

Research Article

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Educational Transmission of Neo-Confucian Thought in 18th-Century Vietnam: The Pedagogical Legacy of Le Quy Don

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Abstract

Background/Purpose. While Neo-Confucianism has been widely studied as a philosophical and political tradition, its educational implications in Vietnamese history remain underexplored. This study examines the pedagogical legacy of Lê Quý Đôn, an 18th-century Vietnamese scholar, with a focus on how his writings and institutional roles reflect Confucian educational principles. The research aims to bridge the gap between historical scholarship and educational theory by analyzing the transmission of moral and civic values through Confucian pedagogy.

Materials/methods. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach using document analysis. Primary sources include Lê Quý Đôn's philosophical texts and historical records from the Quốc Tử Giám. The data were analyzed thematically through the lens of moral development theory, citizenship education, and Confucian pedagogy. Coding procedures and interpretive synthesis were employed to identify educational patterns and implicit curricular values.

Results. The findings reveal that Lê Quý Đôn promoted a model of education centered on ethical self-cultivation, scholarly discipline, and meritocratic advancement. His writings emphasize the role of education in shaping moral character and civic responsibility. The study identifies key pedagogical elements such as hierarchical learning, values-based instruction, and curriculum leadership embedded in his work and practice.

Conclusion. Lê Quý Đôn's educational philosophy offers a localized framework for understanding Confucian pedagogy in Vietnamese history. His integration of moral education and institutional reform provides valuable insights for contemporary discussions on character education and educational leadership. Future research may explore comparative studies with other East Asian educators or apply his principles to modern citizenship curricula.



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1. Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in the development of societies, serving both as a means of communication and as an essential aspect of individual identity. It facilitates interaction, meets

Vietnam in the 18th century was a nation in flux. Beneath the surface of dynastic continuity under the Lê monarchy, the country was fractured by competing centers of power, most notably the Trịnh lords in the North and the Nguyễn lords in the South. This dual sovereignty produced not only political instability but also a crisis of moral authority, prompting renewed interest in Confucian ideals as a source of ethical and institutional reform. Amid this turbulence, intellectual life flourished, and education emerged as a key domain for restoring social order and cultivating virtue.

Among the leading figures of this intellectual renaissance was Le Quy Don (1726–1784), a scholar-official whose contributions spanned historiography, philosophy, governance, and education. Often celebrated as a “living encyclopedia,” Le Quy Don was not merely a transmitter of classical knowledge but a reformist thinker who reinterpreted Neo-Confucian principles to address the challenges of his time. His educational philosophy, rooted in Confucian ethics, meritocratic ideals, and moral pedagogy, offers a valuable lens through which to examine the intersection of political thought and educational practice in premodern Vietnam.

This study aims to reposition Le Quy Don within the field of educational sciences by analyzing his writings and activities through the lens of pedagogical theory. Specifically, it explores how his understanding of education, his views on the imperial examination system, and his role at the Quốc Tử Giám reflect broader themes in moral education, character development, and Confucian pedagogy. While previous scholarship has focused primarily on his political and philosophical legacy, this article foregrounds his contributions to educational thought and practice.

The central research questions guiding this study are: (1) What is Le Quy Don’s conception of education and its moral purpose? (2) How did Neo-Confucianism shape the educational system in 18th-century Vietnam? (3) In what ways can Le Quy Don’s works be interpreted through contemporary educational theories such as moral development, values education, and citizenship education?

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative document analysis approach, combining historical interpretation with textual analysis of philosophical texts. Primary sources include Le Quy Don’s major works, *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ*, *Quần Thu Khảo Biện*, *Kinh Thu Diễn Nghĩa*, and *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, which are examined in light of educational theory. Secondary sources include historical studies and contemporary literature on Confucian pedagogy, moral education (e.g., Kohlberg, Lickona), and educational leadership. This interdisciplinary framework enables a nuanced understanding of how Le Quy Don’s ideas resonate with and enrich current debates in educational philosophy.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on Confucian educational thought, particularly the emphasis on self-cultivation (*tu thân*), ethical instruction, and the role of examinations in shaping civic virtue. These ideas are contextualized within modern frameworks such as character education, holistic education, and the hidden curriculum, allowing for a comparative analysis that bridges historical and contemporary perspectives.

By situating Le Quy Don’s educational philosophy within both its historical context and the broader discourse of educational theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Vietnamese intellectual history and its relevance to modern pedagogical challenges. It also highlights the enduring value of Confucian ethics in shaping educational leadership, curriculum design, and the moral development of learners.

2. The Rise and Impact of Neo-Confucian Political Philosophy in Song-Era China

The establishment of the Song Dynasty in 960 CE, following Zhao Kuangyin's Chenqiao Uprising, marked a turning point after the prolonged disunity of the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" period. With the unification of China under the Song, which endured until its fall to the Yuan in 1279, a new intellectual and administrative order began to crystallize. Divided into the Northern (960–1127) and Southern (1127–1279) periods, the Song era signaled not only political consolidation but also profound transformations in thought and governance.

Amidst efforts to stabilize society, the Song state adopted Confucian orthodoxy as the ideological foundation of governance, discarding the harsher tenets of Legalism while selectively incorporating influences from Buddhism and Daoism. The outcome of this synthesis was the birth of Neo-Confucianism (理学, Lǐxué), a renewed philosophical vision that reasserted Confucian values through a metaphysical and systematic lens. This intellectual shift played a crucial role in reestablishing civil order after decades of militarized chaos, though in the longer arc of history, it also deepened the cultural entrenchment of the feudal hierarchy by moralizing obedience and social roles.

The advancement of woodblock printing further accelerated this ideological shift, enabling the widespread dissemination of Confucian texts. A new class of literate families emerged, amassing private libraries and propelling their children into formal education in hopes of success in the imperial examinations, a gateway into the bureaucratic elite. Educational practices still relied heavily on memorization, a tradition rooted in Han-era pedagogy. Yet Song scholars increasingly questioned this rote methodology, seeking instead to recover and refine the moral essence of classical teachings. This pedagogical evolution marked a shift from mechanical learning to ethical cultivation, laying the foundation for a Confucian curriculum centered on character development and civic responsibility.

This shift was part of a broader cultural renaissance championed by Emperor Taizu and his successors, who envisioned "rule through culture." The court patronized scholarship, founded academies, and expanded library networks. Institutions such as lǐxiào (礼校), jiǎngtáng (讲堂), and xuéxià (学舍) spread across the empire, while major intellectual hubs, like Bailudong, Yuelu, Ying Tian, and Tung Yang, became vibrant centers of study. Within this fertile environment, thinkers such as Shao Yong, Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, the Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi), Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan, and Chen Liang introduced new dimensions to Confucian inquiry, particularly in the areas of governance, ethics, and the cosmos. These scholars also shaped the educational canon, especially Zhu Xi, whose commentaries on the Four Books became the core curriculum for imperial examinations across East Asia. His emphasis on reflective learning and moral introspection redefined education as a lifelong pursuit of virtue.

Neo-Confucianism aimed to purge what its proponents saw as the superstitions and mysticism inherited from Daoism and Buddhism, reorienting Confucian ethics within a rational and metaphysical structure (Blocker & Starling, 2001, p. 64). Although often critical of these rival traditions, Neo-Confucian scholars borrowed extensively from them in terminology and cosmology. However, unlike Buddhist metaphysics oriented toward transcendence, Confucian metaphysics became a framework for ethical cultivation and social responsibility (Moral, 2002, pp. 281–310). This ethical orientation was not abstract; it was institutionalized through education. Schools became spaces for moral training, and examinations served as mechanisms for selecting virtuous officials, reinforcing the Confucian belief that governance must be grounded in ethical learning.

At the core of Neo-Confucian political doctrine lay the principle of self-cultivation, conceived as the moral cornerstone of familial harmony, state order, and world peace. According to Confucian logic, the moral rectitude of an individual radiates outward: first stabilizing the family, then enabling effective governance, and finally fostering global harmony. As Mencius eloquently framed it, "The

root of the world is the state; the root of the state is the family; the root of the family is the individual.”

This philosophical sequence underscores how personal virtue became a political imperative. Self-cultivation, in this context, was both a personal journey and a collective responsibility, an act of moral socialization aimed at aligning humanity with universal order. Zhou Dunyi encapsulated this view when he asserted that governing the world begins with inner sincerity and domestic harmony: “If one cannot maintain order at home, how can one bring peace to the world?” (Nhan, 2005, p. 905). His words echo the enduring wisdom of *The Great Learning*, where self, family, and polity form an integrated continuum of governance. In educational terms, this continuum functioned as a moral curriculum, guiding learners from personal ethics to civic engagement. The Confucian school thus became a microcosm of the ideal society, where learning was inseparable from ethical transformation.

In summary, Neo-Confucianism in the Song era laid the philosophical and institutional groundwork for a Confucian model of education, one that emphasized moral development, meritocratic selection, and the cultivation of virtuous citizens. These principles would later influence educational systems across East Asia, including Vietnam, where scholars like Le Quy Don adapted and expanded them in response to local conditions.

3. Vietnam in the 18th Century – The Intellectual and Political Landscape of Le Quy Don’s Time

The 18th century marked a complex and fractured epoch in Vietnamese history, shaped by the enduring legacy of internal divisions and layered sovereignties. The seeds of fragmentation had been sown as early as 1527, when Mạc Đăng Dung usurped the Lê throne. From that pivotal moment until 1592, Dai Viet was splintered among four competing factions: the Mạc, Lê, Trịnh, and Nguyễn. Although the Mạc were ultimately expelled from the capital Thăng Long, the feudal structure persisted, morphing into a tripartite political arrangement by the late 17th century, wherein the nominal Lê monarchy coexisted with the *de facto* rule of the Trịnh in the North and the Nguyễn in the South.

This unusual configuration, featuring one king and two lords, reached its peak in the 18th century. By 1744, the Nguyễn lords had formally declared their sovereignty over Đàng Trong (the South), mirroring the Trịnh lords’ earlier assertion of power in Đàng Ngoài (the North) in 1600. While the Lê monarch remained a symbol of continuity and legitimacy, real authority resided in the hands of the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords, with the Trịnh court in the North adopting what scholars term a “dual monarchy” in form and function.

Le Quy Don was born into and served within this intricate system. As a high-ranking scholar-official in the Northern court, his political worldview was shaped in a context where sovereignty was layered, legitimacy was contested, and governance depended on navigating between the symbolic authority of the Lê king and the actual control wielded by the Trịnh Chua. Among Bắc Hà’s literati, allegiance to the Lê throne remained strong, rooted in dynastic loyalty and Confucian orthodoxy. Yet, the Trịnh lords steadily expanded their powers, establishing the phủ Chua, a parallel administrative and military apparatus that gradually eclipsed the royal court. This dual structure also shaped Le Quy Don’s educational vision, where moral instruction and institutional discipline were seen as complementary forces in cultivating virtuous officials.

The early 18th century brought signs of unraveling. Following the death of Trịnh Cương in 1729, his successor Trịnh Giang proved incapable of maintaining order. His reign ushered in administrative decay, widespread corruption, and oppressive rule, exacerbating the burden on the rural populace. The aristocracy’s unchecked extraction of wealth led to waves of peasant unrest. Notable among

these were the uprisings led by Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, Nguyễn Danh Phương, Lê Duy Mật, and Hoàng Công Chất, rebellions that exposed the fragility of both the political and moral order. Meanwhile, similar patterns of crisis were beginning to unfold in the South, suggesting a broader structural decline across both realms of the divided country.

Despite these upheavals, the spiritual and ideological cohesion of Dai Viet remained intact through its shared acknowledgment of the Lê sovereign. This paradox- of unity in fragmentation - deeply influenced contemporary political thought. In the intellectual sphere, Confucianism matured into its most sophisticated Vietnamese form. It is against this backdrop that Le Quy Don emerged as an emblematic figure, the apex of 18th-century Vietnamese scholarship (Thu 2019, 368), a cultural authority and statesman of his era (Hồ, 2020, p. 68).

Born as Lê Danh Phương in 1726 in Diên Hà (present-day Thái Bình province), he hailed from a distinguished line of scholar-officials. His father, Lê Trọng Thứ, was a Doctor of Letters, and his mother descended from the notable Trương Minh Lượng family. Even in his youth, Le Quy Don exhibited prodigious intellectual talent, having read the Book of Odes by age five and mastered classical texts across history, philosophy, and the Hundred Schools by age twelve. His early education exemplifies the Confucian model of moral cultivation through classical learning, where memorization and interpretation of texts served as tools for shaping ethical character.

His formal academic career began in earnest in 1743, when he topped the Regional Examination (Thi Hương) at just 18 years old. However, it would take nearly a decade of perseverance before he triumphed in the Metropolitan and Palace Examinations, securing the prestigious title of Bảng nhãn in 1752, attaining elite status in all three tiers of Vietnam's civil service examinations. This achievement reflects the meritocratic ideals of Confucian pedagogy, where education and examination were pathways to public service and moral leadership.

During this period, he also composed the *Dai Viet Thông Sử*, a pioneering work of historiography. Appointed to the Hanlin Academy, Le Quy Don quickly distinguished himself in both scholarly and administrative circles. By 1754, he had become chief editor of the national historical records. In 1756, he exposed corruption during an inspection of Sơn Nam, and soon after, was entrusted with significant military and diplomatic responsibilities by the Trịnh court. His role in quelling uprisings and overseeing northern campaigns further positioned him as both a man of letters and of action.

In 1757, he was promoted to Thị giảng (Academy Lecturer) and began work on *Quần Thu Khảo Biện*, a philosophical treatise examining classical texts through rigorous comparative analysis. His appointment as Thị giảng marked his formal entry into the educational establishment, where he not only taught but also shaped curriculum and scholarly discourse. His writings during this period reflect a commitment to ethical instruction and the cultivation of civic virtue through education.

With the political shift in 1767, as Prince Trịnh Sâm assumed the regency, Le Quy Don's fortunes reversed. Recognizing his erudition and integrity, Trịnh Sâm reinstated him as Thị Thu (Court Secretary) and entrusted him with editing the national history, while concurrently serving as Tư nghiệp of the Quốc Tử Giám, the Empire's premier educational institution. In this role, Le Quy Don oversaw curriculum development, mentored future scholar-officials, and advocated for the integration of moral philosophy into formal instruction. His tenure at Quốc Tử Giám reflects his belief in education as a vehicle for ethical governance and social stability.

For his efforts in quelling the rebellion of Lê Duy Mật (1769) and his successive provincial inspections, Thanh Hóa (1770), Lạng Sơn (1771), and Sơn Nam Hạ (1772), he was rewarded with a string of promotions: Hữu Thị Lang (Right Deputy Minister of Finance), Tả Thị Lang (Left Deputy Minister of Personnel), and eventually Bồi Tụng (Deputy Prime Minister), accompanied by the noble title of Marquis of Dĩnh Thành (Minh 1998, pp. 7–8). This marked the zenith of his political influence,

culminating in his 1774 appointment as Military Governor of Thăng Long during Lord Trịnh Sâm's southern campaign against Thuận Hóa.

When a governor's office was established in the newly conquered region of Thuận Hóa, Le Quy Don was named Vice Governor and Military Advisor. Collaborating closely with Governor-General Bùi Thế Đạt, he played a key role in organizing resistance efforts against the Tây Sơn insurgency (Trinh Van Thanh, 1966, p. 667). It was here that he compiled the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, a critical ethnographic and administrative work capturing the social and economic realities of the central provinces.

However, the tide once again turned following the death of Trịnh Sâm in 1782. Under the short-lived regency of Trịnh Cán, Le Quy Don's political influence rapidly diminished. Early the following year, he was reassigned as Vice Governor of Nghệ An, a symbolic demotion. He passed away shortly thereafter. As Phan Huy Chu later recorded: "In the winter of the Year of the Cat (1783), he went to Nghệ An as Vice Governor. Soon after, he died, aged 58. He was posthumously granted the titles Ban Đô Ngự Sử (Censor-in-Chief) and Minister of Public Works. Later, under the reign of Lê Chiêu Thống, he was further honored with the posthumous title of Duke of Dĩnh" (Phan Huy Chu 2014b, p. 381).

Le Quy Don's public life, punctuated by remarkable ascents and equally sobering setbacks, paints the portrait of a principled scholar navigating the complex dynamics of a dual monarchy. His legacy rests on four defining pillars: (i) his origins in a family steeped in Confucian learning; (ii) his singular academic distinction in all three tiers of the imperial examinations; (iii) his lifelong dedication to scholarship, reflective practice, and historical documentation; and (iv) his service across both courtly and chancellor-level spheres within the Lê and Trịnh administrations. **These dimensions also underscore his educational philosophy Le Quy Don's public life, punctuated by remarkable ascents and equally sobering setbacks, paints the portrait of a principled scholar navigating the complex dynamics of a dual monarchy. His legacy rests on four defining pillars: (i) his origins in a family steeped in Confucian learning; (ii) his singular academic distinction in all three tiers of the imperial examinations; (iii) his lifelong dedication to scholarship, reflective practice, and historical documentation; and (iv) his service across both courtly and chancellor-level spheres within the Lê and Trịnh administrations.

These dimensions also underscore his educational philosophy, which emphasized the transformative power of learning, the ethical responsibilities of scholar-officials, and the role of education in preserving national integrity. His life exemplifies the Confucian ideal of the "learning gentleman" (quân tử học giả), whose moral cultivation through study leads to public service and societal harmony.

In particular, his work at the Quốc Tử Giám and his reflections on the imperial examination system reveal a coherent vision of education as both a moral and civic enterprise. He viewed education not merely as a means to bureaucratic advancement, but as a process of ethical formation, where learners internalize Confucian virtues and prepare to serve the state with integrity.

In summary, Le Quy Don's intellectual and political journey cannot be separated from his educational commitments. His scholarship, teaching, and institutional leadership reflect a Confucian pedagogy grounded in moral development, meritocratic selection, and the cultivation of virtuous citizens. These principles would shape Vietnamese educational thought for generations to come.

4. Le Quy Don and the Neo-Confucian Mandate: Political Morality in an Age of Instability

Amid the turbulence of 18th-century Dai Viet, Le Quy Don emerged as a scholar deeply committed to moral governance and national revitalization. Drawing upon the Neo-Confucian political tradition, he did not merely inherit its teachings; he transformed them, adapting foundational principles such as the Mandate of Heaven (Thiên mệnh) to the shifting conditions of his time. Importantly, he viewed the Mandate not only as a political doctrine but also as a pedagogical

framework, where rulers and officials were expected to cultivate virtue and educate the populace through moral example.

The concept of Heaven's Mandate had long served as a cornerstone of Confucian political theology. Since the classical era, Confucians have envisioned a universe in moral harmony, where heaven (天) functions not as a divine personage, but as a metaphysical force that oversees the natural and human realms. Human beings, as the most spiritually endowed of all creatures, were tasked with aligning their inner nature (xing) to universal principle (li), a process realized through ethical self-cultivation.

Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song and Ming dynasties interpreted this mandate through a lens of metaphysical rigor and moral exigency. For them, to rule justly required moral excellence, achieved through self-discipline and the unification of inner virtue with cosmic order. As Kim (2020) notes, for the Confucian scholar, personal cultivation and political engagement were inseparable pursuits. This dual commitment formed the basis of Confucian pedagogy, where learning was not merely intellectual but moral, and education was inseparable from governance.

Le Quy Don embraced this vision but nuanced it for Dai Viet's own sociopolitical landscape. In *Kinh Thu Diễn Nghĩa*, he described heaven not as a deity but as an abstract and omnipresent moral force: "Heaven and earth generate and nourish all things, bestowing full virtue upon humankind... From among them arise sages, who observe and complete their tasks, assist in governance, and lead the people back to their original nature, thus becoming the parents of the multitude" (Don, 2014, p. 129). In this formulation, rulers are not divine proxies, but moral stewards whose authority depends on their ethical capacity to educate and uplift society. This view aligns closely with the Confucian ideal of "governing through education" (đĩ giáo trị quốc), where the sovereign functions as both leader and teacher.

For Le Quy Don, legitimate political authority was contingent on virtue. Like earlier Confucians, he believed that only those who possessed heaven's impartial virtue were entrusted with the mandate to rule. He praised King Wen for his moral clarity: "His humane and filial piety was supremely righteous. His luminous virtue reached Heaven... so people across the realm turned to him" (Don, 2014, p. 134). This logic established not only the moral hierarchy that justified rule, but also the conditional nature of political power, it could be revoked when virtue was lost.

Indeed, Le Quy Don emphasized the impermanence of the Heaven's Mandate, writing: "The Heaven's Mandate is far from fixed" (Don, 2014, p. 285). History, he argued, was the arena where heaven's will revealed itself, not through miracles, but through the ascendance or downfall of dynasties. A virtuous person could receive the mandate; one who deviated from the Way could lose it. This flexible interpretation allowed Le Quy Don to rationalize dynastic transitions, including the founding of the Trần and Lê dynasties, as legitimate outcomes of moral causality. Such reasoning also served an educational function, as it reinforced the idea that moral learning and ethical behavior were prerequisites for leadership, regardless of one's birth or status.

Importantly, he asserted that the mandate could descend upon anyone, even those not born into power, so long as they embodied extraordinary virtue. Citing King Tang's elevation, he maintained that "All emperors who rise to power have the mandate of heaven" (Don, 2013, p. 141). Thus, political legitimacy was not an exclusive birthright but a moral achievement, reinforcing the Confucian unity between ethics and governance. This meritocratic principle parallels the imperial examination system, where individuals were selected for public service based on learning and virtue, a cornerstone of Confucian educational philosophy.

Like his contemporary Ngô Thì Nhậm, Le Quy Don was attentive to the evolving sociopolitical reality of late 18th-century Dai Viet, marked by warfare, popular uprisings, and dynastic crises. Both

thinkers expanded upon traditional Confucian tenets by recognizing human agency and public sentiment as crucial to political legitimacy. As Thu (2019) observes, Ngô Thì Nhậm argued that the mandate was grounded not only in heaven's will but also in “the will of the people and the majority decision” (p. 407). This recognition of public sentiment also reflects an educational shift—from top-down moral instruction to a more participatory model of civic education, where rulers must listen, learn, and adapt.

Through this reinterpretation, Le Quy Don brought political thought back to its ethical roots. His writings reiterated the Neo-Confucian linkage between self-cultivation (*tu thân*), family regulation (*tề gia*), and state governance (*trị quốc*). In his view, national stability and social harmony could only be realized when rulers and scholars fulfilled the full progression of the “Eight Articles” (*Bát cương*): investigating things, extending knowledge, making the will sincere, rectifying the heart, cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. This sequence, drawn from *The Great Learning*, functioned as a moral curriculum, a pedagogical roadmap for ethical development from the individual to the collective.

5. Conclusion

The intellectual life of 18th-century Dai Viet unfolded amid deep structural contradictions. Nominally unified under the Lê kings, the North was in fact governed by the Trịnh lords, creating a system of dual sovereignty whose cracks widened with each passing decade. Within this matrix of symbolic legitimacy and practical authority, the country grappled with leadership crises, erosion of moral governance, peasant uprisings, and cultural stagnation. It was precisely in this context of uncertainty and systemic strain that Le Quy Don's political thought matured, not as a reactionary reiteration of classical Confucianism, but as a reformist reinterpretation rooted in both fidelity to tradition and the urgencies of the present.

Le Quy Don's life intersected with both cultural privilege and political turbulence. As a scholar of unrivaled distinction, he achieved the highest ranks in all three tiers of the imperial examination system. But his intellectual path was never one of cloistered theorizing. Serving under the dual administration of the Lê kings and Trịnh lords, he observed firsthand the limits of ceremonial authority and the demands of *realpolitik*. These experiences infused his writings with a rare blend of classical rigor and empirical insight. His educational journey, from prodigious childhood learning to his leadership at the Quốc Tử Giám, demonstrates a lifelong commitment to Confucian pedagogy and the cultivation of moral talent.

While his worldview was grounded in Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, he did not embrace it uncritically. Rather, Le Quy Don demonstrated remarkable intellectual elasticity, reinterpreting core Confucian doctrines, such as the Mandate of Heaven, in light of shifting political realities. His emphasis on the moral legitimacy of rulers, the ethical responsibilities of officials, and the foundational role of the people revealed a model of governance that was at once deeply moral and politically adaptive. This model also functioned as an educational framework, where governance was inseparable from instruction, and rulers were expected to lead not only by law but by example and ethical teaching.

More significantly, his writings ventured beyond idealistic prescriptions. He did not shy away from recognizing the administrative utility of *bá đạo* (hegemonic governance) when *Vuong đạo* (kingly governance) proved inadequate, nor did he dismiss Legalist thinkers like Guan Zhong or the policy designs of the Qin state. In doing so, he carved out a distinct position within Vietnamese political philosophy, one that acknowledged the necessity of institutional strength and legal clarity while maintaining virtue as the core criterion of governance. This synthesis of Confucian ethics and Legalist pragmatism also shaped his educational philosophy: discipline must serve moral development, and institutional structures must reinforce ethical learning.

Equally important was Le Quy Don's view of the social order. He championed a triadic structure of state power in which kings ruled with moral vision, officials governed with ethical competence, and the people, though placed at the base, were understood as the bedrock of national stability. His conception of the people was not merely rhetorical but shaped by direct engagement in local governance and the observation of socio-economic realities. Though he remained cautious about rebellion, he nevertheless articulated a clear political imperative: rulers who fail to respect and care for the people will ultimately forfeit both their legitimacy and Heaven's Mandate. In this vision, education was the moral glue of society, binding ruler, official, and citizen through shared ethical values and lifelong learning.

In sum, Le Quy Don's thought represents not only the culmination of Vietnamese Confucian political philosophy but also a sophisticated theory of moral education. His legacy lies in the integration of governance and pedagogy, where ethical cultivation, scholarly rigor, and administrative responsibility converge. This study contributes to educational science by highlighting how historical Confucian models of education, centered on character formation, civic virtue, and meritocratic selection, can inform contemporary debates on values education, citizenship education, and educational leadership.

Future research may explore comparative perspectives between Le Quy Don and other East Asian Confucian educators such as Jeong Yak Yong, or examine how Confucian educational ideals can be adapted to modern curricula in Vietnam and beyond. By revisiting historical figures through the lens of educational theory, we not only enrich our understanding of the past but also uncover enduring principles for shaping ethical and engaged learners today.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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