

Three Typical Elements of Heritage in Northeast-Quang Ninh Cultural Space

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Abstract: In the history of Vietnam, Quang Ninh Province specifically and Northeast Vietnam, in general, are areas where different generations of people and cultures live together. The Northeast Cultural Space evolved based on its magnificent landscape with an extremely significant geostrategic position and the local people's capacity for cultural adoption, creation, and reaction over generations. Of the relics found in this cultural environment, three are the most typical: (i) the border cultural heritage, (ii) the island and coastal cultural tradition, and (iii) the Buddhist-spiritual culture. Such heritage elements are the soft power that contributes significantly to building the country, and protecting sovereignty and national security while at the same time, creating particular features of the cultural space.

Keywords: Border culture, marine culture, Buddhist culture, development, Quang Ninh Province.

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

In the history of Vietnam, the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) has always held an important geoeconomic and geostrategic position. Located in a border region of Vietnam, Quang Ninh Province is blessed with great cultural potential and possesses vast cultural reserves of remarkable value. Over the past decades, many cultural elements have been exploited and promoted as part of rapid, green and sustainable development. This paper uses various sources of material and focuses on analysing three typical elements of cultural heritage in the Northeast region (Quang Ninh), including the border cultural heritage, the island and coastal cultural tradition, and the original values of the Buddhist-spiritual culture (Buddha). These three elements make up a particular cultural compound of the Northeast (Quang Ninh) cultural space and, at the same time, can be seen as a fulcrum and a motive for the country's development and protection.

2. Position as cultural border area

Compared to other border provinces, such as Son La, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, and Lang Son, and so forth, Quang Ninh Province shares its land and sea borders with China's southeast provinces. This geostrategic position is seen as an advantage as well as a challenge to the implementation of development plans and strategies for the province.

After securing victory against the Ming invaders in the 15th century and based on experience and strategic thinking about the position of Dai Viet in regional relations and interactions, Nguyen Trai (a diplomat and military strategist of Dai Viet), affirmed in his work titled "Geography" that An Bang and Hai Dong were "the second most important frontiers on the eastern side of the country" (Nguyen Trai, 2001, p.465)¹. Many times throughout history, the northeast landmass and sea have played an important role in protecting Thang Long Imperial City and the nation. In the 19th century, when remarking on the geostrategic position of Quang Yen Province, the historians of the Nguyen Dynasty wrote: *"The topography is made by mountains, resulting in obstacles to enemies. There are mountains to rely on. It is surrounded by the sea. It is a remote and important land, which helps to protect the border and keep resistance against the Qing. In regard to high mountains, there is Loi Am Mountain. In regard to large rivers, there is the Bach Dang River. There are 22 river mouths and more than 10 military posts with complicated islands and winding rivers. It is a key place on the coast"* (National History Bureau of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1997, p.13).

Looking back over the outstanding achievements of the first period following national independence, it can be seen that after seizing political power in the centre and starting the process of national rebuilding, leaders of all the dynasties, including the Ngo (AD 939-967), the Dinh (AD 968-980), the Early Le (AD 980-1009), the Ly (1010-1225), the Tran (1225-1400), the Ho (1400-1407), the Later Le (1428-1527), the Mac (1527-1593), the Revival Le (1583-1788), and the Nguyen (1802-1945) paid great attention to the Northeast region to make it a political and cultural frontier of the country. Political and cultural boundaries not only defined the national territory but they were also the legal foundations for a sense of sacred national integrity and sovereignty.

Throughout history, local people living in the northeast coastal region and on the islands have had to cope with many changes and challenges due to the regional and international political situations. Sharing land and sea borders with China meant that Chinese feudal dynasties could launch maritime attacks, targetting the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) (Ha Van Tan, 1992, p.37). The natural topographic and sociopolitical characteristics contributed to the formation of, and improvement in, cultural characteristics and personalities of people in the northeast, who are known to be resilient, frank, dynamic and practical thinkers. Over

¹ According to Nguyen Trai, Hai Duong Province (which was next to the sea and where the Luc Dau River and Yen Tu Mountain were located) was one of the four defense areas. It was the most important frontier in the east. Son Tay Province was the most important frontier in the west. Son Nam Province was the most important frontier in the south, while Kinh Bac was the most important frontier in the north. (Nguyen Trai, 2001, pp.458-465).

many generations, they have grasped the attributes of the local natural and living environments, benefitting from their deep knowledge of the local topography. They knew every mountain, every river and every ocean current. They were skilful at logging, farming, handicraft production, salt evaporation, and many maritime economic activities (Nguyen Van Kim, 2014).

Regarding the local customs, personality and lifestyles, Le Tac remarked in his work titled “Abbreviated Records of An Nam” (*An Nam chí lược*) that: “Men took charge of farming and business; women undertook the task of raising silkworms and weaving fabric. The manner of speech was simple and mild. They rarely felt strongly about something. When a person came from a faraway land, they were welcomed hospitably. Those born in Giao Chau and Ai Chau Provinces were likely to be generous and ingenious; those born in Chau Hoan and Chau Dien were likely to be gentle and fond of learning... Local people usually had tattoos... As it was hot, they liked to swim in the river; thus, they were good at rowing boats and wading... When welcoming a guest, they invited him/her to have betel. They liked having pickles and sea animals” (Le Tac, 2002, p.70). The Northeast was an area rich in natural resources². As farmland was limited, local people in the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) took advantage of the geographical position to carry out trade activities via land and sea routes. According to the “Complete Annals of Dai Viet” (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* or *Toàn thư*): “It was very common for people to earn a living by doing business. They relied on trade with merchants coming from the North (China) to afford food and clothes” (National History Bureau of the Le Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, pp.60-61). Writing about Hai Dong Prefecture in the 19th century, the author of the “Categorised Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties” (*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*) described that: “The climatic conditions were favourable; the population was large and prosperous; trade was busily conducted. It was an area of splendour in the outer prefecture. It was also a beautiful location of the country” (Phan Huy Chu, 2007, Vol. 1, p.161). Findings from archaeological, historical, and anthropological researchs show the prominent features of the northeast residents, including their extensive relationships, professional skills, trading tradition, and dynamic thinking.

Owing to the economic activities, cultural exchange, and severe challenges they faced throughout history, the local people completely understood the characteristics and cultural features of neighbouring countries which enabled them to respond appropriately to regional economic and cultural environments. Upholding the tradition of the battle of the Bach Dang River in AD 938, before the third resistance war against the Yuan Dynasty

² According to the author of the book titled “The Original Accounts of Annam”, there were a lot of sea products found in the sea of our country such as oysters, arcas, lobsters, crabs, and manatees... which were used to make delicious dishes. In addition, there were tortoises, cinnabar, sea snails (the body was used for food and the shell was used as an ingredient), whale (the head looked similar to an elephant’s head; the body looked like that of the buffalo; it was more than one *trượng* long; its meat was delicious like that of the manatee), the olive ridley sea turtle etc. “There were countless aquatic animals in the sea” (Gao Xiongzhen, 2017, p.169).

Prince Nhan Hue Tran Khanh Du (? - 1339), assigned to govern the northeast coastal region, asked local people living on Van Don islands to wear Ma Loi hats “*in anticipation*”. The guideline demonstrated the cultural role (closely attached with the economic one) of the strategy for security and protection of this leading centre of external relations and international trade in the country” (National History Bureau of the Le Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, pp.60-61). Due to the particular features of the border political and cultural space, Quang Ninh Province was where exceptional people were trained to strengthen their will, skill, and personality. Tran Quoc Nghien Temple in Cua Luc, Tran Quoc Tang Temple in Cua Ong (or Cua Suot), and second-in-command Tran Khanh Du who was victorious in the battle to annihilate the military supply of Truong Van Ho in 1288 demonstrate Prince Tran Hung Dao’s art of using talented people combined with his vision and decision-making skills during the dynasty” (Ha Van Tan, Pham Thi Tam, 1970, pp.264-265).

Starting with King Ly Anh Tong’s strategic guideline in 1149, the northeast border and coastal area became a matter of great concern. The Thang Long-Northeast (Van Don) route was regarded as the most important conduit not only for maintaining external economic relations but for also diplomatic and cultural ones. It played a central role for the Dai Viet nation. The Northeast cultural space was a place from where many significant policies for the country’s development originated and territorial expansion emanated. It was also a centre for the creation of many special cultural heritage features. In addition to the cultural heritage of the Truc Lam Zen sect, great cultural luminaries, such as Nguyen Trai³ and Le Thanh Tong⁴ in the Early Le Dynasty, as well as the Nguyen Dynasty kings like Emperors Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc (Nguyen Van Kim, 2019a, pp.3-19)... all paid great attention to, and concern for, the country’s sacred border region. The Northeast region (Quang Ninh) was blessed not only with magnificent scenery but it was also a strategic

³ Of the historic and cultural sites in our country, Bai Tu Long Bay together with Ha Long Bay created a natural wonder of the world. In the 15th century, Nguyen Trai, a world cultural scholar, wrote outstanding lines of verse on the landscape and economic activities in Van Don: “*To reach Van Don, it is necessary to cross many high mountains/ The land wonder is found in the open air/ The whole area is reflected in the deep-blue sea/ There are thousands of dark blue shadows like hanging hair/ The universe is shown clearly by the shapes of mountains and sea/ Difficulties cannot shake the spirit/ Green grassy banks can be seen/ It is heard that the foreigners often anchored in the bay*”, according to the translated version by Prof. Dao Duy Anh (Nguyen Trai Complete Works, Literature Publishing House, Vol. 1, 2001, pp.73-74).

⁴ A poem composed by King Le Thanh Tong was carved on stone in Truyen Dang Mountain. It was written during his trip to inspect the troops in An Bang in the 9th year of Quang Thuan Era (1468). The poem was titled: In the spring (the second lunar month) of the 9th year of Quang Thuan Era (1468), I personally reviewed the troops in Bach Dang River. It was cool with fresh winds; the scenery was beautiful; the sea was calm; thus, I travelled on boat on the Hoang Hai Sea for the visit to An Bang; we garrisoned in the foot of the Truyen Dang Mountain; A rock was polished to be inscribed with the following poem: “*Nước lớn mênh mông trăm sông châu vào/ Núi non la liệt như quân cờ, màu biển tiếp liền trời/ Có trăng chỉ nhưng lúc mới cảm thông vẫn phải theo người, như quẻ Hàm hào cửu tam (đã định rõ)/ Nay một tay mặc sức tung hoành từ xa, quyền uy như thần gió/ Nơi cơ quan trọng yếu bậc đế chủ, xúm xít đội quân hùng mạnh như hùm beo/ Cuộc chiến tranh vùng Hải Đông đã tắt ngọn khói báo hiệu/ Muôn thuở trời Nam núi sông còn mãi/ Chính là lúc sửa sang việc văn, tạm ngừng việc võ*”. (Nguyen Hue Chi, 1992, pp.49-50). Thien Nam Cave Master wrote a poem titled “Climate of An Bang, Bach Dang River, Van Don Seaport” (*An Bang phong thổ, Bạch Đằng Giang, Vân Đồn cảng khẩu*) and some other works about the Northeast (Quang Ninh).

border area important for maintaining the security and territorial protection of Dai Viet. Over different historical periods, the monarchical governments paid special attention to Quang Ninh Province. Initial activities of the Ly Dynasty were followed by many important initiatives of the Tran Dynasty which left profound political and cultural traces on the mainland and along with coastal areas. This region, with its mountainous terrain, the coast, and rural areas such as Dong Trieu, as well as historic battle sites, exhibits historical and cultural monuments, and legends highlighting the merits and talents of the former kings and military leaders. There was a time when people of all social strata put their efforts into national affairs, and the national spirit was multiplied, resulting in the national indomitable power (Vu Ngoc Khanh, 2004, pp.398-399). Glorious victories in war, as well as the tolerance and benevolence of the Dai Viet army and people, spread out as messages of peace to other states. By inheriting and developing this tradition, the Tran Dynasty brought about many remarkable cultural achievements, leaving a profound mark on the history of Vietnamese culture.

Remarking on the political tradition and the contribution made by the Truc Lam Zen sect to national protection, Pham Huy Thong wrote: “The Truc Lam Zen sect accomplished the resounding success in the battle of Chuong Duong, the battle of Ham Tu, and the battle of Bach Dang. The battle of the Bach Dang River was seen as an all-out challenge for the nation. It ended with our victory and the river became a sacred river of the country. Yen Tu Mountain also became a sacred place, owing to Tran Nhan Tong’s intention... Yen Tu Mountain with Tran Nhan Tong and the Truc Lam Zen sect bears the mark of the national indomitable spirit and reminds us of an outstanding figure, an ambition, and a generation that contributed significantly to the country” (Pham Huy Thong, 1984, pp.58-59).

The development strategies of many dynasties considered culture to be an important factor when it came to preserving and strengthening the national spirit and identity. In addition to national defence, security, diplomatic, political and economic measures, culture contributed to the protection of national sovereignty and independence⁵. The frontier and political roles of culture, together with cultural particularities, were its core values that attracted special attention of monarchical dynasties. The culture was seen as an element of

⁵ Regarding local people in Quang Yen and Van Don, it was written in the “Dai Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia” (*Đại Nam nhất thống chí*) as follows: “The local custom was that people prefer doing hard jobs...; soil was alkaline; local people fished and traded, taking advantage of mountains and the sea; commodities were transported conveniently to the north and the south (people in An Khoai and Van Ninh cantons in Nghieu Phong District used boats to sail to My Giang in Hai Duong Province and Qinzhou in Guangzhou. In Nam Giang and Nam Cuong Cantons of Hoanh Bo District and Van Hai, Van Ninh, and Yen Hai Cantons of Nghieu Phong District, there was a lot of alluvial soil, but very few rice fields; local people went to the forest to cut wood and some went to sea to fish... Ritual activities were similar... In Van Ninh Canton, there were both Qing and Nung ethnic people; in the Tet holiday, they let off firecrackers; they lit candles and lamps over New Year’s Eve; they cleaned and decorated the ancestral graves on the Qingming day (*Thanh minh*), made worship on the winter solstice, held parties for the ancestral worship on the Duanwu (*Đoan ngọ*) Festival, and held the boat races and singing performances”. In the 13th and 14th centuries, therefore, the culture in Quang Ninh Province had been integrated with other cultures in the region. (National History Bureau of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1997, Vol. 4, p.14).

resistance, a solid wall and a soft power in the strategies for the protection of the national sovereignty, economic privilege and the country's defence and development.

3. Northeast (Quang Ninh) island and coastal cultural heritage in development process

The diverse coastal and island cultural layers of Quang Ninh Province are embodied in the topography of Ha Long Bay. Visitors who come here, as well as to Bai Tu Long Bay, can admire the magnificent natural landscape but they are not aware (or maybe they have some limited knowledge) of the province's island and coastal cultural layers or the natural cultural space of the Northeast (Quang Ninh). This is an environment formed over thousands of years, which has made creative and original contributions to Asia and the world as a whole. According to archaeological findings, following on from the development of the Soi Nhu culture⁶ in the Neolithic period, the subsequent culture identified through the Cai Beo archaeological site is considered to have indicated "the initiation of prehistoric economic zoning in Vietnam"⁷... during the late Neolithic period in Northeast Vietnam. This is an important area in the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea) which led to the formation and prosperous development of the Ha Long coastal culture which followed.

"Ha Long culture originated in the country's northeast. However, it was formed of many elements. Even its remarkable features were also created by exchanges with other cultures, especially in the late period. This is a factor that created particular features of Ha Long culture considered as the gateway of ancient Vietnamese civilisation in both time and space" (Ha Van Tan, 1998, p.267; Trinh Nang Chung, 2008, p.10). Furthermore, "owing to Ha Long culture being a gateway for exchange, the Vietnamese ancient civilisation had the most favourable opportunities for its development. It is possible to suppose that the Ha Long people contributed greatly to the formation and development of the Vietnamese ancient civilisation"⁸.

⁶ Commenting on the Soi Nhu site, archaeologist Trinh Nang Chung supposed: "Soi Nhu is one of the most important archaeological sites in the region of the sea and islands in northeast Vietnam. Regarding the geographical space, it is located on the Cai Bau coast, which is the largest island in Bai Tu Long Bay, and faces the sea, where cultural exchange between North Vietnam and South China and Southeast Asia took place. Regarding the date, it dates back to the same period of the Hoa Binh - Bac Son culture. Compared with the sites of Bac Son - Hoa Binh, however, Soi Nhu is basically different in terms of the living space (*lebensraum*) (Trinh Nang Chung, 2008, p.10).

⁷ Commenting on the site of Cai Beo, archaeologist Nguyen Khac Su argued: "Cai Beo is a large-scale seabed archaeological site. It covers a thick geological layer with a diversified complex of relics and artefacts. The remaining cultural traces reveal the continuation of the development from the middle Neolithic period characterised by the culture of Cai Beo, to the late Neolithic period characterised by the culture of Ha Long. Those materials are important to determine the prehistoric cultural development periods on Cat Ba Island in the context of the prehistory in Vietnam and Southeast Asia". (Nguyen Khac Su, 2009, p.292; Nguyen Hong Quan, 2005).

⁸ In the work, based on archaeological discoveries, the two authors came to the following conclusion: "Covering an area of roughly 2,000 km² in the modern-day Ha Long Bay and Bai Tu Long Bay, there was a large community of ancient people in the period of Hoa Binh and Bac Son culture. They lived together in limestone caves and separately from the people of Hoa Binh and Bac Son cultures. They created their own culture, which existed in parallel with Hoa Binh and Bac Son. It is called Soi Nhu culture". (Ha Huu Nga, Nguyen Van Hao, 2002, p.83, p.236; Quang Ninh Provincial Museum, 2013).

In the opinion of archaeological and cultural researchers, during the Iron Age and in the many dynasties that followed, guardians of the northeast island and coastal culture in Vietnam established relations with other coastal cultures in South China and the Southeast Asian region. Depending on the monsoons, those people with the means of transport would travel from the north, the south, the east or the west to the northeast coastal area. The latter then became a place for the exchange of products between the wider world and the regional economic centres. Like many other areas in Vietnam, the northeast coastal area bears cultural traces from both Northeast and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the ancient Vietnamese had established relations with various groups of the Malayo-Polynesian people (Nguyen Duy Thieu, 2003, pp.3-10) and others in foreign lands. With the presence of the *Pu-lao* people (also called *Bù-lao* or *Bồ Lô*; i.e. Island people) with Malay origins from the 5th to the 15th centuries, the residence of the Cham people, and the coastal cultural traditions among those who made up the Champa kingdom, as well as other groups of people in South and West Asia, resulted in additional reasons for the coastal economic and cultural development in Vietnam, making it more dynamic and adaptable (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2000, pp.41-49). The northeastern fishing community owes a debt of gratitude to the sea for providing a means of subsistence. The fishermen always strive to live in harmony with the sea's vast environment. On the other hand, they have to cope with many difficulties due to unexpected changes in the sea's environment. Thus, the perception of the sea is very complicated. In the past, the belief in the power of the sea led to an understanding about the system of the sea gods, including gods of the heavens, nature, and humans. The existence of the sea gods in the people's consciousness arose not only out of the respect for, and the mythologicalisation of, the local cultural resources but also due to the cultural adoption and exchange with those nations holding the tradition of sea exploitation. If culture is understood to be a living environment in which human beings try to adapt then "the water-related element must be seen as a particular feature of Vietnamese culture. According to the archaeological sites dating back to the Neolithic period and the early Iron Age, villages were mostly distributed along edges of water such as river banks, lakeshores, and by the sea" (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2000, p.42).

Quang Ninh Province is now home to six national intangible cultural heritage elements: "*Tra Co Communal House Festival*" (Mong Cai City), "*Quan Lan Communal House Festival*" (Van Don District), "*Hát nhà tơ*" or "*Hát cửa đình*" folk singing in front of communal houses (Van Ninh Commune, Mong Cai City), "*Hát then*" (*Heaven-worship singing*, Binh Lieu District), "*Tien Cong Festival*" (Quang Yen Town), and "*Cua Ong Temple Festival*" (Cam Pha City). These festivals, except for "*Hát then*" of the Tay people in Binh Lieu District, are closely attached to the coastal cultural space.

Residents in the Northeast coastal region (Quang Ninh) have good knowledge about the sea. They are aware of the monsoons, the tides, and sea currents; they are skilled in rowing and boat building; they know where and when shoals can be found, and how to gather salt. They are knowledgeable about seafood culture and processing methods; they keep the

coastal spiritual and psychological traditions and maintain temples and shrines for worshipping the sea gods. They carry out sea-related traditional performances (such as writing poetry, singing shanties, and antiphonal singing); and they are versed in social relations and human responses to the sea. These are typical elements of the cultural heritage, with early origins that have developed over many generations in Quang Ninh Province (Nguyen Quang Vinh, 2011).

From regional, inter-regional, and inter-cultural perspectives, one can see that the cultural-spiritual space of Yen Tu is closely linked to other areas of the country, especially Thang Long Imperial City. The local cultural traditions in many provinces, such as Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Hai Duong, Nam Dinh, and Thai Binh⁹ are related to Yen Tu. The latter is not only a famous mountain located in the Northeast (Quang Ninh) cultural space, but it is also a well-known land of fortune and a Buddhist centre. First of all, it was a cultural and ideological focal point closely associated with the sense of national independence. Through the ups and downs of history, during the resistance war against the northern invaders and confrontation with opponents from the south, leaders of the Ly Dynasty, and subsequently those of the Tran Dynasty, paid great attention to the Northeast region. This was an important geostrategic border area of the Dai Viet nation. Securing victories against the Mongol-Yuan invasions, on a regional level, the government in Thang Long Imperial City not only maintained peace for the country, but also asserted the nation's position. Studying the Yen Tu cultural space, one realises that King Tran Nhan Tong's decision to move to this mountain was no accident. In addition to its impressive landscape, Yen Tu Mountain held a strategic position. From this vantage point, one can see the whole of the northeast area. Therefore, Yen Tu was not only an outpost but also a defensive wall and a strategic base for the protection of the national territory. It should also be understood that after relocating to Yen Tu where he founded the Truc Lam Zen sect, King Tran Nhan Tong remained focused on national affairs and undertook responsibilities for the nation. His grandson, King Tran Minh Tong (cq: 1314-1320), supposed that his grandfather had

⁹ The historic and famous site of Yen Tu occupies a total area of more than 9,295ha, home to many religious and architectural structures such as pagodas, temples, and shrines...located along a road of nearly 20km from Doc Do (Read Slope; where Bi Thuong and Trinh Pagodas are found) to the top of Yen Tu Mountain (in Phuong Dong Ward, Thuong Yen Cong Commune, Uong Bi City and Hong Thai Dong Commune, Dong Trieu Town, Quang Ninh Province). In reality, the Yen Tu cultural space spans three provinces, including Quang Ninh, Hai Duong, and Bac Giang. The complex of Yen Tu relics can be divided into three areas: *The first area* consists of the East Yen Tu Historic and Landscape Site (the relic site of the Tran Dynasty in Dong Trieu, Uong Bi City, Quang Ninh Province), and the West Yen Tu Historic and Landscape Site (Yen Dung, Luc Nam, and Luc Ngan districts, Bac Giang Province). It is the centre of the Yen Tu cultural space. *The second area* (the adjacent area) consists of: Con Son - Kiep Bac - Thanh Mai Historic Sites (Chi Linh District, Hai Duong Province) and Van Don Historic Site (in which the key role is played by ports, wharfs, and pagodas such as Lam Pagoda, Ho Pagoda, Cat Pagoda, Trong Pagoda in Thang Loi Commune and other relics in Quan Lan Commune, Quang Ninh Province). The third area (the relevant area) consists of: Thang Long Imperial City (Hanoi), Thuan Thanh District (Bac Ninh Province), Thien Truong District (Nam Dinh Province), Long Hung District (Thai Binh Province) and Vu Lam Palace (Ninh Binh Province). The three areas constitute a general cultural space, playing reciprocal roles and deepening the ideological value and particularities of the Yen Tu cultural space.

escaped secular troubles to keep his peace of mind to “protect the country” rather than merely leading a Buddhist life. However, five centuries later, Ngo Thi Nham (1746-1803) thought that King Tran Nhan Tong had moved to Yen Tu to wear the monk’s robes and disseminate Buddhist teachings, and at the same time for “realising situations aimed to prevent the foreign invasions” (Pham Huy Thong, 1984, pp.56-57). The cultural development characteristics of the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) clearly showed an orientation towards the sea with regional and international vision. Van Don Commercial Port was a centre for commodity exchange between merchants from Northeast, Southeast and Southwest Asia. Then, in the 17th and 18th centuries, it expanded to include the participation of many European economic groups. Throughout history, the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) has always been a trading hub. Furthermore, it was also a place for dialogue, confrontation, and cultural contact with regional powers.

Regarding the formation of the cultural features of Quang Ninh Province, it is necessary to mention the contribution made by the Ly Dynasty and the outstanding and distinctive role played by King Ly Anh Tong (reigning from 1138 to 1175). Van Don commercial port was created under his reign in 1149. This was a historic decision reflecting the political and cultural activity of the dynasty. The Ly Dynasty changed Van Don Manor into an international trade port and a centre for foreign trade of Dai Viet, at a time when China’s Song Empire was really powerful. To protect and keep the sovereignty of the northeast coastal area and sea, King Ly Anh Tong made two inspection visits (in 1171 and 1172) to this region in order to “comprehend the terrain, understand how the people lived and how far away the region was” (National History Bureau of the Le Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 1, p.324). It can be said that King Ly Anh Tong had a deep awareness very early on of Vietnam’s historical sovereignty over the sea and islands. He was the first king to make important decisions and bring in policies relating to the sea and islands. At the same time, he was the one who carried out sea exploitation and identified and protected the national sovereignty over the sea.

Some 62 years after the resistance war against the third Mongol-Yuan invasion had ended, King Tran Du Tong (reigning from 1341 to 1369) in the Tran Dynasty, decided to upgrade Van Don’s administrative unit from a manor to a district (1349). This was part of his vision for the northeast; he assigned officials to the posts of Defence Command Governor, Transport Overseer, and Marine Supervisor, and he built a naval force to keep control of the border, the sea and the islands (National History Bureau of the Le Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, p.13). Taking advantage of the influence of Buddhism, the Tran Dynasty leaders made careful preparations and were victorious in the resistance wars. In peacetime, the influence of Buddhism continued to spread throughout the country during this dynasty. The heroes of the three resistance wars together built a large Buddhist centre on Yen Tu Mountain to promote the national spirit, strengthen national solidarity, and ease the people’s sufferings. At the same time, it was used to open channels of cultural exchange and dialogue with other cultures in the region (Phan Huy Le, 2006, p.17; Nguyen Van Kim, 2019, pp.82-83). Yen Tu Mountain was very close to the sacred area of Dong Trieu

District, the homeland of the Tran Dynasty kings and the site of a complex of tombs belonging to members of the dynasty's royal family. The Truc Lam Zen sect was attached to the Tran Dynasty and the Buddhist culture of Dai Viet as well as King Tran Nhan Tong and other Zen sagacious masters. Based on insight which emanated from Thang Long Imperial City and Yen Tu Mountain, the Tran Dynasty leaders opened up a channel for cultural dialogue and formed a cultural and sacred space in the country's northeast region based on the national wisdom and spirit as well as the Buddhist philosophy of tolerance and compassion. This is demonstrated through the traces of Buddhist relics found in coastal areas, and on Cong Dong and Cong Tay islands (Thang Loi Commune, Quang Ninh Province). Such sites include: Lam Pagoda, Ho Pagoda, Cat Pagoda, Trong Pagoda, and Cay Queo Pagoda. The presence of Buddhist pagodas in Van Don not only reveals the spiritual needs of the coastal population and among the seafaring people (such as sailors, merchants, and fishermen) at that time, but it also demonstrates that the Ly and Tran Dynasties wanted to claim sovereignty and leave reminders of cultural traces along the northeast coast and sea area, where foreign cultural values were also adopted.

Through the construction of a series of temples and pagodas in the Van Don coastal area, leaders of the Ly and Tran Dynasties made many great achievements through their strategy of establishing and developing economic relations and cultural exchange with Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest Asia as well. It explains why Van Don was a centre for foreign relations and trade that existed continually over seven centuries, playing an important role in the East Asian trade network.

Talking about Quang Ninh Province's cultural characteristics both past and present, it is essential to pay attention to the island and coastal cultural tradition. Sea-related elements permeated the way of life and lifestyle activities of the population and also significantly influenced the cultural and living activities of royalty¹⁰. Nowadays, Quang Ninh provincial authorities are focusing on developing an ocean economy, marine sciences and technology, sea tourism and services. Together with five national special heritage elements and a collection of more than 600 historical and cultural sites, the island and coastal culture is seen as a strength, a highlight, and a priceless resource for the province's development¹¹.

From a historical perspective, the Northeast (Quang Ninh) culture can be visualised in the following three ways: (i) the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) was a remote and fairly inaccessible frontier area in medieval times; (ii) it was also a land rich in natural resources

¹⁰ It was written in "Complete Annals of Dai Viet" as follows: "In winter, in the 10th lunar month (1363), a lake was dug in the royal garden in the harem. A rockery was built inside the lake and water still ran all over the lake. Pine and bamboo trees as well as beautiful flowers were planted along the bank of the lake. Strange animals and rare birds were raised in the garden. On the west of the lake, there were two cinnamon trees and a palace called "Lac Thanh". Another small lake was dug afterwards. Local people in Hai Dong were commanded to carry sea water to the lake. Sea animals such as tortoises, crabs, and fish were raised in the small lake. Then, people in Hoa Chau were ordered to carry crocodiles to the lake. Another lake called Thanh Ngu was used to raise crucian carps. An official post named "Khanh do" was set up to look after the garden. (National History Bureau of the Le Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, p.143).

¹¹ Ha Long Bay has twice been recognised by the UNESCO as a World Natural Heritage Site. In Quang Ninh Province, there are four elements recognised as national special heritage elements.

as extolled by King Le Thanh Tong, the most clear-sighted king in the Early Le Dynasty, and other monarchical dynasties of Dai Viet: “*Fish and salt are abundant like earth*”¹²; and (iii) Quang Ninh Province, with its long coastline facing the vast wide-open sea, has many advantages for developing a maritime economy, transportation services, and high-quality ecological tourism. The province has been implementing Vietnam’s Maritime Strategy, based on the following direction: “*The sea is a living environment, a living space, a gateway for Vietnamese national economic and cultural exchange.*” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2018, pp.81-82).

4. Buddhism - culture and cultural identity

Based on the ideas and political arrangements in the Ly Dynasty, the monarchical aristocratic model continued to be strengthened during the Tran Dynasty (Phan Huy Le, 1999, p.53). Due to practical requirements, the Tran Dynasty leaders established certain political, economic and social institutions. In the political sphere, the Grand Emperor’s regime was implemented. In the economic sphere, a system of farms and estates bestowed upon feudal lords was applied (Nguyen Phuong Chi, 2002; Truong Huu Quynh, 1982, pp.129-160). In the social sphere, the rule of forced marriage among royal members of the same bloodline was implemented to ensure a power monopoly (Chu Thien, 1941). In the cultural and spiritual sphere, Zen was honoured as the national religion. In the sphere of foreign relations, the dynasty’s leaders continued to implement policies of independence and self-control; it was a generous and tolerant dynasty but also one that was unyielding towards aggressors in the region¹³.

In the history of Asia, the 13th and 14th centuries witnessed the rise of the Mongol–Yuan dynasty which rapidly became a world empire. Meanwhile, some kingdoms in Southeast Asia, such as the Champa, Chenla, and Laos, tried to rise and assert their own positions. In

¹² Regarding natural conditions in the northeast, in the poem “An Bang Climate” (*An Bang phong thổ*), King Le Thanh Tong wrote: “*Ngư diêm như thổ dân xu lợi, Hoà đạo vô điền thuế bạc chinh*” (i.e. Fish and salt are abundant like earth and consequently local people flock to make profit; Fields are limited so little rice is grown and consequently the tax imposed on rice is lower”. Probably, due to difficulty in agricultural production, local people in Hai Dong had to carry out activities in the sea, improving the sea exploitation skills and expanding trade with other countries in the region. (Phan Huy Chu, 2007, Vol. 1, p.160). In the same work, the author also gave a noticeable comment: “In regard to the land of the prefecture (i.e. Hai Dong), the area of the sea and mountains was large, but the area of fields was little. Most local people did business to earn profits. Very few grew rice or mulberry. The tax is therefore different from that in other districts” (Phan Huy Chu, 2007, Vol. 1, p.114).

¹³ Regarding the foreign policy of the Tran Dynasty, Phan Huy Chu commented: “Under the Tran Dynasty, we welcomed the envoys of the Yuan Dynasty with flexibility and got the favourable position. Thus, after the year of Trung Hung, there was no longer war and the envoys from the Northern dynasty (China) had to yield. Over more than a hundred years later, it stopped the Chinese dynasties from having an intention of invading our country. The civilisation and culture of our country was at the same time much improved” (Phan Huy Chu, 2007, Vol. 2, p.618).

such a context, the Tran Dynasty leaders had to implement resolute and flexible foreign policies. Regarding the political aspect, they set up the Grand Emperor's regime which was a special product of the dynasty's political and cultural system, aimed at maintaining the continuity of the family line and ensuring the security of the national political system in the face of unpredictable changes in history¹⁴. To build a self-reliant nation, the Tran Dynasty leaders needed an ideological foundation to strengthen the power and the institutions and keep the nation on track. Realising the Buddhist influence, wisdom, and humanity, they decided to strengthen the religion for the purpose of using it as the ideological foundation for the ruling policy and cultural development. During the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism was not seen as a unique ideology, but rather it was combined with Confucianism, Taoism, and national culture¹⁵. With the Aniyata Dhamma (Indefinite), Buddhist dogmas were mixed with local faiths to combine secularism and religion. This concept believed that it was necessary to participate in society, while the Buddhist teachings were retained and respected in the mind. It was considered as the fundamental principle running through the mind and state of the nation (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2004, p.48). In other words, under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism was closely attached to the national destiny, and the existence of the people and the country. It played a role in consolidating the national power before, during, and after the resistance war. Under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism became attached to secular life, leading and combining with secular activities for the populace's personal goals in life. Due to this principle, the development of the Truc Lam Zen sect showed the improvement of the national spirit and national cultural confidence and creativity.

In taking the decision to select and extol Buddhism, the Tran Dynasty leaders certainly realised that Buddhism was popular for its general value in many countries in the region. Buddhism, with its many sects, was introduced early on to the Dai Viet nation. It became a foundation for ideological, political, and cultural activities under the Ngo, the Dinh, the Early Le, and the Ly Dynasties. By the later years of the Ly Dynasty, however, it seemed to command less respect. Therefore, in order to continue extolling Buddhism, it was necessary to combine it with traditional values to build a new state of mind, demonstrating new features and values in order to bring a new vitality for national development. Tran Dynasty leaders, in particular kings Tran Thai Tong (1226-1257), Tran Thanh Tong (1257-1278), and Tran Nhan Tong (1278-1293) searched for, and founded, a new religious sect able to reflect the national ego. These insightful kings strove hard to find a particular path for

¹⁴ To some extent, the grand emperor's regime can be understood as a division of power: the grand emperor seized power in the ideological and religious spheres, while the emperor (crown prince) seized power in the secular spheres. In the context of Dai Viet, the two sides of power supplemented each other to create an essential resistance and a general power of the nation. Ngo Si Lien argued: "In reality, the handover of the throne was just a preparation for the future in case of unexpected situations, but the grand emperor made decisions about everything" (Nguyen Thi Phuong Chi, 2007, pp.36-43).

¹⁵ Regarding this matter, Keith W. Taylor wrote: "The religion of the Ly Dynasty" did not exclude differences relating to the racial origin and theoretical tendency. Chinese, Cham, and Indian people all took part in the consciousness of the Vietnamese entity. Different forms of the Buddhist ideology were developed at the same time. Classical knowledge, common awareness, the king's support, the gladness and the austerity existed in parallel. The dominant tendency was to learn, instead of taking control" (Taylor, K. W., 2001, p.75).

the national religion. In the multi-religious world, the leaders decided to develop the Zen school of Buddhism, which put more emphasis on the practice of meditation rather than reciting prayers. At that time, Zen practitioners could go into an absolute deep meditative state and consequently reach the level of the Buddhist mind. In history, in some Northeast Asian countries, the Zen sect was always adopted by militant societies (Kazuyoshi, I., 1972; Kitagawa, M. J., 2002; Addiss, S., 2001). No matter where they were located, even fighters on the battlefield who were also Buddhist followers could practice Zen and reach satori without visiting pagodas, temples, or shrines.

Triumphant from the victories of the three resistance wars against the Mongol-Yuan invasions and inheriting his predecessors' ideas and deeds, King Tran Nhan Tong set himself up in a high religious position. He was held in very high regard and founded the Truc Lam Zen School, which was a Zen sect of the Dai Viet nation. It was based on the principles of generosity and kindness with the aim of "entering into the secular world" and protecting the national spirit. In other words, the Truc Lam Zen sect successfully transformed the Buddhist fundamental principle of "being free from passions or senses to transcend the secular world" to the viewpoint of "entering into the secular world"¹⁶. At the same time, this notion was seen as a general value that was blended with the national culture, beliefs, and consciousness to create the quintessence of Vietnamese Zen and culture.

The idea about entering into the secular world was reflected in the cultural behaviour and activities of many kings and noble people under the Tran Dynasty. It was a very different viewpoint to that held by those who chose to lead a wholly religious life. This explains why Zen practitioners and monks willingly went into battle to fight against the enemy during periods of foreign invasion. They believed that they had come into the world to provide help, prevent evil and promoting good. In the rapidly changing society, the mind of Zen was found everywhere in all activities. The high level of participation stemmed from the following concept: "Buddhahood is in mind; when the mind is peaceful and awakened, it means to become Buddha". In the poem titled "Mind and Buddha" (*Phật tâm ca*), Zen Master Tue Trung Thuong Si wrote: "Mind is Buddhahood; Buddhahood is mind; Mind and Buddhahood cannot be separated. Thus, Buddhahood arises, when the mind is awakened; Buddhahood is removed, when the mind is not awakened" (Nguyen Duy Hinh, 1999, pp.592-594). Thus, "the trend on leading a religious life with a completely empty

¹⁶ As the monks and the founders of the Vietnamese Zen sect, those emperors/grand emperors were also authors of famous Buddhist and cultural research works; for example, Tran Thai Tong wrote "The Compass of Zen" (*Thiền Tông chỉ nam*) and "Instructions on Emptiness" (*Khoá hư lục*); Tran Nhan Tong wrote "Aphorisms on the Zen" (*Thiền Lâm thiết chủy ngữ lục*) and "Đại Hương Hải An Collected Poems" (*Đại Hương hải an thi tập*); and, Tue Trung wrote "Tue Trung Thuong Si's Aphorisms" (*Tuệ Trung thượng sĩ ngữ lục*)... In addition, there were "Meditation Necessity" (*Tham Thiền chỉ yếu*) by Pháp Loa, and "Pho Tue Aphorisms" (*Phổ Tuệ ngữ lục*) and "Ngoc Tien Collected Poems" (*Ngọc Tiền thi tập*) by Huyen Quang. Together with other works such as "Warfare Fundamental" (*Binh thư yếu lược*), "Van Kiep Clan Secret Book" (*Vạn Kiếp tông bí truyền thư*), "Exhortation to the military officers" (*Hịch tướng sĩ*), "Ode to Bach Dang River" (*Bạch đằng giang phú*), "De Thach Mon Mountain" (*Đề Thạch môn sơn*)... those research works profoundly show the Buddhist and Taoist spirit as well as the knowledge, the humanity and the national patriotism and stuff" in Dai Viet under the Tran Dynasty.

mind, which was popular in the late period of the Ly Dynasty, changed in the early period of the Tran Dynasty. At the same time, the influences of the Mikkyo (secret teachings) were also removed. It can be said that the national spirit became heightened in the 13th century providing Buddhism with new animation” (Ha Van Tan, 2005a, pp.289-290). The state of mind also reflected the new conceptions of human life in the philosophy of the Truc Lam Zen.

Based on the cultural tradition, patriotism, and national indomitability, the Tran Dynasty rehabilitated and developed Vietnamese Buddhism so that it could accompany the national development after the changes made during the Ly Dynasty¹⁷. With the viewpoint on entering into the secular world, Vietnamese Buddhism became the key factor for connecting, leading, and motivating national development. Before challenges and requirements for the country’s development, Buddhism was combined thoroughly with patriotism and national spirit to create a general strength. Buddhist practice showed the desire for national independence and self-reliance. By sharing the people’s suffering and joy in secular life, many Buddhist monks, Zen masters, and outstanding scholars such as Tue Trung Thuong Si, three founders of the Truc Lam Zen school (King Tran Nhan Tong, Phap Loa, and Huyen Quang), Tran Hung Dao, Tran Quang Khai, and Tran Nhat Duat made significant contributions to the protection and prosperity of the country as well as national independence. Over generations, the Tran Dynasty leaders created the Bach Dang and Dong A bravery spirits. “It was a sign of the development of the national consciousness” (Ha Van Tan, 1988, p.215). The spirits were the very pride and the motive for the development of the subsequent dynasties. Talking about the quality and personality of the leaders and intellectuals in the Tran Dynasty, Le Quy Don wrote: “They were pure, rigid, generous, incorruptible, and elegant... As the Tran Dynasty highly appreciated the scholars without restrictions and treated them amiably and politely, at that time, people had a strong will to become self-reliant, magnanimous, and confident to overcome common temptations, winning fame and being recorded in the historical documents” (Le Quy Don, 2000, pp.345-353).

Comprehending the regional political situation, the Tran Dynasty wanted to get away from the pressures imposed by the Chinese dynasties in order to build its own identity and culture. Like the Ly Dynasty, the Tran Dynasty re-embraced the Vietnamese spirit with its South-Southeast cultural values and the democratic village logic, aiming to prove itself to be a civilised nation with a North-South balance. These two concepts were attached closely to two territorial spaces and geo-cultural regions, which were related to each other but also had their own cultural traditions. With such a spirit, the preoccupation of the Tran Dynasty was the consciousness of origin and patriotism. The patriotic feeling gathered people from

¹⁷ Keith W. Taylor commented: "It is possible to see the eleventh century as the time when Buddhism "broke through" the protective shield of the spirit world, when for the first time in history, Vietnamese society as a whole advanced beyond the animist perspective of the indigenous spirit cults. The “*Báo Cực truyện*” (*Collection of the Stories on the Extreme Nemesis*) shows Buddhism pulling itself up by grasping sturdy rungs in the spirit world, and the Ly kings played the central role in this process”. (Taylor, K. W., 2001, p.89).

all social strata and religions to pursue the general goal of making the nation prosperous. In such a context, Buddhism was chosen to counterbalance Confucian political and cultural pressure increasingly imposed by the Chinese dynasties that spread southwards aiming to seize resources and living space.

Choosing and appreciating Buddhism can be seen as an important strategy reflecting the Tran Dynasty leaders' sensitivity when it came to political and cultural thinking in the face of threats from regional powers. "Under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism bore Vietnamese characteristics and was a new cultural aspect in the history of national culture" (Vu Ngoc Khanh, 2004, pp.393-394). The newly founded Truc Lam Zen sect developed rapidly as it embodied the national spirit and aspirations. First at all, the Tran Dynasty leaders realised the anguish when the nation was conquered. In addition to the spirit of national independence over the past three centuries, the indomitable power tempered over ten centuries when the country was under the Chinese rule resulted in the Dong A spirit of the Tran Dynasty.

In this setting, remarkable people were born. As described above, the first founder of the Truc Lam Zen sect was King Tran Nhan Tong. After he was ordained a monk in 1295, he stayed in the Vu Lam Pagoda (Ninh Binh Province) and then entered into the secular life. Afterwards, he reverted to a religious life in 1299 at Yen Tu Mountain. King Tran Nhan Tong was considered the founding father of the Truc Lam Zen sect. Adopting values from the Wu Yantong sect, the Truc Lam Zen sect was born to unite the main religious schools in Vietnam, including those of Yen Tu and Thang Long. The establishment of the Truc Lam Zen sect marked "the unification of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha" (Ha Van Tan, 2005b, p.218). This Buddhist unification took place following the three Mongol-Yuan invasions. At that time, people were trying to understand the country's position with a sense of tolerance and harmony. It was also necessary to have psychological therapies to ease the troubles experienced in secular life. However, there were still threats from the Chinese dynasty in the north, some kingdoms in the south, and those beyond the border in the west. The implicit and visible dangers continually impacted on the national independence and the political thought of the ruling class. Consequently, kings and notables of the Tran Dynasty not only continued to support Buddhism, but they also became monks and Buddhist leaders, dedicating their lives to Buddhist development. After King Tran Nhan Tong passed away, many kings and notable people gave their support to Phap Loa as the Second Founder of the Truc Lam Zen sect. "Phap Loa was strongly supported by aristocrats. It was a period, when aristocratic people fervently led a religious life in pagodas or at home. Of Phap Loa's students' names inscribed at the end of Vien Thong stele, we can see those of King Anh Tong, King Minh Tong, Queen Mother Tuyen Tu, Prince Van Hue (Tran Quang Thieu), Prince Uy Hue, Chuong Van (the prince's son), and Princess Thien Trinh (the king's sister). Owing to the support provided by the high-ranking mandarins, the Truc Lam Zen establishments had great economic power. Kings and mandarins offered many items whenever pagodas were built or statues created. For example, when a thousand Buddha statues were cast in 1322,

Phap Loa received support from many royal members, including: Queen Mother Bao Tu, Country's Mother Bao Hue, Princess Bao Van, Prince Van Hue, Prince Uy Hue, Prince Dai Quan, Marquis Truong Nhan, Marquis Hung Uy, Marquis Hoai Ninh Trinh Trung Tu (who were sons of princes), and some high-ranking mandarins such as Doan Nhu Hai and Dang Thanh" (Ha Van Tan, 1988, pp.258-259). Under the Tran Dynasty, Zen was closely attached with the nation and the aristocracy for political purposes. Many kings and royal family members were also Zen practitioners devoting themselves to the development of Buddhism (Nguyen Van Kim, 2008).

Regarding thought, in the Tran Dynasty, there were attempts to harmoniously combine sudden awakening (*đốn ngộ*) with the gradual awakening (*tiệm ngộ*) and self-salvation with the external power-based salvation in order to develop a specific path for the Vietnamese people. The Truc Lam Zen sect paid attention to not only the salvation of intellectuals and noble people but also to the lower classes which had different conditions and capacities for self-salvation (Nguyen Duc Su, 1993, p.215). To build an identity within Buddhist thoughts, King Tran Thai Tong used the yin-yang theory to explain the *birth*, something that was unprecedented in the history of Buddhism. Moreover, the attachment of Buddhist and Taoist conceptions with ancestral worship and folk beliefs demonstrated a creative and original feature of Zen philosophy under the Tran Dynasty, compared to other Zen sects in China (Nguyen Duy Hinh, 2005, pp.540-541; Nguyen Van Huyen, 2005, p.356).

Regarding human life, under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism emphasised harmony with secular life without going against natural law. Thus, to become a Buddhist practitioner, it was not necessary to stick to a vegetarian diet or abide by the five precepts. As they lived in obedience to the natural law, they were not afraid of natural law and consequently they could be awakened with thoughts of freedom. Tue Trung drew attention to the following principle: "Let our mind be in harmony with the universe; it means that we have reached the Buddhahood" (Ha Van Tan, 1988, p.240). Comprehending the Buddhist principles on *Anatma* (egolessness) and *Anitya* (impermanence), many Tran Dynasty kings and aristocrats considered fame and wealth to be illusory¹⁸. Moreover, fully aware of the universal law and the birth-death rule, they assumed that only lowly people were afraid of death, but high-minded people understood the dharma and considered death to be returning to the world of awakening.

¹⁸ In the 4th lunar month in 1236, after being on the throne for 10 years, King Tran Nhan Tong left the Imperial City for Yen Tu Mountain with the intention of leading a religious life. Answering the question raised by the Truc Lam sect monk, the king explained: "My parents passed away, when I was a child. I stood alone above all the people and could not rely on anyone. Thinking about emperors in the past, I realised that they were supported or dethroned unexpectedly. Thus, I decided to come to this mountain to lead a religious life as Buddha without any other desires". Remarkably, after finding the king to advise him to come back to the throne, Tran Thu Do showed clearly the Confucian spirit, especially in the aspects related to responsibilities, power, and loyalty (Nguyen Duy Hinh, 2005, pp.488-489). Similar conceptions were also recorded in the *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, Op.cit., p.16 and Institute of Literature, Vietnam Committee of Social Sciences: *Literature under the Ly and the Tran Dynasties*, Vol. 3, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1989, p.29.

Under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhist practice was very active since the viewpoint on entering into the secular world was promoted. The sense of tolerance and freedom influenced all political thoughts. Almost all kings and noble people were very fond of learning and were knowledgeable about many spheres¹⁹. Born in the lower basin of the Red River, the Tran people moved to the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long where they quickly adapted to the cultural environment, knowledge resources, and many other cultural values that had been consolidated in the Imperial City. As a result, after a generation, those who undertook important national missions were mostly noble people and intellectuals, who also fully understood the three teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. King Tran Thai Tong greatly improved himself becoming an intellectual, an ideologist, and a wise Zen master. The Tran nobility also bettered themselves and formed an intellectual aristocratic circle. The power of knowledge helped Tran royalty achieve political supremacy. On the other hand, however, learning about the people's power in wars, the Tran Dynasty leaders discovered the ideological fulcrum, material resources, and endless vitality for the national vision. The very idea of keeping close relations with the people, and highly appreciating their role, and respecting the life of the people came from this practice. In the paper titled "Thinking about Zen and Truc Lam Zen Sect", Ha Van Van supposed that the founding of the Truc Lam Zen sect by King Tran Nhan Tong was the beginning as well as the continuation of the Vietnamese Zen School. The Truc Lam Zen sect's instruction was to enter into the secular world, dealing with the secular life and complying with the natural law. The poems were written by King Tran Nhan Tong, Phap Loa, and Huyen Quang reflected such a simple mind. When the country was under enemy attack, however, they were prepared to ride into battle to fight against the enemy in order to protect the country. It was not true that they reverted to Zen only in peacetime. In reality, they carried out Zen practice every day, regardless of location, whether on mountains, on the battlefield, in the countryside, and so on. Faith was both tempered and challenged by life. The national spirit which developed in the 13th century contributed to the thoughts of the Truc Lam Zen sect. In other words, the national spirit promoted and combined different Zen sects in the Dai Viet nation into the Truc Lam Zen sect.

With the foundation of the Truc Lam Zen sect, the national spirit left its mark on all the thoughts of the Tran Dynasty and subsequent dynasties. The foundation of a specific Zen sect, which put an end to relations with the Zen schools imported from China, was also

¹⁹ In "Instructions on Emptiness", Tran Thai Tong wrote: "Realising my own virtue, I came on the throne and tended the people. I spent all the time doing it without hesitating to face difficulties. Although I had to deal with hundreds of things every day, I spent free time learning to improve knowledge. When I worried that I did not understand the word "*đinh*", I stayed up late to find out its meaning. I reviewed the Confucian classics and studied the Diamond Sutra. It contained thousands of profound things that we had to ponder about so as to collect the quintessence and praise the words of saints to provide assistance for future learners", See: *Literature under the Ly and the Tran Dynasties*, Op.cit., p.34. In the *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, Ngo Si Lien and other historians under the Le Dynasty sang the praise of the knowledge and virtue of the Tran kings and military leaders such as Tran Hung Dao, Tran Quang Khai, Tran Nhat Duat, and Pham Ngu Lao, etc.

seen as a sign of the national spirit. The Buddhist sense of mercy was aimed at saving people by ending unhappy lives in this world; while the viewpoint of entering into the secular world was to ease the people's suffering in this life. This was the real meaning of the Truc Lam Zen sect. It built the notion of loving the people based on Buddhist benevolence. Obviously, the national spirit and the idea of loving the people, which stemmed from the resistance wars, brought the Truc Lam Zen sect into secular life. The establishment of the Tran Dynasty and the victories in the resistance wars injected new vitality into Vietnamese Buddhism. The Truc Lam Zen sect was founded in such a context. The Prajna of this sect was the very wisdom of the Dai Viet era and nation. Eventually, this sect became highly respected for national not religious features (Ha Van Tan, 1984, pp.60-81).

5. Conclusion

Thanks to its geographical location and other political, economic and cultural factors, the Northeast region (Quang Ninh) has always been seen as a centre of exchange, migration, and settlement for people of different cultures. According to the vision of the former monarchical regimes, the Northeast was an important strategic area and consequently, a cultural frontier was established. We can see that four typical features were gradually introduced for the people and culture in the Northeast: (i) *Generosity* found in the characteristics of the local coastal people; (ii) *tolerance, wisdom, and creativity* found in the Buddhist cultural tradition; (iii) *resilience* found in the lifestyle of people in the frontier minefield area evident over generations; and (iv) *analytical, practicality and ambition* found in the minds of the people taking control of the cultural frontier. Owing to the cultural features and resources, together with the entire population, the local communities in the Northeast region have steadfastly protected the coastal border areas and islands; they have always played a role as pioneers in the history of the country's protection and development as well as the international integration.

Similar to many other cities and provinces in Vietnam, the authorities in Quang Ninh Province always pay special attention to cultural issues and every effort has been and is made to further improve its cultural resources for regional and international integration. Culture is a multi-value resource that can be recycled to become a motive for socio-economic development, aiming at sustainable and green growth. The elements of heritage in Quang Ninh Province, including the three mentioned above, are considered to be the soft powers contributing in part to the process of developing resources, demonstrating national identity, building a favourable and smart social environment, and satisfying the increased cultural demands of people in the province specifically and countrywide in general.

Note: Translator: Nguyen Tuan Sinh. Language Editor: Stella Ciorra.

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