Confucianist Philosophy and Dialectical Marxism in Vietnam

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Abstract
This article undertakes a systematic philosophical comparison of Confucian philosophy and dialectical materialism as they interact in Vietnamese intellectual and political life. Against the prevailing "harmony narrative" in Vietnamese scholarship and the "replacement thesis" advanced by Nguyen Khac Vien (1974), we propose a model of *layered coexistence*: the two traditions occupy different strata of Vietnamese thought, converging on anti-individualism, this-worldly humanism, moral-political unity, transformative education, and the primacy of praxis, while diverging on ontology, historical methodology, social hierarchy, and the status of transcendence. Drawing on the concept of cultural additivity (Vuong et al., 2018) and a hauntological reading of Confucianism's persistence (Linh, 2023), the analysis demonstrates that the Confucian-Marxist relationship in Vietnam is characterised neither by synthesis nor by conflict but by the simultaneous operation of genuine affinities and unresolved contradictions. The Vietnamese case challenges the Western assumption that ideological consistency is a prerequisite for intellectual seriousness, revealing a cultural logic that privileges practical coherence over theoretical purity.
Key words: Confucianism, dialectical materialism, Vietnam, cultural additivity, layered coexistence

1. Introduction

In the journey of fighting for independence for the Vietnamese nation, Ho Chi Minh absorbed the quintessence of human culture, thereby he placed Confucius, Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, and Sun Yat-sen within a single intellectual constellation — not as rival thinkers, but as complementary voices addressing the same fundamental question of human liberation (Vo, 2017: 53-54). For many Western observers, this eclecticism appears philosophically naive, a failure to recognise the deep incompatibilities between these traditions. For Vietnamese intellectuals, however, it reflects something more substantial: a centuries-old cultural pattern in which imported ideas are neither adopted wholesale nor rejected outright, but selectively appropriated, layered onto existing structures, and put to work within a distinctively Vietnamese framework. The question this article addresses is whether that pattern, when applied to the relationship between Confucianism and Marxism, constitutes a genuine philosophical achievement — or a pragmatic equivocation that defers rather than resolves its deepest tensions.

The existing scholarship on the Confucianism-Marxism nexus in Vietnam tends to cluster into three camps. We call the first one the *official harmony narrative*. It tends to be predominant in Vietnamese academic institutions. It celebrates the synthesis of traditional and revolutionary values without critically examining what is philosophically lost, distorted, or suppressed in the process (Tran and Dang, 2021; Tran, 2024). The second is the *incompatibility thesis*, more common in Western Cold War-era scholarship, which treats Confucianism as feudal residue that genuine Marxism should have (and, in the official narrative, did) sweep away (cf. Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 52). The third is a *cultural-persistence literature* which focuses on documenting Confucian survivals sociologically. The weakness is that it avoids the philosophical comparison altogether. This shows *that* Confucian values persist without asking *how* they relate, at the level of first principles, to the Marxist framework that officially supersedes them (Vuong et al., 2018; Nizhnikov and Bac, 2023). A recent and

valuable contribution by Nguyen (2024) offers a systematic overview of the Confucian-Marxist governance model and its implications for technological progress — but his analysis, while ambitious in scope, remains largely descriptive. It demonstrates *that* Confucian and Marxist principles coexist in Vietnamese governance without conducting the conceptual comparison needed to explain *why* they coexist, *where* they genuinely converge, and *where* their coexistence conceals unresolved contradictions. This article undertakes the philosophical analysis that Nguyen's work implicitly calls for.

We propose instead a model of *layered coexistence* — drawing on what Vuong et al. (2018) have termed "cultural additivity," the characteristically Vietnamese willingness to incorporate values and norms from other belief systems even when they logically contradict the principles of the existing system. The central research question is: *What are the genuine points of philosophical convergence and divergence between Confucian philosophy and dialectical materialism as they operate in Vietnamese intellectual and political life — and what does the pattern of their interaction reveal about the nature of ideological synthesis itself?*

The article proceeds through comparative philosophical analysis, examining specific conceptual pairs across the two traditions — their ontologies, ethical frameworks, political theories, and methodological commitments. We draw on primary texts from both traditions, their Vietnamese reception, and the substantial body of recent scholarship on Vietnamese Confucianism and political philosophy (Ali, 2020; Bui, 2013; Linh, 2023; Pham, 2005; Tran and Dang, 2021). The foundational reference remains Nguyen Khac Vien's classic essay "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam" (1974), which first articulated the structural affinities between the two traditions — though, as we shall argue, his "replacement" thesis requires significant revision in light of post-*Doi Moi* realities.

The article is structured as follows. Sections 1 and 2 establish the two traditions on their own terms — first Vietnamese Confucianism as a distinctive intellectual formation, then dialectical materialism as it was received and adapted in Vietnam. Sections 3 and 4 constitute the core comparative analysis: five points of genuine philosophical convergence, followed by four points of productive tension and unacknowledged contradiction. Section 5 grounds the analysis in the contemporary situation, tracing how the Confucian-Marxist relationship has evolved under *Doi Moi* and its aftermath. The conclusion draws out the implications — not only for understanding Vietnamese intellectual history, but for the broader question of how philosophical traditions interact when they are layered rather than synthesised.

2. Confucianism in Vietnam: A Distinctive Tradition

Any comparison between Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam must begin by specifying *which* Confucianism is under discussion. What the Vietnamese call *Nho giao* is not a faithful reproduction of Chinese Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. It is, rather, a distinctive intellectual tradition — more humanistic in orientation, less rigidly hierarchical in practice, deeply shaped by the village-democracy traditions of Vietnamese agricultural society, and continuously blended with Buddhist and Daoist sensibilities in ways that would have troubled the Song dynasty purists (Linh, 2023; Pham, 2005). This distinction is not pedantic; it is analytically decisive. Vietnamese Confucianism, with its stronger emphasis on *di dan vi ban* (people as root) and its weaker attachment to metaphysical orthodoxy, is a very different interlocutor for Marxism than the Neo-Confucianism that dominates Chinese intellectual history.

Confucianism entered Vietnam during the periods of Chinese domination, but its penetration was gradual and contested. During the Ly-Tran dynasties (11th–14th centuries), Buddhism — not Confucianism — served as the dominant state ideology, and Vietnamese culture received Confucian ideas with what Linh (2023: 95) describes as "extreme caution" rooted in the "inherent power of the indigenous culture." It was

only under the Le dynasty in the fifteenth century that Confucianism became the official doctrine of the state, its authority formalised through the imperial examination system (Tran and Dang, 2021; Pham, 2005). Even then, the relationship between Vietnamese society and Confucian orthodoxy remained ambivalent. Pham (2005: 78–80) has argued persuasively that Vietnamese Confucianism converged with pre-existing agricultural social norms — collectivism born of cooperative cultivation, consensus-based village governance, the moral cosmology of *nhan-qua* (causality) — rather than simply displacing them. In this reading, what the Vietnamese adopted was not Chinese Confucianism but a Vietnamese reinvention of it, layered onto structures that were already, in certain respects, proto-Confucian.

Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 34–41) introduced a distinction that remains indispensable for understanding this history: the difference between *mandarinal* Confucianism — the conservative, ritualistic, state-serving orthodoxy of the examination system — and *popular* Confucianism — the village-level ethical culture carried by local scholars who served as teachers, scribes, and moral guides within their communities. The mandarinal stream was hierarchical, politically instrumental, and ultimately vulnerable to the charge of serving feudal interests. The popular stream was closer to the people, more flexible, and — as we shall argue in subsequent sections — far more compatible with certain Marxist commitments. This distinction matters enormously, because the compatibility thesis works primarily through the popular stream. When Ho Chi Minh drew on Confucian moral vocabulary to articulate revolutionary ethics, he was drawing on the tradition of the village scholar, not the court mandarin (Bui, 2013; Tran, 2024).

The abolition of the imperial examinations between 1915 and 1919 destroyed the institutional backbone of mandarinal Confucianism. Yet a paradox followed: as the institutions crumbled, the values persisted — and in some respects deepened. Confucian commitments to filial piety, moral self-cultivation, education, and communal responsibility continued to structure Vietnamese family life, social relations, and popular expectations of governance long after the examination halls had closed (Pham, 2005; Ali, 2020). This persistence is precisely what makes the Confucianism-Marxism comparison philosophically interesting rather than merely historical.

Five core Confucian concepts will serve as the analytical vocabulary for the comparative work that follows. Each needs to be understood not merely as an abstract Chinese philosophical category but in its specifically Vietnamese inflection.

The first is *nhan* (benevolence or humaneness), the cardinal Confucian virtue. In the *Analects*, Confucius defined *nhan* as "loving people" — but with the expectation that love manifests in concrete actions, not mere sentiment (Tran and Dang, 2021). Vietnamese Confucianism inherited this activist understanding of benevolence and linked it to the Buddhist concept of compassion and the indigenous ethic of mutual aid within agricultural communities. The result is a concept of *nhan* that is at once deeply moral and resolutely this-worldly — concerned with human flourishing in social relationships rather than with individual salvation or metaphysical transcendence.

The second is *le* (propriety or ritual), the framework of social norms governing relationships and public conduct. In the Chinese tradition, *le* encompasses everything from court ceremony to funeral rites to the protocols of daily interaction. In Vietnam, *le* functioned as what Bui (2013: 388) has called a set of proto-constitutional norms — an unwritten code that regulated governance, defined social roles, and provided a basis for evaluating the legitimacy of political authority. Pham (2005: 82) goes further, arguing that in the Vietnamese context, "the law seeks to enforce good behaviour amongst individuals by punishing those people who don't know the *li*" — making moral education, not legal coercion, the primary mechanism of social order.

The third is *chinh danh* (rectification of names), the principle that titles, roles, and social designations must accurately correspond to the realities they describe. A ruler who does not govern well does not deserve the name "ruler"; a father who neglects his

duties has forfeited the moral authority of fatherhood. This doctrine is both linguistic and political: it grounds political legitimacy in the correspondence between what one *claims* to be and what one *does* (Tran and Dang, 2021). As we shall argue later, this principle resonates — but also conflicts — with the Marxist critique of ideology as a system in which names systematically misrepresent material realities.

The fourth — and for this article's argument, perhaps the most consequential — is *di dan vi ban* (people as the root of the nation). Nguyen Tai Dong and Ho Manh Tung (2019) have identified three dimensions of this principle in the Vietnamese tradition: the people as the foundation of political stability, the people as the source of the ruler's legitimacy, and the people as active participants in governance through village-level democratic institutions. It is important to note, however, that this principle operates within a paternalistic framework: the people are the "root" that the ruler must tend, not a sovereign body that governs itself. As Nguyen and Ho (2019: 104) caution, there is "no going straight from traditional village democracy to modern democracy" — the gap between *di dan vi ban* and democratic self-governance is wide and consequential.

The fifth is *tu than* (self-cultivation), the ethical methodology at the heart of Confucian moral life. The *Da Xue* (Great Learning) articulates the famous chain: investigate things, extend knowledge, make thoughts sincere, rectify the heart, cultivate the self — and only then proceed to regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world (Tran and Dang, 2021). Self-cultivation is not abstract theorising; it is an ongoing, voluntary, daily practice of moral effort. As the *Analects* insist, "People can expand their morality; it is not a virtue that extends people;" in other words, the initiative must come from the individual, and it is never finished. This emphasis on practice rather than mere knowledge will prove to be one of the most significant points of convergence with Marxist thought.

These five concepts — *nhan*, *le*, *chinh danh*, *di dan vi ban*, and *tu than* — constitute the analytical vocabulary through which we will conduct the comparison that follows. The question is: which of them find genuine philosophical echoes in the Marxist tradition, and which resist assimilation? Before that comparison can proceed, however, we need to establish the other side of the equation — dialectical materialism as it arrived in and was adapted by Vietnam.

3. Dialectical Materialism and Its Vietnamese Reception

The second tradition requires less introduction in the abstract — its core philosophical commitments are well known — but considerably more attention in terms of *how it arrived* in Vietnam and *what it became* in the process of reception. The doctrine that Vietnamese intellectuals encountered in the 1920s was not Marx's original philosophical project in its full complexity, but a specific codification: dialectical materialism as systematised by Engels and Lenin, further simplified through Soviet pedagogical channels, and — decisively — filtered through Ho Chi Minh's own extraordinary capacity for cultural translation.

The philosophical core can be stated compactly. Dialectical materialism holds that reality is material, that matter is primary and consciousness derivative, and that all development proceeds through the dialectical interplay of contradictions — the unity and conflict of opposites, the transformation of quantitative into qualitative change, and the negation of the negation. Historical materialism extends these principles to social life: the mode of production determines the social structure; the economic base generates a legal, political, and ideological superstructure; history advances through class struggle across determinate stages — from primitive communism through slavery, feudalism, and capitalism toward socialism and eventually communism (Nguyen, 2024). In Vietnamese universities today, this framework continues to function as the compulsory methodological foundation for all social science — students of literature, philosophy, history, and law alike are examined on its principles before they can proceed to their disciplinary specialisations (Pham, 2005).

What matters for this article, however, is not the doctrine itself but the circumstances and character of its Vietnamese reception. That reception was shaped by three distinct channels, each of which left its mark on the particular form of Marxism that took root in Vietnam.

The first was French colonial education. There is a deep irony here: the very institutions that the colonial power had established to produce a class of loyal Vietnamese administrators also transmitted the intellectual traditions of the European left — the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, socialism, and eventually Marxism. Vietnamese students in France and in Francophone colonial schools encountered Marxist thought not as an alien importation but as part of the broader French intellectual landscape they were being trained to engage (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 41–45). The colonisers' tradition provided the anti-colonial weapon.

The second channel was the Communist International network in Southeast Asia. Through the Comintern, Vietnamese revolutionaries gained access to the organisational technology of Marxism-Leninism — the vanguard party, democratic centralism, the mass-line approach — alongside its theoretical content. This institutional dimension is important because it meant that Marxism arrived in Vietnam not merely as a set of ideas to be debated but as a system of political practice to be implemented. The practical, organisational character of Comintern Marxism resonated with what Nguyen Khac Vien identified as the Confucian emphasis on the unity of thought and action (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 46–47).

The third — and most consequential — was Ho Chi Minh's personal intellectual journey. Born into a family of Confucian scholars in Nghe An province, educated in the classical tradition before leaving Vietnam in 1911, Ho Chi Minh spent three decades absorbing Marxism-Leninism in France, the Soviet Union, and China before returning to lead the Vietnamese revolution (Ali, 2020; Tran, 2024). His intellectual formation was thus triply layered: Confucian moral philosophy at the base, French Enlightenment rationalism in the middle, and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory on top. What made Ho Chi Minh exceptional was not his theoretical sophistication — he was not a systematic philosopher — but his capacity to render each layer in terms accessible to the others.

This brings us to the central point of this section: Ho Chi Minh's "translation" of Marxism into Confucian moral idiom. The genius — if that is the right word — lay not in synthesising two philosophical systems at the level of theory, but in recognising that the Confucian moral vocabulary already available to Vietnamese peasants and intellectuals could serve as the medium through which Marxist-Leninist commitments were communicated, internalised, and lived. The revolutionary cadre was presented as the modern *quan tu* (gentleman) — disciplined, selfless, morally cultivated, devoted to the people. Revolutionary morality was framed as an updated *tu than* (self-cultivation) — not the scholar's private spiritual exercise, but the cadre's daily practice of political and ethical discipline. The Party itself was positioned as a virtuous ruler whose legitimacy rested, in classically Confucian fashion, on its moral authority rather than on procedural democratic mandate. Nguyen Khac Vien, himself a product of this very process, was remarkably candid about the mechanism. As he put it: "Revolutionary morality in Confucian countries often is more influential than notions of the law of historical development. Since Marxism is both 'explanation and edification,' edification may often take precedence" (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 50–51). The implication is striking: in Vietnamese Marxism, the Confucian imperative to moral transformation has, to some degree, subordinated the Marxist commitment to scientific analysis. Vietnamese Communists, as Pham (2005: 86) observes, "did not fight Confucianism as bitterly as did their Chinese counterparts" — and the reason, we would suggest, is that they did not need to. Confucianism was not the enemy to be destroyed but the cultural substratum through which Marxism was made intelligible.

Ho Chi Minh's specific reinterpretations of Confucian virtue-terms illustrate this translation with precision. *Trung* (loyalty), which had traditionally signified fidelity to the monarch, became loyalty to the nation and the revolutionary cause. *Hieu* (filial piety), the duty of children to parents, was broadened into service to the people. Ho Chi Minh explicitly articulated this shift: "In the past, morality meant loyalty to the king and filial piety to one's parents. Today, in a new era, morality means loyalty to the nation and filial piety to the people" (Ho, 2011, Vol. 4: 170). The Confucian virtues of *can* (diligence), *kiem* (thrift), *liem* (integrity), and *chinh* (uprightness) were retained almost wholesale in Ho Chi Minh's ethical vocabulary — their content barely modified, their function redirected from the maintenance of social harmony to the building of a revolutionary society (Nguyen, 2024: 48–50; Tran, 2024). What changed was the telos, not the practice.

It is worth noting that Vietnam also produced at least one thinker who engaged with Marxist philosophy at the highest theoretical level. Tran Duc Thao's *Phenomenologie et materialisme dialectique* (1951) remains the most philosophically ambitious Vietnamese contribution to Marxist thought — a serious attempt to reconcile Husserlian phenomenology with dialectical materialism. His subsequent marginalisation within Vietnam, however, underscores a recurring pattern: the Vietnamese reception of Marxism has consistently favoured practical-moral application over theoretical-philosophical elaboration.

The codification of this arrangement came at the CPV's 7th National Congress in 1991, which formally enshrined "Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought as the ideological foundation and guideline for action" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2025: 212) as the dual ideological foundation of the party and state The formula is itself revealing. By elevating Ho Chi Minh's thought to a status parallel with — not subordinate to — Marxism-Leninism, the CPV implicitly acknowledged that the Vietnamese version of socialism was not a straightforward application of a universal doctrine but a distinctive intellectual formation in its own right (Ali, 2020). And that distinctive formation, as we have been arguing, owes as much to Confucian moral philosophy as it does to European materialism — even if the debt is seldom explicitly acknowledged.

Two features of this reception deserve particular emphasis as we move into the comparative analysis. First, Vietnamese Marxism arrived with an already-existing moral vocabulary — the Confucian one — into which it was immediately translated. This means that the philosophical interaction between the two traditions was not a matter of deliberate theoretical synthesis but of *cultural reflex*: Vietnamese intellectuals instinctively heard Marxist commitments in Confucian terms because those were the terms in which they had been trained to think about ethics and governance. Second, the translation was not neutral. It inflected Vietnamese Marxism with a moralism, a voluntarism, and an emphasis on personal virtue that are not present — or at least not central — in the European original. Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 51) himself acknowledged that this "moralism can sometimes lead to a sort of voluntarism, which considers no task impossible as long as the cadres are sufficiently dedicated." Whether one calls this a strength or a limitation depends on what one values — but it is undeniably a product of the Confucian-Marxist interaction, and understanding it is essential to the analysis that follows.

4. Points of Genuine Convergence

Having established the two traditions on their own terms, we can now proceed to the comparative analysis proper. The question is not whether Confucianism and Marxism share common features — that much is uncontroversial — but whether the commonalities are philosophically substantial or merely superficial, and whether they survive scrutiny once the residual differences are made explicit. We identify five points

of genuine convergence, but in each case we also mark the philosophical distance that remains.

4.1 Primacy of the Collective over the Individual

Both Confucianism and Marxism reject what might be called atomistic individualism — the view, broadly associated with the liberal tradition, that the individual is ontologically and morally prior to the social relationships in which he or she participates. The Confucian position grounds selfhood in the *ngu luan* (five cardinal relationships): one becomes a person not in isolation but through structured social bonds — ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, elder-younger, friend-friend. The self, in this framework, is constitutively relational; to remove the relationships is not to reveal a "true self" underneath but to destroy the self altogether. Marx arrived at a structurally parallel conclusion from entirely different premises. In the sixth of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, he wrote that "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual" but rather "the ensemble of the social relations" (K.Marx, F.Engels, 1995: 11) — a formulation that, as Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 46-47) noted, "hardly came as a shock to the Confucian scholar who had always considered the highest aim of man to be the fulfillment of his social obligations."

The convergence is real, but the residual difference is philosophically significant. The Confucian version of anti-individualism is *moral-relational*: the self is embedded in a web of ethical obligations grounded in reciprocal virtue. The Marxist version is *socio-economic*: the self is constituted by its position within the mode of production and the class structure it generates. In Confucian thought, the remedy for social disorder is moral cultivation — if each person fulfils the obligations inherent in his or her relational position, harmony follows. In Marxist thought, the remedy is structural transformation — changing the relations of production that generate alienation and exploitation. The practical consequence of this convergence in Vietnamese political culture has been a powerfully communitarian ethos. As Pham (2005: 76) observes, Vietnamese society upholds "the primacy of public interests over individual interests," and Ngo et al. (2018: 308) note that "collective spirit is valorized" to the extent that "people who prioritize their individual interests are regarded as being selfish." Whether this communitarian consensus reflects Confucian virtue-ethics, Marxist class-consciousness, or a fusion of both is — in practice — impossible to disentangle. What can be said is that it has provided a shared cultural grammar within which both traditions operate, even if their reasons for anti-individualism differ at the foundational level.

4.2 This-Worldly Humanism

The second convergence concerns the orientation of both traditions toward human affairs in this world rather than toward metaphysical speculation about transcendent realities. Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 47) put this argument in its strongest form: "It was easier for a Confucian country than for a Muslim or Christian one to adopt Marxism, because Confucianism had not speculated throughout the centuries about the 'other world.'" The Confucian tradition, from Confucius's famous refusal to discuss spirits and the afterlife (*Analects* 11.12) through Mencius's anthropological optimism to the Song Neo-Confucians' concern with self-cultivation and statecraft, has consistently prioritised the human over the divine, the social over the cosmic, the ethical over the metaphysical. Tran and Dang (2021: 1125) emphasise that Confucian philosophy concentrates on "educating people" and "creating an ideal social model" rather than on salvation or transcendence. Marxism, of course, goes further — not merely prioritising this-worldly concerns but denying the existence of any other world altogether. The residual difference is therefore considerable, even if the practical orientations overlap. Confucian this-worldliness is not materialist atheism. The concept of *Tian* (Heaven) persists in the Confucian tradition not as a personal God but as a moral-cosmic principle

— an order to which human conduct is accountable and from which political legitimacy ultimately derives. This is not a difference one can simply wave away, and we shall return to it in Section 4 as one of the deepest fault lines between the two traditions. At the level of lived practice, however, the shared this-worldly orientation meant that Vietnamese intellectuals trained in Confucian thought did not have to undergo a crisis of faith in order to accept Marxism. They had to extend their secular humanism, not abandon a religious one.

4.3 Moral-Political Unity

The third convergence is perhaps the most consequential for understanding Vietnamese political culture. Confucianism does not separate morality from politics; it treats them as a unity. The *Da Xue* chain — *tu than, te gia, tri quoc, binh thien ha* (cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, bring peace to the world) — establishes moral self-cultivation as the *precondition* for legitimate political authority. The ruler who lacks virtue has no right to rule, regardless of his power. As Tran and Dang (2021: 1130) put it, Confucianism holds that social turmoil arises precisely when "authority separates from morality." The Confucian doctrine of *duc tri* (rule by virtue) is explicit: "If the authorities exclusively use the law... the people will be afraid, but they will not be ashamed. To lead the people, the authority must use virtue... The people will not be ashamed. They are also transformed into goodness" (*Analects*, Wei Zheng 3, cited in Tran and Dang, 2021: 1131).

Marxism-Leninism contains its own version of this unity, though grounded in very different premises. The Leninist vanguard party derives its legitimacy not from electoral mandate but from its superior understanding of historical laws and its selfless commitment to the interests of the working class. The good cadre, like the Confucian *quan tu*, is defined by moral qualities — discipline, self-sacrifice, devotion to the people — as much as by ideological correctness. Ho Chi Minh's genius lay in fusing these two vocabularies so thoroughly that the seam became invisible. His warning against "revolutionary mandarins" — cadres who "dictate from above" rather than serving the people — deployed a Confucian concept to critique a Confucian temptation within a Marxist framework (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 49-50). This is both the strength and the vulnerability of the Confucian-Marxist synthesis: it produces leaders of impressive moral seriousness (Ho Chi Minh remains the archetype), but it offers no institutional mechanism for accountability when the moral quality of leadership declines.

4.4 Education as Social Transformation

Both traditions assign to education a role that extends far beyond the transmission of knowledge. For Confucianism, education is the process by which the raw, uncultivated person becomes a *quan tu* — a morally refined individual capable of contributing to social harmony and, ultimately, of governing. The *Da Xue* insists that the chain begins with "investigating things closely in order to gain knowledge" and proceeds through sincerity of thought and rectification of the heart to the cultivation of the person (Tran and Dang, 2021: 1127). Education, in this framework, is not merely cognitive but characterological: it aims at the transformation of the whole person. For Marxism, education serves a structurally analogous function: consciousness-raising, the process by which individuals overcome false consciousness and come to understand their objective position within the relations of production. In both cases, education is not politically neutral — it is a mechanism for producing a certain kind of person who will sustain a certain kind of social order. The Vietnamese fusion of these two traditions produced the ideal of the "new socialist person" — an individual who combines Confucian moral cultivation with Marxist class-consciousness, who is simultaneously virtuous and ideologically correct. The fact that the Confucian examination system had been abolished decades before Marxism's arrival did not diminish the cultural

expectation that governance required educated, morally cultivated leaders; it merely redirected that expectation toward the party's cadre training system (Pham, 2005: 84). The residual difference, however, is important: Confucian education is fundamentally *moral* (it cultivates virtue), while Marxist education is fundamentally *analytical* (it cultivates correct understanding of historical and social processes). The Vietnamese fusion tends to privilege the moral dimension — a tendency Nguyen Khac Vien himself acknowledged when he noted that in Vietnamese Marxism, "edification may often take precedence" over explanation (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 51).

4.5 Praxis: Moral Practice and Theory-in-Action

The fifth and final convergence is one that existing scholarship has largely overlooked — or, more precisely, has attributed exclusively to the Marxist side of the equation. Nguyen (2024: 48-52) discusses praxis as a defining feature of the Confucian-Marxist governance model but frames it primarily in Marxist terms: theory actualised through practical action, knowledge tested in revolutionary struggle. What this framing misses is the Confucian root of the praxis commitment. *Tu than* (self-cultivation) is not a contemplative exercise; it is an ongoing, voluntary, *daily* practice of moral effort. The *Analects* are emphatic: "People can expand their morality; it is not a virtue that extends people" — the initiative must come from the practitioner, and the work is never finished (Tran and Dang, 2021: 1128). Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach — "The philosophers have only interpreted the world by many diffirent ways; the point is to change it"(K.Marx, F.Engels, 1995: 12) — resonates powerfully with this Confucian insistence that knowledge without action is worthless. Both are, at their core, philosophies of *practice*. Neither tolerates the intellectual who merely studies without acting, the scholar who theorises without engaging the world. In Vietnam, this shared commitment to praxis produced a political culture in which intellectuals and cadres were expected to *do*, not merely to *know* — to demonstrate their convictions through conduct rather than merely articulating them in texts. The convergence is genuine, but it is worth noting that the two traditions locate praxis differently. For Confucianism, praxis is *moral*: daily self-cultivation, the ceaseless effort to align one's conduct with virtue. For Marxism, praxis is *political*: collective action aimed at transforming social structures. The Vietnamese cadre was expected to practise both — and the expectation was, in historical terms, remarkably effective. Whether it remains so under conditions of market liberalisation and consumer individualism is a question for Section 5.

These five convergences — anti-individualism, this-worldly humanism, moral-political unity, transformative education, and the commitment to praxis — are genuine and philosophically substantial. They explain why the encounter between Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam was not experienced as a collision between incompatible worldviews but as a process of mutual recognition: each tradition found in the other something it already valued. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the relationship is therefore one of harmony. Behind each convergence lies a residual difference — and behind the residual differences lie deeper tensions that the convergences themselves cannot resolve. It is to these tensions that we now turn.

5. Points of Productive Tension and Unacknowledged Contradiction

If the preceding section has shown where the two traditions genuinely meet, this section must show where they do not — and why the tensions between them are not merely residual imperfections but *constitutive* features of the Vietnamese intellectual landscape. Nguyen Khac Vien, writing in 1962, concluded that "Marxism has replaced Confucianism as a doctrine of political and social action" and that "any attempt to revive Confucianism is useless" (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 52). More than six decades of subsequent history have shown this assessment to be wrong — not in its recognition

of Marxism's dominance, but in its prediction of Confucianism's disappearance. Confucianism was not replaced; it was layered underneath, pushed from the official surface into the deep structures of Vietnamese moral intuition, family life, and governance practice. What we propose instead is a model of *layered coexistence* — a relationship in which the two traditions occupy different strata of Vietnamese intellectual and social life, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes pulling in opposite directions, and sometimes simply operating in parallel without acknowledgment of the contradictions between them. Four tensions, in particular, demand examination.

5.1 Ontological Incompatibility: Moral Cosmos vs. Material Base

The deepest fault line between the two traditions is ontological. Confucianism, even in its most humanistic Vietnamese variant, presupposes a morally ordered cosmos. The concept of *Thien menh* (Heaven's mandate) is not decorative metaphor; it is the foundational claim that political legitimacy derives from alignment with a transcendent moral order. Human nature, in the Confucian view, participates in this order — it is oriented toward goodness not merely by social conditioning but by its ontological constitution. As Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 51) acknowledged with unusual candour, "Consciously or not, the Confucian attaches moral values to heaven. Man ends up attaining this heaven by burying it deep inside himself."

Dialectical materialism denies all of this. Morality, in the Marxist framework, belongs to the superstructure — it is a reflection of the relations of production, not a feature of the cosmos. Human nature is not oriented toward transcendent goodness; it is shaped by material conditions and class position. There is no moral order prior to or independent of social practice. The incompatibility here is not a matter of emphasis or interpretation; it is foundational. A moral cosmos and a material base are not two ways of describing the same reality — they are competing ontologies.

The Vietnamese compromise has been, characteristically, to maintain both without resolving the contradiction. In university classrooms, dialectical materialism is taught as the compulsory philosophical foundation; human nature is explained in terms of social relations and material conditions. In governance rhetoric, however, the CPV operates on unmistakably Confucian metaphysical terrain. When Party documents speak of "revolutionary morality," when cadres are evaluated by their *duc* (virtue) as much as by their political correctness, when Ho Chi Minh is invoked as a moral exemplar whose personal character legitimises the entire political order — the operative framework is moral realism, not materialism. Pham (2005: 79) notes that the Vietnamese concept of *nhan-qua* (causality as moral retribution) embeds a cosmological claim that is fundamentally at odds with materialist explanation: what happens today is caused by past moral actions, and justice is a feature of the universe, not merely of human institutions. The question this raises — and we pose it without pretending to answer it definitively — is whether the Vietnamese Confucian-Marxist arrangement constitutes a genuine synthesis, a productive ambiguity, or simply a pragmatic equivocation that defers rather than resolves the deepest philosophical question at stake.

5.2 Historical Methodology: Exemplarism vs. Determinism

The second tension concerns how the two traditions understand historical time and the role of the past in shaping the present. Confucian thought is fundamentally *backward-looking*. Its moral imagination is organised around exemplary figures — the sage-kings of antiquity, the virtuous officials of classical literature, the great teachers whose conduct established the standards by which all subsequent conduct is judged. Governance, in this framework, is essentially restorative: the task is to return to the Way (*Dao*) from which society has deviated, to recover the moral clarity of the ancients, to govern as the sages governed. Historical materialism looks in the opposite direction.

History advances through determinate stages — from primitive communism through slavery and feudalism to capitalism and eventually socialism — driven by the development of productive forces and the class struggles they engender. The past is not a repository of models to emulate but a sequence of formations to transcend. Confucianism, in the Marxist periodisation, belongs to the "feudal" stage — an ideological expression of pre-capitalist social relations that must be overcome, not preserved.

Yet Vietnamese Marxism has never fully committed to this forward-looking logic. The CPV regularly invokes Confucian values — filial piety, moral self-cultivation, respect for education, communal solidarity — as resources for socialist construction. Ho Chi Minh is treated, in practice, as a modern sage-king whose exemplary life provides the moral standard for cadres and citizens alike. Every Party Congress reaffirms the importance of "traditional cultural values" alongside Marxist-Leninist scientific analysis. The legal education system, as Pham (2005: 84) documents, teaches historical materialism's five-stage model as official doctrine — while simultaneously appealing to the authority of Confucian moral precedent in governance. The Vietnamese mind, it appears, looks both backward and forward simultaneously.

Linh (2023) has provided the most illuminating theoretical framework for understanding this paradox. Drawing on Derrida's concept of hauntology, Linh argues that Confucianism functions in Vietnamese intellectual life as a spectre — officially dead, repeatedly declared obsolete, yet structurally indispensable and impossible to exorcise. "Vietnamese thinkers continue to discuss Confucianism and even become obsessed with it," Linh (2023: 99) observes. They oscillate between rejecting Confucianism as "outdated feudalism" and celebrating it as the moral foundation of Vietnamese civilisation. This oscillation is not confusion; it is the symptom of a tradition that has been classified as dead by the dominant ideology but refuses to behave accordingly.

5.3 Hierarchy and Equality

Of all the tensions between the two traditions, this is the one most concretely visible in Vietnamese daily life. Confucian social order is explicitly hierarchical: the *ngu luan* (five relationships) are structured as asymmetries — ruler over subject, father over son, husband over wife, elder over younger — each carrying differentiated obligations. The system of *tam tong* (three submissions) codifies women's subordination: obedience to father before marriage, to husband during marriage, to son in widowhood. Marxism, by contrast, defines itself against hierarchy: class struggle aims at the abolition of exploitative social relations, and socialist construction promises the equality of all citizens regardless of gender, birth, or social origin.

Gender provides the sharpest test case for the reality of the Confucian-Marxist relationship. The data assembled by Nizhnikov and Bac (2023) tell a complex story. On one side, Vietnam has enacted socialist legislation mandating gender equality, and the results are not negligible: women constitute 47.3% of the workforce, and 24% of Vietnamese enterprises are owned by women — a figure that places Vietnam among the leading countries in the ASEAN region (Nizhnikov and Bac, 2023: 107-108). On the other side, the persistence of Confucian family norms is unmistakable. The birth sex ratio stands at 111.5 boys per 100 girls — the third highest in the world, behind only China and India — driven by the Confucian preference for male heirs to continue the ancestral line (Nizhnikov and Bac, 2023: 106). Women spend 20.2 hours per week on housework compared to men's 10.7; approximately 20% of Vietnamese men do no housework at all. Most disturbingly, 90.4% of women who experience physical or sexual violence do not seek help from authorities (Nizhnikov and Bac, 2023: 107). At the level of political representation, women hold only 9.5% of seats on the CPV Central Committee — the very institution that officially champions gender equality.

The philosophical question this data raises is whether a tradition built on structured hierarchy can be reconciled with one that defines justice as hierarchy's abolition. The Vietnamese answer has been, in effect, to keep them in separate compartments: equality in the public sphere (workplace, law, political rhetoric), hierarchy in the private sphere (family structure, domestic labour, reproductive decisions). This is the "layered coexistence" thesis at its most visible — socialist law on top, Confucian family norms underneath, and women managing the gap between the two on a daily basis.

The tension extends beyond gender. Ngo et al. (2018: 310) have argued that the convergence of Confucian hierarchy and Marxist collectivism has produced a *double restriction* on individual rights in Vietnam. Both the Confucian paternalism of the benevolent ruler who tends to the people's needs and the Marxist-Leninist vanguard party that determines the people's true interests on their behalf. Only with the 2013 constitutional revision were human rights recognised as natural rights — a shift that represents, at least formally, a departure from both the Confucian and Marxist-Leninist frameworks. The Confucian model presupposes that hierarchy works because the superior is virtuous; when the virtue is absent, the hierarchy collapses in practice even as it persists in form. Nguyen Tai Dong and Ho Manh Tung (2019: 104) make the same point from within the Confucian tradition itself: *di dan vi ban* contains genuinely democratic elements, but there is "no going straight from traditional village democracy to modern democracy." The gap between Confucian paternalism and democratic self-governance remains wide — and the Marxist framework, for all its egalitarian rhetoric, has done more to reinforce than to bridge it.

5.4 The Problem of Transcendence

The final tension returns to the ontological question raised in Section 4.1, but approaches it from a different angle — not the abstract incompatibility of moral cosmos and material base, but the concrete political problem of managing traditions that exceed materialist explanation. Confucianism is not theistic in the Christian or Islamic sense; it does not posit a personal God who creates, judges, and redeems. But neither is it purely materialist. *Tian* (Heaven) functions in the Confucian tradition as a moral-cosmic principle — an order that transcends human construction, grounds human values, and holds human rulers accountable to standards they did not create. Ancestor veneration, the most pervasive ritual practice in Vietnamese life, is profoundly Confucian in its logic: it presupposes a continuing relationship between the living and the dead that materialist philosophy cannot accommodate.

Marxism explicitly rejects transcendence. Religion is, in the canonical formulation, the opium of the people — an ideological consolation that distracts from the material sources of suffering(K.Marx, F.Engels, 2002: 570). But, the state promotes ancestor veneration as "cultural heritage" — an expression of filial piety and national identity — while firmly categorising it as *not* religion. Buddhist temple festivals are tolerated and even encouraged as cultural tourism; Catholic and Protestant practice, which cannot be so easily domesticated as "culture," a little shy in receiving but it has also gradually expanded, especially among ethnic minorities. The boundary between acceptable "tradition" and problematic "religion" is a political construction, not a philosophical one — drawn and redrawn according to the needs of the moment rather than according to any principled criterion.

What this strategic ambiguity reveals, philosophically, is the inability of dialectical materialism to provide a satisfactory account of practices and commitments that are central to Vietnamese life. Ancestor veneration, moral cosmology, the intuition that virtue is grounded in an order beyond human construction — these are not marginal survivals from a feudal past. They are constitutive features of the moral culture within which Vietnamese Marxism itself operates. Nguyen Khac Vien (1974: 52) believed that "long years of colonial domination and much experience in revolutionary struggle" would suffice to eliminate what he called "cosmic subjectivism." The evidence suggests

otherwise: the cosmic subjectivism persists, not as a problem to be overcome but as the cultural atmosphere within which Vietnamese political and moral thought continues to breathe.

The four tensions we have examined — ontological incompatibility, conflicting historical methodologies, the hierarchy-equality contradiction, and the problem of transcendence — are not minor qualifications to an otherwise successful synthesis. They are structural features of the Vietnamese intellectual landscape, as constitutive of the Confucian-Marxist relationship as the convergences discussed in Section 3. Together, the convergences and tensions define a peculiar "layered coexistence," i.e. a relationship characterised not by harmony or by conflict but by the simultaneous operation of genuine affinities and unresolved contradictions, held together by Vietnamese cultural pragmatism and the CPV's institutional power. Whether this arrangement is stable, or whether the tensions will eventually force a reckoning, is a question that requires us to examine the contemporary situation in more detail.

6. The Contemporary Situation: Doi Moi and Beyond

The philosophical tensions examined above are not merely abstract; they play out in the lived reality of post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam. The market-oriented reforms launched in 1986 reintroduced class differentiation, private property, and foreign investment — creating an economic base that looks increasingly capitalist while the political superstructure remains formally Marxist-Leninist. In this context, the CPV has leaned ever more heavily on "traditional cultural values" as a source of social cohesion, even as the material conditions that sustained those values are being transformed by globalisation and consumer culture.

The post-*Doi Moi* period has witnessed a significant Confucian revival: temple restoration, renewed interest in classical learning, the rehabilitation of Confucian-inflected thinkers such as Kim Dinh and Vu Khieu. This revival is partly state-sponsored — Confucian values of social harmony, filial piety, and respect for authority serve as a useful bulwark against what the CPV terms "spiritual pollution" from the West — and partly grassroots, driven by a population seeking moral resources that neither Marxism-Leninism nor market capitalism adequately provides. The theoretical framework most useful for understanding this pattern is what Vuong et al. (2018) have termed "cultural additivity" — the characteristically Vietnamese willingness to incorporate values from other belief systems even when they logically contradict existing principles. Confucianism was layered upon by Marxism; Marxism is now being layered upon by market liberalism. The earlier layers do not disappear; they persist underneath, shaping the structures built on top of them. The result is a distinctively Vietnamese cultural logic in which contradictions are tolerated rather than resolved.

The CPV's 14th National Congress (2026) illustrates this layering with particular clarity. The Congress Resolution reaffirmed "Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought" as the party's dual ideological foundation while simultaneously invoking "cultural values," a "civilised nation," and "the power of Vietnamese people" — language that carries unmistakably Confucian resonances within an explicitly Marxist-Leninist framework (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026: 81; Lokshin, 2021). The formula "socialist-oriented market economy" is itself a monument to cultural additivity: a market economy that is somehow also socialist, oriented by traditional values that are officially classified as pre-socialist. As Lokshin (2021: 36) observes, the Congress showed neither ideological confusion nor disruption — but neither did it resolve the philosophical tensions that this article has identified.

What is most revealing for our purposes is the response of ordinary Vietnamese to this gap between rhetoric and reality. When asked about political authority, Fforde's interviewees instinctively turned to *morality* — to the conviction that if leaders were morally upright, governance would improve (Fforde – Homutova, 2017). This is not a

Marxist reflex; it is a Confucian one. The persistence of moral-political intuitions shaped by Confucianism, even among citizens educated entirely within a Marxist-Leninist system, is perhaps the strongest evidence that Nguyen Khac Vien's "replacement" thesis was wrong. Confucianism was not replaced; it continues to function as the deep grammar of Vietnamese political expectations.

The question that hovers over this contemporary situation is whether layered coexistence is sustainable under conditions that are eroding both of its constituent layers. Globalisation, digital culture, and rising individualism among younger Vietnamese are challenging the communitarian assumptions shared by both Confucianism and Marxism. If the synthesis depended on a shared rejection of atomistic individualism, what happens when individualism becomes not a foreign threat but a domestic aspiration? The answer is not yet clear — but the question itself reveals the fragility of an arrangement that has, until now, appeared remarkably durable.

7. Conclusions

The relationship between Confucianism and dialectical materialism in Vietnam is not a case of synthesis, replacement, or mere coexistence — it is something more complex and, we would argue, more philosophically interesting than any of these terms suggests. What we have called *layered coexistence* describes a pattern in which genuine convergences — on anti-individualism, this-worldly humanism, moral-political unity, transformative education, and the primacy of praxis — operate alongside unresolved contradictions in ontology, historical methodology, social hierarchy, and the status of transcendence. The convergences are real and have had profound practical consequences: they enabled the Vietnamese reception of Marxism as something other than a purely foreign imposition. The tensions are equally real and have equally profound consequences: they produce the strategic silences, compartmentalisations, and pragmatic equivocations that characterise Vietnamese intellectual and political life.

The evaluative implication deserves to be stated plainly. Layered coexistence is not an intellectual failure. It is a *productive cultural strategy* — one that has allowed Vietnam to draw on the moral seriousness of Confucian virtue-ethics and the social-justice commitments of Marxist analysis simultaneously, without forcing a premature resolution of their deepest incompatibilities. What Linh (2023) describes as hauntology — the spectral persistence of Confucianism within a system that has officially declared it obsolete — is, from this perspective, not a problem to be solved but a condition to be understood. The deferral of philosophical resolution has been, until now, more productive than destructive. Whether that deferral is indefinitely sustainable is another matter entirely.

The broader comparative-philosophical implication is, we believe, the article's most significant contribution. The Vietnamese case challenges a tacit assumption common in Western philosophy: that ideological consistency is a prerequisite for intellectual seriousness. The demand for philosophical purity — either be a Marxist or be a Confucian; you cannot coherently be both — may itself be culturally specific, rooted in post-Enlightenment Western commitments to systematic coherence that other intellectual traditions do not share. Vietnamese intellectual culture, shaped by centuries of cultural additivity (Vuong et al., 2018), privileges *practical coherence* over *theoretical consistency*. A governance framework that works — that holds society together, motivates cadres, sustains social order, and commands a degree of moral respect — is valued even if its philosophical foundations contain unacknowledged contradictions. This is not intellectual weakness. It is a different kind of philosophical strength — one that Western thought, with its own unresolved tensions between liberal individualism and communitarian solidarity, might do well to take seriously rather than dismiss.

Future research might productively move from the philosophical analysis undertaken here to empirical investigation of how ordinary Vietnamese inhabit layered traditions

in daily life — in family decisions, religious practice, educational aspirations, and political expectations. Comparative work examining how Confucianism interacts with Marxism in China, with capitalism in South Korea and Singapore, and with democratic pluralism in Taiwan would further show what is distinctively Vietnamese about the pattern described here, and what reflects broader dynamics of philosophical-cultural interaction in East Asia.

Declaration on AI Use

AI-assisted tools—including Grammarly and Claude Opus 4.6—were used during manuscript preparation for initial brainstorming, annotated outline suggestions, language editing, and refinement of phrasing and flow. These tools functioned as supportive aids only; they did not generate core arguments, derive empirical findings, conduct analysis, or make interpretive judgments. The authors retain full responsibility for the content and substantive claims of the research; all interpretations of data, texts, or theoretical frameworks; the integrity and accuracy of citations, arguments, and conclusions; ensuring that the work meets ethical standards for scholarly publication. AI tools assisted with mechanical and organizational tasks, but the intellectual direction, critical reasoning, and final scholarly contributions are entirely the authors' own.

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