



## THE INFLUENCES OF “THREE-RELIGION” ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE UNDER THE LY - TRAN DYNASTIES

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### **Abstract:**

The Ly - Tran dynasties were the ones reaching the most brilliant development of Vietnamese feudal history. In many fields and aspects, the Ly - Tran dynasties had proud achievements, which made a great contribution to the spirit of "Three-religion". As a form of social consciousness, "Three-religion" with the presence of three coexisting religions including Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism had a stake in changing the face of contemporary socio-political life. Therefore, in this article, the author focuses on analyzing the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism on the socio-political life under the Ly - Tran dynasties to clarify the position and role of each religion.

**Keywords:** three-religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Ly-Tran dynasties, socio-political life

### **1. Introduction**

“Three-religion” refers to the three major religions that made strong impact on the political life of several countries influenced by Chinese culture. Those three religions include Confucianism (also known as Confucianism in China), Buddhism in India and Taoism (also known as Daoism in China). In Vietnam, all three religions played important roles and strongly made an impact on the political ideology and socio-culture of Vietnam, especially under Ly – Tran dynasties. Throughout thousands of years of history, the land of Thang Long was the place on which there were vicissitudes, dramatic changes as well as the harmony between those religions, which have been called “Three-religion”. The combination and harmony of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism created a brilliant and quintessential Dai Viet civilization. Therefore, Confucianism - Buddhism – Taoism religions invisibly built a tripod and “Three-religion” spirit which dominated political, social and religious life of Thang Long land during feudal times since the reigns remained in vogue until the beginning of its decline.

## 2. Content

### 2.1. The Influence of Buddhism

Buddhism was spread directly by Indian monks into our country around the first century to the third century AD. In Vietnam, Buddhism was warmly accepted by the people and quickly took root in this land. Although Buddhism is a supramundane jhana religion, when it was introduced to Vietnam, its feature of "entering the mundane world" was positive. Thus, it really made great contribution to the country. During the reigns of Dinh and the early-Le, Zen masters participated in imperial affairs with the King. However, it was not until the Ly - Tran dynasties that the monks really had a voice in the national affairs. Ly Cong Uan - the King who started the Ly dynasty grew up in the temple and received the support of Buddhists in the campaign to ascend to the throne. At the beginning of the founding of the nation, the Ly Kings urgently needed Zen masters to unite the people. In the Tran dynasty, Buddhism was still respected; during the course of their rule, the Kings Tran Thai Tong, Tran Thanh Tong, Tran Nhan Tong and Tran Anh Tong were originally Buddhists. They used Buddhism as a means to unite the people's hearts and minds in building and defending the country. The Buddhism view of life with the philosophy of salvation, humanity and altruism played an important role in the early period of building and strengthening the Ly - Tran dynasties.

The Kings and mandarins under Ly-Tran dynasties understood the selflessness and humanity of Buddhism even though, when the country was in danger, they still stood up to lead the people to fight and conquer foreign invaders. Buddhism view of life - with the spirit of equality, charity, humanity and altruism - became a spiritual weapon to help the Ly -Tran dynasties struggle against many invading enemies. During the Ly - Tran dynasties, there were many different sects, but the most prominent ones were three sects: Ti-ni-da-luu-chi sect, Vo Ngon Thong sect, Thao Duong sect and Truc Lam Yen Tu sect. These three sects had profound influences on the social and political life under Ly - Tran dynasties. All three sects were inclined to immerse themselves in life to help the country and people's lives. The philosophy of these three sects was the basic theoretical premise for the formation of a unique Zen sect in Tran dynasty, which was Truc Lam Yen Tu sect.

Truc Lam Yen Tu sect, a Zen trend originated in Vietnam during the Tran dynasty was founded by King Tran Nhan Tong. The basic ideology of Truc Lam Zen sect is the ego and mind. *The ego* refers to the root, the nature or the substance of the whole universe. *The mind* is the origin, the substances of the universe and all creatures. The Truc Lam Zen sect emphasizes that Buddha is in everyone's mind, not outside of ourselves. People need to enlighten themselves to find Buddha in their heart and mind. During the dynasties of Dinh, Le, Ly and Tran, especially Ly - Tran Dynasties, the spirit of "entering the mundane world" of Buddhism motivated the Buddhist monks to take on the role of consultants towards the national destiny, like Zen masters Da Bao, Vien Thong, Tue Trung Thuong Si and some talented generals of Buddhism, who the most

famous one was General Tran Hung Dao. The spirit of "entering the mundane world" of Buddhism in the Ly - Tran dynasties became one of the most prominent highlights in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism.

The purpose of spirit of "entering the mundane world" under Ly-Tran dynasties was expressed through two typical contents.

First, Buddhism under Ly - Tran dynasties showed the determination to restore and promote the Buddhist ethical values in social life as well as bring the philosophy of Buddhist ethics deeply into the moral foundation of the people, which became the moral foundation of Dai Viet people.

Second, Buddhism under Ly - Tran expressed noble actions and meanings when Buddhism participated in the politics in order to serve the people and the country with the philosophy of human life, which was closely related to the religion and life.

When the country was in danger or in difficult times, Zen Buddhists participated in the political affairs and made their little effort to serve the people and society. As Zen master Van Hanh, he directly took part in the political affairs in which he contributed to the building of the Ly dynasty - the most glorious, brilliant and humane dynasty in the history of Vietnamese nation. Zen master Van Hanh engaged in political activities to bring good effects to the Ly dynasty. The Ly Dynasty began a period of true national autonomy of Vietnamese history. Zen master Van Hanh mobilized the courtiers to enthrone Ly Cong Uan as a King. He thought that as long as the country was owned by a King, Buddhism would have opportunities to develop and flourish. The benefits of Buddhism depended on the interests of the nation. Buddhism could not develop beyond the people as well as could not be prosperous when the people lost their sovereignty.

What was even more admirable was that after completing his plan, Zen master Van Hanh did not hold high dignity, but he returned to the church to continue his frugal life. It can be seen that he had always been taken care of people's lives, not for his private interests but for the mutual destiny of the country.

The "humanity" lines of the Ly - Tran dynasties made Vietnam reach the peak of national pride and demonstrated the integration of Buddhist culture into the national culture. Buddhism under the Ly - Tran dynasties was a continuation of the process of spreading Indian Buddhism and Zen sects from China. At the same time, combining and receiving indigenous cultural beliefs as well as harmonizing Confucianism-Taoism ideologies formed the typical characteristics of Buddhism in the Ly - Tran dynasties. Buddhism in this century acquired the original Buddhist teachings via the spirit of transformation, selection and creation of new ones which were suitable to the conditions of national history. The philosophy of life views which had a great and positive effect on the social life under the Ly - Tran dynasties were the living way of compassion, charity and the concepts of human life, liberation and morality. These factors themselves aroused patriotism and the national solidarity, which became the spiritual strength in the early days of national construction and institutional improvement. The philosophy of a positive perception made the Buddhist knowledge

under the Ly - Tran dynasties fully involve in the cause of building and defending the country. Therefore, the physical and spiritual life under the Ly - Tran dynasties had many positive changes. Buddhism went beyond the framework of a religion, belief and became a cultural feature and spiritual values in people's life.

## **2.2. Influence of Confucianism**

The birth of Confucianism was associated with the name of Confucius. Its purpose was to propose a solution to help the King stabilize Chinese society at that time. Confucius' ideological system, regardless of its diverse and complex implications, only established a strict order of an Emperor and constructed a complete society. Confucius paid great attention to the five relationships in society such as: King-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, friend-friend. Among these five relationships, there are three relationships that are the most important ones : King-subject, father-son, husband-wife. The theory of morality, ethics, and social politics is one of the core issues in the philosophy of Confucius.

Confucianism followed the hooves of the Northern invaders and then was spread into Vietnam in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC in order to assimilate the Vietnamese people. However, the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam at that time was limited due to the resistance of the Vietnamese people against the assimilation plan of the colonial government. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD with the victory of Bach Dang by General Ngo Quyen, Vietnamese people entered an era of independence, autonomy and really started to build Dai Viet civilization as a centralized feudal state. At this time, Confucianism became an effective assistant in establishing social order and serving the ruling class.

First, in term of the requirement of building and organizing the state apparatus, the demand of consolidating the social order initially stabilized a feudal society and carried out the unification of the country. If the society was stable, the unified country would have good conditions for economic and cultural development. In the context of independence and desires to maintain that independence, at that time Vietnam needed a strong centralized feudal state to implement national unity and build irrigation constructions, especially to motivate, organize and direct the revolutions to preserve the country against foreign invasion. Because the authority of that state was in the hands of the King, the word "faith" in Confucian should be acquired to strengthen the King's power.

The Ly - Tran dynasties were considered to be a flourishing and glorious reign in Vietnamese history with achievements in all aspects, especially in spiritual culture and ideological system. During this period, Buddhism dominated the social life, which greatly influenced the spiritual and cultural life of the nation. In addition, Confucianism - a political-ethical doctrine - had gradually asserted its dominance in organizing the centralized feudal state as well as social management, and made greatly impact on Vietnamese feudal society. During the Ly - Tran dynasties, along with Buddhism considered to be the national religion, Confucianism was also paid attention to its

development, all of which were not a coincidence phenomenon but due to objective conditions, which was firstly the provisions of socio - economic conditions in the contemporary society.

The advent of the industrial - commercial economy and the increase in the goods exchange made the landlords increasingly play a major role in social life and dominate many aspects of economic and politic activities in society. The more the economy developed, the more aristocracy tended to secure their real estates and develop their business of buying and selling real estates. At that time, there was a risk of political dispersion, which led to a tendency to strengthen bureaucracy, to promote Confucianism and to present Confucian scholars into the imperial government. Since the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the structure of leadership class in society changed. Previously, if the class of state management consisted of aristocracy, dutiful officials, bureaucracy and novice monks, from now on the structure of the state management class included two distinct parts: first, the aristocracy who held the highest positions in the dynasty had their own fiefdom, farmlands and slaves, ...they were the class of large possession of land; second, a class of numerous bureaucracy who played an executive role in the state administration, which was a class of non-aristocratic bureaucrats. The changes in land ownership in the economy and changes in the structure of social classes enabled Confucianism to enter the society during this period. In term of politics, any class that established their dominant position in society needed an ideology to reflect and protect the interests of their class as well as consolidate their stable social status. Along with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were accepted quite easily and quickly by Vietnamese people, even in Vietnam, Buddhism sometimes developed rather prosperously and was respected by the feudal government and chosen as the national religion. But in their essence, Buddhism and Taoism were not national religions to rule the state, as Professor Tran Van Giau said "*although in India and China, there are monks who are powerful counselors for a number of Kings, it is the initiatives of those monks in the spirit of Buddhism, but Buddhism doctrine does not discuss politics*" (Hoang Xuan Han, 2003). As a political-ethical doctrine, Confucianism advocated that the right must be united and focused on the celestial emperors, which defended the orthodoxy but in fact preserved dynasties with the interests of ruling families and their noble status. At the same time, it also set the ethical standards for human behaviors and the requirements for the relationships of king - subject, father - son, husband - wife, or for cultivating oneself ...etc. Confucianism had tremendous effects in helping dynasties strengthen ruling class. Basically, the Ly- Tran dynasties still favored Buddhism. However, in order to maintain the power and social management organization, these dynasties chose another tool which was Confucianism. The tendency to harmonize three religions was a combination of Buddhism and Confucianism at first, which was expressed quite clearly in the Buddhism literature under the Ly - Tran dynasties. In general, Confucianism embedded the ideology of protecting family and ancestry connections, securing the links between individuals and the society surrounding the court as well as preserving the social class division according to the name and titles;

Confucianism were able to balance these division and connections on the basis of morality, ethics and politics on which its foundations lied in the principles of mutual rites and law, which were apotheosized into celestial mandates, faithfulness, three kinds of relationship between King-subject, father-son, husband-wife and five cardinal virtues, all of which efficiently served the requirements of the contemporary ruling class.

When the feudal regime gradually stabilized, the demands for education, training, and organizing examinations to find talents to serve the country became an urgent requirement. However, the Buddhism dogmatic system could not meet this requirement, but only Confucianism- with a strict dogmatic system about examinations - could take on this task. Since then, Confucianism was deeply rooted in the political and social life of Vietnamese country at that time. In 1070, the Ly dynasty built the Temple of Literature. In 1075, the first Confucian examination was organized with the name "*Minh Kinh Bac Hoc*" (*Examination for choosing the most outstanding candidates*) and "Confucianism of three-round exams", which officially gave birth to the long-term history of Confucianism examination system in our country. In 1076, the Ly Dynasty established The Imperial Academy in the middle of the imperial city and "*selected officials who were literate to enter the Temple of Literature*" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1998). Since then, members of Ly families officially learnt Confucianism mainly. In the Tran dynasty, after one year holding the power, in 1227, the Tran dynasty organized the *Tam Giao* examination. (*three-religion examination*) From then on, the examinations had been organized regularly and frequently.

Under the Ly - Tran dynasties, the ethical categories of Confucianism such as loyalty, filial piety, humanity, and righteousness...etc which were applied to the field of politics and gradually became ethical standards for human behaviors. If the "loyalty" of Confucianism was used by Chinese feudal dynasties as a powerful tool to absolutely rule the country as a saying "*when the King forced a subject to die, but the subject who did not conform his King's command was disloyal*". The word of the King was celestial Son's saying, so whether it was right or wrong, all subjects had to obey the King, which meant that they were loyal to the King. But when Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam and improved as well as adapted by Vietnamese feudal dynasties, the "loyalty" here was not only absolutely faithful to the King, but also its meaning was expanded. Right from the time of Ly - Tran, the faithfulness to the King was inseparable from the faithfulness to the country, since those Kings were the ones who really led the battles in defending Vietnamese nation to victory. In Vietnam, "loyalty" is often associated with "righteousness" in order to uphold the responsibility of people to the Fatherland, homeland and village. That was the reason why in "*Exhortation to the military officers*", Tran Quoc Tuan often attached "loyalty" to "righteousness". Moreover, if the centralized feudal state desired to become powerful, they must pay attention to human, to the people and thus "righteousness" was inseparable from "the people". The flag of humanity meant that the ruler had to "calm down the people" and free the people from oppression of invaders. In the Tran dynasty,

originated from the reality of the national building and defending at that time, "loyalty" was emphasized as an important requirement for the soldiers and Generals in the revolution to protect the country and the imperial court.

In "Exhortation to the military officers", Tran Quoc Tuan took the faithful people in Chinese history as examples such as Ky Tin, Do Vu, Du Nhu, ... to educate his Generals as "*I have heard that Ky Tin submitted himself to die over and save the Emperor Cao De; Do Vu got himself to be wounded by spears to shelter Chieu Vuong; Du Nhuong swallowed coal to revenge for his master; Than Khoai cut his hand to rescue the state; Kinh Duc - a young man - assisted King Thai Tong to escape the siege of The Sung; Hao Khanh - a servant - warned Loc Son not to follow the plans of rebels. In the past, there were always a number of loyal mandarins and chivalrous warriors dying over for the country*" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1998) and called for their loyalty to the imperial court and the country.

In general, the content of Confucian ideology under the Ly - Tran dynasties mainly concentrated on socio-political ideology with the ideas about ideal models of Vietnamese feudal society, about the way of ruling and building feudal government system, about moral qualities of faithful mandarins, politicians ...etc. These issues were closely related to the development of the centralized and authorized feudal regime in Vietnam at that time, which made contribution to strengthening the unity of society according to the rituals and the law as well as met the requirements of building and defending the country. However, in the Tran dynasty, Confucianism was not a decisive factor for the development and content of socio-political ideology, the rich and heroic reality of the nation-building and defending our country of our people themselves played a key role.

### **2.3. The influence of Taoism**

Taoism was introduced into Vietnam in the Chinese domination period. Along with Confucianism and Buddhism, Taoism also played a rather significant role in the socio-political life under the Ly - Tran dynasties. If Confucianism influenced the intellectual class much, then Taoism influenced the people. In Taoism, it was divided into two trends including Philosophical and Religious Taoism. Philosophical Taoism influenced the King and aristocracy class in the thought of being free, broad-minded and living leisurely, while Religious Taoism was merged with the traditional magical beliefs of the people.

During the Ly - Tran dynasties, Taoism had profound influences on the spiritual life of society, which was manifested through the construction of many shrines as well as highly esteeming and believing in many Taoists, especially Taoist Thong Huyen. Taoism has been immersed in the folk beliefs of Vietnamese people, which created a harmony in the spirit of "Three-religion". Nobody knew Taoism had existed in Vietnamese life for a long time and its sorceries and spells were quite suitable for the ancient beliefs of people in an agricultural country like Dai Viet state. Facing to changes of life and combining with natural beliefs, people still needed spiritual support in which they could believe in the supernatural power and the justice of the divine forces. Thus,

Taoism meets this need of society, which directs people to freedom and come back to inherent nature as well as escape the constraints of life to turn back the status of ease. Besides, Taoism has gradually penetrated Buddhism more and more, some monks learnt about sorceries, love potion and immortality medicine. The people and the King believed that those monks were able to foresee the future, avoid the dangers, pray for rain and call the sun. The Tran dynasty also "sent Feng Shui practitioners to look around the mountains and rivers of the country in order to find a good place where there was good flow of air which could bring luck and prosperity for a King, then they used magic power to exorcise this place" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1998). Taoism brought a strange wind in the view of life and ideals of human life. Like Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism has been selectively acquired by our people and turned into a belief of traditional Vietnamese identity.

It can be seen that the influences of religious ideology were profound on all aspects of Dai Viet people's lives, especially in the socio-political field in order to reconcile social conflicts as well as stabilize all national forces to enter the joint task of combating invading enemies, all of which aimed at building an independent and autonomous country where people have had prosperous and peaceful life. On the other hand, in the process of introducing and establishing the position in our country, those religions did not follow separate and distinct paths; they have associated to each other and absorbed their mutual influences. Patriotism spirit and Thang Long's aspirations were molded from the foundation of the ideology of "Three-religion".

### 3. Conclusion

Ly – Tran dynasties were an era in which all three religions of Confucianism - Buddhism - Taoism gained their foothold in the society and created the spirit of "Three-religion" with profound influences on social life. While Confucianism was a mainstay of national political institutions, Buddhism was the keynote thought in the spiritual life, which could serve the rich religious life of Dai Viet people at that time. The spirit of "Three-religion" was promoted and transformed or in other words it was sublimated into the changes in people's awareness and action. Therefore, the "Three-religion" created insight impact on the socio-political life under the Ly - Tran dynasties.

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