

# Dai Co Viet State in East Asian Historical and Political Context during the Tenth Century

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**Abstract:** In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Tang dynasty declined and eventually collapsed. During the “Five dynasties and ten kingdoms” period, the dynasties could neither maintain political power nor apply pressure on neighbouring countries. Taking the opportunity, Dai Co Viet carried out an armed uprising to gain national independence. Afterwards, by inheriting traditional values and gaining experiences from the region, Dinh Tien Hoang started to set up a political state apparatus. The state of Dai Co Viet bore characteristics of a “functional state”. The patterns and institutions applied by the Ngo, the Dinh, and the Early Le dynasties were then improved successfully under the Ly and the Tran dynasties. The state of Dai Co Viet was much different from the general types of states in history, such as the state for domination and the state for exploitation, which ever appeared in many Eastern and Western countries during the Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** Dai Co Viet state, Dinh Tien Hoang, models of states.

**Subject classification:** History

## 1. Introduction

Located in East Asia, Vietnam is seen to have an important geo-strategic and geo-economic position. During the first centuries AD as well as some centuries BC, many historical, economic, and cultural relations were already set up among nations in the region. Because Vietnam had abundant natural resources and played a role as a link between

Northeast and Southeast Asia, in addition to its position as the gateway from the vast mainland of Asia to the oceans, it was considered a destination for many flows of migrants, merchants, and artisans, etc. At the same time, it was a target for influence and invasion from regional political powers and empires.

In history, Vietnamese political life was greatly impacted by the regional as well as the international political and cultural

environment. In addition to cultural exchange and acculturation, the cultural “coercion” or “imposition” sometimes took place. The regional empires’ ambitions of expanding the territory and appropriating natural, trade, and labour resources in other countries debilitated seriously many nations in East Asia. Vietnam’s struggles for national independence and freedom in the 10<sup>th</sup> century are, therefore, considered a remarkable uprising and “a unique phenomenon in the world history” [3, p.33]. It should be studied, approached, and analysed more comprehensively, scientifically, and objectively from various perspectives.

## **2. Struggles for national independence and assertion of an independent nation**

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnam experienced many changes. In addition to domestic movements, political changes in other countries also exerted strong impacts on social life and historical progression of Vietnam. After a long period under foreign domination, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnam rose up in arms with the aspiration for national independence and the determination to smash the yoke of slavery. Finally, Vietnam succeeded in overthrowing the Chinese domination. In the history of Vietnam, “the 10<sup>th</sup> century was marked with great changes in many aspects and considered significantly a turning point in its national history. All the changes were closely related to the key target, which was to fight against foreign invaders for achieving national independence, putting an end to the period of Chinese domination

that had lasted for over one thousand years, and opening a new period of national independence and development” [8, p.17]. The century is seen as the national revival period with a wide range of fundamental and profound changes, resulting in a new model of development for Dai Co Viet and subsequently Dai Viet.

In the significant moments of the pivotal century, Vietnam not only defeated the Chinese empire’s intention of occupying the country but also prepared the foundation for establishing a self-controlled state and comprehensive development proactively, while strengthening and improving rapidly the capacity to assert the position as a powerful and prosperous nation in Southeast Asia.

With the initial steps after gaining national independence, leaders of the monarchies implemented flexible and harmonious foreign policies, while strengthening necessary power to cope with the repression from regional political powers. The patriotic spirit and glorious achievements were closely attached to some national heroic figures during various dynasties, such as Khuc Thua Du (died 907), Khuc Hao (died 917), Duong Dinh Nghe (931-937), and other heroes under the Ngo (939-965), Dinh (968-980), and Early Le dynasties. The spirit was further demonstrated by the brilliant feats of the Ly dynasty (1009-1225) in the resistance war against the Chinese Song dynasty as well as the victories of the Tran dynasty (1226-1400) in the wars against the three invasions from the Mongol-Yuan Empire, which was the most powerful nation in Asia and the world at that time.

With the outstanding achievements in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century such as the victory of Ngo Quyen at the battle in Bach Dang river in 938, the success of Le Hoan in warding off several invasions by the Chinese Song army in 980-981, and the prevention of the devastation and encroachment on the southern border by the Champa army in 982, the Dinh dynasty actually contributed a great part to wiping out and pacifying all the local warlords, in order to unite the country and establish the state of Dai Co Viet (968-1054). Compared to the long-ruling periods of the Ly (216 years) and Tran dynasties (174 years), the reign of the Dai Co Viet state lasted for just 86 years. During this historical period, however, the Dinh dynasty (968-980) not only continued the tradition and the achievements from the Ngo dynasty (939-967), asserting the national independence and self-reliance, but also set up essential grounds for long-term development and prosperity of Dai Co Viet and subsequently Dai Viet.

The Dinh dynasty made a profound historical hallmark with its strictly decisive policies in various aspects such as the political, economic, administrative, and diplomatic spheres. The leaders of the Dai Co Viet state showed the power, cultural creativity, and high intelligence of the Vietnamese people convincingly. Coping with the political pressure from the Song dynasty in the north and the threats from the Kingdom of Champa in the south, the monarchical governments of the Ngo, the Dinh, and the Early Le dynasties implemented various measures and directed our armies and people to protect the territorial integrity successfully.

Those political and cultural measures created the foundation, premise, and basic principles for dealing with complicated problems related to the foreign affairs between Vietnam and other countries in the region at that time. On the other hand, the lessons learnt from the political and diplomatic policies of the Dinh and the Early Le dynasties were valuable for the implementation of foreign policies under the next dynasties.

The political, military, and diplomatic struggles carried out by the Ngo, the Dinh, and the Early Le dynasties also contributed to improving the patriotism and strengthening the national trust. It can be said that the revival of national independence in 938 resulted in a new position and power for the following monarchies in implementing their internal and external policies. A new chapter of history with social and cultural prosperity and glorious national spirit actually started in Vietnam. In such a context, the kings of the Ngo, the Dinh, and the Early Le dynasties as well as the first kings of the Ly dynasty, including Ly Thai To (1009-1028) and Ly Thai Tong (1028-1054), inherited and developed further valuable traditions, leading to outstanding achievements in Dai Co Viet and writing a significant chapter in the history and culture of Vietnam [16, p.199].

### **3. Regional political thinking and consciousness**

According to the opinion of some researchers, the “Chinese order”, also called

the “Chinese world order”, was established step by step in Northeast Asia [21]. Due to the power and influence of the Chinese empires, the “Chinese order” gradually spread outward to many countries in East Asia and finally covered a vast area. The “order” consists of some core elements affected greatly by the Tian-Ming doctrine, also called the Mandate of Heaven and the Confucian concept of loyalty. It is closely associated with the Confucian spirit and the centralised monarchical political institution, in which China is seen as the centre. With the “order”, the northern feudal dynasties set up for themselves the “mission” to establish circles and regions under its influence, while using power and violence to persuade and take over neighbours and implementing various diplomatic and economic measures to rule over other countries in the region and even faraway “small countries”.

The nature of the Chinese order, its actual power, operation, and influence, however, remain a highly controversial topic among researchers. Some researchers have argued that the so-called Chinese order is just a delusion. Many countries in the region took part in the “order” not because of being afraid the power of the Chinese empires but due to non-political factors. In some contexts, East Asian countries took account of cultural development, academic and religious exchange as well as economic benefit, when sending their missions to China for strengthening diplomatic ties and paying tribute.

Reviewing the political policy of Vietnamese feudal governments in response to the Chinese monarchical dynasties, O. W.

Wolters, an American historian, remarked that “South” and “North” were necessary poles in the Vietnamese conceptualisation of relevant space. In the process of acculturation, “the witnesses were not being guided by Chinese wisdom; they were merely using it in their own way and for their own purposes. The Confucianist canon was always fragmented in Vietnam to lend weight to specific Vietnamese statements about themselves” [11, p.146]. The remark shows that the monarchical dynasties in Dai Co Viet, Dai Viet, and subsequently Dai Nam, kept consistent and profound political characteristics, or more precisely, the political consciousness and practical thinking in implementing foreign policies with the Chinese empires.

Over centuries, East Asian countries, such as Korea, Japan (and even the Kingdom of Champa)... quickly built their own cultural identity and self-defence capacity, while trying to keep an indulgent attitude towards China. In parallel with the national development policies, those countries incessantly strengthened their national position, setting and asserting the territory, and improving foreign relations. The assimilation, anti-assimilation, invasion, and anti-invasion etc. always took place, despite many changes in history. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, consequently, many countries in East Asia successfully restored national independence and, more importantly, with a new development spirit, they actually made significant contributions to the general development in Asia and the world as well.

In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Tang dynasty (618-907) fell into decline and finally ended with the founding of the

monarchical states in the period of “five dynasties and ten kingdoms” (Vietnamese: *Ngũ đại thập quốc*; Chinese: 五代十国). Those states could neither maintain long-term political power nor expand the Chinese domination in local areas and political pressure on neighbouring countries. Recognising the situation and taking the opportunity, many East Asian countries carried out armed uprising and successfully gained national independence<sup>32</sup>. Approached from another perspective, we can realise that many elements of the economic system and political power structure set up in Asia by the Han (206 BC-220 AD), the Sui (581-618), and the Tang dynasties (618-907) fell in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the event in 907 not only marked the end of a great empire in the Chinese history but also broke down the entire system that the Chinese empire spent a lot of time building in many East Asian countries. The victories achieved by the Ngo, Dinh, and Early Le dynasties contributed to breaking the Chinese political structure and power system in the region.

As the countries that had close relations with the Northeast Asian societies, Korea and Japan also experienced deep changes in their history, due to the political upheaval in Chang'an. Although the Chinese culture had greatly influenced both the countries for a long time, the national spirit was not eroded by foreign cultural factors; on the contrary, the consciousness of the origin and national sovereignty was continually nourished. The Buddhist ideology started to infiltrate into Korean and Japanese culture in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The more Buddhism was

introduced into social strata, however, the more it helped to nourish and promote the development of the local traditional religions, including Shamanism in Korea and Shinto in Japan. Thus, Buddhism contributed a significant part in strengthening the national spirit and solidarity.

From the political perspective, the decline of the Tang dynasty was one of the factors weakening the power of the Kingdom of Silla (668-918). Taking advantage of the decline and fall of the Tang dynasty, Wang Kon (918-943), a noble in Kaesong, led an uprising and then, in 918, founded a new great dynasty, the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), in Korea. In reality, the Kingdom of Silla had very close ties and got much support from the Tang dynasty as well as the Kingdom of Baekje. In the context that Silla could not rely on the interference from the Tang dynasty, Wang Kon carried out the political struggle, aiming at wiping out opposing political forces, especially the nobles of Silla. The political success of Wang Kon led to a thriving period of the Goryeo dynasty that lasted for 474 years in the history of the Korean peninsula.

Regarding Japan, the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries were also marked with drastic socio-economic changes. Due to various historical events and influence of the Taika reform (645-649), an economic system of private, tax-free, and autonomous estates, called Shoen, was initially set up in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In many local areas, the power of Bushi bands grew increasingly greater. During around three centuries, when Japan implemented the opening policy to adopt the Chinese civilisation, it sent a large

number of young scholars and monks across the sea to China to learn achievements of the Chinese civilisation. In the context of the decline and fall of the Tang dynasty, Japan proactively lessened its relations with China, to focus on transforming the cultural achievements into its own cultural heritage<sup>3</sup>. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, consequently, all three East Asian countries successfully broke out of the restriction imposed previously by the Chinese empire and quickly set up their regime and independent culture.

Meanwhile, the role and position of the Southeast Asian countries were more and more improved. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, many countries in Southeast Asia became important political forces and gained a lot of impressive cultural achievements. It is one of the regions that had rich cultural diversity and scored many outstanding successes. In history, Southeast Asian culture contributed a considerable part to the development of human civilisations<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to the political and cultural space in Northeast Asia, which had been ever influenced greatly by the Chinese patterns, during the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, some “sub-regional empires” were gradually founded in Southeast Asia, including the Kingdom of Champa, the Khmer Empire in the Southeast Asian peninsula, and Srivijayan Empire in the Southeast Asian archipelagos [7, pp.293-326]. The prosperity of the cultural and economic centres in the Greater Indies provided a new model differing from the Chinese political institutions. Those areas had abundant natural resources and were

called Suvarnabhumi (the Realm of Gold) or Suvarnavipa (Island of Gold). Southeast Asia drew strong attraction from not only diplomatic officials and merchants in the north but also politicians and traders from all over the world. Before the Western explorers and missionaries came in the 5<sup>th</sup> century or so, a close network of political, economic, and cultural relations was established in Asia. From time to time, natural resources and local knowledge in the Southeast Asian countries contributed a part to the general social capital, material riches, and knowledge of Asia. Southeast Asia was directly linked with India and China. At the same time, it played an important role in maintaining the relationship between the two major civilisations and the world. Owing to the early development, high creativity, and cultural prominence in Southeast Asia with some typical cultures such as Dai Viet, Champa, Angkor, Myanmar, and Srivijaya, etc., the significant position, cultural diversity, and resistance power of the countries in the region were eventually recognised.

#### **4. Search for a new model of development**

In the context of vigorous changes taking place during the early period of national independence, Buddhism spread rapidly in Dai Viet and was combined with the traditional culture and indomitable national spirit to create patriotism and sense of national independence and sovereignty. As Dai Viet had to cope with the local warlords and the foreign invaders, however,

the leaders of Dai Co Viet state sometimes implemented drastic measures called “repressive conduct”. Despite the social changes and the emergence of various development trends, Buddhism started to develop remarkably during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. “The very kings, who had ever placed cauldrons of boiling oil in the courtyard or kept tigers in the cages to suppress the opposition, advocated Buddhism strongly. The understanding of such a seemingly contradictory situation may help us to realise the characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 10<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>5</sup> [17, pp.122].

The ideology and core values of Buddhism (and, to some extent, those of Confucianism and Taoism as well) contributed significantly to the development of cultural values and new thoughts of an independent nation [17, pp.158-159]. Dinh Tien Hoang and other leaders of the Dinh dynasty drew up guidelines on the establishment of an administrative system, aiming at building a centralised monarchy as a new model of development on the basis of the Buddhist ideology. Realising the social influence and roles of religious intellectuals, they invited a large number of Buddhist monks, Zen masters, and typical intellectuals to take part in undertaking important activities of the country. In reality, they made significant contributions to strengthening national development and independence as well as improving the living conditions of common people.

After coming to the throne in 971, Dinh Tien Hoang immediately promulgated the regulations on the hierarchy of Buddhist monks, aiming at building a centralised government. At the same time, he appointed

accredited monks to the positions of civil and military mandarins. Ngo Chan Luu, a Zen master, was assigned to the position of Sanghajara (Vietnamese: *Tăng thống*) with the title of “Great master Khuong Viet” i.e. the Head of all Buddhist monks in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Truong Mai Ni was assigned to the position of Personnel Mandarin (Vietnamese: *Tăng lục*) i.e. the Second highest mandarin after Sanghajara. Those Buddhist ranks were also maintained during the periods of the following monarchies. According to the “Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden” (Vietnamese: *Thiền uyển tập anh*) [15, p.39], Dinh Tien Hoang often invited Khuong Viet for discussion and consultation.

Similarly, Khuong Viet was highly respected by King Le Dai Hanh [4, pp.7-20]. To deal with important national affairs during the first days on the throne, the king always consulted venerable monks, including Do Phap Thuan (915-990), Ma Ha (Mahamaya, a Cham ethnic minority monk), and Van Hanh as well as others. In the later period, Van Hanh was also very proactive in mobilising support for the enthronement of Ly Cong Uan<sup>6</sup>.

By the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, Van Phong, a master of the third generation of Vo Ngon Thong Zen sect founded by Vo Ngon Thong (Chinese pinyin: Wu Yantong), led his religious life in Tran Quoc pagoda (built by King Ly Nam De in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with the initial name as Khai Quoc, which means “Founding the Country”). The follower of the Zen priest Van Phong is the very Ngo Chan Luu, who was entitled “Great master Khuong Viet”. As the Sanghajara under the Dinh dynasty, Khuong

Viet developed and turned the pagoda into a Buddhist centre. According to the “Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden”, when Khuong Viet was introducing Buddhist teachings in Khai Quoc pagoda, Da Bao, a Zen priest of the fifth generation of Vo Ngon Thong, came to learn the teachings [2, p.43]. Thus, both Dai La Citadel and Hoa Lu Imperial City were built as the biggest Buddhist centres of the country under the Dinh and the Early Le dynasties. The Buddhist consciousness and popularity in the period can be shown via various pagodas, such as Nhat Tru, Thap, and Ba Ngo pagodas in Hoa Lu and traces of other ancient pagodas and stupas. Showing special respect for Buddhism, the leaders of the monarchies seemed to aim at bringing about the national reconciliation and, at the same time, improving the position of Dai Co Viet culture in comparison to other cultures in East Asia. By giving prominence to Buddhism, the Dinh dynasty expected to encourage a sense of patriotism and national independence, creating new dynamics and ideas for development and paving the way for Dai Co Viet culture to shine more and more in the region.

Regarding the ideology, Confucianism and Taoism were also introduced into Dai Viet during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to Buddhism. Those religious ideologies, however, did not fulfil all necessary conditions to become a cultural and ideological foundation for setting up national ruling policies. When mentioning the development of Buddhist culture, it is impossible to forget that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the first monarchical dynasties applied

harmoniously various institutions on the basis of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist thoughts, combining the rule of virtue and the rule of law together in their national governance. The combination of the three religions, of which Buddhism played an increasingly more important role (from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century), reflects not only the choice of one dynasty but also shows the development of a self-strengthening regime. The regime was more inclined to rely on the tolerance as well as the depth of the Buddhist dogmas to consolidate national power.

Regarding foreign policies, many nations in East Asia set up and maintained relations with China, due to various purposes in the contemporary historical and political context. By the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the position kept by the leaders of Khuc and Duong clans was still titled Jiedushi (Vietnamese: *Tiết độ sứ*), i.e., the military governor of Annam, as assigned by the Tang dynasty. It is a clever political measure to keep a peaceful relation with the great political power in the north. However, it also demonstrates that the Khuc leader and Duong Dinh Nghe were not capable of setting up another model of state institutions at a higher level.

After seizing power, Ngo Quyen proclaimed himself a *Vuong* (King), “assigning positions of mandarins and regulating the formal court rituals and costume” [9, p.204]. According to Ngo Si Lien, a Vietnamese historian, the political institutions Ngo Quyen intended to set up “showed the vision of a monarch” [9, p.205]. Due to some reasons, however, the King could not implement all the political



institutions in practice. Under the Dinh dynasty, Dinh Bo Linh proclaimed himself emperor, “declaring the official name of the country Dai Co Viet, moving the imperial city to Hoa Lu, starting to build a new imperial city with royal palaces, ramparts, and trenches, and regulating new court rituals” [9, p.211]. When making a decision about moving the imperial city to Hoa Lu, on the one hand, Dinh Tien Hoang expected to take advantage of the mountainous terrain in Ninh Binh province and receive support from his homeland.

On the other hand, he hoped to break off the ties with the sinicised political forces, which still exerted a strong influence in the northeast and the centre of the Red River delta. Staying in the imperial city in Hoa Lu, he was determined to prepare new and fundamental steps to improve national development and independence. It can be said that the decision about setting up the imperial city in Hoa Lu was not the return to localism, but it demonstrated Dinh Tien Hoang’s clear-sighted vision towards a united and self-reliant nationalism.

In addition to the decisions mentioned above, Dinh Tien Hoang promulgated drastic regulations about military and civil mandarinates. To strengthen further the state institutions, by the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Early Le dynasty referred to the civil service system of the Song dynasty (960-1279) and set up an administrative apparatus at different levels, including: province, "inter-district", district, "inter-commune", and commune (Vietnamese: *lộ, phủ, châu, giáp-hương, xã*). In the court, there were various positions, including

Grand Preceptor (Vietnamese: *Thái sư*), Grand Commandant (Vietnamese: *Thái úy*), Vicar General (Vietnamese: *Tổng quản*), and Military Commander (Vietnamese: *Đô chỉ huy sứ*), etc. After Le Hoan passed away, Le Long Dinh came to the throne and “revised the mandarin regulations and the court costume for civil and military officials as well as Buddhist monks according to those of the Song dynasty” [9, p.243]. Thus, during the periods of the Ngo, Dinh and Early Le dynasties, the state political institutions were more and more improved. After a short length of time, consequently, Dai Co Viet “became an independent nation with its own government, army, and territory” [8, p.22].

In the political thinking of the Chinese empire, however, Dai Co Viet was considered “Chinese protectorate of Annam province” (Vietnamese: *An Nam đô hộ phủ*), “Jiaozhi” (Vietnamese: *Giao Chỉ*), or “Annam district” (Vietnamese: *An Nam quận*). Similarly, the Southern Han dynasty only granted the title “Jiedushi of the Jinghai regiments and Governor of Annam” (Vietnamese: *Tĩnh Hải quân tiết độ sứ kiêm đô hộ*) to Ngo Xuong Van, King of Nam Tan (Vietnamese: *Nam Tấn vương*). Later, the Song dynasty granted the title “King of Nanyue” (Vietnamese: *Nam Việt vương*) to Dinh Lien, the title “Governor of Annam, Jiedushi of the Jinghai regiments, and Marquess of Jingzhao prefecture” (Vietnamese: *An Nam đô hộ Tĩnh Hải quân Tiết độ sứ kinh triệu quận hầu*) to Le Hoan, and the title “King of Jiaozhi district” (Vietnamese: *Giao chỉ quận vương*) to Le Long Dinh. Those titles partly show the unrealistic recognition made by the

Chinese dynasties. As the Chinese dynasties had to bestow titles upon the leaders of a monarchy in the south, it demonstrates their acknowledgement of the independence of the monarchy. It can be seen as an initial and very significant diplomatic achievement of the Vietnamese nation. After a period of desperate struggles for national self-control, in 1164 (i.e. the second year of the Emperor Xiaozong), the Song dynasty had to grant the title “King of Annam” (Vietnamese: *An Nam quốc vương*) to King Ly Anh Tong (the sixth king of the Ly dynasty, 1136-1175) and changed the name “Jiaozhi district” into “Kingdom of Annam”<sup>7</sup>.

Reviewing the movements around the south-north political axis, we can realise that Dinh Tien Hoang proactively sent his emissaries to Chinese dynasties in the north for setting up a friendship in 970. Under the Early Le dynasty, after the success in the war against the Song dynasty (980-981) and the pacification of Champa, Le Hoan sent his emissaries to China for strengthening mutual understanding and peaceful relationship between the two countries in the spring of 983. The courageous decision of the dynasty in Hoa Lu was certainly aimed at “normalising” the relations with the Song dynasty quickly. Over the 24 years on the throne (980- 1005), Le Hoan sent his emissaries nine times to the Song dynasty, specifically: the first time in 983 and the second time in 985, asking for the title “governor”; the following times were in 986, 991, 994, 995, 996, 997 and 1004. This means that, on average, the Early Le dynasty sent its emissaries to China once every 2.6 years (around 31 months).

Meanwhile, the Song dynasty sent its emissaries ten times to Dai Viet, according to the “Complete Annals of Dai Viet” (Vietnamese: *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* or *Toàn thư* for short). The first time was in 986 and the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth times - in 987, 988, 990, 993, and 995 respectively. The seventh and the eighth times were in 996, and the ninth - in 997. The 10<sup>th</sup> time was in 1003 when the emissaries might reach only the border to placate people, recommending them to flee to Qinzhou.

The systematisation and analysis of those historical events surely enable us to draw more precise scientific conclusions related to the foreign policy of the first monarchies in Vietnam. Over a period from the Dinh to the Early Le dynasty, they implemented foreign policies, which might seem tactically flexible but strategically drastic and principled. As a result, the national independence and sovereignty were viewed as a sacred value and supreme target in the foreign policies of those dynasties. To protect the fledgeling government with national independence and sovereignty before the powerful Chinese empire, many clever and flexible foreign measures were taken. In the chapter titled “Diplomatic Ties” (Vietnamese: *Bang giao chí*) in the “Annals of the Laws and Institutions of Successive Dynasties” (Vietnamese: *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*), based on the rise and fall in history of Vietnam, Phan Huy Chu wrote: “Our country has a border with China in the north. The leaders set up a nation with an independent territory and private population; they proclaimed themselves emperors

domestically, but just proclaimed themselves kings in the foreign relations, and accepted to be granted with titles by the Chinese dynasties. Indeed, it had to be so, according to the situation. Thus, all our dynasties attached much importance to the title-bestowing ceremonies, the tribute-paying, and the diplomatic ties” [2, p.533].

To establish a self-controlled state, the leaders of Dai Co Viet were, on the one hand, very resolute in protecting the political independence; on the other hand, however, they showed rationality, willing to adopt valuable achievements of the Chinese civilisation, including also the model of administrative institutions. The adoption reflects the clear-sighted viewpoint and the spirit of Vietnam. The administrative institutions under the Tang and, subsequently, the Song dynasties were highly appreciated models of organisation, which had been screened over centuries. The institutions were run by a system of mandarins, who had wide knowledge and good management skills. In the period of the Ly dynasty, the structure of “six ministries” (Vietnamese: *Lục bộ*) was adopted from China. However, the leaders of Thang Long Imperial City applied this political structure flexibly, appropriately to the socio-political conditions in Dai Viet. From the comparative perspective, we can see that the administrative structure of “eight ministries” built on the basis of the structure of “six ministries” was also set up in Japan by the mid-seventh century [20, p.51]. Meanwhile, the Chinese model-based state institutions were step by step built in Korea by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, only after Wang Kon came to the

throne. Moreover, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the structure of “six ministries” was fully established, undertaking specific functions in Korea [19, pp.109-115].

Thus, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, East Asian nations adopted and coped with the influence from China differently, depending on their specific socio-economic and political conditions. However, it is obvious that East Asian nations realised the political changes in the region properly and took advantage of the decline in China to struggle and quickly achieve national independence. More importantly, the nations were fully aware of the value of national independence and proactive in making preparations for coping with political pressure from the powerful regional empire.

Besides, under the political pressure exerted by the Chinese dynasty in the north, the dispersion of power and the local division by warlords were exterminated, and consequently, a centralised political institution was established. The political institution was the only choice, as it helped to mobilise the strength of the whole community of Viet people to achieve the supreme goal, which was to protect national independence. The existence of the centralised political institution itself led to the need of appropriate socio-economic policies and governance at the national level. Starting with an agricultural society, certainly, the political institution should rely on the agricultural socio-economic foundation. In the context that social governance remained dependent on the custom of people, the top priority of Dai Co Viet monarchical state was always given to

agricultural economic development and rural social management [6, p.453].

Reviewing historical and socio-economic changes in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, we can find that economic growth and social division somewhat affected the establishment of Dai Co Viet state, but the direct factor resulting in the establishment was the struggle against foreign invasion. It was born in a special historical situation for the sake of gathering national power to fight against Chinese domination and undertaking the social management before the urgent requirements in history. As a result, Dai Co Viet state basically bore the characteristics of a functional state. The pattern and institutions created by the state were multiplied and developed fully during the following period of the Ly and the Tran dynasties with some fundamental particularities, including the friendliness and the closeness with the people. It was much different from the general types of states in history, such as the state for domination and the state for exploitation. The model of the state mentioned above was considered indispensable, resulting from the socio-economic division and severe class contradiction. Such a state also appeared in many Eastern countries and, particularly, in Western countries during the Middle Ages.

## 5. Conclusion

Playing a vital role in the East Asian civilisation, Vietnam, a nation located in the place connecting Northeast Asia with Southeast Asia, was always impacted deeply

by the social and political environment in the regions. After restoring national independence in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the first monarchies, including the Ngo, the Dinh, and the Early Le dynasties (and subsequently the Ly and the Tran dynasties) not only maintained diplomatic ties with the Chinese dynasties but also had a wise southward vision. Before every turning point in history, in reality, traditional cultural values and depth, as well as the consciousness of the origin, contributed a significant part to strengthening patriotism, national spirit, identity, and power. Those political and cultural features constituted an important factor in helping Vietnam to overcome extreme challenges in history and shaping the rational political thinking as well as the vision and capacity of the Dai Co Viet state. In other words, the vitality and the pervasiveness of culture are shown by not only its duration and influence but also its adaptability to drastic changes and hard challenges of the cultural and political environment in the region and the world as well.

Over a long history of struggles for national independence and development, Vietnamese people have realised more and more their cultural values and identity. Tran Quoc Vuong, a Vietnamese historian, wrote: “The 10<sup>th</sup> century undertook its historic role in ending a long and severe period of the political and military struggles against the Chinese domination and the restructuring of Vietnamese civilisation from “the fragments” of ancient Viet civilisation in combination with external elements from China and

India...” [18, p.153]. In the political aspect, it is possible to assert that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, “Ngo Quyen deserved credit for gaining the government, but Dinh Tien Hoang was the person, who deserved credit for setting up the foundation for building an independent nation with all necessary elements, including country name, era name, territory, and currency... Especially, he initially set up a powerful centralised institution, a type of state organisation appropriate to the rules of development in Vietnam, which constantly encountered critical challenges and required a powerful central government” [3, p.35].

Thus, the roles and position of the Dai Co Viet state should be studied in the context of regional ties and political interaction as well as the comparison by time and space. Such an approach will enable us to recognise more precisely the developments and position of Dai Co Viet and Dai Viet in history. Looking at the historical changes of Vietnam in the East Asian context, we can see that the position of Dai Co Viet and subsequently Dai Viet, Dai Nam, and finally Vietnam, has been both invariable and flexible, due to the following factors: great changes in the territorial borders; economic foundation and social characteristics; models and features of political institutions; national position and thinking approached and analysed from the internal and external perspectives.

As a nation in East Asia, Dai Co Viet and Dai Viet always kept close ties with its neighbouring nation in the north, but they were also influenced by political pressure from that nation. Remarkably, in

adopting the patterns and institutions creatively from the Chinese dynasties, Vietnam’s monarchies remained inclined towards Southeast Asian traditional space. During the development of a self-reliant and independent nation, starting with the governance of the Red River delta and the plains of Ma and Lam rivers, the monarchical dynasties of Dai Viet step by step expanded their influence and set up the sovereignty over other mountainous areas, the sea, and islands stably. Initially, the agricultural economy was considered fundamental for development. During many periods in history, however, the ruling governments paid much attention to synchronous economic development, utilising all the resources effectively and promoting the strength of various economic sectors with a view of creating and strengthening general national power<sup>8</sup>. From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was highly respected and promoted, but the transformation into Confucian political models was carried out vigorously in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and those models were maintained continuously until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, during the same period with the same social context, many kingdoms in Southeast Asia, typically Funan, Dai Viet, Angkor, and Srivijaya etc., had different patterns and levels of development. Southeast Asian societies were, therefore, very complicated with a mixture of many factors, development patterns, and scales. This characteristic is very strong, compared with other societies in East Asia and Asia as well. In the author’s opinion, it is necessary to research the similarities and

differences between those societies. Only by that way can we get more and more comprehensive and profound understanding of the diversity in the development of the East Asian history and culture, whereby it will be possible to determine the development rules and tendencies in each nation as well as their prominent contributions in the general historical and political context of the region.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The paper was published in Vietnamese in: *Nghiên cứu lịch sử*, số 2, 2018. Translated by Nguyen Tuan Sinh, edited by Etienne Mahler.

<sup>2</sup> Noticeably, over more than half a century (907-960), after the Tang dynasty lost its central political power in China, there were neither political forces nor dynasties playing the role as a powerful empire in the region. During the period of the change in political power from the Tang to the Song dynasty (960-1279), China experienced so vigorous fragmentation that many researchers call it “the Five dynasties and ten kingdoms period” including: Later Liang (907-923), Later Tang (923-936), Later Jin (936-947), Later Han (947-950), and Later Zhou (951-960). Compared with the Tang and the previous dynasties, therefore, all the dynasties in “the Five dynasties and ten kingdoms” period were quite weak, and each of them existed for a very short time. On average, each dynasty was on the throne for just over a decade. Such a short duration was not enough to build a strong government, maintain the ruling position, stabilising domestic society, or implementing policies on outward territorial expansion [5].

<sup>3</sup> In the aspect of thoughts and religions alone, Japanese people adopted many cultural factors from

China, but they set up their conceptions, values, and theories early. That is why the royal members followed Shinto, while the bureaucratic system practised the Confucian ideology during the reign of the emperors of Japan. In China, the Confucian thoughts were mainly applied in the civil system; where as in Japan, they were applied in the military system. In the Chinese Confucianism, tolerance was considered the most important virtue. Meanwhile, the Japanese Confucianism considered loyalty (in the sense of devoting the entire life to the owner) as a core virtue. Thus, the Japanese Confucianism obviously bore the national characteristics of Japan [10, pp.29-31].

<sup>4</sup> Tadao Umesao, a Japanese scholar, supposed that Southeast Asia was a region of civilisation. Similarly, in the work titled “A Study of History: A Way of Interpretation”, Arnold Toynbee, a well-known cultural and historical researcher, also made a remarkable comment on the position of “Vietnamese civilisation” in relation to China and other civilisations in the region: “There is a closer affinity between the Sinic Civilization on the one hand and the Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese Civilizations on the other hand. These three civilizations have been inspired by the Sinic, but they have developed their loans from the Sinic Civilization on lines of their own that are distinctive enough to entitle them to rank as separate civilizations of a sub-class that we may label ‘satellites’...” [12, pp.151-164], [1, p.61]. Although the two scholars have some differences in the viewpoint on the position and characteristics of Southeast Asian culture, they both highly appreciated the typical cultural values of Southeast Asia, considering Southeast Asia “a region of civilisation” and viewing Southeast Asian civilisations in the context of interaction with other civilisations in the world.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the pragmatic thinking and the chaotic political context, many people came to Buddhism. On the other hand, Buddhism was seen as a therapy for spiritual relief. After Dinh Lien, King of Nam Viet, killed his younger brother Hang Lang, he ordered to set up a hundred stone pillars in Hoa Lu Imperial City, on which Buddhist scriptures were carved for the purpose of praying for the peace of his brother's soul and asking for permanent perquisite. By now, 20 of the stone pillars have been found in Hoa Lu by researchers. According to Ha Van Tan, all the stone pillars were carved with "the Unisha Vijaya Dharani Sutra". It is very likely that the pillars were placed after the spring of 979 (year of Kỷ Mão) and before Dinh Tien Hoang and Dinh Lien were killed by Do Thich in the 10<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the same year [13, pp.786-815].

<sup>6</sup> According to the "Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden" (Vietnamese: *Thiền uyển tập anh*) [15, p.166], Zen master Phap Thuan, whose surname is Do, led a religious life in Co Son pagoda (Thanh Hoa province). He was a student of Zen master Phu Tri in Long Thu pagoda. He was well-known for being "a talented scholar, who was excellent at poetry and understanding of social affairs". When Le Hoan asked him about the destiny of the nation, he answered in a verse as follows: "*Quốc tộ như đằng tạc/Nam thiên lý thái bình/Vô vi cư điện các/Xứ xứ tức đao binh*" (i.e. the destiny of the nation is like a roll cloud/The south enjoys peace/Wu-wei emerges on the palaces/There is no longer war anywhere) [17, p.130].

<sup>7</sup> During the Ly dynasty, in 1016, the Song dynasty just agreed to bestow the title "King of Pacified South" (Vietnamese: *Nam Bình vương*) upon King Ly Thai To, the title "King of Jiaozhi district" (Vietnamese: *Giao Chỉ Quận vương*) upon Ly Nhan Tong and Ly Than Tong.

<sup>8</sup> Studying on the traces of the handicraft industries in the period of the Dinh and the Early Le dynasties as well as the findings of archaeological excavations at some research sites such as Thanh Lang (Thang Lang commune, Me Linh district, Vinh Phuc province) and Duong Xa (Qua Cam village, Hoa Phong commune, Yen Phong district, Bac Ninh province) etc., archaeological scholars came to the following conclusion: "Although the period of the Dinh and the Early Le dynasties was short, the first bricks were successfully set up for the tradition of national ceramics imbued fully with Vietnamese identity" [14, p.63].

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