

From “Elevating the Worthy” and “Esteeming the Worthy” to Talent Governance in the Digital Age: The Values and Limits of Mohist and Confucian thought for Contemporary Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Digital transformation has expanded talent governance beyond recruitment and remuneration to include the identification, attraction, selection, development, deployment, empowerment, retention, and reassessment of talent. This article examines the contemporary relevance and limits of the Mohist doctrine of Shang Xian (“Elevating the Worthy”) and Confucian ideas concerning the recognition, cultivation, and employment of worthy persons, with particular reference to Vietnam. Using textual-hermeneutic analysis, comparative philosophy, conceptual reconstruction, and qualitative policy analysis, the study identifies five normative dimensions that can be reconstructed from the classical sources: opportunity, capability, virtue and public responsibility, recognition and reward, and development and empowerment. It adds institutional accountability as a specifically modern corrective, forming a six-dimensional framework for talent governance. Applying this framework to Vietnam’s contemporary talent-policy architecture identifies several areas of normative alignment while highlighting questions concerning evidence-based assessment, transparency, empowerment, reviewability, and bias. The article further proposes normative–institutional translation—moving from classical insight through conceptual reconstruction to modern institutional safeguards—as the appropriate method for relating classical thought to contemporary governance. Mohist and Confucian ideas thus remain relevant not as ready-made policy models, but as normative resources requiring institutional reconstruction under modern legal, digital, and plural conditions.

KEYWORDS: Mohism; Confucianism; Shang Xian; esteeming the worthy; talent governance; digital transformation; Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is changing the knowledge and capabilities required for economic, organizational, and public-sector development. Talent governance therefore extends beyond recruitment and financial incentives to the identification, development, deployment, empowerment, retention, and reassessment of people whose capabilities contribute to institutional goals. Research on talent management emphasizes that talent is context-dependent, while digital transformation increases the importance of digital competence, creativity, adaptability, interpersonal skills, and continuous learning (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Banerjee & Sharma, 2025). Public institutions similarly require flexible systems for skills development, mobility, and effective use of human capabilities (Burtscher et al., 2024; OECD, 2023).

In this article, talent governance refers to the institutional processes through which talent is defined, identified, selected, developed, deployed, empowered, rewarded, retained, and reassessed within accountable decision structures. Governance is used rather than management because the analysis concerns not only human-resource practices but also standards, evidence, authority, public responsibility, and institutional accountability.

These issues are increasingly important in Vietnam. The National Strategy on Attracting and Utilizing Talent to 2030, with a Vision to 2050, provides a national framework for discovering, attracting, utilizing, and retaining talent (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2023). Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW emphasizes high-quality human resources and mechanisms for attracting and retaining scientists and experts in science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam [CPV Politburo], 2024). Decree No. 179/2024/NĐ-CP addresses talented persons in public institutions, while the Law on Science, Technology and Innovation and Decree No. 263/2025/NĐ-CP further develop policies concerning scientific and technological talent (Government of Vietnam, 2024, 2025; National Assembly of Vietnam, 2025). Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW also links higher education to high-level human-resource and talent development (CPV Politburo, 2025). Together, these documents indicate an emerging policy architecture extending beyond attraction toward talent formation, utilization, development, remuneration, and retention.

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This development raises a philosophical question: who should be recognized as worthy of responsibility, by what standards, and under what conditions should their capabilities be developed and used? Classical Chinese philosophy addressed related questions in different historical circumstances. Mohist Shang Xian (尚賢), or “Elevating the Worthy,” challenges status-based appointment and emphasizes the elevation and employment of persons with relevant qualities and abilities (Mozi, 2010; Fraser, 2016). Confucian texts likewise address worthy and capable persons while emphasizing cultivation, education, appropriate appointment, and responsible political conduct (Confucius, 2003; Mencius, 2008).

These traditions cannot be treated as ready-made theories of modern talent governance. Their concepts developed within political institutions fundamentally different from contemporary states. Moreover, “esteeming the worthy” is used here as an analytical category for relevant Confucian ideas, not as a canonical doctrine equivalent to Mohist Shang Xian. The task is therefore to reconstruct selected normative insights rather than assume direct continuity between classical philosophy and modern policy.

Relevant scholarship remains divided among several fields. Mohist studies examine Shang Xian, merit, ability, and public benefit (Knoblock & Riegel, 2013; Fraser, 2016); research on Confucian meritocracy addresses virtue, competence, selection, and political legitimacy (Bell, 2015; Bai, 2020; Han, 2026; Ziliotti, 2026); and talent-management scholarship focuses on identification, development, deployment, and retention under changing organizational and digital conditions (Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Tambe et al., 2019; Banerjee & Sharma, 2025). The literature reviewed for this study shows limited integration between classical Mohist–Confucian normative resources, contemporary talent-governance theory, and Vietnam’s emerging digital-era talent-policy architecture.

The article addresses this gap through three research questions:

RQ1: What normative principles concerning the identification, selection, development, use, and recognition of worthy persons can be reconstructed from Mohist Shang Xian and relevant Confucian texts?

RQ2: How can these principles be translated into talent governance in the digital age, and what historical, conceptual, epistemic, and institutional limits prevent their direct application?

RQ3: What does the reconstructed framework reveal about the normative strengths, gaps, and unresolved institutional questions within contemporary Vietnamese talent policy?

The article makes two related contributions. First, it challenges the simplified contrast between ability-centered Mohism and virtue-centered Confucianism. It reconstructs five classical-derived dimensions—opportunity, capability, virtue and public responsibility, recognition and reward, and development and empowerment—and adds institutional accountability as a specifically modern corrective, producing a six-dimensional framework for talent governance.

Second, the article develops normative–institutional translation as the mechanism connecting classical thought with contemporary governance: classical insight → conceptual reconstruction → modern institutional safeguards. Rather than directly applying ancient ideas, this approach reconstructs their normative value within institutions governed by law, evidence, transparency, review, and accountability. It provides the analytical basis for examining both the contemporary relevance and the limits of Mohist and Confucian thought for talent governance in Vietnam.

2. MATERIALS, SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Materials and Scope

The study draws on three bodies of materials. The first consists of classical Mohist and Confucian texts. For Mohism, the primary focus is the three Shang Xian (“Elevating the Worthy”) chapters of the Mozi (Chapters 8–10), using Johnston’s complete translation (Mozi, 2010) and Knoblock and Riegel (2013) for textual comparison, together with Fraser (2016) for philosophical interpretation. For Confucianism, the study examines relevant passages in the Analects and Mengzi, primarily through Slingerland’s translation of the Analects (Confucius, 2003) and Van Norden’s translation of the Mengzi (Mencius, 2008).

The second body comprises contemporary scholarship on Mohism, Confucian political meritocracy, talent management, digital capability, public employment, and artificial intelligence in human-resource decisions (Bell, 2015; Bai, 2020; Tambe et al., 2019; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Burtscher et al., 2024; Banerjee & Sharma, 2025; Han, 2026; Ziliotti, 2026). The third consists of major Vietnamese policy and legal documents concerning talent, education, science and technology, innovation, and digital transformation, particularly those issued between 2020 and 2025.

The expression “esteeming the worthy” is used throughout this article as an analytical category for related Confucian ideas concerning the recognition, cultivation, promotion, and employment of worthy persons. It is not the title of a canonical Confucian doctrine equivalent to Mohist Shang Xian.

2.2. Conceptual Scope and Distinctions

The study does not assume that classical and contemporary concepts are interchangeable. The classical term xian (賢) cannot be mechanically translated as modern “talent”; depending on context, it refers more broadly to a worthy or morally and practically

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qualified person. Likewise, contemporary terms such as talent, high-quality human resources, digital talent, experts, and political leaders describe overlapping but distinct categories.

The analysis therefore focuses on shared normative and functional questions rather than direct conceptual continuity: who should be entrusted with responsibility, how relevant capability should be identified and developed, what ethical qualities should accompany it, and under what conditions capable persons can contribute effectively. These distinctions help avoid projecting contemporary human-resource concepts onto classical texts.

2.3. Research Methods

The study combines four methods. First, textual-hermeneutic analysis is used to interpret relevant passages from the Mozi, Analects, and Mengzi in relation to their concepts of worthiness, ability, cultivation, appointment, and political responsibility. Particular attention is given to Mozi Chapters 8–10, Analects 2.19, 2.20, and 13.2, and Mengzi 1B7 and 2A5.

Second, comparative philosophical analysis identifies similarities and differences between Mohist and Confucian approaches without reducing them to a simple opposition between ability and virtue. The comparison concerns their normative foundations and their approaches to opportunity, capability, cultivation, recognition, and the employment of worthy persons.

Third, conceptual reconstruction translates selected classical insights into analytical dimensions that can be examined under contemporary conditions. This process does not claim that ancient thinkers developed modern talent-governance concepts. It identifies normative principles that may retain analytical value after historical and institutional differences are recognized.

Fourth, qualitative policy analysis examines how these reconstructed dimensions relate to Vietnam’s contemporary talent-policy architecture. Policy documents are analyzed for their normative and institutional provisions concerning talent formation, attraction, selection, utilization, development, remuneration, empowerment, and retention. The study evaluates their normative and institutional design; it does not measure their empirical effectiveness.

2.4. Principle of Functional Comparison

The comparison between classical philosophy and contemporary talent governance follows a principle of functional rather than historical equivalence. Mohist and Confucian texts are not treated as early versions of modern human-resource management. Instead, the study asks how historically different traditions respond to comparable functional questions concerning the identification, development, and appropriate use of human capability.

The analytical process therefore proceeds through normative–institutional translation: classical insight → conceptual reconstruction → modern institutional safeguards. Classical principles are first interpreted within their original conceptual setting, then reconstructed at a more general normative level, and finally examined in relation to contemporary institutions. This approach allows classical thought to inform modern analysis without assuming direct institutional continuity or attributing contemporary concepts retrospectively to ancient thinkers.

3. “ELEVATING THE WORTHY” AND “ESTEEMING THE WORTHY”: RECONSTRUCTING TWO CLASSICAL APPROACHES

3.1. Mohist Shang Xian: Worthiness, Ability, and Opposition to Inherited Privilege

3.1.1. Shang Xian as a Problem of Governance

The Mohist doctrine of Shang Xian (尚賢), usually translated as “Elevating the Worthy,” addresses a fundamental problem of governance: who should be entrusted with responsibility and on what grounds? The three Shang Xian chapters of the Mozi (Chapters 8–10) connect the elevation and employment of worthy persons directly to the quality of government (Mozi, 2010, chs. 8–10; Knoblock & Riegel, 2013).

Chapter 8 presents the elevation of worthy persons as a foundation of government and associates it with employing the capable (shì neng). Public responsibility should therefore be allocated according to relevant qualities rather than inherited or established social position (Mozi, 2010, ch. 8). The concern is both normative and practical: government cannot function well when officeholders lack the qualities required for their responsibilities.

This principle is not equivalent to modern meritocratic administration. Its contemporary significance lies instead in the question it poses: whether responsibility should follow status or demonstrated worthiness and capability (Fraser, 2016).

3.1.2. Worthiness Is Not Reducible to Technical Ability

The common contrast between an ability-centered Mohism and a virtue-centered Confucianism oversimplifies Shang Xian. Mohist worthiness includes practical ability but is not reducible to technical competence. Worthy persons are assessed in relation to conduct, judgment, knowledge, capability, and contribution to political and social purposes (Mozi, 2010, chs. 8–10; Fraser, 2016).

Within the broader Mohist concern with public benefit and social order, capability matters because it enables contribution to collectively valued outcomes. Mohist merit is thus both ethical and functional. This does not erase differences from Confucianism;

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rather, it relocates them in their normative foundations and in the mechanisms through which capability, ethical quality, and political responsibility are connected.

3.1.3. Social Origin and Access to Public Responsibility

A distinctive feature of Shang Xian is its criticism of inherited status as a sufficient basis for office. Chapter 8 allows capable persons from lower social groups, including farmers, artisans, and merchants, to be promoted. It further states that office should not remain permanently noble and ordinary people should not remain permanently low: those with ability may be raised, while those without it may be lowered (Mozi, 2010, ch. 8).

These passages give Shang Xian a strong anti-status dimension. Social origin should not permanently exclude capable persons from responsibility. Yet this is not modern liberal equality. Mohist reasoning focuses primarily on the political costs of excluding useful capacities because of birth or status.

The principle is therefore better reconstructed as status-independent opportunity: inherited position should not override relevant merit in allocating public responsibility (Fraser, 2016; Schwartz, 1985). Modern equality of opportunity requires additional legal and institutional safeguards absent from the Mohist context.

3.1.4. Recognition, Reward, and Authority

The Shang Xian chapters also indicate that identifying worthy persons is insufficient unless they receive the conditions necessary to act. Chapter 8 connects their employment with rank, material support, responsibility, and authority, arguing that inadequate rank, emoluments, or decision-making power would prevent them from accomplishing their tasks (Mozi, 2010, ch. 8; Knoblock & Riegel, 2013).

Recognition is therefore linked to effective use. Rank and resources enable action, while authority allows appointed persons to exercise responsibility. The modern reconstruction is not that ancient emoluments equal contemporary salaries, but that recognition, resources, and authority must accompany responsibility. Talent formally recognized but denied meaningful resources or decision space remains institutionally underutilized.

3.2. Confucian Perspectives: Virtue, Ability, Cultivation, and Responsible Appointment

3.2.1. “Esteeming the Worthy” as an Analytical Category

Unlike Mohist Shang Xian, “esteeming the worthy” is not a single canonical Confucian doctrine. The term is used here as an analytical category covering related ideas in the Analects and Mengzi concerning the recognition, cultivation, promotion, and employment of worthy persons.

Confucian texts situate these questions within a broader account of moral cultivation and political order. Public office is not ethically neutral, because the character and conduct of officeholders affect the political community. At the same time, capability remains relevant. The central issue is how virtue, ability, cultivation, and political responsibility should be related (Confucius, 2003; Mencius, 2008).

3.2.2. Promoting Worthy and Capable Persons

In Analects 13.2, when Zhonggong asks about government, Confucius advises him to appoint appropriate officials, overlook minor faults, and “promote those who are worthy and talented” (ju xiancai) (Confucius, 2003, 13.2, pp. 138–139). Zhonggong then asks how those he does not personally know can be identified, introducing an important epistemic problem: a decision-maker cannot personally know every suitable candidate.

The passage therefore connects good government with both the promotion and discovery of capable persons. It does not establish a modern recruitment procedure, but it raises a question that remains central to talent governance: how can merit beyond the decision-maker’s immediate knowledge be reliably identified?

3.2.3. Moral Qualification and Political Appointment

The ethical dimension appears explicitly in Analects 2.19. Responding to Duke Ai’s question about government, Confucius recommends raising the upright over those who are not upright (Confucius, 2003, 2.19, p. 14). Political appointment is therefore not ethically neutral: the qualities of those exercising authority matter to the wider political community.

This does not establish an absolute hierarchy of virtue over ability. Rather, it provides a basis for the dimension later termed virtue and public responsibility: capability exercised through public authority must be connected to responsible conduct.

3.2.4. From Selection to Cultivation

Analects 2.20 adds a developmental dimension. Confucius recommends promoting good or accomplished persons while teaching those who are not yet capable (Confucius, 2003, 2.20, p. 14). Suitable human capacities therefore need not merely be discovered; they can also be formed through education and cultivation.

Classical cultivation is not equivalent to contemporary talent development. The functional insight is narrower but important: capability can be developed rather than merely selected. A system concerned only with recruiting already accomplished persons neglects the processes through which future capabilities are produced.

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3.2.5. Honoring the Worthy and Employing the Capable

The Mengzi reinforces the connection between worthiness and political employment. In 2A5, Mencius refers to “honoring the worthy and employing the capable” (zun xian shi neng) so that outstanding persons can occupy appropriate positions (Mencius, 2008, 2A5).

The passage prevents Confucian concern from being reduced to symbolic respect for moral character. Recognition must be connected to actual use. It also confirms that Confucian thought cannot be characterized simply as virtue without capability: both matter, although they operate within a broader moral-political conception of government.

3.2.6. Judgment and Verification Before Appointment

An important epistemic insight appears in Mengzi 1B7. In discussing appointment, Mencius distinguishes among different sources of judgment: approval by attendants is insufficient, as is approval by senior officials; even broader support requires the ruler to investigate before appointing the person (Mencius, 2008, 1B7).

The passage belongs to a hierarchical political context and should not be read as modern independent review or democratic accountability. Its narrower significance is that claims of worthiness require examination rather than acceptance from a limited circle. It therefore supports a distinction between asserted merit and examined merit. Contemporary institutions confront a structurally similar epistemic problem when credentials, expert recommendations, performance indicators, or algorithms are used as evidence of talent.

3.3. Similarities and Differences: Beyond “Ability versus Virtue”

The textual evidence shows substantial overlap between the two traditions. Both connect the qualities of officeholders to political order, recognize capability as relevant to appointment, and refuse to treat responsibility as morally neutral.

Their emphases nevertheless differ. Mohist Shang Xian more strongly challenges status-based barriers and connects merit with appointment, resources, and authority, justified largely by public benefit and effective order. Confucian texts emphasize cultivation, upright conduct, appropriate appointment, and the responsibility to recognize and employ worthy persons (Confucius, 2003, 2.19–2.20, 13.2; Mencius, 2008, 1B7, 2A5; Mozi, 2010, ch. 8).

The difference is therefore not simply ability versus virtue, but concerns normative foundations and mechanisms of formation, selection, and use. Each tradition also carries risks when translated into modern institutions: Mohist concern with contribution can be reduced to narrow output measurement, while Confucian concern with moral character can become subjective moralism if criteria remain vague or unreviewable.

3.4. Toward a First Conceptual Reconstruction

Five analytical dimensions can be reconstructed from this comparison. Opportunity derives primarily from the Mohist challenge to inherited status. Capability reflects both traditions’ concern with relevant ability. Virtue and public responsibility captures the ethical conditions under which capability is exercised. Recognition and reward concerns the status and resources necessary to support contribution. Development and empowerment combines the Confucian emphasis on cultivation with the Mohist concern for sufficient authority to accomplish assigned tasks.

These are analytical reconstructions developed by this study, not doctrines explicitly formulated as a unified framework by Mozi, Confucius, or Mencius. They preserve selected normative insights while enabling comparison with contemporary talent governance. They are also insufficient by themselves for modern institutions. Classical texts raise questions about worthiness, capability, recognition, and use, but do not provide contemporary procedures for determining who defines merit, what counts as evidence, how bias is controlled, how decisions can be reviewed, or who bears responsibility for erroneous judgments. These problems require a sixth dimension—institutional accountability—introduced later as a specifically modern corrective.

4. TALENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE: WHY THE CLASSICAL QUESTION MUST BE REFORMULATED

The classical question of who deserves responsibility remains relevant, but its institutional form has changed substantially. In the digital age, talent is more dynamic, organizationally dependent, and difficult to assess than a fixed set of qualifications. Classical insights must therefore be reformulated in relation to changing capabilities, talent lifecycles, credential-based selection, and increasingly data-driven assessment.

4.1. From Fixed Qualifications to Dynamic Capability

Talent in the digital age cannot be defined simply as technological expertise. Digital transformation changes not only specific technical skills but also the conditions under which knowledge is produced, applied, and renewed. Contemporary talent increasingly combines domain expertise with digital capability, creativity, adaptability, interpersonal competence, and continuous learning (Banerjee & Sharma, 2025; Burtscher et al., 2024).

Talent should therefore be understood as dynamic rather than static. Its value depends not only on what individuals currently know but also on their capacity to learn, adapt, collaborate, and apply knowledge in changing contexts. This is consistent with the broader

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talent-management literature, which emphasizes that definitions and assessments of talent depend on organizational and institutional contexts (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020).

This produces a limited functional connection with the Confucian emphasis on cultivation. The comparison does not imply historical equivalence between moral self-cultivation and contemporary professional development. Rather, both challenge the assumption that human capability is simply possessed once and for all. In contemporary terms, talent is not merely possessed; it is continuously developed and contextually activated.

4.2. From Recruitment to the Talent Lifecycle

A second reformulation concerns the scope of talent governance. Recruitment alone does not ensure that talent is effectively used. Strategic and global talent-management research emphasizes the importance of identifying critical capabilities, developing people, deploying them appropriately, and creating conditions for retention and contribution (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2010).

From this perspective, talent governance can be understood through an interconnected lifecycle:

Identify → Attract → Select → Develop → Deploy → Empower → Retain → Recognise → Reassess.

The lifecycle highlights a distinction between having talent within an institution and enabling talent to contribute. A highly capable person may be successfully recruited yet remain underutilized because of inadequate resources, limited autonomy, inappropriate placement, weak development opportunities, or deficient recognition.

This point provides a functional bridge to the classical discussion. Mohist Shang Xian connects the elevation of worthy persons with the resources and authority required to accomplish their responsibilities, while Confucian texts emphasize cultivation and appropriate employment. In modern institutional terms, selection must therefore be connected to development, deployment, empowerment, and reassessment.

4.3. From Credentials to Demonstrated Capability

Modern systems have largely moved beyond inherited birth as an explicit basis for allocating public and professional positions. Yet formal equality of access does not eliminate status-based selection. Credentials can themselves become proxies for merit, particularly when degrees, institutional prestige, titles, or formal qualifications are treated as sufficient evidence of capability.

This creates an important conceptual progression:

birth/status → credential/status → demonstrated capability.

The Mohist criticism of inherited status provides a normative lens for reconsidering contemporary credentialism, although the two problems are historically distinct. The relevant principle is that social or institutional markers should not automatically substitute for evidence of relevant capability.

This issue is particularly significant in Vietnam. Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW explicitly identifies a continuing problem in personnel policy: qualifications and degrees may be valued more highly than actual capability (CPV Politburo, 2025). This diagnosis creates a direct contemporary policy question concerning how institutions can move from formal indicators toward more substantive evidence of competence and contribution.

The solution, however, cannot be to disregard qualifications. Credentials can provide useful evidence of training and expertise. The problem arises when they become status proxies rather than evidentiary inputs. Talent governance therefore requires multiple forms of evidence appropriate to the role concerned, combined with opportunities for capability to be demonstrated and reassessed.

4.4. AI, Data, and the Problem of Identifying Merit

Digital technologies expand the capacity to identify and assess talent through performance data, digital profiles, automated screening, predictive analytics, and artificial intelligence. These tools may increase the scale and consistency of assessment, but they also introduce new epistemic and institutional risks. AI-assisted human-resource decisions can reproduce historical bias, rely on imperfect proxies, reduce complex qualities to measurable indicators, and make decision processes difficult to explain or contest (Tambe et al., 2019).

Digitalization therefore does not solve the classical problem of identifying worthy persons; it changes its form. A decision once dependent heavily on personal judgment may now depend on credentials, metrics, databases, algorithms, or combinations of human and automated assessment. The central problem becomes not merely whether merit matters, but how merit is defined and verified. This reformulation leads to a set of institutional questions:

Who defines merit, using what evidence, through which indicators and decision procedures, and under what conditions can those judgments be questioned or corrected?

Neither Mohist nor Confucian thought supplies modern answers to these questions. Their relevance lies in maintaining attention to capability, ethical responsibility, appropriate recognition, cultivation, and the problem of identifying worthy persons. Contemporary governance must add institutional mechanisms capable of making such judgments transparent, evidence-based, reviewable, and accountable.

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The digital age thus transforms the classical question from “Who is worthy?” into the more institutionally demanding question of how worthiness and capability are defined, evidenced, developed, exercised, and reassessed. This reformulation provides the basis for examining Vietnam’s contemporary talent-policy architecture in the following section.

5. FROM CLASSICAL PRINCIPLES TO CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE TALENT GOVERNANCE

The reconstructed classical principles provide a normative lens for examining Vietnam’s emerging talent-policy architecture. The comparison does not suggest that contemporary policies derive from Mohist or Confucian thought. Rather, it asks where policy provisions exhibit normative alignment with the reconstructed dimensions and what institutional questions remain unresolved. This section therefore examines opportunity, capability, virtue and public responsibility, recognition and reward, development and empowerment, attraction and retention, and the effective utilization of talent.

5.1. Opportunity: From Status-Independent Access to Open Talent Systems

Vietnam’s recent policies seek to broaden the sources from which talent can be identified and attracted. The National Strategy on Attracting and Utilizing Talent to 2030, with a Vision to 2050, establishes a framework for discovering and attracting talented persons across sectors (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2023). Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW further calls for special mechanisms to attract highly qualified Vietnamese people, including those abroad, as well as foreign experts and scientists in strategic fields (CPV Politburo, 2024). Decree No. 179/2024/NĐ-CP similarly provides mechanisms for attracting and utilizing talented persons in public institutions (Government of Vietnam, 2024).

At the normative level, this orientation aligns with the reconstructed Mohist principle of status-independent opportunity: access to responsibility should not be restricted by inherited or established position when relevant capability exists. The modern institutional context is fundamentally different, but both raise the question of whether systems are sufficiently open to identify capability beyond conventional status boundaries.

The unresolved question concerns how openness is operationalized. Broadening the pool of potential talent does not itself ensure equal access if selection continues to depend heavily on institutional prestige, formal credentials, personal networks, or other status proxies. Opportunity therefore requires not only wider recruitment but also transparent and relevant criteria for identifying capability.

5.2. Capability: From Formal Qualifications to Demonstrated Competence

Vietnamese policy increasingly emphasizes high-quality human resources and talent for science, technology, innovation, education, and digital transformation (CPV Politburo, 2024, 2025; National Assembly of Vietnam, 2025). Particularly significant is Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW, which identifies the continuing tendency in personnel policy to value qualifications and degrees more highly than actual capability (CPV Politburo, 2025).

This diagnosis creates a strong normative connection with the classical problem identified earlier. The Mohist critique of status-based appointment does not provide a contemporary recruitment model, but it offers a lens through which credentialism can be reconsidered. Modern institutions may overcome inherited status while creating new forms of status through degrees, titles, or institutional prestige. The relevant transition is therefore birth/status → credential/status → demonstrated capability.

The institutional challenge is to determine what counts as reliable evidence of capability. Qualifications remain relevant, particularly in specialized fields, but should function as evidentiary inputs rather than automatic substitutes for merit. A capability-oriented system therefore requires role-relevant assessment, demonstrated performance, multiple sources of evidence, and periodic reassessment rather than exclusive reliance on formal credentials.

5.3. Virtue and Public Responsibility

Talent governance concerns not only what capable persons can do but also the purposes and responsibilities associated with their capabilities. This is especially important in public administration, education, science, and technology, where professional decisions may affect institutions and society beyond individual performance.

The classical traditions provide a normative basis for this dimension. Mohist worthiness connects ability to public benefit, while Confucian texts connect political responsibility with upright conduct and moral cultivation. In contemporary Vietnam, policies on talent operate within broader requirements concerning public responsibility, professional standards, and contribution to national development (CPV Politburo, 2024, 2025).

The alignment should not be overstated. Classical virtue cannot simply be converted into a modern personnel criterion. If “virtue” is defined vaguely, assessment can become subjective or moralistic. Contemporary talent governance therefore requires public responsibility to be translated into observable professional standards, integrity requirements, ethical obligations, and accountable conduct appropriate to particular roles.

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5.4. Recognition and Reward: Beyond Financial Incentives

Vietnam’s talent policies recognize that attracting and retaining highly capable persons may require differentiated incentives. Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW calls for special policies concerning income and working and living conditions for leading scientists and experts, while Decree No. 179/2024/NĐ-CP establishes incentives for talented persons in public institutions (CPV Politburo, 2024; Government of Vietnam, 2024). Policies concerning science, technology, and innovation similarly seek to create more favorable conditions for high-level human resources (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2025; Government of Vietnam, 2025).

This orientation is normatively compatible with the Mohist connection among recognition, material support, and effective service. Yet the classical reconstruction also suggests why remuneration alone is insufficient. Financial reward can support attraction and retention, but contribution depends on whether talented persons receive the resources, institutional position, and working conditions required to use their capabilities.

The unresolved question is therefore whether reward is accompanied by enabling conditions. A policy may recognize talent financially while leaving organizational constraints, limited resources, or restricted decision space unchanged. Recognition becomes institutionally meaningful only when it facilitates contribution.

5.5. Development and Empowerment

Contemporary talent governance must develop capability rather than merely compete for already accomplished individuals. Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW emphasizes education and higher education in developing high-quality human resources and talent, while Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW stresses human-resource development for science, technology, innovation, digital transformation, and emerging technologies (CPV Politburo, 2024, 2025).

This orientation has a functional affinity with the Confucian emphasis on cultivation: capability is not fixed but can be formed and improved. In modern terms, development includes advanced education, interdisciplinary learning, digital and AI capabilities, research training, professional development, and lifelong learning. The comparison concerns this developmental logic rather than any equivalence between Confucian self-cultivation and contemporary training.

Development, however, is incomplete without empowerment. Newly acquired capability has limited institutional value if individuals lack meaningful responsibility, autonomy, resources, or opportunities to apply it. The key policy question is therefore not only how talent is developed, but whether institutions enable developed capability to be exercised.

5.6. Attraction and Retention as an Institutional Ecosystem

Vietnam’s recent policy architecture increasingly recognizes that talent attraction cannot be separated from retention. Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW combines special mechanisms for attracting scientists and experts with attention to income, working conditions, and living environments, while the National Talent Strategy addresses attraction, utilization, and retention within a longer-term framework (CPV Politburo, 2024; Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2023).

This suggests a shift from isolated incentives toward a talent ecosystem. Sustainable attraction depends on remuneration, research and technological infrastructure, career opportunities, professional autonomy, institutional culture, mobility, and conditions for continued development. The issue is particularly important for highly mobile talent capable of working across institutions or national borders.

The unresolved institutional question is whether these elements operate as an integrated system. Attractive entry conditions may produce recruitment without long-term retention if professional autonomy, career development, infrastructure, or recognition remain inadequate. Talent governance must therefore consider the institutional environment across the talent lifecycle rather than focus on initial attraction.

5.7. From Talent Utilization to Empowerment

The distinction between recruiting talent and genuinely utilizing it is particularly important. The National Talent Strategy and recent regulations repeatedly emphasize the attraction and utilization of talented persons (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2023; Government of Vietnam, 2024). Yet “utilization” can remain narrow if understood primarily as appointment to a position.

The Mohist discussion of rank, resources, and authority provides a useful normative insight here. Appointment without the means to accomplish assigned responsibilities is incomplete recognition of worthiness. Translated into contemporary institutional terms, effective talent utilization requires appropriate placement, resources, autonomy, decision space, and responsibility proportionate to capability.

This leads from utilization to empowerment. Compensation helps attract and retain talent, but meaningful resources and authority enable contribution. Consequently, talent that is recognized but not empowered remains institutionally underutilized.

Across these dimensions, Vietnam’s contemporary talent-policy architecture shows several areas of normative alignment with the reconstructed classical principles: broader access to talent, stronger attention to actual capability, differentiated recognition, human-capability development, and concern with attraction and utilization. The analysis also reveals unresolved questions concerning how

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capability is evidenced, how criteria are made transparent, whether rewards are accompanied by authority and resources, and how talent judgments can be reviewed.

These questions cannot be resolved by classical principles alone. They point toward a sixth dimension absent as a modern institutional structure in the classical sources: institutional accountability. The following section therefore examines both the limits of classical inheritance and the institutional safeguards required to translate its normative insights into contemporary talent governance.

6. VALUES AND LIMITS: TOWARD A SIX-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF TALENT GOVERNANCE

The preceding analysis shows that Mohist and Confucian ideas retain contemporary value only through selective reconstruction. Their contribution lies not in supplying an ancient model of meritocracy for modern institutions, but in identifying normative questions concerning opportunity, capability, ethical responsibility, recognition, development, and the use of worthy persons. Their historical and institutional limits simultaneously require a specifically modern corrective: institutional accountability.

6.1. What Can Legitimately Be Inherited?

Five normative dimensions can be reconstructed from the classical sources. First, the Mohist challenge to inherited status supports opportunity beyond fixed social position. Second, both traditions recognize capability as relevant to the allocation of responsibility. Third, capability is connected to virtue and public responsibility, rather than treated as ethically neutral. Fourth, worthy persons require appropriate recognition and reward. Fifth, Confucian cultivation and the Mohist concern with effective appointment support development and empowerment.

These principles should be understood as normative resources rather than institutional prescriptions. Their contemporary value lies in the questions they preserve: Who should have access to opportunity? What constitutes relevant capability? Toward what ends should capability be exercised? How should contribution be recognized? Under what conditions can capability develop and be effectively used?

6.2. Historical Limits

The most fundamental limitation is historical. Mohist and Confucian political thought emerged within monarchical and hierarchical societies lacking modern constitutional government, equal citizenship, administrative law, independent review, and contemporary rights frameworks. Their concepts of office, hierarchy, authority, and worthiness therefore cannot be transferred directly into modern institutions.

Even the Mohist criticism of inherited status does not constitute a modern theory of equality. Similarly, Confucian concern with worthy government does not itself establish democratic legitimacy or rule-of-law constraints. Contemporary reconstruction must therefore distinguish normative insight from institutional form. What may remain relevant is a question or principle, not the political structure in which it originally appeared.

6.3. Conceptual and Epistemic Limits: Who Knows Who Is Worthy?

A second limitation concerns the concepts of worthy, virtuous, and talented. These terms are evaluative and potentially contested. Different institutions may require different capabilities, while ethical qualities are difficult to assess consistently. A merit system therefore faces an epistemic problem: who is competent to judge merit, and on what evidence?

The classical texts recognize aspects of this difficulty. *Analects* 13.2 raises the problem of identifying capable persons beyond a decision-maker's immediate knowledge, while *Mengzi* 1B7 suggests that claims about a candidate require examination rather than reliance on a narrow circle of judgment (Confucius, 2003, 13.2; Mencius, 2008, 1B7). These passages illuminate the problem but do not supply modern verification procedures.

Contemporary institutions must therefore distinguish asserted merit from examined merit. Degrees, recommendations, performance records, interviews, peer assessments, and other indicators can provide evidence, but none should automatically be equated with merit itself. Talent judgments require evidence appropriate to the role and procedures through which such evidence can be scrutinized and reassessed.

6.4. Political and Institutional Limits of Merit

Merit-based governance can itself generate concentrations of power. Those authorized to define and identify merit may reproduce their own values, favor familiar profiles, or transform existing advantages into apparently neutral standards. Meritocracy can therefore create elite closure even when it formally rejects hereditary privilege (Bell, 2015; Bai, 2020; Ziliotti, 2026).

This problem is especially important when moral character becomes a selection criterion. Vague appeals to “virtue” may permit subjective judgment, while apparently objective indicators of capability can privilege those with better access to education, institutions, or professional networks. Neither ethical language nor performance measurement is automatically impartial.

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Modern talent governance must consequently ask not only who is worthy, but also who defines worthiness and who controls those definitions. Merit requires institutional limits on the power of merit-identifiers themselves.

6.5. Digital Limits: Metrics, Proxies, and Algorithmic Bias

Digital technologies intensify these epistemic and institutional problems. Data analytics and AI can process large amounts of information and assist in screening or assessment, but measurable indicators are not identical to the qualities they are intended to represent. Publication counts may imperfectly represent research quality; credentials may only partially indicate capability; performance metrics may privilege easily measured outputs over less visible forms of contribution.

AI-assisted systems add risks of historical bias, proxy discrimination, opacity, and excessive reliance on automated recommendations (Tambe et al., 2019). A technically consistent assessment can therefore remain substantively unfair or conceptually mistaken.

Digital talent governance should not seek to eliminate human judgment but to structure its relationship with evidence and technology. Data and AI may support assessment, while human judgment remains necessary for interpretation, contextual evaluation, and responsibility. The relevant question becomes how evidence, technological systems, and human decision-makers can be combined without allowing any one of them to become an unquestionable authority.

6.6. Institutional Accountability as the Modern Corrective

The preceding limits reveal what the classical traditions cannot provide by themselves. Modern talent governance requires an institutional dimension governing how judgments of talent are produced, justified, challenged, and corrected. This article terms that dimension institutional accountability.

Institutional accountability includes transparent criteria, relevant evidence, appropriate expert or peer assessment, explanation of decisions, opportunities for review, safeguards against bias and conflicts of interest, clear responsibility for decisions, and periodic reassessment. Its purpose is not to replace judgments about capability or ethical responsibility, but to make those judgments institutionally answerable.

This produces a six-dimensional framework:

Table 1. Six-Dimensional Framework for Talent Governance

Dimension	Classical/Modern Source	Core Question	Contemporary Translation	Institutional
Opportunity	Mohist challenge to status	Who has access?	Open access, fair recruitment, anti-nepotism	
Capability	Mohist and Confucian concern with ability	What can the person actually do?	Competence, performance, innovation, digital capability	
Virtue and Public Responsibility	Both traditions	Toward what ends is capability exercised?	Integrity, professional ethics, public responsibility	
Recognition and Reward	Mohist rank and material support	How is contribution recognized and supported?	Remuneration, recognition, position, resources	
Development and Empowerment	Confucian cultivation; Mohist authority	Can capability grow and be exercised?	Lifelong learning, mentoring, autonomy, resources, authority	
Institutional Accountability	Modern corrective	Who defines, verifies, reviews, and answers for merit judgments?	Transparency, evidence, review, anti-bias safeguards, accountability	

The framework should not be understood as six independent variables of equal weight. Talent governance emerges from their interaction. Opportunity without credible capability assessment can weaken selection; capability without public responsibility can become socially harmful; recognition without empowerment can leave talent underutilized; and all five classical-derived dimensions become vulnerable when judgments cannot be examined or challenged.

Institutional accountability is therefore not another classical principle. It is the modern condition that enables reconstructed classical insights to operate within rule-based, plural, and technologically mediated institutions.

6.7. Normative–Institutional Translation

The relationship between classical thought and contemporary governance can now be expressed as a three-stage model of normative–institutional translation:

Classical insight → Conceptual reconstruction → Modern institutional safeguards.

At the first stage, classical ideas are interpreted within their historical and textual contexts. At the second, selected insights are reconstructed at a level that permits functional comparison—for example, the Mohist challenge to inherited status becomes status-

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independent opportunity, while Confucian cultivation contributes to a developmental understanding of capability. At the third stage, these reconstructed principles are subjected to contemporary requirements of law, evidence, transparency, reviewability, equality of opportunity, and accountability.

This third stage is essential because conceptual reconstruction alone cannot solve modern institutional problems. A principle such as selecting the worthy remains incomplete until institutions specify who evaluates candidates, what evidence is admissible, how conflicts of interest are controlled, whether decisions can be reviewed, and who bears responsibility for error.

The framework therefore proposes inheritance through transformation rather than direct application. Classical philosophy contributes normative resources; conceptual reconstruction identifies their contemporary analytical value; and modern safeguards determine the institutional conditions under which those values can be legitimately used. In this sense, the six-dimensional framework and normative–institutional translation are complementary: the former identifies what dimensions talent governance should examine, while the latter explains how classical insights can enter contemporary analysis without anachronism.

7. CONCLUSION

This article examined the contemporary relevance and limits of Mohist Shang Xian (“Elevating the Worthy”) and Confucian ideas concerning the recognition, cultivation, and employment of worthy persons for talent governance in the digital age, with particular reference to Vietnam. Rather than treating these traditions as ready-made models, the study reconstructed selected normative insights and examined the institutional conditions required for their contemporary use.

In response to RQ1, the textual analysis identified five classical-derived dimensions: opportunity, capability, virtue and public responsibility, recognition and reward, and development and empowerment. The comparison also challenges the simplified opposition between an ability-centered Mohism and a virtue-centered Confucianism. Both traditions connect capability with ethical and political responsibility, although they differ in normative foundations and in their approaches to formation, selection, and employment.

In response to RQ2, these principles require reformulation under digital conditions. Talent is increasingly dynamic and context-dependent, while credentials, performance metrics, data, and AI complicate the identification of merit. Classical insights therefore remain insufficient without a sixth dimension—institutional accountability—comprising transparent criteria, relevant evidence, reviewability, safeguards against bias, and responsibility for talent judgments. The study accordingly proposes a six-dimensional framework and a three-stage process of normative–institutional translation: classical insight → conceptual reconstruction → modern institutional safeguards.

In response to RQ3, applying this framework to Vietnam’s contemporary talent-policy architecture reveals several areas of normative alignment, including broader talent attraction, greater attention to actual capability, differentiated incentives, human-capability development, and talent utilization. It also identifies unresolved institutional questions concerning how capability is evidenced, how credentialism is avoided, whether recognition is accompanied by resources and authority, and how talent decisions are reviewed and held accountable. These findings concern policy design rather than empirical policy effectiveness.

The study is primarily philosophical and policy-analytical. It does not test the implementation or outcomes of Vietnam’s talent policies, nor does it establish causal relationships between classical traditions and contemporary policy. Future research could examine organizational cases, compare talent-governance arrangements across institutional or national contexts, and empirically investigate how criteria, assessment procedures, empowerment, and accountability operate in practice.

The contemporary relevance of Mohist and Confucian thought lies neither in reviving an ancient meritocracy nor in treating classical wisdom as ready-made policy. It lies in recovering enduring questions about who deserves responsibility, by what standards, for what purposes, and under whose accountability, and reformulating those questions for institutions shaped by law, digital technologies, and plural societies.

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