hundred and ninety thousand Qing troops into the country, borrowing external force to the utmost, but who, having already lost the hearts of his own people, gained only ruin and disgrace and left behind the perpetual stain of one who "carried the snake home to bite his own hens". One side, though victorious, took the initiative in suing for peace and kept its country; the other relied on foreign force and lost both throne and name. This contrast clearly displays the dialectic of heart and force in the Vietnamese political tradition.

Nguyen Trai's pen in the work of subverting enemy morale shows the method of striking at hearts applied with refinement to each kind of opponent: with enemy generals he analysed the times, the balance of forces and the logic of survival or ruin; with collaborator troops he opened a path to repentance; with the obstinate he exposed their position while still leaving them a way out. When Vuong Thong, at his wits' end, sued for peace while the generals wished to go on storming the citadel, Nguyen Trai advised

Le Loi to induce Vuong Thong to surrender rather than attack him by force [1, p. 15]. Thus, when the enemy had surrendered, "our divine martial power did not kill; we embodied the heart of Heaven to show our love of life", and five hundred boats and several thousand horses were granted to the surrendered troops for their journey home; the proclamation gives the reason plainly: "We took the preservation of armies intact as our aim so that the people might rest" [1, p. 81]. Once military victory had been secured, opening a path of survival for the defeated army helped to limit losses on both sides, to end the war early and to create conditions for restoring amity. Striking at hearts here does not replace military victory; it is the means of bringing the war to a close so that the victory can be secured for the long term.

Traditional diplomacy also bears the mark of a subtle strategy: emperor at home, king abroad. Domestically, the dynasties of Dai Viet styled their rulers emperors without reserve, proclaimed their own reign titles and affirmed that "over the mountains and rivers of the Southern land the Southern Emperor reigns" [20, vol. I, p. 321]; externally, after every victory they took the initiative in sending envoys to seek investiture and offer tribute, accepting the nominal title of king so that the northern court might keep its face [30]. To yield in name while preserving the substance entire, to bend momentarily in empty form while safeguarding independence, was not submission but the attack upon hearts raised to the level of statecraft: it struck at the adversary's very psychology of the celestial empire, turning his need for prestige into a guarantee of one's own peace. Thanks to this, the intervals between wars were commonly long stretches of amity and trade, allowing the peoples of both countries to recover their strength. B. Womack's study of Sino-Vietnamese relations likewise shows that, within the tributary relationship, ritual deference on the Vietnamese side was generally exchanged for de facto acknowledgement of its autonomy [16].

The aim of the resistance wars was to drive out the invaders and to regain and safeguard independence; winning the heart of the adversary contributed to that aim while limiting losses and securing its results for the long term. This is the spirit of victory without annihilation: to keep intact rather than to shatter, to subdue hearts rather than to annihilate living beings. In an unequal balance of forces, winning the heart of the adversary was at once a strategy of national defence and an expression of the tradition of humanity and justice, of reverence for life and of love of peace.

3. The value of the art of winning hearts and minds and its inheritance and promotion in the present period

From the foregoing study several conclusions may be drawn concerning the value of this legacy. *First*, the three themes of closeness to the people, the search for worthy men and the handling of adversaries in traditional Vietnamese political activity are not three separate bodies of experience but three interrelated dimensions of one and the same art of winning hearts and minds: the hearts of the people are the root, the hearts of the scholars the load-bearing pillar and the heart of the adversary the outer rampart of political power. *Second*, in receiving the Confucian proposition of "subduing others by virtue" [23, p. 65] and the military strategists' idea of "attacking hearts" [21, p. 17], [22, p. 2024], our forebears applied them to their own conditions of national defence, binding the morality of the ruler to the fate of the community and carrying the spirit of persuasion in place of coercion beyond the confines of the battlefield. It is precisely here that traditional patriotism, already generalised at the level of values [11], is present at the level of the method of governing.

Even so, in a spirit of critical inheritance, the historical limits of this legacy must be stated plainly. The first is a class limit: under monarchy, closeness to the people was, in the last analysis, aimed at consolidating royal power; it operated only so long as the interests of the dynasty coincided with those of the nation, and the people remained essentially objects to be shepherded and placated rather than subjects of power. The second is an institutional limit: placing complete trust in the enlightened virtue of wise kings and able generals, that is, in rule by men, the tradition failed to produce an effective mechanism for constraining power once its holders degenerated; the history of dynastic decline shows that the hearts of the people, lacking institutional guarantees, remain no more than a moral admonition. These limits were overcome in a fundamental way only when the traditional idea of the people as root was raised to a new quality in the age of proletarian revolution.

President Ho Chi Minh brought about that transformation. Drawing first and foremost on the nation's tradition of taking the people as the root, President Ho Chi Minh affirmed: "The country takes the people as its root" [33, vol. 5, p. 501]; "Only when the root is firm does the tree endure; / The tower of victory is built upon the foundation of the people" [33, vol. 5, p. 502]. At the same time, President Ho Chi Minh absorbed the rational elements of the Eastern conception of the people as the root and, on the foundation of Marxism–Leninism, developed a qualitatively new understanding of the people's role and status. Marxism–Leninism provided the scientific basis for this advance: the popular masses are the decisive force in historical development, and "it is not the constitution of the state that creates the people, but the people that create the constitution of the state" [34, vol. 1, p. 350]. On this basis, President Ho Chi Minh affirmed the people's status as political subjects: "All benefits are for the people. All powers belong to the people… In short, authority and strength rest with the people" [33, vol. 6, p. 232]; cadres and Party members must be "the truly faithful servants of the people" [33, vol. 15, pp. 611–612]. Within this conception, the people were elevated from recipients of care and relief to masters in whom all power must reside; winning hearts and minds developed from a ruler's strategy into an essential feature of a regime of the people, by the people and for the people. This transformation constitutes a dialectical negation: the rational kernel of the tradition is preserved while its class and institutional limitations are transcended.

In the present work of building and defending the Fatherland, this value continues to be inherited in all three dimensions. As regards the hearts of the people, the Political Report to the 14th Congress calls for "thoroughly grasping and fully practising the viewpoint that 'the people are the root'", for persevering with the motto "the people know, the people discuss, the people act, the people inspect, the people supervise, the people benefit", and for "taking the satisfaction and trust of the people and businesses and work performance as the criteria for evaluating cadres" [35, vol. I, pp. 74–75]; since the 13th Congress, the Party has set the requirement of building the "people's hearts-and-minds posture" within all-people national defence and people's security [36, p. 157]. Attending to the legitimate interests of the people, promoting democracy and resolutely preventing and combating corruption, waste and bureaucratism therefore constitute the practice of "easing the strength of the people" under new conditions, for every instance of harassment and estrangement from the people erodes the regime's "deep roots and firm foundations".

As regards the hearts of the scholars, the spirit of seeking worthy men, exemplified by President Ho Chi Minh's 1946 notice "In Search of Men of Talent and Virtue" [33, vol. 4, p. 504], has now been institutionalised in guidelines and policies. Resolution No. 45-NQ/TW states that "building a comprehensively strong contingent of intellectuals is an investment in building and nurturing the 'vital energy of the nation' and in sustainable development", and calls for "breakthrough mechanisms and policies to attract and make good use of intellectuals, especially elite intellectuals and leading experts" [37, Sec. II.1]; Than Nhan Trung's "vital energy" has thus reappeared in the Party's documents today. Giving concrete form to this guideline, Government Decree No. 179/2024/ND-CP of December 31, 2024 lays down policies to attract and make good use of talented people working in agencies, organisations and units of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the State, the Vietnam Fatherland Front and socio-political organisations, with mechanisms for the selection, remuneration and priority appointment of talented people [38]. This policy is being implemented precisely at a time when the entire political system is restructuring its organisational apparatus towards a leaner structure with fewer focal points and reduced staffing [39], and local government is moving to a two-tier organisation at the provincial and commune levels [40]. In the light of our forebears' lesson of seeking worthy men, streamlining the apparatus is not merely a matter of reducing numbers; it also requires identifying capable people, placing them in the right positions and enabling them to develop their talents; as focal points become fewer, the quality of each position becomes all the more decisive.

As regards the heart of the adversary, the value to be inherited lies not in mechanically transferring the wartime notion of the "enemy" to modern international relations, but in the method of handling relations with partners, objects of struggle and external threats. Since the 8th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee, the Party has clearly identified partners and objects of struggle, while stressing the need for a dialectical view: an object of struggle may still present aspects to be won over and cooperated with, while a partner may present aspects that differ from or conflict with our interests [41]; cooperation must therefore be combined with struggle. The Documents of the 13th Congress call for "strategies to prevent the risks of war and conflict early and from afar" [36, pp. 156–157], that is, defending the Fatherland while the country is not yet in danger. Vietnam's defence policy is peaceful and self-defensive in nature, with its "four noes" [42]; its foreign relations and diplomacy bear the identity of "Vietnamese bamboo" [43], with "firm roots, a sturdy trunk and flexible branches" [44], aiming to ensure the highest interests of the nation [36]. These guidelines are close in spirit to the Tran's alternation of firmness and flexibility and to Nguyen Trai's principle of "taking the preservation of armies intact as the aim so that the people might rest". The value of winning the adversary's heart today therefore lies in a method of preventing conflict before it arises, reducing confrontation, winning consensus and keeping the door to peace open, while making no concession on independence, sovereignty and the national interest.

In sum, the methodological value of the art of winning hearts and minds lies in showing that durable political strength must be built upon the hearts of the people, upon people of talent and virtue, and upon righteousness, consensus and peace, and cannot rest on coercive force alone. This is also a historical argument for refuting the claim that "the people are the root" is merely a propaganda ornament, and it contributes to protecting the Party's ideological foundation in the spirit of Resolution No. 35-NQ/TW of the Politburo [45], [46]. In the final analysis, a persuasive refutation is the practice of striking at hearts under new conditions, attending in practical ways to the life and the legitimate interests of the people and consolidating their trust in the Party; to hold the hearts of the people is to hold the ideological front at its root.

4. Conclusion

In Vietnamese political history, closeness to the people, the search for worthy men and the handling of adversaries can be identified as three interrelated dimensions of the art of winning hearts and minds: taking the hearts of the people as the root of power, the hearts of the scholars as the pillar of the nation, and the heart of the adversary as the object of moral persuasion so that "without giving battle, the foe submits". Nguyen Trai's maxim muu phat tam cong, originally bound up with the resistance against the Ming, is the distinctive crystallisation of that art, an art that regards the human heart as the profound foundation of a country's strength. That legacy carries the historical limits of the monarchical age, yet its rational kernel has been inherited and raised to a new quality by President Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam in the theory of a State of the people, by the people and for the people, and in the present viewpoints of the people as root and of the "people's hearts-and-minds posture". To study this legacy

and to apply it creatively helps both to clarify the national roots of the viewpoint that "the people are the root" and to suggest methods for consolidating the hearts of the people, making good use of talented people, defending the Fatherland early and from afar, and maintaining a peaceful environment for the country in the new period of development.

REFERENCES

[1] N. Trai, *Complete Works of Nguyen Trai*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1976.

[2] Military Encyclopedia Dictionary Center – Ministry of National Defence, *Vietnam Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2004.

[3] N. L. Bich, *Nguyen Trai Fighting the Invaders to Save the Nation*. Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1973.

[4] P. V. Dong, "Nguyen Trai, the nation's hero," *Nhan Dan Newspaper*, Sep. 19, 1962.

[5] V. X. Dan, *Nguyen Trai's Thought in the Course of National History*. Hanoi: Culture and Information Publishing House, 1996.

[6] N. D. Thuc, *History of Vietnamese Thought*. Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1992.

[7] N. T. Thu, Ed., *History of Vietnamese Thought*, vol. I. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1993.

[8] N. H. Hau, *An Outline of the History of Vietnamese Philosophy*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2010.

[9] D. Chinh, Ed., *History of Vietnamese Philosophical Thought from the Founding of the Nation to the Early Twentieth Century*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2013.

[10] T. D. Huou, *Reaching Modernity from Tradition*. Hanoi: Culture Publishing House, 1996.

[11] T. V. Giau, *The Traditional Spiritual Values of the Vietnamese Nation*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1980.

[12] H. X. Han, *The Master of La Son*. Paris: Minh Tan Publishing House, 1952.

[13] A. B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

[14] O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999.

[15] H. X. Han, *Ly Thuong Kiet: A History of Diplomacy and Religion under the Ly Dynasty*. Hanoi: Song Nhi Publishing House, 1949.

[16] B. Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[17] V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 33. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2005.

[18] Institute of Political Science, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, *Lectures on Political Science*. Hanoi: Political Theory Publishing House, 2006.

[19] P. H. Le and V. M. Giang, Eds., *Traditional Values and the Vietnamese People Today*, vols. I–II. Hanoi: State-Level Science and Technology Program KX-07, 1994-1996.

[20] Institute of Literature, *Literature of the Ly–Tran Dynasties*, vols. I–II (part 1). Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1977–1988.

[21] Sun Tzu, *Sun Tzŭ on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*, L. Giles, Trans. London: Luzac & Co., 1910.

[22] S. Chen (Tran Tho), *Records of the Three Kingdoms with Modern Annotations and Translations* (Sanguozhi jinzhu jinyi), Y. Su et al., Eds. Changsha: Hunan Normal University Press, 1991.

[23] N. H. Le, *Mencius*. Hanoi: Culture Publishing House, 1996.

[24] M. T. Ly, Trans., *The Four Books with Commentary*, M. T. Nguyen, Ed. Hanoi: Religion Publishing House, 2010.

[25] G. Chi and N. H. Le, *Xunzi*. Hanoi: Culture Publishing House, 1994.

[26] N. S. Lien *et al*., *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, vol. II, Institute of History, Trans. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1998.

[27] T. N. Anh, "Ngo Thi Nham and his human life philosophy," *The University of Danang - Journal of Science and Technology*, no. 4(89), pp. 45–47, 2015.

[28] N. T. Nham, *Complete Works of Ngo Thi Nham*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2003–2006.

[29] N. A. Dung, *The Ngu Binh U Nong Policy under the Ly, Tran, and Early Le Dynasties (11th–15th Centuries)*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2020.

[30] P. H. Chu, *Classified Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties*, Institute of History, Trans. Hanoi: History Publishing House, 1961.

[31] T. N. Trung, "Stele inscription recording the names of doctoral laureates of the Nham Tuat examination, third year of the Dai Bao era (1442)," stone stele, Temple of Literature – Imperial Academy, Hanoi, composed 1484.

[32] N. G. V. Phai, *Unification Records of the Imperial Le*, N. D. Van and K. T. Hoach, Trans. Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 1984.

[33] H. C. Minh, *Complete Works*, 15 vols. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House – Truth, 2011.

[34] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Complete Works*, vol. 1. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 1995.

[35] Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documents of the 14th National Congress*, vol. I. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House – Truth, 2026.

[36] Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress*, vol. I. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House – Truth, 2021.

[37] The 13th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, *Resolution No. 45-NQ/TW dated November 24, 2023 on continuing to build and promote the role of the intellectual contingent to meet the requirements of rapid and sustainable national development in the new period*. Hanoi, 2023.

[38] Government of Vietnam, *Decree No. 179/2024/ND-CP dated December 31, 2024 on policies to attract and make good use of talented people working in agencies, organizations and units of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the State, the Vietnam Fatherland Front and socio-political organizations*. Hanoi, 2024.

[39] The 12th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, *Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW dated October 25, 2017 on a number of issues on continuing to renovate and rearrange the organizational apparatus of the political system to be streamlined and operate effectively and efficiently*. Hanoi, 2017.

[40] National Assembly of Vietnam, *Law on Organization of Local Government No. 72/2025/QH15 dated June 16, 2025*. Hanoi, 2025.

[41] The 9th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, *Resolution of the 8th Plenum on the Strategy for Protecting the Fatherland in the New Situation*. Hanoi, 2003.

[42] Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House - Truth, 2019.

[43] N. P. Trong, *Building and Developing a Comprehensive and Modern Vietnamese External Relations and Diplomacy Imbued with the Identity of "Vietnamese Bamboo"*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House - Truth, 2023.

[44] N. P. Trong, "Building and Developing Modern Vietnamese Foreign Relations and a Diplomatic Service Richly Imbued with the National Identity," *Nhan Dan Online*, Dec. 31, 2021. [Online]. Available: https://en.nhandan.vn/building-and-developing-modern-vietnamese-foreign-relations-and-a-diplomatic-service-richly-imbued-with-the-national-identity-post109131.html [Accessed: August 01, 2026].

[45] Politburo, *Resolution No. 35-NQ/TW dated October 22, 2018 on enhancing the protection of the Party's ideological foundation and combating erroneous and hostile viewpoints in the new situation*. Hanoi, 2018.

[46] D. T. Phuong, "Protecting the ideological foundation of the Party in teaching Marxist–Leninist philosophy," *The University of Danang - Journal of Science and Technology*, vol. 21, no. 8.1, pp. 75–80, 2023.