


THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF CONFUCIANISM DURING THE LY-TRAN DYNASTIES, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the religious dimensions of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran dynasties (1009-1400 AD) in Vietnam, a period marked by significant sociopolitical and cultural transitions. Initially introduced as a moral and ethical philosophy from China, Confucianism underwent a complex process of localization, blending with indigenous Vietnamese beliefs and practices as well as Buddhism and Taoism. Through historical records, literary works, and ritual practices documented in “The Complete Annals of *Đại Việt*” and other classical texts, this study delves into how Confucianism not only served as a guiding principle for governance, education, and social norms but also manifested religious aspects that influenced spiritual and religious life in Vietnam. The religious aspects of Confucianism during this era are evident in several key areas. Firstly, the concept of Heaven (Tian) and the Mandate of Heaven played a crucial role in legitimizing royal authority, with rulers and Confucian scholars frequently invoking divine will to justify political actions and social order. This sacralization of monarchy underpinned by Confucian ideals facilitated the integration of Confucianism into Vietnamese spiritual life. Secondly, the incorporation of Confucian rituals and practices, such as the Heaven Worship Ceremony (*Tế Giao*) and the veneration of Confucius and other sages at the Temple of Literature, highlights the religious dimensions of Confucian practice, emphasizing reverence, filial piety, and the moral obligations of rulers and subjects alike. Moreover, the article discusses how Confucianism interacted with and was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, leading to a syncretic religious landscape in Vietnam. This interaction is illustrated through the blending of Confucian principles with Buddhist and Taoist ideals, affecting notions of kingship, governance, and the cosmological order. In conclusion, the religious aspect of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran dynasties significantly contributed to the shaping of Vietnamese identity, governance, and cultural heritage. By examining the religious dimensions of Confucianism, this article provides a more nuanced understanding of its role in Vietnamese society, highlighting the complex interplay between philosophy, religion, and politics in historical Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: Confucianism; Ly-Tran Dynasties; Religious Practices; Vietnamese Culture and History; Mandate of Heaven.

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Introduction

Vietnam's history extends back to the Hung Kings era in 2879 – 258 BC, leading to the establishment of the Văn Lang kingdom³ (now known as northern Vietnam), the Vietnamese people already had their own writing, culture, and religion (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009). The worship of the Hung Kings is a crucial aspect of Vietnamese spiritual beliefs and moral traditions, reflecting the reverence and importance attributed to these legendary figures (Tian; Kosoy; Lee; Ransom *et al.*, 2008). During this period, the Dong Son drums emerged as iconic artifacts that symbolize the cultural sophistication and artistic achievements of ancient Vietnamese civilization. These bronze drums, known for their intricate designs and historical significance, are considered masterpieces of Dong Son culture, showcasing the advanced metallurgical skills and artistic prowess of the time (Kipfer, 2021). Before the Chinese Han Dynasty's invasion, Vietnam was marked by a vibrant mix of religion, culture, and social norms foundational to Vietnamese identity. The *Hồng Bàng* Clan, significant in this period, helped preserve Vietnam's history through oral traditions dating back to the first millennium BC (Kelley, 2012). This era witnessed the development of cultural practices and languages shaping early Vietnamese society.

The final Hung king was overthrown by an individual who established dominance over the Lac lords, created the Au Lac kingdom, and assumed the title of King An Duong. The background of King An Duong is somewhat obscure; the sole piece of information offered by historical accounts is that his surname was Thuc, the Vietnamese equivalent of Shu, and his given name was Phan, then he found the Kingdom of Au Lac (257-208 BC) (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009). When the Qin Dynasty was in chaos after the death of Qin Shi Huang (210 BC), Zhao Tuo (趙佗, 240-137 BC) separated Baiyue, then led troops to annex the Au Lac kingdom (208 BC) and neighboring Gui Lam district and established a separate country, named Nanyue with the capital located at Panyu (now Guangzhou, China) in 207 BC. In 111 BC, Emperor Wu of Han's army invaded Nanyue and annexed Nanyue into the Han empire and transform Kingdom of Au Lac into Han Dynasty territory. Au Lac was subsequently divided into three districts known as: Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and Nhat Nam. To establish ideological control over the populace, the Western Han Dynasty introduced Confucianism into the region, marking the beginning of its influence on Vietnamese societal norms, education, and governance.

Confucianism, with its emphasis on moral education, communal harmony, and ethical leadership, profoundly impacted various aspects of Vietnamese society. The introduction of Confucian values by the colonial government during the Western Han Dynasty era laid the groundwork for the enduring influence of Confucian principles in shaping Vietnamese cultural and religious practices (Quyet, 2023; Truong, 2013). The spread of Confucianism into Vietnam had far-reaching implications, particularly in the realm of education. Confucian values associated with moral education and ethical conduct became integral to the educational system, emphasizing the cultivation of virtues and ethical leadership among the Vietnamese populace (Marginson, 2011; Quyet; Thanh; Phuong, 2023). s educational philosophy rooted in Confucian principles continues to shape educational practices in Vietnam. Moreover, Confucian political philosophy, with its focus on governance, ethics, and the role of the ruler, left a lasting imprint on Vietnamese governance structures. The principles of Confucian governance influenced the political landscape of Vietnam, guiding leaders in their pursuit of ethical leadership and communal harmony (Nguyen; Pham; Lai, 2023; Park; Schepp, 2015). The impact of Confucianism extended beyond governance and education to influence Vietnamese writing

³ The Văn Lang Kingdom (2879–258 BC), during the era of the Hung Kings, coincided with the period of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors (三皇, 2852 – 2070 BC) as described in traditional Chinese historical texts.

systems. The introduction of Confucian values influenced the development of writing styles and literary expressions in Vietnam, reflecting the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Confucian thought (Pham; Nguyen; Nguyen; Do *et al.*, 2023).

During the Ly-Tran Dynasties, Confucianism played a pivotal role in shaping Vietnam's educational ideologies, moral values, and societal norms, alongside Buddhism and Taoism. Confucianism was deeply integrated into the educational system during the Ly-Tran Dynasties, reflecting a combination of traditional Vietnamese values and Chinese Confucian principles. Buddhism, as the state religion, also made substantial contributions to education in Vietnam, emphasizing harmony among Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Dang, 2021). Additionally, Taoism influenced Vietnamese folk beliefs, showcasing the interconnectedness of these religious traditions (Vuhong, 2022). Educational ideologies from Chinese Confucianism were absorbed and developed during the Ly-Tran period to meet the specific needs of *Đại Việt* in the 11th to 14th centuries. Confucian education in the Tran Dynasty was particularly significant, with historical analyses shedding light on the educational content and methods employed during that era (Thai, 2022). These educational methods continue to be relevant in contemporary Vietnamese education, demonstrating the enduring impact of historical practices (Uoc, 2023). The intertwining of religious values with cultural beliefs is evident in Vietnamese society, where Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have influenced not only education but also business practices, legal systems, and social norms. The coexistence and interaction of these belief systems have shaped Vietnamese society, reflecting a unique blend of cultural elements deeply rooted in historical traditions (Vuong; Ho; La; Nhue *et al.*, 2018). The Ly-Tran period, particularly the Tran Dynasty, was notable for the adoption and adaptation of Confucian educational methods, which continue to influence Vietnamese education today.

According to author Lee Dian Rainey in the book “*Confucius and Confucianism, The Essentials*,” around the mid-20th century in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and among Western scholars, a movement emerged to re-examine Confucianism, known as the “New Confucianism” movement. Most New Confucianists argue that “Confucianism is a religion, or at least a spiritual experience.” (Rainey, 2010, p. 185) They also believe that one of the fundamental reasons for the miraculous economic growth of countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore in the latter half of the 20th century is due to their use of Confucianism as a “moral religion.” (Rainey, 2010, p. 189) In recent years in China, many young scholars, based on their research on ancient texts and archaeological artifacts related to Confucianism, have also concluded that Confucianism is a religion. These findings make the study of the religious aspect of Confucianism extremely meaningful. In Vietnam during the Ly-Tran periods (1009 - 1400 AD), Confucianism not only impacted the political life of the feudal society but was also blended with other religions to influence people's spiritual and religious life. Therefore, many scholars are interested in studying the religious aspect of Confucianism. However, the explanations and arguments supporting the thesis that Confucianism during this period was a religion or had religious aspects are still rudimentary and not fully convincing. Thus, delving into the religious aspect of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods will contribute to a more precise and more comprehensive understanding of the social role of Confucianism at that time.

The Origin of Religious Concepts in Confucianism during the Ly-Tran Dynasties

According to “The Complete Annals of *Đại Việt*” [*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*], the spread of Confucianism to Vietnam began at the dawn of the common era with the establishment of educational institutions and the teaching of rituals and propriety by the two governors Tich

Quang (錫光) and Nham Dien (壬延) in the Giao Chi and Cuu Chan districts around 110 BCE (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009; Taylor, 2013). Thus, when introduced to Vietnam, Confucianism was already Han Confucianism, a form of Confucianism that had been sanctified and considered a state religion in China. Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒; 179 - 104 BC) was the person who laid the foundation for Han Confucianism. He developed Confucianism in a more idealistic and mystical direction, increasing its elitist and harsh characteristics. In Vietnam, despite going through many ups and downs, this divine-right type of Confucianism persisted throughout the Northern domination period under the patronage of the Northern authorities. During the Ly-Tran periods, in response to the strong demand for consolidating the supreme status of the king, Han⁴ Confucian theories about Heaven, the mandate of Heaven, etc., played a crucial role in sacralizing the monarchy and elevating the king to the highest position. Therefore, kings, officials, and Confucian scholars at that time could not ignore exploiting these mystical aspects of Han Confucianism.

Moreover, from around the 6th and 7th centuries onwards, Confucianism from China to Vietnam carried many elements of Taoism and Buddhism or was influenced by Shamanism (witchcraft religion). Therefore, the rational nature of Confucianism faded, and its mystical aspect thus increased and became quite apparent not only during the Northern domination period but also throughout the subsequent independent eras. During the Ly-Tran periods, although Confucianism gradually asserted its position in society, the influences of Buddhism and Taoism were still significant. Consequently, Confucianism at this time could not avoid being influenced by the idealistic thoughts of these religions, especially Buddhism. When the royal power concept of Confucianism was mixed with Buddhist thoughts, the leader would become kings-Buddhas, wielding both secular power and sacred authority to rule over the people and the country.

The religious aspects of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods increased when it not only blended with Buddhism and Taoism but also with the local beliefs and ideologies of the Vietnamese people. Once the country gained independence, the dynasties borrowed the rational model of Confucianism to build a vital state. However, they also needed a supportive populace, hence the need for a unifying belief system or, in other words, a shared belief system that was widely trusted by the masses. According to the historian Ta Chi Dai Truong: “Beliefs, even though they go through individuals, private groups, still carry a potential unified nature that the authorities can serve themselves. The divine authority, when materialized in the secular system, ultimately serves the secular system.” (Ta, 2009, p. 146) Therefore, the kings of this period paid more attention to the deities worshipped within the country, the Confucian scholars who wrote history recorded many magical details and mysterious beliefs that occurred during the dynasty, and Confucian scholars collected and recorded legendary stories because those were the popular beliefs and ideologies in society at that time.

Confucian scholars during the Ly-Tran periods gradually asserted their position in society. However, the reality is that until the middle of the Tran period, they were still in the position of secretaries and family retainers, so not many dared to defend the “orthodoxy” they pursued openly. Moreover, many Confucian scholars came from the ordinary people during this period. They still felt close to folk beliefs, so they discreetly expressed their group’s viewpoints by recording the mystical tales that interested their era and were communicated among the people. For these reasons, Vietnamese Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods embodied many elements and religious aspects.

⁴ Han Dynasty (汉朝) was an imperial dynasty of China (202 BC – 9 AD, 25–220 AD), established by Liu Bang and ruled by the House of Liu.

Some Religious Aspects of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran Dynasties

The religious aspect of Vietnamese Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods is primarily manifested in the views on Heaven, the mandate of Heaven, and the destiny decreed by Heaven held by Confucian scholars and rulers who followed Confucianism. During the Ly dynasty⁵ (1009–1225), when the feudal ruling class used Confucianism to consolidate government, manage society, and develop culture, the Confucian views on Heaven and the mandate of Heaven were frequently mentioned by the Ly kings and court officials as the basis and support for the fundamental political activities of the feudal state. To establish the Ly dynasty, Dao Cam Moc proved that Ly Cong Uan's ascent to the throne was by Heaven's will, fitting with the destiny decreed by Heaven, and this was the moment Heaven bestowed the throne. Cam Moc told Ly Cong Uan:

Recently, the supreme lord was ignorant and tyrannical, committing many unjust acts; Heaven grew weary and did not grant him longevity; his young successor is incapable of handling the difficult situation. Troubles abound, the gods are displeased, and the people eagerly await a true leader. Why don't you seize this opportunity to employ wise strategies, making decisions as Tang of Shang⁶, Yu the Great⁷ did in ancient times or as Dinh⁸ and Le⁹ did more recently align with Heaven's will and the people's hearts instead of stubbornly clinging to trivialities? [...] In this moment when Heaven offers its mandate, what more do you hesitate for? (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 252-253)

Upon ascending to the throne, Ly Cong Uan named his era “*Thuận Thiên*” (Harmony with Heaven) to express his belief in Heaven's will and mandate. In his Edict on the Capital Relocation, Ly Cong Uan also emphasized that the relocation of capitals by the Shang, Zhou, and the Three Dynasties' kings¹⁰, as well as his relocation from Hoa Lu to Thang Long, were all in accordance with Heaven's mandate, explaining the short reigns of the Dinh and Early Le dynasties as “neglecting Heaven's mandate.” The subsequent Ly kings also often mentioned Heaven's mandate and the importance of following it. Discussing with his officials how to deal with the rebellion of the Three Dukes, Crown Prince Ly Phat Ma¹¹ also expressed the view that Heaven bestowed the throne, and the actions of the Three Dukes were essentially “scheming to seize Heaven's throne.” (Institute of Literature, 1977, p. 250) Notably, the immortal poem “*Nam quốc sơn hà*.”¹² (Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country), attributed to Ly Thuong Kiet, asserted the independence and sovereignty of *Đại Việt*¹³ as a truth in accordance with Heaven's will, preordained in the book of Heaven:

⁵ Later Ly Dynasty, officially *Đại Cồ Việt* from 1009 to 1054 and *Đại Việt* from 1054 to 1225, was a Vietnamese dynasty that existed from 1009 to 1225. It was established by Ly Cong Uan (*Lý Công Uẩn*) when he overthrew the Early Lê dynasty.

⁶ Tang of Shang: Legendary first king of the Shang dynasty in ancient China

⁷ Yu the Great: king and founder of Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BC), the first dynasty in traditional Chinese historiography.

⁸ *Đinh Bộ Lĩnh* (924–979; r. 968-979), real name allegedly *Đinh Hoàn* (丁桓), was the founding emperor of the short-lived Đinh dynasty of Vietnam, after declaring its independence from the Chinese Southern Han dynasty.

⁹ *Lê Hoàn* (941–1005), posthumously titled Lê Đại Hành, was the third ruler of *Đại Việt* kingdom, ruling from 981 to 1005 and founder of the Early Lê dynasty.

¹⁰ Three Dynasties (三代) is the combined name of the three Chinese dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou.

¹¹ Ly Phat Ma (李佛瑪, 1000–1054), posthumously temple name Thái Tông, was the second emperor of the Lý dynasty, ruled *Đại Việt* from 1028 to 1054. He was considered the most successive Vietnamese emperor since the tenth century.

¹² *Nam Quốc Sơn Hà* is a famous 10th- to 11th-century Vietnamese patriotic poem. Dubbed "Vietnam's first Declaration of Independence," it asserts the sovereignty of Vietnam's rulers over its lands.

¹³ *Đại Việt* (大越), also historically referred to as Annam, was a sovereign state located in what is now northern Vietnam, particularly around today's Hanoi, from the 10th century until the early 19th century. Initially named *Đại Cồ Việt* in 968 by Dinh Bo Linh, a Vietnamese leader who unified the region following the period known as the Anarchy of the 12 Warlords, the country was renamed early in the tenure of Ly Thanh Tong (r.1054–1072), the third emperor of the Ly dynasty. The kingdom

Nam quốc sơn hà nam đế cư Southern rivers and mountains, southern Kings rule
Tiết nhiên định phận tại thiên thư. It is clearly determined in Heaven's book.
 (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009, p. 110)

“The book of heaven” (*thiên thư* -天書) refers to the concept of an inevitable, unchangeable truth. Therefore, those who do not understand the “book of heaven,” acting against the “will of heaven,” will surely fail. Into the Tran period (1226-1400 AD), Confucian scholars commonly expressed their faith in Heaven's will and mandate. In the beliefs of Confucian scholars of this era, the idealistic and mystical notion emerged that “heaven's mandate” and “heaven's destiny” determine human life and activities. Heaven is understood as a supernatural, mystical force with will, purpose, and the power to control all phenomena in nature and society. Confucian scholar Nguyen Phi Khanh (1355-1428) wrote: “What is Heaven? It is the ultimate purity, the ultimate void, the ultimate vastness. The four seasons proceed without evident effort, all beings thrive without visible trace; if not for Heaven's ultimate purity, ultimate void, ultimate vastness, how could this be?” (Institute of Literature, 1978, p. 496-497). According to Nguyen Phi Khanh, humans must live and work by “heaven's principle,” and the actions of “*xuất*” (serving the people and country) or “*xử*” (seeking personal pleasures) by a Confucian scholar are not to be whimsically decided upon. He wrote: “In the deeds of ‘*xuất*’ and ‘*xử*’ by a distinguished person, ‘*xuất*’ is to act according to Heaven's principle, ‘*xử*’ is to seek contentment, also by Heaven's principle.” Confucian scholar Chu Van An (1292-1370 AD) believed: “Whether one lives in a straw hut or a jade palace, it is all predestined; wealth or poverty is determined by heaven, beyond human desire.” (Institute of Literature, 1978, p. 60) According to him, everyone has their own fate determined at birth, which also relates to whether one becomes an official. Therefore, he felt serene and content with his life. Ho Tong Thoc (胡宗簇; 1324-1404) reasoned that Xiang Yu¹⁴'s defeat by Liu Bang¹⁵ was understandable as Heaven decreed it. He wrote:

Heaven decreed defeat, fleeing towards the path of Zha left, Returning without a way to reach Jiangdong, Five years of turmoil, what was achieved? Only to be buried in Lu Gong's tomb. (Institute of Literature, 1978, p. 69)

Not only believing in Heaven's mandate, the concept of “heaven-human induction” (*thiên nhân cảm ứng*) was also prevalent in Vietnamese society at that time. Contemporary Confucian scholars believed that Heaven and humans were not separate entities but closely related, with the affairs of Heaven and humans based on the same principle. The theory of heaven-human induction refers to the relationship between Heaven and humans but mainly discusses the mystical relationship between Heaven and the ruler, represented by the king. In this relationship, the king governs the people on behalf of Heaven, and Heaven often monitors the king's actions and governance. Heaven would show auspicious signs like timely rains, bountiful harvests, etc., to encourage the king, or display ominous signs like storms, droughts, earthquakes, etc., to express its anger towards the king's wrongdoings. The “*Việt sử lược*” - Abridged Chronicles of Đại Việt (越史略), records many strange phenomena like “the appearance of golden dragons,” “divine beings appearing,” “divine lights appearing,” etc., to signify that the king's actions align with Heaven's will. For example, the book records the capital relocation by King Ly Thai To to Dai La (in 1010 AD), where “as the boat docked beneath the citadel, a golden dragon appeared on the royal vessel, hence the name “*Thăng Long*” (Ascending Dragon)” (Abridged Chronicles of Đại Việt, 2005, p. 75); or the construction of the Thien An palace by King Ly Thai Tong also

persisted through various dynasties until the early 19th century, concluding with the rule of Emperor Gia Long (r.1802-1820) of the Nguyen dynasty, who renamed the nation to *Việt Nam* (Vietnam).

¹⁴ Xiang Yu (232-202 BC) was a Chinese general and leader of the rebel forces that overthrew the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC)

¹⁵ Liu Bang (劉邦, 256-195 BC) or Emperor Gaozu of Han, was the founder and first emperor of the Han dynasty, reigning from 202 to 195 BC.

witnessed the appearance of a golden dragon. In particular, Confucian scholars believed in Heaven's powerful and responsive nature, capable of empathizing with humans. Therefore, humans could appeal to Heaven with sincerity and conduct, causing Heaven to be moved and sympathize with humans, thereby dispelling calamities. Hence, from the Ly dynasty, the practice of burning incense and, praying to Heaven and establishing altars for offerings emerged. In 1012, when King Ly Thai To personally went to battle against Chau Dien, upon his return to Vung Bien, the sky darkened with fierce winds and thunder; the king performed a ritual to "ask for heaven's consideration," and right after the prayer, the winds and thunder calmed. Historian Ngo Si Lien¹⁶ commented: "The interaction between heaven and humans is swift; who says that in the darkness, heaven does not observe our actions and dares to deceive heaven?" (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009, p. 83) Therefore, actions against Heaven's mandate would be punished by Heaven: "The virtue of His Majesty moves even heaven and earth; anyone daring to plot otherwise would be pursued and destroyed by the divine powers of heaven and earth." (Institute of Literature, 1977, p. 251) Heaven would sense the legitimate wishes and aspirations of the people. History records that in 1048, the Ly dynasty established the "Xã Đàn" (imperial altar) outside Truong Quang gate for seasonal offerings, praying for good harvests (Abridged Chronicles of Đại Việt, 2005, p. 86).

Into the Tran dynasty, Nguyen Phi Khanh wrote a poem about preparing to pray for rain as follows:

The land burns dry throughout the nation, A downpour from Heaven deeply blesses. The state prepares a solemn ceremony to pray for rain, Heaven then brings harmony and joy soaking the people. The dragon lies, a creature of the human world, Its image in Heaven can promise rain amidst drought. No need to parade emaciated figures in the marketplace, Only a sincere heart can touch Heaven. (Institute of Literature, 1978, p. 392)

Here, Nguyen Phi Khanh suggested that drought was a punishment from Heaven, primarily aimed at the king. If the king repented before Heaven, harmony would be restored, and the people filled with joy. He emphasized the king's self-cultivation and virtue, for if the king is virtuous, Heaven will grant auspicious signs, essentially moving Heaven: "Only a sincere heart can touch Heaven." Regarding this, the poem "Phu lau Ngoc huynh" at Ban Khe records: "Who could know the signs of Heaven? The appearance of dragon horses signifies the merit of the Hy family, Heaven bestowing Huyen Khuê highlights Yu the Great's peaceful reign, isn't that Heaven using auspicious signs to indicate good omens?" (Institute of Literature, 1978, p. 239) Thus, the theory of "heaven-human induction" on one hand affirms the king's authority as governing on behalf of Heaven, and on the other hand, reminds the king and his officials to govern well since Heaven constantly monitors the king's actions and policies.

The mystical element of Vietnamese Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods is also shown through the feudal court and Confucian scholars frequently applying the I Ching or Yijing for divination (Hon, 2019), predicting Heaven's preordained fate for humans or outcomes in wars, etc. History records: "Previously, when the Yuan¹⁷ army invaded (in 1285), the king ordered Thi Kien to divine the hexagrams, obtaining Dui changing to Zhen, predicting good fortune. The following year, in summer, the Yuan army was defeated, just as predicted. In the second year of

¹⁶ Ngo Si Lien (吳士連, 1400–1497) was a Later Le dynasty Vietnamese historian. He was the principal compiler of The Complete Annals of Đại Việt [Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư].

¹⁷ The Yuan dynasty (元朝, spanning from 1271 to 1368) was an imperial Chinese dynasty led by the Mongols, serving as a successor to the divided Mongol Empire.

Trung Hung, in autumn, when the Yuan invaded again (in 1286-1287), the king again asked Thi Kien to divine, obtaining Qian changing to Kan. Thi Kien interpreted: ‘Huan means dispersion, a sign that the enemy forces will disintegrate.’ Indeed, they were routed when the Yuan reached the Bach Dang River. The king praised Thi Kien’s talent.” (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 532) The four hexagrams mentioned by Tran Thi Kien show his profound understanding of the I Ching, his divinations based on the principle of change and transformation of yin and yang in the hexagrams and lines, thus his thoughts carried a mystical idealistic hue.

With the intention of forming the concept of king - Buddha, monopolizing both secular authority and supernatural power, the kings of the Ly and Tran dynasties personally led the Zen Buddhist sect. Therefore, in their poetry and literature, the spirit of Confucianism was subtly imbued with the idea of enlightening the mind and realizing Buddha’s nature. Confucianism, blended with local elements and mixed with legends about deities, created its mystical form of expression. The images of national heroes, loyal servants, and mighty kings were interwoven with tales of stone gods, river, and sea gods.

Thus, kings, officials, and Confucian scholars used these idealistic notions relatively widely during the Ly and Tran periods. These concepts served as a sharp weapon to strengthen the military regime. However, during the Ly and Tran eras, when the feudal system in Vietnam was developing, and the feudal class played a positive role in societal development, aligning their interests somewhat with the broader population, the ideas of “mandate of heaven,” idealism, and mysticism had not yet become the restrictive chains they would in later stages of Vietnam’s feudal era. Instead, they also functioned to affirm the will and belief in the success of the nation-building and defense efforts.

Some religious aspects of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods

If the Confucian thinkers of the Ly-Tran era simply conceived of a Heaven governing humans and society, where Heaven predestined each person’s fate, then these were merely mystical idealistic thoughts rather than religious beliefs. However, in reality, these concepts were integrated into the spiritual life of the dynasty through worship activities similar to other religions. Therefore, the religious nature of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods was distinctly manifested in the rituals and sacrificial activities of the royal court and local feudal authorities.

A vital ritual highly regarded by Confucianism in the feudal court was the Heaven Worship Ceremony (*Tế Giao*). “Giao” refers to the suburban area of the king’s capital. The South, corresponding to yang, symbolizes Heaven. Therefore, the king’s heaven and earth worship altar was located to the South of the capital, known as the Nam Giao altar. The Heaven Worship Ceremony in Vietnam appeared as early as the Ly dynasty. According to *The Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, in September 1154, Emperor Ly Anh Tong “went to the southern gate of Dai La to observe the construction of the *Viên Khâu* altar” (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 398). According to Rites of Zhou (周禮)¹⁸ *Viên Khâu*, known as Nam Giao, is the altar for heaven worship. Historian Phan Huy Chu noted: “Ly dynasty rituals generally followed the Song dynasty’s three-year Heaven Worship Ceremony, also known as the middle ceremony (every two years) and the minor ceremony (annually), but how exactly they were conducted is unknown” (Phan, 2008, p. 734). Since Heaven is considered a sacred and supreme deity, and the king is Heaven’s son, bestowed

¹⁸ Originally titled “Officers of Zhou” (周官), the “Rites of Zhou” is a classical Chinese text that discusses bureaucratic and organizational principles. It was compiled with the Book of Rites and the Etiquette and Ceremonial to form part of the “Three Rites,” recognized as ancient ritualistic texts within the canon of Confucian classics.

to govern and carry out Heaven's will, the king himself must perform the Heaven Worship Ceremony to show reverence and pray for Heaven's protection. During the Tran dynasty, there is no mention of the Heaven Worship Ceremony, so it cannot be studied further. Worshiping Heaven also manifested when natural disasters or unusual phenomena occurred; the king had to pray to Heaven for forgiveness and personally change to be pardoned by Heaven. For example, as mentioned above, Emperor Ly Thai To set up a heaven worship altar at Vung Bien.

Another sacrificial ritual promoted by ancient Vietnamese Confucian scholars was the worship of deities who contributed significantly to the development of agriculture, a profession Confucianism once considered the foundation of all under Heaven. These deities are the Land God (*Thần Xả Tấc*) and the Agriculture God (*Thần Nông*). “*Xả*” is the earth god, and “*Tấc*” is the god of granaries. The Agriculture God is credited with inventing farming, crop cultivation, and creating agricultural tools. The king personally performs sacrifices to the Land God and the Agriculture God, followed by the *Tịch điền* ceremony (plowing ceremony)¹⁹, adhered to Confucian regulations. From the Han dynasty, it became a state religious ritual in China. During the Ly - Tran periods, these sacrificial rituals were also carried out in Vietnam. Records show that in 1032, Emperor Ly Thai Tong went to Tin Huong in Do Dong Giang to plow the field. In 1038,

In spring, February, the emperor went to Bo Hai Khau to plow the field. The officials cleared the grass and prepared the altar. After sacrificing to the Agriculture God, the emperor wanted to perform the plowing ceremony himself, but some officials objected, saying: ‘This is the work of farmers; why should Your Majesty do it?’ The emperor replied: ‘If I do not plow myself, how can I make offerings and proclaim over all under Heaven?’ Then he pushed the plow three times and stopped. (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 294)

Historian Ngo Si Lien commented: “*Thai Ton* revived the ancient ceremony, personally plowing the field, proclaiming over all under Heaven, first for worshipping the royal ancestors; then for nourishing the myriad people; the effectiveness of governance enriching many is very appropriate” (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 294).

In 1048, Thai Tong again established the Land God altar outside the Truong Quang gate to pray for good harvests throughout the seasons. By the Tran dynasty, no records mention this ritual anymore. However, through the poetry and prose of Confucian scholars of this period, notably Nguyen Phi Khanh, reflecting on praying for rain, and in 1316, Emperor Tran Minh Tong “ordered nobles and officials to harvest the ‘plowing ceremony’ field” (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 586), it can be confirmed that subsequent dynasties continued to worship the Land God, the Agriculture God, and perform the plowing ceremony.

The feudal state's reverence for Confucianism was also associated with worshipping the founders and developers of Confucianism, including Confucius²⁰ and the pre-Confucian sages at the Temple of Literature (Csikszentmihaly, 2020). The Temple of Literature was built during the Ly dynasty. “The Complete Annals of Đại Việt” records: “In autumn, August (in 1070), the Temple of Literature was built, statues of Confucius, Duke of Zhou (周公), and the Four Associates²¹ were made, and the Seventy-two Disciples were painted, with sacrifices held in all

¹⁹ The plowing ceremony is a festival opened by the king in the middle of the first lunar month. The king will go down to the field to plow three furrows, and the princes and ministers will plow the rest. After that, this field will be cared for, and the product will be used for next year's offerings.

²⁰ Confucius (551-479 BC) is depicted in various roles, including educator, counselor, compiler, thinker, innovator, and visionary. His connection to critical ideas and cultural customs in East Asia, along with his identification as a pioneer of Eastern philosophy in Early Modern Europe, positions him as possibly the most influential intellectual figure in the history of East Asia.

²¹ Four Associates: Yan hui (顏回), Zengzi(曾參), Zisi(子思), Mencius(孟子)

four seasons” (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 323). Later dynasties maintained and restored the Temple of Literature, honoring not only Confucius but also esteemed sages and renowned Confucian scholars. Figures such as Chu Van An, Truong Han Sieu (1274 – 1354), and Do Tu Binh (1324-138) received veneration at the temple dedicated to Confucius. Through this worship practice, these historical figures, who preceded the era of Confucianism, were elevated to the status of deities.

The next ritual is the worship of ancestors. The practice of ancestor worship predates the introduction of Confucianism in our country. However, the Confucian virtue of filial piety provided a theoretical foundation and principles and regulations for caring for parents and ancestor worship. Confucianism details specific guidelines for ancestral rites. As Confucianism’s role was elevated, these regulations extended beyond moral norms and customs to become codified into state law. In “*Annals of the Official Orders of the Successive Dynasties*” from the Ly -Tran periods, the ritual annals document various ancestor worship ceremonies like those at the ancestral temple, imperial temple, royal mausoleums, mourning rituals, mourning attire, etc. Acts such as marrying or engaging in leisure activities during parental mourning, hiding a parent’s death, or falsely declaring a living parent dead were considered unfilial - one of the ten unforgivable sins (Ten Evils) (Phan, 2008). In 1128, Emperor Ly Than Tong decreed: “Due to national mourning, no one in the country is allowed to ride horses or use blue palanquins and curtained carriages” (Phan, 2008, p. 789). In 1315, Emperor Tran Minh Tong also issued a decree “prohibiting accusations among family members and slaves” to promote filial piety within family relationships (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2004, p. 584). In a society based on a family-run agricultural economy with little commodity exchange, like the *Đai Việt* society at that time, filial piety was upheld as a cultural standard, and ancestor worship was considered one of the most important customs of the people. Therefore, when Confucian scholars of this period focused on exploiting the virtue of filial piety from Confucianism, this doctrine became more easily absorbed and rooted among the masses.

To consolidate the belief and power of the divine right and to organize religious ceremonies and court rituals directly, the Ly-Tran period, as well as later periods, had a governmental department for managing religious affairs called the Ministry of Rites. Its duty was to organize and execute Confucianism’s religious activities and ceremonies. The emperor, being the Son of Heaven, presided over the most important rituals. Officials, depending on their rank, were responsible for carrying out various ceremonial duties.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the investigation into the religious aspect of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran dynasties reveals a multifaceted influence of Confucian philosophy on Vietnamese society, extending beyond mere ethical and moral guidelines to encompass significant religious dimensions. This study has demonstrated that Confucianism, during this era, was not only a system of thought concerned with social harmony and ethical governance but also played a pivotal role in the spiritual and religious life of Vietnam.

The religious manifestations of Confucianism were evident through practices such as the Heaven Worship Ceremony, the veneration of Confucius and other sages, and the integration of Confucian moral principles into state rituals and personal conduct. These practices underscored the deep intertwining of governance, culture, and religion, reflecting a unique Vietnamese synthesis of Confucianism with indigenous beliefs and other imported religions, namely Buddhism and Taoism.

Moreover, the concept of the Mandate of Heaven and the sacralization of the monarchy under Confucian ideals highlight the complex relationship between the divine, the ruler, and the governed. This relationship not only legitimized the political order but also fostered a shared moral and spiritual ethos among the Vietnamese people, further cementing Confucianism's role in shaping the national identity and cultural heritage of Vietnam.

This exploration into the religious dimensions of Confucianism during the Ly-Tran periods contributes to a broader understanding of Vietnamese history and culture. It reveals the adaptability and enduring influence of Confucianism as it intertwined with the spiritual fabric of Vietnamese society, shaping its social norms, governance, and religious life. The study also illuminates the rich tapestry of Vietnamese religious traditions, showcasing the dynamic interplay of philosophical, religious, and cultural forces that have defined Vietnam's historical and societal development.

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