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LEGITIMACY AND MORAL ORDER IN NGUYEN POLITICAL THOUGHT:
A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF CONFUCIAN GOVERNANCE
IN 19TH-CENTURY VIETNAM

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Abstract: *This article examines the philosophical foundations of political legitimacy in the Confucian political thought of the Nguyen dynasty in nineteenth-century Vietnam. It focuses on three core concepts of Confucian statecraft – rectification of names (chính danh), rule by virtue (đức trị), and ritual governance (lễ trị) – to explore how Nguyen rulers understood political authority as a moral responsibility grounded in ethical cultivation and cosmological order. The study adopts a hermeneutic and comparative approach. It analyzes a corpus of Vietnamese imperial sources, including the Đại Nam Thực Lục, the Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn, and Emperor Tự Đức's reflective text Khiêm Cung Ký. These materials are interpreted within the wider context of East Asian Confucian political philosophy, allowing the Vietnamese case to be considered alongside intellectual developments in late imperial China and Tokugawa Japan. The article argues that Nguyen political thought articulated sovereignty through a synthesis of virtue, ritual order, and cosmic harmony. Legitimate rule depended on the moral self-cultivation of the ruler and on ritual practices that maintained the correspondence between political authority and the moral structure of the cosmos. At the same time, the 19th century confronted this Confucian vision of governance with the political and intellectual challenges of colonial modernity. Rather than abandoning its ethical foundations, the Nguyen court reaffirmed Confucian principles as the basis of legitimate authority. By reconstructing this moral framework, the study highlights the distinctive character of Vietnamese Confucian political philosophy and contributes to comparative discussions of legitimacy and moral governance in East Asian intellectual history.*

Keywords: Vietnam, Nguyen dynasty, Confucian political philosophy, moral legitimacy, rule by virtue, rectification of names, Vietnamese Confucianism, 19th century, political ethics in East Asia

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In 19th century, the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945) ruled Vietnam during one of the most turbulent periods in its history – a time of internal consolidation, moral anxiety, and external confrontation with Western powers. The Nguyen emperors, especially Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc, sought to preserve their political authority by grounding it in the moral and ritual foundations of Confucian governance [Woodside, 1988, p. 45–47].

Each of these rulers embodied a distinct modality of Confucian rationality: Minh Mang systematized moral order through the institutionalization of rites and bureaucratic codification; Thieu Tri maintained this orientation with continuity rather than reform, preserving the ritual morality of statecraft; and Tu Duc transformed this inheritance into a philosophical introspection

on virtue, responsibility, and legitimacy. This internal evolution illustrates the dynasty's effort to articulate sovereignty not merely as dynastic succession but as an ethical and cosmological order founded on virtue (đức), ritual (lễ), and rectification of names (chính danh).

The growing presence of European colonialism and Christianity, however, introduced competing moral universes that challenged the very premises of Confucian legitimacy [Li, 2020, p. 89]. Within this complex setting, the Nguyen court was compelled to reformulate its authority as mediation between celestial and human orders rather than a form of political domination.

The study of Nguyen political thought – often approached from historical or sociological perspectives – has rarely been examined as a coherent philosophical system grounded in moral cosmology. Traditional historiography tends to portray the dynasty as rigidly conservative, emphasizing its failure to adapt to modernity [Marr, 1981, p. 63–65]. Yet recent scholarship has reconsidered this view, suggesting that Nguyen political rationality was not mere orthodoxy but a deliberate effort to defend Confucian moral order against both internal disorder and the epistemic intrusion of the West [Nguyen, 2019, p. 212; Taylor, 2013, p. 258–260].

From this perspective, the Nguyen intellectual project represents a distinctive form of Confucian moral rationalism – a legitimation of power based on ethical and ritual coherence rather than bureaucratic efficiency. It continues the long tradition of Vietnamese Confucian statecraft inherited from earlier dynasties, particularly the Le, while reinterpreting it in a specifically Vietnamese metaphysical and ritual idiom.

This article approaches the Nguyen political thought as a philosophical discourse on legitimacy. It asks how did the Nguyen rulers and scholars conceive legitimate authority, and in what ways did moral and ritual principles constitute its philosophical foundation.

The analysis proceeds from the premise that the Nguyen conception of governance was not purely administrative but profoundly metaphysical: for the Nguyen, power was inseparable from virtue (đức), ritual propriety (lễ), and cosmic harmony (thiên mệnh) [Mencius, 2009, p. 171]. The Confucian notion of “rule by virtue” (đức trị) thus formed both the ethical content and the epistemological structure of political legitimacy.

At the same time, the 19th century witnessed the gradual erosion of this worldview. The encounter with European rationalism, Catholic theology, and colonial aggression exposed the limits of Confucian metaphysics in accounting for sovereignty and moral responsibility [Taylor, 2013, p. 258–260]. Yet the Nguyen response did not take the form of ideological substitution but of moral intensification – the reaffirmation of Confucian virtues as the only legitimate basis of authority. Imperial edicts and court records from this period reveal a consistent effort to rearticulate the cosmic dimension of governance in the face of worldly disorder [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1852, p. 24].

Emperor Tu Duc's *Khiêm Cung Ký*, for instance, functions not merely as an epitaph but as a reflective philosophical text expressing anxiety about the moral conditions of rulership and the fragility of the moral cosmos under foreign pressure [Hoang, 2024(2), p. 170].

Building on these insights, the present study interprets Nguyen political thought as a philosophical articulation of legitimacy and moral order. Rather than judging the dynasty by its political outcomes, the paper seeks to reconstruct the internal logic of its moral reasoning – how the Nguyen court philosophically understood the relationship between virtue, order, and authority. By situating this reasoning within the broader East Asian Confucian tradition, the article highlights both the local particularities and the universal philosophical dimensions of moral governance.

Methodologically, the study adopts a hermeneutic and comparative approach, applied to central texts of Nguyen intellectual life: the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (Veritable Records of Dai Nam), the *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục* (Imperially Ordered Comprehensive Mirror of Vietnamese History), and imperial writings such as *Khiêm Cung Ký*. Read philosophically, these

texts reveal a persistent concern for the metaphysical unity between political order and moral virtue [Phan, 1961, p. 112–114].

By re-examining these sources, this article contributes to the growing field of Southeast Asian thought, viewing it not as a derivative of Chinese Confucianism but as a localized philosophical response to historical contingency [Sakai, 2021, p. 98]. The Nguyen conception of legitimacy, though expressed in Confucian vocabulary, must thus be understood through the unique Vietnamese synthesis of Confucian ethics, indigenous political culture, and the existential challenge of colonial modernity.

In sum, this study proposes that Nguyen political philosophy represents a moral ontology of governance, wherein power derives its legitimacy from ethical integrity, ritual correctness, and the alignment between human and celestial orders. This philosophical reading of Nguyen statecraft allows us to move beyond conventional historical narratives toward a deeper understanding of how moral ideas shaped the foundations of authority in 19th-century Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts hermeneutic and comparative methodology to interpret Nguyen political thought not as a collection of historical policies but as a moral and cosmological system of governance. The approach rests on two premises: first, those Confucian political concepts in Vietnam possess an intrinsic philosophical coherence that can be reconstructed through textual interpretation; and second, that Vietnamese Confucianism, while rooted in the Chinese classics, developed its own discursive autonomy through historical adaptation and moral localization [Sakai, 2021, p. 96].

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Texts

The primary orientation of this research is hermeneutic. By reading royal chronicles (Đại Nam Thực Lục), official historiography (Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục), and reflective writings such as Khiêm Cung Ký, the study treats political language as the articulation of a philosophical worldview. Following Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the analysis seeks to understand how meaning is constituted through historical self-understanding [Gadamer, 2004, p. 271–273].

Rather than isolating “facts” of policy, each textual expression is interpreted as part of a moral discourse aimed at maintaining cosmic and social order. The Nguyen texts are therefore approached as philosophical documents: they encode assumptions about virtue (đức), hierarchy (lễ), and legitimacy (chính danh). The hermeneutic approach allows one to read beyond literal content to grasp the underlying moral rationality – how rulers conceptualized the unity between ethics and politics, between Heaven (thiên) and the throne (quân). This interpretive stance, successfully applied to Chinese and Japanese traditions of political thought [Angle, 2012, p. 58–60; Bell, 2010, p. 145], proves especially fruitful for Vietnamese sources, which remain under-theorized in Western political philosophy.

Comparative Framework and East Asian Political Philosophy

In parallel, the study employs a comparative framework that situates the Nguyen conception of legitimacy within the broader Confucian political cosmology of East Asia. Drawing on Mencius's theory of rule by virtue (德治) and Xunzi's notion of ritual governance (禮治), the analysis demonstrates how the Nguyen court reinterpreted these classical principles under local conditions.

While the late Qing tradition – with thinkers such as Kang Youwei and Zhang Zhidong – sought to reconcile Confucian moral cosmology with the modern state, the Nguyen dynasty

remained committed to the metaphysical primacy of virtue over law. Similarly, unlike Tokugawa Japan, where ritual was integrated into a pragmatic administrative ethic, Vietnamese Confucianism preserved an essentially moral and cosmological dimension.

This comparative perspective thus refuses to treat Vietnamese Confucianism as derivative; rather, it regards it as a localized philosophy of moral order - a hybrid intellectual formation negotiating between the universalism of Confucian cosmology and the particularities of Vietnamese history. It thereby contributes to de-centering Sinocentric assumptions in the study of Confucian political theory [Elman, 2013, p. 41–43].

Conceptual Structure: Legitimacy, Virtue, and Moral Order

The conceptual framework rests on three interrelated notions: legitimacy (chính danh) – understood not merely as the legal right to rule but as the moral correctness of social names and roles, following Confucius’s dictum that “if names are not correct, language is not in accord, and affairs cannot be accomplished” [Confucius, 1992, p. 127].

Virtue (đức) – conceived as the ontological source of authority, where the ruler’s inner moral state sustains both the state and the cosmos. It is a moral – metaphysical principle rather than an ethical ornament.

Moral Order (đạo lý/ lễ trị) – representing the institutionalization of virtue through ritual and social hierarchy, the medium by which cosmic harmony is enacted in political form [Tu Weiming, 1989, p. 74].

Together, these concepts constitute a Confucian ontology of governance: virtue grounds being, ritual orders action, and rectification of names ensures moral coherence.

Corpus and Analytical Procedure

The corpus examined includes imperial chronicles and edicts [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1852; 1867], moral treatises, and epigraphic inscriptions such as *Khiêm Cung Ký* [Tu Duc, 1884]. Secondary sources in both Vietnamese and English provide additional interpretive scaffolding [Taylor, 2013; Hoang, 2024(1)]. Each text is analyzed through thematic coding – identifying recurrent moral concepts, ritual metaphors, and cosmological justifications – in order to reconstruct the Nguyen intellectual model of legitimate authority.

This methodological and conceptual design allows Nguyen political thought to be seen not as a static moral code but as a living philosophical discourse negotiating between tradition and crisis. Through hermeneutic interpretation and regional comparison, the study demonstrates that the Nguyen vision of legitimacy rests upon a distinctively Vietnamese synthesis of Confucian virtue ethics, ritual politics, and moral cosmology.

THE NGUYEN DYNASTY’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN TEXTS

This section examines how the Nguyen dynasty articulated its vision of legitimate rule through three fundamental textual forms – royal chronicles, imperial edicts, and reflective inscriptions. Each genre fulfils a distinct philosophical function: the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* codifies the metaphysics of moral causality; Minh Mang’s edicts translate ritual ethics into political legislation; and Tu Duc’s *Khiêm Cung Ký* expresses the ruler’s introspective moral consciousness. Taken together, these sources form a textual tradition of moral – political philosophy that continually negotiates between cosmic principle and historical contingency.

The Moral Logic of the Đại Nam Thực Lục

The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (大南實錄, Veritable Records of the Great South), compiled according to strict bureaucratic procedure, was intended to record events “faithfully yet reverently” (thực

nhi bất lộ, kính nhi bất thiên). On the surface, it is a chronicle of court affairs; at a deeper level, it constructs a moral cosmos in which human action, Heaven's will, and ritual propriety are inseparable.

For example, in the annals of Minh Mang's eleventh year (1830), a solar eclipse is followed by an imperial edict of self-reflection:

「朕惟日蝕者，天之戒也。人君有所不德，則天以象告焉。」

"I reflect that an eclipse is Heaven's warning; when a ruler's virtue fails, Heaven gives its sign" [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1830, p. 145].

The eclipse is thus not a natural phenomenon but a moral symbol. The text operates within what Charles Taylor (1989) would call a moral ontology: cosmic and political orders share a common ethical grammar. To "read" the world correctly is to engage in philosophical reasoning through ritual and introspection.

Throughout the *Thực Lục*, one observes a ritual hermeneutics of events. Political disturbances, rebellions, floods, or omens are narrated alongside ritual responses, transforming history into a didactic mirror. During a southern rebellion in 1835, the text records:

「治道未修，民心或失所依。朕深自克責，命禮部祈禱於社稷。」

"The Way of governance has not been rectified, and the people's hearts have lost their anchor. I deeply reproach myself and command the Ministry of Rites to pray to the Spirits of Soil and Grain" [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1835, p. 287].

Here, the sovereign assumes total moral responsibility: political disorder is the effect of ethical dissonance. History becomes a Confucian phenomenology of rule – an interpretation of being in history through categories of moral duty.

Minh Mang's Edicts: Institutionalizing Ritual as Political Philosophy

If the Annals provide moral narrative, Minh Mang's edicts constitute moral legislation. His reign (1820–1841) represents the most systematic attempt to transform Confucian ethics into a bureaucratic and ceremonial order.

In an edict of 1833 regulating village rituals, Minh Mang declared:

「禮者，治之本也。禮壞而國不存。」

"Ritual is the root of governance; when ritual decays, the state cannot endure" [*Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn*, 1833, fol. 6r].

This statement echoes Xunzi's dictum: "Rites are that by which Heaven and Earth are joined, and by which people are ordered". Ritual (lễ) thus becomes not social convention but metaphysical infrastructure – a performative bridge linking cosmos and polity.

In administrative practice, this vision produced a detailed codification of ceremonies, state oversight of temples, and explicit condemnation of "heterodox" practices. Edicts concerning Catholic activities, for instance, invoked a moral argument: "The Western religion undermines filial piety and confuses the names of ruler and subject; thus it endangers the root of propriety" [*Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn*, 1835, fol. 12r].

The issue here is not primarily religious but ontological: the subversion of "names" (chính danh) destroys the moral structure of the world. As Hoang Phuong Thao notes, the prohibition policy reflected "ritualistic considerations" rather than mere coercion [Hoang, 2024(1), p. 96]. Governance through ritual sought to preserve the correspondence between language, society, and cosmos.

Khiêm Cung Ký: The Emperor as Moral Philosopher

Composed in 1884, Tu Duc's *Khiêm Cung Ký* is the most introspective text in Vietnamese imperial literature. Combining epitaph, confession, and moral treatise, it stands as a philosophical meditation on virtue, failure, and legitimacy.

At the beginning, Tu Duc writes:

「朕生性柔懦，不逮於祖宗之剛毅。每懼德不配位。」

“My nature is gentle and weak, unworthy of the firmness of my ancestors; I constantly fear that my virtue does not match my station” [Tự Đức, 1884, fol. 2r].

This statement enacts a process of self-rectification (*tu thân*), in line with the Confucian injunction that “the ruler must correct himself before correcting others” (Analects 13.6). Beyond moral humility, however, it expresses an ontological anxiety: if virtue sustains the celestial mandate, its deficiency endangers the metaphysical legitimacy of the throne.

Later, Tu Duc concludes:

「知天命而不能盡，非天之咎，人之咎也。」

“To know Heaven’s Mandate yet fail to fulfill it – this is not Heaven’s fault but man’s” [Tự Đức, 1884, fol. 5v].

Here, *thiên mệnh* (天命, the Mandate of Heaven) is not deterministic but an ethical horizon: virtue is destiny realized through moral consciousness. This introspection transforms classical cosmology into an ethical phenomenology of power. As Hoang Phuong Thao observes, the *Khiêm Cung Ký* redefines kingship as the critical guardianship of moral order, linking political theology and ethical psychology [Hoang, 2024(2), p. 169].

Ritual Practice as the Pedagogy of Legitimacy

Beyond canonical texts, the everyday life of the Nguyen polity embodied pedagogy of virtue. Rituals of thanksgiving after harvests, sacrifices to Heaven and Earth (*Nam Giao*), and mourning regulations for officials served to educate subjects in the recognition of moral hierarchy.

Thus, after a good harvest in 1838, Minh Mang ordered the establishment of “schools of rites and morality” (*khai lễ học, khai nghĩa học*), declaring:

「禮義者，民之根也。」

“Rites and righteousness are the root of the people” [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1838, p. 412].

Here, political pedagogy becomes cosmological: to teach ritual is to maintain the fabric of the universe. As D.A. Bell notes, Confucian virtue is “performative” – realized through ritual enactment rather than abstract belief [Bell, 2010, p. 145].

The Nguyen Moral – Cosmological Synthesis

The analyses above reveal that Nguyen political thought operates according to a triadic model:

Dimension	Conceptual Core	Philosophical Function
Moral Self	Đức (Virtue)	Source of legitimacy; ruler as moral exemplar
Ritual Order	Lễ (Rites)	Medium of cosmic harmony; institutional enactment
Cosmic Sanction	Thiên mệnh (Mandate of Heaven)	Metaphysical validation; continuity between cosmos and polity

This model – what may be called a moral ontology of governance – conceives politics not as an arena of power but as a continuous performance of ethical correspondence. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* narrates it historically; Minh Mang’s edicts codify it institutionally; the *Khiêm Cung Ký* reflects upon it introspectively; and ritual practice enacts it communally.

Legitimacy thus becomes a relational property sustained by virtue, ritual correctness, and cosmic harmony. This systematic conception of authority testifies to a fully developed Vietnamese

political philosophy in active dialogue – but not subordination – with the broader Confucian world of East Asia.

LEGITIMACY IN CRISIS: CONFUCIAN ETHICS AND THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER

The second half of the 19th century confronted the Nguyen dynasty with an unprecedented moral and ontological rupture in Vietnamese history. The intrusion of Western powers – combined with internal tensions and the spread of Christianity – destabilized the Confucian cosmology of legitimacy. Yet, far from abandoning its ethical foundations, the Nguyen court reaffirmed virtue (đức), ritual (lễ), and rectification of names (chính danh) as the supreme frameworks of resistance. This section argues that the Nguyen crisis was less a moral failure than a crisis of translation: the Confucian order of meaning could no longer be rendered intelligible within the epistemic regime of colonial modernity.

The Heavenly Mandate Confronting Secular Power

In classical Confucian ontology, political legitimacy (chính thống) derives from the Mandate of Heaven (thiên mệnh), the metaphysical principle linking cosmic harmony and moral virtue. The ruler governs not through force but through moral correspondence: virtue ensures prosperity, while its decay brings disorder.

When French troops attacked Da Nang in 1858, the Đại Nam Thực Lục recorded Emperor Tu Duc's reaction not in military but in ethical terms:

「西夷擾我疆土，天以是警朕德之不修也。」

“The Western barbarians disturb our borders; Heaven thus warns me that my virtue is unrectified” [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1858, p. 213].

Here, invasion is moralized: not a geopolitical event but a cosmic warning. The sovereign's duty of rectitude demands self-reform before retaliation. As Hoang Phuong Thao notes, this “metaphysics of responsibility” reflects both the Nguyen's fidelity to moral rationality and their inability to adapt to the accelerated temporality of modernity [Hoang, 2024(2), p. 170], what Reinhart Koselleck calls the conceptual lag of traditional orders before modern time [Koselleck, 2004].

Ritual Orthodoxy as a Politics of Purification

Under external pressure, the court reinforced the centrality of ritual as a cosmic remedy. Between 1861 and 1863, several edicts prescribed renewed sacrifices to Heaven and the imperial ancestors, along with the public recitation of the Ten Moral Instructions to the People (Thập điều huấn dân). One such edict declared:

「禮行則心定，心定則國安。」

“When ritual is practiced, the heart is settled; when hearts are settled, the state is secure” [*Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn*, 1861, p. 22].

Ritual thus becomes a form of cosmic therapy: through formal repetition, the order of the world is reactivated. This logic echoes Xunzi's idea that ritual “straightens man's twisted desires”. Yet this strategy faced an ontological dissonance: the enemy – France – operated within a secular rationality, insensitive to moral causality. Ritual could not affect a disenchanted world.

Tu Weiming speaks of Confucianism's “ritual humanism” [Tu Weiming, 1989, p. 76]: its moral strength became its political weakness, for the modern world no longer recognized the correspondence between virtue and order.

The Moralization of Defeat: From Misfortune to Ethical Pedagogy

After the Treaty of Saigon (1862), Tu Duc transformed defeat into moral instruction:

「國之喪地，朕之喪德也。苟能反己修省，則猶可望天心之回。」

“The loss of territory is the loss of my virtue. If I sincerely reform myself, Heaven’s heart may yet return” [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1862, p. 327].

Here, catastrophe becomes pedagogy. Following Mencius (6B15), the suffering sent by Heaven strengthens virtue. Tu Duc extends this logic to the imperial scale: misfortune serves as moral education for the sovereign.

Yet this coherence hides a tragic impossibility: no amount of introspection could repel gunboats. The Nguyen moral universe required a morally responsive cosmos, but colonial modernity had abolished that resonance.

Moral Sovereignty and Its Impossibility

At the heart of the crisis lay the contradiction between moral sovereignty and political sovereignty. In the Confucian paradigm, royal authority is derived – conferred by Heaven and sustained by virtue. In the modern Western conception, sovereignty is self-founded, legal, and coercive.

During the 1863 negotiations, Tu Duc reportedly declared:

「天命在人，不在人力。朕不敢以力抗天。」

“Heaven’s Mandate resides in the people, not in force; I dare not oppose Heaven through power” [*Đại Nam Thực Lục*, 1863, p. 401].

This statement, ethically sublime but diplomatically fatal, reveals the incommensurability of two ontologies of power: legitimacy as moral correspondence versus legitimacy as autonomy of the will. As Benjamin Elman has shown regarding Qing China, this tension haunted all Confucian monarchies in the modern age [Elman, 2013, p. 42]. However, in Vietnam, fidelity to the Heavenly Mandate precluded any viable political translation.

Tu Duc’s Introspection and the Ethics of Failure

In the Khiêm Cung Ký, Tu Duc confesses:

「兵革交作，疆宇日蹙。非天之不佑，實朕之不德也。」

“Wars rage on all sides, our frontiers shrink day by day. It is not Heaven that abandons us, but my own lack of virtue”. [Tự Đức, 1884, fol. 6r].

This passage embodies an ethics of absolute responsibility. The king refuses to renounce morality even in defeat. As Hoang Phuong Thao notes, this “ethical perseverance” transforms political failure into moral fidelity [Hoang, 2024(2), p. 171].

Philosophically, Tu Duc enacts a form of existential Confucianism: he experiences history as self-trial. Crisis becomes the space where moral consciousness tests itself against the unintelligibility of the modern world.

Moral Universality and Historical Contingency

In comparative perspective, the Nguyen experience parallels that of other Confucian polities confronting modernity. As S. Angle observes, the difficulty of modern Confucianism is not ethical but institutional: how can moral universality be translated into a new political form? [Angle, 2012, p. 60].

Vietnam’s failure was not philosophical but historical: morality remained intact yet untranslatable. Moral legitimacy, inconvertible into instrumental rationality, lost its visibility. Yet it retained the power of testimony – the enduring conviction that to govern is to cultivate virtue, and that power is just only insofar as it is morally grounded.

The Last Moral Kingdom

With the Patenôtre Treaty (1884) and the establishment of the French protectorate, the political autonomy of the Nguyen ended, but their moral universe survived. Their response to crisis reveals a coherent yet doomed philosophy:

Moral ontology – Virtue grounds existence.

Ritual performativity – Order is realized through ceremony.

Cosmic correspondence – Heaven remains the ethical horizon.

The Nguyen failure was not one of thought but of translatability: their world presupposed that Heaven still responded to virtue. When Heaven fell silent, legitimacy ceased to be audible.

Thus, 19th-century Vietnam embodied the final attempt of a state to ground its sovereignty on ethics. The moral kingdom of the Nguyen did not perish through incoherence but through ontological solitude – it remained faithful to a cosmology the modern world no longer shared.

MORAL LEGITIMACY AND THE FATE OF THE VIETNAMESE CONFUCIAN STATE

The philosophical trajectory traced in this study demonstrates that the Nguyen dynasty's conception of political legitimacy was not merely a moral ideal but a coherent metaphysical system. Rooted in Confucian ontology, it elevated virtue (đức), ritual propriety (lễ), and the rectification of names (chính danh) as constitutive principles of sovereignty. To govern meant maintaining harmony between Heaven, Earth, and humanity – not through coercion, but through moral correctness.

Yet this internal coherence rendered the system fragile when confronted by a modernity that redefined legitimacy in secular, juridical, and technological terms. Facing the rationality of colonial power, the dynasty sought to defend a virtue-based conception of authority against a world governed by force and efficiency.

Historically, the Nguyen response, especially under Emperor Tu Duc, represents the final, full articulation of Confucian moral governance in East Asia. Whereas the Qing dynasty in China and the Tokugawa polity in Japan achieved partial syntheses between morality and modernity, Vietnam sought to preserve the cosmology of Heaven intact. Its failure was not intellectual but incommensurable: moral legitimacy could not be translated into the language of modern power.

The reflective texts of the reign – imperial edicts, ritual decrees, and the Khiêm Cung Ký – embody a philosophy of responsibility. In affirming that “the loss of territory is the loss of my virtue”, Tu Duc articulated an ontological conviction: sovereignty cannot be separated from moral cultivation. It was not morality that collapsed, but the world that ceased to respond to it.

This rupture reveals the boundary between two regimes of legitimacy: one cosmic, grounding authority in the correspondence between human virtue and heavenly order; the other secular, constructing it through institutional rationality and coercive capacity. The tragedy of the Nguyen lay in their faith that the world would remain morally resonant – that Heaven would continue to respond to virtue. When Heaven fell silent, history ceased to speak the language of morality.

Philosophically, the Vietnamese case enriches our understanding of late Confucianism: it demonstrates that Confucianism is not merely an ethics but ontology of legitimacy – defining existence, order, and authority in moral and ritual terms. The Nguyen experience challenges the modern separation between political rationality and moral transcendence, offering instead an alternative: a politics of virtue in which sovereignty arises from self-cultivation and history remains a field of ethical testing.

Placed within the comparative perspective of East Asia, this study reveals a shared dilemma: how to reconcile moral universality with historical contingency. As Tu Weiming observes, “the cultivation of virtue remains the root of all governance” [Tu Weiming, 1989, p. 75]. The Nguyen

rulers embodied this conviction to the end, transforming their political downfall into a moral testimony.

Thus, the Nguyen philosophy of legitimacy marks both an ending and an inheritance. It closes the era of the moral kingdom – a world in which power and virtue were one – while bequeathing a conceptual legacy to later Vietnamese and East Asian thought. In an age preoccupied with power and legality, their insistence on virtue reminds us of another possible foundation of legitimacy: the moral cultivation of the self as the true source of authority.

Far from being a relic, the Nguyen experience remains a critical resource for the contemporary renewal of Confucian political philosophy. It illuminates the enduring tension between moral universality and historical transformation, between ethical responsibility and political realism. The moral kingdom did not vanish; it endures as the philosophical memory of a world in which to govern still meant to be just.

HERITAGE AND CONTINUITIES OF MORAL LEGITIMACY AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The fall of the Nguyen dynasty in 1884 did not mark the disappearance of the Confucian moral paradigm in Vietnam, but rather its silent transformation. Far from being abolished by colonial modernity, the idea of legitimacy grounded in virtue was reinvested in new intellectual contexts, notably through the reformist and modernist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This section examines the subterranean continuity of the Confucian ethics of power in post-imperial Vietnamese thought, particularly among scholars such as Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, and other literati trained in the Nho học tradition.

From the Heavenly Mandate to the Moral Sovereignty of the People

The end of the monarchy did not erase the moral schema of the Heavenly Mandate (thiên mệnh); it merely transferred it to a new subject: the people. In *Việt Nam vong quốc sử* (1905), Phan Bội Châu reinterpreted legitimacy not as a cosmic mandate but as a popular one – retaining its moral foundation. He wrote: “The virtue of the people is the true Heaven; he who loses the people loses the Mandate”.

This reformulation reflects the persistence of Confucian moral rationalism adapted to the demands of modern political consciousness. Power, now republican or nationalist, remained a moral function – the collective virtue of the people replacing the individual virtue of the sovereign.

Thus, the passage from thiên mệnh (Heaven’s Mandate) to dân quyền (people’s sovereignty) was not a rupture but a translation: the source of legitimacy shifted, but not its moral nature.

Phan Châu Trinh and the Moralization of Republicanism

Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926), often portrayed as a secular reformer, was in fact deeply rooted in Confucian moral humanism. In his writings on civilization and national renewal, he affirmed that the regeneration of the country could come only from the moral rectification of its citizens: “Freedom without virtue is anarchy, not reform” [Phan, 1961; see also: Huynh, 2008, p. 94–96; Marr, 1981, p. 221–224].

Trinh redefined rectification of names (chính danh) as a civic operation: restoring moral meaning to words such as “patriotism”, “people”, and “freedom”. In doing so, he preserved chính danh as both an epistemological and ethical principle, now applied to modern political vocabulary.

In this way, Phan Châu Trinh realized what Tu Duc had only foreseen: reconciliation between Confucian moral philosophy and modern political rationality.

Confucianism as Ethical Humanism under Colonial Modernity

Under colonial rule, Confucianism ceased to be a state doctrine but remained a moral culture. Scholars turned teachers, translators, or local administrators continued to embody lễ (ritual propriety) and đức (virtue) in everyday practices.

Recent studies [Nguyen, 2019; Pham, 2020] have shown that this inherited ethic of duty helped preserve a sense of rectitude in educational and bureaucratic spheres, even under French domination.

Confucianism thus evolved into an ethical humanism of resistance – not a political religion, but a moral conscience opposing cultural subjugation.

Regional Comparisons: Crossed Confucian Modernities

This persistence of the moral paradigm was not unique to Vietnam. The Republican China and Meiji Japan followed similar trajectories. In China, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao reconfigured moral legitimacy into a reformist project (Datong shu). In Japan, Nishi Amane and Fukuzawa Yukichi reinterpreted virtue (toku) as civic ethics. Vietnam thus belonged to the same East Asian constellation in which modernity did not abolish Confucianism but transmuted the moral into the political. As Tu Weiming writes, “East Asian modernity is Confucian insofar as it seeks to moralize reason rather than to disenchant it” [Tu Weiming, 1996, p. 54].

The Nguyen dynasty and its intellectual heirs participated in this shared endeavour to preserve the moral dimension of politics in a disenchanted world.

Philosophical Legacy and Ethical Relevance

Today, the rediscovery of Vietnamese Confucianism has revived interest in comparative political philosophy. The idea of moral legitimacy as the foundation of authority has gained new resonance amid contemporary crises of governance and public trust.

The Nguyen model, re-examined through the lens of moral philosophy, invites us to envision a form of politics grounded not in institutional force but in reflective virtue. It opens the way toward an Asian political humanism capable of dialoguing with Western thought without dissolving into it.

Thus, Vietnamese political philosophy – from Tu Duc to Phan Châu Trinh – forms a line of continuity illustrating what might be called a moral tradition of legitimacy, one that unites cosmology, ethics, and politics within a single ontology of meaning.

General Conclusion: The Persistence of the Moral Kingdom

Modernity did not destroy the Nguyen “moral kingdom”; it dispersed its elements into modern Vietnamese culture. Đức (virtue), lễ (ritual), and chính danh (rectification of names) survive as silent principles of public morality, still perceptible in the moral and educational language of today.

Vietnam, through this continuity, embodies an ethical modernity rather than a merely institutional one. In this sense, moral legitimacy is far from being relic – it remains a critical resource. It reminds us that no political order can endure unless it is rooted in ontology of virtue.

The thought of the Nguyen, extended by early 20th century reformers, testifies to the vitality of the Confucian philosophy of responsibility – an inheritance linking the imperial past to contemporary reflections on ethical governance.

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