
Public Service Ethics in Ho Chi Minh's Thought: The Philosophical Foundation for a Modern Integrity-Oriented State

Phan Thi Hien

Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam

Orcid: 0009-0005-2546-8528

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary effort to establish a modern, transparent, and accountable state apparatus, public service ethics must be understood not merely as technical management, but fundamentally as a matter of institutional morality. This article examines Ho Chi Minh's philosophy of public ethics as an indispensable foundation for building an honest and efficient public administration in Vietnam. Drawing from his seminal works - *Rectify Working Style*, *Revolutionary Ethics*, and numerous letters and speeches to cadres - Ho Chi Minh articulates a coherent framework of values including diligence, thrift, integrity, uprightness, impartiality, and absolute loyalty to the people. These values do not only carry historical significance but remain vitally relevant today, especially in combating corruption, reforming administrative systems, and improving leadership accountability. Through a combination of philosophical interpretation and policy analysis, the article argues that Ho Chi Minh's ethical vision can be institutionalized into a systemic model for governance, serving as both a normative guide and a practical tool in the construction of a rule-of-law socialist state.

KEYWORDS

Ho Chi Minh. Public ethics. Integrity. Administrative reform. Political responsibility. Leadership ethics. Rule-of-law state.

1. Introduction

In the process of building a rule-of-law state in Vietnam today, the demand for an honest, service-oriented, and efficient public administration is not merely a matter of technical management, but fundamentally a matter of public ethics. When public trust in the government is tested by phenomena such as abuse of power, corruption, administrative stagnation, and the moral decline of officials, the core question is not just "what mechanisms," but rather "which individuals" – namely, the competence and integrity of those who wield power. In that context, Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service ethics continues to demonstrate its timeless value, both as an ideological foundation and as a normative framework that can be translated into modern governance models.

In Ho Chi Minh's thought, public service ethics is a fusion of revolutionary morality and political responsibility. It is expressed not only through loyalty to the Party but, more importantly, through the attitude of serving the people, a spirit of integrity, impartiality, and resistance to privilege and self-interest. He emphasized: "Cadres are the servants of the people, not revolutionary mandarins. Being a cadre means to serve, not to enjoy privileges" (Complete works, vol. 5, 2000: 381). This viewpoint precedes many modern theories of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and governance ethics in contemporary public management (Pollitt, 2003: 119).

Today, as Vietnam accelerates administrative reform, power oversight, institutional efficiency, and anti-corruption efforts, Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service ethics is not only a "spiritual legacy" but also a practical orientation for building institutions of integrity. However, the research, application, and institutionalization of this thought still face numerous limitations: a lack of theoretical systematization, an absence of quantifiable governance standards, and a tendency to fall into moralistic preaching rather than being developed into actionable policy frameworks.

This study sets out to address the following core issues:

First, to clarify the conceptual content of Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service ethics from theory to political practice;

Second, to identify the key principles such as diligence, thrift, integrity, righteousness, impartiality; placing the people at the center; aligning words with actions; and opposing bureaucracy, corruption, and privilege;

Third, to analyze the applicability of this value system in building a team of public officials, managing public administration, and overseeing the exercise of power;

Fourth, to propose directions for institutionalizing and formulating policies to implement Ho Chi Minh's ethics in the process of building a modern, integrity-based state.

To achieve these objectives, this article focuses on the following key research questions:

First, what are the constituent elements of Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service ethics, and how are they manifested in real-life practice?

Second, how does Ho Chi Minh's model of public service ethics differ from Western theories such as servant leadership or the ethics of governance?

Third, how can principles like "integrity," "impartiality," and "accountability to the people" be institutionalized within a modern public governance framework?

Fourth, how can the idea of public ethics be transformed from slogans into behavior, from belief into policy, from moral norms into legal standards?

Fifth, what challenges are undermining the implementation of Ho Chi Minh's public ethics in current administrative practice, and what solutions can address them?

By addressing these issues, the article not only reaffirms the role of Ho Chi Minh's thought in Vietnam's political-administrative system but also provides a systematic and suggestive conceptual framework for developing public service ethics as an institutional foundation for an integrity-based state capable of adapting to the demands of development, integration, and modernization.

2. Literature Review

Public service ethics is a prominent field in public administration science and contemporary political theory, particularly in the context where administrative systems must confront challenges such as the corruption of power, crises of public trust, and growing demands for transparency and accountability. According to Pollitt (2003), public service ethics is understood as "a set of values and standards guiding the behavior of civil servants in exercising state power in service of the citizens" (p. 119).

International scholars studying public service ethics have mainly approached the field through three major theoretical frameworks: (1) the administrative-institutional approach, (2) the philosophy of service approach, and (3) the critical perspective. Each direction provides fundamental conceptual frameworks but also reveals theoretical limitations.

According to Rohr (1989), public service ethics refers to "a set of moral principles derived from the Constitution and citizenship that underpins administrative decisions" (p. 59). From an institutional perspective, the OECD (1998) proposed an ethical framework based on three pillars: transparency, accountability, and integrity - designed to regulate civil servants' behavior in environments prone to power abuse. Scholars such as Kernaghan (2003) and Huberts (2014) have also built models of public service ethics as value systems linked to governance capacity, emphasizing openness, integrity, and anti-corruption within administrative apparatuses.

However, many scholars have warned of a technocratic deviation in modern public service ethics. Denhardt & Denhardt (2000) introduced the "New Public Service" model to replace the "governance-as-business" orientation with the notion that "civil servants serve citizens." This perspective draws from Robert Greenleaf's philosophy of "servant leadership" (1977), which asserts that leaders must prioritize the needs of others over personal power. This marks a transition from institutional models toward ethical ones, emphasizing compassion, humility, and empathetic capacity.

At a critical level, postmodern scholars such as Frederickson (1997) have situated ethics within the context of legitimacy crises, fragmented public roles, and alienation between law and morality. Frederickson stressed that ethics must embody "social equity as administrative ethics," not merely compliance, but actual justice in citizen-official relations.

Thus, the global framework of public service ethics has shifted from institutional models to philosophies of service, and from obedience to citizen dialogue. However, most of these models are

based on Western foundations and do not reflect the socio-cultural characteristics of Eastern societies - where ethics is often framed in terms of duty, communal ideals, and traditional morality-elements deeply embedded in Ho Chi Minh's thought.

In Vietnam, public service ethics in Ho Chi Minh's thought has become a core subject in political education and administrative science research. Works by Hoàng Chí Bảo (2020), Trần Văn Giàu (2005), and Nguyen Trong Phuc (2013) show that Ho Chi Minh did not approach ethics as moralistic dogma but rather as a revolutionary value system-where ethics and politics are unified. Ho Chi Minh once affirmed: "Diligence, thrift, integrity, and righteousness are the foundations of a revolutionary. Without ethics, no matter how talented, one may still harm the country and the people" (Complete works, vol. 5, 2000: 289).

Nguyen Duc Ha (2018) argued that a key feature of Ho Chi Minh's public service ethics lies in the integration of "political responsibility" and "moral self-awareness," meaning that cadres fulfill their duties not only due to regulations, but out of honor and loyalty to the people. Nguyen thi Kim Dung (2019), from the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, emphasized: "Public service ethics is not merely a personal virtue but a capacity for institutionalized behavior within the administrative system" (p. 203).

More recently, researchers such as Trần Văn Hùng (2021) and Nguyen Anh Tuan (2023) have approached Ho Chi Minh's thought from the perspective of administrative reform and public responsibility. They observed that principles like "impartiality," "being close to the people," and "respecting the people" not only carry ethical significance but also serve as organizing principles for a transparent, integrity-based, and self-regulating administrative system.

Nevertheless, most studies remain descriptive and lack the depth required to systematize the thought into a theoretical model that can be compared with modern doctrines. Few studies place Ho Chi Minh's thought in dialogue with international academic discourse or quantify public service ethics into measurable indices.

The crucial contribution of this article is to examine whether Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service ethics can be considered a middle path: neither purely technocratic nor merely individualistic, but a model grounded in Vietnam's cultural - political realities. The integration of "integrity - service" in his thought is not merely a slogan, but an organizational design with the capacity for self-regulation, self-discipline, and community orientation. This helps to fill the gap in modern theories-where ethics is sometimes over-technologized or excessively romanticized. From this approach, the article identifies the following scholarly gaps:

Lack of interdisciplinary and institutional modeling approaches: Most research separates ethics from administrative institutions. The application of Ho Chi Minh's thought within institutional reform frameworks (e-government, power oversight, civil service evaluation) remains sparse.

Absence of international academic dialogue: Few studies compare Ho Chi Minh with global scholars such as Denhardt, Greenleaf, or Huberts. This limits the potential to develop a universal public service ethics framework.

Lack of quantification and indexation of public service ethics: Values like "integrity," "impartiality," and "diligence" need to be translated into behavioral criteria, assessment indices, and internal monitoring tools within public administration.

Acknowledging the strengths and limitations of previous research, this article seeks to build upon and transcend them in three directions:

First, restructure Ho Chi Minh's ideological system on public service ethics into a logical theoretical framework, consisting of four pillars: integrity, service, responsibility, and power oversight.

Second, conduct academic comparisons with contemporary models (OECD, servant leadership, governance ethics...) to highlight both the unique and universal elements in Ho Chi Minh's thought.

Third, propose a Vietnamese-style institutionalization model of public service ethics with behavioral indicators, evaluation tools, and transparent organizational design, based on the spirit of "closeness to the people - for the people - with integrity."

3. Research Methodology

This article utilizes a multi-methodological approach grounded in the principles of political science, public administration theory, and Ho Chi Minh studies. The methodology is designed to ensure theoretical rigor, historical contextualization, and practical relevance.

First, the method of documentary analysis plays a central role. Primary sources such as *Ho Chi Minh Complete works* (National Political Publishing House, 2000), political texts, speeches, and letters written by Ho Chi Minh serve as foundational documents. These materials are analyzed to extract the conceptual framework of public service ethics from Ho Chi Minh's thought, thereby avoiding misinterpretation or secondary bias.

Second, the historical-logical method is employed to trace the development of Ho Chi Minh's views on public service ethics, from his early revolutionary writings to his final political testament. This allows the study to uncover both the consistency and evolution in his thought, as well as how it responded to the practical demands of Vietnam's political context.

Third, comparative analysis is conducted between Ho Chi Minh's model and contemporary theories of public service ethics, such as Greenleaf's servant leadership, Pollitt's governance ethics, and the OECD's integrity framework. Through this comparison, the research identifies similarities, differences, and unique contributions of Ho Chi Minh's philosophy.

Fourth, the interdisciplinary approach integrates perspectives from political philosophy, public governance, ethics, and cultural studies. This broadens the explanatory power of the research and reflects the multi-dimensional nature of public service ethics in both theory and practice.

Finally, the article adopts an analytical-synthetic approach, aiming to not only describe and interpret but also reconstruct Ho Chi Minh's ethical framework into a contemporary model. This includes identifying key principles (integrity, responsibility, anti-corruption, and people-centeredness), articulating them in modern administrative language, and exploring their institutional implications.

By combining these methods, the article ensures a comprehensive, objective, and theoretically grounded examination of Ho Chi Minh's public service ethics, while contributing to the academic dialogue on ethics in governance in both Vietnam and broader comparative contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

Public Service Ethics in Ho Chi Minh's Thought: Concept, Origins, and Characteristics

In Ho Chi Minh's thought, public service ethics is not merely a set of formal behavioral norms but a comprehensive value system closely tied to revolutionary ideals, the formation of political character, and responsibility to the people. According to Ho Chi Minh, "a cadre must constantly train in revolutionary ethics in order to fulfill the duty of a loyal servant to the people" (2000, vol. 5, p. 295). This statement emphasizes ethics not only as a necessary element but as one inherently connected to the relationship between the individual and the community, between those in power and those they serve.

Ho Chi Minh's conception of public service ethics was shaped by three major sources: (1) the moral traditions of Eastern philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Buddhism; (2) Marxism-Leninism and proletarian revolutionary ethics; and (3) his practical experiences in revolutionary activities and state governance. Eastern traditions provided Ho Chi Minh with a moral vocabulary - terms such as "integrity" (liêm), "righteousness" (chính), "loyalty" (trung), and "filial piety" (hiếu). Meanwhile, Marxism-Leninism offered a framework emphasizing the unity of ethics and politics, of ends and means. The synthesis of tradition and revolution made Ho Chi Minh's ethical conception both culturally familiar and organizationally modern.

Unlike Western theoretical approaches that often separate personal morality from professional ethics, Ho Chi Minh did not treat public service ethics as an isolated field. On the contrary, he consistently viewed it as a concrete manifestation of revolutionary ethics. In his well-known essay "Strengthen Revolutionary Ethics, Eliminate Individualism" (1969), Ho Chi Minh asserted: "Revolutionary ethics do not fall from the sky. They are cultivated and strengthened through daily struggle and training" (2000, vol. 12, p. 509). This declaration lays a foundational principle: public service ethics is not innate or instinctual - it is the product of continuous revolutionary and administrative practice.

Another significant point is that Ho Chi Minh did not understand public service ethics through rigid legalistic thinking, but rather as a dynamic relationship between leaders and the people. He emphasized that “diligence, thrift, integrity, righteousness, and impartiality” are not merely ethical ideals but essential conditions for fulfilling official responsibilities (Vol. 6, 2000: 401). In this system, “integrity” cannot be separated from “righteousness,” “diligence” is not divorced from “impartiality,” and “selflessness” is the highest expression of a cadre’s virtue - marked by an absence of personal gain, egoism, or prioritization of individual interests over collective ones. This is not only ethical advice but also a principle for organizing public power.

The core features of public service ethics in Ho Chi Minh's thought can be summarized as follows:

First, it is a value system with a clear political orientation - linked to the ideal of serving the people, safeguarding national independence, and building socialism.

Second, it embodies profound humanism, placing the people - especially the masses - at the center of all state activities.

Third, it is an ethics of action, meaning it must manifest in concrete administrative behavior rather than remain abstract ideas.

Finally, it is a dynamic norm - constantly reshaped and redefined through historical and social practice. Accordingly, when discussing the role of ethics in cadre development, Ho Chi Minh once wrote: “To govern the country, one must first reform oneself; to reform oneself, one must first have revolutionary ethics” (2000, vol. 10, p. 259). In this sense, public service ethics is not something external or imposed - it is an internal institution capable of regulating power through the conscience of the cadre. This explains why Ho Chi Minh placed particular emphasis on “criticism and self-criticism” as a means of safeguarding ethical integrity within organizations (Vol. 5, 2000: 305).

In summary, public service ethics in Ho Chi Minh’s thought is a system of values integrating politics and morality, national culture and revolutionary ideals, public duty and personal virtue. It serves as the foundational basis for building an honest, effective, and people-centered public administration.

The Relationship Between Ethics and Power in Ho Chi Minh’s Thought

One of the most remarkable and timely contributions of Ho Chi Minh’s thought on public service ethics lies in how he conceptualized the relationship between ethics and power as two interdependent, mutually regulating dimensions. Unlike classical views which treat political power and ethics as separate domains - one belonging to organizational structure, the other to individual conscience - Ho Chi Minh proposed an innovative perspective: power needs ethics in order not to become a tool of corruption; conversely, ethics needs power as the space where its authenticity is expressed and tested. As early as 1947, in his work *Correcting Working Style*, Ho Chi Minh warned: “If a cadre lacks ethics, the higher their power, the more dangerous the consequences” (Vol. 5, 2000: 42). This concise statement encapsulates a profound philosophy: public power is never innocent; it is always at risk of abuse unless regulated. For Ho Chi Minh, regulation arises not only from external institutions such as laws, audits, and supervision, but more crucially, from the internal moral character of the cadre. Ethics, therefore, becomes a “soft fortress” - resilient yet persistent - preventing power from degenerating into egoism, self-interest, or authoritarianism.

This notion aligns with modern understandings of power control, yet it also differs fundamentally. While Western thinkers such as Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, emphasize the principle of “power checks power” through institutional separation and counterbalancing mechanisms, Ho Chi Minh focused on the internal regulation of power - stemming from the ethical consciousness and the ideal of serving the people. This marks a convergence between Eastern traditions (self-cultivation as the basis for state governance) and the proletarian revolutionary ideal (prioritizing collective over individual interests).

The integration of ethics and power in Ho Chi Minh’s thought is also reflected in how he refused to equate power with status or legal authority. He wrote: “Cadres are loyal servants of the people, not revolutionary mandarins” (Vol. 5, 2000: 299). Here, public power is redefined as the capacity to serve, rather than to command. The ideal cadre in Ho Chi Minh’s model is one “who has power but does not pursue self-interest,” “has authority but does not become arrogant,” “has responsibility but does not

remain indifferent.” In this sense, ethics becomes a prerequisite to ensure that power does not become corrupted, and that it yields real political and social benefits.

Ho Chi Minh’s thinking on ethics and power has been received and further developed by many contemporary scholars. For instance, Nguyen Trong Phuc (2019) asserts: “For Ho Chi Minh, public service ethics is not only a foundational value system, but also a soft institution that prevents the degeneration of power at its root” (p. 70). This perspective reflects a shift from a purely moral approach to a political-institutional one: ethics is not only a personal virtue but a tool for behavior regulation within the domain of public power. In a world growing ever more complex, where power is increasingly decentralized and prone to misuse, Ho Chi Minh’s vision of the reciprocal constraints between ethics and power remains highly relevant. It does not contradict modern theories of public governance or institutional separation of powers but rather enriches them by adding a layer of moral depth to legal and administrative mechanisms that are often formalistic. In this regard, Ho Chi Minh’s thought may serve as a “moral corridor” for the exercise of power in Vietnam’s current trajectory toward building a socialist rule-of-law state.

Public Service Ethics: A Mechanism to Regulate the Corruption of State Power

One of the most significant contributions of Ho Chi Minh’s thought on public service ethics lies in his recognition of ethics not merely as a desirable personal trait but as an internal institution - a mechanism of self-regulation over the conduct of state officials. This form of control does not rely solely on external tools such as laws, administrative institutions, or coercive rules; rather, it is grounded in moral consciousness, revolutionary ideals, and individual responsibility. This is a distinctive approach that transcends both functional ethics and utilitarian ethics, aiming instead toward a model of self-conscious morality - where the subject voluntarily adjusts behavior according to the highest norms. Ho Chi Minh once stated: “Strict laws cannot replace ethics; and lofty ethics must be embodied in action” (2000, vol. 8, p. 145). This idea reflects a clear awareness that ethics and law are fundamentally different regulatory systems but must be complementary. While law exerts external control - through sanctions, norms, and coercion - ethics governs from within, via conscience, self-respect, and a sense of duty. That is why Ho Chi Minh affirmed: “Morality must be the foundation. Only with morality can one have self-respect, fear wrongdoing, and feel ashamed when committing injustice” (Vol. 9, 2000: 123).

It is noteworthy that Ho Chi Minh did not emphasize ethics as a static or innate condition, but as an ongoing process of cultivation and moral training. He wrote: “Revolutionary ethics do not emerge naturally. They are forged through struggle, study, and self-discipline” (Vol. 10, 2000: 251). Thus, public service ethics is not immutable but a living construct, continuously shaped and reinforced through concrete actions and reflective awareness. This approach is closely aligned with modern ethical frameworks such as reflexive ethics and ethics of character, as discussed by Western thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel in communitarian theories.

What makes Ho Chi Minh’s ethical framework distinctive is that it was never conceived as an abstract theory, but always connected to practical behavior and real conditions. He once emphasized: “A person with talent but no virtue is useless. A person with virtue but no talent will find it difficult to accomplish anything” (Vol. 6, 2000: 132). This perspective outlines an ideal cadre model that does not rely solely on technical competence but also on the ability for self-restraint, self-criticism, and self-transformation. In this sense, ethics is not merely decorative but serves as a foundational pillar for cultivating a culture of responsible power within the administrative system. Ho Chi Minh’s thought also contains a clear preventive dimension. He warned: “A corrupted cadre in a high position can bring down an entire system and destroy the people’s trust in the Party” (Vol. 11, 2000: 389). This long-range view illustrates that ethics is not just an individual concern but one with systemic implications, shaping both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state apparatus.

In conclusion, public service ethics in Ho Chi Minh’s thought goes beyond personal virtue or traditional morality. It becomes a form of soft political governance - a self-regulating mechanism capable of countering corruption and degeneration within state power. In an era when many nations face ethical crises in public administration, Ho Chi Minh’s model of “self-regulation through morality” is not merely of historical value, but also offers guidance for the future.

Ho Chi Minh's Conception of Public Service Ethics in the Context of Building a Modern Integrity-Based State in Vietnam

In the process of institutional reform and administrative modernization, the construction of an integrity-based state in Vietnam demands more than procedural changes or organizational restructuring. At its core lies the imperative to reform the value system underpinning public service - where public service ethics must assume a central role. Yet, reality reveals that ethics remains a systemic bottleneck in Vietnam's governance. Manifestations of power abuse, bureaucratic inertia, corruption, and indifference toward citizens persist across various levels. According to Conclusion No. 21-KL/TW by the Central Committee of the Communist Party (2021), numerous cadres and Party members - including those holding high-ranking positions - have exhibited "ideological, moral, and lifestyle degradation," while internal "self-evolution" and "self-transformation" remain complex and unresolved phenomena. In its 2023 public report, the Government Inspectorate disclosed that, within the first nine months alone, financial violations exceeding VND 52,000 billion and mismanagement of over 6,700 hectares of land were discovered; 574 cases involving 411 individuals showing criminal signs were transferred to investigative authorities (Government Inspectorate, 2023). These figures do not merely indicate isolated misconduct but signal an erosion of ethical foundations within the administrative apparatus.

The issue of "petty corruption" at public service outlets is also evident in the Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI). According to the 2022 PAPI report published by UNDP, 42% of respondents reported encountering difficulties when performing basic administrative procedures (UNDP, 2023). This statistic is troubling, reflecting a growing erosion of public trust in civil servants-who serve as critical intermediaries between the state and citizens. Notably, Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranked Vietnam at 83 out of 180 countries, with a score of only 42/100 - showing no improvement over 2022 (Transparency International, 2024). While nations like Singapore, Estonia, and South Korea have institutionalized public service ethics as a strategic pillar of governance, Vietnam's regulatory frameworks - despite reforms such as the 2019 amendment to the Law on Cadres and Civil Servants - remain largely symbolic due to weak enforcement mechanisms. The World Bank's 2022 institutional review observed that ethical violations in the Vietnamese public sector are seldom met with serious consequences, fostering a culture of "systemic irresponsibility" (World Bank, 2022). Similarly, the OECD (2019) warned that Vietnam must reinforce public service ethics through concrete enforcement mechanisms - ranging from greater transparency and accountability to improved recruitment and recurring ethical training. Without curbing abuse of power in the public sector, the report noted, it will be difficult to sustain institutional legitimacy in the long run (OECD, 2019).

One contributing factor to the erosion of public service ethics is the "ritualization" of political education, wherein the study of Ho Chi Minh's thought is reduced to formalistic contests and attendance exercises. In addition, non-transparent recruitment and promotion processes - alongside the phenomenon of office-buying - have corroded ethical integrity at the system's entry point. A 2021 report by the Central Organization Commission acknowledged the widespread occurrence of "factionalism, cliques, and interest groups" in cadre planning and appointments, adversely affecting the quality of civil servants, particularly at the grassroots level.

In this context, Ho Chi Minh's moral-political framework emerges as a profound ethical compass with humanist depth and high institutional relevance. He asserted that "diligence, thrift, integrity, uprightness, public-mindedness, and impartiality" are not only personal virtues but foundational to administrative competence. In his 1947 work *Rectify Working Style*, he warned: "A cadre without ethics - when endowed with high power - can become a grave danger" (Ho, 1947: 42). This warning remains strikingly timely today, where ethical failures - if unaddressed at their root - can lead to public disillusionment and institutional collapse. To apply Ho Chi Minh's vision effectively in the present context, public service ethics must be placed at the heart of institutional reform - not merely as moral exhortation but as a governance tool capable of guiding behavior through trust, responsibility, and culture. His philosophy of "serving the people" must be translated into institutional capacity, wherein

every process, action, and public servant is aligned with clear ethical standards and subjected to independent oversight.

Ho Chi Minh's Political Philosophy: From Public Service Ethics to Institutional Reform

Ho Chi Minh's reflections on public service ethics do not exist as an isolated moral system; rather, they are embedded within a broader revolutionary framework encompassing political reform, the renewal of governance models, and national development. For him, public service ethics are not merely a set of individual behavioral codes but serve as an "endogenous driving force" to help the state transcend stagnation, bureaucratism, and institutional corruption. This perspective lays a theoretical foundation for linking administrative reform to a reconfiguration of the core values of public authority - namely, integrity, fairness, and the capacity to serve society. In a letter to local People's Committees (1946), Ho Chi Minh emphasized: "If officials want the people's trust, they must be honest, impartial, selfless, refrain from embezzlement, avoid self-interest, and devote themselves wholly to the nation and its people" (1946: 124). This assertion does not merely convey an ethical standard but acts as a political proposition for constructing a civil service grounded in popular sovereignty. Integrity in public service, thus, becomes the first condition for restoring social trust-which is foundational to institutional legitimacy (Easton, 1965). A World Bank (2022) survey found that in countries with high integrity indices, post-pandemic recovery and public spending efficiency were 30 - 40% higher than in countries with lower integrity rankings. This demonstrates that integrity is not merely an ethical concern but also a driving force for economic development and social stability. As Fukuyama (2013) argues, "Administrative capacity, when coupled with a culture of integrity, forms the bedrock of a resilient modern state."

In Vietnam, one of the primary obstacles in civil service reform is the tension between process and value. Many reform policies are promulgated but fail in implementation due to a lack of internal alignment with the culture of public service. This is where Ho Chi Minh's thought can play a central role: helping to reconnect institutional procedures with the goal of serving the people, and re-establishing the ethical identity of civil servants-not as indifferent executors, but as proactive public servants. While Western scholars such as Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) have emphasized the "ethical drift of the modern state" and proposed systemic reforms through mechanisms of power oversight (counter-democracy), Ho Chi Minh offered a foundational ethical education for public service as the moral cornerstone. According to him, institutional reform is only sustainable when grounded in a consistent ethical system - one in which cadres and civil servants are not only bound by legal regulations but also self-disciplined through revolutionary conscience and patriotic love. This is a form of "political interiorization," an area often overlooked even by progressive governance theories.

Thus, Ho Chi Minh's philosophy provides the basis for a model of "proactive integrity" - where civil servants do not wait for supervision to behave ethically, but are internally motivated to maintain ethical standards. This model could help Vietnam move beyond superficial reform toward deeper institutional culture transformation, as South Korea once did in the 1990s through its combined integrity campaigns and public service law reforms (Kang, 2002).

However, realizing Ho Chi Minh's integrity philosophy requires simultaneous changes at three levels: (1) Legal institutions - regulations on public service ethics must be tied to clear enforcement mechanisms with binding legal force and transparent accountability. The issuance of Codes of Professional Ethics must be accompanied by independent and public evaluation mechanisms (Nguyễn Khắc Mai, 2018). (2) Organizational culture - public agencies must prioritize justice over performance, and value integrity over personal relationships. As Ho Chi Minh stated: "We must have policies that respect the virtuous, regardless of closeness or novelty" (1956: 288). This is essential to curb the pervasive phenomenon of "buying positions and promotions," which undermines internal ethics. (3) Public service education and training - training programs must shift from purely technical skill development to ethical cultivation, focusing on self-criticism, reflexive capacity, and administrative compassion-what Ho Chi Minh considered "the root of politics."

In this light, public service ethics, as envisioned by Ho Chi Minh, do not stand apart from institutional reform but act as its very source of legitimacy and durability. The philosophy of integrity is not an

auxiliary condition, but rather the “moral current” that safeguards institutions from degeneration during the exercise of power. Without public service ethics, institutional reform risks becoming mechanical, vulnerable to failure, or easily co-opted by vested interest groups.

5. Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh’s thought on public service ethics is not merely a traditional moral legacy; it also forms a vital theoretical and practical foundation for the ongoing construction of a socialist rule-of-law state in contemporary Vietnam. Unlike technocratic approaches by Western scholars - typically rooted in institutional rationality or individualist philosophy - Ho Chi Minh’s vision of public ethics is shaped by a communal - action-based moral framework, where traditional virtues are inseparable from revolutionary ideals. While the OECD emphasizes three governance principles - transparency, accountability, and integrity - as highly institutionalized and technocratic standards, Ho Chi Minh formulated a model of the public official grounded in revolutionary morality as a dual framework: both internalized and institutional. In this model, power is restrained not solely by law, but by the moral qualities of the person who wields it. This is the critical insight behind his statement: “To govern the country, one must first govern oneself; to govern oneself, one must possess revolutionary ethics” (Ho, 1958: 11).

Within his theoretical structure, public service ethics represent a synthesis of political ideals, social responsibility, and practical conduct. A public servant is not simply an executor of commands but a person “with both virtue and talent, with virtue as the foundation” (Ho, vol.5, 2000: 291). This perspective both reflects the Confucian philosophy of “governing by virtue” (thân chính) and serves as an early critique of the cold technocracy and bureaucratized morality that characterizes modern administrative systems. Rather than measuring competence through technical indexes or output efficiency alone, Ho Chi Minh emphasized social trust, moral responsibility, and public outcomes as central criteria for evaluating officials.

The urgency of his thought becomes even more evident when contrasted with present-day realities: the degradation of public service ethics, the abuse of power, bureaucratic inertia, and petty corruption among a segment of public servants have eroded public confidence in state institutions. While external control mechanisms such as inspection, oversight, or procedural technocracy are important, they are insufficient without an inner ethical foundation. As Le Huu Nghia observed, “We cannot build an honest administration relying only on legal instruments; we must also depend on the cultural and political-moral character of public officials” (2020: 98).

In this context, the restoration and institutionalization of Ho Chi Minh’s thought on public service ethics must be considered a strategic direction - not merely a moral slogan. This requires reforming personnel policies to emphasize civic virtue, integrating public ethics as a cross-cutting content in recruitment, deployment, and evaluation of officials, while simultaneously promoting mechanisms of power oversight rooted in the values of diligence, thrift, integrity, righteousness, and selflessness. Such a path is not only feasible but essential for building an administration that is not only efficient and effective but also legitimate and supported by the people.

Article for publication of the university-level topic research, will be reported in the school year 2024-2025 on “Ho Chi Minh’s political culture with the construction of leaders in Vietnam”, led by the author. The project received financial support from Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade

References

- [1] Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. (2021). *Conclusion No. 21-KL/TW on strengthening Party building and rectification*. Hanoi: Office of the Central Committee.
- [2] Central Organization Commission of the Communist Party of Vietnam. (2021). *Report on the evaluation of personnel and organizational work in 2021*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House.
- [3] Denhardt, J. V., & Denhardt, R. B. (2000). The new public service: Serving, not steering. *Public Administration Review*, 60(6), 549–559.
- [4] Du Gay, P. (2000). *In praise of bureaucracy: Weber, organization, ethics*. London: Sage Publications.
- [5] Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. New York: Wiley.

-
- [6] Frederickson, H. G. (1997). *The spirit of public administration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [7] Fukuyama, F. (2013). What is governance?. *Governance*, 26(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12035>
- [8] Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.
- [9] Ho Chi Minh. (1946). Letter to the People's Committees. In *Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh* (Vol. 4, pp. 123–124). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000.
- [10] Ho Chi Minh. (1947). Reforming working style. In *Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh* (Vol. 5, pp. 41–47). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000.
- [11] Ho Chi Minh. (1956). Speech at the cadre training course. In *Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh* (Vol. 8, p. 288). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000.
- [12] Ho Chi Minh. (1958). Revolutionary ethics. In *Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh* (Vol. 10, pp. 11–18). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000.
- [13] Ho Chi Minh. (1969). Improve revolutionary ethics, sweep away individualism. In *Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh* (Vol. 12, p. 509). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000.
- [14] Ho Chi Minh. (2000). *Complete Works* (Vols. 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). Hanoi: National Political Publishing House.
- [15] Hoang Chi Bao. (2020). Ho Chi Minh's thought on public ethics and exemplary responsibility. *Journal of Political Theory*, (3), 5–12.
- [16] Huberts, L. (2014). *The integrity of governance: What it is, what we know, what is done, and where to go*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [17] Kang, D. C. (2002). *Crony capitalism: Corruption and development in South Korea and the Philippines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Kernaghan, K. (2003). Integrating values into public service: The values statement as centerpiece. *Public Administration Review*, 63(6), 711–719.
- [19] Le Huu Nghia. (2020). Building an honest administration following Ho Chi Minh's thought. *Communist Review*, (937), 95–101.
- [20] Nguyen Anh Tuan. (2023). Practical values in Ho Chi Minh's thought on public service and administrative reform. *Journal of State Management*, (8), 22–27.
- [21] Nguyen Duc Ha. (2018). Revolutionary ethics in the new era under Ho Chi Minh's thought. Hanoi: Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics.
- [22] Nguyen Khac Mai. (2018). Institutionalizing public ethics to prevent moral decay among officials. *Democracy & Law Journal*, (4), 12–17.
- [23] Nguyen Thi Kim Dung. (2019). Institutionalizing public service ethics in Ho Chi Minh's thought. *Journal of Political Science*, 2(34), 201–210.
- [24] Nguyen Trong Phuc. (2013). Building the Party based on Ho Chi Minh's thought. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House.
- [25] Nguyen Trong Phuc. (2019). Public ethics in Ho Chi Minh's thought as a soft institution for controlling power. *Party Building Review*, (7), 68–72.
- [26] OECD. (1998). *Principles for managing ethics in the public service*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [27] OECD. (2019). *Public integrity in Vietnam: Assessment and recommendations*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264307735-en>
- [28] Pollitt, C. (2003). *The essential public manager*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- [29] Rohr, J. A. (1989). *Ethics for bureaucrats: An essay on law and values* (2nd ed.). New York: Marcel Dekker.
- [30] Thanh tra Chính phủ. (2023). *Report on inspection, citizen reception, complaint and denunciation settlement, and anti-corruption activities in the first 9 months of 2023*. Hanoi: Government Inspectorate.
- [31] Tran Van Giau. (2005). Traditional moral values in Ho Chi Minh's thought. *Journal of Philosophy*, (5), 3–9.
- [32] Tran Van Hung. (2021). Public ethics in current administrative reform according to Ho Chi Minh's thought. *Journal of Politics and Development*, (7), 15–21.

-
- [33] Transparency International. (2024). *Corruption Perceptions Index* 2023. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>
- [34] UNDP. (2023). *The Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) 2022*. Hanoi: UNDP Vietnam. <https://papi.org.vn>
- [35] World Bank. (2022). *Vietnam public expenditure review: Toward efficiency and equity*. Washington, DC: World Bank.