

# HO CHI MINH'S HUMILITY: FROM VIEWPOINTS TO ACTIONS AND CRYSTALIZATION OF HUMILITY IN HIS HISTORICAL WILL

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**Abstract:** *Ho Chi Minh is both a great thinker and a shining example of revolutionary morality. In his mindset, morality is a "root" of the revolutionaries and humility is an indispensable virtue in their character. Ho Chi Minh persistently educated the virtue of humility for the team of cadres and party members through not only his profound systems of viewpoints but also his extraordinary humility. All these noble things are emotionally crystalized in his Will. The author aims to prove the high unity of thoughts and practices as well as actions and speeches of Ho Chi Minh. It is a virtue in Ho Chi Minh's personality and a factor to form his greatness.*

**Keywords:** *humility, Ho Chi Minh, Ho Chi Minh's handwritten will, Ho Chi Minh Thought.*

## СМИРЕНИЕ ХО ШИ МИНА: ОТ МНЕНИЯ К ДЕЙСТВИЯМ И КРИСТАЛЛИЗАЦИИ СМИРЕНИЯ В ЕГО ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ВОЛЕ

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**Аннотация:** *Хо Ши Мин является одновременно великим мыслителем и ярким примером революционной морали. По его мнению, мораль - это «корень» революционеров, а смирение является неотъемлемой добродетелью в их характере. Хо Ши Мин настойчиво обучает смиренному качеству кадров и членов партии не только системой глубоких взглядов, но и своим необычайным смирением. Все эти благородные мысли эмоционально кристаллизуются в его Воле. В этой статье автор стремится доказать высокий уровень единства мыслей и практик, а также действий и слов Хо Ши Мина. Это достоинство личности Хо Ши Мина и фактор формирования его величия.*

**Ключевые слова:** *смирение, Хо Ши Мин, рукописная воля Хо Ши Мина, Мысль Хо Ши Мина.*

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As a thinker and leader with the very special attention to morality, Ho Chi Minh has an intensive interpretation about his appreciated moral values. As the boundary between humility and arrogance is the boundary between fortune and misfortune as well as between success and failure, Ho Chi Minh had not only persistently educated the virtue of humility to the cadres and party members but also set a good example for such virtue. If Ho Chi Minh's historical Will is convergence and sublimation of his personality, the virtue of humility, which achieves the level of self-forgetfulness and clearly expressed in his Will, reaches its culmination of his personality.

### **1. Ho Chi Minh's viewpoints about humility of the revolutionaries and the practice of humility throughout his lifetime**

The history of the nation and that of mankind have been formulated by physical attempts, intelligences and bloods of billions of people over thousands of years. In the process of development, personal knowledge, no matter how intensive it is, is extremely limited in comparison with the endless knowledge treasure of the mankind and any person, no matter how talented he or she is, always needs supports from many people to be successful. Humility, which is understood as courtesy, respect-showing, honor-showing, no complacency and no boast about the personal roles, merits or talents, and self-awareness of personal limitations in order to reach perfection, is a *quality of the cultured person*. In Ho Chi Minh's personality, there is a convergence of many prominent qualities, among which humility reaching the level of self-forgetfulness is the most outstanding one.

Humility is not an innate virtue but results from an arduous education and training process. Ho Chi Minh, who was born in a poor intellectual family and received a very strict education from his father who highly treasures moral values. As a profound Confucian intellectual, Nguyen Sinh Cung [Ho Chi Minh's father] gave a name "Nguyen Sinh Khiem" and a nick name "Tan Dat" to Ho Chi Minh's brother and "Nguyen Sinh Cung" and "Tat Thanh" to Ho Chi Minh. This way of naming expressed his father's extremely thoughtful concept of morality. He views that whoever has personality traits including modesty, respect, humility and courtesy would surely make successes. To become a

cultural celebrity, Ho Chi Minh went on a long journey “from the nation to the mankind” both geographically and ideologically. In various cultures, either national or international, Eastern or Western and ancient or modern share the same understanding about humility. “Eliminating the arrogance is to become a good man” [12, с. Стихотворение № 158] advised by Nguyen Binh Khiem, a principal graduate in the imperial examination of Mac Dynasty in Vietnam. A passage in the Tao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching discusses about humility that he is free from self-display, therefore he shines forth; from self-assertion, therefore he is distinguished; from self-glorification, therefore he has merit; from self-exaltation, therefore he rises superior to all. An ancient Greek proverb says “Arrogance is the prerogative of the fool”. Humility is also highly appreciated by the Marxist-Leninist classics. Lenin not only considered “Communist arrogance” as first enemy of the revolutionary government but also emphasized that all the revolutionary parties had been dissolved so far due to self-admiration or arrogance, unawareness of what makes their strength and fear for speaking out their limitations” [16, с. 141]. The revolutionary practices helped Ho Chi Minh, who inherited and learned the clear-sighted seniors’ thoughts of humility and disregard of luxury, to increase the level of humility because this personality trait helps him to understand “The revolutionary work is so immense that it cannot be done well by one individual or household” [7, с. 513].

On the premises of right ideas, Ho Chi Minh consistently asserted that humility and simplicity are indispensable virtues of the true revolutionaries. When he worked in Guangzhou Province of China to make preparations for the establishment of the [Indochinese Communist] Party in 1928, he emphasized “An exemplary revolutionary should be modest, tolerant, sympathetic and courageous when losing his or her edge or calm when making a success and he should not forget that his or her life or career belong to the mankind, not himself or herself” [7, с. 514]. Ho Chi Minh considered “greed for fame and arrogance” as opposite characters of humility, one of 23 core virtues of the revolutionaries. When drafting the work “*Modification of working-styles*”, Ho Chi Minh clearly indicated “Arrogance, greed for fame and mindset of leader” are three of many dangerous diseases which our cadres need to eliminate.

In November 1948, Ho Chi Minh wrote an article entitled “Disease of arrogance and narcissism” to help his cadres to have a full awareness of the dangers of arrogance. In this article, he defined “Arrogance means a personal with the thought that *I can do and master everything. I can do better than others. I am a god and do not need to learn anything*” [9, с. 631]. When affirming that a person must have RIGHTEOUS qualities to become a perfect man, he clearly said that a person with the RIGHTEOUS qualities, at first, is not an arrogant and egotistic person and always want to make progresses.

In 1975, when the Polish President raised a question “You are well-known about humility, what can you say about it? ”. Ho Chi Minh gave his own definition “Humility is a moral foundation of the Vietnamese nation. Personally, I always realize my weaknesses. Concerning to the colleagues and friends, they may be my teachers where I have to find something to learn. As for the enemies, it is necessary to know their strong points and our weak ones” [2, с. 396]. By confirming the virtue of humility as the moral foundation of the entire Vietnamese nation rather than his personal quality, Ho Chi Minh showed his inherent humility.

As an ethicist, Ho Chi Minh has a thorough interpretation on moral values which he pursues. With the thought that the peoples are those who make the history and the history belong to them but not any individual hero, he demanded the revolutionaries to be modest. He also requested that “the longer they work or the more competent they are, the more humble they should be as it is clearly seen that there are extremely- plentiful and immense world affairs, social works and national affairs. No matter how talented an individual is, he or she cannot know or do all of them” [9, C. 631]. He warned the cadres that the closer they were to the victory or at the time of victory, the more humble they should be as the victory-brought joy easily make us so subjective and contemptuous that we may make a mistake(s).

For those who make merits, Ho Chi Minh, on the one hand, greatly encourage them but on the other hand, he reminded “Individual achievements are made mainly thanks to the support with the thought that the peoples are those who make the history and the history belong to them but not any individual hero of the collective. Thereby, the people, who make achievements, should not be boastful but be modest” [3, с. 588]. All in all, the revolutionaries should be modest under all circumstances. The root of humility is knowledge, an understanding of oneself, people and life. Humility helps the people to behave in the proper way. Personally, they should not have illusion but an attitude of progressiveness. For the other people, it is advised to show the respect, tolerance and honor. As for the works, the spirit of devotion should avail due to an awareness that the individual efforts are only waterdrop in the sea as compared with the peoples’ ones. With this proper attitude, the humble person will constantly make progresses and receive the love of the peoples.

With the view of “Building in parallel with opposition and opposition for the purpose of building”, Ho Chi Minh also carefully and deeply analysed the origin and consequence of arrogance. He affirmed that the disease of arrogance is produced by subjective-minded and narrow-minded attitudes. Based on the Lao Tzu’s saying “Rivers and seas are immense and deep as they are at the lowest position to collect water from small streams”, Ho Chi Minh indicated the origin of humility and complacency “Big rivers and vast seas contain as much as water due to their depth and width. Small bowls and shallow plates are easy to be filled up with the little amount of water due to their

shallowness and narrowness. Arrogant and egoistic people look like shallowness bowls and plates” [10, c. 130]. He also pointed out the danger of arrogance because it may generate many bad habits like self-illusion, laziness, self-admiration, fondness of flatterers, harming of the talented, disregard of the subordinates and peoples and ignorance of organizational disciplines etc. Arrogance also leads to “greed for fame”, which means “only interest in such positions as presidency, membership of committees or associations rather than practical works” [9, c. 295].

It also gives a rise to the “mindset of leader”, which is used to describe a person who only makes some successes but immediately thinks that he is so much talented and heroic that he is worthy of becoming a leader in spite of the fact that the achievements are made by the group of people [9, c. 295]. Consequently, the “disease” of arrogance not only makes that person regress and lose an opportunity for development but also makes the people disrespect and keep away from him. Ho Chi Minh asked the cadres to practice humility consistently because no matter how much humble they are, it is not enough and to stay vigilant and eliminate this type of character because it is “very dangerous to morality and works” [9, c. 632].

He also conscientiously pointed out “The holy medicine to cure this disease consists of four tastes including a) honest self-criticism and welcome of other people’s critics, b) shortcomings-overcoming efforts and promotion of strong points, c) attempts of learning for progresses and d) practice of solidarity” [9, c. 633]. Thereby, a system of profound views on humility was been created by Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh is both an ethicist and a symbol of integrity of revolutionary morality. Humility and simplicity are two prominent features in his ethics and style. The late president of Chile, Salvador Allende, a late-president of Chile, said “It is his extreme simplicity and extraordinary humility if we want to find anything typical for the entire Ho Chi Minh’s life” [1, c. 37]. This virtue is clearly manifested in his daily lifestyle and conduct with a myriad of emotional things.

The first manifestation of Ho Chi Minh’s humility is his gratitude and respect for the peoples. As the hero of the national liberation, the leader of the Party and the Government, he has never considered himself as “hero” or a “savior” although he brings fame to the Vietnamese nation and homeland. In contrast, he only views himself as a soldier who obeys the order of the entire populace in the fatherfront and even a servant of the peoples. He always asserted that the peoples were actually a master with the authority and he was merely their servant. He also talked with gratitude that the peoples were very kind and without the peoples, he did not exist.

Considering himself as an inseparable component of the peoples, he came to the peoples very naturally without using any protocols or rituals and without the master-like style. He always expressed his deep sympathy for all of their sadness or joyfulness. He also spoke to the peoples in their language-using ways. Therefore, he is not a President of supreme powers in the Vietnamese’s hearts but merely “Uncle Ho” with so many full-blooded sentiments.

As the greatest culturalist, Ho Chi Minh had *never concealed his shortcomings or limitations but always expressed his spirit of progress*. He had no hesitation to ask Bui Bang Doan, an older intellectual, to revise his paper as he felt his manuscript unacceptable after completing and proofreading it. Regarding to the education-level, he openly spoke with university students that he only finished the primary school [9, c. 543]. In regard to the common knowledge, he said “I saw electric lights for the first time at the age of 17 and listen to radio for the first time at 29” [5, c. 187]. At the end of his life, he also confided to foreign journalists that he had no idea about such concepts as party and labour union and difference between socialism and communism and had not read any Lenin’s works at the outbreak of the October revolution [6, c. 583]. It can be said that few people honestly talked about their shortcomings at the peak of their powers. He is also a great thinker but he voluntarily regarded himself as “a little student” of the souls. He also earnestly asked his officers to criticise him “If there are any smudges on my forehead and anyone see them but do not tell me on the excuse of respecting me, I have them forever” [9, c. 260]. Thanks to the awareness of his limitations and his great efforts for learning, he became a brilliant cultural celebrity.

Ho Chi Minh was not a stoic but his humility and spirit of “sharing joys and sorrows” with the public *refrained him from all privileges*. He dressed, ate, accommodated and worked like an ordinary person. His daily belongings are simple and minimal. David Halberstam, a US journalist, wrote that Ho Chi Minh wore with not much difference from his peoples. The Westerners used to mock him about it. Until one day, they understood and realized that his simplicity and ability to harmonize with the public set the basis for his success [15, c. 202].

Despite of being the supreme leader of the Party and the nation as well as the well-known person in all four continents and with the obtainment of full love from the Vietnamese, Ho Chi Minh *is completely alien to “cult of personality”*. For him, only one kind of subject to be revered is the peoples. Within 24 years in presidency, he only allowed to celebrate his birthday on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1946 for a single case but the celebration actually served the political objectives and diplomatic affairs.

At the peak of power, Ho Chi Minh absolutely did not want to be praised. He refused any suggestions for honoring him like longevity-wishing ceremony, construction of monuments or memorial halls and autobiography-writing etc in both a resolute and skillful manner. His extraordinary humility forces his officers and the peoples to respect his desire of “being forgotten” regardless of how much they love and respect him. *Ho Chi Minh had never appreciated his talent and received any titles which he absolutely deserved*. “Although he has an outstanding

collection of literary products in which some of his poems are assessed to be on par with the Chinese poetry in Song and Tang Dynasties but he did not regard himself as a poet rather than a person with the love for poetry and described himself as a pedestrian who picks up beautiful flowers when seeing them by the road” [11, c. 107].

It is him who gave a birth to and led the Vietnam’s revolutionary press. He has a huge fortune of around 2,000 articles in different languages like English, French, Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese etc but he only considered himself as a person with the natural association with the press but few experiences in journalism [4, c. 164].

He always treasures and cuddles all others’ contributions and sacrifices but forgets his own sacrifice and devotion. As a person who created the most brilliant era in the national history and made contributions to changing the world history, he did not talk about his merits but in contrast he always pondered about what he could not do for his nation and the peoples. When evaluating the successes and shortcomings of the revolutionary government at the moment of establishment, he said “I have to say honestly that the successes are attributed to the efforts of the peoples. The above shortcomings are my faults” [8, c. 192]. Later on, the fact that the South could not be liberated [during his lifetime] also left him so many torments and he always claimed that he “had not completely fulfilled his obligations with the South” [6, c. 675]. He also refused to receive our state’s Golden Star Medal and the Soviet Union’s Lenin Medal with his promise that he would receive these noble awards by the date when the South was liberated. Therefore, when he said a goodbye to the world, there were no medals on the bosom of his worn shirt.

It can be affirmed that greatness always associates with humility in Ho Chi Minh’s personality and he becomes more greater because of extreme humility and simplicity. With the clear understanding about these two characters, the late Prime Minister Pham Van Dong “painted” Ho Chi Minh’s portrait: “Ho Chi Minh is tall but not far, new but not strange, great but not showing greatness, brilliant but not overwhelming and first-time sight but bringing the familiar feeling” [13, c. 17]. Humility is his prominent virtue which contributes to making him immortal in the hearts of the Vietnamese.

## **2. Humility and self-forgetfulness in Ho Chi Minh’s will**

Humility is manifested in an emotional way in Ho Chi Minh’s will. In fact, Ho Chi Minh will is our respectful way of calling but Ho Chi Minh modestly call it as “some words” or “letter”. With a full respect for the peoples and the Party, Ho Chi Minh used such phrases as “In my opinions”, “I believe”, “I wish”, “I would suggest”, “My final wish is”, etc in his will to express his personal opinions or aspirations which are his suggestions on the spirit of democracy and he did not have any intentions of “imposing” his opinions on the organization and the alive.

Ho Chi Minh is a reticent person in his lifetime. It is reticence of a person who always forgets himself, never appreciates his dignity and contributions and does not want anyone to bother or praise him. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, a close friend and colleague of Ho Chi Minh wrote “I gradually understand Ho Chi Minh’s personality thanks to my observation of his operations and accommodation with him for a long time” [14, c. 200]. Spending the whole life to take care of the peoples’ and nation’s affairs, he commenced to ponder and consider his personal affairs or funeral ones at the age of 75. Therefore, a part of *his personal affairs* in the 1968 draft has some more additions and revisions than what Ho Chi Minh drafted in 1965.

Firstly, he added very soft and delicate “general conclusion” about his glorious, extremely noble, brilliant, beautiful and clean life which is also full of hardships and sacrifices “I wholeheartedly devoted my lifetime to serve the Fatherland, revolution and peoples. Even now, I have to say a goodbye to this world, I have nothing to regret rather than I cannot serve more and longer” [6, c. 615]. For a whole life of full sacrifice [for the nation, peoples and revolution], it is expected that he has nothing to regret or repent. However, he still **has a single regret** which absolutely does not relate to a long-life dream or personal enjoyment. He bemoaned his inability to make more contributions for a longer time. In Ho Chi Minh’s personality, his humility and spirit of devotion also exist in tandem. As a humble person, he always considers his contributions little and desires to devote. The more he devotes, the more he understands that the victory of the revolution cannot be formed by one individual’s efforts. Therefore, he is more humble.

With his strong love and care for the peoples, he lived a simple and even austere life. In his will, he also made a recommendation about his funeral affairs with that spirit. He clearly warned “After my death, it is obliged not to organize a large-scale and expensive spiritual worship to avoid the waste the peoples’ time and money” [6, c. 615]. In Vietnamese customs, a special attention is paid to funeral ceremonies. Despite of hardship-full and poverty-stricken life, the dead would be content at his or her death if his funeral ceremony were organized in a well-cared manner. However, Ho Chi Minh opposed this common desire with a fear that his peoples would waste their timing and money.

He demanded to cremate his corpse as cremation is both an environment-friendly for the alive and a land-saving solution for the paddy-field land. A word “paddy-field” was added into the 1968 draft with an implication of saving the farmers’ cultivating land. During his lifetime, he was of an opinion “Truth is something beneficial for the nation and peoples” [3, c. 378]. His choice of cremation is affected by this noble truth. He has both the spirit of *innovation* and a clear vision about the future as “cremation” was not common in Vietnam at that time. He realized the need to protect the farming land and the risk that the burial ground for the death may encroach upon the

residential and farming land of the alive. By setting an example, he wanted the peoples to gradually change their practice of burial to address the future challenges.

When he was alive, he did not want to live in a mansion and he also desired to lie in the soil and to be close to the peoples rather than “stay” in the magnificent mausoleum after death. Therefore, he recommended “finding a hill for burial”. With the tormenting nostalgia of the Southern peoples, he recommended “sending some of his bone ash to the Southern peoples”. In the 1965 typing draft, this phrase was underlined with the implication that it is a very noticeable and important thing. Until 1968, he also rewrote about this issue “My bone ash should be divided into three portions, each of which is placed inside a crockery box. The first is given to the North, the second for the Central and the last for the South” [6, c. 615]. With his simple and economical character, he warned placing his bone ash in a very cheap crockery box rather than other types of expensive and valuable materials. He absolutely neither cared about integrity of his corpse nor desired to build “stone mausoleum and copper statue”. He was only concerned about arrangement of accommodations for the peoples when they visit him.

With the spirit of devotion, he desired to use his death in a right way to make contributions to beautifying the nature and improving the environment so much that he carefully advised “it is necessary to plant trees on the top and on the sides of the hill. Anyone when visiting [my tomb] should plant several trees in memory. For a long time, more trees turns into plantations which are beneficial to the landscapes and agriculture. The care should be entrusted to the elderly” [6, c. 615]. At the moment around a half of century ago, environmental issues are not as much pressing as they are now but Ho Chi Minh was fully aware that environment protection is to protect the living conditions of the people and the country is only able to develop in a sustainable manner if protecting the environment. It is both his vision and care for the long-term future of the nation.

Even when the discussed personal affairs relate to his corpse, Ho Chi Minh still thought and worried about the peoples. He worried about the waste of time, money and paddy-field land and even hardships in arrangement of accommodation when the peoples come to visit [his tomb]. Although he called it as his personal affairs, his way to handle with these affairs entirely targets to the *collective affairs* that are in fact interests of the nation and the peoples. He completely forgot “himself” and used his death as an opportunity to make more contributions and then create a momentum for the development of the future generations.

With the thorough comprehension about the peoples’ emotions and wishes for their extremely beloved leader of the nation, the third Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam asked his permission to handle with his personal affairs in a different way. Thanks to that, international friends and his decedents have opportunities to visit him [in the mausoleum], who has a *legendary* life to receive profound lessons about proper behaviors of human beings including humility, a character which a person should have. Ho Chi Minh’s life examined Lao Tzu’s profound philosophy “Heaven and earth are everlasting is because they do not exist for themselves. The saint puts himself last, finds himself in the lead”. It is an equal thing that the history considers him as embodiment of self-sacrificing and humility.

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