

THE ROLE OF TRẦN THÁI TÔNG IN ENSURING SOCIAL STABILITY IN ĐẠI VIỆT DURING THE EARLY TRẦN PERIOD

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Manuscript received: 19/10/2023; Peer-reviewed: 25/11/2023; Accepted: 30/11/2023

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Abstract

This research uses a historical approach to clarify the important role of King Trần Thái Tông in establishing the political system, governing the country and people, and building the cultural and ideological foundation for Đại Việt society during the Trần dynasty. The article analyzes Trần Thái Tông's proactive choice of Buddhism as the key to long-term peace and stability, inheriting the cultural and social heritage of the Lý dynasty, and applying Buddhist thought and wisdom to build and develop the country. In this sense, Trần Thái Tông is an important historical figure who played the role of a bridge between Buddhism of the Lý and Trần dynasties. Besides, the research affirms the significant contributions of King Trần Thái Tông to Buddhism and the unification of Buddhism during the Trần dynasty.

Keywords: *Trần Thái Tông, Lý - Trần Buddhism, Trúc Lâm Zen Sect*

1. Introduction

King Trần Thái Tông stands as a unique figure in Vietnamese history. He not only founded the Trần dynasty, playing a crucial role in its establishment and development, but also contributed significantly to the foundation of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect. As a historical figure bridging two dynasties, he served as a vital link between Buddhism in the Lý and Trần periods. His illustrious reign played a pivotal role in shaping a distinctive

cultural era in Vietnam: the Lý-Trần period.

Right from the time of the monarchy, historians paid considerable attention to this historical figure, recording both praise and criticism. Notable examples include Phan Phu Tiên in *Đại Việt sử ký tục biên*, Ngô Sĩ Liên in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, Ngô Thì Sĩ in *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, and the Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn in *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*. While acknowledging Trần Thái Tông's contributions to the Trần dynasty and Buddhism, these

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historians also heavily criticized him for the circumstances of his ascension to the throne, his marital life, and his morality from a later Confucian perspective.

Nowadays, many studies have been conducted on Trần Thái Tông, particularly by scholars of Buddhism. Among the most notable are those by Nguyễn Lang (*Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận*), Lê Mạnh Thát (*Toàn tập Trần Thái Tông*), and Hòa Thượng Thích Thanh Từ (*Khóa hư lục bình giải*). Overall, modern scholars recognize Trần Thái Tông's critical role in establishing the Trần dynasty, building and developing Đại Việt society, and laying the foundation for the One-Sect Buddhism of the Trần period (Phật giáo nhất tông). Additionally, they analyze the historical context to clarify, explain, and defend him against the criticisms of Confucian historians.

Based on a historical approach, this research aims to reconstruct the life and career of King Trần Thái Tông within the complex context of the early dynasty's establishment. Employing textology, the study examines Buddhist texts attributed to Trần Thái Tông, analyzing and identifying his Buddhist thought and views on utilizing Buddhism for governance, pacification, and cultural and educational development. Fundamental historical research methods, including dialectical materialism, source criticism,

synthesis, comparison, and description, are also utilized. Notably, the study applies the global history approach to assess the impact of climate change on history, identifying connections between historical events in Đại Việt and the world during Trần Thái Tông's reign to achieve a comprehensive evaluation of this historical figure. Additionally, statistical and quantitative methods are employed to shed light on the research issues.

Drawing from the case of Trần Thái Tông, this article elucidates why the Trần dynasty chose Buddhism as its cultural and ideological foundation and evaluates the pivotal role of Buddhism in maintaining peace and stability in Đại Việt society during the early Trần period. Furthermore, the article analyzes Trần Thái Tông's role in fostering the interconnectedness of Đại Việt culture during the Lý-Trần period as a bridge between the two eras.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TRẦN DYNASTY

The Trần dynasty lasted 174 years (1226-1400). This was a turbulent dynasty in Vietnamese history). First of all, the Trần military force established its position and rose to power by quelling the prolonged internal conflicts that plagued the late Lý dynasty and early Trần dynasty, most notably the uprisings led by Đoàn Thượng and Nguyễn Nộn. Subsequently, Đại Việt valiantly

repelled three consecutive invasions by the powerful and aggressive Mongol Empire, which had conquered over half of the world: the first Mongol invasion (1258), the second Mongol-Yuan invasion (1284-1285), and the third Mongol-Yuan invasion (1287). Champa also launched numerous attacks and raids, and directly attacked the capital Thăng Long (1360-1390). King Trần Duệ Tông lost his life in a battle against Champa at the Citadel of Đồi Bàn (1377).

In addition, the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records frequent natural disasters and epidemics during this period, particularly in the last 70 years of the dynasty, which caused significant social upheaval (Vũ Đức Liêm 2021). Based on these events, it can be asserted that the Trần dynasty was characterized by military conflicts, turmoil, and instability.

However, it was during this period that Vietnamese Buddhism reached its peak, achieving unification under a single school - the "One Sect Buddhism" (Phật giáo nhất tông) (Nguyễn Lang 2011, 205) - and becoming a cornerstone of the flourishing Đại Việt civilization. The Trần dynasty and the people of Đại Việt admired peace and fought valiantly to defend it, relying on culture and Buddhism to solidify their peaceful existence.

This begs the question: why such a paradox? Why did Buddhism become a decisive choice for the cultural, social,

and peaceful foundations of Đại Việt during the Trần dynasty? The answer lies in the very beginning of the dynasty, with a central figure - the first king, Trần Thái Tông. Studying the case of Trần Thái Tông will find many valid grounds that contribute to explaining this issue.

3. TRẦN THÁI TÔNG: AN ARRANGED KING

Within the context of the early Trần dynasty, Trần Thủ Độ played a leading role in the political arrangements that established the new regime. Consequently, many historians argue that Trần Thái Tông was a passive figure in the dynasty's formation. Several monarchical historians even emphasize the notion of Trần Thái Tông's "arranged" ascension to the throne (*Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn* 2001, 188).

However, these evaluations of Trần Thái Tông primarily focus on his personal issues, neglecting the broader picture and historical context. Even Trần Thái Tông himself initially struggled with the conflict between his personal desires and his responsibilities towards the dynasty, the country, and the people. This is most evident in the exchange between the king and Quốc sư (the teacher of the crown prince) when he contemplated retiring to Mount Yên Tử, as recorded by the king himself in in "Bài tựa Khóa hư lục" - the preface entitled "Khóa hư lục": "Quốc sư held my hand and said:

'As a monarch, one must take the will of the people as one's own will, and the heart of the people as one's own heart. Now the people want Your Majesty to return, how can you not return? However, I beg Your Majesty not to forget the study of the Buddhist scriptures for even a moment'" (Thích Thanh Từ 1996, 10).

This became the guiding principle for his governance and pacification of the people throughout his reign as king and retired emperor for over half a century (1226-1277) – a period long enough for him to diligently establish a unique governing style and lay a solid foundation for the Trần dynasty (1226-1400).

Through his talent and dedication, Trần Thái Tông gradually assumed the responsibility for the country and the people. His proactive approach manifested in four key areas: 1/ Inheriting the legacy of the Lý dynasty; 2/ Establishing the political and social institutions of the Trần dynasty; 3/ Leading the military against foreign invaders; 4/ Laying the foundation for the Unified Buddhist ideology of Đại Việt during the Trần period. Notably, all of Trần Thái Tông's proactive actions were guided by Buddhist thought. In this sense, Buddhism became a crucial factor in ensuring the stability that was essential for the establishment of the Trần dynasty.

4. INHERITING THE LÝ DYNASTY'S HERITAGE

4.1. The Continuation of the Lý Royal Lineage through the Maternal Line

When Trần Thái Tông ascended to the throne, it was a time when the Trần ruling family realized the need to establish a strong patrilineal system for a centralized, powerful central institution. And this mission was entrusted to Trần Thái Tông.

During the Lý dynasty, a patrilineal monarchy modeled after Confucian China had been established, with the king passing the throne to his eldest son (Momoki Shiro 2019, 28-31). However, the role of noble women remained significant. This is evident in the legend of Lý Công Uẩn's birth, which is associated with his mother whose name was Phạm Thị who lived in Tiêu Sơn Mountain (only the maternal line is known). The regency and powerful influence of Lý dynasty queens over young emperors, such as Empress Dowager Ý Lan - mother of Lý Nhân Tông, Empress Lê - mother of Lý Anh Tông and her alliance with Đỗ Anh Vũ, Empress Dowager Đàm - mother of Lý Huệ Tông, and especially the last ruler of the Lý dynasty, Empress Lý Chiêu Hoàng. The transfer of power between the Lý and Trần families, apart from the role of Trần Thủ Độ, must also be attributed to the significant influence of Trần Thị Dung - wife of King Lý Huệ Tông.

In the transition between the two dynasties, the continuity is reflected in the continued importance of the maternal line. Trần Thái Tông married Lý Chiêu Hoàng, daughter of Lý Huệ Tông. When Lý Chiêu Hoàng had no children, Trần Thị Dung and Trần Thủ Độ immediately arranged for Trần Cảnh to marry Princess Thuận Thiên, who was pregnant, also is a daughter of Lý Huệ Tông. Trần Thái Tông's crown prince, later known as King Trần Thánh Tông, was the son of him and Empress Lý Thuận Thiên.

During this significant transition between the Lý and Trần dynasties, Buddhism, a traditional religion of the nation, played a crucial role in mediating institutional conflicts. This is because Buddhism emphasizes equality, compassion, and engagement with the world.

4.2. The Buddhist Foundation of the Lý dynasty

The inheritance of the Lý dynasty's Buddhist foundation was crucial for the peace of Đại Việt in the early Trần dynasty, as evidenced by two salient points:

First, the Trần dynasty inherited the strong social foundation of Buddhism from the Lý dynasty.

A look at the history of the establishment and development of the Lý dynasty reveals that this dynasty lasted 217 years (1009-1226) due to its being built and consolidated on the solid social foundation of Buddhism.

Buddhism arrived in Giao Châu in the 1st century AD, with the Luy Lâu Buddhist center (now in Bắc Ninh province) as its center. Over 1,000 years of development, it became the largest religion, permeating Vietnamese society. With its inherent dialectical materialism, practical application, orientation towards goodness, call for equality, and doctrines of Samsara and Dependent Origination, Buddhism resonated with the indigenous cultural sentiment of the Vietnamese people from the outset, quickly penetrating and deeply embedding itself in the cultural and spiritual life of Vietnamese villages. Lý Công Uẩn was raised and grew up in a pagoda education environment, was arranged by the Buddhist forces to take a position in the Early Lê dynasty, and then gradually ascended to the throne, establishing the Lý dynasty. In 1009, Lý Công Uẩn ascended to the throne. A year later, in 1010, he moved the capital from Hoa Lư - the defensive capital of the Đinh and the Early Lê dynasties - to Đại La citadel, renaming it Thăng Long, a metropolitan city. The capital of a long-lasting, peaceful centralized state was established. Why did Lý Công Uẩn make the quick and decisive decision to move the capital to propel Đại Việt forward? Scholars have offered many explanations. Among them, the most important reason is Lý Công Uẩn's firm belief in the people's support - the crucial social foundation of the dynasty. And the hearts of the

Vietnamese people at that time had been permeated by Buddhism, thanks to the deep-rootedness of this religion in the very fabric of Vietnamese society, the village. Throughout the more than 200 years of the Lý dynasty's existence, the social foundation of Buddhism was further strengthened. Buddhism was widely embraced by the people and truly became a national religion, an integral part of Đại Việt culture. Grasping the strong social foundation of Buddhism was the key to the door of peace in the early Trần dynasty.

In addition, the Trần dynasty continued to revere Buddhism. Trần Thái Tông - the first king who became a Zen master - was an effective measure to mitigate the tension in the transition from the Lý dynasty, which had taken Buddhism as its pillar. At the same time, the young king Trần Thái Tông's respectful attitude towards Buddhism and his commitment to inheriting the Lý dynasty legacy won the trust and support of the Buddhist, which had become very powerful by the end of the Lý dynasty. King Lý Huệ Tông abdicated in favor of his son and became Huệ Quang Grand Master, residing in Chân Giáo pagoda (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 8).

The Trần Dynasty had the support of the Buddhist community right down to the villages, meaning it had the hearts of the people. This was the path that helped the Trần dynasty suppress

the separatist forces at the end of the Lý dynasty, typically those of Nguyễn Nộn and Đoàn Thượng. According to statistics, there are still 37 temples dedicated to Đoàn Thượng in Hà Nam province alone (Lại Văn Toàn & Trần Thị Băng Thanh 2004, 142-145, 952-954), indicating that they were not only a separatist military force but also enjoyed the support of the people and villages. Moreover, with the compassionate philosophy of Buddhism, Trần Thái Tông even allowed the people to build temple to worship Đoàn Thượng as a hero who had contributed to the country (Lại Văn Toàn & Trần Thị Băng Thanh 2004, 142-145), further winning the people's trust and strengthening the Trần dynasty's social foundation from within the villages. Therefore, the Trần dynasty made significant progress compared to the Lý dynasty in many aspects.

On the other hand, this was seen as an effective political and economic measure to stabilize society from the village level, a driving force for economic development. Based on epigraphic materials such as *Càn Ni sơn Hương Nghiêm tự bi minh*, *Cổ Việt thông Diên Phúc tự bi minh*, *Báo Ân thiền tự bi ký...*, it can be seen that the ownership of pagoda land in the Lý dynasty was already quite large (Nguyễn Thị Phương Chi 2002; 2019, 722-725) and constantly increased thanks to the donations of the royalty, nobles,

officials, and the custom of sending "hậu" (land for the deceased) by the people.

Second, Trần Thái Tông also inherited the Buddhist ideology of the Lý dynasty, using Buddhism as the ideological foundation for governing the country and pacifying the people, alongside the use of Confucianism as a governing doctrine to organize the state apparatus and stabilize social order.

Zen Master Trần Thái Tông had a deep understanding of Buddhist teachings. He constantly cultivated Buddhist studies as the core of his learning. This was a connection with the national traditional culture, connecting and inheriting the cultural and ideological heritage of the Lý dynasty, avoiding an abrupt break with the previous dynasty in both cultural and social aspects. Buddhism was truly a precious bridge between the patriarchal institution and traditional culture - maternal power, between the imported political system (from China) and national culture (indigenous). Thanks to that, the king would achieve the connection between the centralized central government and the village social base - the cultural and social foundation of Vietnam for thousands of years.

To do this, the king worked day and night, assuming the mission of not only being the head of state in terms of administration and politics but also the

leader of ideology and culture. In the "Preface to the Threefold Samadhi Sutra", reprinted in the book *Khóa hư lục*, Trần Thái Tông expressed himself as follows: "I consider the virtue of being the master of the country, leading the people, every time I think of the difficulties, I forget the morning and evening. Although there are ten thousand things, I steal the free time, take care of the time, and study more and more. I am still afraid that I do not understand the words fully, so I still study late at night. I have read the books of Confucius, and I have also read the Buddhist scriptures" (Thích Thanh Từ 1996, 481-482).

The caliber of Trần Thái Tông is there. He devoted all his energy to practice, becoming a king who was excellent both in civil and military matters, proficient in Confucianism and well-versed in Buddhist scriptures. Trần Thái Tông was deeply aware of his duties and responsibilities towards his family, dynasty, and country. Although Trần Thủ Độ had not much education, but thanks to his military outstanding talent and strategy he could start the beginning of the Trần dynasty from war. Therefore, the task of building the educational, cultural and ideological foundation for the solid existence of the dynasty was placed on the shoulders of the young king. He proactively tried to step by step seize the throne and consolidate the dynasty. This showed the profound cultural background of the leading figures of

the Trần dynasty. Trần Thủ Độ himself also understood the role of Trần Thái Tông. Trần Thủ Độ and Trần Thái Tông had a deep connection and trust in building the court, governing the country and pacifying the people, and imbued with the altruistic ideology of Buddhism. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records: In the year Giáp Tý [1264], in the first month, Grand Tutor Trần Thủ Độ died (at the age of 71), posthumously awarded the title of Thái sư Trung Vũ Đại Vương. Although Thủ Độ had not much education, he was more talented and strategic than others and was honored by everyone when he served as a mandarin in the Lý dynasty. Thái Tông was able to gain all lands and people of the whole country thanks to his ingenuity and strength. Therefore, he was relied on by the state and his power surpassed that of the king. At that time, there was someone who impeached him, went to see Thái Tông and cried, saying: "Your Majesty is still young and Thủ Độ's power surpasses that of the king, what will happen to the country?" Thái Tông immediately ordered a carriage and horses to go to Thủ Độ's residence, arrested the person who impeached him and told Thủ Độ everything that person had said. Thủ Độ replied: "It is exactly as he said." Then he immediately took money and silk to reward that person (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 41).

Such solid foundations led the Trần dynasty to choose Buddhism as the ideology for governing the country and pacifying the people (alongside Confucianism as the doctrine for organizing the state model). Standing at the center, the foundation, Buddhism has contributed to creating the cultural and ideological characteristics of the Trần period.

5. ESTABLISHING THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE TRẦN DYNASTY

The political and social institutions of the Trần dynasty were unique institutions formed during the reign of Trần Thái Tông. The centralized aristocratic monarchy emerged due to the requirements of the historical context and the will of the Trần clan, ensuring the stable existence of the dynasty for nearly 200 years. This institution concentrated power in the hands of the Trần aristocracy. Key positions in the court were all held by the aristocracy (Vũ Văn Quân et al. 2019, 50-51). The Supreme Emperor held power, and the king, during the reign of the Supreme Emperor, only played the role of a crown prince. Therefore, this two-king institution stabilized the throne, minimizing the risks of usurpation or coup d'état by foreign powers. On the other hand, this institution strengthened the still-loose patriarchal political institution of the Lý dynasty. The dominant patriarchal character was a historical feature of the

Trần dynasty - a dynasty that emphasized strength, was built from the suppression of internal rebellion, matured and stood firm thanks to its military and cultural strength that overcame the three invasions of the Mongol-Yüan empire, the most powerful in the world.

According to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*: In the year Ất Dậu [1225], in the 12th month, Trần Thái Tông received the throne from Chiêu Hoàng and ascended to the throne as Emperor, changing the reign name to Kiến Trung (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 8). In the year Bính Tuất [1226], in the first month, Trần Thủ Độ was appointed Grand Tutor and Commander-in-Chief of the Military Campaign... Trần Thủ Độ attacked Nguyễn Nộn, Đoàn Thượng and the barbarians. In the 5th month, ranks were awarded to civil and military mandarins according to their different ranks. In the 10th month, his father was honored as Supreme Emperor and lived in the Phụ Thiên Palace, Hạc Kiều Ward on the left side. Whenever there was a major event in the country, he would stay there to consider and decide (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 8-10). In the year Canh Dần [1230], in the 3rd month, the *Quốc triều thông chế* was compiled and the laws and rituals were revised... (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 13-14). In the year Nhâm Thìn [1232], in the first month, the court rituals were established (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 14-15).

In 1234, Trần Thái Tông transformed the Trần dynasty into a centralized monarchy following the Confucian model of China. This was a significant step forward compared to the Lý dynasty. Specifically, institutionalizing the organization of the state apparatus; establishing a regular civil service examination system; appointing civil service mandarins in an authoritative system down to the commune level; perfecting the administrative system, placing mandarins at the commune level; completing the organization of the army. Thanks to these reforms, the Trần dynasty was strengthened and able to successfully resist the Mongol ferocious invasion in 1258.

In terms of diplomacy, Trần Thái Tông brought more than half a century of peace to Đại Việt thanks to his skillful diplomatic strategy. At that time, the expansion of the Mongol empire had caused turmoil throughout the world. Previously isolated nations were now connected, interacting with each other politically and militarily, forming historical ties. In that context, Trần Thái Tông proved himself to be not only a brave king on the battlefield, but also a shrewd and flexible politician and diplomat. The king was particularly wise in his understanding of the Mongol expansion, the Mongol war of conquest against the Song dynasty, and so on, in order to formulate appropriate diplomatic

strategies to ensure the interests of the nation and the dynasty.

In the year Mậu Ngọ [1258], in the first month, the king sent envoys to pay tribute to the Song dynasty; at the same time, he sent Lê Phụ Trần - a general who had fought alongside the king against the Mongols - and Chu Bác Lãm to the Yuan dynasty and reached an agreement to pay tribute once every three years. On the other hand, the king abdicated in favor of Crown Prince Hoảng, becoming Supreme Emperor and retiring to the Northern Palace (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 35). The abdication, but in fact still holding power, was also a formal pretext, to help ease the relationship between Đại Việt and the Mongols after the war in which Trần Thái Tông personally led the army.

Thanks to his perseverance in this flexible and soft diplomatic policy, Trần Thái Tông was able to maintain peace for Đại Việt for a long time. His reign from 1226 to 1277 meant that for about 20 years after the war with the Mongols in 1258, until his death, Đại Việt lived in peace.

Economically, Trần Thái Tông created the conditions for the emergence of a unique land tenure system in the Trần dynasty, namely the *điền trang - thái ấp* (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 43-44). This was also a special land tenure system in the

history of the Trần dynasty (Nguyễn Thị Phương Chi 2002; 2019).

So, what role did Buddhism play in Trần Thái Tông's establishment of the Trần Dynasty's political and social institutions? Trần Thái Tông's Buddhist ideology emphasized wisdom in practice, focusing on cultivating and applying intelligence in daily life. He always stressed the importance of core awareness as the foundation for action, believing that reaching the pinnacle of wisdom is equivalent to attaining Buddhahood. Trần Thái Tông's farsightedness, resourcefulness, and flexibility in his governing style were the result of his cultivation of wisdom as both a monarch and a Buddhist layman. In other words, he utilized Buddhist wisdom to establish an effective system for the country during a turbulent era.

6. LEADING THE TROOPS AGAINST THE FIRST MONGOL INVASION (1258)

Trần Thái Tông was a valiant military leader. Despite ascending to the throne at the age of eight and growing up in a peaceful and luxurious environment, he devoted himself to both academic and martial pursuits. When the Mongol army invaded Đại Việt, he personally led the troops into battle in the first clash at Bình Lệ Nguyên (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 33).

Trần Thái Tông also personally led the decisive battle that ultimately defeated the Mongols: "On the 24th day, the King and the Crown Prince boarded a warship and advanced to Đông Bộ Đầu, where they engaged the enemy and completely routed them. The Yuan army fled back to the Quy Hóa camp, where the camp commander Hà Bổng rallied the Man people to attack, but they were also defeated" (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 34).

He is remembered as a courageous king in Vietnamese history, whose bravery inspired the Đại Việt army and people to fight with exceptional valor. The combined heroism of the king, his subjects, and the Trần army led to a resounding and unexpected victory, where a small nation defeated the most powerful empire in the world at that time.

7. ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATION OF ONE-SECT BUDDHISM DURING THE TRẦN DYNASTY

According to scholar Nguyễn Lang, at the beginning of the Trần dynasty, the merging of the three Zen schools of Tỳ Ni Đa Lưu Chi, Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường led to the development of the Trúc Lâm school - the only Zen school during the Trần dynasty. This was largely due to the influence of Trần Thái Tông and Tuệ Trung thượng sĩ, and therefore, the Trần dynasty can be considered as the era of "One Sect Buddhism" (Nguyễn Lang, 2011: 205).

Trần Thái Tông's path of Buddhist practice was greatly influenced by the Trúc Lâm National Master, also known as Thiền sư Viên Chứng. Viên Chứng was responsible for reviewing many Buddhist scriptures before they were printed in Đại Việt, including Trần Thái Tông's "Khóa hư lục" (Nguyễn Lang 2011, 214-215). In 1236, when Trần Thái Tông went to Yên Tử mountain to become a monk, it was Viên Chứng who awakened his Buddhist and national spirit, persuading him to return to rule the country: "There is no Buddha in the mountains, the Buddha is in our hearts. If the mind is calm and wisdom arises, that is the Buddha. If Your Majesty can enlighten that mind, you will immediately become a Buddha right here, there is no need to seek hardship outside" (Thích Thanh Từ 1996, 7-8).

When it comes to the Buddhist ideology of Trần Thái Tông, there have been numerous in-depth research studies conducted to date. It can be said that his most prominent Buddhist ideas are: "Phật tại tâm" (The Buddha is within), "Tinh thần nhập thế" (The spirit of engagement), "Lấy Thiền làm phương pháp" (Using meditation as a method), "Lấy tuệ giác, tự giác và từ bi làm phương châm đạt tới Phật tính" (Taking wisdom, self-awareness, and compassion as the motto for attaining Buddhahood).

Trần Thái Tông's ideology is manifested in his works: *Thiền tông chỉ nam* (The Guide to Zen); *Kim Cương*

Tam Muội kinh chú giải (Commentary on the Diamond Sutra); *Lục thì sám hối khoa nghi* (Six Repentance Rituals); *Bình đẳng lễ sám văn* (Prayer for Equality); *Khóa hư lục* (Instructions on the Essentials of Emptiness); *Thi tập* (Poetry Collection) (Thích Thanh Từ, 1996: 7-8). It is rare to find a king who has contributed so many works to Buddhist studies. Trần Thái Tông played a crucial role in building the Buddhist doctrine of the Trần dynasty. His great efforts in scholarship and propagation achieved brilliant success, contributing to the unification of Buddhism during the Trần dynasty.

Conversely, Buddhist ideology also had a profound influence on Trần Thái Tông's governance style. For example, the vigilance and encouragement of action reflected in the "Lục thì sám hối khoa nghi" made him a wise ruler. The king was always self-aware and did not lose himself in a life of mindless enjoyment. When the nation needed him, he fought bravely and risked his life, leading the army (Nguyễn Lang 2011, 225).

In his Zen ideology, Thái Tông was always striving to realize wisdom in order to find something that is not born or destroyed in the cycle of birth and death, impurity, suffering, impermanence, and non-self (Nguyễn Lang 2011, 243). Therefore, the king valued the stability of the regime. The Trần Thái Tông reign can be

considered the most stable period in the over 170 years of the Trần dynasty.

Trần Thái Tông's devotion to Buddhism was manifested in specific policies. He created conditions for Buddhism to penetrate deeper into villages and the daily lives of the people. In the year of Tân Mão [1231], he issued an edict that all pavilions and stations in the country must have a Buddha statue for worship. Previously, due to the hot weather, many pavilions were built for people to rest on the way, usually whitewashed and called pavilions and stations (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2,14). Historian Ngô Thì Sĩ also assessed that Buddhism under the Trần dynasty was more respected than under the Lý dynasty, evidenced by the fact that in just the intercalary month of the year Bính Thìn [1256], the king had 330 bronze bells cast (*Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn* 2001, 208).

Inspired by Buddhist teachings, Trần Thái Tông and many Trần nobles had a unique perspective on the throne. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records the following anecdote: In the winter October of the year Mậu Thìn [1268], the king [Trần Thánh Tông] and his elder brother, Tĩnh Quốc Đại Vương Quốc Khang [the eldest son of Lý Thái Tông, Empress Thuận Thiên was pregnant with Quốc Khang 3 months before marrying Trần Thái Tông] were joking in front of the Retired Emperor.

The Retired Emperor was wearing a white cotton shirt at the time. Tĩnh Quốc danced a Hồ dance, and the Retired Emperor took off his shirt and gave it to Quốc Khang. The king also danced a Hồ dance to ask for the shirt. Quốc Khang said: "The most precious thing is the throne, I don't even compete with my Majesty for it. Now the Supreme One has given me this small thing, and my Majesty also wants to take it away?". The Retired Emperor laughed and said: "So you see the throne and this ordinary shirt is no different." He praised him for a long time and then gave Quốc Khang the shirt (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 46). The egalitarian spirit of Buddhism made the relationship between the king and his subjects, and between father and son, closer and simpler. It was this innocent perception of kingship and power that motivated the Trần king and nobles to dedicate themselves to the dynasty and the country, leading to the brilliant achievements of the early Trần Dynasty.

In his personal life, the kindness and compassion of Buddhism, which had long been blended with the Vietnamese people's lifestyle of valuing loyalty and naturalness in emotions, greatly influenced Trần Thái Tông's behavior. A typical example is his "way of dealing with people" in his marital relationship. According to historical records, in the spring of the year Mậu Ngọ - 1258, after the resounding victory of the first

resistance war against the Mongols, the king summoned all the officials to court to confer titles and ranks. The king appointed Lê Phụ Trần as Grand Historian; he also gave Princess Chiêu Thánh in marriage to him. The king said: "Without you, I would not have today. Please try your best so that we can be together forever." (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 35). Throughout his reign, based on Lê Phụ Trần's talent and contributions, Trần Thái Tông always placed him in important positions. In particular, in the year Giáp Tuất [1274], he also appointed Lê Phụ Trần as Junior Tutor and concurrently Director of the Imperial Academy (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 48), i.e. the teacher of the Crown Prince. Lý Chiêu Thánh gave birth to two children and lived a happy and peaceful life with Lê Phụ Trần. In Vietnamese traditional culture, Trần Thái Tông's behavior is full of kindness; from a Buddhist perspective, it is compassion, equality, love for people, and respect for the core values in the Heart.

8. LÝ THÁI TÔNG AND TRẦN THÁI TÔNG: AN ATTEMPT TO SKETCH A CONNECTION

This paper aims to explore the similarities between two Vietnamese monarchs: Lý Thái Tông (1028-1054) and Trần Thái Tông (1225-1277), in order to shed light on the cultural connections between their respective dynasties.

Firstly, both were founding monarchs. Lý Thái Tông and Trần Thái Tông established the unique political systems of the Lý and Trần dynasties, respectively, which contributed to long periods of social stability. Both monarchs were skilled in both civil and military affairs and served as paragons of virtue for their subjects. They were not only talented politicians and cultural figures but also brave military leaders who fought on the battlefield. Their abilities and determination were crucial to the survival and development of their dynasties.

Secondly, both adopted similar strategies to stabilize their realms in the context of internal turmoil and instability upon their ascensions to the throne. These two key strategies were: 1) adopting Buddhism as the foundation of their ideologies; and 2) emphasizing the ideology of loyalty and making the Oath of Đồng Cổ (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 1, 262; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 2009, Vol 2, 11).

Regarding the adoption of Buddhism as a key strategy for stabilizing their realms, both Lý Thái Tông and Trần Thái Tông inherited the Buddhist legacy from previous dynasties and actively engaged in it. The Oath of Đồng Cổ marked the initial establishment of a ruling ideology that combined the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This confirmed the ideology of the

Three Teachings as One Origin during the Lý-Trần period. Therefore, in both founding dynasties, Buddhism was a key factor deliberately chosen to pacify the country and lay the foundation for the development of the dynasties.

Thirdly, both monarchs were Zen masters. Lý Thái Tông belonged to the Vô Ngôn Thông Zen lineage, while Trần Thái Tông belonged to the Yên Tử Zen school. Both monarchs applied Buddhist teachings to governance with an engaged spirit. Both the Lý Thái Tông and Trần Thái Tông reigns were marked by a strong devotion to Buddhism. While the kings were determined to defend their territories and achieved resounding military victories against invaders (both conquered Champa, Lý Thái Tông in 1044 and Trần Thái Tông in 1252), they were also flexible and diplomatic in their internal and external affairs.

In conclusion, the most important constant between the two monarchs was Buddhism. They both chose Buddhism as the key to long-term stability and peace for the country. This demonstrates the crucial role of Buddhism as a thread connecting Đại Việt society during the Lý-Trần period and preserving the traditional cultural heritage of the nation.

9. CONCLUSION

The contributions of King Trần Thái Tông to Đại Việt during the Trần dynasty were immense, of which

choosing Buddhism as the ideological foundation of Đại Việt society was the greatest success in his reign. Thanks to this, in the early Trần dynasty, the country was peaceful and stable, creating an important foundation for the flourishing of Đại Việt civilization.

This research, from a historical perspective, takes Buddhism as the focal point to analyze the life, career, and contributions of Trần Thái Tông to Đại Việt. Through historical events, it demonstrates the proactiveness, creativity, flexibility, and leadership skills of Trần Thái Tông. At the same time, from an institutional perspective, the article points out the transition from the Lý dynasty's institutional system to the Trần dynasty's institutional system (aristocratic centralized monarchy, patriarchy) and analyzes the important role of Buddhism as a bridge and a means of mediation.

Furthermore, an important reason for Trần Thái Tông's success in his governance was his application of Buddhist thought: thoroughly developing the two factors of Mind and Wisdom in Zen Buddhism into life. From a heritage perspective, Trần Thái Tông presented deeply the inheritance of the Trần dynasty from the cultural and social foundation of the Lý dynasty.

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