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Le Cong Co

A Vietnamese Legacy of Ethical Leadership

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Abstract

This article examines the legacy of ethical leadership lived by Le Cong Co. His life and career in Vietnam has involved years as an educator, a Viet Cong fighter seeking to eject American military forces from Vietnam, and a Vietnamese government official after the Americans withdrew from Vietnam and educational administration. He presently is the founder, President and Provost of Duy Tan University—the largest private university in central Vietnam.

The ethical dimensions of his leadership are interpreted using four categories of ethical leadership: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership and virtuous ethical leadership. As such, an international understanding of ethical leadership is enhanced via focus on a Vietnamese leader using Vietnamese perspectives on ethical leadership as the basis of interpretation.

Ethical leadership practices often evolve from lives of struggle whereby the individual learns to sharpen innate skills that resonate with those around him/her. Such is the case of Le Cong Co. His is a story that grows out of deep desperation and a will to survive and ultimately prosper.

He grew up in country that was occupied by foreign forces, which had a history of such occupation, and he worked diligently to serve the needs of his family, community and country. He was a teacher, then drawn into military service to repel foreign invaders, served his country militarily with uncommon valor, returned to education after the foreign forces departed and went on to found a university.

That his story would be told favorably in an American publication is ironic because the country he fought so valiantly against was the United States. It is assumed that, with the passage of time, the international community can recognize ethical leadership from all sides of an international controversy. Human beings are not able to dictate the circumstances they are born into. They do have input regarding how they address those cir-

cumstances. The life of Le Cong Co exemplifies an impressive array of life choices that reflect significant ethical leadership.

The concept of ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Trevino & Harrison, 2005, p. 118). The following four categories of ethical leadership will be used to interpret the ethical leadership qualities of Le Cong Co: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership and virtuous ethical leadership.

Use of the aforementioned four categories is stressed within a Vietnamese contextual understanding presented by Mai Ngoc Khuong and Vo Minh Duc in “The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Employees Virtuous Behavior: A Study of Marketing Agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam” (2015, pp. 832–839). Hence, depiction of Vietnamese leadership ethics is enhanced via interpretation using a Vietnamese theoretical frame of reference.

Le Cong Co was born November 28, 1941 in Ai My, Dien Tho, Dien Ban, Quang Nam Province, Vietnam and received his elementary and secondary education in the Viet-Minh region during the second period of Vietnamese resistance against the French colonialists. In 1959, before the age of ten, he joined the war effort after the death of his mother, sister and brother from starvation that occurred in relation to the French occupation of Vietnam. The Viet-Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, was the Vietnamese resistance movement against the French colonialists. Co served as a scout for the Viet-Minh resistance in Quang Nam Da Nang between 1950–54. This function helped him to gain skills with human relations insofar as learning to interpret fundamental human behaviors.

At the age of fourteen Le Cong Co advanced to the role of messenger for the National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong, in Saigon and served in this capacity until he was eighteen (1959). During this time, he sharpened his insights with motivation and gained an appreciation for the role of ethics in human relations. They actively resisted the dictatorship of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was later killed by pro-American forces. He was also the leader of the anti-war movement, at Chu Van An High School, in Saigon. His graduation from high school in 1958 was distinctive in that he placed second, among 500 high school graduates, in the French style educational system utilized by his high school. He then went on to serve as a high school teacher in Can Tho.

His academic talents were recognized via his completion of a Bachelor of Science degree at the Sorbonne Program (Saigon) in 1963, where he ranked top of his class in the mathematics major. He was offered a scholarship for PhD study in Nuclear Physics at McGill University, Canada but did not pursue this opportunity due to the on-going war effort in Vietnam. However, he did serve as a Lecturer at Hue University for two years (1962–64)—which was one of only two universities in South Vietnam at that time.

His life in academia blended with continued service to his country as they sought to oust foreign forces from Vietnam. Ethical distinctions that contrasted just and unjust governmental actions had very real consequences for his worldview. Between 1960–65, at the ages of nineteen to twenty-four, Le Cong Co was President of the College Student Association in Central Vietnam, Hue. In that capacity he worked as an undercover agent to attract students to support the cause of North Vietnam to unite the country, served as the head of the anti-war student movement at Hue University and collected intelligence information for North Vietnam by working as the tutor for children of a number of top officials of South Vietnam. During this time period he was protected by the Hue Police Chief, who had a brother working as a major colonel of the North Vietnamese Army in Hanoi.

Le Cong Co's skill with organizing capabilities were recognized and he continued his climb into leadership positions. His appreciation for the role of ethics in motivating those he led evolved and his reputation as an ethical leader grew. He served as President of the Da Nang Communist Youth Movement during 1964–65 whereby he built underground insurgent forces serving in Da Nang. "In the early 1960s, it was primarily members of the second generation of political activists emerging from this family (the family of Nguyen Thuc Tuan) who would form the core of Le Cong Co's Youth Association and fill most of leadership positions in Hue" (Lillie, 2014, p. 34)

One of the high points of his leadership during this time was the peaceful takeover of Da Nang City Hall that involved students and workers. It lasted nine days before being suppressed by the South Vietnamese police. His years as an activist were full of such protest actions. He learned to negotiate ethical dilemmas that he encountered and was able to employ lessons learned from such encounters.

Nguyen Thuc Lu brought Le Cong Co to Thanh Luong village in 1961 to work with a group of family, friends and neighbors "who would then go on to become the core leadership of the Youth Association in Hue. During this fateful meeting, Le Cong Co and Nguyen Thuc Lu established

the command structure for the organization. Leadership responsibilities for the organization were assigned as follows: Duong Dinh Na was made President of the Youth Association in Hue; Pham Van Duc was assigned the position of Vice President in charge of military affairs; Nguyen Thuc Tan was assigned the position of committee” (Le, 2012, p. 70). This emphasis on rich interpersonal relationships was based on common trust and ethical understanding of one another.

It is worth noting that the motivation for his efforts was to free Vietnam from foreign domination, that was seen to be an unethical international action. Le Cong Co is quoted in that regard by Aaron Lillie.

“Although originally founded by order of the central leadership of the NLF in Saigon, most students who joined cared little about communism and were principally motivated by a patriotic desire to resist what they viewed as an invasion by a foreign power.” (Lillie, 2014 p. 7). Aaron Lille elaborates in reporting “the National Liberation Front was itself deeply divided on the issue of what sort of government should be instituted after the war. As former student activist leader Le Cong Co has pointed out, the student movement in southern Vietnam was ‘a patriotic movement, not a communist movement. There were some people in the movement who were communists, but most people were patriots....’” (Lille, 2014, p. 10).

He continued his advancement by becoming a Committee Member of the National Liberation Front of Central Vietnam in 1965. This placed him at the forefront of Viet Cong forces fighting to eject American forces from Vietnam. By 1966, he was President of the Thua Thien Hue Province Communist Youth Movement whereby he built strong ties with the Buddhist resistance movement in Hue, collected intelligence information for North Vietnam, coordinated many strikes and walk-outs at Hue schools and factories, and built underground insurgent forces in Hue. It was during this period he came to better understand ethical orientations as being, not only just, but more effective with the accomplishment of his organizational goals and objectives.

Nguyen Thuc Lu brought a range of individuals together to form a solid cadre of regional student activists who were led by Le Cong Co. “After Lu and Co were introduced by Lu’s father Tuan they had quickly become close friends while attending Hue University. Together the two of them set

about building the foundations of an organization that would eventually grow to several hundred students spread out over a five-province area of central Vietnam” (Le, 2012, p. 70).

Le Cong Co’s leadership and ethical insights with Vietnamese politics enhanced his ability to assess developments related to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Aaron Lille writes “According to the former President of the Youth Association in central Vietnam, Le Cong Co, ‘one of the biggest mistakes the Americans made was assassinating Ngo Dinh Diem. After the fall of the Diem regime there was no government that could rival it, and because of that, the Americans had to pour troops into southern Vietnam to save the government’” (Lille, 2014, p. 44).

Co’s understanding for how interpersonal and international ethical dimensions had parallels became sharper during this period and he grew in his ability to apply this understanding.

In 1967 Le Cong Co was named political chief for Battalion 810, North Vietnamese Army. During that time his cover was blown in Da Nang while disembarking an airplane at the Da Nang airport. A gunfight ensued at the airport and he was almost caught by South Vietnamese Secret Services at the airport. This resulted in him going into the jungles, and he was promoted to lead Battalion 810 of the North Vietnamese Army in Thua Thien Hue. Co credits his ability to detect his blown cover and avoid capture to sensitivities with the human condition that he developed via a growing appreciation for ethical dynamics associated with deceptions practiced by his opposition.

By that time the Viet Cong were preparing for the Tet Offensive in 1968. During the Tet Offensive, Le Cong Co led Battalion 810, which was assigned to capture the ancient palace in Hue. His unit hung a large Vietnamese National Liberation Front flag on top of the ancient palace in Hue. The flag’s posting lasted for twenty-five days of fierce fighting against American, South Korean, and South Vietnamese forces. This led to ferrying wounded North Vietnamese soldiers across the Perfume River when they were driven out of Hue by American forces. The Tet Offensive battles in Hue are depicted in the American film “Full Metal Jacket.”

The Kokava Campaign, Asao–Aluoi Thua Thien Hue followed within which they battled against twenty American battalions across eighteen hills in Asao and Aluoi. This event is depicted in the American film “Hamburger Hill.” He was promoted to the rank of Major Colonel, at the age

of twenty-eight, as result of the Kokava Campaign. Later the same year, he led Viet Cong forces in the Da Bac Battle (Silver Stone Battle) at Thua Thien Hue. They attacked the stronghold of American forces in Da Bac, sustained significant casualties due to false intelligence from the scout battalion about the layout of American defenses in Da Bac and captured some American troops resulting in acquisition of an American map that guided the Viet Cong through the artillery fire of American forces.

The fighting against the Viet Cong and Americans was exceedingly intense, brutal and raw. According to Le Cong Co:

Surviving the combined American and RVN onslaught in the jungle and countryside around Hue over next four years was as much a matter of luck as anything else....People didn't understand how I was still alive because the fighting was so fierce....Other people went on missions. They all died. The entire group that was with me all died, only I survived....There were some days when I was in Phu Van that tanks demolished all of the houses and underground hideouts. Some days 50–70 guerillas died in one day. (Lille, 2014, pp. 69–70)

Co survived encounters that demanded immediate assessment of other people and their motivations, friend and foe alike, and such assessments drew from and added to his raw understanding of human influence and ethical correlations. Misreading such encounters could equate with instant death.

During the 1970–71 period Le Cong Co was assigned as Political Chief of Regiment Six in Thua Thien Hue. This involved promotion to lead Regiment Six, Division 324B Ngu Binh and many subsequent battles along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He was promoted to Administrative Chief of the National Liberation Front in Thua Thien Hue in 1972 and guided planning for many North Vietnamese Army campaigns in Thua Thien Hue. He was sent back into Hue in 1972 to lead underground insurgent forces after the collapse of many insurgent cells due to the capture of their leader by South Vietnamese Secret Services. This assignment lasted until 1975 and involved his re-organizing the anti-war student movement in Hue.

During the Paris Peace Treaty Negotiations preparations (1973–74) he was nominated as one of the Vietnamese leaders of the National Liberation Front to participate in the negotiation of the Paris Peace Treaty that involved four entities: the United States, the North Vietnamese government, the South Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front of

Vietnam. He was sent back to Hue in the middle of the negotiation to prepare for the capture of Hue.

The 1975 liberation of Hue was eventful. Le Cong Co directed the plan involving creation of fear and confusion among the South Vietnamese Army in Hue by having local insurgents dress as civilians and run around the city in chaos, faking evacuation. He received intelligence in early March 1975 from a French Catholic priest that the South Vietnamese Army would retreat from Hue to set up defenses in Da Nang. He reported this to the Hanoi Chief of Staff and helped direct most of the attack by the North Vietnamese Army against the defenses in Da Nang. Le Cong Co led local insurgents to liberate Hue city March 25, 1975 and welcomed the North Vietnamese Army regulars into Hue on the following day.

His work with the liberation of Hue involved welcoming top leaders of North Vietnam to Hue including Communist Party Secretary Le Duan, General and Chief of Staff Vo Nguyen Giap, and Vice Premier To Huu. He personally briefed Communist Party Secretary Le Duan about battlefield conditions and was chosen to become one of the top leaders of the interim government in central Vietnam if the North would have failed to capture Saigon in the move to reunify the country.

The departure of the Americans, and the cessation of related military activities, resulted in Le Cong Co's return to educational interests in Vietnam. He was appointed to head the Hue University system via his promotion to General Secretary of Hue University, the second largest university system in South Vietnam. In that capacity he handled public relations with intellectuals and the common people in Hue.

Between 1976–78 Le Cong Co was a Senior Scholar at the Nguyen Ai Quoc School of Political Science in Hanoi. This position was intended to prepare him for assignment as one of the top leaders in Vietnam. During that time he was offered assignment to South America, to help with the communist movement there, but he declined that opportunity because he did not agree with the plan. He spent some time assessing the scope of his achievements up to that point and gave consideration for how his future service to Vietnam could benefit the country. An enhanced understanding of ethical dynamics was part of that assessment.

The following three years (1978–81) was a turbulent time for Le Cong Co. He was suspended from all political activities in Hanoi and Da Nang and charged with being a proponent of capitalist ideologies and suspicion of being a CIA agent because of his many escapes from near-death situa-

tions while working undercover in Da Nang and Saigon during the war. He was sent back to Da Nang for investigation within the formal court system. During that time, a book entitled *Tuition Paid By Blood*, focusing on Le Cong Co as the main character, was published. It was authored by renowned writer Nguyen Khac Phuc and poet Thu Bon. Co believes much of his defense was grounded in application of ethical leadership principles, both on his part and the part of those investigating him.

He was cleared of all charges in 1981 after 30,000 pages of documents were located in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon that detailed various U.S. activities in Vietnam. He was then assigned to handle relations with overseas Vietnamese. This position involved travel to Eastern Europe to study about various successful models of communism. After a trip to Eastern Europe, Russia and East Germany he wrote an article titled “Communism Will Collapse in Eastern Europe” based on his observations. He was disciplined for publishing such an opinion and was almost put on trial for stressing that view.

Controversy surrounding publication of *Tuition Paid in Blood* erupted in 1983 in relation to information presented in the book. The Vietnamese Politburo suspended publication of the book and an inquiry ensued. There was public criticism of the book and copies of it were burnt in protest in Hue. He was subject to direct discipline by Vice-Premier To Huu. Similarly, a book about Le Cong Co titled *City in Windfall* was published in 1985 but was banned in Hue.

He served as a Senator in Hanoi between 1986–1992. He ran for office independently, without nomination support by the Vietnamese Communist Party, and became the first independent candidate in the modern history of Vietnam to win a seat in the Senate. He believes his reputation for having a sterling ethical foundation was key in his being elected/re-elected and serving with distinction.

He exercised influence during the “Doi Moi” period in Vietnam that stressed renovation of the Vietnamese economy as it transitioned from a central-planning economic model to a market-oriented economic model. This involved writing the new Investment Law in Vietnam. He also input clauses for the new Education Law which included establishment of private universities and colleges. Part of his team changed the Constitution of Vietnam whereby China was removed from the list of arch enemies, freedom rights for citizens were established and the Senate was set up as an independent organization that functions separately from the central government.

By that point, Le Cong Co's career had evolved from educator, to activist, to soldier, to politician. He then returned to his first occupational domain, education, and pursued innovations having to do with educational institutions in Vietnam. His first significant educational venture in this period emphasized creation of Central Vietnam University in 1986. This venture failed when it's proposed establishment was rejected by Prime Minister Do Muoi.

He was elected to committee membership in The National Scholar Association of Vietnam in 1987. That membership continued for over thirty years and involved many terms. In 1988, he created the Center of Practical English in Da Nang. It was the first private training center in Vietnam and attracted thousands of students to study English. Later the same year, he opened the Center of Electronics & Informatics Technologies in Da Nang. It was the first private center to study about these fields in Vietnam.

Le Cong Co served as the Head of Tourism & Hospitality of Quang Nam in Da Nang between 1988–92. During this period he built the Furma Resort as the first inland five-star hotel in Vietnam. It was modeled after the floating five-star hotel in Saigon. He also contributed to development of the Cross-Indochina road running from Vietnam to Laos to Thailand.

Le Cong Co took a distinct step with his vision of educational innovation by establishing Duy Tan University in 1992. It is located in Da Nang. He has served as president and provost. The path for founding the institution evolved through his re-application for the establishment of the Central Vietnam University, that had been rejected earlier. However, this re-application was accepted contingent on the name being changed to Duy Tan University and a cap on the number of students being set at five hundred.

Since 1992, Duy Tan University has grown and become well-recognized in Vietnam. It is presently ranked the number one private university in Vietnam and ranked number nine among all universities in country. Enrollment has grown to over 22,000. Innovation has been a key factor for the university. It received permission to offer graduate programs in 2008, it is one of the ten Vietnamese universities granted permission to offer online programs and it has academic partnerships with well-known universities in the U.S. (including Carnegie Mellon University, Penn State, California State University/Fullerton and the University of North Carolina). He has served as the Vice-President, Association of Private Universities of Vietnam since 2004.

Le Cong Co's involvement with higher education in Vietnam is based on an exceptional public service career that has transcended teaching, military service, government service and educational administration. He believes

his reputation for practicing ethical principles has been key to his foundation, personally and professionally. Recognition for his service above self is exemplified in the many honors that have been bestowed upon him. He received the National War Hero Medal in 1971 for his work with the National Liberation Front of Vietnam (however the award was later revoked in relation to political issues) and the Medal of National Independence in 1995 (for war time achievements). He is also listed in the Official Book of Historic Persons in Vietnam, which officially recognizes him as one of the historic persons in modern day Vietnam. In 2016 he was granted National Labor Hero status in relation to his efforts after the American war as politician and educator.

The contributions of Le Cong Co and his comrades have received overdue recognition in recent years as the relevance of their achievements is recognized.

Le Cong Co and a community of Vietnamese scholars centered around Duy Tan University, working in collaboration with historian Ngo Vinh Long, have been steadily building up a body of Vietnamese language scholarship on the history of National Liberation Front-led student organizations. This has resulted in the publication of a number of Vietnamese language historical texts and other materials related to the student movement, including books, academic articles and film and television documentaries. As yet, none of this material has been translated into English, and very little has been scrutinized by scholars outside of Vietnam. (Lillie, 2014, p. 76)

Co and his comrades consistently stress the role of ethical variables in understanding how they persevered and thrived in times of hardship and sacrifice.

The following four categories of ethical leadership can be used to interpret the ethical leadership qualities of Le Cong Co: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership and virtuous ethical leadership. Illustrations for each category will be offered from perspectives he has conveyed. Use of the aforementioned four categories is stressed within a Vietnamese contextual understanding presented by Mai Ngoc Khuong and Vo Minh Duc in “The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Employees Virtuous Behavior: A Study of Marketing Agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam” (2015, pp. 832–39). Hence, depiction of Vietnamese leadership ethics is enhanced via interpretation using a Vietnamese theoretical frame of reference.

Charismatic Ethical Leadership

According to Brown & Trevino (2005, p. 956) charismatic ethical leadership is defined as when “inspirational leaders who convey ethical values,

are other-centered rather than self-centered, and who role model ethical conduct.” Le Cong Co refers to this type of phenomena when he speaks of love for oneself, fellow citizens and country. He recognizes love as the root of ambition, passion and patriotism. He stresses that love, career and country are the three elements connecting our lives together. Co believes this will culminate with mutual benefit for ourselves and others.

Contingent Reward Ethical Leadership

The concept of contingent reward ethical leadership is defined as “an exchange of rewards between leaders and followers in which effort is rewarded by providing rewards for good performance or threats and disciplines for poor performance” (Muenjohn, 2008, p. 6). The Vietnamese cultural context is evident with emphasis on this domain in that Le Cong Co bluntly states Vietnamese will not be successful in their careers if their nation is invaded. This is with reference to Vietnam being invaded by the U.S., the French before that, the Japanese before that and the Chinese before that.

He summarizes lessons from the Vietnam-American war years using the key objectives that motivated him: 1) reunification of the country; 2) freedom from foreign domination; 3) alleviating oppression, poverty and disadvantage. Hence, these were rewards he was seeking to achieve at that time and are foundation for what he presently stresses.

Regulatory Focus Ethical Leadership

Regulatory Focus Ethical Leadership “has two components, which are ethical promotion focus and ethical prevention focus.” (Shao, 2010, p. 79). That is, in some instances we can promote ethical objectives while, in other instances, we can better realize ethical objectives via prevention of some behaviors. He cautions that the ethics of the younger generation are being negatively influenced and, in some ways, we don’t understand that we are slowly losing their potential. This is followed up with the belief that caring and sharing with others will make our lives more tranquil.

Virtuous Ethical Leadership

The concept of virtuous ethical leadership is defined as leading with “behaviors beneficial to others that reflect moral ideals and involve personal costs or risks. Virtuous ethical behaviors are praiseworthy if performed and not blameworthy if not performed” (Trevino, Brown & Hartman, 2003,

p. 10). Such positions are manifested in the Duy Tan University principles and doctrine.

The Duy Tan University principles are to teach and learn by following humanistic principles. Graduates should be sympathetic and willing to help the underprivileged. Duy Tan University doctrine stresses building a teaching and research university based on the foundation of humanitarianism and innovation and to educate global citizens with moral qualities and community awareness.

One might think there would be ill feelings on the part of the Vietnamese against the U.S. but that is not the case. Le Cong Co, during a 2013 interview, offered his thoughts on how the Vietnamese-American War occurred against the desires of the Vietnamese and Americans.

American participation in the War was a mistake. Indeed America was a not a country that wanted to conquer Vietnam. To Americans, the main issue in Asia was the Chinese. That is the balance of powers, not just in Southeast Asia and Asia, but globally. The Vietnamese- American War occurred against the desires of the Vietnamese and American people.” (Lillie, 2014, p. 78)

Co credits his extensive appreciation for relevant ethical perspectives, both Vietnamese and American, helped him to arrive at such a conclusion.

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