



Humanistic Philosophy in the State and Legal Thought of King Le Thanh Tong: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Significance

Dr. Vo Thi Xuan Huong

Faculty of History and International Relations, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Vo Thi Xuan Huong**

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Abstract

The reign of King Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497) marked a defining stage in the formation of Vietnam’s centralized monarchy, combining political stability with legal and cultural development. His philosophy of governance, grounded in humanism, synthesized Confucian ethics and indigenous Vietnamese values to create an enduring model of moral governance. Based on historical and philosophical analysis of royal decrees, the Hong Duc Code, and annalistic records, this study clarifies how Le Thanh Tong integrated moral virtue with legal order to ensure that justice was guided by compassion and humanity. The research focuses on his conception of the ruler and the people, the ethical foundation of administration, and the moral role of education and literature in statecraft. The findings reveal that his synthesis of virtue and law transformed the state into an instrument of ethical education, where law served morality and morality legitimized law. His humanistic philosophy shaped the evolution of Vietnamese legal and political thought and continues to offer theoretical and moral significance for building a socialist rule-of-law state centered on humanity, justice, and responsibility.

Keywords: Le Thanh Tong, Humanism, Confucian Governance, Virtue and Law, *Hong Duc Code*, Vietnamese Political Philosophy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical context and significance of Le Thanh Tong’s reign

The fifteenth century witnessed the consolidation of Vietnamese sovereignty and the maturation of state institutions following centuries of resistance and nation-building. King Le Thanh Tong (1442–1497), the most celebrated monarch of the Early Le dynasty, transformed Dai Viet into a powerful centralized state governed by law, education, and moral discipline. His reign was distinguished not only by military and territorial achievements but by profound intellectual and ethical reform. As historians have observed, Le Thanh Tong’s policies reflected the culmination of a long process in which Vietnamese political thought assimilated and localized Confucian doctrines, adapting them to national realities and cultural sensibilities (Doan Chinh, 2013)^[1]; (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1991)^[2].

The king’s state philosophy represented a synthesis between moral virtue and institutional rationality. He viewed the state not merely as an apparatus of control but as a moral organism designed to nurture social harmony and human welfare. This conception of governance, grounded in compassion and justice, constituted what later scholars would call the “humanistic state philosophy” of the Le dynasty (Vu Khieu, 1995)^[6].

1.2. Problem statement and research objectives

Despite the extensive historiography surrounding Le Thanh Tong’s reign, previous research often emphasized administrative efficiency and legal codification while underestimating the underlying moral and philosophical dimensions.

This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing the humanistic essence of Le Thanh Tong's political and legal thought. Specifically, it explores three major questions:

1. What philosophical foundations underpinned his conception of the state and law?
2. How did his humanism manifest in administrative and legal reforms?
3. What is the contemporary significance of his humanistic philosophy for modern governance and legal culture in Vietnam?

By approaching these questions from a historical–philosophical perspective, the research aims to demonstrate that Le Thanh Tong's governance was not purely technocratic but deeply ethical, guided by compassion, virtue, and a profound respect for human dignity (Le Thi Son, 2004)^[5]; (Nguyen Hoai Van, 2007)^[10].

1.3. Literature review and theoretical background

Modern Vietnamese scholarship has devoted significant attention to Le Thanh Tong's reign, particularly his contributions to law, education, and administration. Doan Chinh (2013)^[1] identifies the king's humanism as a unifying principle of state organization, where moral virtue operates as the foundation of governance. Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan (2011)^[4] emphasizes the humane spirit in the *Hong Duc Code*, which balances justice and mercy. Similarly, Le Thi Son (2004)^[5] argues that the Code reflects not only legal sophistication but a concern for moral education, social harmony, and gender equity.

From a philosophical perspective, Vu Khieu (1995)^[6] situates Le Thanh Tong's thought within the Vietnamese adaptation of Confucianism, describing it as “ethical statecraft” that prioritizes benevolence (*nhân*) and righteousness (*ngĩa*) over coercion. Nguyen Hoai Van and Dang Duy Thin (2012)^[7] further interpret his reforms in education and bureaucracy as expressions of *moral institutionalism*, a system where law is inseparable from ethics.

Internationally, Le Thanh Tong's thought aligns with the broader East Asian Confucian tradition while maintaining distinctive Vietnamese characteristics. His concept of *thân dân*—compassionate governance—echoes Mencius's idea of *minben* (the people as the root), yet it differs by emphasizing empathy and mutual responsibility rather than rigid hierarchy (Phan Quoc Khanh, 2003)^[3]. Such comparisons highlight the originality and universality of his humanistic vision.

1.4. Methodology and sources

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, philosophical interpretation, and textual study. Primary sources include the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* (1998a, 1998b)^{[13][14]}, the *Hong Duc Code* (*Quốc triều hình luật*), and the king's literary works such as *Hong Duc Quoc Am Thi Tap*. These materials provide direct insight into the ethical and political ideals of the Le court.

Secondary sources encompass contemporary Vietnamese research and classical Confucian literature, allowing for a comparative understanding of humanistic governance. The analysis is grounded in qualitative interpretation rather than positivist description, seeking to reconstruct the moral logic underlying the king's actions and decrees. The integration of textual, historical, and philosophical methods ensures that the

study captures both the structural and ethical dimensions of his statecraft (Vo Thi Xuan Huong, 2015)^[12].

1.5. Research significance

The study contributes to both historical scholarship and contemporary political thought. Historically, it clarifies the moral foundations of the Vietnamese state during the fifteenth century, a period when Confucianism was not passively adopted but actively reinterpreted through a humanistic lens. Philosophically, it reveals the coherence of Le Thanh Tong's thought as a synthesis of virtue, law, and humanity.

In practical terms, the findings bear implications for present-day Vietnam, where the construction of a socialist rule-of-law state (*Nhà nước pháp quyền XHCN*) continues to prioritize the harmony between legal regulation and moral education. By revisiting Le Thanh Tong's example, policymakers and scholars can rediscover a traditional model of governance that upholds justice while fostering compassion. His thought thus bridges the past and present, providing ethical guidance for modern statecraft (Le Minh Tam, 2010)^[8]; (Doan Chinh, 2013)^[1].

1.6. Structure of the article

The article is divided into four sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a historical and theoretical overview of the formation of Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy, focusing on the interaction between Confucian and indigenous Vietnamese values. Section 3 analyzes the core dimensions of his humanism as expressed in the concepts of state, law, administration, and education. Section 4 concludes with an assessment of the contemporary relevance of his ideas for modern Vietnamese governance and moral culture.

This structure allows for a comprehensive interpretation of Le Thanh Tong's intellectual legacy—one that situates him not only as a historical figure but as a philosopher whose vision of humane and ethical governance continues to inspire Vietnamese thought today. As Vu Khieu (1995)^[6] asserts, the greatness of Le Thanh Tong lies in his capacity to transform virtue into policy and morality into law, establishing a paradigm of governance rooted in humanity and wisdom.

2. Historical and Theoretical Background

2.1. The socio-historical context of Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy

The fifteenth century was a decisive period in the consolidation of Vietnam's centralized feudal monarchy. After centuries of foreign domination and internal turbulence, the Le dynasty, founded in 1428, sought to restore political order, national unity, and cultural identity. Under King Le Thanh Tong (r. 1460–1497), Dai Viet achieved a level of institutional stability and cultural refinement unparalleled in previous centuries. The king's reign, lasting thirty-seven years, became known as the golden age of Vietnamese civilization (Doan Chinh, 2013)^[1].

Politically, Le Thanh Tong reorganized the state into a highly disciplined bureaucracy with clearly defined administrative hierarchies. The Six Ministries (*Lục Bộ*) and Three Courts (*Tam Ty*) provided a rationalized system for governance, while the provincial structure known as *Thừa tuyên* ensured central control over local administration (Nguyen Hoai Van, 2007)^[10]. Economically, he promoted agricultural

development and land surveys, encouraged irrigation works, and implemented tax reforms to reduce the burdens on farmers. These policies reflected his conviction that the prosperity of the people was the true foundation of state power (Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan, 2011) ^[4].

Culturally and ideologically, Le Thanh Tong completed the process of Confucian institutionalization initiated by earlier dynasties. However, unlike the rigid Sinocentric model, he infused Confucianism with distinctly Vietnamese humanism—an emphasis on compassion, moral equality, and social harmony. Doan Chinh (2013) ^[1] observed that his adaptation of Confucian doctrine was not passive imitation but creative transformation, grounded in the principle of *thân dân* (empathy toward the people). This transformation allowed Confucian political ethics to coexist with traditional Vietnamese communalism and Buddhist compassion.

Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy emerged in response to historical necessity. After a long period of warfare and disorder, moral restoration was essential for stabilizing society. By placing ethics at the core of governance, the king provided not only a legal but also a moral framework for the reconstruction of national identity. Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] emphasized that the Le dynasty under his rule represented the first complete integration of virtue, law, and education into a coherent system of statecraft—a synthesis rarely achieved in other Asian monarchies of the time.

2.2. The intellectual foundations: Confucianism and its Vietnamese transformation

The theoretical framework of Le Thanh Tong's humanism was primarily derived from Confucian ethics, especially the teachings of Confucius (*Khổng Tử*) and Mencius (*Mạnh Tử*). Central to these doctrines was the concept of *nhân* (benevolence) as the highest moral principle and *ngĩa* (righteousness) as the guiding standard for political conduct. In the Chinese context, these virtues reinforced hierarchical order and the authority of the emperor as the "Son of Heaven." However, in Vietnam, they were localized to emphasize social responsibility, compassion, and the well-being of the people (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1991) ^[2].

According to Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan (2011) ^[4], Le Thanh Tong's interpretation of Confucianism reflected a distinct moral pragmatism. Rather than viewing virtue as a metaphysical abstraction, he regarded it as an instrument for governance and public welfare. His belief that "the ruler must first cultivate his virtue before ruling the people" exemplified the Mencian idea that moral example is the source of legitimacy. Yet he went beyond Mencius by institutionalizing virtue into law and administrative practice.

This process of adaptation is often described by Vietnamese scholars as the *Vietnamization of Confucianism* (*Việt hóa Nho giáo*). Phan Quoc Khanh (2003) ^[3] explained that while Chinese Confucianism stressed social hierarchy and patriarchal values, Le Thanh Tong's version emphasized human equality before moral principles and the compassionate duty of rulers. His governance philosophy blended Confucian ethics with indigenous traditions of communal solidarity and Buddhist altruism, producing a distinctive Vietnamese moral culture.

The influence of Buddhism, though less visible in formal institutions, contributed to the king's tolerant and compassionate worldview. Buddhist teachings on mercy (*từ bi*) and nonviolence reinforced his approach to justice and

governance. Le Thi Son (2004) ^[5] noted that the coexistence of Confucian rationality and Buddhist compassion in Le Thanh Tong's thought reflects the syncretic nature of Vietnamese spirituality, where moral duty and empathy were intertwined.

Thus, Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy was built upon an integrated ethical foundation that combined the Confucian emphasis on virtue, the Buddhist spirit of compassion, and the Vietnamese tradition of communal responsibility. This synthesis distinguished Vietnamese political thought from both Chinese authoritarianism and Western legalism, offering a moral vision of governance rooted in humanity and justice (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1].

2.3. The moral philosophy of virtue, law, and humanity

At the heart of Le Thanh Tong's thought lies the relationship between virtue (*đức*), law (*pháp*), and humanity (*nhân*). This triad formed the ethical core of his governance. He recognized that virtue alone, without legal discipline, could lead to disorder, while law without moral foundation could become oppressive. Therefore, he sought to balance moral cultivation with legal enforcement, creating what Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] termed "moral legality."

In this model, law was not an external force imposed upon society but an expression of moral order. The *Hong Duc Code* (*Quốc triều hình luật*) exemplified this philosophy by incorporating Confucian ethical norms into legal regulations. Crimes such as corruption, disloyalty, and cruelty were treated not only as violations of law but as betrayals of morality. Conversely, acts of filial piety and benevolence were rewarded as expressions of virtue (Le Thi Son, 2004) ^[5]. This moral conception of law reflects Le Thanh Tong's belief that justice must harmonize *công* (impartial fairness) and *tình* (human sentiment). In Vietnamese culture, this synthesis embodies a humanistic sense of empathy and proportionality. Phan Quoc Khanh (2003) ^[3] argued that this moral jurisprudence distinguished Vietnamese legal thought from its Chinese counterpart, which prioritized order and punishment. By integrating emotion into justice, Le Thanh Tong humanized law and ensured that it served as a tool for moral correction rather than mere coercion.

Furthermore, Le Thanh Tong redefined the concept of "righteous rule" (*chính danh*). In classical Confucianism, this term referred to the ruler's legitimacy through correct titles and proper conduct. The king expanded it to include moral accountability to the people. Nguyen Hoai Van (2007) ^[10] observed that in his decrees, the king repeatedly stressed that the true legitimacy of a ruler lies in benevolence and impartiality, not in divine mandate or aristocratic lineage. Such statements reveal a deep shift toward human-centered governance unprecedented in Vietnamese political thought.

2.4. Education and moral cultivation as the foundation of governance

Education occupied a central place in Le Thanh Tong's theoretical system. He considered learning not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as a moral process essential to social order and national prosperity. The king proclaimed that "virtue is the root of learning, and learning is the path to virtue," encapsulating his belief in the inseparability of knowledge and ethics (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1].

He restructured the national education system, revitalizing the *Quốc Tử Giám* (National Academy) and reforming the

civil service examinations to ensure that officials were selected based on both talent and moral integrity. Nguyen Hoai Van and Dang Duy Thin (2012) ^[7] emphasized that the content of examinations during his reign extended beyond classical texts to include moral reasoning, statecraft, and social responsibility. By aligning education with ethical formation, Le Thanh Tong institutionalized virtue as the foundation of governance.

Cultural policy was also an extension of this educational philosophy. The establishment of the Tao Đản Literary Society under royal patronage reflected his belief that literature and art should serve moral and social purposes. In the *Hong Duc Quoc Am Thi Tap*, he used poetry to promote compassion, diligence, and loyalty among both officials and citizens (Mai Xuan Hai, 2003) ^[8]. Literature thus became a moral pedagogy, shaping collective consciousness and reinforcing ethical norms within society.

As Vo Thi Xuan Huong (2015) ^[12] noted, Le Thanh Tong's combination of moral education, legal reform, and cultural enlightenment created a holistic system of governance that cultivated both the intellect and conscience of his subjects. His educational reforms ensured that moral virtue was not confined to elites but extended throughout the administrative hierarchy and the populace.

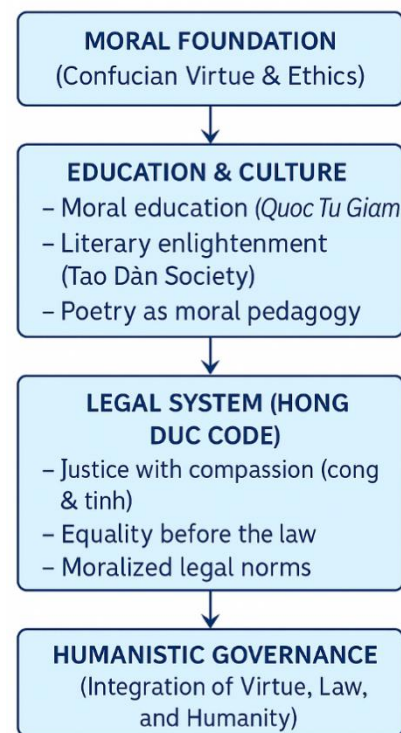
2.5. The philosophical synthesis: Vietnamese humanism as state ideology

The culmination of Le Thanh Tong's intellectual project was the articulation of a distinctly Vietnamese form of humanism that integrated ethics, law, and governance into a unified worldview. Doan Chinh (2013) ^[11] described this synthesis as "the moralization of politics," in which state institutions served as instruments for moral education and human development.

This philosophy regarded the ruler as the moral exemplar of society, responsible for both personal virtue and institutional justice. Yet, unlike autocratic models of divine kingship, Le Thanh Tong's conception emphasized reciprocal duty: while subjects owed loyalty and respect, the monarch owed compassion and fairness. This reciprocal humanism blurred the line between authority and humanity, transforming political power into moral stewardship (Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan, 2011) ^[4].

The king's humanistic ideology thus transcended the dualism of idealism and realism. It was both a moral vision and a practical program, implemented through legal codes, educational systems, and administrative reforms. Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] asserted that this unity of morality and practicality was the hallmark of Le Thanh Tong's genius, positioning him as both a philosopher-king and a reformer.

In theoretical terms, his thought contributed to the broader evolution of Vietnamese political philosophy by defining the relationship between morality and governance as dialectical rather than oppositional. Law and virtue were not competing forces but complementary aspects of humanistic statecraft. This integration became a defining feature of Vietnamese governance for centuries and continues to inform contemporary discourses on ethical leadership and public administration (Le Minh Tam, 2010) ^[8].



Source: Prepared by the author based on Doan Chinh (2013) ^[11], Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6], and Vo Thi Xuan Huong (2015) ^[12].

Fig 1: The Structure of Le Thanh Tong's Humanistic Governance System

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sources and Data

This study is based primarily on historical and legal documents from the fifteenth century, especially the Quốc triều hình luật (Hong Duc Code), royal decrees, annalistic records such as the Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư, and moral treatises attributed to King Lê Thánh Tông. Supplementary data were drawn from Vietnamese and international scholarly works concerning Confucian statecraft, the philosophy of governance, and comparative law traditions in East Asia. These sources provide the necessary context to identify the intellectual foundations and institutional expressions of humanistic governance during the Lê dynasty.

The analysis also integrates secondary studies by Vietnamese historians and legal scholars (e.g., Doan, 2013 ^[11]; Vu Khieu, 1995 ^[6]; Le Thanh Sam, 2004 ^[8]), which elucidate how moral, political, and juridical ideas coalesced in the King's state-building project. The combination of primary and secondary materials allows for a critical reconstruction of the King's humanistic thought in its historical setting.

3.2. Analytical Approach

The research adopts a qualitative historical approach, combining textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and philosophical reflection. Each legal and literary text was examined in its socio-political milieu to determine how ethical reasoning informed legal provisions and administrative regulations. The method emphasizes content analysis—tracing recurrent moral themes such as benevolence (nhân), righteousness (nghĩa), integrity (liêm),

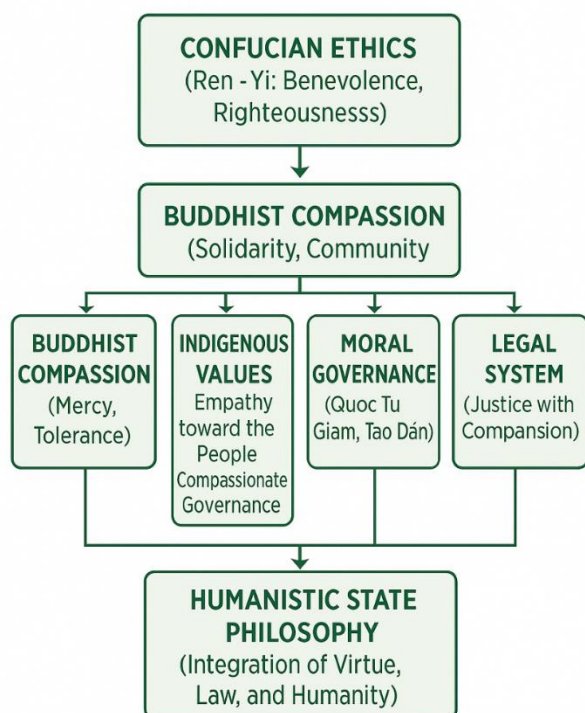
and empathy toward the people (*thân dân*)—and their institutional manifestations in governance, education, and justice.

Furthermore, a comparative interpretive method is applied to situate Lê Thánh Tông's thought within broader East Asian traditions. By comparing Vietnamese Confucianism with the Ming and Choson (Korean) models, the study highlights distinct features of Vietnamese moral governance, particularly the fusion of ethical humanism and legal rationality. This interpretive approach enables an understanding of how Vietnamese statecraft localized and humanized the Confucian "rule by virtue" ideal.

3.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is grounded in the triadic relationship among virtue (*đức*), law (*pháp*), and humanity (*nhân*). These three principles serve as analytical categories to evaluate how moral ideals were codified into legal norms. "Virtue" represents the moral foundation of rulers and officials; "law" embodies the institutional mechanisms that enforce fairness and discipline; and "humanity" mediates between them, ensuring compassion, proportionality, and social harmony.

The framework also draws on the idea of ethical legality, in which moral education and legal order are mutually reinforcing. This perspective recognizes that, for Lê Thánh Tông, good governance did not depend solely on punitive enforcement but on cultivating virtuous citizens and officials through education, literature, and ethical discourse. Consequently, the study interprets the King's humanistic philosophy as a dynamic synthesis of moral principle and legal structure, rather than a mere adoption of Confucian orthodoxy.



Source: Vo Thi Xuan Huong (2025)

Fig 2: Conceptual Framework of Humanistic Governance under King Le Thanh Tong

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Humanism in the concept of the state and the people

The humanistic foundation of Le Thanh Tong's governance was built upon the principle of *thân dân*—governing with empathy and responsibility toward the people. He considered the people not as passive subjects but as the root of the nation (*dân vi bản*). In his royal instructions, he emphasized that "the ruler's virtue is measured by the welfare of his people," a sentiment that encapsulates both Confucian ethics and Vietnamese communal values (Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan, 2011) [4].

This principle guided every aspect of his administrative, economic, and legal reforms. He promoted irrigation systems, improved agricultural productivity, and reduced taxes during years of poor harvest, showing his conviction that good governance must begin with compassion (Doan Chinh, 2013) [1]. Nguyen Hoai Van (2007) [10] observed that his decrees on famine relief, care for widows and orphans, and equitable land distribution revealed a deep sense of moral obligation toward the vulnerable.

The concept of *thân dân* also shaped the king's view of authority. Instead of enforcing fear or coercion, he believed in moral persuasion. The ruler, as the moral exemplar, should "govern by virtue so that the people follow willingly." This notion aligns with the Mencian doctrine that the legitimacy of rulers derives from their humane conduct rather than divine right. Yet, Le Thanh Tong's version differed by institutionalizing empathy into the structure of government, thus transforming compassion into policy (Vu Khieu, 1995) [6].

In his reforms, Le Thanh Tong linked the stability of the state with the ethical behavior of both officials and citizens. The moral education of the people was a political responsibility, for only a virtuous populace could sustain a just state. According to Doan Chinh (2013) [1], this view marked a distinctive shift from hierarchical Confucian paternalism toward a more reciprocal form of moral governance in which state and people shared a common ethical destiny.

4.2. Humanism in legal philosophy and the Hong Duc Code

Le Thanh Tong's *Hong Duc Code* (*Quốc triều hình luật*) is widely regarded as one of the most progressive legal systems in premodern Asia. It embodied a vision of justice deeply infused with moral and humanitarian values. The Code was not designed merely to punish but to reform, educate, and harmonize society (Le Thi Son, 2004) [5].

Unlike earlier dynastic laws that emphasized control and punishment, the *Hong Duc Code* integrated ethical norms such as filial piety, loyalty, honesty, and compassion. Legal scholars such as Phan Quoc Khanh (2003) [3] have highlighted the Code's provisions protecting women's rights, inheritance equality, and respect for family obligations. These principles demonstrate the king's belief that law should reflect social justice and moral responsibility rather than rigid authority.

Le Thanh Tong envisioned law as an instrument of moral instruction. Sentences were adjusted according to the offender's intent and circumstances, demonstrating his humanistic concern for fairness. Crimes committed out of ignorance, necessity, or coercion were judged with leniency, while acts rooted in greed or cruelty were condemned severely (Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan, 2011) [4]. This combination

of strictness and compassion—known in Vietnamese jurisprudence as the balance between *công* (justice) and *tình* (human feeling)—became a hallmark of his legal philosophy. Furthermore, the Code promoted equality before the law. Officials and nobles were subject to the same legal scrutiny as commoners. Corrupt mandarins faced harsh penalties, as corruption was viewed as a moral betrayal of the king's trust and the people's welfare (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1]. Le Thanh Tong regarded integrity in governance as sacred, believing that “a corrupt official destroys the people's trust more than a tyrant's sword.”

Le Thi Son (2004) ^[5] noted that the *Hong Duc Code* also reflected humanitarian protection of the weak. Laws concerning family relations recognized women's property rights and granted them legal standing in marriage disputes. These provisions, rare for their time, reflected Le Thanh Tong's awareness of social equity and the dignity of individuals.

Comparatively, the Code exceeded contemporary Chinese and Korean systems in its moral depth and concern for human welfare. While the Ming legal codes prioritized imperial authority, the *Hong Duc Code* prioritized justice as a moral virtue. Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] described this distinction as “ethical legality”—the unification of law and conscience. By embedding moral sentiment into legal structure, Le Thanh Tong transformed Vietnamese law into a living expression of humanity.

4.3. Humanism in administration and ethics of governance

Le Thanh Tong's administrative reforms reveal how his humanism permeated the structure of the state. His vision of governance was inseparable from morality. Officials were not merely bureaucrats but moral agents responsible for exemplifying righteousness, diligence, and compassion. In royal edicts, he repeatedly reminded mandarins that “officials must love the people as parents love their children” (Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu, 1998a) ^[13].

The bureaucratic system under his rule—consisting of the Six Ministries (*Lục Bộ*) and the Three High Offices (*Tam Ty*)—was organized to ensure efficiency and accountability. Nguyen Hoai Van and Dang Duy Thin (2012) ^[7] explained that these institutions combined functional rationality with moral supervision. The *Ngự sử đài* (Royal Censorate) served not only to monitor official conduct but to uphold moral standards.

Le Thanh Tong introduced merit-based recruitment through rigorous examinations that tested not only classical learning but moral judgment. Candidates were required to demonstrate understanding of Confucian ethics and the principles of benevolent governance. According to Doan Chinh (2013) ^[1], the king's emphasis on both talent and virtue reflected his conviction that good governance depends on the moral quality of those who serve the state.

Corruption and negligence were treated as grave moral crimes. Officials who oppressed the people or misused public resources were dismissed or punished publicly. However, the king also valued self-correction and moral education; he encouraged confession and reform rather than mere retribution. This combination of strictness and forgiveness reflected his humanistic approach to justice within the bureaucracy (Nguyen Hoai Van, 2007) ^[10].

Through such mechanisms, Le Thanh Tong institutionalized ethical governance. His administrative philosophy thus fused

Confucian virtue with Vietnamese communal ethics, creating what modern scholars call a “moral bureaucracy.” This system combined rational management with moral restraint, ensuring that power was exercised with conscience and compassion (Vo Thi Xuan Huong, 2015) ^[12].

4.4. Humanism in education, literature, and culture

Education was the cornerstone of Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy. He believed that learning was the foundation of virtue and that moral enlightenment was essential for sustaining a civilized society. “Learning without virtue breeds arrogance, but virtue without learning remains unfulfilled,” he declared (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1].

The king revitalized the *Quốc Tử Giám* (National Academy) and expanded the imperial examination system. The curriculum integrated Confucian classics, statecraft, and moral philosophy. Nguyen Hoai Van and Dang Duy Thin (2012) ^[7] noted that Le Thanh Tong's education policy aimed to produce scholars who combined wisdom with moral conduct, creating a generation of officials devoted to both intellect and ethics.

Beyond institutional education, Le Thanh Tong's humanism extended to literature and art. As a poet and scholar himself, he founded the Tao Đàn Literary Society, which brought together leading intellectuals of the time. The society's motto, *Văn dĩ tải đạo* (“literature carries the Way”), reflected his conviction that culture serves as a vehicle for moral cultivation (Mai Xuan Hai, 2003) ^[8].

His poetry collections, particularly the *Hong Duc Quoc Am Thi Tap* and *Quynh Uyen Cuu Ca*, conveyed lessons in virtue, diligence, and compassion. Doan Chinh (2009) ^[9] emphasized that these works functioned as moral textbooks for both officials and citizens. Through literature, the king transformed ethical philosophy into aesthetic experience, merging beauty with goodness.

Cultural policy during his reign also emphasized respect for history, loyalty, and national pride. He commissioned the compilation of historical records such as the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* to preserve moral lessons from the past (Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu, 1998b) ^[14]. By linking historical memory with ethical education, Le Thanh Tong reinforced the continuity between cultural identity and moral responsibility. As Vo Thi Xuan Huong (2015) ^[12] observed, this integration of education, literature, and history was unprecedented in Vietnamese dynastic governance. It reflected a holistic view of humanity where intellectual development and moral virtue were inseparable.

4.5. Humanism and compassion in political and diplomatic conduct

Le Thanh Tong's humanism also manifested in his political and diplomatic behavior. His wars of expansion were tempered by moral restraint and humanitarian concern. During the 1471 campaign against Champa, he ordered his generals to avoid harming civilians and to respect temples and cultural relics. Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan (2011) ^[4] highlighted that this act of mercy distinguished Vietnamese warfare from the militarism of other regional powers.

Domestically, his clemency toward offenders exemplified his belief in moral correction rather than vengeance. He often reduced sentences for those who repented or confessed voluntarily. Such policies, as Phan Dai Doan (1997) ^[10] observed, reveal a compassionate understanding of justice

grounded in the Confucian ideal of *nhân nghĩa*—benevolence and righteousness.

This spirit of tolerance was also evident in his dealings with ethnic minorities and frontier communities. Instead of imposing assimilation, he adopted a policy of cultural inclusion, appointing local leaders and respecting regional customs. Le Thi Son (2004) ^[5] considered this policy a manifestation of humanistic pluralism that strengthened national unity while preserving cultural diversity.

Le Thanh Tong's approach to foreign diplomacy combined dignity with restraint. His correspondence with Ming China reflected confidence in Vietnamese sovereignty tempered by respect for international norms. According to Doan Chinh (2013) ^[1], this combination of firmness and civility exemplified his belief that true power derives from moral integrity rather than coercion.

4.6. The synthesis of virtue and law as the moral logic of governance

The most distinctive feature of Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy was the synthesis of *đức trị* (rule by virtue) and *pháp trị* (rule by law). He viewed these principles not as opposites but as complementary dimensions of a single moral order. "Virtue is the spirit of law, and law is the instrument of virtue," he wrote in one of his decrees (Vu Khieu, 1995) ^[6].

This synthesis created a moral logic of governance in which ethical self-cultivation legitimized authority, and legal order institutionalized morality. Nguyen Hoai Van (2007) ^[10] interpreted this as the "dual foundation of Vietnamese governance," ensuring that power was exercised with both justice and benevolence.

The *Hong Duc Code* became the embodiment of this synthesis. It translated abstract virtues into legal norms and transformed moral obligations into enforceable duties. The Code's combination of rigor and empathy reflected the king's conviction that law must educate as much as it punishes (Le Thi Son, 2004) ^[5].

This integrated model of virtue and law influenced later Vietnamese dynasties, particularly the Nguyen, whose emperors continued to regard moral education as a component of legal enforcement. Le Minh Tam (2010) ^[8] noted that the ethical dimension of law introduced by Le Thanh Tong remains a vital reference in modern Vietnamese legal theory, especially in discussions about building a socialist rule-of-law state grounded in humanity.

4.7. Comparative reflections and theoretical implications

In comparison with contemporary Confucian states, Le Thanh Tong's philosophy stands out for its human-centered orientation. While Ming China upheld hierarchical order and divine authority, Dai Viet under Le Thanh Tong emphasized moral reciprocity and social justice. His thought represents what scholars have termed the "Vietnamese Confucian humanism," which transformed traditional doctrines into a humane and practical philosophy of governance (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1].

The theoretical implications of this humanism are profound. It challenges the dichotomy between morality and law, between ruler and subject, and between idealism and pragmatism. By embedding compassion into power and ethics into policy, Le Thanh Tong established a paradigm of governance that remains relevant in modern discussions of

ethical leadership and public administration (Vo Thi Xuan Huong, 2015) ^[12].

Moreover, his integration of education, justice, and culture anticipates contemporary notions of sustainable development and moral citizenship. The emphasis on moral integrity, empathy, and social responsibility offers valuable insights for governance in today's context of globalization and ethical crisis. As Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] concluded, Le Thanh Tong's humanism transcends its historical moment, standing as a testament to the enduring Vietnamese belief that the strength of a nation lies not in its wealth or armies but in the virtue of its people and the compassion of its rulers.

5. Conclusion

King Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy constitutes a remarkable synthesis of moral idealism and practical statecraft, representing one of the highest achievements in the intellectual history of Vietnam. His thought transcended the temporal boundaries of the fifteenth century to establish a political and ethical model grounded in humanity, justice, and moral responsibility. Through his integration of Confucian ethics, Vietnamese communal traditions, and Buddhist compassion, he constructed a system of governance that balanced law with virtue and authority with empathy (Doan Chinh, 2013) ^[1].

5.1. The moral foundation of Vietnamese statecraft

The humanistic philosophy of Le Thanh Tong reaffirmed that moral virtue is the essence of political legitimacy. He believed that a ruler who lacks compassion cannot sustain authority, and that the people's trust is the true source of power. This conviction shaped his administrative, legal, and educational reforms, turning the monarchy into an instrument of moral education. Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] described this as "the moralization of politics," a process in which state institutions become vehicles for ethical cultivation.

The relationship between the ruler and the people, according to Le Thanh Tong, was not merely hierarchical but reciprocal. The ruler's virtue nourished the people's loyalty, while the people's trust reinforced the ruler's legitimacy. Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan (2011) ^[4] emphasized that this mutual moral obligation reflects the Vietnamese adaptation of Confucian humanism, where authority is tempered by empathy and governance is guided by benevolence. Such reciprocity redefined political ethics in premodern Vietnam, transforming the traditional image of an absolute monarch into that of a moral guardian.

The *Hong Duc Code* institutionalized this principle by translating moral concepts into legal norms. Laws that protected women, punished corruption, and rewarded filial piety revealed a legal philosophy rooted in compassion and fairness (Le Thi Son, 2004) ^[5]. Through the Code, Le Thanh Tong demonstrated that moral values could coexist with legal rationality, creating a humane and effective system of governance. This combination of ethical conscience and institutional discipline became a defining feature of Vietnamese political culture.

5.2. The synthesis of virtue and law in historical perspective

The harmony between virtue (*đức trị*) and law (*pháp trị*) in Le Thanh Tong's thought represented a theoretical innovation within the broader East Asian intellectual tradition. While Confucian states such as Ming China

emphasized virtue as a personal moral standard of the ruler, Le Thanh Tong institutionalized virtue through law and administration. He believed that laws devoid of moral purpose would lead to tyranny, while moral exhortation without law would result in disorder (Vu Khieu, 1995) [6].

This synthesis produced what modern scholars call “ethical legality” (*đạo đức pháp quyền*), in which justice serves both as a legal principle and as a moral commitment (Phan Quoc Khanh, 2003) [3]. By uniting law with virtue, Le Thanh Tong created a stable and morally coherent political order. Nguyen Hoai Van (2007) [10] pointed out that this equilibrium prevented abuses of power while fostering compassion within the legal system. It also ensured that the state remained responsive to social needs, not merely to the will of rulers.

In this respect, Le Thanh Tong’s legal philosophy anticipated later developments in Vietnamese legal and administrative ethics. Subsequent dynasties, particularly the Nguyen, inherited and expanded upon his notion that law must serve human welfare. Le Minh Tam (2010) [8] emphasized that the moral dimension of law introduced by Le Thanh Tong continues to influence Vietnam’s current legal reforms, especially the development of the socialist rule-of-law state (*Nhà nước pháp quyền XHCN*).

5.3. The role of education and culture in moral governance

A central aspect of Le Thanh Tong’s humanism was his conviction that education is the foundation of virtue and that moral cultivation is the foundation of governance. He viewed learning as a transformative process that shapes both intellect and character. Through the *Quốc Tử Giám* and a reformed civil service examination system, he institutionalized education as a means of moral recruitment for the bureaucracy (Nguyen Hoai Van & Dang Duy Thin, 2012) [7]. Doan Chinh (2013) [11] argued that this educational philosophy embodied a vision of human development consistent with Confucian ideals yet uniquely adapted to Vietnamese social conditions. Education, in his view, was not confined to elite scholars but extended to the moral enlightenment of the populace. By integrating education with cultural and legal policy, Le Thanh Tong ensured that ethical awareness permeated every level of society.

His literary and cultural projects, notably the *Hong Duc Quoc Am Thi Tap* and the establishment of the Tao Đản Literary Society, further expressed his belief that art serves moral and civic purposes. The idea that “literature conveys the Way” (*văn dĩ tải đạo*) reflected his conviction that beauty and virtue are inseparable. Mai Xuan Hai (2003) [8] observed that these works disseminated moral ideals in a language accessible to the people, thereby linking artistic expression with ethical instruction.

The king’s promotion of education and culture as tools of governance prefigured modern notions of cultural policy and civic ethics. His model of “moral education through culture” offers valuable lessons for contemporary societies seeking to harmonize intellectual development with social responsibility.

5.4. Compassion and tolerance as political ethics

Le Thanh Tong’s humanism was not limited to domestic governance but extended to diplomacy and warfare. His conduct in the Champa campaign of 1471 illustrates a commitment to moral restraint even in conflict. As recorded in the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* (1998b) [14], he ordered his

generals to spare civilians and preserve temples, emphasizing that victory must not come at the expense of humanity. This fusion of military success and moral discipline distinguished Vietnamese political ethics from the expansionist tendencies of other contemporary empires (Phan Dai Doan, 1997) [10].

Domestically, his leniency toward repentant offenders demonstrated a compassionate understanding of justice. Rather than seeking retribution, he sought rehabilitation. Nguyen Ngoc Nhuan (2011) [4] noted that this approach reflected the Buddhist notion of *from punishment to transformation*, blending Confucian virtue with Buddhist mercy. By prioritizing education and self-reform over punishment, Le Thanh Tong established a humane model of legal enforcement that remains exemplary in Southeast Asian history.

The king’s inclusive attitude toward ethnic minorities and local communities also revealed a forward-looking political tolerance. Instead of imposing assimilation, he recognized local customs and promoted intercultural respect. Le Thi Son (2004) [5] argued that this policy fostered social cohesion while preserving cultural diversity—an early expression of pluralism within a unified state.

5.5. The enduring influence of Le Thanh Tong’s humanism

The influence of Le Thanh Tong’s thought continued long after his death. Subsequent dynasties, including the Later Le and the Nguyen, inherited his principles of moral governance and educational reform. His philosophy became a cornerstone of Vietnamese statecraft, shaping both traditional scholarship and modern administrative ethics.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Vietnamese scholars have revisited Le Thanh Tong’s legacy as a source of guidance for contemporary reform. Doan Chinh (2013) [11] asserted that the king’s synthesis of virtue and law anticipates the modern concept of governance by ethics and law (*đức trị kết hợp pháp trị*). Similarly, Vo Thi Xuan Huong (2015) [12] emphasized that his humanistic principles resonate with current efforts to build an ethical civil service, promote moral education, and cultivate integrity in public life.

The concept of *thân dân*, or “empathy toward the people,” has been reinterpreted in contemporary political discourse as a foundation for participatory governance and transparency. By encouraging dialogue and respect between rulers and citizens, this philosophy supports the democratization of administration while maintaining cultural continuity.

Le Thanh Tong’s notion of “moral bureaucracy” also remains relevant to current challenges of corruption and moral decay. Nguyen Hoai Van (2007) [10] argued that his insistence on virtue-based recruitment and ethical accountability offers enduring lessons for public management. Modern Vietnam’s emphasis on integrity, responsibility, and service orientation among officials echoes the king’s admonition that “virtue is the lifeblood of the state.”

5.6. Contemporary relevance for Vietnam’s socialist rule-of-law state

In the context of twenty-first century Vietnam, Le Thanh Tong’s humanistic philosophy provides theoretical and ethical insights for constructing a socialist rule-of-law state grounded in morality and humanity. Le Minh Tam (2010) [8] observed that the integration of ethics and law remains a guiding principle in contemporary Vietnamese legal development. This alignment reflects the historical continuity

of Vietnamese political culture, in which moral virtue is inseparable from justice.

The king's synthesis of *đức trị* and *pháp trị* offers a valuable framework for harmonizing legal modernization with moral renewal. In a time of globalization and rapid socio-economic transformation, his insistence on compassion, education, and moral accountability provides a counterbalance to materialism and bureaucratic alienation. As Doan Chinh (2013) ^[1] noted, the moral vitality of a state depends on the ethical integrity of its institutions—a lesson as relevant today as it was five centuries ago.

Moreover, Le Thanh Tong's philosophy supports the contemporary pursuit of human-centered governance (*quản trị vì con người*), which emphasizes social justice, equality, and cultural sustainability. By linking ethical conduct with legal enforcement, Vietnam can continue to build a state that protects both the rights and dignity of its citizens. This approach mirrors Le Thanh Tong's own vision that the purpose of governance is not to dominate but to serve.

His model of moral governance also aligns with global movements toward ethical leadership and responsible administration. The idea that "virtue legitimizes authority" echoes universal values of good governance promoted by modern institutions. Thus, the legacy of Le Thanh Tong bridges traditional Vietnamese wisdom and modern democratic ethics, demonstrating the adaptability and universality of his humanistic thought.

5.7. Final Reflections

Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy remains one of Vietnam's greatest intellectual legacies. It reflects a deep understanding of the human condition and the moral responsibilities of power. His life and works demonstrate that the strength of a nation lies not in wealth or force but in the virtue, compassion, and education of its people.

As Vu Khieu (1995) ^[6] eloquently summarized, "Le Thanh Tong turned morality into the law of the state and law into the expression of morality." This integration of ethics and governance continues to define Vietnam's cultural identity and political ethos. In a modern world facing crises of morality, inequality, and alienation, his vision offers enduring inspiration: that the true measure of progress is not material abundance but the moral elevation of humanity.

The continuing relevance of Le Thanh Tong's humanistic philosophy affirms its universality. It stands as a bridge between the past and the present, between Eastern and Western traditions, and between moral idealism and practical governance. His legacy invites reflection on how law and virtue, reason and compassion, can coexist to create a just and humane society.

In this sense, the humanistic thought of King Le Thanh Tong is not only a testament to Vietnam's intellectual maturity but also a timeless contribution to global political philosophy—a vision of governance grounded in justice, guided by virtue, and sustained by humanity.

6. Recommendations

This study recommends strengthening interdisciplinary research across history, law, and ethics to clarify the continuity and limits of Vietnamese humanistic governance in contemporary practice. Comparative work with East Asian rule-of-law models should be expanded to test the portability of "ethical legality" beyond its original context, with special

attention to anti-corruption, civil-service integrity, and civic education.

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