

The Ideology of “Rule By Virtue” and “Rule By Law” in Confucianism and the model of the Socialist Rule of Law State in Vietnam

A ideologia do “governo pela virtude” e do “governo pela lei” no confucionismo e o modelo do Estado socialista de direito no Vietnã

Ta Quang, NGOC

Hanoi Law University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

E-mail: nguyenhuuduc1990.dhl@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9496-4788>

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the philosophical structure of the Confucian concepts “rule by virtue” (德治) and “rule by law” (法治) through classical textual interpretation and conceptual analysis, and evaluates how these principles interact with the contemporary model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam. The research clarifies the normative foundation of Confucian political philosophy, analyzes the compatibility between Confucian ethical governance and socialist legal constitutionalism, and identifies how traditional values can contribute to modern governance. The findings demonstrate that Confucian virtue-based governance provides ethical foundations for cultivating public morality, while Confucian conceptions of law offer insights into normative order. The study contributes a philosophical framework for understanding how traditional East Asian moral–legal structures can be adapted to strengthen modern legal institutions.

KEYWORDS: “rule by virtue”, “rule by law”, Confucianism, Socialist rule-of-law state of Vietnam, adaptation of Confucian ideology in modern Governance

RESUMO:

Este estudo examina a estrutura filosófica dos conceitos confucionistas de “governo pela virtude” (德治) e “governo pela lei” (法治) por meio da interpretação textual clássica e da análise conceitual, e avalia

como esses princípios interagem com o modelo contemporâneo do Estado de Direito socialista no Vietnã. A pesquisa esclarece o fundamento normativo da filosofia política confucionista, analisa a compatibilidade entre a governança ética confucionista e o constitucionalismo jurídico socialista e identifica como os valores tradicionais podem contribuir para a governança moderna. Os resultados demonstram que a governança confucionista baseada na virtude fornece fundamentos éticos para o cultivo da moralidade pública, enquanto as concepções confucionistas de direito oferecem insights sobre a ordem normativa. O estudo contribui com uma estrutura filosófica para a compreensão de como as estruturas morais e jurídicas tradicionais do Leste Asiático podem ser adaptadas para fortalecer as instituições jurídicas modernas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: “governo pela virtude”, “governo pela lei”, confucionismo, Estado de Direito socialista do Vietnã, adaptação da ideologia confucionista na governança moderna

Introduction

The study of the Confucian concepts often translated as rule by virtue and rule by law in relation to the contemporary model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam must be grounded in a precise philosophical understanding of their classical meanings. This requirement arises not only from the practical demands of national development but also from the need to clarify the normative foundations of governance within a rapidly changing social context. Economic, cultural and institutional transformations have created a need for a governance model that is firmly based on legal authority while at the same time shaped by a stable ethical orientation. In this environment, Vietnam seeks to absorb the richness of global thought while preserving the enduring values that structure its cultural identity. The Documents of the XIIIth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2021) reaffirm this direction by emphasizing the improvement of the socialist rule of law state and the importance of traditional ethical foundations in state administration.

Within this context, Confucian political philosophy becomes a relevant source of analysis because it offers a coherent system that connects moral cultivation, ritual order and legal regulation. Classical texts such as the Analects and the Mencius present a vision of governance in which virtue operates as the inner ethical force that guides the ruler while law functions as an external structure that maintains order. Contemporary scholars have shown that this relation between moral principles and regulatory norms continues to shape political discourse in East Asia, a reminder that the Confucian tradition is not only historical but also philosophically active. When viewed in this light the Vietnamese

case becomes an example of selective adaptation in which a modern legal system interacts with inherited cultural values.

The Constitution of Vietnam, adopted in 2013 sets out essential principles of the rule of law state including the supremacy of law, the unity of state power accompanied by mechanisms of coordination and control, and the ethical responsibilities of officials. These elements resonate with philosophical interpretations of Confucian thought which understand virtue and law as complementary. The theoretical need for this study therefore lies in clarifying the conceptual structure of these Confucian notions and examining how they may illuminate the dual moral and legal character of Vietnamese political culture. The practical need concerns the construction of a system of governance that requires both ethical integrity and a transparent legal framework in order to operate effectively.

From these considerations, a clear research problem emerges. The study seeks to examine the philosophical relationship between the Confucian ideas of rule by virtue and rule by law and the contemporary model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam. This problem raises an important question. To what extent can traditional moral principles support the development of a modern legal state and how are these principles transformed within current political and cultural conditions?

The central research question of the study is how the Confucian concepts of virtue-based governance and law-based governance contribute to the formation of the socialist rule of law model in Vietnam. Additional questions include the degree of compatibility between the Confucian moral legal structure and the constitutional principles established in 2013 and how cultural factors shape the interaction between public ethics and legal enforcement.

The objective of the study is to analyze the philosophical structure of Confucian morality and law to identify normative points of convergence with the socialist rule of law state and to assess the relevance of these concepts in contemporary governance. On that basis the study aims to construct a logical and coherent analytical framework for explaining how traditional values are inherited and reinterpreted in Vietnam.

The study provides three main contributions: First it offers a philosophical clarification of the concepts of virtue-based governance and law-based governance in the Confucian tradition. Second it compares these concepts with key principles of the Vietnamese legal and political system as articulated in the Constitution of 2013 and the Documents of the Thirteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Third it proposes a conceptual approach for integrating public ethics and legal order in state administration in a way that aligns with both cultural heritage and contemporary institutional requirements.

On this theoretical and practical foundation the article develops an argument that addresses the interaction between ethical and legal principles in the construction and operation of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam.

Literature Review

Research on the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” occupies an important place in classical East Asian philosophy. When examined under a strict philosophical lens, these concepts must be understood through the textual structure of the Analects, the Mencius and the early commentarial tradition. Chan’s canonical compilation *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* presents the foundational passages on virtue, humanity and rectification of names, highlighting that Confucius treats morality as the primary normative force governing political order (Chan 1963, pp. 14-21). Mencius articulates a more explicit moral metaphysics based on human nature, arguing that political authority must rest on the cultivation of benevolence rather than coercive law (Mencius 2004, pp. 72-76). These classical sources provide the philosophical ground on which the notions of virtue and law are conceptualized, and therefore all contemporary interpretations must be read with reference to their textual origins.

In contrast to the philosophical core of the tradition, modern scholarship tends to frame Confucianism within political theory or socio-legal studies. Jiang’s analysis of imperial Chinese law, for example, is a historical and institutional inquiry rather than a philosophical reconstruction of the concepts themselves. Yet, Jiang does identify the normative assumption that law in Confucian societies functioned as a moral pedagogy rather than a purely coercive mechanism (Jiang 2022, pp. 2291-2293). Ma’s classical article in *Philosophy East and West* also demonstrates that the Confucian relation between virtue and law emerged from a philosophical debate with early Legalism, but his analysis remains descriptive of institutional practices rather than conceptual clarifications (Herbert 1971, pp. 445-447). These works help contextualize the philosophical categories but cannot replace a direct textual examination of the Analects and the Mencius.

Contemporary philosophical debates reopen the question of how Confucian moral concepts can support modern governance. Angle’s discussion of the “Confucian constitutional order” situates virtue and law within a normative framework for political legitimacy, arguing that Confucian ethics can contribute to constitutional reasoning if reconstructed through modern categories (Angle 2014, pp. 503-504). Yi Huah Jiang similarly treats Confucianism as a political philosophical resource rather than a cultural ideology, emphasizing its potential to shape public virtues in contemporary societies (Yi Huah

Jiang 2018, pp. 157-160). These works maintain a philosophical orientation because they explicitly analyze Confucian concepts as normative categories within the field of political philosophy.

Other scholars adopt broader cultural or legal perspectives and therefore do not operate strictly within philosophy. Lin and Trevaskes’ study of law, morality ideology during the Xi Jinping era, although important for understanding East Asian governance, examines Confucian values as part of a political moral discourse rather than as philosophical doctrines (Lin and Trevaskes 2021, pp. 130-133). Similarly, research on public ethics in Vietnam, such as Anh Duong Thi Thuc (2025), treats Confucian values as social norms that shape administrative behavior, but does not analyze them conceptually within a philosophical vocabulary. These studies are useful for contextualization, yet they must be distinguished from philosophical inquiry in a narrow sense.

Within the Vietnamese context, several studies explore the relationship between traditional values and the socialist rule of law state. Ha Nguyen Thi Thu (2024) highlights the continuity between ancient Eastern notions of governance and contemporary institutional design. However, these analyses remain within the frameworks of legal and political science. From a philosophical standpoint, a more fundamental question concerns how Confucian moral concepts can be normatively reconstructed to support the rule of law without importing hierarchical or authoritarian elements inconsistent with modern political philosophy. This conceptual problem has not been sufficiently addressed in existing Vietnamese literature.

Taken together, existing scholarship can be grouped into three categories: First are classical philosophical sources that articulate the meaning of virtue and law at the level of normative reasoning. Second are modern political philosophical reinterpretations that attempt to reconstruct Confucianism within contemporary frameworks. Third are legal, political and cultural studies that examine how Confucian norms operate in practice. The main gap identified for this research lies in the absence of a systematic philosophical reconstruction that places Confucian concepts of virtue and law into direct dialogue with the normative foundations of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam. This study, therefore, contributes by clarifying the conceptual structure of these Confucian notions and evaluating their relevance for contemporary political philosophy in Vietnam.

Research Methods

The methodological foundation of this study is grounded in the standards of philosophical inquiry, which require conceptual rigor, textual fidelity and normative coherence. To examine the Confucian ideas of rule by virtue and rule by law within the theoretical framework of the contemporary socialist rule of law state of Vietnam, the research employs four interrelated philosophical approaches:

textual interpretation, conceptual analysis, comparative philosophical reasoning and normative evaluation. These methods allow the study to remain within the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy while still engaging with political institutions in a theoretically grounded manner.

The first is a textual interpretation of classical Confucian sources. Confucian concepts cannot be understood without returning to the primary texts in which they were originally articulated. The study therefore, uses close reading of the *Analects*, the *Mencius* and early commentaries from the classical tradition. This approach focuses on explicating the meanings of virtue, humanity, propriety and law as they appear in the original passages. Textual interpretation allows the reconstruction of the internal logic of Confucian political ethics without imposing modern categories onto ancient doctrinal structures. Through this method, the study identifies the philosophical foundations of virtuous governance and the normative function of law in classical Confucian thought.

The second is conceptual analysis. Philosophical inquiry requires the clarification of key concepts in order to avoid ambiguity and anachronism. The study therefore, analyzes the conceptual content of virtue, law, moral cultivation, order and authority within Confucianism, distinguishing them from their modern political and legal equivalents. This method helps reveal the structure of Confucian reasoning and prevents the uncritical transfer of contemporary meanings into historical categories. Conceptual analysis also enables the delineation of the limits of Confucian thought, identifying which doctrines are compatible with modern rule of law principles and which elements must be reinterpreted or set aside.

The third is comparative philosophical reasoning. Since the research concerns the relationship between Confucianism and the socialist rule of law state of Vietnam, it is necessary to compare the normative assumptions of classical Confucian political philosophy with the normative foundations of the modern rule of law. This comparative approach does not treat Confucianism as a historical curiosity or as a mere cultural phenomenon, but as a philosophical system capable of entering into meaningful dialogue with modern political theory. By placing Confucian concepts alongside principles such as legal supremacy, power control and public accountability, the study identifies points of convergence and tension between the two frameworks. Comparative reasoning also allows for a critical examination of how traditional values can be reconstructed or reframed within contemporary political philosophy.

The fourth is normative evaluation: This research does not merely describe concepts but evaluates their validity and applicability in light of contemporary moral and political demands. Based on the conceptual reconstruction of Confucian virtue and law, the study assesses their potential contribution to the theoretical foundation of the socialist rule of law state of Vietnam. Normative evaluation makes it possible to determine the extent to which Confucian moral principles support modern governance and

to what degree they require reinterpretation to align with contemporary commitments such as equality before the law, transparency and democratic participation. Through this process, the study aims to provide a philosophical justification for integrating traditional values into modern institutional design.

These four methods form a coherent content framework that ensures the study remains anchored in textual fidelity and conceptual clarity while engaging in rigorous normative reasoning. By relying on established methods of philosophical inquiry rather than importing techniques from social sciences or legal studies, the research preserves disciplinary integrity and contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how Confucian ideas may interact with and enhance the development of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam.

Research Results

The research results show that the Confucian “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” ideas have a tight philosophical structure and complement each other in forming the governance model of ancient and medieval East Asian countries. When approaching this system of values from the perspective of the current model of the Vietnamese socialist rule of law state, many important points of compatibility can be seen, while also revealing significant possibilities for application in contemporary national governance. The research is implemented in three main directions including the connotative structure of the ideology of virtue and law in Confucianism, the compatibility between this system of values and the fundamental principles of the Vietnamese socialist rule of law state, and the possibility of practical application in the context of comprehensive innovation.

The ideological structure of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” of Confucianism

Confucianism was formed as a political ethical doctrine to guide the rulers of the country and the people through the combination of education and the establishment of order. In the classic text, Lizhu, Fan & Na, Chen (2015, pp. 33-35) present the image of the gentleman as the center of the governing apparatus, in which personal morality is considered the key to leading the world. This is further affirmed by Mencius (2004) when he placed benevolence and righteousness as the foundation for human transformation. Chan (1963, p. 45-47) argued that Confucian virtues include qualities such as benevolence, propriety, and trustworthiness, which play a role in guiding the behavior of leaders and, at the same time, creating internal stability for society. Virtue here is not only a personal quality but also a principle of locating social order through education and example.

In parallel with “rule by virtue”, “rule by law” in Confucianism is not understood as a rigid legal system in the legalist sense, but as a mechanism to establish a framework to maintain order based on

rules, rituals, and ethical laws. Herbert (1971, p. 444) stated that law in ancient Chinese tradition is a combination of legal rules and ethical standards to form a unified whole. Jiang (2022, p. 2290) further analyzed that law is used to maintain order and prevent moral degradation, not to confront virtue. Confucianism regards law as a supporting measure, while virtue is the foundation. It is impossible to maintain effective governance without law, just as it is impossible to influence people’s hearts without morality.

The unique point of Confucianism is the harmonious combination of education and sanctions. Virtue aims to nurture the inner self, helping people self-regulate their behavior. The law establishes a framework to ensure public order. As Lin and Trevaskes (2021, pp. 123-125) pointed out in their study of legal and moral ideology in contemporary China, the relationship between virtue and law has become a principle of governance that has been restructured under new political conditions. This affirms the enduring value of the structure of virtue and law as two complementary pillars.

In the context of Confucianism developing over many periods, the elements of family, community and social order become the operating environment of these two principles. Jue Jiang (2019) argues that the family is considered the foundation of political order, in which ethics and codes of conduct are transmitted from the most basic social units. From this, it can be seen that the ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” are not two separate poles, but a unified ethical system to guide and regulate society from individuals to the nation.

In this content, Baumann and Winzar (2017), when analyzing East Asian labor ethics, stated that social efficiency does not come from pure law but from the combination of personal qualities and general discipline. This is how Confucianism understands the relationship between ethics and legal norms. Jing and Doorn’s (2020) study also further affirmed this structure when they analyzed the ethical responsibilities of engineers from a Confucian perspective, arguing that law only makes sense when placed in the context of ethics and professional qualities.

Thus, the ideological structure of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” in Confucianism is built as a unified system, in which virtue is the root and law is the means to ensure stability. These two pillars create a measure for both leaders and people, contributing to the formation of a culture of governance that has lasted for thousands of years. This is an important foundation for comparison with the principles of the current model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam.

Compatibility between “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” with the model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam

The socialist rule of law state in Vietnam is built on the basis of the rule of law, power belongs to the people and governance is based on transparency, responsibility and control of power. The

Constitution (2013) affirms that law is supreme in social management. However, the law does not stand alone but is linked to the ethical values of the cadre team, in line with the viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2021) on building an honest, ethical and people-serving state. The analysis results show that there are deep similarities between Confucian “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” with the principles of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam:

First, the model of the socialist rule of law state focuses on the nature of the people, of the people and for the people. This corresponds to the Confucian view of humanism when considering the people as the root of the nation, as Mencius affirmed that the people are more important than the country. The values of humanity, righteousness and trust in Confucianism can be seen as the moral foundation that helps guide the behavior of cadres in the modern context.

Second, the combination of strict law and public ethics is a modern manifestation of the “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” models. Anh Duong Thi Thuc (2025) analyzed that virtue and talent need to be combined in public ethics, in which virtue is a necessary condition to ensure standard behavior, and law is a control mechanism to prevent violations. Van (2022, pp. 353-355) also warned that in market economic conditions, if ethics are lacking and one only relies on the law, it is easy to lead to a decline in social trust. These analyses affirm the compatibility between Confucian ideology and the requirements of public ethics in Vietnam.

Thirdly, the combination of virtue and law has been creatively applied in Ho Chi Minh’s ideology. According to Tai Nguyen The (2017) and Trung Nguyen Xuan (2019), Ho Chi Minh’s ideology inherits the Confucian tradition when considering ethics as the foundation of officials, while promoting the role of law in state building. This is a clear demonstration of the ability to reconcile the two ideologies in the modern context.

Fourth, according to Ha Nguyen Thi Thu (2024), ancient Eastern political theories have formed many values compatible with the current model of the rule of law state, especially in building a rule-based governance. This perspective shows that the Confucian idea of “rule by law” can be seen as a theoretical reference for establishing a legal order.

Fifth, recent studies on the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam, such as the analysis of Khang Cu Huy and Xuan Le Thi (2024), emphasize that building a rule of law state needs to rely on many factors, in which traditional culture plays an important role. When comparing with the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law”, it is possible to see the compatibility between these two approaches in building a transparent political environment.

When comparing with contemporary political models in East Asian countries as analyzed by Angle (2014), Yi Huah Jiang (2018) and Jiang Dongxian (2021), it can be concluded that the trend of

combining Confucian tradition and the modern rule of law model is being seen as a solution to build legitimacy and political stability. This suggests an approach for Vietnam in perfecting the rule of law state model with the support of traditional cultural values.

Thus, the compatibility between the ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” with the model of socialist rule of law state in Vietnam is expressed at many levels, from moral foundation to legal institutions and governance methods. This is an important foundation to clarify the applicability of this value system in national governance practice.

The applicability of the ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” in current national governance

The research results show that the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” can be creatively applied in the current national governance of Vietnam in three major directions: First, in building public ethics; Second, in perfecting the law and improving enforcement; Third, in strengthening social trust and ensuring the sustainability of the political system. Specifically as follows:

In the field of public ethics, the research of Anh Duong Thi Thuc (2025) emphasizes that cadres must possess both virtue and talent, in which virtue plays a decisive role in integrity and responsibility. The Confucian idea of “rule by virtue” contributes significantly to building the personal qualities of cadres, considering setting an example and cultivating as the foundation. This is not only consistent with Ho Chi Minh’s views but also continues the Confucian tradition of gentlemen. Dang Huong Giang (2025), in her research on integrity education under the Le Thanh Tong dynasty, affirmed that the combination of moral training and strict sanctions created a clean political environment. This is a lesson that is still very valuable for Vietnam today.

In the legal field, the Confucian idea of “rule by law” suggests that the law needs to be built on the foundation of social ethics and must be strictly enforced. The National Assembly (2013) identified the Constitution as the supreme legal document, setting out the principle of social management by law. However, as Ho (2024) analyzed Chinese law, the law is only effective when accompanied by moral education. From this, it can be inferred that the Vietnamese legal system, if supplemented by public ethics education programs and legal culture, will achieve higher efficiency in implementation.

In socio-economic governance, the ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” contribute to fostering social trust. The National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities (1996) warned that the decline of morality in the market economy period would reduce community cohesion. The idea of “rule by virtue” can help strengthen trust, while the idea of “rule by law” helps ensure justice and stability. This combination contributes to enhancing the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the people.

In addition, some lessons from East Asian countries also show that combining Confucian traditions with modern rule of law models can produce positive results in governance. Onwurah (2025) pointed out in his study of the Chinese Civil Code that many legal principles bearing strong Confucian imprints help strengthen social stability. Lin and Trevaskes (2021, pp. 132-135) also argue that the combination of law and virtue helps maintain the legitimacy of power in the modern context.

In the context of Vietnam continuing to perfect the socialist rule of law state, the research of Khang Cu Huy and Xuan Le Thi (2024) affirms that the combination of traditional cultural values and modern legal principles is an inevitable trend. This shows that the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” not only have historical value but also have practical significance in current national governance practices.

In terms of public policy development, the idea of combining virtue and law can guide policy design in the direction of relying on both law and moral standards, avoiding the situation of being too biased towards legal tools or depending on moral factors without sanctions. This helps the policy to have a higher ability to be implemented and receive social consensus.

In terms of power control, the idea of “rule by virtue” emphasizes the moral self-constraint of the ruler, while “rule by law” emphasizes control by rules. The combination of these two factors suggests that the power control mechanism in Vietnam needs to be developed in parallel between political moral standards and clear legal mechanisms. This is an approach that is both consistent with tradition and consistent with the requirements of institutional modernization.

Thus, the possibility of applying the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” in Vietnam’s national governance today is very clear. These two principles contribute to the formation of public ethics, support the building of the legal system and strengthen social trust. The creative application of the combination will contribute to improving the effectiveness of governance, aiming at the goal of building a strong, humane and sustainably developing socialist rule-of-law state in Vietnam.

Discussion

The preceding analysis shows that the Confucian ideas of rule by virtue and rule by law must be understood within a unified philosophical structure rather than as two competing modes of governance. From a philosophical standpoint, the central question is how these concepts, originally articulated in pre imperial China, can enter into a meaningful dialogue with the normative foundations of the contemporary socialist rule of law state of Vietnam. To address this question, it is necessary to examine both the internal logic of Confucian moral reasoning and the normative demands of modern political philosophy.

First, classical Confucian texts present a conception of political authority grounded in moral cultivation. Chan’s compilation reveals that Confucius consistently treats virtue as the core principle that enables the ruler to transform society through moral exemplarity (Chan 1963, pp. 5-8). Mencius further deepens this view by linking political order with an account of human moral nature. His argument that benevolence is the basis of legitimate rule positions virtue not simply as a personal quality but as the metaphysical foundation of political authority. Read philosophically, these claims are not descriptive but normative, asserting that governance must be grounded in moral reason rather than coercion.

Modern philosophical interpretations support the view that Confucian moral concepts can be reconstructed to address contemporary political problems. Angle’s analysis of Confucian constitutional order argues that virtue can function as a normative principle within modern political theory when appropriately reformulated (Angle 2014, pp. 503). Yi Huah Jiang likewise reexamines Confucianism as a political philosophical resource capable of shaping public virtue in contemporary societies (Yi Huah Jiang 2018, p. 1960). These interpretations affirm that Confucian virtue is not merely a historical artifact but a living normative category that can inform present debates about governance, legitimacy and political ethics.

A central issue arises when comparing Confucianism with the modern rule of law. Some scholars argue that Confucian moral emphasis may conflict with the impartiality and formal constraints required in legal systems. However, a closer philosophical reading suggests that Confucianism contains its own conception of normative order that is compatible with structured governance. Ma’s analysis demonstrates that law in traditional Chinese society contained a moral teleology and functioned as an extension of ethical norms, rather than as an independent coercive mechanism (Herbert 1971, pp. 445-447). Jiang’s study of imperial law shows that legal norms were embedded in a broader moral order and did not operate in isolation from ethical expectations (Jiang 2022, pp. 2291-2293). These findings reveal that law in the Confucian tradition is coherent with, rather than contrary to, moral cultivation.

From a philosophical perspective, the challenge is not whether Confucianism can accommodate law, but how law should be conceptualized. Confucian thought insists that legal rules without moral grounding lose their normative legitimacy, while virtue without structure risks becoming ineffective moral idealism. This insight mirrors contemporary philosophical debates about the relationship between ethics and legality. The balance between moral agency and institutional design is therefore not foreign to Confucianism but central to its philosophical architecture.

When placed in dialogue with the socialist rule of law state of Vietnam, the relevance of Confucian morality becomes more apparent. The Vietnamese constitutional framework emphasizes the supremacy of law, public accountability and power control. At the same time, official documents require

that public officials cultivate ethical qualities such as integrity, responsibility and dedication to the people. This dual emphasis is not an accidental combination of moral and legal demands but reflects a deeper philosophical alignment with the Confucian synthesis of virtue and normative order.

Jing and Doorn’s discussion of Confucian moral responsibility illustrates that professional ethics become meaningful only when situated within a normative institutional context (Jing and Doorn 2020, pp. 233-237). This supports the argument that Confucian virtue can serve as the ethical foundation for public service, while legal norms articulate the external standards that ensure accountability. Jiang’s analysis of the family as a prototype of state order also provides philosophical insight into the Confucian belief that moral and institutional elements must operate together to maintain stability (Jue Jiang 2019, pp. 229-235).

However, philosophical reconstruction must also recognize the limitations of Confucian moral theory. Confucian emphasis on hierarchy and role obligations may conflict with contemporary commitments to equality before the law. Berling notes that some aspects of Confucian social order, when taken as fixed moral truths, may inhibit democratic participation and individual rights (Berling 2024). Similarly, Hang (2018) points out that although Confucian ethics can support certain forms of public responsibility, its hierarchical assumptions must be critically examined in modern contexts.

Therefore, a selective reconstruction is necessary. Elements of Confucian virtue that promote moral responsibility, ethical cultivation and public integrity remain philosophically relevant. Conversely, aspects that reinforce fixed hierarchies or restrict individual autonomy must be reevaluated in light of contemporary political philosophy. This selective reconstruction aligns with the approach suggested by Jiang’s notion of progressive Confucianism, which advocates reinterpretation rather than strict preservation of classical doctrines (Jiang Dongxian 2021, pp. 160-167).

The philosophical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Confucian ideas of virtue and law, when carefully reconstructed, offer a coherent normative framework that can inform the ethical and institutional foundations of the socialist rule of law state of Vietnam. Confucianism provides a vision of governance in which moral cultivation shapes the character of public officials while legal norms ensure transparency, accountability and institutional integrity. This dual structure mirrors the philosophical understanding that good governance requires both ethical purpose and normative constraint.

In conclusion, the dialogue between Confucian philosophy and the modern socialist rule of law state is not a mere cultural juxtaposition but a genuine philosophical engagement. Confucianism contributes a rich moral vocabulary for conceptualizing authority, responsibility and ethical leadership, while the rule of law provides the institutional mechanisms that ensure fairness and prevent abuse of

power. The philosophical task is to integrate these two dimensions in a manner that respects classical insights while meeting contemporary normative demands.

Conclusion

The research results confirm that the Confucian ideas of “rule by virtue” and “rule by law”, although formed in an ancient context, still contain values that are capable of deep dialogue with the current model of the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam. “Rule by virtue” focuses on cultivating, setting examples and educating morality to create a foundation for public ethics, while “rule by law” functions to establish a framework of rules that contributes to ensuring discipline and transparency in state management activities. The compatibility between these two value systems and modern rule of law principles is clearly demonstrated in the requirement to build a team of honest officials, in promoting the rule of law and in efforts to control power in the spirit of the Constitution of Vietnam. The research has provided a theoretical framework to help understand the adaptation of Confucian thought in the contemporary political context, thereby strengthening the scientific basis for combining traditional values with the requirement of institutional modernization. At the same time, the research results contribute to expanding the cultural approach in building a socialist rule-of-law state.

However, the research is still limited in that it has not deeply examined the impact of each local cultural element and has not fully analyzed the Confucian elements that can hinder democracy and human rights. These analyses need to be continued in future works. The next research direction can focus on empirical surveys of public ethics, assessing the level of presence of Confucian values in the behavior of officials, and at the same time studying the model of combining “rule by virtue” and “rule by law” in each specific area of governance to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the socialist rule-of-law state in Vietnam.

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