

Nguyen Binh Khiem Ideology on Centrism-It's Meaning and Historical Value for Vietnam

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Abstract: A centrist way of thinking and attitude some Vietnamese confucius scholars adapted when placed in confused, complicated situations of officials taking sides and fighting for power in the Imperial Court. Nguyen Binh Khiem was a typical confucius scholars putted under training that aced at the highest rank and was favored by the Imperial Court. Unfortunately, once reached the court, his tough and straight-forward personality caused a response from the ruler. Therefore, he gave up his position and returned to his hometown abiding the centrist way of living. This study reflects Nguyen Binh Khiem's mind-set and attitude. A confucius scholar that has obtained all the essence of cultural knowledge of the era, inheriting the essence of confucianism-Buddhism-Taoism, using it as the theoretical basis and methodology to resolves different types of conflicts between civilians and the officials as well as of officials taking sides in the Imperial Court.

Key words: Centrism, Le Dynasty, "Trung Tan", feudalism, humanitarian, literature carry morals

INTRODUCTION

The book of Zhong Yong captures the words of confucius about the "Zhong Yong" theory, that is, the way the gentleman keeps the mind and the behavior is neutral, not excessive, not inadequate and must try to live in the world by five constant virtues include, kindness, decorum, uprightness, wisdom, faithfulness human. The "Zhong Yong" theory not only describe the relationship between people, the relationship between people and things but also the relationship between people and the nature, emphasizing the unified nature, people in harmony with nature in opposition to the mode of human behavior in one-way, one-sided. The red thread throughout the whole book is confucius saying that,

"The Zhong Yong theory" in the thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem" is a issue of great theoretical and practical significance for Vietnamese social life in tradition as well as the present, however, to date the Vietnam theorist has not paid much attention to this issue but only mentions the ethics of his though such as the human problem in the philosophy of Nguyen Binh Khiem by Tran Nguyen Viet; Nguyen Binh Khiem and the moral ideas of researcher, Do Huy; Nguyen Binh Khiem-the typical thinker of the 16th century by Nguyen Tai Thu (Huy, 2005).

For the purpose of clarifying the Zhong Yong theory of Nguyen Binh Khiem, the researcher will focus on a number of issues: Zhong Yong theory is to live honestly to avoid the loud noise to keep the soul pure and is

concerned with the suffering of man. Zhong Yong theory is a balanced life, not extreme, outrageous is living in harmony with nature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

When conducting the research, the researchers used the methods of philosophical study and literary sciences such as the method of unification between logic and history, between analysis and synthesis, between chronological and synchronical, text analysis method, comparative comparison method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content; Background information on the life and career of Nguyen Binh Khiem: Nguyen Binh Khiem's real name is Nguyen Van Dat. He was born on 1491 at Trung Am Village, Vinh Lai Town, Ha Hong District, Hai Duong Province (now Ly Hoc Village, Vinh Bao District, Hai Phong City (Khanh, 1983). His father was Nguyen Van Dinh (Cu Xuyen)-though famous but did not pass the examination. His mother was Nhu Thi Thuc-daughter of Ho Nhu Van Lan-A doctorate from Le Thanh Tong Dynasty (Lan, 2006; Tho and Dung, 2016; Viet, 2000) Nguyen Binh Khiem was a well-educated person since, birth, both sides of his family has the spirit to learn and profound knowledge. However, his mother side proved to be more influential in shaping his identity and talent,

especially, from his mother's thirst to raise a well-educated son. As an adult, he found out about Luong Dac Bang-a well-known retired confucius scholar from Lach Trieu village (now Hoang Hoa, Thanh Hoa) and travelled there to learn. Smart, intelligent and hard-working, Nguyen Binh Khiem became one of Luong's best student. Therefore, before Luong Dac Bang passed away, he handed Nguyen Binh Khiem all of his treasured books called "Thai At Than Kinh"-a book on life, environment and humanity. Luong also assigned his son-Luong Huu Khanh over to Nguyen Binh Khiem to take care of and teach.

Grew up and lived in an Era of confusion in 1535, Nguyen Binh Khiem bypass nine examinations (6 of those under the Le Dynasty) for more than 20 years. Even when the Mac Dynasty took over (1527) and the society slowly became more stable, he still overlooks the examinations (2 of those under the Mac Dynasty). Not until 1535, under the prosperous and peaceful rules of King Mac Thai Tong (Mac Dang Doanh) that he decided to finally participate in the exam. He became a doctorate at age 45 and appointed to compose and fix all documents of the Imperial Court, he also kept various different positions there. The sudden death of Mac Thai Tong in 1550 ended the most prosperous phase of the kingdom under the Mac Dynasty. At the same time, Nguyen Binh Khiem also lost a solid support to execute his political wishes. Officials in the Imperial Court started to take sides, due to small age, Mac Phuc Hai-Mac Hien Tong's son was unable to take over and make administrative decisions. Nguyen Binh Khiem took advantage of the situation and handed over 18 indictments but was not approved. Therefore, he resigned in 1542 after 8 years served as an official in the Imperial Court. He passed away on November, 28th, 1585, aged 95. Nguyen Binh Khiem was known as one of the greatest ideologist of the 16th Century.

The great work of Nguyen Binh Khiem is the collection of Bach Van poem written in Han scripts and Bach Van poem written in Nom script. In addition, the prophecies are called National Prophecies, National Quotes, etc. These works have a lot of different content, but the most outstanding is the moral thought that the red thread through is the Zhong Yong theory.

Content of Nguyen Binh Khiem ideology on centrism:

Centrism is a real and honest way of living for visitors to have a place to rest when passing by the Tuyet Giang River, he created a place called "Trung Tan". The name brought curiosity among visitors, many asked for its meaning which made him carved another headstone with "Trung tan quan bi ky" on it. "People are made good, entangled with materialism and lust, some are unable to

remain their integrity similar to when they were born. They lie, cheat and becoming vain, biased. People in the Imperial Court fights for reputation, wealth and the ones in the market fights for their benefits. Some asked me what does "Trung Tan" mean? I said: "Trung" means in the middle, even, honesty is being centered and dishonesty count for not being centered. "Tan" means spot, a worthy spot is the right spot, not knowing what is worthy is picking the wrong spot. This is the meaning of the name, same as loyalty to the King, duties to the parents, keeping the peace between brothers and sisters, staying faithful to your spouses, keeping the trust between friends-the meaning of being centered. See but do not greed nor fight for benefits, be happy and stay open to people, treat people and other creatures with kindness. Being centered is the same as being balanced. If you could stay center and follow it, making it a living standard then everything will be an unbelievable merit!" (Khanh, 1983).

People come and goes, read if you can or ask to be read to if you cannot. The words carved on the stone have various educational values, specifically a lesson of human morality. "Trung Tan quan bia ky" displayed master bach Van's clear angle and ideology on the current Era. Nguyen Binh Khiem suggested a doctrine about human philosophy, living in an honest way as a way of living freely.

Centrism is to avoid loudness and keep a pure soul: His work contained nearly 800 of poems and dozens of literature works, his philosophy on centrism was mentioned the most. "Trung Tan quan bi ky" is a masterpiece that portrayed the mindset of living a quiet, balanced life and made it a declaration, sending a special message to the contemporary people as well as future generations. This carved stone still retain educational values till this day, even though the current era is much different from the olden days. In "An honorable man in wartime", Do Lai Thuy rated Nguyen Binh Khiem's action upon retirement as a deviation (Thuy, 2005), a perfect deviation created by circumstances. To explain this decision, we need to investigate the content of his poems, specifically Nom poetry number 79:

"Another day, another pecker, another fishing rod
Poetry no matter who pleases
Foolish look for a peaceful place
Wise man looks for a crowd
Fall eats bamboo shoot, Winter eats bean sprouts
Spring bath Lotus Lake, Summer bath in pond
Wine come I will drink
Wealth seems like a dream" (Nguyen Binh Khiem's poetry)

No debates on the structure of the poem (composed abiding the Duong Dynasty Law) but pay close attention to the meaning of the poem. As we know the use of “literature carry morals” and “indirect meaning” are created by the Vietnamese feudal poetry. In this poem, Nguyen Binh Khiem used old ancient tales to talk about life to describe the human temperament. Centrism is concerns for the suffers of mankind and choosing a humanitarian lifestyle.

It can be said that mankind and the humanitarian lifestyle are the main focal point throughout his whole life and work, making him the main focus of the century (Vuong, 2000).

Influenced by the ideology of “heavenly consolidation” by Dong Trong Thu, Nguyen Binh Khiem deemed that people were born on the face of the Earth must always carry with them the nature of three resources (destiny, life environment, moral). To live a happy life, people must obey these three laws (destiny, life environment, moral) otherwise they will have to pay. Acquired the philosophy “the good nature of human beings” of Manh Tu, in “Trung Tan quan bi ky” he pointed that all human beings are good but it’s the circumstances that push human away from their original goodness.

In an era of chaos alike the time he had lived, humans are quick to change their nature. From ordinary civilians to the Imperial officials, everyone became greedy and materialistic:

“The world is transformed into a hill
Salty, sour, spicy, sweet
Silver, money, disciples
Out of rice, out of alcohol, no more you and me”
(Nom poem number 58. In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s Poetry)

Standing far away from the material temptation of the feudal system, far from the busy life of the contemporary society, Nguyen Binh Khiem had the chance to take a closer at life in a more clear and truthful way. He found that contemporary feudal society was a society that valued money and wealth more than humanity so, he wrote:

“Human life is like ten gold
There’s more than that
Before no need to ask
After burdening the back laugh
Brother he, happy to note
Wine and tea tattered roar
The man’s weight is prompted
Now I know wealth is heavier than human” (Nom poem number 80. In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s poetry)

Centrism is to have a balanced life, churn away from negativity or excessive. Living in a society with different class divisions and different sides. There were constant clash between the sides, constant wars, fratricide. This is the reason why Nguyen Binh Khiem chose to live the “centrist” life: “Religion comes from within, I take the middle ground, never dull nor clear”.

The word “centrism” in this statement includes many different meanings, both in the middle, churn away from negativity, loyal to the homeland, build a peaceful life and live honestly as he had mentioned in his work “Trung tan quan bia ky”. This conception is perhaps acquired by reading confucius’ “Centrism”. According to the saying of confucius: “if the mind does not go astray from side to side, if it stays center, balance, abide moral standards and never change then it is called the right path. Center is the right path that all people must follow, it is the theory that governs it all” (Confucius, 1950).

The poems mentioned above are 2 out of more than 800 poems by Nguyen Binh Khiem that proved great historical significance on the anti-corruption and anti-bribery movement in our country today. Centrism is strongly associated with concept that civilians are the root of the country

According to Nguyen Binh Khiem, in any particular political system or in any age, civilians are always the most honest and truthful. They have always followed the path of justice, never taking sides or stray from their own decision. Therefore, when it comes to the writer Nguyen Binh Khiem, we cannot fail to mention two of his famous verse:

(From ancient times, civilians are the root
Good civilians count for a good country)
(Nguyen Binh Khiem’s poetry)

These two verses have the same meaning as the famous saying by Nguyen Trai: (Turn the boat and you will find out that people are like water), the only difference is that Nguyen Trai’s form of expression is more subtle, with more educational values and was executed more profoundly. According to Nguyen Binh Khiem, the Kings needed to understand that if they won the people’s heart then they have won the whole kingdom. Nguyen Binh Khiem’s idea on “national heritage of the country” is of great significance for Vietnam in that era when it grasped the “lesson learned from the people”. By applying these lessons to the Doi Moi (Renewal) process, Vietnam gained enormous achievements in various aspects which improved the economy remarkably. The Zhong Yong theory is a prosperous lifestyle, fun with the nature and things.

Living the whole life in the countryside, Nguyen Binh Khiem understands the great role and value of the nature in production and life. Nature not only supplies food and foodstuff for human beings (“eating bamboo shoot in spring, eating bean sprouts in Winter”) but also a space for daily life (“bathing in lotus ponds in spring, bathing in ponds in summer”). The nature is the inspiration for artistic creation and the aesthetics of human. Under the pen of Nguyen Binh Khiem, mountains, rivers, countryside all come alive with souls. The moon, the wind and the cloud seem to be friends, he confided with the nature as a friend to try to prove his love affair: “Days of meetings, flowers are guests/at desert night, moon is a lamp” (Lesson 13).

The way of living in harmony with the nature is evident in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s behavior towards the lively scene, giving the poet a creative source of inspiration. Therefore, the poet always has the sense of preserving the beauty of the creature not even hurt a petal, not stop the moonlight out of the door “(Lesson 60). In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s poem, the most beautiful and lively image is the moon, the moon not only radiates the light of the most beautiful planet in the universe but also the endless source of poetic inspiration. So is the image that conveys human qualities: “Anyone who knows the friendship/as high as the moon is standing” (Lesson 6). Living the centrist lifestyle but remain concerned about life, doing good things to help the society.

Nguyen Binh Khiem is not a “closed curtain” but a man of action. It showed that, even though he lived in the countryside but he did not shun himself from life and work of the court. The 2 years after his resignation, in 1544, King Mac again gave him the title of Elector then promoted him to Procurator, Vice Deputy and lastly Trinh Grand Duke. Therefore, folks called him a familiar name of “the Duke of Trinh”

Some biography researchers that researched Nguyen Binh Khiem said that the origin of the name Trinh Tuyen (attached to his title of Elector and Trinh Grand Duke) was derived from the name of Trung Am Village and not from the name Trinh Di and Trinh Hao-two typical representatives of the Tong Dynasty in China. Almost two decades from the age of 53-73 years, Nguyen Binh Khiem, although, did not lived in the capital but still took part in government affairs, sometimes of the national issues or help the King with the revelations, King Mac honored him as a military strategist.

The King often send a messenger to ask for his consent on important things, sometimes Nguyen Binh Khiem goes to the capital to discuss business then return back to Trung Am village. After reaching the age of 73,

Nguyen Binh Khiem officially retired and live a private life in his hometown. Despite his age, Nguyen Binh Khiem wrote more poetry and literature more than any other composers of the 16th century it showed how powerful his creativity was.

The historical values and meaning of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s centrism

The historical value of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s centrism:

In the contemporary context of the Vietnamese society where different political parties constantly compete for power, Nguyen Binh Khiem fulfilled his role as an adviser to the feudal court, helping the King to calm and protect the people. According to Dr. Tran Quoc Vuong, aside from poetry, Nguyen Binh Khiem was also well-known for his thesis (Vuong, 2000), predictable statements about the destiny of the King, Court and Dynasty not only in the contemporary period but also later. Legend has it that when Nguyen Hoang-Nguyen Kim’s son asked Nguyen Binh Khiem if he should leave North Vietnam and move to Thuan Hoa (Hue) to settle down. Nguyen Binh Khiem said: “Hoang Son united, keep yourself center”. Nguyen Hoang understood this, followed his advice and established the Nguyen Dynasty that remained until the middle of the twentieth century.

When the Mac Dynasty was about to collapsed, he sent his son to ask Nguyen Binh Khiem for advice, he said: “Cao Bang though small can still be kept”. The Mac Dynasty took the advice, moved to Cao Bang to re-establish and held the throne for nearly 80 years. For the Le-Trinh Dynasty when King Le Trung Tong died without an heir, Trinh Quoc wanted to take over the throne but was afraid of public opinion, so, he sent people to consent him. He told the Trinh family: “Keeping the Buddhist temple is good”. Trinh Kiem complied, find the Le descendants Le Tru (Le Loi’s brother)-King Le Anh Tong. Though the Le Dynasty holds the throne but the Trinh family exercised their right to govern. The Le Dynasty worked with the Trinh family, the two survived for more than 200 years.

Education is one of Nguyen Binh Khiem’s greatest contributions to the era. In addition to his years as an official in the Imperial Court, he used his spare time to teach. He opened a school by the Tuyet River and was honored as “Tuyet Giang phu tu”. Alike Confucius, he had many successful students who passed such as Phung Khac Khoan, Luong Huu Khanh, Truong Thoi Cu, Dinh Trung Trung, Han Giang Nguyen Van Chinh. Phung Khac Khoan is the most well-known out of all of them. He lived in Bung Village, Phung Xa Commune, Thach That District, Ha Tay Province (now Hanoi) was promoted to the Ministry of Public Works. He was also a very good

physiotherapist alike his teacher, the folks called the Duke of Bung. Though not taught directly by him, Nguyen Thiep (1723-1804) always considered himself as a student Nguyen Binh Khiem. Nguyen Thiep came from the village of Tinh Thon, Nguyet UC, Lai Thach, La Son District (now Can Loc District, HaTinh Province). Although, he was a wise and intelligent student but it took him a long time to participate in the exam. He spent more than two decades as an official in the Imperial Court before resigning and moved to Bui Phong farm on Thien Nhan mountain (in Nam Dan District and Thanh Chuong District, Nghe An Province) and called himself master La So, General Nguyen Hue has also repeatedly sent men to ask Nguyen Thiep to help him strategize for his fights against enemies. Nguyen Binh Khiem had made a stamp in Nguyen Thiep's poetry, philosophy, concept and lifestyle.

Charmed by the talented teacher Nguyen Binh Khiem, Nguyen Thiep travelled back to Hai Duong to find related traces to his life and wrote the poem "Passing by Duke of Trinh's place". Through his heartfelt poetry, Nguyen Thiep praised Nguyen Binh Khiem as a godly person whom can plot and manifest great things as well as a man with magical words that could keep three generations safe (Lien, 1998). The similar political view between Nguyen Binh Khiem and Nguyen Thiep reflects "skepticism" on the intellectual's feudalism in Vietnam. Throughout their lives and careers, future generations can still retrace the social psychology of the era.

Era notions on Nguyen Binh Khiem's centrism: In the economic-political-social context of Vietnam today, Nguyen Binh Khiem's centrism proved to be a positive wide-spread philosophy that impacted the perceptions of majority of the citizens significantly, especially businessman and intellectuals.

The Vietnamese economic system has been used over two decades and brought about great achievements contribute to the advancement in life. However, every medallion has its flip side, the purpose of this economic mechanism is to put profits to the forefront. Therefore, business owner have disregarded ethical standards and legislation to produce and circulate "dirty" food, poor quality goods that affect public health and disturbing the consumption market.

In the context mentioned above, Nguyen Binh Khiem's opinion of centrism criticize the bad habits of human beings, condemning the greed and immorality of a fraction of people who regarded money more than human and praising dignified people. Centrism advises producers and businessmen to place themselves in between the producers and consumers, stop chasing after profits while

weighing up between morality and law. At the same time, there is a voice of Nguyen Binh Khiem that says: "Let business ethics be in the top position". Nguyen Binh Khiem's philosophy on centrism is the theoretical and methodological basis for the contemporary intellectuals to deal with socio-political issues. Due to various reasons in Vietnam, there is still a monogenetic political system. According to Article 4 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Communist Party of Vietnam is the only political force in the country, called totalitarianism. So, what and how to ensure democracy condition if only one party led? This is a hard question (CPV., 2016).

In a monogenetic political context, intellectuals-the purest essence of society must choose the way of centrism, they must not go to the extremes both in their work and behaviors. Therefore, most of their thoughts and actions should always orient towards harmony, sharing common and national interests. In doing so, not only will they be able to protect their reputations but also protect the common interest of the vulnerable section.

Corruption and moral degradation among party members has always been one of the hot issues, centrism is needed to resolve this issue. Corruption is a bad habit, reflecting the pit-less greed of humanity. The consequences of corruption can make an enormous impact on lifestyles, creating social evils and moral degradation. Vietnamese law has imposed strict punishments such as imprisonment, death penalty but still cannot eliminate corruption.

In the world today in general and in Vietnam in particular the pollution and exploitation of the environment are triggering the SOS signals which require the help of the Zhong Yong theory. Therefore, harmonizing the interests among classes and people, creating a friendly environment for nature is one of the basic contents of the philosophy of sustainable development that the Vietnamese state is trying forwards. This content has been identified by the communist party of Vietnam with the socialist ideals and striving for the past years. The road of regulating the interests and protecting the environment has come from the cultural and social realities of the Vietnamese people, the path of modernization and nationalization. But in the process of modernization, content in harmony with nature is easily set aside. Due to the pressure of economic development and the backward, rigid, even lack of knowledge on conquest and natural regeneration, due to the weakness in promulgation and enforcement of environmental law, the nature of Vietnam increasingly and severely damaged (especially, after the Formosa disaster). Environmental pollution, forest fires, depleted water sources. lead to the decline in the quality of life. The imbalance of the

ecosystem that leads to the imbalance in the vicious circle of culture that creates the risk of unsustainable development is a great challenge for Vietnam. To overcome this risk, receiving the philosophy of life centered in Nguyen Binh Khiem thought is very important.

With Nguyen Binh Khiem's centrism, we see how he praised the quiet, simple lifestyle, the balance between physical and mental state. Staying close to the citizens is his political view, churn away from all negativity, staying centered, no manipulations. If the Communist Party members understand this concept of life, they will have a cleaner, healthier, more human way of life, contributing to the advancement of society.

Nguyen Binh Khiem is one of the rare intellectuals in the Vietnamese feudal history who have crystallized the fundamental values of all three ideologies: Confucianism Buddhism-Taoism. To obtain the knowledge to pass the exam and work as an official, he had to "drink books, eat history", memorized the "Four Letters"- "Five Sutra". Once retired, he followed the philosophy of Lao Tao's words "wealth, disgrace", "work, retreat". Returned home and build Bach Van hermitage, he lived according to Buddhist traditions. Even though he is no longer an official, Nguyen Binh Khiem did not escaped the political life and remained an advisor to the Imperial Court and opened a school to teach his students which was the philosophy of the Tran Dynasty that he had learned from.

CONCLUSION

Even though it had been nearly half a millennium, since, the Nguyen Binh Khiem days. That had been long enough for us to analyze and evaluate him correctly and accurately. Dr. Nguyen Tai Thu's in "Nguyen Binh Khiem-a symbolic philosopher of the 16th Century" remarked objectively: "While the nobleman was fighting for fame and wealth, Nguyen Binh Khiem was indifferent. He have had a great education, intelligence and talent in society, he could have become a privileged, wealthy, happy man but he refused all, renounced all the prizes, resigned and returned to the countryside, lived among the peasant farmers. His life was clear and pure. Some people criticized his attitude and how he shuns away from society but it is fair to say that, his ability to upkeep the noble qualities of a nobleman at that time are hard to come by" (Thu, 1993).

To look at him from another perspective, Dinh Gia Khanh wrote: "As a great literature writer of our country, Nguyen Binh Khiem is thought of as a great fig tree radiating essence on the whole era. Although, he was not as successful as Nguyen Trai but his heart of gold and concerns about the people will never fade and entitled to

the educational values he had left behind. His heart, poetry reflected his ideology for fine Vietnamese traditions as well as its people. Nguyen Binh Khiem is considered to have brought a lot of contribution to the process in building the soul and quality of Vietnam" (Khanh, 1983).

Although, not fully integrated the "work, virtue, speech" saying alike the two predecessors (Tran Nhan Tong and Nguyen Trai) but what Nguyen Binh Khiem had done in the field of speech and his virtues showed that he is a celebrity of the time. He had played many roles: a philosopher, a poet, a teacher, a monk and a historical prophet. With his lifestyle, he lived for almost a whole century, witnessing the prosperity and down-fall of many dynasties. With his gentle but sharp pen, he criticized the snobbish lifestyle of those with a lot of money but is uncharitable. His poetry is highly educational and lead people to higher values of: Truthfulness, compassion, grace. To be able to live for a whole century and witnessed all the glories of the society while still maintaining a centered life, abide moral standards and dedicate all of his knowledge to the society is what he had always strived for.

Nguyen Binh Khiem had entered history as a Saint. Dai Cao Dai had honored him as Thanh Son Chon one of the three sacred Saints of the Tao. The paining of Tam Thanh signed a peace treaty at the Tay Ninh Holy See by Le Minh Tong in 1947, depicted Nguyen Binh Khiem's portrait next Victor Hugo-the famous French writer and researcher of "Les Miserables" and Sun Yat-sen-a Chinese Revolutionary leader, the founder of the theory "three principles of the people". One wrote a peace treaty in Chinese characters, one wrote it in French: "Heavenly consolidation created a path of righteousness".

In 2000, the people of Hai Phong City constructed a project to upgrade a large area of "Nguyen Binh Khiem cultural relic site" in Trung Am Village, Ly Hoc Commune, Vinh District with various work of his great merit. His monument was also built in the relic it stood there watching heaven and earth as if providing future predictions.

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