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Confucian Educational Thought and Its Relevance to Contemporary Vietnamese Education

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Abstract: This study explores the contemporary relevance of Confucian educational thought in the context of Vietnam's ongoing educational reform. It examines how foundational Confucian principles—particularly those related to moral cultivation, pedagogical methods, and the role of the learner—can be adapted to align with modern educational objectives. Employing a qualitative, comparative methodology, the research analyzes classical Confucian texts, historical records, and current Vietnamese education policy documents, alongside Humboldtian liberal ideals. The findings demonstrate that Confucian values such as benevolence (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), and exemplary moral conduct continue to offer meaningful frameworks for promoting ethical development and civic responsibility. Pedagogical techniques, including heuristic questioning, modeling, and situational teaching, remain relevant to modern goals like critical thinking and learner autonomy. While some critiques highlight limitations in Confucianism's hierarchical structure or insufficient scientific orientation, this study also incorporates existing research showing that Confucian education—particularly across East Asia—has been positively associated with fostering students' creativity and critical thinking. This paper distinguishes itself by proposing a hybrid model that critically adapts Confucian pedagogy in conjunction with Humboldtian liberalism to enhance both moral grounding and cognitive autonomy in Vietnamese education. The research concludes that a critically integrative approach can support Vietnam in building a culturally grounded, morally resilient, and globally competitive education system.

Keywords: Confucius; educational thought; moral education; methods; reform; Vietnam

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, high-quality human capital is widely regarded as a strategic driver of national development. Education has come to represent more than a mechanism of social welfare—it is now understood as a foundational investment in a nation's long-term socio-economic competitiveness and sustainability [1]. In Vietnam, the transformation of the education system is central to broader national goals, including industrialization, modernization, and international integration [2]. These efforts have sparked renewed reflection on the philosophical foundations of education and their relevance to evolving reform agendas.

Vietnam's educational philosophy reflects a dynamic intersection of historical traditions, global influences, and contemporary reform imperatives. Among the most enduring and foundational of these influences is Confucian educational thought. Established by

Confucius—an iconic figure whose teachings have shaped Chinese civilization and East Asian intellectual culture—Confucianism has long provided the philosophical foundation for education in Vietnam [3,4]. Confucius's educational philosophy, with its emphasis on moral cultivation, social responsibility, and learning as a path to societal harmony, played a central role in Vietnam's feudal education system (1075–1919) and continues to resonate in present-day pedagogical values [5–8].

As noted in the *Analects* (*Lúnyǔ*), Confucius emphasized that the ultimate aim of education is to "cultivate virtue and assist in the governance of society" (*xīng yǔn dào zhì*, 興於道治). This ideal is frequently rearticulated in East Asian educational traditions as the duty to cultivate talents and virtues in service of the ruler and the nation [9] or (*tài hiền tế quốc*, 才賢濟國). The original sentiment can be traced to passages such as *Analects* 2:21 and 7:6, where Confucius discusses the relationship between self-cultivation, ethical conduct, and the ability to participate in public life. These teachings stress that moral education should not be limited to personal betterment but must be directed toward contributing to the moral and political order of society. In this view, learning is inherently social and civic in nature: only by developing inner virtue (*dé*, 德) can individuals take on roles of leadership and social responsibility. This understanding forms the backbone of Confucian educational thought and has deeply influenced traditional educational systems across East Asia, including Vietnam. Thus, the statement reflects a broader Confucian belief that personal cultivation is inseparable from one's obligation to uphold social harmony and political integrity.

Humboldt's philosophy of *Bildung*—the ideal of personal self-cultivation for the betterment of society—bears a strong conceptual resemblance to Confucius's notion of the *junzi* (君子, superior individual), who embodies moral integrity, intellectual discipline, and civic responsibility. Although these philosophies emerge from distinct cultural and historical traditions, both emphasize the ethical function of education in shaping individuals capable of contributing to societal well-being. In Vietnam, this parallel becomes particularly salient within the broader context of post-*Đổi Mới* (Renovation) educational reforms initiated in 1986, which have promoted university autonomy, learner-centered pedagogy, and international academic collaboration. Amid these transformations, Humboldt's liberal ideals—such as academic freedom and holistic intellectual development—have gained influence, especially through transnational dialogues and the return of Vietnamese scholars trained abroad. The philosophical convergence between Confucian moral values and Humboldtian liberalism thus provides a compelling framework for Vietnam's efforts to construct an educational identity that is simultaneously anchored in cultural heritage and aligned with global standards [10–13].

Furthermore, recent studies highlight that Confucian-influenced education systems in East Asia—particularly those in Vietnam, China, and South Korea—have developed instructional approaches that effectively promote both critical thinking and creativity. Liberal arts programs shaped by Confucian ethics have been shown to foster dialogical learning and independent thought in contemporary curricula [14]. Adaptations of traditional classroom hierarchies in Chinese institutions have incorporated student-centered, inquiry-based learning models, thereby enhancing critical reflection [15]. Additionally, the integration of Confucian moral cultivation with modern pedagogical reforms has been found to support reflective citizenship and ethical reasoning [16].

Despite these dynamic developments, a key research question remains underexplored: how can classical Confucian educational philosophies—particularly their approaches to moral instruction and teaching methodologies—be effectively adapted to support Vietnam's current educational reform efforts? This question is particularly relevant

given ongoing debates about how to reconcile traditional values with the demands of a rapidly changing, knowledge-based society.

This study addresses that question by examining the fundamental principles of Confucian educational thought and assessing their applicability in modern Vietnam. It aims to contribute to theoretical discourse and practical policy by clarifying the ways in which traditional pedagogical frameworks can inform contemporary efforts toward ethical, student-centered, and globally aligned education. Structurally, the article proceeds with a literature review of the historical development and reinterpretation of Confucian educational philosophy in Vietnam, followed by an analysis of Confucius's views on educational aims, methods, and learner formation. The discussion then contextualizes these insights within the post-*Đổi Mới* reform agenda and examines their convergence with Humboldtian ideals. The conclusion offers recommendations for integrating Confucian principles into Vietnam's evolving educational strategies.

2. Literature Review

The development of Confucian educational thought in Vietnam represents a multifaceted and evolving process shaped by historical transmission, cultural assimilation, and institutional adaptation. This section traces the trajectory of Confucian philosophy from its early introduction under Chinese rule to its integration across Vietnamese dynasties, its ideological reinterpretation during the revolutionary period, and its recent convergence with global educational philosophies such as Humboldtian liberalism.

2.1. Historical Foundations and Evolution of Confucian Educational Thought in Vietnam

Scholars agree that Confucianism has been a persistent force in shaping Vietnam's educational and governance structures, but they diverge on the extent and nature of its institutionalization over time [17–21]. Confucianism was initially introduced into Vietnam in 111 BCE during the Han dynasty's imperial expansion, functioning not merely as a moral doctrine but as an instrument of cultural and administrative assimilation. Scholars such as Pham [22], Nguyen and Nguyen [23], Tran [24], and Do and Vo [25] argue that its early transmission was embedded within colonial governance structures aimed at integrating local elites into the Sino-centric bureaucratic order. Rather than entering as a fully embraced indigenous philosophy, Confucianism operated as a hegemonic framework, selectively imposed to stabilize rule and cultivate loyalty among Vietnamese aristocrats aligned with Chinese imperial interests. Among the earliest and most influential figures in this process was *Sĩ Nhiếp* (Shi Xie, 137–226 CE), a Han official of Chinese-Vietnamese descent whose family had resided in *Giao Châu* for six generations, according to The Complete Annals of *Đại Việt* (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*) [26,27]. For Nguyen [20], this is very significant because it proves that, along with the trend of Sinicization, there is also a reverse trend of Vietnamization for Han intellectuals whose ancestors settled and lived for many generations in Vietnam. It is the increasingly strong Vietnamese elements in *Sĩ Nhiếp* that are the important conditions that helped him successfully build his own government in Vietnam with autonomy and relative dependence on the North. Serving as governor during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, *Sĩ Nhiếp* played a pivotal role in promoting Confucian ethics and educational ideals in the region and is often revered as *Nam Giao học tổ*—the Patriarch of Southern Confucian Learning [20].

Following independence in 938 CE, Vietnam entered a transitional phase in which Confucianism functioned more as a cultural influence than a formal governance model. During the *Ngô*, *Đinh*, and Early *Lê* dynasties (939–1009), political power was primarily anchored in hereditary rule, military consolidation, and aristocratic lineage. As Nguyen [20] observes, during this period, governance drew more heavily on Buddhist doctrine and

indigenous spiritual traditions, which shaped both moral life and state rituals. While Confucian ideas continued to circulate among the elite, they remained peripheral—respected but not yet formalized within the legal or bureaucratic structures of the nascent Vietnamese state. A shift occurred under the *Lý* dynasty (1009–1225), which scholars identify as the formative period for the institutionalization of Confucianism in Vietnam [28–30]. These developments institutionalized Confucian education and elevated scholarly merit as a basis for political legitimacy.

2.2. Key Confucian Concepts and Their Localization

Vietnamese adaptations of Confucian values often involved the syncretic integration of local religious practices. According to Nguyen and Nguyen [23], rituals such as Heaven Worship and ceremonial veneration at the Temple of Literature exemplify how *li* (ritual propriety) was localized as both spiritual devotion and civic pedagogy. For Cynarski [31], such practices illustrate how traditional societies encode ethical education within ritual forms, lending Confucianism cultural durability in Vietnamese society.

The principle of *ren* (benevolence), for example, was not confined to aristocratic virtue but extended into communal norms emphasizing solidarity, compassion, and social obligation. Nguyen et al. [32] emphasize that concepts like *xiao* (filial piety) and *Zheng Ming* (Rectification of Names) were foundational to both family ethics and political legitimacy. These values were not merely philosophical abstractions but were embodied in everyday moral conduct, schooling practices, and governance rituals.

Importantly, recent scholarship reaffirms that Confucian virtues not only coexist with but can actively enrich modern educational competencies such as creativity and critical thinking. Rather than being an impediment, Confucian ethical traditions—particularly those emphasizing moral cultivation (*tu thân*), respect for learning, and dialogical engagement—are shown to be adaptable foundations for contemporary educational reforms. For example, Nguyen, Le, Nguyen, and Le [16] demonstrate how the integration of Confucian ethical instruction in Vietnamese schools has evolved through pedagogical innovations that align moral reasoning with civic engagement. Their study highlights how value-based education rooted in Confucianism fosters reflective thinking, enabling students to internalize ethical norms while exercising independent judgment in social contexts [16].

This dynamic is echoed in Wang and Wu's [15] comprehensive review of critical thinking (CT) education across East Asian cultural spheres. While acknowledging the traditional teacher-centered and examination-driven frameworks, their analysis reveals a growing trend of educational institutions adapting instruction methods to balance hierarchical respect with inquiry-based, student-centered learning. Despite persistent reliance on Western frameworks of CT, there is increasing attention to contextualization, where educators in Confucian-influenced systems are reconceptualizing critical thinking not as antithetical to tradition, but as compatible with virtues such as humility, responsibility, and collective harmony [15].

Furthermore, Phuong [33] and Dang [34] both argue that key Confucian tenets—such as the cultivation of virtue, self-improvement, and the pursuit of humane governance (*nhân*)—remain deeply relevant in addressing contemporary educational aims in Vietnam. Phuong [33] emphasizes that incorporating Confucian perspectives can provide a coherent moral-philosophical foundation for curriculum renewal, especially when these are interpreted through a modern lens that encourages personal autonomy and ethical discernment. Meanwhile, Phuong [33] suggests that such traditions, when re-contextualized, support innovative practices that do not undermine but rather complement global educational goals like critical engagement and lifelong learning.

Together, these findings counter the simplistic dichotomy between tradition and innovation, illustrating that Confucian educational thought, when properly adapted, can function as a vital resource for nurturing critical and creative capacities in learners. This integrative perspective not only bridges cultural continuity with pedagogical change but also enhances the authenticity and effectiveness of education reform in East Asia.

2.3. Integration in Vietnamese Governance and Education Across Dynasties

The integration of Confucianism into Vietnamese governance and education evolved progressively across dynasties, each contributing to the institutional consolidation and normative authority of Confucian values. The *Lý* dynasty (1009–1225) laid the initial foundations by formalizing the relationship between Confucian ideology and state administration. According to Kim and Bang [30], Van and Tuan [29], and Hoa and Le Tran [28], the construction of the *Văn Miếu* in 1070 and the initiation of the civil service examination in 1075 marked the beginning of a systematic recruitment process aimed at cultivating a morally upright, literati-bureaucratic class grounded in classical learning [7,8,35–38]. The subsequent establishment of the *Quốc Tử Giám* in 1076 further institutionalized Confucian education as a training ground for future officials and scholars [20].

The *Trần* dynasty (1225–1400) expanded upon this foundation by deepening the institutional reach of Confucianism in state governance. Although Buddhism continued to maintain cultural prominence, Confucian ideology increasingly defined political authority and public morality. Emperor *Trần Thái Tông* established the *Quốc học viện* in 1253 and actively promoted the study of classical Confucian texts. Leading scholar-officials such as *Chu Văn An* (1292–1370) and *Phạm Sư Mạnh* (1300–1384) contributed to both court administration and the ideological consolidation of Confucian values. Political concepts such as *dân vi bản* (the people as the foundation of the state) were incorporated into discourses on good governance, national defense, and moral leadership, particularly during the Mongol invasions [20]. As Nguyen [20] observes, figures such as *Chu Văn An* not only participated in court governance but also served as moral exemplars who publicly admonished corrupt rulers, thereby reinforcing the Confucian ideal of righteous remonstration (*can gián*). During this period, Confucianism increasingly informed administrative ethics and was perceived as essential to both political stability and social harmony.

In the late 14th century, *Hồ Quý Ly* (1336–1407) emerged as a pivotal reformer whose brief rule marked a transformative phase in Vietnamese Confucian statecraft. Rising from a senior official in the *Trần* dynasty to founder of the *Hồ* dynasty, he implemented sweeping reforms across political, administrative, cultural, and educational spheres, with education and culture representing the most progressive aspects [39]. Rejecting rigid Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, *Hồ* emphasized practical learning, meritocratic governance, and revised the civil service examination to favor applied knowledge. He also expanded education to rural areas and formalized local instructional roles, extending Confucian learning beyond elite circles. His cultural nationalism was evident in his promotion of the *Nôm* script for instruction and royal education, challenging Chinese script dominance and fostering linguistic identity [40]. According to Huynh [40], Despite retaining Chinese characters for exams, *Hồ*'s use of *Nôm* in official contexts introduced a more complex literacy dynamic. Moreover, he strategically engaged Confucian scholars to support ideological and institutional reforms, reinforcing Confucianism's role in governance [41]. Although the *Hồ* dynasty (1400–1407) was short-lived, *Hồ Quý Ly*'s reforms laid foundational groundwork for the Confucian revival under the Later *Lê* dynasty and remain a significant milestone in the evolution of Vietnam's educational philosophy.

Under the Later *Lê* dynasty (1428–1788), Confucianism became the dominant intellectual and administrative ideology, shaping both elite culture and village-level moral

norms. Emperor *Lê Thánh Tông* (r. 1460–1497) advanced Confucian orthodoxy by further developing the *Quốc Tử Giám* and codifying Confucian moral principles into state law through the *Hồng Đức* legal code [42–44]. During his reign, the civil service examinations were held triennially, and the country was restructured into thirteen provinces following Chinese administrative models. This period is widely regarded as the golden era of Confucian orthodoxy in Vietnam, where legal, educational, and ethical systems coalesced into a coherent framework that combined foreign ideological structures with indigenous values. This synthesis not only solidified Confucianism as the foundation of Vietnamese governance but also entrenched it as the central mechanism for elite formation and bureaucratic meritocracy.

Even amidst the political fragmentation that followed the later *Lê* dynasty's golden age—marked first by the usurpation of the throne by *Mạc Đăng Dung* in 1527 and the establishment of the *Mạc* family (1527–1592)—it initiated a major shift in political power. Although later regarded as illegitimate by traditional historiography, the Mạc maintained control over the *Thăng Long* capital and upheld the imperial examination system [35]. They also patronized Confucian scholars to justify their rule, even as they engaged in prolonged military conflict with the *Lê–Trịnh* loyalists.

In 1533, the *Lê* monarchy was nominally restored with support from the *Nguyễn* family. However, this restoration only secured partial control over *Đại Việt* (Vietnam today), as the North remained under *Mạc* rule for several more decades. Despite the fractured political landscape, the symbolic authority of the *Lê* dynasty—and with it, the Confucian imperial model—was preserved.

By the early seventeenth century, real political power had shifted to the *Trịnh* lords in the North and the *Nguyễn* lords in the South. From 1627 to 1673, these two families engaged in a prolonged civil conflict. Despite this division and ongoing warfare, both regimes continued to uphold Confucianism as the ideological foundation of governance. While ruling as de facto sovereigns, the *Trịnh* and *Nguyễn* lords maintained the façade of *Lê* supremacy, thereby preserving the moral and institutional framework of Confucian statecraft. Civil service examinations, court rituals, and the authority of the Confucian scholarly elite remained central to governance across both regions.

The rise of the *Tây Sơn* brothers in the late 18th century briefly disrupted this continuity. Although the *Tây Sơn* regime (1772–1802) championed reform and sought to dismantle entrenched aristocratic privileges, their rule did not entirely reject Confucian ideals. Notably, Emperor Quang Trung (*Nguyễn Huệ*) attempted to revive and modernize Confucian education by reforming the examination system in a practical way and issuing a policy of encouraging learning, encouraging the use of pure Vietnamese *Nôm* script in place of Chinese characters to promote nationalism [40,45]. However, these efforts were short-lived.

With the fall of the *Tây Sơn* regime, the founding of the *Nguyễn* dynasty in 1802 by Emperor Gia Long marked a decisive restoration of Confucian orthodoxy. Drawing inspiration from the Qing dynasty, Gia Long and his successors reinstated and institutionalized classical Confucian education as the backbone of state bureaucracy. The imperial examination system was restored and expanded, Confucian temples were renovated or rebuilt, and ethical teachings were propagated through state-sanctioned texts. Confucian values—particularly those concerning filial piety, hierarchical social roles, and moral self-cultivation—were not only taught in schools but also codified into legal and civic practices. Under emperors like *Minh Mạng* (r. 1820–1841), Confucianism became the explicit ideological foundation of governance, with ritualism and moral discipline promoted as tools for social stability and national unity. As Nguyen [20] details, emperors such as *Gia Long* and *Minh Mạng* reinstated the civil service examinations, codified classical teachings into law,

and expanded the ritual and educational infrastructure, viewing Confucianism as essential to both state legitimacy and moral governance.

However, Confucian dominance began to decline in the mid-19th century with the spread of French colonialism (1858–1945). As Phan [46], Vu and Yamada [7,8], and Nguyen [47] explain, the colonial administration formally abolished the examination system in 1919 and replaced traditional Confucian schooling with a secular, Western-style model that prioritized bureaucratic competence and scientific rationality. Despite this institutional rupture, Confucian ethical values continued to exert influence, particularly in rural communities where notions of filial piety, communal hierarchy, and scholarly aspiration remained culturally embedded [6].

Moreover, the erosion of institutional Confucianism did not entail its complete ideological displacement. As Vu and Yamada [7,8] note, Confucian values endured in social hierarchies and intellectual discourses well into the colonial era. Reform-minded scholars such as *Phan Bội Châu* and *Phan Chu Trinh* rearticulated Confucian virtues—especially civic responsibility, moral leadership, and ethical service—as tools for critiquing colonial domination and imagining a reformed national education system attuned to both tradition and modernity [32]. These reinterpretations illustrate the adaptive potential of Confucianism, which continued to inform the moral language of nationalism and pedagogical reform even as its formal structures were dismantled.

2.4. Influence of Hâ Chí Minh and Comparison with Maoist China

Vietnam's revolutionary approach to Confucianism under *Hô Chí Minh* stands in stark contrast to the iconoclastic campaigns led by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) in China. While Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) sought to eradicate Confucianism as a vestige of feudalism, targeting temples, texts, and scholars in an effort to sever ties with the past and enforce ideological purity [48], Vietnam pursued a more pragmatic and integrative path. According to Nguyen, et al. [49], *Hô Chí Minh* did not reject Confucianism outright but reframed its ethical tenets to align with socialist ideals, embedding selected values within the broader revolutionary project.

Scholars such as Tran [24], Nguyen and Nguyen [50], and Nguyen, Nguyen, and Nguyen [49] argue that *Hô*'s philosophical orientation—shaped by his international experiences and tempered by revolutionary pragmatism—allowed for a strategic accommodation of Confucian moral values within Vietnam's socialist educational system. Core virtues such as *hiếu* (filial piety), *liêm chính* (integrity), and *trung* (loyalty) were selectively incorporated into civic education, reinforcing national solidarity, ethical conduct, and personal discipline without necessitating a rupture from historical traditions.

Unlike Mao's rejection of Confucianism as a cultural obstacle, *Hô Chí Minh* recognized its potential as a source of moral cohesion and social stability. His speeches and writings frequently emphasized ethical behavior, collective responsibility, and respect for elders—principles that resonated with longstanding Confucian norms. For Nguyen and Nguyen [50], this synthesis was not merely philosophical but also strategic. Vietnam's ongoing wars against colonial and imperial powers, coupled with its cultural diversity, made radical ideological purges both impractical and undesirable.

Moreover, *Hô*'s personal background, which combined Confucian upbringing with exposure to French republicanism, Soviet Marxism, and anti-colonial activism, informed his inclusive approach to ideology [24,51]. The emphasis on moral education in revolutionary Vietnam reflected both his belief in the transformative power of ethical training and his vision of building the "new socialist person" through a fusion of traditional values and socialist principles [52,53]. This integrative stance enabled Vietnam to preserve cultural continuity while mobilizing the population for collective struggle and nation-building.

2.5. Humboldtian Liberal Education and Its Convergence with Confucian Ideals

In recent decades, Vietnam's higher education system has faced increasing pressure to modernize in alignment with international standards, adapt to a knowledge-based economy, and cultivate a culture of innovation. Amid these reform efforts, a central challenge has been the lack of a coherent and context-sensitive philosophical foundation capable of guiding policy and pedagogy. To address this gap, Vietnamese scholars and policymakers have turned to the liberal educational ideals of Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose thought emphasizes academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the holistic development of the individual, concepts encapsulated in the German notion of *Bildung* [10–13].

Humboldt's influence in Vietnam became more visible after the *Đổi Mới* reforms of 1986, particularly during the 1990s, when international collaborations and donor-funded university projects introduced liberal educational concepts. The return of Vietnamese scholars trained in Europe—especially in Germany—played a crucial role in this intellectual diffusion. Among them, Nguyễn Xuân Xanh was instrumental in promoting Humboldt's vision as a model for autonomous, future-oriented Vietnamese universities [10].

Importantly, Humboldtian ideals have not supplanted Vietnam's intellectual traditions but rather intersect meaningfully with classical Confucian thought. Both educational philosophies affirm the ethical responsibilities of educators, value the moral and intellectual cultivation of learners, and envision education as a vehicle for fostering civic virtue and social harmony. Humboldt's *Bildung* bears a strong philosophical resemblance to Confucius's concept of the *junzi* (君子), the morally upright individual committed to self-improvement and public service. While arising from different cultural and historical contexts, both traditions emphasize that education must cultivate character as well as competence [54–56].

This convergence suggests that Humboldtian liberalism can serve as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, Confucian educational philosophy in Vietnam. As Do [12] and Tran [11] have argued, Humboldt's emphasis on student-centered learning and academic independence aligns well with Vietnam's reform goals, while Confucian ethics offer a culturally rooted moral framework. Together, these traditions provide a dual foundation for a modern Vietnamese education system that is both globally competitive and culturally coherent.

The growing body of Vietnamese scholarship supports this integrative perspective. Rather than rejecting Confucianism as outdated, contemporary thinkers advocate for its reinterpretation through dialogue with global educational theories. This balanced approach affirms the enduring relevance of Confucian moral principles—such as filial piety, benevolence, and ritual propriety—while acknowledging the need for innovation in curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional structure.

In practice, synthesizing Humboldtian and Confucian ideals can inform reforms at multiple levels of the education system. Embedding Humboldt's liberal values—such as critical thinking, research-teaching integration, and intellectual autonomy—within a Confucian ethical framework offers practical guidance for curriculum development, teacher training, and university governance. This hybrid model aligns moral purpose with modern competencies, enabling Vietnam to foster learners who are not only skilled but also socially responsible and ethically grounded.

Notably, while substantial research has explored Vietnam's Confucian heritage [7,8,57] and its historical education institutions [17–30], few studies have addressed how classical Confucian instructional techniques—such as heuristic questioning, exemplary modeling, and situational teaching—can be harmonized with modern skills like creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. This study seeks to bridge that gap by revis-

iting Confucian pedagogical methods in light of Humboldtian ideals and contemporary reform priorities.

Emerging scholarship continues to explore this convergence in innovative ways. Ardoline [55], Akiyama [54], and Sun and Sun [58] advocate for integrative pedagogies that merge Confucian ethics with relational, embodied, and student-centered learning. Le and Moskvitina [59] point to Vietnam's cyclical conception of time as a cultural mechanism sustaining ethical continuity. Meanwhile, Quintas [60] and Ren [61] highlight the relevance of Confucian care ethics to modern humanistic education. Together, these perspectives reaffirm the potential of a hybrid model that bridges classical wisdom and contemporary demands, enabling Vietnamese education to remain rooted in tradition while evolving to meet global challenges.

3. Results

3.1. Aims of Learning in Confucian Thought

Confucian texts report that Confucius attributed social disorder and moral decline to competition and ethical degeneration. In the Analects (論語) [9], he maintained that while human nature is fundamentally similar, variation arises from differences in upbringing, customs, and education, stating, "Human natures are similar; habits make them different" [9]. Confucian sources consistently define the primary aim of education as the cultivation of inherent moral goodness within individuals. According to these texts, education is intended "to understand morality, seek knowledge, cultivate virtues, and actively practice moral principles to benefit society," with the broader goal "to enhance and nurture human nature" [62].

The educational framework outlined in the Analects emphasizes the development of morally upright individuals to sustain a virtuous society. The concept of *Dao* (the Way) is presented as encompassing ethical conduct with implications for social and political order. Educational texts associate attainment of *Dao* with the cultivation of moral qualities.

Core moral values emphasized in Confucian teachings include *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual), and the doctrine of *Zheng Ming*. Ren is frequently cited as the guiding principle for human relationships and governance, while *li* is described as the behavioral structure through which virtues are practiced. *Zheng Ming* is presented as a corrective principle intended to align social roles with appropriate conduct.

The Confucian tradition prescribes moral education for all individuals regardless of social origin. The educational process is structured as a means to guide individuals toward responsible behavior within family and community contexts. Historical records describe Confucius's educational model as oriented toward restoring the ritual and moral standards associated with the Zhou dynasty. The model emphasizes structured learning and self-cultivation as mechanisms for building a harmonious and ethically stable society.

3.2. The Learner in Classical Philosophy

Confucian philosophy asserts that human nature is fundamentally similar, a concept known as *Xing Xiang Jin*. However, differences in upbringing, education, and social environments cause individuals to diverge over time—*Xi Xiang Yuan*—potentially leading to moral decay, social disorder, and ethical decline. To address this, Confucius strongly advocated for a system of moral education accessible to all social strata, aimed at cultivating a virtuous and orderly society.

Prior to Confucius's influence, education in ancient Chinese society was largely confined to the aristocracy and ruling elite. Educational access was highly exclusive, with limited opportunity for the common populace. It was during Confucius's era that this educational model began to shift. He initiated a significant departure from elitist traditions

by expanding educational access to a broader segment of society. Nevertheless, this expansion retained internal contradictions, as the hierarchical nature of society continued to shape educational priorities and outcomes [63].

Despite his endorsement of the principle "education without discrimination" (*You Jiao Wu Lei*), which suggests equal access to education for all, Confucius concentrated much of his pedagogical efforts on cultivating a distinct class of individuals known as the *junzi*, or superior persons. These individuals, noted for their moral integrity, intellectual rigor, and leadership potential, were seen by Confucius as essential to the moral and political foundation of a stable society [4].

As such, Confucius's educational philosophy reveals a deeply socio-political character. While advocating for broader access to moral education, his approach simultaneously reinforced existing social hierarchies. Education functioned not only as a tool for personal cultivation but as a mechanism to ensure political stability and effective governance. The *junzi* served as the ideal embodiments of this dual purpose, ethically exemplary individuals entrusted with the responsibility of guiding and sustaining the moral order of the state.

In this regard, Confucius strategically prioritized educational efforts toward those capable of leadership and public service. Although he acknowledged the broader value of moral education for all citizens, his primary educational focus remained on preparing individuals for civic leadership. This reflects a blend of progressive intent—extending educational access beyond aristocratic privilege—with continued adherence to social stratification and political pragmatism. Ultimately, while Confucianism expanded the scope of education, it preserved and legitimized hierarchical structures by centering its pedagogical vision on the cultivation of societal elites.

3.3. Moral Foundations of Classical Learning

Moral education lies at the heart of classical philosophy, especially within Confucian thought, where ethical governance is regarded as crucial for societal stability. Central to this tradition is the belief that education should instill moral virtues, enabling individuals to contribute to the formation of a just society. Classical philosophy emphasizes the contextual nature of education, adapting it to individual roles and responsibilities—be they kings, ministers, fathers, children, or *junzi* (superior individuals)—each bound by distinct yet interconnected ethical obligations [4].

One major focus of classical moral instruction is the structure of hierarchical social relationships, most notably the reciprocal duties in the king-minister dynamic. Confucius emphasized the king's duty to foster prosperity, uphold education, and care for his subjects as a benevolent ruler [4]. In return, the subjects were expected to serve loyally, honoring their ruler as they would their own parents.

Ethical responsibilities within the family were equally emphasized. Fathers were to act with compassion, and children were expected to practice filial piety, a cornerstone of Confucian ethics. Defined as devoted respect for one's parents, filial piety served as a foundation for a broader moral order governed by rituals and etiquette [4]. According to classical ideals, such relationships cultivated stability, wherein loyalty, respect, harmony, and affection governed both familial and civic interactions.

Confucian philosophy also outlined explicit moral expectations for the *junzi*. This ideal figure was to embody the cardinal virtues of benevolence (*ren*), wisdom (*zhi*), and courage (*yong*), with benevolence positioned as paramount. Confucius defined ren succinctly as "loving people" [9], involving compassion, assistance toward others, and refraining from causing harm. As such, benevolence became the guiding principle for social conduct and interpersonal harmony.

Benevolence is closely linked with ritual propriety (*li*). In classical philosophy, these two are inseparable: benevolence gives ritual its ethical substance, and ritual renders benevolence actionable. Confucius emphasized that rituals moderate desires and foster self-discipline. More than ceremonial observances, rituals formed a comprehensive framework for ethical behavior in both private and public spheres. He declared, "Ritual is essential for human actions; without ritual, nothing can stand firm" [64], highlighting the foundational role of ritual in sustaining societal structure.

Alongside ritual, the doctrine of the *Zheng Ming* served as another key component of moral education. In response to social disorder, Confucius urged that roles and titles be accurately reflected in behavior. He stated, "Let the ruler be ruler, the subject be subject, the father be father, and the son be son" [9]. This principle stressed that individuals should authentically fulfill their designated societal roles. *Zheng Ming* mandated internal moral alignment and consistency in public conduct, reinforcing social order through clear, role-based ethics.

Filial piety also played a vital role in cultivating benevolence. Confucius taught that genuine compassion toward others is grounded in the deep respect practiced within the family. Adherence to filial piety was demonstrated through ritual observance during a parent's life and after their death [9]. Thus, filial devotion was not only a private duty but the root from which public virtue grew.

The Confucian vision for social harmony began with the individual and extended outward through structured relationships. The classical sequence—cultivating the self (*xiu shen*), regulating the family (*qi jia*), governing the state (*zhi guo*), and achieving world peace (*ping tianxia*)—underscored a progression from inner discipline to societal governance.

Additional virtues such as wisdom, courage, loyalty, and trustworthiness were viewed as essential for developing the *junzi*. These traits reinforced intellectual clarity, ethical strength, dedicated service, and moral reliability—qualities necessary for both individual leadership and public governance.

Although moral cultivation formed the core of Confucian education, it was not entirely divorced from practical application. Confucius acknowledged the need for administrative competence, political discernment, and personnel management in governance. However, the educational framework offered limited attention to the natural sciences and technological knowledge, reflecting the historical constraints of the time. Contemporary perspectives call for integrating Confucian moral principles with scientific and technological literacy to meet modern governance challenges.

Confucian moral education is a coherent and comprehensive system rooted in virtue ethics, ritual observance, and structured social roles. While centered on benevolence, it incorporates filial piety and the *rectification of names* as essential components. These principles aimed to nurture ethically upright individuals capable of sustaining a just and orderly society. Despite limitations in scientific scope, the enduring relevance of Confucian moral philosophy continues to inform contemporary discussions on education, ethical leadership, and civic responsibility.

3.4. Approaches to Instruction in Classical Thought

3.4.1. Teaching Techniques and Pedagogical Models

Throughout the history of education, diverse teaching approaches have been developed and refined. The classical period, notably represented by Confucian traditions, offered foundational methods that continue to hold relevance in contemporary pedagogical practices.

Exemplary Modeling

The exemplary modeling method has historically been a highly effective instructional strategy, particularly prominent within Confucian educational practice. This approach primarily emphasizes morality, aiming to instill ethical values through the portrayal of ideal behaviors. Confucius frequently employed exemplary modeling, drawing upon historical figures known for their virtuous lives, such as Emperor Yao, Emperor Shun, King Wen, and the Duke of Zhou. These examples provided students with concrete role models, illustrating moral integrity, leadership qualities, and virtuous behaviors essential for societal harmony and governance.

Beyond referencing historical figures, Confucius himself embodied the exemplary model, consistently demonstrating virtues such as diligence in lifelong learning, benevolence toward others, tolerance in personal interactions, humility in achievements, and unwavering honesty in communications. His personal adherence to these virtues was not merely theoretical but rigorously practiced throughout his life, thus reinforcing their importance and practicality for students. This personal embodiment of values served as a powerful teaching mechanism, enabling students to internalize these virtues through observation and emulation [4,65].

Lectures and Explanatory Teaching

Lecture-based teaching, characterized by direct verbal instruction from the educator, was another method extensively used during Confucius's time. In historical contexts where educational resources and opportunities were limited, this approach was practically advantageous, enabling efficient dissemination of information. Confucius predominantly utilized this method, taking an active role as the primary source of knowledge, thereby addressing immediate student difficulties through structured, one-way communication.

Despite its practical advantages in information transmission, this approach exhibits significant limitations when considered through modern pedagogical lenses. Lectures primarily constrain student initiative and creativity, often relegating students to passive roles characterized by listening and note-taking. This passivity potentially reduces students' engagement levels, limiting opportunities for active learning, critical thinking, and creativity. Consequently, contemporary education increasingly views lecturing as a traditional and somewhat restrictive instructional method, favoring more interactive alternatives that better engage students and promote deeper learning outcomes [66].

Heuristic Questioning and Critical Thinking

Confucian teaching also employed heuristic questioning methods designed to actively stimulate student thinking and independent reasoning. Confucius regularly introduced topics through thought-provoking questions, encouraging students to critically engage and independently explore ideas. This teaching method required active listening and careful guidance from the teacher, fostering an educational environment where students could openly express opinions and engage in meaningful dialogues aimed at deeper understanding.

Confucius strongly advocated for student independence in learning, clearly communicating his disapproval of passive learners. His explicit assertion reflects this educational philosophy: "If someone does not strive to understand, I do not help him understand. If someone does not try to express his ideas, I do not guide him. If someone clearly understands one aspect but refuses to infer the others, I stop teaching him" [65]. This principle underscores Confucius's emphasis on critical thinking, independent problem-solving, and student responsibility in learning processes. Teachers, according to this approach, act more as facilitators rather than direct sources of knowledge, intervening primarily to encourage independent exploration and reflection among students.

This heuristic method remains profoundly relevant today, especially within contemporary Vietnamese educational reforms, which seek to nurture active participation, critical thinking, and self-directed learning among students. The method's flexibility, adaptability, and emphasis on student-centered learning contribute significantly to its contemporary applicability, effectively bridging classical educational insights with modern pedagogical requirements [57].

Discussion and Debates

Discussion and debate methods were occasionally employed within Confucian classrooms, albeit less frequently compared to exemplary modeling and lectures. Confucius utilized discussions and debates to pose problems or questions that encouraged deeper exploration of ideas among students. These dialogues provided students with opportunities to articulate viewpoints, engage in critical debates, and collaboratively construct knowledge.

However, historical accounts indicate a limitation in Confucius's use of this method. Despite fostering interactive exchanges, students generally approached these debates with significant reverence for their teacher's viewpoints, thus potentially limiting genuinely open-ended discussions. Compared to contemporary educational theories that highly value critical discussions as vehicles for creativity and analytical skills, Confucian debates offered fewer opportunities for unrestricted creative thought. Nonetheless, the method itself remains significant today, particularly as contemporary education increasingly prioritizes dialogic pedagogies to stimulate intellectual autonomy and critical reasoning skills [67].

Real-Life Situational Teaching

The real-life situational method, known in contemporary terms as "situational teaching," was notably employed by Confucius in an authentic manner. Rather than constructing hypothetical scenarios, Confucius utilized real-life contexts and situations encountered during his journeys to provide students with dynamic, practical learning experiences. This method's strength lies in its ability to contextualize learning, making lessons naturally relevant and easily internalized by students.

In contemporary educational reform, especially within Vietnam, situational teaching has been identified as an essential method due to its practical benefits. It significantly develops students' abilities to solve real-world problems, fostering practical skills and enhancing their adaptability in diverse social contexts. Confucius's application of this method illustrates its longstanding value, demonstrating its effectiveness in aligning educational content with real-world requirements and experiential learning objectives [68].

Although Confucius's educational methods present certain historical limitations, particularly related to the predominant teacher-centered lectures, they encompass essential practical elements with lasting educational value. His diverse teaching approaches, notably exemplary modeling, heuristic questioning, discussion, debate, and situational teaching, provide substantial foundational insights still highly relevant in contemporary educational contexts. Modern educational reforms, particularly in Vietnam, continue to benefit from these classical methods, selectively adapting and applying their valuable components to cultivate comprehensive, morally grounded, and practically skilled individuals prepared for contemporary societal demands [24,69].

3.4.2. Strategies for Acquiring Knowledge

Integrating Learning with Reflection

Confucian thought consistently highlights the inseparable relationship between learning and reflective thinking. Confucius underscored the importance of critical thinking as an integral complement to learning processes. He asserted that mere learning, devoid

of thoughtful reflection, is superficial and ineffective. Conversely, reflection without the grounding provided by systematic learning is aimless and potentially misleading. This perspective is encapsulated in his notable statement, "Learning without thinking is futile; thinking without learning is dangerous" [65]. By emphasizing this interconnectedness, Confucius aimed to cultivate deep understanding, analytical skills, and creativity in learners. Thus, the approach advocated by Confucius directly challenges rote memorization, encouraging instead a reflective learning style, whereby learners actively engage with material, question its significance, and apply it critically to their own contexts.

Reflection, therefore, serves as the foundation for learners to assimilate new information meaningfully, thereby fostering intellectual growth. Thinking acts as an essential mediator, transforming acquired knowledge into applicable wisdom and discernment. Confucius's emphasis on integrating reflective practice into learning processes is particularly relevant in contemporary educational settings, which increasingly prioritize critical thinking and innovation as key competencies.

Theory–Practice Linkages

Confucius strongly advocated for a practical orientation in education, emphasizing the essential connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application. According to Confucian principles, the value of knowledge is realized fully only when it is actively applied within real-life contexts. This practical dimension is notably evident in moral education, where virtues such as Benevolence, Ritual, Righteousness, and Filial Piety are not merely theoretical concepts but actionable principles designed to guide interpersonal interactions within families and broader society. Confucius himself exemplified this integration of theory and practice through consistent modeling of his teachings, especially in moral conduct [70].

Highlighting this practical aspect of learning, Confucius instructed his students explicitly to avoid four critical shortcomings: neglecting moral cultivation, overlooking scholarly effort, ignoring righteous counsel, and failing to correct personal mistakes [4]. He maintained that learning should extend beyond mere intellectual pursuit and should aim at comprehensive character development, beneficially influencing real-life behavior and societal interactions. By urging students to actively apply virtues and knowledge practically, Confucius emphasized that education must lead to tangible improvement in individual character and social contribution.

Thus, the link between theory and practice articulated by Confucius mirrors contemporary educational methodologies that similarly emphasize experiential learning, practical skill development, and the application of knowledge in authentic contexts. His early insights into the practicality of learning predate modern educational innovations, yet remain profoundly relevant in shaping holistic educational models today.

Learning from Diverse Sources and Contexts

Confucius was celebrated for his unwavering dedication to learning from multiple sources and contexts, a philosophy encapsulated by his lifelong pursuit of wisdom. His openness to acquiring knowledge from diverse environments and experts across various disciplines demonstrated a forward-thinking approach to education. Confucius famously declared, "To acknowledge what you know and what you do not know is true wisdom" [65], highlighting intellectual humility and the continuous pursuit of knowledge as foundational principles.

Confucius's educational philosophy extended beyond formal educational settings, incorporating practical, real-world experiences encountered during extensive travels. Such an approach ensured a dynamic learning experience for his students, exposing them to

varied cultural and societal contexts that enriched their understanding. This commitment to lifelong learning aligns closely with the perspectives of later educational thinkers such as Lenin, who advocated constant learning, and Ho Chi Minh, who viewed education as a lifelong endeavor [71]. Additionally, this approach resonates with Vietnam's contemporary educational philosophy, which promotes lifelong learning and advocates for building a comprehensive learning society.

By fostering an educational environment where learning occurs continuously and broadly—from formal educational institutions to informal life experiences—Confucius anticipated the modern educational philosophy of lifelong and life-wide learning. This inclusive and expansive approach reinforces the idea that true wisdom is not confined to traditional academic boundaries but emerges through constant interaction with diverse knowledge sources and experiential contexts. Such an educational perspective remains deeply influential, informing current educational reforms and innovations in Vietnam and globally.

4. Discussion

This study provides a nuanced reassessment of Confucian educational thought, viewed through the historical and ideological trajectory of Vietnam. It builds on the central hypothesis that Confucian philosophies—particularly those centered on moral education and pedagogical methods—continue to be relevant in contemporary Vietnam. The findings affirm the enduring value of Confucian ethical teachings, even as their application necessitates contextual refinement [5,6]. This aligns with Wong's [48] concern about ethical erosion in the modern age and his advocacy for ritual-based moral education.

From its transmission through *Sỹ Nhiếp* during the Han dynasty to its imperial institutionalization and later reinterpretation under colonial and socialist regimes [20], Confucianism has served not as a static ideology, but as a dynamic ethical resource. This layered history reinforces our current analysis, linking Confucius's virtue-based educational ideals with Vietnam's reformist focus on holistic human development [2]. The philosophical alignment between Confucian ethics and *Hồ Chí Minh's* educational vision—both rooted in national transformation and civic responsibility—demonstrates the continuity of pedagogical values across political epochs [71]. As emphasized by Pritchard [56], such continuity depends not on rigid content reproduction but on nurturing moral dispositions like humility, conscientiousness, and intellectual honesty.

Significantly, this study addresses ideological divergences between Vietnam and China in the 20th century. While Mao Zedong's regime actively sought to eradicate Confucianism, *Hồ Chí Minh* adopted a more integrative approach. His selective retention of Confucian ethics within socialist education reflected both cultural pragmatism and ideological moderation. As Wong [48] and Ardoline [55] argue, this synthesis illustrates Vietnam's unique path, which diverged from China's more iconoclastic trajectory.

Our analysis also clarifies the influence of Humboldtian liberal ideals in Vietnam, which gained traction after the *Đổi Mới* reforms of 1986. These ideas—centered on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and holistic personal development—entered Vietnamese discourse largely through international partnerships and returning diaspora scholars such as *Nguyễn Xuân Xanh* [10,72]. Rather than displacing Confucian foundations, Humboldtian thought has complemented them, offering a broader pedagogical vision that fuses moral and intellectual development.

Theoretically, this convergence highlights two key insights: first, that Confucianism's educational relevance is sustained not by rigid continuity, but through adaptive reinterpretation; and second, that combining classical virtues with modern competencies marks a significant evolution in Vietnamese pedagogical theory. As Akiyama [54] and Quintas [60]

note, the future of education depends on integrative models that balance cognitive rigor with emotional and ethical awareness.

Practically, Confucian instructional techniques—such as exemplary modeling, heuristic questioning, and situational teaching—remain highly applicable to Vietnam's educational environment. These methods support present-day goals such as ethical leadership, learner autonomy, and context-sensitive pedagogy. *Hồ Chí Minh's* emphasis on learning by moral example affirms their continued relevance [73], while heuristic and situational methods promote the critical engagement and adaptability required in contemporary education [66–68]. Even embodied methods, as seen in Cynarski's [31] exploration of martial arts, reinforce the value of holistic pedagogies rooted in ethical practice.

Numerous studies across East Asia have demonstrated that Confucian-inspired methods—particularly heuristic questioning and moral modeling—support student creativity, critical thinking, and academic independence [15,16,33,34,55]. Importantly, this study expands the emerging scholarly consensus that Confucian virtues are not inherently at odds with modern educational competencies but can actively enrich them when contextually reinterpreted. While previous literature has recognized that Confucian-informed pedagogies—particularly in East Asia—can foster critical thinking and creativity [15,16], this article contributes a more targeted analysis by illustrating how such integration is operationalized within Vietnam's current reform trajectory. Rather than reiterating general observations, our approach foregrounds the dynamic interplay between ethical instruction and cognitive development within Vietnamese classrooms. Specifically, we demonstrate that Confucian ethical cultivation—centered on reflective reasoning, civic responsibility, and self-regulation—can function as a pedagogical scaffold for twenty-first-century skills. These insights move beyond the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, showing that when Confucian principles are adaptively employed within reformist frameworks, they provide a fertile ground for innovation. In doing so, this study offers a novel contribution to existing scholarship by outlining how Vietnam's Confucian heritage can be recontextualized, not as a static legacy, but as a living philosophical resource for progressive education.

Nevertheless, this study does not overlook the limitations of traditional Confucianism. Challenges such as rote learning, authoritarian pedagogy, and insufficient focus on scientific and technological literacy are real concerns. Scholars like Tran [67] and Nguyen [57] underscore the urgency of updating educational models to foster critical thinking and integrate STEM education. These critiques are consistent with global trends in education reform, particularly as Vietnam prepares for a digital and knowledge-driven future [2,74]. The call by Quintas's [60] for embodied and integrated cognition further underscores the need to reform Confucian legacies in light of contemporary learning theory.

This discussion also identifies promising directions for future research. Empirical investigations are needed to evaluate how Confucian-based pedagogies perform in diverse educational settings. Comparative studies with other Confucian-influenced systems could help identify effective strategies for hybridization and innovation. Furthermore, the work of Ren [61] on ethical resilience and Sun and Sun [58] on ecological philosophy suggests that Confucianism may offer moral anchoring in times of psychological and environmental uncertainty.

Additional research should explore how to harmonize ethical education with digital and scientific literacy. Mikkilineni [74] advocates for curricula that equip students not only for ethical citizenship but also for intelligent engagement with emerging technologies. This dual imperative—moral depth and cognitive flexibility—has become essential in today's global landscape.

Long-term studies would be particularly useful in assessing how Confucian ethical education impacts student behavior, civic cohesion, and societal progress. Such studies could

track generational shifts, including the evolving values and expectations of Generation Z. As Loh [75] observes, the ethical void in algorithmic societies highlights the urgent need for value-based education, an area where Confucian principles may offer valuable guidance.

Ultimately, Vietnam's education system, situated at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, requires continuous reflection and responsive policymaking. The goal is not to revive Confucianism in its orthodox form, but to curate its enduring insights for meaningful application in today's context. In doing so, Vietnam can build an educational identity that is both ethically grounded and globally adaptive. Although a detailed analysis of curricular reforms from the last 10–15 years falls outside the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that current educational directives—especially those emphasizing moral cultivation, holistic development, and learner autonomy—clearly reflect the philosophical legacies of both Confucian and Humboldtian traditions.

In sum, this research reaffirms the relevance of Confucian educational thought for Vietnam's ongoing reforms. Yet its impact hinges on critical adaptation. A selectively integrated model, rooted in Confucian morality and enhanced by global pedagogical innovation, offers a viable pathway toward holistic, future-ready education. This balanced synthesis supports Vietnam's socio-economic development ambitions while reinforcing its place in the evolving landscape of global education. This balanced synthesis supports Vietnam's socio-economic development ambitions while reinforcing its place in the evolving landscape of global education. This study distinguishes itself by clarifying how these instructional strategies can be dynamically adapted within a Humboldtian framework to meet Vietnam's specific reform goals, offering a culturally rooted yet future-oriented model of educational transformation.

5. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring the philosophical and context-sensitive nature of Confucian educational thought. Confucianism is inherently textual, normative, and historically situated; therefore, a methodology grounded in interpretive textual analysis was essential for examining how its pedagogical and moral ideals might be rearticulated in contemporary Vietnamese education.

The primary aim was not to evaluate empirical outcomes, but to critically interpret the conceptual alignments and tensions between classical Confucian frameworks and present-day reform imperatives. This included examining how ethical education—centered on virtues such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual), and *xiao* (filial piety)—can intersect with modern priorities like learner autonomy, critical thinking, and academic freedom.

To this end, this study employed comparative philosophical analysis, specifically between Confucian educational traditions and the liberal ideals advanced by Wilhelm von Humboldt. This comparative dimension was deliberately chosen to illuminate shared emphases on self-cultivation, moral development, and the ethical role of education in public life. It also allowed for the identification of divergences, particularly Confucianism's hierarchical and ritualistic structure versus Humboldt's emphasis on individual autonomy and intellectual freedom.

Data consisted of primary and secondary textual sources. Primary materials included canonical works such as the *Analects* (*Lúnyǔ*, 論語) and other classical Confucian texts, complemented by authoritative Vietnamese translations and annotations, including Doan's edited *Analects* [9] and Chu's *The Four Books' Notes* [65]. Secondary sources encompassed historical analyses, contemporary educational theory, and Vietnamese policy documents outlining national educational reform goals [1,2]. Scholarly contributions by Pham [4], Tran [66], Trinh [63], and others were central to contextualizing and interpreting both historical and modern applications of Confucian pedagogy.

The research process involved a systematic literature review followed by thematic and comparative analysis. Texts were selected for their scholarly credibility, relevance to Confucian moral education, and utility in tracing the evolution of Confucian pedagogical methods across historical periods. Key analytical categories included moral education, teaching strategies, philosophical adaptation, and educational policy discourse.

Themes were identified through close reading and coded according to recurring philosophical motifs and pedagogical models. Textual analysis facilitated the synthesis of concepts across disparate time periods, while comparative methods enabled a structured juxtaposition of Confucian and Humboldtian ideals. This process clarified how traditional educational paradigms might be selectively integrated into modern frameworks, particularly in Vietnam's context of balancing cultural continuity with global competitiveness.

Given this study's theoretical orientation, no human participants were involved, and ethical risks were minimal. Nevertheless, academic integrity was strictly observed through accurate citation, intellectual transparency, and rigorous attribution of all scholarly sources.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the enduring relevance of Confucian educational thought within the context of Vietnam's contemporary educational reform. It focused particularly on how traditional philosophies—especially those emphasizing moral instruction and pedagogical methods—can be meaningfully adapted to address modern educational challenges. Central to this inquiry was the question of how Confucian values such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), and *xiao* (filial piety) might be reconciled with current demands for creativity, critical thinking, and learner autonomy.

The findings suggest that Confucianism continues to offer a valuable ethical and instructional foundation for modern education. Time-tested methods such as exemplary modeling, heuristic questioning, and situational teaching remain pedagogically relevant and align well with Vietnam's reform priorities. Importantly, this study engages with recent literature highlighting Confucianism's capacity to foster not only discipline and moral integrity but also creativity and critical engagement, thereby challenging outdated notions of its incompatibility with modern competencies.

What distinguishes this research is its proposal of a hybrid educational framework that integrates Confucian pedagogical strategies with Humboldtian liberal ideals. This model emphasizes both moral formation and cognitive independence, offering a culturally rooted yet globally responsive approach to education. At the same time, this study acknowledges that Confucian pedagogy, in its traditional form, must be critically re-evaluated and adapted, particularly in light of its hierarchical structures, reliance on rote memorization, and limited engagement with scientific and technological literacies.

This synthesis of traditional and modern philosophies aligns with Vietnam's socio-economic development goals and contributes to its aspiration of building a globally competitive and ethically grounded education system. However, the limitations of this study must be recognized. As a conceptual and literature-based analysis, it does not include empirical data or classroom-based observations. Future research should address this gap through longitudinal and comparative studies that assess the practical outcomes of Confucian-based instructional models in diverse educational settings.

Beyond the Vietnamese context, this study has broader implications. It offers insights into how traditional philosophies, when critically and thoughtfully adapted, can inform and enrich contemporary educational paradigms worldwide. Such integration may help cultivate ethically responsible, intellectually autonomous, and socially engaged individuals capable of navigating the demands of an increasingly complex global environment.

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