TRAN NHAN TONG: FROM ENLIGHTENED MONARCH TO BUDDHIST EMPEROR – THOUGHT AND THE JOURNEY OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Tran Nhan Tong (1258–1308) occupies a distinctive position in the history of medieval Vietnam. He was both the emperor who directly led Đại Việt during a period of profound turbulence and a key figure in the resistance against the Mongol–Yuan invasions in 1285 and 1288. He also laid important foundations for the formation and development of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen tradition. After abdicating the throne, Tran Nhan Tong entered monastic life, practiced Buddhism at Yên Tử, and was later honored as the "Buddhist Emperor." The convergence of royal authority, political leadership, spiritual cultivation, and social responsibility makes him an exceptional historical figure in Vietnam, in whom political action, spiritual life, and responsibility toward the community were not separate domains. This article approaches Tran Nhan Tong as an integrated historical and intellectual figure, examining the continuity between state governance, national defense, renunciation, Buddhist practice, religious teaching, and the formation of the Trúc Lâm tradition. The concept of "engaged Buddhism" is employed as an analytical category rather than as a doctrinal system explicitly formulated by Tran Nhan Tong himself. On this basis, the article explores the manifestations of his engagement with worldly life through his political experience, writings, religious practice, and activities directed toward society and human beings. The study combines historical methods with textual analysis, synthesis, and intellectual interpretation, drawing on historical records, Tran Nhan Tong's writings, and specialized scholarship on the Trần dynasty, Vietnamese Buddhism, and Trúc Lâm Zen. The article argues that the transition from emperor to Buddhist emperor did not constitute a complete withdrawal from social responsibility; rather, it marked a transformation in the mode through which such responsibility was exercised. This perspective helps illuminate the intellectual continuity between governance, Buddhist cultivation, and engagement with society in Tran Nhan Tong's legacy.

Keywords: Tran Nhan Tong; Buddhist Emperor; enlightened monarch; Trúc Lâm Zen; engaged Buddhism; Vietnamese Buddhism; political thought

1. INTRODUCTION

Tran Nhan Tong (1258–1308) was one of the most distinctive figures in the history of medieval Vietnam. He was both the emperor who directly led Đại Việt during a period of profound turbulence and a key figure in the two wars of resistance against the Mongol–Yuan forces in 1285 and 1288. At the same time, he played an important role in laying the foundations for the formation and development of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen tradition. After abdicating the throne, Tran Nhan Tong entered monastic life, practiced Buddhism at Yên Tử, and was later honored as the Buddhist Emperor. The convergence of royal authority, political leadership, and the life of a Zen practitioner created an exceptional historical figure in Vietnam, in whom political activity, spiritual life, and responsibility toward the community did not exist as separate domains.

The study of Tran Nhan Tong therefore cannot be confined to evaluating him either as a king who made major contributions to the defense of the country or solely as a prominent figure in Vietnamese Buddhism. More important is the relationship among the different stages and dimensions of his life: from governing the state and resisting foreign invasion to abdicating the throne, entering monastic life, propagating Buddhism, and developing the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition. When these dimensions are considered as an integrated whole, a distinctive process of transition can be discerned —from the responsibility of the head of state to the responsibility of a practitioner toward society and human beings.

Within this approach, “engaged Buddhism” is employed as an analytical concept for examining the relationship between religious practice and social reality in Tran Nhan Tong’s thought and actions. It is necessary to avoid equating the modern concept of “engaged Buddhism” with a fully developed theoretical system explicitly formulated by Tran Nhan Tong. Instead, his spirit of engagement should be identified through his life, writings, and political, social, cultural, and Buddhist activities across different stages of his life.

From this perspective, the article focuses on three issues: first, the manifestations that shaped the image of Tran Nhan Tong as an enlightened monarch in the context of Đại Việt in the late thirteenth century; second, the significance of the

transition from emperor to Buddhist emperor; and third, the principal dimensions of his thought and journey of engagement as reflected in his life, writings, and activities. The article thereby seeks to clarify the continuity among governance, Buddhist practice, and engagement with society, while also identifying the intellectual significance of Tran Nhan Tong in the history of Vietnamese thought and culture.

The article employs a historical approach combined with textual analysis, synthesis, and intellectual interpretation, based on comparisons among historical sources, Tran Nhan Tong's writings, and specialized studies of the Trần dynasty, Vietnamese Buddhism, and the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition. This approach places Tran Nhan Tong's thought and actions within their historical context, limits the imposition of modern concepts on a medieval figure, and at the same time highlights the enduring values of his intellectual and spiritual legacy.

2. TRAN NHÂN TÔNG – AN ENLIGHTENED MONARCH IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ĐẠI VIỆT IN THE LATE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

2.1. Historical Context and the Formation of Political Leadership

Tran Nhan Tong (1258–1308), personal name Tran Kham, ascended the throne in 1278, at a time when Đại Việt was facing major upheavals in East Asia. By then, the Trần dynasty had spent more than half a century consolidating its rule while gradually developing a political mechanism capable of mobilizing national resources in times of crisis. By the late thirteenth century, the expansion of the Yuan Empire posed an unprecedented challenge to Đại Việt. Following the destruction of the Song dynasty in 1279, military and diplomatic pressure from the north continued to intensify. In this context, Tran Nhan Tong's accession was not merely a transfer of power within the royal family; it took place alongside the pressing requirement to safeguard the country's independence.

Historical sources indicate that Tran Nhan Tong inherited a system of leadership in which coordination between the emperor and the retired emperor held an important position. After abdicating, Tran Thanh Tong continued to participate in major affairs of the state. In assessing the achievements of the two emperors, Tran Thanh Tong and Tran Nhan Tong, Ngô Sĩ Liên wrote that Tran Thanh Tong "entrusted the generals and ministers to work together with Nhan Tong," thereby overcoming a situation in which the country's very survival was threatened and bringing "the realm from peril back to

security" (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, p. 67). This assessment is significant because it situates Tran Nhan Tong within a collective leadership structure of the Trần dynasty, rather than isolating him from the figures and institutions that participated in governing the country.

At the same time, the image of Tran Nhan Tong in the official historical record is associated with the qualities of a ruler capable of rallying people around a common cause. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* describes him as "benevolent and gentle, able to unite the people" and evaluates his achievements in connection with the restoration and strengthening of the Trần dynasty (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, p. 67). This assessment was written after the Trần period and must therefore be situated within the context of medieval historiography; nevertheless, it remains important evidence for understanding how traditional historians assessed Tran Nhan Tong's capacity for state governance.

"Uniting the people" in the circumstances of the late thirteenth century was not merely a moral quality attributed to the ruler. When Đại Việt confronted an empire possessing superior military capabilities and resources, maintaining cohesion among the court, the army, and society became an important condition of resistance capacity. Tran Nhan Tong's political leadership should therefore be understood through the combination of leadership capacity, the ability to coordinate different forces, and an awareness of the need to maintain social stability.

2.2. Tran Nhan Tong and the Two Wars of Resistance against the Yuan in 1285 and 1288

During his reign, Tran Nhan Tong directly confronted two major Yuan invasions in 1285 and 1288. These were decisive challenges to both the survival of the Trần dynasty and the independence of Đại Việt.

The war of 1285 unfolded under circumstances in which the Yuan forces deployed troops along multiple fronts and rapidly placed pressure on Đại Việt's defensive system. Faced with the enemy's initial superiority, the Trần forces did not attempt to hold the capital at all costs. Instead, they withdrew, preserved their forces, and gradually shifted to counteroffensive operations. The course of the war demonstrates the ability of the Trần leadership to adapt to an adversary possessing superior forces. In their study of the thirteenth-century resistance wars against the Mongols, Hà Văn Tấn and Phạm Thị Tâm devote substantial attention to the balance of

forces, battlefield developments, and the transition of the Trần forces from defensive operations to counteroffensive action (Hà Văn Tấn & Phạm Thị Tâm, 2003, pp. 44, 102).

The victory in this war should not be attributed solely to Tran Nhan Tong. The emperor occupied the highest position within the political system, but the victory resulted from the coordination of Tran Nhan Tong, Tran Thanh Tong, Tran Quoc Tuan, other commanders, and the military and civilian forces of Đại Việt. In assessing the achievements of Tran Thanh Tong and Tran Nhan Tong, the official historical record likewise places them within a collective effort with the generals and ministers to lead the country through the war (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, p. 67). This assessment corresponds to the actual structure of the war, in which political decision-making, military command, and popular participation were closely interconnected.

After the defeat of 1285, the Yuan dynasty continued to prepare for a new invasion. In 1288, Yuan forces returned to Đại Việt with the aim of restoring the position they had lost. However, the experience of the previous war, together with the Trần dynasty's active preparations, produced a different strategic situation. The Trần forces gradually weakened the enemy, disrupted its logistical support, and selected an appropriate moment for a counteroffensive. The victory on the Bạch Đằng River in 1288 marked the culmination of the resistance, but it should be understood as the outcome of a comprehensive war effort, rather than as a victory determined by a single battle alone.

Studies of the thirteenth-century Mongol–Yuan wars indicate that the Trần strategy relied on preserving forces, exploiting terrain, prolonging the war in order to weaken the adversary, and selecting the appropriate moment for a counteroffensive (Hà Văn Tấn & Phạm Thị Tâm, 2003, pp. 272–274). Within this structure, Tran Nhan Tong acted as the head of state, maintained political unity, and worked with other leaders to organize the resistance. His image as an enlightened monarch therefore derives not simply from "defeating the Yuan," but also from his ability to sustain a leadership structure capable of adapting to a large-scale war.

Another detail reflects Tran Nhan Tong's position in postwar political and diplomatic affairs. Trần diplomatic documents indicate that the emperor was directly involved in managing relations with the Yuan dynasty. In his study of the diplomatic writings of the Trần period, Phạm Văn Ánh examines documents preserved in a

number of different textual sources and identifies them as an important component of Đại Việt–Yuan diplomatic relations in the late thirteenth century (Phạm Văn Ánh, 2008, pp. 39–48). This makes it possible to view military victory and diplomacy not as two separate spheres, but as interconnected dimensions of safeguarding national interests.

2.3. From Military Victory to Peacebuilding

One important dimension that is easily overshadowed by the image of military victory is the restoration of the country after war. In 1288, immediately after the defeat of the Yuan forces, the Trần dynasty had to confront the severe consequences of war. The capital and many other areas had been devastated; the challenge was no longer simply to defeat the enemy but to restore social life, strengthen national resources, and prepare the country to cope with subsequent developments.

The materials examined by Lê Mạnh Thát indicate that after the victory on the Bạch Đằng River, Tran Nhan Tong quickly implemented measures to restore the country. These included a general amnesty and exemptions or reductions in taxes and corvée for areas directly affected by the war. These measures can be compared with the records of the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, which explicitly mention tax and corvée exemptions for areas devastated by warfare (Lê Mạnh Thát, 1999, Chapter V).

This point is significant in assessing Tran Nhan Tong as an enlightened monarch. The capacity to govern cannot be measured solely by the ability to achieve victory on the battlefield. After war, the state must also move rapidly from a wartime mobilization regime toward economic recovery and the stabilization of social life. Policies reducing the burden on areas directly affected by warfare indicate that the court recognized the need to rebuild the social resources of the country.

At the same time, the Trần dynasty shifted strongly toward diplomacy in order to reduce the risk of renewed war. The diplomatic materials of the Trần period preserved in *An Nam chí lược*, *Nguyên sử*, *Thiên Nam hành ký*, and *Trần Cương Trung thi tập* provide a rich body of documents concerning relations between Đại Việt and the Yuan dynasty. Phạm Văn Ánh identifies these four sources as important materials for studying the diplomatic correspondence of the Trần emperors; his separate study of Tran Nhan Tong's diplomatic writings was published in *Tạp chí Văn học*, no. 12, 2008, pp. 39–48 (Phạm Văn Ánh, 2008, pp. 39–48).

These diplomatic documents indicate that after the war, the Đại Việt court did not pursue a state of continuous military confrontation with the Yuan dynasty. Rather, diplomacy became an important instrument for safeguarding the gains of the war, reducing the risk of renewed conflict, and creating conditions for Đại Việt's recovery. Some of Tran Nhan Tong's diplomatic writings have also been preserved in texts concerning interstate relations, indicating his direct involvement in addressing sensitive issues between the two states (Phạm Văn Ánh, 2008, pp. 39–48).

Therefore, viewing Tran Nhan Tong simply as a king who "defeated the Yuan" provides an incomplete picture. An important dimension of his statecraft lay in his ability to transform military victory into conditions for peace and national recovery. This is also an important link between the image of the enlightened monarch and the concept of engaged Buddhism examined in the subsequent sections.

2.4. Firm in Defending Independence without Absolutizing Confrontation

In relations with the Yuan dynasty, Tran Nhan Tong faced a complex political problem: Đại Việt had to safeguard its autonomy while coexisting with an empire of overwhelming power. Consequently, the Trần dynasty's policy could not rely on a single mode of action.

When sovereignty was directly threatened, the court organized resistance with a high degree of determination; when the war ended, however, maintaining diplomatic relations became essential. Trần diplomatic documents clearly reflect this characteristic. According to Phạm Văn Ánh, the surviving diplomatic corpus includes letters, memorials, petitions, reports, and other genres sent by the Trần emperors to the Song and Yuan courts, with the majority concerning relations with the Yuan (Phạm Văn Ánh, 2009). These documents reflect not merely the formal rituals of interstate relations but also the ability to employ political language and diplomatic writing to defend Đại Việt's position.

An example illustrating the complexity of these relations is the mission of Nguyễn Đại Phạp to the Yuan court. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records an exchange between Nguyễn Đại Phạp and Trần Ích Tắc, reflecting Đại Việt's firm attitude toward those who had defected to the Yuan (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, p. 68). This episode demonstrates that diplomacy during the Trần period did not imply concessions on fundamental principles. Rather, diplomacy was employed together with a clear awareness of national interests and dignity.

Thus, Tran Nhan Tong's statecraft can be understood through the combination of firmness and flexibility: firmness in defending independence, and flexibility in choosing appropriate methods and timing in dealing with external partners. This characteristic is important for understanding his political trajectory. War was not an end in itself but a means employed when the fundamental interests of the country were threatened; peace and stability were the conditions that needed to be safeguarded over the long term.

2.5. Uniting the People and the Responsibility of the Ruler

From the perspectives discussed above, the image of Tran Nhan Tong as an enlightened monarch can be understood through three interconnected capacities: leadership in wartime, organizing postwar recovery, and maintaining peaceful relations through diplomacy.

Ngô Sĩ Liên's assessment that Tran Nhan Tong was "benevolent and gentle, able to unite the people" should be understood within this broader structure (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, p. 67). "The people's support" in the context of a medieval state should not be understood as a political concept in the modern sense, but the stability of the court and the ability to mobilize society were clearly factors of decisive importance to Đại Việt's strength.

This also explains why Tran Nhan Tong's historical image is not associated merely with a single military victory. He is remembered as a ruler operating at a time when Đại Việt simultaneously faced the demands of defending sovereignty, organizing warfare, rebuilding the country, and managing relations with a major regional power. Throughout this process, the emperor's role cannot be separated from that of the court, the military commanders, and the people; yet his ability to connect different forces and maintain unity at decisive moments contributed to Tran Nhan Tong's distinctive position in history.

From this perspective, calling Tran Nhan Tong an enlightened monarch is not merely a reference to his achievement of major military victories. It also reflects the combination of the determination to defend the country, statecraft, diplomatic thinking, and an awareness of the long-term stability of society. These qualities provide the foundation for understanding the next transition in his life: from a monarch directly bearing responsibility for the state to a Buddhist emperor who continued to influence

society through religious practice, the propagation of Buddhism, and the development of a distinctly Đại Việt Buddhist tradition.

3. FROM EMPEROR TO BUDDHIST EMPEROR: THE TRANSITION BETWEEN ROYAL AUTHORITY AND MONASTIC LIFE

3.1. Abdication: The Transfer of Power without Withdrawal from Political Life

In 1293, after approximately fourteen years of direct rule, Tran Nhan Tong abdicated in favor of his son, Tran Anh Tong, and became the retired emperor (Thái thượng hoàng). This event opened a new stage in his life, but it did not constitute a complete break with political power or political responsibility. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records Tran Nhan Tong's transfer of the throne to Anh Tong in the ninth year of the Trùng Hưng era and his subsequent retention of the position of retired emperor within the court (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, pp. 201–203).

Within the political institutions of the Trần dynasty, the practice of transferring the throne to a successor while the reigning emperor was still alive was not entirely unfamiliar. The case of Tran Nhan Tong, however, was distinctive because the transfer of royal authority took place after two wars against the Yuan and while he remained capable of participating directly in affairs of state. His action should therefore not be understood simply as an abandonment of power. As retired emperor, Tran Nhan Tong continued to play an important role in the political life of the court and in guiding his successor.

The significance of this period lies precisely in its transitional character. Tran Nhan Tong left the position of emperor but did not yet withdraw from responsibility toward the country. Royal authority was transferred to Tran Anh Tong, while the political influence of his father continued. This explains why Tran Nhan Tong's life after 1293 cannot be described through the simple sequence of "king – abdication – monastic life." Between these two states existed a period in which political responsibility and the aspiration for religious practice coexisted.

Modern scholarship has also emphasized the intermediate character of this period. Bùi Thị Ánh Vân and Sujin Lee (2022) note that after abdicating in favor of Tran Anh Tong, Tran Nhan Tong continued to devote time to Buddhist practice, religious instruction, and the study of Buddhist scriptures while remaining connected

to affairs of the court. In other words, the transition from “king” to “practitioner” did not occur at a single moment but developed through a process.

3.2. Vũ Lâm in 1294: The Beginning of Monastic Life

One point that needs to be clarified in studying this process is Tran Nhan Tong’s entry into monastic life at the Vũ Lâm palace. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records the event in 1294 and further states that in 1295 the retired emperor returned to the capital “because he had previously entered monastic life at the Vũ Lâm palace and then returned” (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2, pp. 203–206). Thus, Tran Nhan Tong had begun his monastic life before his move to Yên Tử.

This detail is significant for historical interpretation. If 1299 alone is treated as the sole date of his entry into monastic life, the transformation of Tran Nhan Tong from monarch to practitioner is reduced to a single event. The episode at Vũ Lâm reflects an experimental or transitional stage, in which the intention to withdraw from court life had emerged while his ties to political life had not yet completely disappeared.

His return to the capital in 1295 further clarifies the incomplete nature of this transition. Tran Nhan Tong had entered monastic life, but the responsibilities of a retired emperor still required him to return to the political sphere of the court. This interplay makes the period from 1293 to 1299 particularly distinctive in his life: royal authority had been transferred, but political responsibility had not disappeared; monastic life had begun, but had not yet become his predominant way of life.

Here, too, it is necessary to avoid interpreting the relationship as an absolute opposition between the “world” and the “Way.” If entering monastic life is understood simply as leaving the secular world, Tran Nhan Tong’s case becomes difficult to explain fully. Instead, the events at Vũ Lâm indicate a gradual adjustment of his position within social and political life rather than an abrupt rupture.

3.3. Yên Tử in 1299: The Turning Point from Retired Emperor to Buddhist Emperor

In the eighth month of the Kỷ Hợi year, corresponding to 1299, Tran Nhan Tong left Thiên Trường and went to Yên Tử Mountain to “enter monastic life” and practice the ascetic discipline of *đầu đà*. This marked the decisive turning point in his transformation. Research based on the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* identifies this event as occurring after he had previously entered monastic life at Vũ Lâm. Accordingly, 1299

should be regarded as the point at which his transition to a dedicated monastic life was consolidated, rather than as the absolute beginning of the entire process (Ngô Sĩ Liên et al., 1993, vol. 2; Lê Mạnh Thát, 1999).

At Yên Tử, Tran Nhan Tong assumed the religious name Hương Vân Đại Đầu Đà, practiced the *đầu đà* ascetic discipline, and gradually established a religious life whose influence extended beyond the personal sphere. From this point onward, he was no longer merely a retired emperor engaged in Buddhist practice but became a figure of exceptional importance in the Buddhist life of Đại Việt. His activities in teaching the Dharma, training disciples, establishing religious institutions, and organizing a lineage associated with Yên Tử created important foundations for the formation and development of the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition.

Calling him the "Buddhist Emperor," however, does not mean completely rejecting his earlier political identity. On the contrary, the title reflects the distinctive combination of the governing experience of a monarch and the spiritual authority of a Zen practitioner. The transition from emperor to Buddhist emperor was therefore not the replacement of one person by another, but a transformation in the mode through which the same historical actor exercised influence on society.

During his reign, Tran Nhan Tong influenced society through state power, the military, and political institutions. After entering monastic life, his influence was increasingly exercised through religious instruction, Buddhist practice, the organization of the Buddhist community, and the transmission of ethical and spiritual ideas. The change in the mode of action is more significant than a change in the underlying orientation toward the community.

3.4. From "Abdication" to a Continuing Form of Service to Society

Tran Nhan Tong's activities after his arrival at Yên Tử demonstrate that he did not choose a completely secluded life detached from society. Sources concerning his life record his activities in preaching the Dharma, transmitting Buddhist teachings, training monks and nuns, and engaging in social activities. The textual tradition concerning Trúc Lâm also associates him with the organization of ordination ceremonies and the propagation of Buddhism at various locations, including Phổ Minh, Báo Ân, and Chân Giáo pagodas (Bùi Thị Ánh Vân & Lee, 2022).

In particular, Tran Nhan Tong's activities were not confined to Yên Tử. In 1301, he traveled to Champa, a journey that carried both religious significance and

implications for Đại Việt–Champa relations. He subsequently returned to Đại Việt and continued his religious and educational activities until the final years of his life. This further supports the view that his entry into monastic life did not constitute an absolute withdrawal from society.

This idea is expressed clearly in the *Cư trần lạc đạo phú*. In the concluding part of the work, Tran Nhan Tong articulated a view of Buddhist practice that did not necessarily entail complete withdrawal from secular life. The text is included in *Thơ văn Lý – Trần*, volume 2, upper book, pp. 505 and 510 (Nhiều tác giả, 1989, pp. 505, 510). This text provides an important basis for examining the relationship between religious practice and worldly life in Tran Nhan Tong's thought.

Accordingly, the journey from emperor to Buddhist emperor should be understood as a process of transforming his social role, rather than simply abandoning the secular world. Tran Nhan Tong left the throne but did not abandon his concern for human beings and the community; he moved from the position of head of state to that of a spiritual guide. This constitutes a direct link between the history of Tran Nhan Tong's life and the question of "engaged Buddhism."

At this level, the concept of "engaged Buddhism" must be used with methodological caution. Tran Nhan Tong should not be attributed with a fully developed doctrine of "engaged Buddhism" in the sense of modern theoretical frameworks. More precisely, his life and actions allow us to identify a tendency toward engagement with society, in which Buddhist practice, religious instruction, and responsibility toward the community were integrated into a coherent relationship. This unity constitutes a distinctive feature of the Buddhist Emperor: he relinquished direct political power without relinquishing responsibility for human life and society.

4. TRAN NHÂN TÔNG'S THOUGHT AND JOURNEY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIETY

4.1. Buddhist Practice within Worldly Life: The Foundation of His Engaged Thought

One of the most distinctive features of Tran Nhan Tong's thought is his understanding of the relationship between worldly life and Buddhist practice. If entering monastic life is understood as completely abandoning the secular world in pursuit of individual liberation, Tran Nhan Tong's life and actions are difficult to explain adequately. From his experience as a monarch to his life as a Zen practitioner,

he gradually developed a perspective in which Buddhist practice did not necessarily entail withdrawal from worldly life.

This idea is expressed most clearly in the *Cư trần lạc đạo phú*. From its title alone, "cư trần" and "lạc đạo" bring two categories often regarded as opposites into a unified relationship. "Cư trần" means living in the midst of the world, while "lạc đạo" refers to finding joy in the Way. The essential point is not to reject worldly life but to affirm the possibility of practicing the Way within that very life.

In the phú, Tran Nhan Tong writes:

"Living in the world, take delight in the Way according to conditions; When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep."

(Nhiều tác giả, 1989, vol. 2, upper book, p. 505).

These two lines do not present Buddhist practice as an escape from life. "According to conditions" primarily expresses an attitude of non-attachment to circumstances; practice takes place within the concrete conditions of everyday existence. Thus, "cư trần" is not opposed to the "Way" but becomes the very space in which the Way is practiced.

The idea is developed further in the lines:

"The treasure within the house—there is no need to seek it; Facing phenomena, remain free of attachment; do not ask about Zen."

(Nhiều tác giả, 1989, vol. 2, upper book, p. 505).

The "treasure" is not located in an external world but within the human being; "remaining free of attachment when facing phenomena" does not mean indifference to life but rather freedom from domination by external circumstances. From this perspective, ethical life is not based on withdrawal from society but on the ability to transform oneself while living within society.

This provides an important basis for identifying the tendency toward social engagement in Tran Nhan Tong's thought. Nevertheless, "cư trần lạc đạo" should not be equated with a conception of social and political engagement in the modern sense. Tran Nhan Tong did not formulate a doctrine of "engaged Buddhism" using the terminology of modern scholarship. What can be established from the text is a conception of Buddhist practice oriented toward transforming the human being within worldly life, which was subsequently expressed through concrete activities of religious instruction and engagement with society.

4.2. From Self-Cultivation to Religious Instruction: Engagement as a Mode of Buddhist Practice

If “cư trần lạc đạo” establishes the foundation at the level of inner cultivation, Tran Nhan Tong’s life after entering monastic life extends this orientation into the social sphere. He did not stop at personal cultivation but engaged in preaching the Dharma, transmitting Buddhist precepts, training the monastic community, and developing an organized system of practice. These activities were directly associated with the formation of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen tradition.

In his study of Tran Nhan Tong, Lê Mạnh Thát devotes substantial attention to the emperor’s activities after entering monastic life and to the formation of Trúc Lâm. From this perspective, Tran Nhan Tong was not merely a figure of significance in the political history of the Trần dynasty; from the late thirteenth century onward, he became an important center of Đại Việt’s Buddhist life (Lê Mạnh Thát, 1999).

It is important that his activities of religious instruction took place in a society that had just experienced large-scale wars. The development of Buddhist life can therefore also be considered in relation to the community’s need for spiritual and ethical stability. Tran Nhan Tong’s conception of Buddhist practice did not lead people toward a rejection of life; instead, it emphasized disciplining the mind, practicing good deeds, and living responsibly under concrete social conditions.

This orientation is also expressed in *Đắc thú lâm tuyền thành đạo ca*. The work depicts Tran Nhan Tong’s path of practice through the experiences of a person who had once lived within the royal court and subsequently chosen a purified life in the mountains. Yet “lâm tuyền” was not the endpoint of the journey. From Yên Tử, his activities continued to reach toward the community through preaching the Dharma and organizing Buddhist life.

Tran Nhan Tong’s journey of engagement can therefore be identified through a three-level process: self-cultivation – religious instruction – community organization. Self-cultivation provided the ethical and spiritual foundation; religious instruction transformed personal experience of practice into guidance for others; and community organization gave these values institutional form within a Buddhist tradition capable of enduring over time. This is what enabled his thought on engagement to move beyond the sphere of an individual way of life.

4.3. Engagement Rooted in Political Experience and a Sense of Responsibility toward the Community

Tran Nhan Tong's engagement with society must also be situated in relation to his political experience before entering monastic life. This constitutes a distinctive feature separating him from the image of a Zen practitioner who entered religious life solely from a monastic environment.

Tran Nhan Tong had been the head of state during an exceptional period in the history of Đại Việt. His experiences of war, diplomacy, state governance, and national reconstruction provided a practical foundation for his understanding of human beings and society. When he entered monastic life, he did not do so without social experience. On the contrary, he carried with him the political memory and sense of responsibility of a person who had directly borne responsibility for the fate of the country.

This is evident in his activities after entering monastic life. In 1301, Tran Nhan Tong traveled to Champa. The journey took place in the context of increasingly close Đại Việt–Champa relations, reinforced by political commitments and dynastic marriage between the two courts. His journey should therefore not be considered entirely separate from the regional diplomatic context. After the journey, he continued his activities of religious instruction in Đại Việt.

The interplay between religious activity and the social and political context reveals an important characteristic: entering monastic life did not eliminate Tran Nhan Tong's sense of responsibility toward the community. The form of responsibility changed, but the object of his concern expanded from the self toward the wider community.

Here, "engagement with society" should not be understood simply as bringing Buddhism into political activity. More precisely, it affirms that spiritual life carries responsibility for social life, and that religious practitioners need not remain outside matters affecting the community. Drawing on his experience of state governance, Tran Nhan Tong adopted another mode of influence: guiding people through religious instruction, ethical cultivation, and the organization of Buddhist life.

4.4. "Hòa Quang Đồng Trần" and the Idea of Being Present in the World

A concept frequently employed in studies of Tran Nhan Tong's thought is "hòa quang đồng trần." Its use, however, must be situated within its proper Zen context. It

should not be transformed into a modern political slogan and projected retrospectively onto his thought.

Within the Zen tradition, “hòa quang đồng trần” expresses a state in which one does not display one’s inner radiance but blends into worldly life without being assimilated by it. In relation to Tran Nhan Tong’s thought, this idea is closely connected to “cư trần lạc đạo”: living in the world without allowing the mind to be dominated by worldly circumstances.

The central point is integration without assimilation. A practitioner does not necessarily need to seek a space completely separated from society in order to attain awakening. Rather, the capacity for cultivation is tested precisely through relationships with people and circumstances.

This also helps explain why Trúc Lâm did not develop as a system entirely detached from Đại Việt society. Trúc Lâm inherited elements of earlier Vietnamese Zen Buddhism while simultaneously becoming closely connected with the cultural, social, and political environment of Đại Việt. Tran Nhan Tong was therefore both an heir to the Zen tradition and a figure who shaped a form of Buddhism bearing a distinctive imprint of Đại Việt society in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

4.5. Engagement as a Transformation of the Mode of Serving Humanity

The overall trajectory of Tran Nhan Tong’s life reveals a relatively clear logic of development: as emperor, he fulfilled his responsibility toward the country through political power; as retired emperor, he continued to participate in guiding state affairs; and after entering monastic life, he turned increasingly toward religious instruction and the cultivation of the community’s spiritual life.

What changed first was the mode of action. What remained relatively stable was his sense of responsibility toward human beings and society.

This is important for distinguishing Tran Nhan Tong’s engagement from a simplistic understanding of the social activities of a religious practitioner. Engagement here began with self-transformation, expanded into religious instruction, and then acquired a degree of institutional expression through the construction of a religious community. From this perspective, monastic life did not mark the end of his service to society but a transformation in the mode of that service.

The continuity between the two stages—governance and Buddhist practice—is precisely what makes Tran Nhan Tong distinctive. He was neither a king who happened to become a Zen practitioner nor a Zen practitioner completely detached from political experience. The image of the Buddhist Emperor emerged from the intersection of monarchical experience, the experience of war, a sense of responsibility toward the community, and the ideal of Buddhist practice.

From this perspective, Tran Nhan Tong's thought and journey of engagement can be summarized in three dimensions: cultivating oneself within actual worldly life; guiding others through the experience of awakening; and directing spiritual life toward social stability, ethical conduct, and community. This structure gives depth to the image of the Buddhist Emperor and helps explain why Tran Nhan Tong continues to occupy a distinctive position in the history of Vietnamese thought and culture.

5. THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF APPROACHING TRAN NHÂN TÔNG AS A THINKER OF ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIETY

Approaching Tran Nhan Tong from the perspective of engagement with society helps connect dimensions of his life that are often studied separately: state governance, national defense, peacebuilding, Buddhist practice, religious instruction, and the development of Buddhism. From this perspective, Tran Nhan Tong's departure from the throne is not regarded as the end of his social role but as a transformation in the way he influenced people and the community. The political experience of a monarch, the experience of war, and Zen practice can thus be situated within a single historical trajectory.

The value of this approach also lies in clarifying the distinctive character of Trúc Lâm in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. "Cư trần lạc đạo" places Buddhist practice in direct relationship with worldly life, while Tran Nhan Tong's activities after entering monastic life demonstrate that religious instruction and community organization became important modes of practicing the Buddhist Way. According to Lại Quốc Khánh (2018), Tran Nhan Tong's engaged Buddhist thought was expressed primarily through practice, particularly in the practitioner's sense of responsibility toward the community and the integration of Buddhist cultivation with social instruction.

Nevertheless, the limits of this approach must be clearly defined. Tran Nhan Tong's "engagement" should not be equated with the concept of engaged Buddhism in

modern discourse, nor should he be attributed with a fully developed theoretical system of engagement. “Engagement with society” is an analytical concept used to identify the relationship among his thought, life, and social activities. Its value therefore lies in clarifying the continuity between his political and religious identities, rather than in modernizing or restructuring Tran Nhan Tong’s thought through categories foreign to his historical context.

6. CONCLUSION

Tran Nhan Tong represents a distinctive case in medieval Vietnamese history, in which royal authority, national responsibility, and Buddhist practice converged within a single historical trajectory. As emperor, he and the Trần dynasty led Đại Việt through the invasions of the Yuan Empire, while also participating in diplomatic affairs and the reconstruction of the country after war. These experiences provided an important practical foundation for his subsequent transformation.

From his abdication in 1293 to his move to Yên Tử in 1299, Tran Nhan Tong underwent a process of transition from head of state to guide of the spiritual life of the community. Entering monastic life was therefore not a negation of his political past but a transformation in the way he fulfilled his responsibility toward people and society. Whereas this responsibility had previously been exercised primarily through political power, after entering monastic life he exercised it through Buddhist practice, religious instruction, and the development of Buddhist life.

From Tran Nhan Tong’s writings and life, particularly the idea of “cư trần lạc đạo,” it is possible to identify a tendency toward engagement with society characterized by several basic features: Buddhist practice connected with worldly life, awakening connected with self-transformation, and religious instruction oriented toward the community. Nevertheless, “engagement with society” should be understood here as an analytical concept, not as a modern doctrine directly attributed to Tran Nhan Tong.

It is precisely the continuity between the enlightened monarch and the Buddhist Emperor, state governance and religious instruction, responsibility toward the country and responsibility toward human beings that gives historical depth to Tran Nhan Tong. The value of studying him therefore lies not in separating the two images of “king” and “practitioner,” but in recognizing a trajectory in which political power was transformed into spiritual influence, experience in state governance into responsibility

for religious instruction, and the ideal of Buddhist practice into a relationship with community life. This is the distinctive feature that shaped the historical image of Tran Nhan Tong—from enlightened monarch to Buddhist Emperor.

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