



Values and limitations in Le Quy Don's thoughts on Integrity

To Tuong Vi, Nguyen Thi Nhu

Faculty of Philosophy, VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

The paper analyzes the integrity ideology of the outstanding scholar Le Quy Don (1726 - 1784) in the context of the 18th century Vietnamese feudal society in serious crisis due to corruption and moral degradation of mandarins. Le Quy Don considered integrity as the “root of political affairs” and a mandatory criterion for those in power, deciding the prosperity and decline of the nation. The paper also analyzes the core manifestations of integrity from Le Quy Don's perspective. These views have profound practical value and are valuable lessons for the current work of building a culture of integrity. However, due to the limitations of the times, this ideology has been still moralistic, lacked institutional solutions to control power, has been too dependent on the will of the leader and have not promoted the supervisory role of the people.

Keywords: Le quy don, integrity, political ideology, official ethics

Introduction

Integrity is one of the moral qualities that is of primary concern in all areas of social life, meaning uprightness and purity. Vietnam is currently considered a country with stable politics and a strongly growing economy. However, in this context of development, the country also has to face the negative side of the emergence of a group of officials with degraded ethics, fascinated by money, committing wrongdoings, embezzlement and corruption, thinking only of personal interests instead of the common development of the country. The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam emphasized that building a culture of integrity was a key task and solution in the current work of preventing and combating corruption and negativity.

In feudal history, the issue of integrity has been of interest to thinkers since early times. Le Quy Don (1726 - 1784) was an outstanding scholar and politician who not only had a deep understanding of integrity but also made efforts to practice and turn what he understood into action throughout his official career. His thoughts and honest life still have profound meaning, leaving extremely valuable lessons for today. Therefore, studying Le Quy Don's thoughts on integrity is an issue of both theoretical and practical significance, contributing to building integrity ethics and overcoming moral degradation in the current social context. There have been a number of articles directly discussing Le Quy Don's thoughts on integrity. Ha Thuc Minh's article (1968) argued that in *Quan Thu Khao Bien*, Le Quy Don set out clear requirements on ethics and responsibilities of officials. The criticism of bureaucracy and corruption in the state apparatus was expressed by Le Quy Don from a historical perspective, but in essence it reflected his consistent ideology of integrity. Phan Thi Ngoc Huyen's article (2017) [8] affirmed that, in Le Quy Don's thought, integrity was not only a personal moral quality but also a principle of governing the country, associated with the prosperity and decline of the dynasty. These works have directly contributed to clarifying a core aspect in Le Quy Don's political and ethical thought: consider integrity both as a standard of personality for those in power and a governing principle that has decisive significance for the fate of the nation. However, no work has yet fully

synthesized the manifestations of integrity shown separately in Le Quy Don's works, and has not yet given a full and objective assessment of the values and limitations of his thoughts on this issue.

In this paper, we give assessments of the value and limitations of Le Quy Don's thought on integrity based on an overview of the core contents of that thought. Clearly identifying both the value and limitations not only helps to correctly understand the stature of his thoughts in the context of the 18th century, but also opens up many important lessons for the current work of building a team of cadres and civil servants, towards an honest, transparent and effective administration.

Contents

1. Conditions for the formation of Le Quy Don's integrity ideology

Le Quy Don's integrity ideology was formed in the turbulent social and ideological context of the 18th century. Vietnamese society in the 18th century witnessed a prolonged decline. The Le Dynasty was “in name only” and the real power was in the hands of the Trinh and Nguyen lords, leading to the decentralization of power and a crisis of governance. The bureaucracy was corrupt and harassed the people. Le Quy Don once criticized in *Kien Van Tieu Luc* that: “Being officials, they exploit the people. Holding a high position, the first thing they do is accepting bribes” (Le Quy Don, 2007, *Kien Van Tieu Luc*, page 27). The situation of buying and selling official titles became public, even became a policy, causing incompetent and immoral people with money to be promoted, pushing society into injustice (Truong Huu Quynh, 2008, page 218) [7]. The agricultural economy declined, coupled with high taxes and levies, causing hardship and misery for the people (Pham Dinh Ho, 2012, pages 189-190) [6]. This context urged Le Quy Don to build a system of counterbalancing values, taking integrity as the core of national governance.

Le Quy Don's ideology was based on Confucianism, especially the spirit of “self-cultivation, family harmony, and national governance”. However, he was not dogmatic but selective. He went beyond the purely theoretical framework, criticized formal and empty learning and

emphasized the value of practical knowledge. He made detailed surveys of geography, economics, administration, and taxation (in Phu Bien Tap Luc and Kien Van Tieu Luc), considering integrity to be linked with the ability to manage society transparently and political responsibility. With a rational worldview and a worldly outlook, he considered integrity a necessary condition for exercising power fairly, not an abstract moral virtue.

2. The core content of Le Quy Don's thought on integrity

1. The fundamental role of integrity

Le Quy Don considered integrity as the fundamental moral standard, the "root of political affairs". According to him, the king was the one who ruled the people on behalf of Heaven, and the mandarins were the ones who helped Heaven (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 339). Therefore, integrity was a prerequisite to be worthy of that position. Integrity was the moral fence that helped those in power stand firm against the storms of power and desire. He also affirmed that integrity was a factor that ensured the long-term stability and prosperity of society, and warned about the consequences of the lack of integrity: "The country was ruined by corrupt officials; immoral officials were corrupted by greed for bribes. The eternal bad thing was in that saying" (Le Quy Don, 1995, Quan Thu Khao Bien, page 129). The lack of integrity of those in power in a country can lead to the downfall of a nation.

2. Manifestations of integrity

In Le Quy Don's thought, integrity was expressed through five main manifestations:

First, cleanness, non-greed, non-selfishness: An honest person must be upright, not accept bribes, and not accumulate illegal assets. He warned that accepting bribes was a foolish act, "using a pearl to shoot a sparrow", exchanging eternal dignity and honor for trivial benefits (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 354). He emphasized that as long as one was devoted to justice and brought benefits to the country and the people, one's official title would naturally be stable and one's position in the hearts of the king and the people would be increasingly respected, without the need for shady or obscure behavior: "Be honest, do your duty, benefit the country and the people, then titles would come naturally" (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 354).

Second, simplicity, not luxury: Integrity was not only about not being greedy, but also about living frugally and avoiding extravagance. He saw this as a measure to prevent greed and dishonest behavior. According to Le Quy Don, luxury was the root of all corruption, because insatiable greed drives people into evil ways to satisfy them: "The gentleman desires much, he desires wealth and honor, goes against the way and gets into trouble. The petty person desires a lot, has many needs, takes money illegally, goes bankrupt, loses his life; if he becomes an official, he will take bribes, if he is just normal person in the village, he will become a thief" (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 356). On the contrary, a gentleman with "few desires" is not controlled by external things, so he can "go straight on his way", a petty person with "few desires" keep himself careful, "does not commit crimes, and is rich" (Le Quy Don, 2006, *Van Dai Loai Ngu*, pages 355-356). Le Quy Don advocated a preventive solution (active) instead of just dealing with

corruption once it has occurred (passive). He believed that instead of just punishing the corrupt acts, it was necessary to attack its roots, which were greed and luxurious lifestyles.

Third, fairness, integrity, and impartiality: Fairness and integrity are being straightforward in all dealings, not being partisan, not letting personal emotions (such as anger) influence judgment. An official must be "very careful, not biased at all" (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 367). Le Quy Don promoted the principles of fairness and integrity because that was the way of heaven (Le Quy Don, 1993, *The Book of Documents*, page 42). However, in the context of a chaotic society, where "uprightness" could bring danger, Le Quy Don realized that integrity must go hand in hand with wisdom and flexibility. He emphasized the need to skillfully combine hardness and softness (lenient but not weak, strict but not harsh) to effectively govern the country (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 338). Fourth, responsibility, dedication to public service, daring to say and do: Integrity was shown in the spirit of "doing more" than "talking more" (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 373). Officials were the ones who enjoyed the country's benefits, must work "diligently" to resolve suffering and injustice for the people. Laziness and irresponsibility were a form of dishonesty, because they indirectly harmed the people. Even if one was not corrupt or accepted bribes but was lazy, irresponsible, only kept oneself, kept the official position, and naturally enjoyed benefits from the people, then it was no different from the act of fabricator, sitting around and enjoying benefits, not giving anything back to the people, to the country, an act of shame to the people, to the country, to one's own conscience (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 364).

Integrity must also be demonstrated in daring to say, daring to do, daring to take responsibility, taking the interests and lives of all people as the measure for each action: Officials must dare to advise, present the pros and cons of the work and report, "do not let it linger, causing harm to the people" (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 362). According to him, integrity was a positive quality that required commitment and action, not just passively "keeping oneself clean". Therefore, he considered silence in the face of wrongdoing as a form of dishonesty.

Fifth, constant cultivation to perfect personality: Integrity was not innate but the result of training, a long-term, persistent "self-cultivation". He compared that this cultivation process was initially small like a termite nest, then large like a mountain hill: "that cultivation, when new, was like a termite nest; then it grew bigger, like a mountain hill." (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 339). Cultivation must, therefore, start from the smallest things, and must be regular, continuous, gradually accumulating into a solid foundation. It is self-discipline every day, every hour, without stopping, constantly accumulating, unable to neglect.

3. Consequences of dishonest behavior

Dishonest behavior has serious consequences, not only for individuals but also for the nation. For individuals, minor acts of dishonesty result in dismissal from office and loss of respect, while serious acts of dishonesty result in the king's punishment for the whole family. Le Quy Don cited many historical examples to clarify his point of view. He mentioned characters like Gia Quyen Chi, Trinh Ung,

Duong To, Quach Sung Thao - all of whom were typical characters of the type of people who acted deceitfully, lacked principles, only sought personal gain, and in the end, all had to suffer bad consequences (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 350-351). The law could punish by dismissal from office, confiscation of property, or even execution, but such punishment was not the harshest. What was more terrible than death was the destruction of reputation and virtue - the values that made up a person's personality and position in society. Le Quy Don also emphasized that a scholar who lost integrity not only lost his dignity in the present, but also left an eternal stain in history. That was the invisible but eternal sentence. For society, integrity was the foundation of stability and development. Dishonest behavior would cause disaster for the people and the country. Greedy and dishonest officials disrupted society. A greedy king was more dangerous than a corrupt official. A greedy king would lose his country because in his hands he had absolute power, could mobilize all resources to serve his greed, inevitably leading to the weakening of the court, social instability and ultimately the risk of losing the country (Le Quy Don, 2006, Van Dai Loai Ngu, page 355).

3. Values and limitations in Le Quy Don's thoughts on integrity

1. Values

Le Quy Don's integrity ideology is not only a product of a turbulent feudal era, meaningful to the time, but also carries timeless values, still meaningful to today's society.

First, comprehensiveness and systematicness: Le Quy Don not only viewed integrity in a personal sense but also placed it in a social context, closely linked to the prosperity and decline of the nation. His thoughts on integrity included many aspects, from not being greedy to living a simple life, from being fair and upright to being responsible, dedicated to work, daring to say and do, etc. This created a system of strict ethical criteria, which were guiding principles for those in power. This concept covered everything from personal ethics to principles of national governance.

Second, the concept of integrity is closely linked to governance: Le Quy Don deeply realized that integrity was not only a personal moral quality, but also a mandatory criterion for those in power, the root of political affairs, and determined the rise and fall of a dynasty. From a historical perspective, Le Quy Don especially criticized decadent kings such as Tran Phe De, Le Uy Muc or Le Tuong Duc - those who "loved wine and women, disregarded national politics", leaving a stain in history books, pushing the dynasty into decline. Through that, he affirmed that the prosperity or decline of a nation was closely linked to the integrity of its leader. Therefore, integrity was not only a matter of self-cultivation, but also a core principle to keep the government stable and the people at peace.

Third, the emphasis on practicality and clear warning of consequences: Le Quy Don not only stopped at praising integrity as an abstract moral standard, but also pointed out the specific consequences of a lack of integrity. The consequences were not only legal penalties but also personal disgrace in honor and the national decline. He also repeatedly used historical evidence to prove the inevitability of decline when integrity was abandoned. This strong warning had a profound deterrent effect and was essential in

preventing corruption and building a transparent and effective administration.

Fourth, emphasizing the moral cultivation: According to Le Quy Don, integrity was not an innate quality, but the result of a continuous, persistent training process that did not allow for laxity. He emphasized self-reflection and self-correction to perfect personality. This was a warning about the responsibility of scholars to set an example for society. This viewpoint is very close to the requirements of the current Party building and rectification work. Building a team of honest officials and civil servants cannot stop at legal regulations, but must also go hand in hand with regular education and training in ethics.

2. Limitations

Due to the influence of historical context and Confucian ideology, Le Quy Don's integrity ideology has still had some limitations:

First, the lack of systematic power control mechanisms: His thoughts were mainly based on moral education and personal self-cultivation. He has not yet come up with a mechanical solution to stop the decline, lacking an independent system of power control. Nowadays, ensuring integrity in the state apparatus cannot only rely on the self-awareness of officials, but needs to be bound by legal institutions and social supervision mechanisms: clear decentralization of powers between the legislative, executive, and judiciary; transparency of assets and income; supervision by the press, people, and civil society organizations. Therefore, it can be said that in order to promote the value of Le Quy Don's integrity ideology in the current context, it is necessary to supplement systematic control mechanisms, in order to turn "integrity" from an ethical reminder into an operating principle of a transparent and sustainable public administration.

Second, depending a lot on the will and ethics of the leader: The political system in his view was too dependent on the personal morality of the king. This was the inherent limitation of the feudal system: When the king was virtuous, the government was temporarily stable, but when the king was corrupt, the whole system quickly degenerated while no mechanism was powerful enough to prevent it. This led to the instability of governance, the rise and fall of a nation was closely tied to the personal morality of one person. A governance system could not rely solely on the ethics of its leaders, but needed an independent control system to ensure integrity, even when individual leaders lacked qualities. This was the point that Le Quy Don's thought, due to the historical context, could not overcome.

Third, the role of the people in power supervision has not been mentioned: Le Quy Don's thoughts mainly focused on the mandarin class, while the people were mainly considered as objects of rule, not yet given the right to participate in supervising and criticizing power. That view clearly reflected the characteristics of Confucian ideology and feudal institutions, which placed almost absolute trust in the ruling elite. This made his system of power control in thought one-sided. From a historical perspective, this limitation was inevitable, because the feudal social context of the 18th century did not allow the formation of widespread democratic institutions. However, compared with the requirements of modern society, the absence of the people's role reveals a fundamental weakness. People's

participation was considered a key factor to ensure the integrity and transparency of the public apparatus. Through social criticism, the right to supervision, the right to denounce and the role of the press, people are not only beneficiaries but also direct subjects contributing to building a clean and effective governance system. Therefore, when applying Le Quy Don's thoughts to current practice, it is necessary to supplement and promote democratic elements, taking people as the center, to overcome the historical limitations in his concept.

Conclusion

Le Quy Don's thought on integrity is a comprehensive and highly practical political ethics system, reflecting the desire for social reform of a great thinker in the context of feudal crisis. He affirmed that integrity was not only a personal quality but also the root of political affairs, a mandatory criterion for those in power, and determined the rise and fall of a nation. However, due to the limitations of the times, this ideology remains moralistic, lacking systematic power control mechanisms and the people's supervisory role. To promote this value in the current process of building an honest government, we need to supplement modern legal institutions, decentralize power, do assets transparency, and especially promote the role of people's supervision and criticism. Combining Le Quy Don's thoughts on self-cultivation of integrity with modern power control mechanisms will be a solid path to building a clean and effective administration.

References

1. Le Quy Don. The Book of Documents. Translated by Ngo The Long and Tran Van Quyen. Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 1993.
2. Le Quy Don. Quan Thu Khao Bien (Translation). Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995.
3. Le Quy Don. Van Dai Loai Ngu. Translated by Tran Van Giap. Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006.
4. Le Quy Don. Kien Van Tieu Luc. Translated and annotated by Phan Trong Diem. Culture - Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007.
5. Le Quy Don. Phu Bien Tap Luc. Institute of History, Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007.
6. Pham Dinh Ho. Writing in The Rain. Translated by Nguyen Huu Tien. Tre Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2012.
7. Phan Ngoc Huyen, "Integrity in Le Quy Don's the way of being an official", Journal of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City, 2017:4(224).
8. Ha Thuc Minh, "Le Quy Don's historical viewpoint in Quan Thu Khao Bien", Philosophical Bulletin, 1968, 11.
9. Truong Huu Quynh editor, Vietnamese History from the 10th century to, National University of Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2008, 1858.