

THE CONCEPT OF FILIAL PIETY IN PHAN THANH GIẢN'S PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK ON HUMAN LIFE

O CONCEITO DE PIEDADE FILIAL NA VISÃO FILOSÓFICA DE PHAN THANH GIẢN SOBRE A VIDA HUMANA

Nguyen Tran Vinh Linh

PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Email: linhmap70@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5968-0621>

Cao Xuan Long

PhD in Philosophy, Associate Professor, University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Corresponding Author Email: Caoxuanlong@hcmussh.edu.vn
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2773-830X>

Abstract: Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1867) was a senior official of the Nguyễn dynasty who served under Emperors Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, contributing notably to Vietnam's cultural and intellectual life. His philosophical outlook on human existence was shaped by classical Confucian learning and his extensive experience as an upright, diligent mandarin marked by integrity, impartiality, and competence. Central to his thought is the emphasis on moral values, especially filial piety, which he regarded as the fundamental ethical principle guiding human conduct within both family and society. Using historical–social, typological, and systematic approaches combined with analytical–synthetic methods, this study clarifies key aspects of his conception: filial piety as the basis of moral cultivation; as care, respect, and emotional support for parents; and as gratitude toward superiors and benefactors. His ideas retain lasting relevance in contemporary Vietnamese moral life.

Keywords: Filial piety. Conception of filial piety. Philosophy of human life. Phan Thanh Giản.

Resumo: Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1867) foi um alto funcionário da dinastia Nguyễn que serviu sob os imperadores Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị e Tự Đức, contribuindo notavelmente para a vida cultural e intelectual do Vietnã. Sua visão filosófica sobre a existência humana foi moldada pelo aprendizado confucionista clássico e por sua vasta experiência como um mandarim íntegro e diligente, marcado por integridade, imparcialidade e competência. Central ao seu pensamento é a ênfase em valores morais, especialmente a piedade filial, que ele considerava o princípio ético fundamental que guia a conduta humana tanto na família quanto na sociedade. Utilizando abordagens histórico-sociais, tipológicas e sistemáticas, combinadas com métodos analítico-sintéticos, este estudo esclarece aspectos-chave de sua concepção: a piedade filial como base da formação moral; como cuidado, respeito e apoio emocional aos pais; e como gratidão para com os superiores e benfeitores. Suas ideias mantêm relevância duradoura na vida moral vietnamita contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Piedade filial. Conceito de piedade filial. Filosofia da vida humana. Phan Thanh Giản.

Introduction

The Vietnamese people have always highly valued filial piety, considering it a fundamental moral standard of human conduct. In Confucianism, the doctrine of filial piety concerns the relationship between children and their parents, with its inherent responsibilities and obligations. However, understandings of filial piety within Confucianism have exhibited distinct characteristics across different historical periods and dynasties. For the Vietnamese, filial piety has long been regarded as “the foremost among a hundred virtues,” deeply embedded in enduring cultural practices such as ancestor worship, respect for the elderly, and the observance of the duties expected of a child.

Inheriting the cultural traditions of the nation and although influenced by Confucian doctrines, Phan Thanh Giản’s conception of filial piety in his philosophy of human life is neither passive nor strictly tied to the ideology of the ruling class. Instead, it functions as a moral doctrine that cultivates ethical character and regulates human conduct in accordance with moral principles, from the family sphere to broader society. Guided by compassion, filial deference, and above all the Confucian spirit of practicing the Way, he transformed filial piety into a normative ethical guideline for self-cultivation, aiming ultimately to orient individuals toward the values of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Literature review

The concept of filial piety has been formed and maintained throughout the history of Vietnamese thought, emerging from long-standing customs such as religious beliefs, ancestor worship, and respect for elders. When Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam and became the official ideological system, it exerted a significant influence on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Confucianism highly values and affirms the moral significance of filial piety, institutionalizing it into the social ethical framework. At times, Confucianism also functioned as a tool for state governance, employed by successive feudal dynasties in Vietnam, with the Nguyễn dynasty being a notable example. However, under the influence of various subjective and objective factors, the conception of filial piety among Vietnamese Confucian scholars has exhibited differences.

Research specifically related to *“Phan Thanh Gian’s Views on Filial Piety in His Philosophy of Human Life”*, within the scope of our search, includes the following:

Hoang Thu Trang (2013), in the article *“Confucian Concepts of Filial Piety and Their Influence on Family Life in Contemporary Vietnam”*, summarized the notion of “filial piety” in Confucianism, particularly emphasizing the education of filial values in individuals. Confucian ideas about filial piety not only provide the foundational basis for the formation and development of traditional Vietnamese families historically but also continue to influence family life in Vietnam today, both positively and negatively.

Hoang Thuc Lan, in the article *“Filial Piety in Contemporary Vietnamese Families”*, analyzed in depth the content of filial piety and lamented its current decline in Vietnamese families. According to the author: *“Filial piety constitutes the ethical and cultural standards governing children’s conduct toward their parents. Filial piety is the root of being a human. In today’s market economy, filial piety is at risk of erosion; therefore, it is necessary to strengthen moral education in general and the education of filial piety in particular, especially among young people”* (2014, p.75). Similarly, Nguyen Hong Phong (2015), in the master’s thesis *“Filial Piety in Confucianism and Its Significance for Moral Education in Contemporary Vietnamese Families”*, also highlighted the contents of “filial piety” in Confucianism and its reception by Vietnamese people in fostering moral education.

In the article *“Filial Piety in Confucianism and Buddhism”*, Thich Dong Thanh (2017) argued that *“both Confucianism and Buddhism consider filial piety a fundamental moral virtue that each individual must continuously cultivate throughout life”*, citing the Hieu Kinh: *“Filial piety is the root of virtue, the source of teaching... the body, hair, and skin are received from one’s parents and must not be harmed; this is the beginning of filial piety. Establishing oneself and practicing the Way, bringing honor to future generations, to glorify one’s parents, is the culmination of*

filial piety. Regarding filial piety, the beginning is caring for one's parents, followed by duties to the ruler, and finally establishing oneself" (Thich Dong Thanh, 2017).

Nguyen Thi Hoang Oanh (2023), in the article *"Making Filial Piety a Perennial Cultural Value"*, provided an overview of filial piety and presented concrete examples of how Vietnamese people perceive and practice it. The author noted: *"Vietnamese people have always valued and internalized the principle of filial piety in moral education; they regard it as a guiding path and humane standard of conduct for children toward their parents, as well as a benchmark for moral values"*.

Regarding Phan Thanh Gian's personality and philosophical thought, Nguyen Duy Oanh is considered among the earliest researchers. In 1974, the book *Portrait of Phan Thanh Gian* was first published, summarizing his biography, works, and contributions to sketch a portrait of Phan Thanh Gian—a mandarin and a poet admired and respected by the people. In 2005, Phan Thi Minh Le and Chuong Thau translated all of Phan Thanh Gian's Hán-script works, including more than 400 poems and approximately 100 essays, compiled in *Poetry and Prose of Phan Thanh Gian*, allowing readers to appreciate his literary talent and the humanistic moral reflections embedded in his works.

Hoang Lai Giang (2015) provided a profound and appreciative perspective on Phan Thanh Gian, particularly praising his ethical qualities. In addition to the book *Phan Thanh Gian: A Hundred Years of Sorrow*, he authored multiple articles, including *Phan Thanh Gian – A Great Personality*, emphasizing Phan Thanh Gian as the most upright official of the Nguyễn dynasty, endowed with virtues such as filial piety and compassion (Multiple Authors, 2015, p.167). Similarly, Nguyen Dong Trieu, in *"A Perspective on Phan Thanh Gian's Character Through Some of His Works"*, highlighted his noble virtues, foremost among them filial piety: *"Filial toward parents, respectful toward teachers, sincere with friends, and compassionate toward the poor and suffering. The article recounts his frequent teachings to the people, reminding them that 'No virtue surpasses honoring one's parents'..."* (2017, p.151).

Le Quang Truong and Nguyen Thi Lien, in *"Phan Thanh Gian's Literary Conception"*, addressed his moral views in literature: *"When he discusses issues of benevolence, filial piety, respect, reputation, and loyalty, readers sense a 'return' to Confucianism. Yet it is not merely a return but a re-examination of Confucian thought after thirty years of intensive study and more than forty years of rich administrative experience. In each work, he expressed his own opinion—not to glorify, but to affirm the positive values of the sages' ethics"* (2018, p.69).

Continuing this theme, Nguyen Tran Vinh Linh (2021), in *"Humanity in the Poetry of Phan Thanh Gian (Through the Study of Luong Khe Thi Thao)"*, demonstrated Phan Thanh Gian's filial piety and reflections on the duties of a loyal and filial person through poems about the emperor, parents, and family. The author remarked: *"Through verses praising..., Phan Luong Khe also revealed aspects of his character, consistently oriented toward the moral values of an exemplary Confucian scholar."*

From these previous studies, it is evident that, although the authors have presented diverse and in-depth perspectives on filial piety in Confucianism and its reception in Vietnam across different historical periods, and while each thinker adds personal insights reflecting the characteristics of their era, no study has specifically examined Phan Thanh Gian's conception of filial piety. Therefore, we chose the topic *"Phan Thanh Gian's Views on Filial Piety in His Philosophy of Human Life"*, not only to highlight his moral character but also to clarify his perspective on filial piety, one of the foremost and enduring moral values for humanity across all ages.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodological approach in order to examine the concept of filial piety within Phan Thanh Gian's philosophical outlook on human life in a focused and context-sensitive manner.

First, the historical-contextual method is employed to reconstruct the intellectual and socio-political environment in which Phan Thanh Gian lived and developed his thought. By situating his reflections within the late Nguyễn dynasty, this approach helps to explain how filial piety was

interpreted not only as a moral obligation within the family but also as an ethical response to broader social and national challenges.

Second, the textual analysis method is used as a primary tool to closely examine Phan Thanh Giản's extant writings, poems, and official documents. Through this method, key expressions, moral arguments, and implicit philosophical assumptions related to filial piety are identified and interpreted, allowing for a more precise understanding of how the concept is articulated in his thought.

Third, the analytical–synthetic method is applied to systematize the various dimensions of filial piety found in his philosophical outlook. This includes analyzing filial piety as *a personal moral virtue, a familial responsibility, and an extended ethical principle linked to social and political duties*. These aspects are then synthesized into a coherent conceptual framework.

Fourth, the comparative method is utilized in a targeted manner to contrast Phan Thanh Giản's understanding of filial piety with classical Confucian interpretations. This comparison highlights both continuity and adaptation, thereby clarifying the specific characteristics of his thought within the broader Confucian tradition.

Finally, the philosophical–evaluative method is employed to assess the ethical value and contemporary relevance of his conception of filial piety. This method allows the study to move beyond description toward critical reflection, particularly in relation to the applicability of traditional moral values in modern Vietnamese society.

By integrating these methods, the study ensures that the analysis remains closely aligned with the central research objective: to clarify the content, structure, and significance of filial piety in Phan Thanh Giản's philosophical outlook on human life.

Results and discussion

Phan Thanh Gian's philosophy of human life encompasses his perspectives on human beings and their existence. He particularly emphasized moral qualities and moral education, including his views on filial piety. His thought was heavily influenced by Confucianism, as the Nguyễn dynasty used Confucian ideology as a tool for state governance throughout its history. However, in his expression, filial piety became natural and gentle, not constrained by rigid rules, aiming to cultivate filial, virtuous individuals appropriate for the era. This would help establish harmonious and peaceful families and contribute to an ideal society with a wise ruler, virtuous officials, and a contented populace.

Before discussing Phan Thanh Gian's views on filial piety, it is necessary to present the basic content of filial piety in Confucianism to observe the progressive nature of his conception. Accordingly, this study includes the following content: (1) Confucian concepts of filial piety; (2) Phan Thanh Gian's views on filial piety in self-cultivation; (3) Phan Thanh Gian's views on filial piety in family and social relationships.

Confucian concepts of filial piety

Confucianism, a political and philosophical doctrine, was formed early in China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. In Confucianism, "filial piety" (hieu) is considered the root of humaneness (ren) and propriety (li), the highest virtue that both scholars and commoners must uphold and practice. Confucius stated:

"A person who is filial toward his parents and respectful toward elders yet enjoys quarreling and defying superiors is rarely seen. A person who does not offend superiors but desires to rebel does not exist. The superior person focuses on mastering the root of self-cultivation, and then the principles of personal conduct arise naturally in the heart. Filial piety and respect are the roots of being human" (Si Shu, 2006, p.101).

Human behavior reaches its greatest value in filial piety, and there is no greater human transgression than impiety. A child must first practice filial piety toward parents by caring for and supporting elderly parents. This care should be voluntary, respectful, and wholehearted, stemming from genuine emotion. A filial child should also bring happiness to their parents and ensure that

their parents gain respect from society. Therefore, in repaying parental love, children must strive to achieve personal success, not only to glorify themselves but also to bring honor to their parents.

Filial piety also entails obeying the will of one's parents, reflecting the subordination of children to parental authority and the strict upbringing of parents. However, this rule can lead to "foolish filiality," such as the saying "The father commands, the son obeys; if the son does not obey, he is unfilial". Confucian filial piety even requires children to conceal their parents' faults, considered appropriate by sages. When Confucius was asked about a man who reported his father for stealing someone else's goat, he replied: "The father conceals the child's fault, the child conceals the father's fault, honesty is found therein" (Lun Yu, p.206). This implies that when personal and state interests conflict, a child should prioritize family loyalty over law, which is also a major limitation of Confucian filial piety, potentially leading to the neglect of legal obligations.

According to Confucianism, children must marry and have sons to continue the family line. The greatest impiety is not having a male heir, as without a son, ancestors cannot be worshiped, the family line ceases, and the value of filial piety cannot be transmitted across generations. This is considered a strict standard of filial piety in Confucian thought, causing tragedies in countless families during feudal times and continuing to influence society today (Hoang Thu Trang, 2013, p.106).

In general, filial piety in early Confucian thought contains many progressive and reasonable aspects. Later, when Confucianism became a powerful tool for ruling the people, the concept of filial piety became increasingly rigid and extreme: "A loyal minister must die for the ruler; a son must die for his father, or he is unfilial". Although Phan Thanh Gian served under a Confucian-dominated dynasty, his perspective and actions demonstrate that Confucianism was "transformed" into a more open and human-centered philosophy. In other words, he selectively adopted Confucian thought to create a humanistic philosophy of life. What he embraced was not the harsh, rigid ethical rules of Confucianism but a flexible and adaptable application of Confucian theories to explain practical social issues in Vietnam at the time.

Phan Thanh Gian's concept of filial piety

Throughout his life, Phan Thanh Gian exemplified the model of a devoted son. The strict moral upbringing from his family, whose parents were benevolent and virtuous, contributed significantly to shaping his character. Perhaps through a lifelong practice of self-cultivation and ethical conduct, he formulated practical, accessible, and culturally appropriate views on filial piety that resonated with the lifestyle and mindset of Vietnamese people. According to him, human moral qualities are manifested in two aspects: self-cultivation and in relationships with family and society.

Filial piety in self-cultivation

In the journey of self-cultivation of a junzi (gentleman), Phan Thanh Gian emphasized that individuals must continuously cultivate filial piety toward parents and benevolence toward the people. He pointed out that one should prioritize the cultivation of filial piety, as it forms the foundation for other virtues. Following the wisdom of the ancients: "The teachings of the sages begin with oneself, then extend to things" (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.882). Practicing filial piety first is essential: "When filial piety is established, myriad good deeds naturally arise. Filial piety is the greatest virtue and the most important principle. The sages first teach this" (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.772).

It is evident that the concept of filial piety from Confucianism was inherited and developed by the Nguyễn dynasty. If the Confucian Five Virtues are "ren, li, yi, zhi, xin" (benevolence, propriety, righteousness, wisdom, faithfulness), Phan Thanh Gian prioritized them as "filial piety, propriety, righteousness, wisdom, faithfulness", with filial piety encompassing benevolence. He cited Zengzi: "Zengzi said: Filial piety is the principle of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the virtue of man. When the Son of Heaven is filial, he can pacify the nation. From the ruler to commoners, no one can fulfill their duties without filial piety. Such is the greatness of this virtue" (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.772).

In Vietnamese ethical thought, human morality is clearly defined: “Wholeheartedly worshipping mother and respecting father / To fulfill filial duty is the way of a child” (Vietnamese folk verse). Building on this tradition, Phan Thanh Gian elevated filial piety as the foremost virtue, followed by benevolence. He maintained that learning was not merely a path to personal glory or wealth but a means to cultivate oneself as a virtuous person: “Benevolence is primarily love; there is no greater love than love for parents” (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.772).

Although benevolence is ranked second, in essence, Phan Thanh Gian incorporated it within filial piety, meaning filial piety embodies benevolence. He affirmed that all virtuous conduct originates from filial piety: “How could a scholar achieve benevolence without first cultivating filial devotion? Therefore, filial piety leads naturally to benevolence. Neglecting filial piety is a failure toward superiors and disrupts social order. How can one claim to possess humaneness without filial piety?” (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, pp.773–774).

Thus, for moral development, one must first cultivate filial piety. Filial virtue enables a person to honor their parents, love family members, and subsequently extend care to others. Therefore, according to Phan Thanh Gian, filial piety is the primary and fundamental ethical standard in human moral conduct.

Filial piety in family and social relationships

In family relationships

According to Phan Thanh Gian, filial piety within the family primarily refers to the behavior of children toward their parents. Children must care for and provide for their parents, do good deeds to bring joy to them, show respect for elders and consideration for juniors, and express love and harmony among family members. However, in his perspective, filial piety is not a one-sided relationship; it is a reciprocal bond between parents and children, and between superiors and subordinates. This reflects the warm, affectionate nature of Vietnamese familial culture, contrasting with the rigid and strict parent–child relationships of Confucian feudalism.

Furthermore, Phan Thanh Gian emphasized that filial piety should first be practiced within the family and then extended to society. A harmonious, peaceful, and happy family forms the foundation of a good society, where filial respect guides interpersonal conduct.

Regarding parents, Phan Thanh Gian considered filial piety to be the most important moral value for children. Across his works and various situations, he consistently upheld that filial duty ranks above all other virtues: “There is no principle more important than honoring one’s parents” (Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p.109). Children should provide for their parents under any circumstance, whether in wealth or poverty. Later generations still remember the story of Phan Thanh Gian, who was wrongfully accused, and Phan Thanh Gian volunteered to serve in penal labor in his father’s place. Every day he visited his father in prison, performing the hard labor on his behalf (Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p.71). His devotion impressed the supervising official, who provided financial support for his education.

Phan Thanh Gian frequently reminded himself and advised others about filial piety: “To support your parents, one must do good deeds” (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.48). This demonstrates the depth of his understanding of filial duty: supporting one’s parents goes beyond material needs—providing food, clothing, and shelter—but also encompasses bringing spiritual joy and happiness to them.

According to Phan Thanh Gian, the essence of filial piety is to do good deeds to bring joy to one’s parents. Even in matters of education and official service, he believed that success should be pursued not for personal fame or gain, but to please one’s parents: “*The essence of being a filial child lies in continuing one’s parents’ aspirations...*” (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.58). Out of filial duty and the social obligations of a Confucian scholar, he entered officialdom to satisfy his parents, even though he personally preferred a leisurely life: “*Drinking homemade wine from the river, listening to soft music, and sleeping peacefully.*”

According to him, the desires and expectations of parents placed on their children should always be good and worthy, and children should strive to fulfill them to bring their parents joy.

Therefore, even after attaining high office, he did not boast about his achievements, considering them merely a continuation of his father's aspirations:

*"Strict instructions were given,
Continuing the path of filial duty.
Depart without sorrow,
Letters will be sent constantly."*
(Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, pp.60–61)

Phan Thanh Gian repeatedly emphasized that his entry into official service was *"not for the pursuit of fame and prestige, but to fulfill the duty of pleasing one's parents..."* (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.60).

In addition to the depth of his thought, he believed that a child's affection for their parents should not be distant or formalistic—*"respect from afar"*—but rather close, sincere, and loving, while still maintaining reverence. When he went to Huế for examinations, he was moved by having to be away from his father for many days:

*"Silent tears fell softly,
At the moment of bidding farewell to my old father."*
(Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.60)

He always longed to return home to his family and meet his parents and siblings with joy and affection:

*"A day will come to return to my hometown,
Rejoicing with parents and siblings."*
(Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.48)

Phan Thanh Gian's love for his father was expressed simply and sincerely. He frequently wrote letters and visited his father, while his father, in turn, reported in detail the family situation in letters to him. This demonstrates the closeness, intimacy, and absence of distance in the parent-child relationship, representing an advancement in humanistic thought compared to traditional Confucian views on filial duty.

Through Phan Thanh Giản's conduct, the two-way nature of the parent-child relationship is clearly demonstrated, reflecting the warmth and closeness characteristic of Vietnamese family life, which contrasts with the rigid and authoritarian parent-child relationships in feudal Confucianism. In his poem *Đồng sào điếu ca*, he employs the image of a bird's nest to describe the family. He acknowledges the care and love parents provide to their children: *"sheltered and cherished by mother and father"*, and the parental attitude of raising children selflessly: *"Raising children does not await the day they repay."* Only through filial devotion can one perceive the full extent of parental sacrifice, from which he advises children on their responsibilities toward the profound debts owed to their parents:

*"Raising children with hopes for a lifetime,
Do not bring suffering to those who nurtured you."*
(Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.48)

Regarding family, Phan Thanh Giản's consistently emphasizes filial harmony, proper conduct, and close bonds among family members. All these principles are rooted in love and responsibility, expressing filial piety within the family context. Before traveling to the royal capital to take examinations, he wrote the poem *Gia biệt*, in which he mentions all family members and conveys heartfelt emotions for each individual:

*"My seventy-year-old aunt,
Weak and frail, cannot leave her bed."*

*Hearing I come to bid farewell,
Silently, my heart aches with love.”*
He even addresses his cousins:
*“Two cousins are always gathered,
Bound by constant affection...”*
(Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p.61)

Phan Thanh Giản's filial devotion, as well as his conception of filial piety, was not only admired domestically but also earned the respect of the French. Eliacin Luro, a French official who came to Nam Kỳ in 1864 and stayed until 1876, overseeing the local judicial department under Governor Dupré, summarized Phan Thanh Giản's life and observed: *“His filial piety would soon attract attention, for it is a virtue highly respected by this people.”* (Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p.443).

Filial piety in social relations

It is evident that Phan Thanh Giản's placed great emphasis on filial piety. He was concerned not only with practicing filial piety within the family but also extending it to broader social relations. Practicing filial piety involves cultivating love and respect for family members; when one loves and respects one's family, this naturally extends to love and consideration for others in society. The family is a fundamental unit of the state. Only when families are harmonious, filial, and morally upright can the state be strong. Phan Thanh Giản's maintained: *“Filial piety is first practiced within the family, and then benevolence spreads to all things. That is what is meant by being close to one's kin while also loving the people.”* (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, pp. 773–774).

For Phan Thanh Giản, filial piety was not confined to the domestic sphere; it also extended outward to society, encompassing relationships with the people, one's superiors, and those to whom one was indebted. Rather than dwelling on abstract theory, he employed the experiences and actions of his own life as practical illustrations of moral principles, demonstrating the ethical ideals that people should cultivate.

Filial piety toward superiors encompassed respect for ancestors, venerable elders, and those who had assisted him. In his relationship with the king, Phan Thanh Giản's demonstrated loyalty and filial devotion, equating the ruler's benevolence to the nurturing care of parents: *“The king's favor is as profound as the care of one's mother and father.”* (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 60).

In every circumstance, he urged consideration for the king's benevolence, regarding it with the same gratitude as one would for one's parents: *“Only in hardship does one realize the depth of the king's favor; only through long illness does one understand the profound care of a parent.”* (Phan Thi Minh Le, Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 60).

Although wholeheartedly loyal and filial toward the king, Phan Thanh Giản's was also known for his courage to speak candidly, providing frank counsel to achieve the ideal of “a wise ruler and virtuous minister.” This reflects a progressive ethical perspective, avoiding the limitations of blind loyalty and rigid filialism present in traditional Confucianism.

Phan Thanh Giản's held a deep conviction in moral virtue, human goodness, and gratitude. He consistently remembered those who had aided him and sought opportunities to reciprocate. When he studied under his mentor, Master Vo, he paid his respects upon assuming office in Gia Định, walking on foot to his mentor's humble dwelling and carefully adjusting ceremonial items with great reverence. This demonstrated his respectful attitude toward his teacher: *“Although holding high office, he always preserved the proprieties of a devoted student.”* (Multiple authors, 2015, p. 74).

In his youth, Phan Thanh Giản's was aided by Mrs. Nguyen Thi An, who, impressed by his filial devotion, regularly provided him with financial support and clothing. He remembered her generosity throughout his life, visiting her even after achieving distinction and office.

Filial piety toward the people was another important dimension of his ethical practice. Phan Thanh Giản's frequently instructed the populace on filial principles, embedding the philosophy of humaneness within daily life. His teachings emphasized that filial piety should begin at home and

extend outward to society. While conducting inspections, he would stop along the way to resolve grievances and injustices, demonstrating a genuine dedication to educating and guiding the people in moral conduct:

“No virtue is more important than honoring one’s parents. Nothing is more crucial than repaying the nation and one’s family. While young, one must strive to study diligently. When grown, one must work to repay parental debt and serve the nation.” (Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p. 109).

As an official, Phan Thanh Giản’s not only instructed the people in moral precepts but also actively cared for their welfare. Through his judicial and administrative work, he taught values of tolerance, integrity, honesty, and filial respect, demonstrating practical moral leadership rather than merely theoretical knowledge. On one occasion, when returning home to mourn his father, he traveled without attendants and was initially unrecognized by local officials, who questioned him before allowing passage. After the funeral, he commended the official for performing his duty correctly, rewarding and promoting him. Emperor Minh Mạng remarked that he was “a man of upright character, solid determination, broad learning, and high talent.” (Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p. 62).

Phan Thanh Giản’s simple rural upbringing instilled in him a modest lifestyle and sincere interpersonal conduct. Even after attaining high office, he remained humble, describing himself as “an elderly student from the Phan family in the southern reaches” and living a frugal, honest life that earned widespread respect: *“Although a high-ranking minister, his life remained extremely simple, humble, and considerate toward the people.”* (Multiple authors, 2015, p. 74).

In his governance, Phan Thanh Giản’s maintained a clear awareness that the people were “like his own parents,” holding himself personally accountable for their well-being and the fate of the nation. He advised the court on policies that benefited the populace, even when such petitions jeopardized his career. His ethical principle of “filial piety toward the people” manifested in key state decisions. He accepted the surrender of fortresses to the French in exchange for a commitment not to seize the royal treasury or harm the populace, submitting a memorial to King Tự Đức and accepting personal responsibility, ultimately choosing death to atone for any failures in his duty to the nation. While reflecting the difficult circumstances of his era, this decision exemplifies the moral integrity of a Confucian scholar steeped in the ethics of a junzi. It can be seen as a contextually appropriate response, balancing national interest and social responsibility.

Conclusion

It can be observed that Phan Thanh Giản’s perspective on filial piety in his humanistic thought exhibits many characteristics of Confucian ethics. However, he selectively embraced the moral essence of Confucianism and combined it with traditional Vietnamese ethical values, making the core content of his thought on filial piety more accessible, imbued with love, and a strong sense of responsibility. The ultimate goal of this humanistic philosophy was the well-being and development of human life. Phan Thanh Giản’s conception of filial piety not only aligns with Vietnamese cultural values and the ideological context of his era but also continues to retain its relevance today as a normative ethical standard for personal cultivation and for regulating relationships within families and society.

References

HOANG THU TRANG. Confucian concept of “hieu” and its influence on family life in contemporary Vietnam. *Vietnam Social Sciences Journal*, 9(70), 105–111, 2013.

HOANG THUC LAN. Filial piety in contemporary Vietnamese families. *Vietnam Social Sciences Journal*, 10(83), 70–75, 2014.

KHONG TU. **Tu thu** (Tran Trong Sam & Kieu Vu Bach Thuan, Translation work). Hanoi: Vietnam Writers’ Association Publishing House, 2006.

LE QUANG TRUONG, & NGUYEN THI LIEN. Phan Thanh Gian's literary concepts. **Thu Dau Mot University Journal of Science**, 4(29), 2016.

NGO THI LAN ANH, & HOANG THU THUY. The significance of filial piety for family relationships in contemporary Vietnam. **Science & Technology Journal**, 191(15), 9–13, 2018.

NGUYEN DONG TRIEU. A perspective on Phan Thanh Gian's character through some of his works. **Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science**, 14(11), 148–158, 2017.

NGUYEN DUY HAI. The concept of chu Hieu in Vietnamese culture among students in Ho Chi Minh City today. **Van Hien University Journal of Science**, 6(2), 46–54, 2018.

NGUYEN DUY OANH. **Chan dung Phan Thanh Gian**. Hanoi: Bo Van hoa, Giao duc va Thanh nien, Su hoc Publishing House, 1974.

NGUYEN HONG PHONG. **Filial piety in Confucianism and its significance for moral education in contemporary Vietnamese families**, 2015.

NGUYEN THI THU. **“Dao hieu” in Buddhism and its impact on ethics in contemporary Vietnam** (Master's thesis). University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2015.

NGUYEN TRAN VINH LINH. Humans in Phan Thanh Gian's poetry: A study of *Luong Khe thi thao*. **Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science**, 18(10), 1807–1818, 2021.

NHIEU TAC GIA. **The 21st century perspective on the historical figure Phan Thanh Gian** (3rd ed.). Hanoi: Hong Duc Publishing House, 2015.

PHAM THI HOANG OANH. Making filial piety an enduring cultural value. **Quan Doi Nhan Dan Online**, 2023. <https://ct.qdnd.vn/van-hoa-xa-hoi/de-dao-hieu-la-van-hoa-truong-ton-529271>

PHAN THI MINH LE, & CHUONG THAU. **Poetry and Prose of Phan Thanh Gian**. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam Writers' Association Publishing House, 2005.

THICH DONG THANH. Chu Hieu in Confucianism and Buddhism. **Vietnam Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh City**, 2017. <https://www.vbu.edu.vn/chu-hieu-trong-nho-giao-va-phat-giao-2638.html>

Recebido em 12 de janeiro de 2026

Aceito em 27 de abril de 2026