

RESEARCH

Le Cong Co: philosopher and exemplar of resilience and hope for an independent Vietnam

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The life of Vietnamese philosopher/educator Le Cong Co has personified theological foundations for resilience and hope. As such, his life has manifested intense dedication, resilience (physical, emotional, and mental), insight, and initiative in moving Vietnam toward independence and modernization. It has continually stressed a constructive vision for hope and a renewed emphasis on resilience and justice for Vietnam as manifested in his work as an educator, military leader, and university leader. Fate has placed his life at the crossroads of Vietnamese history whereby he has been witness to fundamental developments along the path toward Vietnamese independence and modernization.

Keywords: Le Cong Co, Vietnam, philosophy, resilience, U.S.–Vietnam War 1965–1975

Introduction

Resilience hope are qualities that can be studied in varied contexts. Some of these contexts offer situations that allow for manifestations of the traits that highlight these qualities. The history of the world has offered a wide range of people who have personified theological foundations for resilience and hope. Vietnamese philosopher/educator Le Cong Co is such a person. His life has manifested intense dedication, resilience (physical, emotional, and mental), insight, and initiative in moving Vietnam toward independence and modernization. His life has stressed a constructive vision for hope and a renewed emphasis on resilience and justice for Vietnam.

Le Cong Co is a philosopher/educator who has sought sustainable justice in freeing Vietnam from foreign colonization via his work as an educator, military leader, and university leader. At a fundamental level, he is a philosopher who has employed his philosophical insights in support of the initiatives he has dedicated his life to. Fate has placed his life at the crossroads of Vietnamese history whereby he has been witness to fundamental developments along the path toward Vietnamese independence and modernization.

It is within this framework the social scientist can seek to interpret Le Cong Co's life via a lens that differentiates between variables that were within the power of Le Cong Co or were simply variables that played out around him that he had no control over.

Review of literature

Brueggemann (1) asserts that “The prophetic task, in the midst of exilic despair over destruction and displacement, is to declare and enact hope for a buoyant future that is securely in the purview of God.” Le Cong Co has indeed done that in a manner that is commensurate with the views of Richard Alves. Alves (2) is credited with establishing that “The human being unconsciously composes life's score according to the laws of beauty, even in the moments of deepest despair.” In doing so, he has drawn parallels between Vietnam's quest for reunification and the views of Rukeyser when she established that “It seems to me that the belief in peace as completeness belongs to the same universe as the hope of the individual as full valued (3). These positions resonate in the life and actions of Le Cong Co.”

The life of Le Cong Co from an impoverished child to a Vietnamese visionary has paralleled the evolution of Vietnam from colonized satellite to independent Indo-China power. One can recognize similar parallels with liberation theology. "Liberation theology . . . embodies a momentous leap out of the many centuries in which Christianity was defined as a system of beliefs imposed by a hierarchy. . . . It is an unmistakable sign of the coming of an age of the spirit (4)." Religion, like philosophy, offers insights for understanding moral identity. "Religion is one of the great limiters of moral identity, since most believers differentiate themselves, in moral terms, from those who do not share their faith (5)." This is a recurring theme.

We live in "a time in which the power of death is pervasive and militant and in which people exist without hope or else in pursuit of transient, fraudulent, or delusive hopes (6)." This has clearly been the case in the history of Vietnam. Ironically, such understanding can be elusive when one is in the midst of living in such turmoil. "The fact that man constitutionally corrupts his purest visions of disinterested justice in his actual actions seems to never occur to him (7)." This has been evidenced in the landscape Le Cong Co has lived within.

Methodology

The methodological approach for this report will be a historical review that fundamentally moves in chronological order. Le Cong Co told me he became a communist at the age of 3 years. I later asked how a 3-year-old could adopt the communist ideology. His explanation made good sense. Communist doctrine was not significant to his family, but communism held significance in that it offered means for expelling foreign domination from Vietnam. His family suffered horribly under French rule. His mother, sister, and brother starved to death during the French occupation of his hometown, and this cruelty fueled his desire to expel the French. The story of his immediate family and extended family abounds with events involving extreme cruelty at the hands of foreign forces.

Life under French colonial rule was harsh. One of his early memories is sitting on his grandmother's lap when a French soldier entered the house and was speaking with his grandparents. During the course of this conversation, the French soldier smacked his grandmother with a closed fist resulting in her falling to the ground and bleeding from the head. He learned at a young age (3 years old) that the French were an evil force and that life for the Vietnamese would be much better without them. He was told communism was the path to removing the French from Vietnam. He became a communist.

The United States (U.S.) Marines came ashore in Da Nang with much fanfare on March 8, 1965. It was as if the circus came to town except that the circus did not leave town after the weekend. Instead, it performed a 10-year engagement

that played out in bloody detail. The entry of the U.S. military into the area revealed a stunning array of weaponry that impacted the social landscape. Most notable were the B-52 aircraft and their potential for massive bombing.

Danang changed quickly with the entry of the U.S. military into the area. Businesses opened to cater to the Americans. The economic stimulus was bold and swift. American lifestyles were adopted in varied ways among the Danang populace. By December 1965, underground Vietcong cells were operating in Hue and Danang. Their existence became known to the South Vietnamese government. National Liberation Front flags were hung in the area as bold expressions of defiance. Many people were arrested during this period, and the radio broadcasts reported that most of the perpetrators had been captured except for Le Cong Co. He was reported to be on the run.

By March 1966, the Vietcong were taking advantage of the conflict between General Nguyen Cao Ky and President Nguyen Van Thieu. There were large demonstrations in Hue that were mostly anti-American. Many of the demonstrators were from Hue University and functioned from that base of operations. A central point in all of this is that the Vietnam War was not a civil war. Rather, it was fought mostly by the Americans against the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. That was why South Vietnam collapsed so quickly after the departure of the Americans in 1975. At the high point, the American troops stationed in South Vietnam amounted to over 500,000. All the war supplies also came from the U.S. So, it was mostly a war that promoted American interests in the region.

Report of findings

It should also be noted that to say it was a war of ideologies is not exactly correct. It may be correct from the perspective of the Americans, but from the perspective of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, it was only a war to gain independence. Such a goal to reunite the country had been a long-term venture. It dated back to 1858 when the French initiated their colonization of Vietnam. Le Cong Co's background and insights into philosophy set him apart as a leader regarding how Vietnam was legitimately poised to seek independence.

It just so happened that the Vietnamese were caught between the Eastern and Western powers. The Vietnamese had to pick a side to have the means to fight the war. But overall, it should be remembered that in the minds of most Vietnamese, it was just another war against foreign invaders. Another reason it can be said it was not a war of ideologies was that the Chinese and Russians did not want Vietnam to win the war. They just wanted Vietnam to be a buffer zone between Communist forces and the Allied forces. The Chinese and Russian mindsets were really emphasizing a war of ideologies, but the Vietnamese wanted no part of

that. The Vietnamese were focusing solely on their desire for independence and reunification of the country.

The rivalry between the north and south of Vietnam after the Vietnam War may not be accurately characterized as a civil war, but it could be described as a competition for position, resources, and power nationwide. This rivalry will be eternal. It will certainly be a factor as the living standard between the North and South fluctuates. There will continue to be a conflict between those in power in the North and in the South. This scenario has parallels with the competition between Democrats and Republicans in the U.S.

The North Vietnamese owed much to China for the Chinese support of North Vietnam during their victory against the French colonialists. Vietnam had to continue down the path of Communism to pay off that debt. That debt is still being paid in that China and Russia continue to refer to their roles in the Vietnamese victory over the Americans. The South was in a similar position. Diem was the one who realized that he would not want the Americans to fight the war for South Vietnam. It may be for that reason he was assassinated by forces supported by the U.S. Ho Chi Minh was heard to say: “After all, President Diem did have a solid love for this country.”

Administrations after Diem had no choice because they were set up by the Americans so they had to allow the Americans in to fight the war for them. Another variable centers on the fact that administrations after Diem had no power to resist the North in that they came to rely totally on the Americans for support with the war effort. It basically became an American war that the South Vietnamese participated in via a supporting role.

This was a time of much change for Le Cong Co. His life of struggle, warfighting, and continual challenge quickly evolved into a life of constructively planning for the future, both personally and professionally. This meant marriage and children. It meant formal positions of authority within the Vietnamese government. It resulted in new challenges and a future that would have been beyond his imagination years earlier. His leadership skills remained a constant factor in his life—past, present, and future. His philosophical orientation enhanced his visionary prowess considerably.

The book *Tuition Fee by Blood*, which focused on Le Cong Co, was banned in Hue because it offended the pride of the people in Hue. As a result, it was never published. In the book, the author, Nguyen Khac Phuc, tried to expose the difference between the nature of people in Hue and Danang. As the people of Hue are not transparent and direct in their approach, they can be considered to be conservative, dishonest, and non-uniform. This may be right or wrong, but such an assertion was not well received in Hue.

The primary reason for the banning of the book may have had to do with the intention that it was to be part of a series of five books that were critical of Hue residents. It was believed that *Tuition Fee by Blood* was to be the first of such a series. In that series, the most condemning book of Hue was to be

entitled *1968*. The year 1968 is a sensitive topic from the Vietnam War period, and the book *1968* focused on that period. Le Cong Co's association with such a book would make it all the more controversial. As a result, the leadership in Hue reacted fiercely to make sure that no books in the series would be published and distributed in Hue, especially the one entitled *1968*.

The macro-level effects of the U.S. occupation of Vietnam were huge, and they reshaped the Vietnamese economy in fundamental ways. “A quarter of a billion dollars a year did not, perhaps, seem very much to the Americans, but for the first five years of the Diem regime it covered the whole cost of the Saigon government's armed forces and 80 percent of all other government expenditures (8).” These effects echoed throughout the Vietnamese economic infrastructure. “American aid represented a large-scale relief project more than an economic development program, and because development had not been emphasized, termination of American aid would almost certainly produce both political and economic collapse of Vietnam (9).”

Le Cong Co's introduction to leadership did not involve unique childhood experiences that groomed him for guiding others. His abilities with leadership are based on philosophically grounded orientations with problem-solving skills. Le Cong Co's problem-solving skills are philosophically oriented in his concrete understanding of math and how to apply such mathematical abilities with the scientific method. He sees three primary philosophical principles as being key to his effective leadership: (1) understanding the situations of others and their struggles; (2) seeking to motivate others by addressing their struggles, needs, and desires; and (3) walking the talk—that is, practicing what he is preaching. Le Cong Co sees each person as being like a tree that needs to be nurtured.

He believes his ability to develop vision and pursue vision is grounded in the scientific method and his strong philosophical/mathematical skills. Furthermore, his understanding of the human condition is enhanced by this appreciation for philosophical/mathematical applications in our lives. It is apparent that he firmly believes in the directions he espouses with his leadership in both military and civilian contexts. He mortgaged his house to build the main building of the Duy Tan University (DTU) campus. Many men died under his leadership. He has made it a practice to share DTU-generated profits with families of fallen military comrades.

Le Cong Co views himself, first and foremost, to be a teacher of philosophy. His early adult years were spent in teaching and he has returned to education as an educational administrator. This perspective has been a significant part of his foundation as a leader guiding others. He emphasizes that different contexts require different approaches. For instance, the military leadership context stresses punctuality, resilience, never giving up, and flexibility when confronted with the fog of war. The effective military leader cannot assume that military leadership approaches will

automatically transfer to non-military contexts. All-out/total war is an all-or-none situation. Leadership approaches used in such a situation will not necessarily fit with more routine daily organizational developments.

However, there is some common ground that can be recognized among different philosophical contexts. For instance, he found he could motivate military members and civilians to die for the cause of the expulsion of foreign domination from Vietnam. That is basically because the yearning to expel foreigners from Vietnam is so central in the Vietnamese cultural mindset.

The Americans departed Vietnam in April 1975. This was a time of great celebration for the North Vietnamese forces in that they had finally driven foreign forces from Vietnam and unified the country. It was a time of transitioning from a wartime mentality and rebuilding the country's infrastructure. Two primary objectives involved the movement to rid the South of capitalism and the decision to change the currency from South Vietnamese dollars to North Vietnamese dollars.

A "Top Leaders" political school was assembled in Hanoi in 1976. This school comprised 117 students who were selected from those who held communist leadership positions (primarily military) during the war. They were to be educated to provide leadership for the country and were taught by the senior leaders of the country at that time. Le Cong Co was selected for a seat in this school. He and his wife moved to Hanoi. It was a great honor to be selected for enrollment in this school, and it positioned him to become a future leader of the country. His dedication as a Vietnamese patriot never wavered, but his intrigue with the "Top Leaders" program dropped significantly after arriving in Hanoi.

Of the 117 students, only about 25 had college degrees. Many had no formal education at all. The primary selection criteria for admission to this "Top Leaders" program had to do with service during the wartime period. That is, a vast majority of the students had been distinguished military leaders. However, Le Cong Co was quick to observe that a fledgling nation needed leaders who could make various facets of the nation function, not just win in warfare. There was an incredible mismatch between the skills that existed in the pool of students and the skills that were needed to run the country.

Many of the students were uneducated individuals who had performed exceedingly well in warfare contexts but were ill-prepared to serve in other capacities that the nation needed.

Mixing educated elites with illiterate political hacks made for a toxic environment. They could barely understand one another let alone make progress toward making plans to run the country.

Various factions quickly evolved within that setting. Le Cong Co jokingly refers to the typical student stereotype as big-bellied, bald-headed, boastful, and unattractive. After being placed in positions of leadership, they were

known as people who "crashed the party" (would arrive in settings uninvited), claim credit for the good things being accomplished (although such credit claiming was not warranted), and would "run while standing still" (talk in bold terms about all that they were achieving here and there but, in reality, were not doing anything that they claimed). Such "leaders" were known for being annoyances in the settings they offered their presence. A corresponding problem was that the government practiced centralized decision-making and micro-management instead of allowing for local initiatives to function at lower levels.

The school subjects studied included: (1) Marxism-Leninism, (2) Political Economics, (3) History of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and (4) Field Study Visits (visiting locations for case study understanding of various types of situations). Le Cong Co shares the often-repeated phrase that socialism going into southern Vietnam was like a river of water rushing through a dusty house in that all that was left behind was a muddy mess. The point is that the south of the country was churned into economic shambles during this period when they were forced to adhere to socialist ideology and corresponding practices.

Le Cong Co's wife, who was a Communist party member and vividly dedicated patriot during the war, became disillusioned during their time at the "Top Leaders" school. Their (her and Le Cong Co's) embracing of communism had been because it offered the opportunity to rid Vietnam of foreign domination. Communism had duly served that function, but the shortcomings of communism were readily apparent in the areas associated with running the post-war country functions. They could see that Vietnam was repositioning itself to be run at various levels by self-serving political hacks.

The infighting among the top leaders class and corresponding affiliates proliferated during this period. Le Cong Co was at odds with the thinking of many of his colleagues and was singled out for scrutiny under such circumstances. He wrote a paper while he was a student in the school, and it closed with a statement that landed him in trouble. This closing statement conveyed "The train to the 21st century is leaving the station. If Vietnam does not use this opportunity to climb aboard we will be seen by the world as a poor village in the desert." This position was observed by his detractors as having capitalist leanings, and he was duly criticized for espousing such ideas.

Conclusion

Le Cong Co is an innovative thinker and a wellspring of philosophical ideas—certainly, a challenge to those who are content with following the *status quo* routines common with socialist bureaucracies. His history of functioning in Vietnam reflects an approach that is collegial, philosophically grounded, and seeking to get along, but he still ruffles

feathers enough that there are periodic efforts to undermine him. Le Cong Co's venture into higher education marked a distinct transition from service as a government official. His creation of DTU has been an exceedingly innovative venture that has drawn from his philosophical insights—very much a free enterprise venture. It reflects his philosophy with money insofar as believing money should be put to work for worthwhile purposes rather than simply saved and invested.

His publication of two books *Years For the People: A Memoir* (10) and *Years With the People: A Memoir* (11) highlight his philosophical foundations and applications thereof. They illustrate his expression of resilience and hope regarding aspirations for an independent and prosperous Vietnam. He consistently stresses how ideals aligned with justice pave the path for a bright future that Vietnam can readily pursue. Such books place him among well-respected visionaries having to do with the future of Vietnam.

The name “Duy Tan” was suggested by his wife. It translates to English as “restoration, innovation and continuous improvement.” The mission of DTU focuses on education, training, and research. It stresses education for a new generation in peacetime, as opposed to wartime. It promotes the idea that students should be resourceful and able to stand on their own two feet. DTU seeks a diversity of programs so the university can be strong and viable. It not only acknowledges market demand but also stresses patriotism along with humanistic principles. The first DTU program focused on English as a second language, and then it ventured into Information Technology.

In contrast with the University of Danang (public university), DTU was seen as something of a “freak” phenomenon. It had no funding, it did have limits on enrollment and the tuition that could be charged, and it had an unusual mission. The success of the university speaks for itself as an illustration of the philosophy and vision of Le Cong Co and his family. His son and daughter are actively involved with leadership roles within the institution. DTU opened its doors in 1992 and presently boasts an enrollment of over 25,000 students. They make full use of the classroom space. I have observed how classes are offered 7 days a week from early morning until late in the evening.

DTU encourages students to create jobs for themselves and others, not just to get a job. It stresses individual independence and entrepreneurial spirit. DTU offers awards for students who go on to create their own businesses. It reinforces patriotic spirit by encouraging appreciation for lessons from the war years via field trips to the Vietnam battlefields. It produces a different kind of graduate than the University of Danang based on the unique orientation of DTU.

DTU operates with a vision that looks 10 years into the future and a strategy that focuses on the next 5 years. However, the situational context is continually changing, so their planning is exceedingly flexible. The DTU fundamental mission is based on a five-point strategy that stresses: (1)

openness (to ideas); (2) promotion of creativity; (3) well-roundedness (as humans, engaged with the environment and ethics); (4) modernization; and (5) globalization (grounded in Vietnamese patriotism).

The formal DTU mission statement is posted conspicuously on campus and in the literature (digital and hard copy) distributed by DTU. It reads:

“Duy Tan University’s mission is to focus on the education and research of various sciences and technologies in order to produce dynamic, creative, healthy graduates, who love their country, possess humanitarian Vietnamese values, a sense of community, self-confidence and a broad range of capabilities and skills to become citizens of the world.”

This mission statement stresses distinct Vietnamese values and characteristics that will modify over time. Le Cong Co believes the Vietnam citizenry must have ample common ground, so the youth do not get lost in blends of random globalization. National defense used to be about fighting wars, now it is more about fighting for better living standards and a better economy.

The idea of setting up a university was always a dream for Le Cong Co throughout the war. By 1988, when he was in the Parliament, the leadership of Vietnam said the Vietnamese economy needed a variety of legal structures and economic bodies, so he thought maybe Vietnam could have varied educational systems too. He then committed to setting up the first private university in Vietnam. However, when Le Cong Co proposed the idea to Communist Party Chief Do Muoi, he said Le Cong Co was exhibiting capitalistic orientations and such inclinations were not acceptable. But then the Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, heard about the idea and asked Le Cong Co to write up a definite plan for how such a private university could be created.

Le Cong Co proceeded with the development of his plan and submitted it to the Prime Minister. The proposal was submitted for consideration under the auspices of being new legislation, but then this recognition was halted after 2 months. Over time, the idea was resurrected whereby notions of privatization were rebranded as being a “people-founded university.” This allowed for sidestepping the privatization issue.

All things considered, one can see how the life of Le Cong Co has mirrored developments in Vietnam during the past 85 years. His leadership has clearly been enhanced via his orientations and actions as a philosopher and visionary. His continual focus on resilience, hope, and justice—as manifested in his practices and writing—offers guidance for present and future generations in Vietnam. This finding is clearly commensurate with William Brown’s assertion regarding character formation. “Such is the way of wisdom’s wonder, that which keeps the self in motion and ever in the throes of inquiry (12).”

Author notes

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