



# An Investigation Of The Royal Patronage Of Buddhism In Vietnam During The Ly-Tran Dynasty

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## Abstract

The Ly (1009–1225) and Tran (1225–1400) dynasties represent a golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism, marked by unprecedented royal patronage and the integration of Buddhism into the political, cultural, and social fabric of the nation. This paper investigates the extent and nature of royal patronage during this period, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between the state and the Sangha. By examining historical chronicles, epigraphic evidence, and Buddhist texts, this study explores how Buddhism was institutionalized as a state ideology, and how royal support facilitated the flourishing of Vietnamese Buddhist culture, art, and education.

## Introduction

The Ly and Tran dynasties in Vietnam witnessed profound transformations in both political consolidation and religious life. Buddhism, in particular, was elevated as a spiritual foundation of governance. The rulers during these dynasties not only acted as patrons of Buddhist institutions but also embodied Buddhist ideals in their leadership. This paper explores the forms of royal patronage, their historical significance, and their enduring influence on Vietnamese Buddhism.

## Literature Review

Scholarship on Buddhism in medieval Vietnam emphasizes the strong interdependence between religious institutions and political power. Taylor (2013) offers a comprehensive historical overview, situating Buddhism as a cultural foundation of Vietnamese society. Nguyen (2005, 2008) highlights the role of monks as political advisors and the ways in which dynastic legitimacy was strengthened through religious symbolism. Pham (2010) investigates Buddhist education, noting its role in shaping both religious and intellectual life. Meanwhile, Nguyen and Pham (2016) focus on the personal transformation of King Tran Nhan Tong and the

establishment of the Truc Lam Zen tradition. Kelley (2015) underscores the influence of Buddhist patronage on literary and artistic production.

Despite these valuable contributions, relatively few studies adopt a holistic approach to understanding royal patronage as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing politics, education, culture, and spiritual practice. This paper seeks to address that gap.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative historical approach, utilizing a range of primary and secondary sources:

1. **Primary Sources:** Vietnamese historical chronicles such as *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete Annals of Đại Việt) provide valuable information on royal decrees, temple constructions, and the involvement of monks in governance.
2. **Epigraphic Evidence:** Inscriptions on steles and temple monuments offer insights into the material dimensions of royal patronage, including land grants and tax exemptions.
3. **Buddhist Texts:** Records of sermons, treatises, and Zen teachings—particularly those of King Tran Nhan Tong—illustrate the spiritual commitments of the monarchy.
4. **Secondary Sources:** Modern scholarly analyses in Vietnamese, English, and French contextualize the political and religious significance of the Ly-Tran dynasties.

Through triangulation of these sources, this paper reconstructs the multifaceted role of royal patronage in shaping Vietnamese Buddhism.

## Royal Patronage under the Ly Dynasty

The Ly dynasty established Buddhism as a state religion, intertwining political authority with religious legitimacy. Several forms of patronage can be identified:

1. **Construction of Monasteries and Pagodas:** King Ly Thai To and his successors built numerous temples, including the famous One Pillar Pagoda (Chùa Một Cột), which became a symbol of Vietnamese Buddhist devotion (Taylor, 2013).
2. **Appointment of Monks as Advisors:** Eminent monks such as Vạn Hạnh played crucial roles in advising the court, shaping policy, and legitimizing the dynasty's rule (Nguyen, 2008).
3. **Land Grants and Tax Exemptions:** Monasteries received vast tracts of land and privileges, ensuring economic stability for Buddhist institutions (Nguyen, 2005).

Through these mechanisms, the Ly kings utilized Buddhism as both a spiritual and political instrument.

## Royal Patronage under the Tran Dynasty

The Tran dynasty continued and expanded the Buddhist orientation of the Ly rulers but also introduced unique elements:

1. **Personal Practice of Buddhism:** King Tran Nhan Tong, after abdicating, became a monk and founded the Truc Lam Zen school, symbolizing the fusion of royal authority and Buddhist spirituality (Nguyen & Pham, 2016).
2. **Educational Patronage:** Buddhist monasteries became centers of learning, where both Buddhist scriptures and Confucian classics were studied (Pham, 2010).
3. **Cultural Patronage:** Poetry, art, and architecture flourished under Buddhist inspiration, with royal support fostering a distinct Vietnamese Zen tradition (Kelley, 2015).

This dynasty's patronage demonstrates not only institutional but also deeply personal engagement with Buddhism.

## Impact of Royal Patronage

The royal patronage of Buddhism during the Ly and Tran dynasties had lasting consequences:

- **State Legitimacy:** Buddhism provided a moral and cosmological framework for justifying political power.
- **Cultural Flourishing:** Literature, art, and architecture thrived under Buddhist patronage.
- **Religious Syncretism:** The blending of Buddhism with Confucianism and Daoism reflected a uniquely Vietnamese religious landscape.
- **Legacy of Truc Lam Zen:** The foundation of a distinct Vietnamese Buddhist school by a former king set a precedent for integrating spirituality and governance.

## Discussion

The royal patronage of Buddhism in Vietnam during the Ly-Tran dynasties can be compared with similar patterns in neighboring countries such as China and India. In Tang China, emperors like Wu Zetian elevated Buddhism to a position of prominence, using it as a source of legitimacy (Ch'en, 1964). Similarly, in India, King Ashoka's sponsorship of Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE provided a model for rulers who sought to merge political authority with religious ideals (Strong, 1983).

Unlike the Indian model, which emphasized missionary activities and international propagation, Vietnamese royal patronage was primarily directed toward internal consolidation and cultural identity. In contrast to China, where Confucianism eventually supplanted Buddhism as state orthodoxy, Vietnam under the Ly-Tran dynasties maintained a more balanced syncretism between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This

indicates that Vietnamese rulers selectively adapted regional influences while forging a distinct path that reflected local needs.

The Truc Lam Zen tradition, established by King Tran Nhan Tong, represents an innovative contribution to global Buddhism. It signaled the possibility of a ruler embodying both kingly and monastic ideals, blending political leadership with renunciation. This dual role was rarely seen elsewhere in Asia, marking Vietnam's unique contribution to the Buddhist world.

### **Implications for Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism**

The legacy of Ly-Tran royal patronage continues to shape Vietnamese Buddhism today. Modern Vietnamese Buddhist institutions often reference the Truc Lam Zen tradition as a symbol of national identity and religious resilience. The emphasis on harmonizing Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist values remains relevant in addressing contemporary issues of governance, morality, and cultural preservation.

Moreover, the example of King Tran Nhan Tong's renunciation has inspired contemporary Buddhist leaders to embody ethical leadership and social responsibility. Current Buddhist revival movements in Vietnam frequently draw upon Ly-Tran precedents to legitimize their roles in promoting education, social welfare, and environmental awareness. Thus, the Ly-Tran model of patronage serves not only as a historical phenomenon but also as a guiding framework for engaging Buddhism with modern Vietnamese society.

### **Conclusion**

The Ly and Tran dynasties exemplify the symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and political authority in Vietnam. Royal patronage not only ensured the prosperity of Buddhist institutions but also embedded Buddhism within the very fabric of Vietnamese culture and governance. The legacies of these dynasties continue to inform contemporary understandings of Vietnamese Buddhism, offering enduring lessons on the integration of spiritual values with political leadership.

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