

NGUYEN TRAI. Famous scholar and statesman in early fifteenth-century Vietnam. Nguyen Trai was the son of Nguyen Phi Khanh, a scholar and official who had been sent to China after the occupation of China by the Ming. Nguyen Trai passed his doctoral examination in 1400 at the age of twenty and entered into the bureaucracy under the new Ho Dynasty founded the same year. When Chinese forces occupied Vietnam in 1407, Nguyen Trai refused to collaborate with the new regime and was placed under house arrest in Thang Long, (present-day Hanoi).

When Le Loi raised the standard of revolt against the Ming in 1418, Nguyen Trai escaped from confinement and became Le Loi's closest adviser and the primary strategist of the latter's victory over the Chinese in 1428. In his numerous writings, Nguyen Trai stressed the importance of political struggle, of "winning hearts and minds" ("it is better to conquer hearts than citadels"), of strategy, of protracted struggle, and of the use of negotiations to mislead the enemy and of the necessity to choose the right opportunity to strike for victory. Many of his works on strategy, such as Quan Trung Tu Minh Tap (writings composed in the army), Binh Ngo Sach (Book on Defeating the Wu) and Bai Phu Nui Chi Linh (essay on Chi Linh mountain), have become classics of Vietnamese literature. Binh Ngo Dai Cuo (proclamation on defeating the Wu) written after victory, became Vietnam's declaration of independence.

After victory in 1428, Nguyen Trai served the new emperor as a high official in the bureaucracy. As a staunch Confucianist, Nguyen Trai emphasized the importance of such Confucian values as integrity, righteousness, and purity of purpose. Such high moral standards frequently aroused resentment and jealousy among his colleagues in the bureaucracy and even aroused the suspicion of Emperor Le Thai To himself. He retired after the death of Le Thai To and the accession of the latter's son Le Thai Tong. But when the emperor died mysteriously in 1442 after a short visit to Nguyen Trai's retirement home in Hai Hung Province, Nguyen Trai was accused of regicide and executed along with his entire family. Twenty years later his name was rehabilitated by Emperor Le Thanh Tong.

Nguyen Trai is viewed in modern Vietnam as one of the truly great figures in Vietnamese history. His ideas on formulating a strategy to defeat the Ming were not only respected and admired, they were consciously imitated by leading strategists of the Communist Party in their own struggle for national unification

against the French and the United States. Although few of his writings have survived, he is considered one of the foremost writers in Vietnamese history and a pioneer in the use of chu nom (the written form of the spoken Vietnamese language). Above all, his integrity, his sense of loyalty and human-heartedness, representing the best elements of Confucian humanism, have won him the respect and admiration of generations of Vietnamese. (See Confucianism; Later Le Dynasty; Le Loi)