



Educational and Examination Reforms Under King Lê Thánh Tông

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Abstract

During his 38-year reign, King Lê Thánh Tông established one of the most prosperous, orderly, and culturally dynamic periods in Vietnamese history. A cornerstone of this achievement was his comprehensive reform of education and the imperial examination system, which fundamentally reshaped how talent was identified, trained, and utilized in state administration. Following the devastation of the Ming occupation (1407–1428), Đại Việt faced the urgent task of reconstructing its intellectual and bureaucratic foundations. Recognizing that national revitalization required a capable and morally upright scholarly class, King Lê Thánh Tông initiated sweeping changes across all levels of the educational system. His policies expanded state-sponsored schools from the capital to provincial and district levels, broadened access to include talented commoners, and strengthened academic support through stipends, land grants, and tax exemptions. At the same time, the king implemented strict regulations to safeguard academic integrity and ensure fairness in learning and examinations. He also refined the curriculum by integrating classical Confucian texts with practical subjects such as law, administration, customs, and geography—aligning scholarly training with the real demands of governance. Equally transformative were his reforms of the examination system, which standardized testing procedures, clarified degree classifications, and formalized ceremonial honors for successful candidates. These changes institutionalized meritocracy, elevated scholarly prestige, and established an efficient, ethical bureaucracy that contributed to the flourishing of the Hồng Đức era. The success of these reforms demonstrates that knowledge and human capital were perceived as foundational to national strength, offering enduring lessons for educational development today.

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1. Introduction

The reign of King Lê Thánh Tông (1460–1497) represents one of the most illustrious periods in Vietnamese history, marked by political stability, economic prosperity, and extraordinary cultural and intellectual development. His era, frequently referred to by historians as the “Age of Lê Thánh Tông,” is distinguished by a comprehensive set of reforms that transformed the foundations of the Early Lê dynasty. These reforms encompassed a wide spectrum of domains—including administration, legal institutions, military organization, culture, and particularly education and examinations—which together established a centralized, disciplined, and merit-based governance structure.

Among these areas, educational and examination reforms held a central role because they directly shaped the quality of the bureaucratic apparatus responsible for governing the country. Following the devastation of the Ming occupation (1407–1428), Đại Việt urgently required a well-educated, morally upright, and intellectually capable corps of scholars to rebuild state institutions and restore cultural vitality. King Lê Thánh Tông recognized that the sustainability of national prosperity rested on nurturing human capital; thus, he systematically restructured the educational system, expanded access to schools, standardized curricula, enforced strict academic discipline, and transformed the imperial examinations into a rigorous and equitable mechanism for selecting talent.

Although the topic of Lê Thánh Tông's reforms has been briefly introduced in several upper-secondary history textbooks—such as *Chân trời sáng tạo*, *Kết nối tri thức với cuộc sống*, and *Cánh diều*—these materials primarily describe the reforms at a surface level. They often lack detailed analysis, fail to contextualize the reforms within broader historical conditions, and do not explore the mechanisms that made them successful. Consequently, there remains a need for a more comprehensive and historically grounded examination of these reforms.

Drawing primarily on the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* and other historical sources, this article aims to elucidate the scope, nature, and significance of the educational and examination reforms carried out by King Lê Thánh Tông. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how these reforms shaped the development of Đại Việt during the Hồng Đức era, while also providing valuable insights for teaching and learning about this important historical period.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research methodology designed to analyze the educational and examination reforms implemented under King Lê Thánh Tông from both historical and pedagogical perspectives. The following approaches constitute the methodological framework of the research:

Historical-Contextual Analysis: The research begins by situating the reforms within the broader socio-political context of 15th-century Đại Việt, particularly the aftermath of the Ming occupation and the consolidation of power during the Early Lê dynasty. Primary historical sources, especially the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, are examined to reconstruct the conditions that shaped the king's decisions and to understand how these reforms addressed the needs of the time.

Textual and Document Analysis: A systematic examination of imperial edicts, legal provisions, royal decrees, and official historical records is conducted to identify specific policies relating to education and examinations. Textual analysis is used to clarify the structure, objectives, and ideological foundations of each reform. Key passages are interpreted within the framework of Confucian educational philosophy and traditional bureaucratic institutions.

Comparative Approach: The study incorporates a comparative lens by examining earlier educational systems under the Lý-Trần dynasties and contrasting them with the reforms introduced during the Hồng Đức era. This approach highlights the originality, continuity, and innovations of Lê Thánh Tông's policies while revealing their impact on subsequent generations.

Discourse and Policy Analysis: To better understand the political intentions behind the reforms, the study applies discourse analysis to royal directives and examination regulations. This method clarifies how the king used moral rhetoric, Confucian ideals, and administrative language to legitimize and enforce educational transformation. Policy analysis is also employed to assess the effectiveness, feasibility, and social influence of the reforms.

Pedagogical Interpretation for Teaching Practice: The research also considers modern educational implications by interpreting historical reforms in relation to contemporary teaching needs. This pedagogical perspective supports teachers in delivering more comprehensive, accurate, and engaging lessons on Lê Thánh Tông's era.

Through this multi-method approach, the study achieves a holistic understanding of King Lê Thánh Tông's educational and examination reforms, clarifying their historical significance and contemporary relevance.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Historical Context

The educational and examination reforms initiated under King Lê Thánh Tông must be understood against the backdrop of a turbulent yet transformative historical period. During the brutal Ming occupation (1407–1428), Đại Việt endured profound devastation. Cultural institutions were systematically dismantled: books were burned or confiscated and taken to China, temples and schools were destroyed, and countless teachers and students were killed, exiled, or forcibly relocated. The Ming administration sought not only political control but also the eradication of the intellectual foundation painstakingly built during the Lý-Trần dynasties. By attacking the cultural and educational core of Đại Việt, the occupiers intended to eliminate the nation's capability for self-governance and cultural continuity.

The triumph of the Lam Sơn uprising marked a fundamental turning point. With the restoration of independence under Lê Thái Tổ, Đại Việt embarked on rebuilding its centralized feudal state, quickly entering a period of vibrant recovery and growth. The early Lê rulers—Lê Thái Tổ (1428–1434) and Lê Thái Tông (1434–1442)—prioritized reestablishing the education system, reviving cultural life, and reinstating intellectual traditions. Their policies laid the groundwork for what would later become one of the most brilliant eras in Vietnamese history.

When Lê Thánh Tông ascended the throne in 1460 amidst deep political turmoil and succession disputes, the kingdom faced acute internal and external challenges. Internally, factional conflicts among high-ranking officials threatened stability; social disorder and rampant criminality further weakened national cohesion. Externally, Đại Việt confronted persistent military threats from the northern Ming and from Champa in the south. Through decisive leadership, strict enforcement of laws, and wide-ranging administrative reforms, the young king swiftly reestablished order, restored state authority, and initiated a comprehensive transformation across political, economic, and cultural domains.

By the Hồng Đức era (1460–1497), King Lê Thánh Tông had successfully built one of the most sophisticated and effective bureaucratic structures in Southeast Asia. His reforms elevated the moral and intellectual standards of the civil service, reinforced legal discipline, and fostered conditions for sustained cultural and educational flourishing. As both a

scholar and a poet of exceptional talent, the king recognized the indispensable role of intellectuals in national governance. Guided by the conviction that “talent is the vital essence of the nation,” he organized twelve imperial examinations during his reign, producing 501 Doctors (Tiến sĩ), an extraordinary achievement reflecting not only the king’s strategic vision but also the sweeping reforms designed to encourage learning and elevate knowledge as a pillar of national strength.

3.2. Reforms in Education and the Imperial Examination System

3.2.1. Expansion of Schools and Access to Learning

Before the Lê dynasty, educational institutions in Đại Việt were limited. Under the Lý–Trần dynasties, the Quốc Tử Giám in Thăng Long and the family school in Thiên Trường served primarily the aristocracy. Only during the reign of Trần Thái Tông (1226–1258) did exceptionally gifted commoners gain access to elite institutions.

After independence was restored, Lê Thái Tổ reintroduced the practice of talent recruitment, initiating examinations such as the Minh kinh (1429) and the Hoàng tử (1431). These early measures helped identify capable scholars who contributed to rebuilding national administration and cultural life.

Lê Thái Tông continued to expand educational infrastructure, requiring every administrative unit—provinces, districts, and localities—to establish schools. Thousands of promising students were admitted to the Quốc Tử Giám and other state schools, gradually forming a broad foundation of educated citizens.

When Lê Thánh Tông assumed the throne, he clearly understood that no reform could succeed without highly competent officials. As a result, the king initiated sweeping educational reforms, especially during the Hồng Đức era. In the capital, alongside the Quốc Tử Giám, he established additional state academies such as Sùng Văn Quán, Chiêu Văn Quán, and Tăng Quảng Đường. Importantly, these institutions expanded their admissions criteria to include talented commoners, reflecting a significant shift toward meritocratic inclusion.

At the local level, a more systematic educational network emerged. Provincial and district schools were overseen by supervisors and instructors responsible for regular instruction, assessments, and examination preparation. While state-funded village schools did not yet exist, private community schools proliferated, forming a widespread grassroots educational system.

3.2.2. Incentives for Learning and Educational Support

To promote literacy and scholarly advancement, the court instituted numerous incentives. Schools received land grants to fund operations, while students were offered stipends, tax reductions, and exemptions from corvée labor—benefits that significantly reduced barriers to education.

The state ensured strict regulation of textbooks, mandating transparent distribution of official learning materials and punishing corrupt officials who withheld or misappropriated resources. This emphasis on fairness and accessibility encouraged broad participation in education while maintaining high academic standards.

Additionally, the king introduced numerous anti-cheating measures to protect the credibility of the imperial

examinations. These included strict penalties for impersonation, plagiarism, and illicit assistance, helping cultivate a culture of academic honesty and merit-based achievement.

3.2.3. Curriculum Innovations

While Confucianism remained the ideological foundation of the educational system, Lê Thánh Tông recognized the limitations of an exclusively classical curriculum. Accordingly, he required successful examination candidates and newly appointed officials to study practical subjects including law, administrative procedures, local customs, agriculture, and the geography of Đại Việt.

This was a notable departure from earlier eras and reflects the king’s intention to connect scholastic learning with state governance. Although supplementary subjects were considered secondary to classical learning, their inclusion marked a significant step toward aligning education with the practical demands of public administration.

3.2.4. Reform of the Examination System

As the central mechanism for talent selection, the imperial examinations were subject to extensive reform. King Lê Thánh Tông standardized examination procedures across the Hương (regional), Hội (metropolitan), and Đình (palace) levels. Candidates were required to demonstrate not only literary skills but also moral integrity. Those guilty of unfilial conduct, criminal behavior, or dishonorable occupations—including performers—were barred from participation.

The evaluation process was rigorous, employing multiple rounds of grading and strict anonymity protocols to ensure fairness. The king also redefined academic titles and created a structured hierarchy of degrees, including distinctions between first-rank, second-rank, and third-rank Doctors. This system promoted clear expectations and enhanced the prestige of scholarly achievement.

3.2.5. Honor and Rewards for Scholars

Recognizing the importance of honoring talent, King Lê Thánh Tông established ceremonial practices to elevate the status of new Doctors: public proclamation of names, golden boards posted at the city gates, royal banquets, and material rewards such as robes, horses, and celebratory processions. In 1484, he ordered the creation of the first ten stone steles at the Temple of Literature, inscribing the names and hometowns of doctoral laureates—an enduring legacy that symbolizes Vietnam’s cultural reverence for scholarship.

4. Discussion

The reforms implemented under King Lê Thánh Tông represent one of the most comprehensive and forward-looking transformations in the history of Vietnamese education and governance. When examined in broader historical and theoretical contexts, these reforms reveal not only the king’s strategic intelligence but also his profound understanding of the relationship between talent cultivation and national power. Several key themes emerge from the analysis of his policies.

4.1. Education as an Instrument of State-Building

King Lê Thánh Tông clearly recognized that sustainable state-building requires a rational, centralized, and merit-driven bureaucracy. By restructuring the educational system,

expanding access to learning, and formalizing training institutions from the capital to local districts, he created a cohesive national framework for cultivating administrative talent. This approach parallels reforms in other East Asian states influenced by Confucian governance, yet the Vietnamese adaptation demonstrated a distinctive emphasis on practicality and local relevance. The establishment of an educated, disciplined intelligentsia was essential in strengthening political centralization during the Hồng Đức era.

4.2. Meritocracy and Social Mobility

One of the most remarkable aspects of Lê Thánh Tông's reforms is the widening of access to state-sponsored education. Unlike earlier dynasties, which largely restricted learning to aristocratic households, the king allowed talented commoners to enter elite institutions such as Sùng Văn Quán and the Quốc Tử Giám. The imperial examinations became not only a mechanism for identifying talent but also a path for vertical social mobility. This shift toward meritocracy fostered a more dynamic, competitive intellectual environment and helped weaken hereditary privilege, enabling broader participation in state affairs.

4.3. Integration of Classical Learning and Practical Governance

While Confucianism remained the core ideological foundation, the king's curriculum reforms revealed a pragmatic orientation. Newly appointed officials were required to study laws, administrative procedures, and local customs—subjects essential for effective governance yet often neglected in purely classical academic settings. This integration reflects an early form of applied public administration and demonstrates the king's awareness that theoretical excellence must align with statecraft and the practical needs of society.

4.4. Ethical Governance and Cultural Consolidation

The strict moral regulations imposed on examination candidates—requiring virtue, filial piety, and ethical conduct—indicate that Lê Thánh Tông envisioned governance not only as a matter of intellect but also of character. By promoting Confucian ethical values, the king aimed to cultivate a bureaucracy grounded in integrity and public responsibility. The erection of doctoral steles at the Temple of Literature further reinforced cultural identity by linking scholarly achievement with national pride and collective memory.

4.5. Long-Term Impact and Enduring Legacy

The influence of Lê Thánh Tông's reforms extended far beyond his reign. The educational and examination systems established under the Hồng Đức era became foundational models for subsequent dynasties, shaping Vietnam's intellectual elite for centuries. His policies created a culture in which scholarship was revered, examinations were institutionalized, and learning was associated with both personal advancement and national service.

Moreover, the king's recognition of intellectual capital as a cornerstone of national strength offers valuable lessons for contemporary educational policy. His emphasis on meritocracy, ethical leadership, and practical knowledge remains relevant today, providing a historical framework for

discussions about modern educational reform and nation-building.

5. Conclusion

The reign of King Lê Thánh Tông stands as a defining chapter in Vietnamese history, not only for its political consolidation and economic prosperity but also for its far-reaching transformation of the nation's educational and examination systems. Through a comprehensive series of reforms, the king successfully institutionalized a meritocratic framework that elevated the role of knowledge, ethics, and scholarly excellence in the governance of Đại Việt. His efforts produced a stable, capable, and morally upright bureaucracy that contributed significantly to the flourishing of the Hồng Đức era—an era widely regarded as one of the most enlightened and prosperous in the nation's past.

The analysis of historical evidence demonstrates that these reforms were neither incidental nor superficial; rather, they formed a coherent and long-term strategy aimed at strengthening state capacity through the systematic cultivation of human capital. By expanding access to education, standardizing curricula, introducing incentives for learning, and enforcing strict integrity in examinations, King Lê Thánh Tông forged an educational environment that encouraged competition, fostered social mobility, and aligned intellectual achievement with national service.

His innovations in curriculum design—emphasizing both classical Confucian learning and practical administrative knowledge—reflected an advanced understanding of the needs of a developing state. Meanwhile, the ceremonial honoring of successful candidates, including the iconic doctoral steles at the Temple of Literature, heightened the cultural prestige of scholarship and embedded educational excellence into the moral fabric of society.

Statistically, the results speak for themselves: within just 38 years, the king organized 12 metropolitan examinations and produced 501 Doctors, including 10 top laureates (Trạng nguyên). These achievements, unmatched in scale and impact by most other periods, highlight the apex of Vietnamese medieval education.

The enduring legacy of Lê Thánh Tông demonstrates that a nation's prosperity is inseparable from its investment in intellectual development and ethical governance. His reforms offer valuable insights for modern educational policy, reminding us that the cultivation of knowledge, virtue, and talent remains the foundation upon which strong and resilient societies are built. In this sense, the Hồng Đức reforms continue to resonate as a timeless testament to the transformative power of education and visionary leadership.

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