

Thoughts and Policies on Governing the People under the Ly-Tran and the Early Le Dynasties: Experiences and Historical Lessons

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Among the factors that constitute the power of a political system, popular participation and support always hold an important role. The Vietnamese monarchical political systems are no exception. A study by Vu Minh Gia showed that during the period of the 10th–19th centuries, the presence of decentralized feudalistic states was occasionally seen (most notably during the “disorder of the 12 warlords”), but in general the centralized system was the dominant form of government. This system always rested on three pillars: the economic power of the state, authoritarian sanctions and popular support.

In Vietnam, three forms of centralized systems existed, people-oriented, bureaucratic and authoritarian, which reached their peak corresponding with the Ly-Tran dynasties (11th–13th centuries), Early Le (15th century) and Nguyen dynasty (19th century). The similarity between these is a high degree of centralization, while their difference lies in the various sources from which the

independent courts in Vietnam began to establish and continuously consolidate their centralized institutions, and simultaneously attempted to develop their social underpinnings based on popular support. This resulted from an awareness to ensure the survival of the imperial court and monarchy.

¹ Vu Minh Giang (2008), 43–61; Vu Minh Giang (2009), 139.

Within this scope, the article focuses on dissecting the main differences that make up the characteristics of two forms of governance in Vietnam during the 11th–14th centuries and the 15th century, as reflected in the political viewpoints, ideas and policies of each state towards its populace. The Ly and Tran dynasties put a particular emphasis on popular power, the construction of a centralized system based on a harmonious relationship between villages and nation, and the consolidation and support of the populace, all of which forged a prosperous and successful dynasty in every aspect, repeatedly defeating the invaders, and protecting national independence and sovereignty of the country. The Early Le dynasty, although being attentive to the role of the populace, due to its excessive consolidation of a centralized, pro-Confucius system and strengthening of the bureaucratic and legal system, gradually weakened its connection with the populace and lost its support. Two different political worldviews and management approaches led to differences in the relationship between the authorities and the masses, producing completely opposite results. The following presentations somewhat clarify this fact.

The “People-oriented” Ideas and Policies of the Ly and Tran Dynasties

Compared to the political institutions of the governments in the 10th century (Ngo, Dinh and former Le), it is obvious that the Ly and Tran dynasties made fundamental, even contrasting shifts in their viewpoints about the role of the populace, their ideas of governance, and their closeness to the populace and people-centric propensities.

Historical statistics show that the word “populace/people” (dân) was almost absent in various decrees, edicts or proclamations of the emperors prior to the Ly dynasty (1009–1225). Policies such as popular reassurance and consolation were never implemented, although military suppression happened quite frequently in this era. Historical records also prove that no tax exemption and reduction or food relief policies were introduced, although famines, poor harvests, natural disasters and foreign aggressions were quite common. The only amnesty scheme was released in 989, after Le Dai Hanh king changed the

name of the era.² Normally, the emperors maintained a great distance from the populace. They made few policies to improve the wellbeing of the people, and even showed no outward tendency to get close to them, except for the ploughing (tịch điền) ritual which initially took place in 987 and continued during the former Le dynasty. By establishing a centralized system based on complicated military apparatuses and severe penalties, the Dinh and former Le dynasties set themselves against the majority of the population, heightening existing socio-political conflicts. The introduction of the Ly dynasty (in 1009) was the result of a relatively smooth campaign for political mobilization, receiving the support of various social forces, but was also due to the low popular confidence in former dynasties.

Meanwhile, words such as “populace/people” (dân) or “the under heaven” (thiên hạ)³ used to refer to the masses, thus reflecting the “people-oriented” ideas and actions of the Ly and Tran dynasties, are regularly embedded in official historical records.

Before shifting the capital to Thang Long, King Ly Cong Uan issued the Edict on the Capital Rearrangement (Thiên đô chiếu). Apart from other notable values, this was the first political document composed by a dynasty which addressed issues pertaining to civil welfare and livelihood. In this edict, the founder of the Ly dynasty emphasized that the capital relocation was “the answer to heaven’s imperative above and the people’s will below”, conveying his wish that “his people were prosperous” and “free from adversity”. In addition, the edict was based on the consultation of nationwide mandarins and population. Such heedfulness of an emperor was unprecedented. In response, the entire population answered: “Your Majesty has made a long-term strategy for the under heaven so as to ensure not only the great success of His royal career but also the prosperity and abundance of the population. No one dares to deny such a favorable deed”.⁴

When attempting to form his royal court, Ly Thai To received sincere words from Dao Cam Moc which urged him to “answer heaven’s imperative

² Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 226.

³ In the original Chinese version of Complete History of the Great Viet, the historians under the Later Le dynasty primarily used “dân” (民) and “thiên hạ” (天下) to refer to the population/people.

⁴ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 241.

above and the people's will below" and words of wisdom from Monk Van Hanh which told him to "be tolerant and forgiving" to "win the people's hearts" and "direct the whole population".⁵ Aside from the Edict on the Capital Rearrangement, the Ly dynasty issued several edicts to ask for straightforward opinions (in 1076, 1392), and edicts to ask for ingenious people (in 1182).

The decrees and edicts compiled by the kings might have retained some remnants of such ideas as "heaven's imperative", "emperor's authority" typical of Chinese Confucianism. On not a few occasions did the Ly kings emphasize their role as "ruler of the population", "superior to the populace", or the Tran kings proclaimed themselves as "father of the people" (dân chi phụ mẫu). Yet these notions were not baseless and dogmatic as the typical Confucian ideas, but were transformed into practical deeds and bore humanistic values. The emphasis on and familiarity with the people was a characteristic ruling philosophy and the essence of these political institutions.

In June lunar 1300, two months before his death, Tran Hung Dao (Tran Quoc Tuan) caught a serious illness. Tran Anh Tong king personally returned to Hung Dao's palace in Van Kiep. On Hung Dao's deathbed, the king sincerely inquired about his health and also asked about his ideas on national defense and protection. Tran Hung Dao summarized his experiences and historical lessons on the national struggle against foreign aggressors, in which he focused on clarifying that the victory of the Tran dynasty over the Yuan-Mongolian army was thanks to "consensus between the king and his servants, harmony between royal family members, and national solidarity". His testament was short yet full of meaning. It was not only a heartfelt and profound product of a senior statesman who had spent more than 70 years of his life serving the imperial court during its most desperate yet epic period; the amalgamation of professional military experiences of a grand general who three times took on the responsibility of leading his people in their national struggle against a foreign invasion; but it was by and large the political idea and guideline of the Tran dynasty. More importantly, Tran Hung Dao released his testament not only at the time when the victories were fading into the past, but also when the popular confidence and support for the imperial court was seemingly diminishing. It was a lesson on winning the popular confidence.

⁵ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 238.

Table 1: “People-oriented” Policies and Actions of the Ly and Tran Dynasties

	Reign	Familiarity with the people	Popular assurance	Tax reduction, food relief	Amnesty, official pardon	Total
Ly dynasty (1009–1225)						
1.	Thai To (1009–1028)	2	2	4	1	9
2.	Thai Tong (1028–1054)	6	5	4	11	26
3.	Thanh Tong (1054–1072)	1	–	2	2	5
4.	Nhan Tong (1072–1127)	12	–	1	5	18
5.	Than Tong (1128–1138)	1	–	1	5	7
6.	Anh Tong (1138–1175)	2	–	–	2	4
7.	Cao Tong (1176–1210)	1	–	1	2	4
	Total:	25	7	13	28	73
Tran dynasty (1226–1400)						
1.	Thai Tong (1226–1258)	1	–	–	4	5
2.	Thanh Tong (1258–1278)	–	–	–	2	2
3.	Nhan Tong (1279–1293)	–	–	3	5	8
4.	Anh Tong (1293–1314)	–	2	1	2	5
5.	Minh Tong (1314–1329)	3	–	–	1	4
6.	Hien Tong (1329–1341)	–	–	–	2	2
7.	Du Tong (1341–1369)	–	–	5	3	8
8.	Nghe Tong (1370–1372)	1	1	–	1	3
9.	Due Tong (1373–1377)	–	–	–	1	1
10.	Phe de (1377–1388)	–	–	–	1	1
11.	Thuan Tong (1389–1398)	1	–	–	1	2
12.	Thieu De (1398–1400)	–	–	–	1	1
	Total:	6	3	9	24	42

Source: Based on statistics of the author in Complete History of the Great Viet

Indeed, even before Tran Hung Dao gave his advice to “wisely use the energy of the people as a sustainable strategy”, the Tran dynasty had been well aware of the principle of “people as a central foundation”. Since establishing his imperial court, Tran Thai Tong king was especially fond of the words expressed by monk Truc Lam: “He who is king must take the aspirations of his people as his own and take the heart of his people as his own”. Therefore, a golden throne for a king “is nothing more than a rugged pair of shoes which can be disposed of whenever.” Later generations of kings were all devoted to the peo-

ple and respected the entire population. According to history, on an occasion, when the first national struggle against the Yuan-Mongolian army (1258) reached its climax, the king inquired of his people about the situation of the invaders: “Where is the Yuan army?” A fisherman named Hoang Cu Da, a former courtier who was sailing along the Red River, impudently answered: “I don’t know, go ask those who eat mangos.”⁶ Responding to such contempt of Cu Da, the king not only tolerated him but blamed himself for having treated his subordinates unfairly.

Statistics from official records on the policies and actions that reflect the people-oriented governance of the Ly and Tran dynasties (table 1) show that the Ly and Tran kings made the most efforts to get close to their people. With their populist lifestyle, the Ly kings often left their imperial citadel or visited rural areas to watch such activities as fishing, wrestling, cock-fighting, ploughing or harvesting, and even personally engaged in ploughing, etc. There were in total 25 occasions in which the kings made these efforts, 12 of which happened in era of Ly Nhan Tong. Similar behaviors were rare under the previous and following dynasties. Right in the era of Ly Thai To, the king decided to build Long Duc palace (the East palace) outside the Imperial Citadel, wherein the Prince resided. His purpose was to let the one who would inherit his throne live among ordinary people and learn in the process about their life.⁷ Tran Thai Tong once said: “I would like to go out to hear the people’s voice and assess their opinions, learn about their difficulties”.⁸ On February lunar 1022, judging that the construction of an artificial mountain would be too difficult for the populace, king Ly Thai To suspended it.⁹ In May 1371, King Tran Nghe Tong issued an edict to

*“construct the palace in a simple and cost-effective way, and hire only royal family members and mandarins to build it without bothering the people”.*¹⁰

⁶ The story goes: The king once offered mangos to his close servants but forgot about Hoang Cu Da. He then held a grudge against him and thus replied in such way. See Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 28–29.

⁷ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 243.

⁸ Institute of Historical Studies (1981), 316.

⁹ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 246.

¹⁰ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 155.

Under the Ly and Tran dynasties, especially the early Ly dynasty and late Tran dynasty, military suppression occurred on a regular basis in many local areas, not to mention the aggressions for territorial expansion into the Champa kingdom in the 11th–14th centuries. However, unlike before, whenever the king launched an expedition, he issued a proclamation¹¹ clearly laying out his intent to pacify for the sake of peace. On their expedition, the soldiers were forbidden to get involved in robbing or harming the populace. After the campaign, the court made an edict to reassure and comfort the people. For example in 1028, when Ly Thai Tong personally led his army to pacify the Truong Yen Palace (now in Ninh Binh), as soon as he reached his destination, he ordered, “Whoever robs the villagers will be beheaded.” The soldiers arduously listened to his order and dared not to transgress. Upon entering the palace, they were met by hundreds of people who paid tribute to them in the form of buffaloes and wine. The king issued a decree to comfort the people, creating a jubilant atmosphere.¹² In a similar vein, after having attacked Hoan district (1031), Ai district (1035), Phat The Citadel (1044), Nghe An (1371), or after having established Thuan and Hoa districts (1307), the Ly and Tran kings sent their emissaries to comfort and console the people.

The Ly and Tran dynasties emphasized the improvement of the population’s wellbeing. As statistics show, the Ly dynasty introduced at least 4 tax reduction schemes (for half a year), 3 tax exemption schemes (for 1 to 3 years) and 6 food relief schemes for the poor; while the corresponding numbers of the Tran dynasty were 3, 1 and 5. Tax reduction and exemption and food relief schemes were implemented most frequently under the dynasties of Ly Thai To (4), Ly Thai Tong (4), Tran Nhan Tong (3) and Tran Du Tong (5). These policies were often carried out as soon as the new king ascended his throne or during Buddhist festivals. The king decided to issue tax exemptions not only when the people faced drought, a bad harvest and famine, but also when they achieved a good harvest (as in 1016). When a major cold spell came in 1055, King Ly Thanh Tong told his subordinates that:

“Even in the palace, basking near the fire made of bone char, wearing squirrel fabric, I am still cold, let alone the prisoners down in the dungeon who are miserably bound in

¹¹ For example the proclamation on the expedition to Ma Sa cave (Thảo Ma Sa động hịch), in 1119.

¹² Complete History of the Great Viet (1993a), 251.

*chains. Whether they are guilty, they are nevertheless hungry, wearing only rugged cloth, being frozen to death, some even dying regretfully. How I pity them. I thereby order the warders to provide them with blankets and two meals a day”.*¹³

The Tran kings also introduced a new way of distributing relief food by involving the rich in this activity (The Edicts in 1358, 1362). Tolerant legislations clearly reflect the people-oriented guiding principle of the Ly and Tran dynasties. Although it was not regulated by any official document, amnesty was frequently granted and can be considered a consistent policy of these two dynasties. Amnesty was given as soon as the king ascended his throne, changed the name of the era or on the occasion of a Buddhist festival. Statistics show that, except for Ly Hue Tong and Ly Chieu Hoang, the other 7 kings under the Ly dynasty and 12 kings under the Tran dynasty issued at least 1 to 5 decrees (Ly Thai Tong) which provide for amnesty.¹⁴ Contrary to terrifying tiger cages and cauldrons in front of the royal palaces in Hoa Lu capital under the Dinh and former Le dynasties, King Ly Thai Tong (1029) decided to build bell towers along the sidelines of Thien An royal hall (where he gave audiences) and ordered that: “Whenever a citizen would like to complain about a false charge against him, he should ring the bell”.¹⁵ Also to make it convenient for the people, in 1052 the king ordered the construction of a big bell at Long Tri palace. These kinds of cases, kings judged directly or handed over to crown princes to solve them. People coming to the royal palace where the kings gave audiences was a practice which only took place under the Ly and Tran dynasties. In a trial, King Thanh Tong pointed to princess Dong Thien next to him and told the warders:

*“I devote as much affection to my daughter as I do to my people. I truly pity those who unwittingly commit their crimes, so from now on, let’s alleviate their charges whether they are heavy or not”.*¹⁶

Brutal punishments imposed in former dynasties were no longer applicable. The trials were conducted justly, transparently and legally. From the Ly dynasty to the Tran dynasty, the “people-oriented” propensity was consistent and

¹³ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 271.

¹⁴ According to our statistics, the Ly dynasty issued totally 20 grand amnesty schemes in the following years, the Tran dynasty made 20.

¹⁵ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 254.

¹⁶ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete history of the Great Viet, 273.

lasting, but there were still a few shifts. It was the transition from a “people-centric, people-based” state under the Ly dynasty to a “people are the origin” state under the Tran dynasty.¹⁷ In particular, since the middle of the 14th century, the increasing influence of Chinese Confucianism and the internal bureaucratization led to significant changes in the ideas and policies of the state.

In commenting and evaluating the “people-oriented” propensity of the Ly and Tran dynasties, historians in the Later Le dynasty argued that it was a rating scale that measures the quality and intellect of an emperor and the progressiveness of a dynasty. Several kings are valorized and remembered in historical records for this quality. In the Complete History of the Great Viet, the Confucian historians speak highly of such qualities as “easing people’s energy”, “love for the people” (by Ly Thai To), “nurturing the whole population” (Ly Thai Tong), “lenience”, “true love for the people” (Ly Thanh Tong), “harmony, compassion and consolidating the people’s hearts” (Tran Nhan Tong); so as to create a “wealthy and abundant population”, “a peaceful land”. Therefore, they are “loved by the people”, “followed by the people”, “supported by the people”, and considered “good kings”.

But the Ly and Tran kings are criticized for these very qualities from time to time. Two aspects that are discussed most frequently in the historical comments on the Ly and Tran dynasties are their overemphasis on Buddhism and excessive lenience in legal decisions. Ngo Si Lien commented on the lifting of the death penalty imposed on Grand Preceptor Le Van Thinh by Ly Nhan Tong (in 1096): “A servant (criminal) who murdered his own king is spared capital punishment; that is an error in criminal law, which stems from the king’s belief in Buddhism.”¹⁸ Or the “(king) who avails of the occasion of a (Buddhist) festival to spare a criminal, does not act rightfully.” “Meanwhile a king such as (Ly Nhan Tong) unwisely spares the life of many petty men (...) if all petty men are freed of their guilt by mere luck it is not good news for the gentlemen.”¹⁹ What matters here is the perspective. Perhaps the Confucian historians in the Le dynasty failed to acknowledge that the Buddhist tendency is only an outward manifestation of the characteristic ruling principles of Ly and Tran dynasties, which are harmony and “oneness with the people”.

¹⁷ Nguyen Phan Quang (1995), 194, Phan Dang Thanh 1995, 153.

¹⁸ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 283.

¹⁹ Social Science Publisher (1993a), Complete History of the Great Viet, 302.

Thanks to their practical guidelines and policies, the Ly and Tran dynasties successfully developed a strong unity between their authorities and their population, which acted as a source of power for the cause of national construction and development in every aspect and demonstrated its capacity most vividly during the struggles against foreign invaders for national salvation. Due to the distinctiveness of the political systems under these dynasties, especially under the Ly dynasty, their forms of governance are deemed by some foreign scholars as “not typically centralized enough”, and “the political power of the Ly dynasty was based on traditional consensus and the independence of villages.”²⁰ The viewpoints of international scholars are recognized by Vietnamese domestic historians as they reveal the transitional character of Vietnamese political systems during the 11th–14th centuries, which still bore characteristics resembling those of the typical Southeast Asian communal democracies and were insufficiently affected by the Chinese Confucian political model.²¹ However, the total denial of a centralized power structure in these eras is not tenable and requires further investigation.²²

Confucianism, Bureaucracy and Civil Policies of the Early Le Dynasty

The introduction of the Le dynasty (in 1428) was the result of a great war for national salvation, of the efforts and contributions of all the masses. More than anyone, the Le kings were deeply aware of the role of the people’s confidence. Therefore, popular confidence is always regarded as a great strength and a constitutive element that helps to maintain the State’s power. The Le dynasty is also one the most politically influential and prestigious eras for the population.

The viewpoints and guidelines of the Early Le dynasty (1428–1527) and their implementation were essentially people-oriented. Many policies were created to win the hearts of the people and improve every aspect of their life. This is reflected in our collected statistics (table 2). The Le kings, especially the five early ones (from the reign of Thai To to Hien Tong) released a large number of decrees and edicts (now commonly referred to as edicts) related to

²⁰ Taylor (1990), 139.

²¹ Polyakov (1996); Momoki Shiro (2011).

²² See Pham Duc Anh (2011).

the people. Among them at least 27 edicts were issued by Le Thanh Tong. In terms of the average number of edicts per year, King Thai Tong (1434–1442) produced 16 edicts within 8 years, which was the highest number (approximately 2 edicts annually). More importantly, this period was when the Le dynasty was in turbulence. It strived to strengthen its authority while at the same time seeking to secure a foothold among the people. Since the beginning of the 16th century (after the period of Le Hien Tong), previous constructive policies of the state towards its people had almost ceased.

Table 2: The Policies towards the People of the Early Le Dynasty

No.	Reign	Self-corrective and disciplining edicts	Tax reduction-food relief	Amnesty-Official pardon	Total
1.	Thai To (1428–1433)	2	2	3	7
2.	Thai Tong (1434–1442)	7	3	6	16
3.	Nhan Tong (1443–1459)	9	3	4	16
4.	Thanh Tong (1460–1497)	10	5	12	27
5.	Hien Tong (1498–1504)	4	1	3	8
6.	Tuc Tong (1504)	–	–	1	1
7.	Uy Muc (1505–1509)	–	–	1	1
8.	Tuong Duc (1510–1516)	–	–	2	2
9.	Chieu Tong (1516–1522)	–	–	3	3
10.	Cung Hoang (1522–1527)	1	–	2	3
Total:		33	14	37	84

Source: Based on statistics of the author in Complete History of the Great Viet

The civil policies established by the Early Le dynasty primarily focused on the practical demands such as tax exemption and reduction, food relief distribution for the poor and amnesty and official pardon. In April 1428, the state introduced two important policies: removing all taxes previously imposed on land plots, gold and silver, lagoons, berry plantations and reducing taxes imposed on the “locations plundered by invaders” (the Ming army).²³

²³ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 239.

Later, tax exemption and reduction schemes were regularly set up as soon as a new king ascended the throne, especially when famine and bad harvests occurred. Apart from the general keywords such as “nationwide amnesty”, “tax exemption”, “tax cutback” or “tax reduction”, official historical records also kept in-depth statistics on the tax reduction policies, including both land and head taxes, introduced by the imperial court. Accordingly, farmers who owned berry plantations in the army were granted 5 sào (1.800m²) of cultivable lands and ordinary farmers were given 4 sào (1.440m²) of berry farms to ensure their livelihood and were exempted from tax for their whole life. Male and female widows were provided with 3 sào (1.080m²) of land and exempted from tax.²⁴ On 1488, the king issued an edict:

“From now on, the scholars who have been educated, know how to write, have good conduct, passed their exam or were exempted from it will be freed from half of the amount of tax and corvée.”²⁵

By 1501, the state had regularized the duration of corvée and the amount of head tax. The handicapped that were unable to work were exempted from both corvée and head tax, while those that could earn a livelihood were exempted from half of the amount of their head tax.²⁶ The food relief policy was maintained on a regular basis, especially when famine happened. Besides, in this era the state itself allowed its people to borrow paddy which had to be paid back when they successfully harvested their rice (the edicts issued in 1437, 1448, and 1497).²⁷

The above statistics show that the decisions to provide for a “grand” amnesty and “amnesty” for the prisoners were frequently mentioned in official historical records, in which the density of these decisions was even higher than those during the Ly and Tran dynasties (37 decisions in total). In particular, under the Le Thanh Tong reign, at least 12 decisions were recorded. These decisions were made on such occasions as the coronation of a king and the changes of an era name, but unlike before no decision was made when natural disasters happened, and fewer decisions were made at the same time as the Buddhist festi-

²⁴ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 331.

²⁵ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 504.

²⁶ Social Science Publisher (1993c), Complete History of the Great Viet, 27.

²⁷ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 347, 362, 523.

vals.²⁸ The number of prisoners benefiting from each amnesty decision often amounted to a few hundreds.²⁹ As for the unsolved cases, the kings issued many edicts that provided for commutation and even acquittal.³⁰ It should be further noted that “grand” amnesties were maintained until the beginning of the 16th century. Subsequently, the policy possibly only retained a ceremonial significance and primarily served as a tool to legitimize the king’s throne.

However, the ideas of the Early Le dynasties for their population and their practical manifestations were different from those held by the Ly and Tran dynasties. The differences are as follows.

The king “received his heavenly imperative” that asked him to care for and rule over the whole population. On the other hand, the root of royal power originates from within the people. In *The Royal Poem about the way of the king* (Ngũ chế quân đạo thi), Le Thanh Tong stated that the “way of a king” is to “devote his love to the people and his respect to heaven.” Or in an edict, it was declared that “A king is made by heaven to care for his people, and thus he is supposed to answer heaven’s imperative by loving his people”.³¹ A Le king “cannot sleep well for he worries for his people/He dares not to postpone a task bestowed by heaven” (Personal statement-Tự thuật), and always wishes that “everyone lives in abundance and tranquillity towards a prosperous nation.”³² A devoted king first and foremost “creates a role model by improving his ethical conduct and improves agricultural productivity to ensure the people’s livelihood.”³³

The masses and ordinary citizens therefore were responsible for honoring the king and adhering to his orders. It should be noted that the first edict given by the Le dynasty (dated January 1428)

²⁸ Except for one occasion in which Le Thanh Tong offer amnesty to 50 prisoners during the Vu lan Buddhist festival. Social Science Publisher (1993b), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 318.

²⁹ In 1434, 225 prisoners were granted amnesty on one occasion. See Social Science Publisher (1993b), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 315.

³⁰ Social Science Publisher (1993b), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 362, 402.

³¹ Social Science Publisher (1993c), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 98.

³² Social Science Publisher (1993b), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 412.

³³ Social Science Publisher (1993b), *Complete History of the Great Viet*, 497.

“orders the ministries (...) to establish legislations to govern the army and the people, so that commanders know how to manage their army, officials at localities know how to govern their people, and the nation as a whole knows that the laws exist.” Because “chaos will ensue if there are no laws”, “the laws are established so that (...) the whole population knows what are good and bad behaviors. They should advocate good conduct while avoiding mischiefs and violating the laws.”³⁴ A year after his coronation, in March 1461, Le Thanh Tong issued a decree: “In farming (...) every citizen should devote himself to increasing his livelihood and ensuring his basic needs, without resorting to shortcuts, petty businesses or hooliganism. Whoever owns lands but displays sluggishness will be given due punishment by the authorities.”³⁵

The mandarins— parents of the people – were required to love and care for the people as much as possible. Le Thai Tong once issued a decree: “To be a servant essentially requires two conditions. He must be respectful to his king and affectionate towards his people. With full loyalty he loves his king; with genuine faithfulness he loves his people.”³⁶ On another occasion Le Nhan Tong propagated: “The mandarins, who are currently in service must motivate their people to work hard and conduct fair trials. In combating theft they must be resolute and shun irresponsibility and idleness.”³⁷ Three requirements were introduced into the examination system for mandarins at local areas under the Le Thanh Tong dynasty: 1. they had to love their people, 2. they had to earn popular trust and affection, 3. they had to prevent the people from abandoning their local areas.³⁸ As for mandarins in remote and bordering areas, whoever “knows how to nurture his people and peacefully govern them while still managing to collect enough taxes, within 6 years, will be transferred to a better position”, and if he failed, he would have to wait 6 years until re-examination.³⁹ In 1498, Le Hien Tong announced a decree: “(The mandarins) who abuse their power and are haughty to the people, who pursue their own

³⁴ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 291.

³⁵ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 393.

³⁶ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 310.

³⁷ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 381.

³⁸ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 447.

³⁹ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 433.

interests at the expense of people's wellbeing, whether they are caught red handed or not (...) shall be categorized as unqualified."⁴⁰

Therefore, whenever political disorder or a natural disaster happened or the people suffered from bad harvests, the kings issued an edict in which he blamed himself and disciplined his servants (see table 2 above). He repeatedly questioned his conscience in the edicts:

"Am I possibly not devoted enough to receive heaven's blessing, or so insufficiently committed to the cause of my ancestors, so inadequately accommodating to the population that I end up in this situation? Am I so incapable of utilizing talented people or my servants are so incompetent that I end up being like this? Is it because bribery has become so widespread and concubines have abused their power so much that I end up in this situation? Or is it because I have mishandled public properties through over-spending and extravagance? Or is it because the generals and vassals do not care about their people and have sunk into corrupting habits? Or because the generals at different levels only care about possessions without regard for their duty as public servants?"⁴¹

The nature of the relationship between the State and its population changed, mostly due to changes in the former. The main causes are the influence of Confucian ideology and the resulting bureaucratization and administratization within the political system.

For one thing, Confucianism absolutized the role and power of the king. Within the Eastern and Vietnamese monarchies, the emperor/king holds enormous authority. The king is the originator of the law. Every imperative from the king in the form of a decree or an edict has the highest legal value. The laws are compiled and distributed primarily according to the will of the king and first and foremost serve his rights. Only the king is permitted to amend or dispense the laws. The "king's order" itself is "national laws". The king is also head of the national administrative system, who directly leads the government. The king holds supreme rights in the appointment, evaluation or punishment of the entire system of mandarins. As far as private law is concerned, the king is held as the supreme judge, who makes the decisive judgments in all kinds of legal cases and unitarily changes the (even already made) rulings or offers amnesty. The emperor as well as everything that belongs to him is sacred and inviolable. Legislations made by the Le dynasty prohibited

⁴⁰ Social Science Publisher (1993c), Complete History of the Great Viet, 12.

⁴¹ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 370.

any idea and action that might have damaged the emperor's reputation and status. Such crimes as profanity, blasphemy or sedition, and mutiny were deemed serious deserving the highest charges. Through different administrative layers, the emperor maintained his authority and deeply intervened into every segment from the political, socio-economic, and ideological to the cultural sector.⁴²

The era when "As brothers, people from the four corners of the nation joined one another to hoist the bamboo flags/Soldiers of all ranks like fathers and sons drank mixed drinks from river water" (Proclamation of victory/ Bình Ngô đại cáo) began to recede into the past. Of the same fate was the image of 10 arduous years struggling against the Ming army when

"Upon entering the palace, the king and his army were met by hundreds of people who paid tribute to them in the form of buffaloes and wine (...) As the local people crowded the palace as if they had been going to public fairs, the king issued a decree to comfort them, creating a jubilant atmosphere." Instead, to take just one example: As soon as the king's envoy entered Lam Kinh (Thanh Hoa), the men and women started to perform rí ren singing at the gateway. In this custom, men and women formed two opposite lines and started singing, and occasionally they hooked their legs and necks together in the shape of flowers, which looked very ugly nevertheless. Counsellor Dong Hanh Phat told Field Marshal (Trinh) Kha that: "This is an irreverent custom, which aims to satirize the king's envoy". The custom was immediately banned by Kha."⁴³

And the paradox showed itself. The more it claimed to care for the people and take them under its protection, the more the imperial court became bureaucratized and distant from them. Nguyen Trai's earlier sincere advice and also a warning: "May his Majesty care for his people so that no complaint can be heard at any commune or village" came to light.

From the court's viewpoint, the king's edicts revealed that power abuse and haughtiness and the oppression of the people became more and more persis-

⁴² In the Criminal Codes of the National Imperial Court (Quốc triều hình luật), especially in the two chapters Protection of the imperial palace (Vệ cấm) and Forbidden behaviors (Vi chế) there are dozens of stipulations directly related to the king venerated and revered position (see stipulations 51, 52, 57, 63, 110, 111, 122, 123, 125, 127, 132).

⁴³ Social Science Publisher (1993b), Complete History of the Great Viet, 358–359.

rent.⁴⁴ From the people's perspective, though little was mentioned by historical records, in reality: "The people made complaints after complaints", "the people were distressed by delays in the legal procedures" (1465), "the people showed great resentment" (1481), "the people dared not to make any suspicious move" (1509), "the people became desperate due to magnified taxes and fees" (1522).

Though being quickly anticipated, bureaucratization and disconnection with the people not only persisted but increasingly became intensified. Such was a natural consequence and a side effect, or a "sickness" or "social evil" that originated from the very administrative system of this dynasty.

Some Concluding Remarks

State apparatuses under the Ly-Tran dynasties (11th–14th centuries) were established as soon as national independence had been firmly secured, resulting from the objective demands for centralized authority, territorial integrity and the adaptation of foreign ruling models. A prominent trait underpinning the

⁴⁴ This situation is reflected in the royal edicts (in the Complete History of the Great Viet). In 1429: "I (...) assign you (the officials) with important military and civil tasks. Yet you only sit idly and disregard your tasks, disappointing the trust put on you by the imperial court, and being apathetic towards your soldiers and people". In 1435: "Many officials ignore the royal regulations. Those in charge of the national treasury and imperial documents are ineffective or haughty, and willfully delay their decisions with regard to tax collection or exemption, causing distress for the people. Those in charge of military services have no compassion for the people as they borrow items from the people without showing proper care to them, blaming them for the broken or lost items that are otherwise useful. Those in charge of civil services only care for their self interest while ignoring the people, excuse the rich while arresting the poor, buy expensive timber to build houses, make unfair judgments, cause inner divisions, feed on bribery, show slackness while being gluttonous." In 1471: "Those of you, who are responsible for an entire area, have to dutifully take care of your people. (Yet) you are willfully ignorant of your humanistic task granted by the court which is to care for the people, and only show interest in such minor businesses as disciplining the people or arranging records." In 1481: "(Mandarins) dispose of their responsibilities, ignore the people's hardships, and sit lazily without devising any policy, thus leaving the people deprived."

political institution of these dynasties is the reliance of state power on popular support and on the harmonious and tight relationship between villages and nation. On the other hand, “people-oriented” had always been the crucial tenet of these reigns, which was actualized in their policies. These positive ruling ideas and policies constituted strong socio-political structures and firm political institutions, which helped the Ly and Tran dynasties persevere for four centuries and became the main reason why these dynasties were “celebrated for their civilization” and successfully united their military and civil policies as well as repeatedly defeated the invaders, protecting the national independence and sovereignty of the country. Under the Ly and Tran dynasties, the strength of the whole people was highly promoted because the interests of the monarchy were always tied to national sovereignty and the rights of citizens.

In establishing its monarchy after having emerged victorious from a great war for national liberation, which was achieved with the pains and blood of countless people, the Le dynasty became all the more aware of the profound lesson about the power of popular support. Also thanks to leading all the people to defeat the Ming army and regaining national independence, the Le dynasty had huge political prestige with its population. This allowed the Le reign to consolidate and strengthen the centralized institutions which brought no little success for the country. However, the Early Le dynasty only lasted for a century (1428–1527) and the heyday of centralized monarchical institutions actually only lasted about three decades under the reign of the talented king, Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497). Political institutions and the state apparatus of the Early Le dynasty revealed themselves as very restrictive and inadequate. More importantly, those institutions were not built on a solid social foundation. By prioritizing the consolidation of its centralized, pro-Confucius system and overly focusing on the development of its bureaucratic and legal system, the Early Le dynasty slowly disintegrated the strong cohesion between villages and nation and lost its credibility among the people. It was the consequence, the flipside or the cost incurred by a centralized and bureaucratic governance system.

Under centralized monarchies, there is almost no possibility of creating a democratic or egalitarian system. However, the fact remains that the Ly, Tran, Le and other Vietnamese feudal dynasties put a strong emphasis on the population and on constructing their foothold based on the confidence, backing and support of the people. It is basically a survival aspect of their sovereignty and

system. The idea of “people as a central foundation”, although changing in terms of its contents and outward manifestation, nevertheless retains an everlasting value. In other words, that is traditional political thought and a legacy of Vietnam. Since the construction of the Revolutionary government (in 1945), especially from Innovation (Đổi mới, 1986) to nowadays, “taking the people as the basis” as well as “promoting the people’s self-mastery” has become a guiding principle and motto of the Vietnamese government – a government of, by and for the people. However, in view of the achievements and the challenges that lie ahead, especially in the context of the strong development of a market economy and international integration, Vietnam’s government needs to seriously evaluate experiences and historical lessons. So the Vietnamese state must today represent the rights and interests of the people and highly promote the people's sovereignty. The basis of the rule of law is the establishment of a democracy which recognizes and ensures the implementation of the people's power in the most profound and intrinsic way.⁴⁵ By this, Vietnam could continue to promote the precious values and traditions of its nation as well as set up an important social platform for reforming and perfecting the political system and state apparatus of today.

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⁴⁵ Dao Tri Uc (2007), 233.

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