

Clan Culture in Vietnam: Theoretical and Practical Issues

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Received August 01, 2026; Revised September 01, 2026; Accepted September 09, 2026

Abstract Vietnam is known as an agricultural country with a long-standing tradition in Southeast Asia. Its unique geographical position and millennia-long history of nation building and defense have endowed the Vietnamese people with a distinct cultural identity and a strong spirit of self-reliance and resilience. Within the overall structure of Vietnamese culture, clan culture holds a significant position. Each developmental stage of Vietnam, both in the past and present, bears the distinct imprint of clan culture. Clan and clan culture have become a cultural entity that is present and significantly influences Vietnamese history and culture. This study will focus on clarifying the theoretical and practical issues surrounding clan culture in Vietnam.

Keywords: *clan, clan culture, theory, practice, Vietnam*

Cite This Article: Tang Chanh Tin, “Clan Culture in Vietnam: Theoretical and Practical Issues.” *World Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2026): 19-24. doi: 10.12691/wjssh-12-1-3.

1. Introduction

The issue of clan and clan culture is an important content in the studies of history and culture of each country and nation. It is "a particularly universal socio-historical phenomenon of humanity" [1]. For Vietnamese nation, the millennia-long history of nation-building and defense has affirmed the importance of clans and their culture with a tightly-knit community model of house - village - nation. Through historical ups and downs, with the demands of water management, agricultural production, and resistance to foreign invasions, these relationships have increasingly bonded, creating a significant endogenous strength for the entire nation.

Looking back at the past, clan culture has fulfilled its duty to the nation's destiny during fierce historical challenges. In the current period and looking forward to the future with rapid changes in the process of integration and globalization; the awareness and study of clan culture must be further enhanced and considered a way to decipher oneself, awaken the source of strength, and create momentum for the country's sustainable development. However, research on clan and clan culture in Vietnam has not yet matched its inherent potential, as noted by the late Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai said, “In our country, clan is a topic that has not been studied much to strengthen education on clan traditions” [2]. Therefore, with the spirit of “reviewing the old to understand the new”, our article will focus on depicting the picture of clan culture in Vietnam from theoretical and practical perspectives.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Summary of Studies on Clan and Clan Culture in Vietnam

2.1.1. Research on Clan and Clan Culture in Vietnam

In Vietnam, from a very early age, studies on the issue of clan and clan culture have been conducted; first of all the studies on family rituals of feudal authors. Most of the studies in this period were associated with mandarins and dignitaries in the court, scholars who passed examinations in the Confucian education system at that time, typically the works of *Hồ Thượng thư Gia lễ (Family Rituals of Minister Ho)* by Ho Si Duong, *Tứ lễ trích tập sự (The Four Ceremonies Extract Compilation)* by Bui Huy Tung, *Thọ Mai Gia lễ (Tho Mai Family Rituals)* by Ho Si Tan... These works presented quite specific and detailed descriptions of the traditional family rituals of Vietnamese people, focusing on rituals and regulations associated with the human life cycle such as mandarin, marriage, mourning, ancestor worship, ... These contents all directly or indirectly mention the issue of clan and clan culture, which is a major issue in Vietnamese culture.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the face of the strong influence of Western culture, including new approaches and research methods with contemporary social issues, including family rituals, a number of Vietnamese scholars published their articles on family rituals. Typically, Tran Duy Nhat with the article “*Reforming Customs*” published in Nam Phong Magazine

Issue 59 in 1922; Thien Dinh with the article "*Common rituals*" published in many issues of Nam Phong Magazine in 1930; Do Nam Nguyen Trong Thuat with "*How Should We Reform Rituals?*" also published in Nam Phong Magazine in 1934... The publications of these authors highlighted the views of the new Vietnamese intellectuals on the traditional family rituals of their ancestors. The views expressed all praised and valued traditional family rituals but also proposed changes to adapt to the new situation of society.

After 1945, especially after 1986, research on Vietnamese family rituals continued with notable works such as *Văn Công Thọ Mai Gia Lễ* by Ha Tan Phat published in 1961; *Gia lễ xưa và nay* (Past and present family rituals) by Pham Con Son published in 1996. These are elaborate research works on family rituals within the scope of Vietnamese families and clans, becoming valuable documents for researching and learning about Vietnamese family rituals.

Along with the issue of family rituals, the study of clan in general and clan culture in particular has also been a topic of interest from very early on in Vietnam. The study of clan and clan culture is approached from many different angles such as ethnology, anthropology, history, sociology, cultural studies, ... Within the scope of this article, it mainly refers to the studies of Vietnamese clan and clan culture as a research object of history and culture.

From very early on, the issue of clan has been mentioned in typical medieval works of Vietnam such as *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (*The Complete Annals of Dai Viet*), *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (*The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting Vietnamese History*), *Đại Nam thực lục* (*The Veritable Records of Dai Nam*), *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (*The Comprehensive Geographical Records of Dai Nam*)... In particular, in the important Laws of the feudal monarchies in our country such as *Hong Duc Law* in Le Dynasty or *Gia Long Law* in Nguyen Dynasty, the issue of Vietnamese clan associated with marriage and family was also mentioned.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; during several journeys to the regions of Cochinchina and Tonkin, some Western scholars such as Cristoforo Borri, John Barrow, William Dampier... left behind studies on the history, culture, customs, and landscapes of many localities they set foot in. Among those studies, there were some contents that mentioned the issue of clan and clan culture of Vietnamese people. However, because the issue of clan and clan culture is not the main research subject, these studies only mentioned briefly and generally. Typical works of this period include *the Land of Cochinchina* by Cristoforo Borri in 1621; *A Journey to the Land of Cochinchina (1792-1793)* by John Barrow; *A Journey to the Land of Tonkin in 1688* by William Dampier...

In the period before 1945, there were a number of outstanding studies on Vietnamese culture by French scholars and some Vietnamese Western intellectuals. In the work *The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta* by scholar Pierre Gourou; the author conducted a survey and statistics on names of clans in the "Tonkin Delta" (202 surnames) and made comments on families and clans of Vietnamese people in relation to history and culture

(Gourou, 2004). Scholar and priest Léopold Cadière, who has been with Vietnam for more than 60 years, a leading Vietnamese scholar, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Bulletin des amis du vieux Hue* in the period of 1914-1944, in his studies repeatedly mentioned the clan issue of Vietnamese people. He made the following observation about Vietnamese clans: "The Vietnamese, no matter what the circumstances, belong to a clan, that is, a family in the broad sense, an organization firmly and closely linked by blood, by material interests, by religious beliefs, by the moral bonds of the community" [3].

In addition to the research of foreign authors, it is impossible not to mention the typical works studying Vietnamese culture by Vietnamese scholars. In their studies, they directly mentioned clans and aspects of clan culture as an important part of the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people, typically Phan Ke Binh with *Việt Nam phong tục* (*Vietnam Customs*), Dao Duy Anh with *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* (*Outline of Vietnamese Culture History*), Nguyen Van Huyen with *Văn minh Việt Nam* (*Vietnamese Civilization*)...

In the period from 1945 to 1975, with the great impact of the war, studies on Vietnamese culture as well as clan culture encountered many difficulties. During this period, in South Vietnam, there were a number of studies on customs, family rituals, clans, ..., typically *Nếp cũ - Con người Việt Nam* (*Old Habits - Vietnamese People*) by author Toan Anh, published in 1965; *Đất lề quê thói* (*Traditions of the Homeland*) by Nhat Thanh Vu Van Khieu published in 1970 or *Gia phả: Khảo luận và thực hành* (*Genealogy: A Study and Practice*) by Da Lan Nguyen Duc Du published in 1970... These studies contributed to filling a gap in cultural and clan research due to the impact of the war, and at the same time supplemented important sources of information on preserving memories of family, clan, family rituals, genealogies, customs and practices.

After 1975, when the country was reunified, especially after 1986 when the country implemented Doi Moi (Renovation) policy; studies on culture in general and clan culture in particular received more attention. There were more in-depth studies on lineage culture from various approaches, including ethnology and cultural studies [4,5,6,7,8].

Along with cultural studies that mention the issue of clan culture, in the past decade or so, there have been many research works that take clan culture as the main subject of survey and research, typically *Văn hóa dòng họ Việt Nam* (*Vietnamese clan culture*) by Do Trong Am [9]; *Văn hóa dòng họ* (*Clan culture*) [10,11];...

In addition, in the trend of revival of clan culture for the past 10 years, a series of guidebooks on how to establish genealogies, write genealogies, as well as basic issues of clans have been printed and published. These books have relatively similar titles and content, including a section on how to write genealogies, instructions on a number of tasks related to clans such as worshipping and funerals, typically *Gia phả dòng tộc* (*Clan Genealogy*) by Ho Duc Tho [12]; *Gia phả dòng tộc* (*Clan Genealogy*) by Mai Hoa [13]; *Gia phả dòng tộc* (*Clan Genealogy*) by Gia Cat [14]... Due to their compilation style, which leans towards summarizing materials, these works have many limitations in research methods and do not delve deeply into specific

aspects of lineage culture but only mentioning the issue of genealogy.

In addition, the issue of clan culture, especially Vietnamese clan genealogies, received the attention of many domestic and foreign research programs, typically *Chương trình nghiên cứu gia phả Việt Nam (Vietnamese Genealogy Research Program)* by Hanoi VNU. This is a large-scale research program of the Center for Vietnamese Studies and Cultural Exchange under Hanoi VNU, with the cooperation of the French School of the Far East (E.F.E.O), Paris VII University - France and University of Alberta - Canada.

A number of centers specializing in genealogy and family research have been established and operated quite actively, such as the *Center for Genealogy Research and Practice* under Ho Chi Minh City Historical Science Association.

Along with research books on clan culture, the issue of Vietnamese clan and clan culture has also been discussed by scholars and researchers on many forums, especially research journals. Some studies on the theory of clan culture and the practice of expression of clan culture through some specific cases in localities [15,16,17,18] contributed to affirming the important position of clan culture in the overall culture of Vietnam and emphasizing the need for serious and in-depth studies on clan culture in Vietnam.

After 1986, when the country implemented *Đổi mới* (Renovation) policy in the spirit of the 6th National Congress of the Party, the material and spiritual life of the people was gradually improved; many traditional cultural values were revived after a long period of decline due to the impact of war and difficult life in the postwar period. Clan culture is also not out of this general trend when some clans begin to promote connection, tracing their roots, establishing contact boards; A number of clan seminars are held. In 1997, the People's Committee of Nghe An province held a seminar "The Culture of Clans in Nghe An with the Cause of Implementing the Vietnamese Human Strategy in the early 21st Century", attracting a large number of prestigious scientists and researchers in the country to participate. This is the first seminar on clan culture in a locality to be held besides the seminars of each clan. Following Nghe An, in 1999, Thai Binh province organized the "Clan Culture in Thai Binh" to discuss and exchange views on the role and influence of clans and clan culture in the social life and history of a number of clans and families. In December 2015, Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities in collaboration with the Institute of Clan History organized the scientific conference "Vietnamese Family, Clan and Genealogy Culture". This conference brought together many prestigious scholars at home and abroad, opening up many issues of an orientational nature for the study of clans and clan culture in Vietnam today.

2.1.2. Some Comments on the Study of Clan Culture in Vietnam Today

From the content of the summary of the previous studies on clan and clan culture of the authors, it can be seen that clan and clan culture are research issues of interest from many different scientific fields, from history, culture to philosophy, anthropology, ethnology,

sociology... Each field has a different approach when researching family issues, but they all agree that this is an important research content when researching the country and people of Vietnam.

In the period before 1945, studies on clan culture were primarily focused on family rituals associated with the feudal bureaucratic class. There were some studies by French scholars and Western-educated Vietnamese intellectuals. However, the issue of clan and clan culture is just one content in the overall research on Vietnamese culture, country and people; it has not been systematically and intensively researched. The subsequent period, marked by 30 years of struggle for national liberation and unification (1945-1975) recorded many significant losses and sacrifices, hence the investment in research on clan culture was somewhat limited. After 1975, especially since 1986, the country renewed and promoted economic development and international integration. Researchers have the opportunity to devote their efforts to studies on culture in general and clan culture in particular. A number of research works and articles that take clan and clan culture as research subjects have raised many theoretical and practical issues related to clan culture.

However, there have not been many works that deeply analyze the values expressed by clan culture, the role of clan culture in development; in the economic, political, cultural and social life of the community. There is also a lack of comparative studies on clan culture from the perspective of regions and ethnic groups as well as studies on transformation of clan culture in the context of urbanization.

In the trend of a strong revival of clan culture, many conferences on clan culture have been held in various provinces and cities. A number of organizations that research genealogies, connect and gather clans have been established nationwide, creating a vibrant atmosphere for clan culture. Many practical issues related to clan culture have arisen, requiring thorough research and understanding.

In addition, most foreign studies focus on clans as the main research subject associated with anthropological, philosophical, and sociological issues; or specialize in genealogy. The issue of clan culture is still a topic that is rarely addressed in current international studies.

2.2. Clan Culture - The Immutable Entity of Vietnamese Culture

2.2.1. Family Line and Clan Culture

For Vietnamese people, the issue of clan is closely associated with the homeland and roots; respected and highly appreciated by everyone. Because, from birth, each person is raised and grows up within the environment of the kinship community. Families and clans have become the most noble and sacred things when remembered by every Vietnamese.

According to scholar Dao Duy Anh, "Vietnamese clans traditionally have two levels, one is the house or small family, including husband, wife, parents and children; The second is the clan, or the extended family, including all men and women with a common ancestor, including both the dead and the living" [19]; it is "the collection of all paternal descendants of the same recognized ancestor"

[20]. And indeed, "Vietnamese people, regardless of their circumstances, belong to one clan, that is, family in a broad sense, firmly organized, closely linked by bloodline, by material benefits, by religious beliefs and by the moral ties of the community" [3].

It can be seen that it is not easy to give an accurate and complete definition of clan. Depending on each approach and each research direction, scholars and researchers offer different perspectives on clans. The most common feature when referring to a clan is shared bloodline and a common ancestor.

The existence and development of clans are always associated with the changes, ups and downs of national history and culture. In that process, Vietnamese clans have formed unique cultural features, which is clan culture. This encompasses "sacred values deep in the hearts of generations. It is not only due to the biological gene inheritance creating new generations that succeed their ancestors but also includes the gratitude of birth and upbringing" [10]; it is "an element of national culture, a cultural entity containing all material and spiritual cultural values produced by clans during their formation and development" [21]. It can be seen that the culture of a clan is the totality of the material and spiritual values that the clan has created throughout its formation and development, vividly reflecting its role in the local economic, political, cultural and social life as well as its interaction with the natural and social environment.

2.2.2. Clan - The Cohesion of Community

"A clan emerges with marriage and the nuclear family of a couple in a biological male-female relationship. The family has children from parents. From children, there are grandchildren and great-grandchildren, forming a clan" [22]. The clan is associated with the development of human society from the early days to the era of civilization. For the Vietnamese people, from the early days of nation building, each Vietnamese is aware of the spirit of "compatriot", sharing a common origin, "our whole nation is a big family, because from the origin we were born with the same mother... Families and clans all have the same spirit, one meaning" [7].

The Vietnamese family has always existed, developed and become a source of life throughout each person's life. Each clan carries the spirit of solidarity, attachment and mutual support. The spirit of pride in the traditions of the clan has created a sense of preserving good relationships in the kinship community, training the next generation worthy of the traditions of the clan. It is the spirit of solidarity in their clan that contributes to creating unity in the village community, then expanding to the national level, creating the strength of unity for the whole nation.

Relationships within the clan are clearly defined by blood ties and hierarchy, divided into senior and junior branches with appropriate forms of address and behavior. In each clan, The role of the patriarch is highly regarded within each clan. This individual makes critical decisions, leads ancestral worship ceremonies, and mediates conflicts in the clan fairly and objectively. Relationships within the clan cultivate individuals with strong moral character, respectful of elders, and most importantly, fostering love and mutual support.

The clan has created and reinforced the sense of

community, from the kinship community, clan to village, ethnic group and nation. In Vietnam, the clan is an important social institution, directly contributing to the structure of the village and more broadly the country. The history of Vietnam with the resistance wars against foreign invasion and the struggle to conquer nature has recognized the role of clan culture in fostering community cohesion and mutual support during hardships. And in peaceful and developmental times, clan culture continues to play a role in economic support, improving living standards, promoting education, and preserving and enhancing clan traditions.

2.2.3. Clan Culture - a Place to Preserve Vietnamese Culture

Through many ups and downs of history, the family has become a place to preserve the traditional cultural values of the nation. Vietnamese people, no matter where they are in the world, they never forget their roots. They always remember and always keep a sense of family and clan and always hope for "Falling leaves return to their roots". Vietnamese clan culture has fulfilled the mission of preserving and inheriting the good values of the previous generation to the next generation. "It is an environment for human development, for cultural integration, and for the transmission of culture from one generation to another. It is where individuals learn and cultivate language, intellect, production experience, social behavior, cultural awareness, and a sense of origin..." [21].

For Vietnamese people, the family is an important educational environment, besides family, school and society. From birth to adulthood, marriage, and parenthood, each person lives in the warm atmosphere of kinship; there, we share, help, and most importantly, receive guidance and teachings about morals, ethics, behavior, and the beautiful traditions of the lineage. This foundation shapes a person in society with all the virtues of truthfulness - goodness - beauty. It instills the principle that in everything we do, we must carefully consider not to tarnish the image and traditions of our lineage and not to disappoint our ancestors and parents.

"Birds have nests, people have clan", clans are the roots that everyone returns to. Each clan is like a tree, with branches representing generations and individuals sprouting from the root. Each clan also generates and transmits unique cultural traits over generations. In periods when national culture faces severe challenges, particularly assimilation by adversaries, the inherent strength of Vietnamese culture re-emerges stronger than ever.

Right at the beginning of the nation's history, the role of clan culture was affirmed when making contribution to preserving the identity and origin of Vietnamese culture. This strength ensured that "the Chinese settlers sent by Ma Yuan not only failed to assimilate the Vietnamese people and serve as a pillar for their administration but were completely Vietnamized" [4]. The role of clan culture in preserving Vietnamese cultural values is further manifested in various aspects of clan culture, such as tangible values like genealogy books, family codes, ancestral halls, and ancestral tombs, as well as intangible values like ancestor worship rituals, education in traditions, moral principles, social relationships, proper conduct...

In modern life, clan culture plays an important role in

mobilizing descendants to comply with the guidelines and policies of the Party and the State, making contribution to building an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity. In particular, one of the highlights of clan culture is its emphasis on learning encouragement and talent development. This is a vivid expression of the studious tradition of Vietnamese people. The achievements and success of descendants are a source of pride for the clan, and in turn, successful individuals always remember the support they received from their ancestors and family. This contributes to the emergence of outstanding individuals who bring "breakthroughs" to their clans [22]. This tradition has shaped renowned scholarly clans in Vietnam, such as Vu clan in Mo Trach village (Hai Duong), Bui clan in Thinh Liet village (Hanoi), Nguyen clan in Tien Dien village (Ha Tinh), Ho clan in Quynh Doi village (Nghe An), Phan clan in Bao An village (Quang Nam)...

2.2.4. Clan - socio-economic Nucleus

In addition to cultural values, community cohesion; clan culture also plays an important role in economic, political and social life in Vietnam in the past as well as present. First of all, clan and clan culture play an important role in economic development, especially the household economy. In the context of traditional agricultural production, community and mutual assistance are highly valued. The clan has become a backbone for the household economy, members within a family or clan often collaborate in farming work. During harvest seasons, relatives join hands to assist each other, fostering a cohesive and enthusiastic atmosphere, strengthening solidarity. When coming to new lands, clans play a critical role in land reclamation, attracting settlers, establishing stable livelihoods, and forming prosperous villages.

During times of crop failure and economic hardship, the role of clan culture becomes even more pronounced in providing mutual support, sharing and caring for one another. In the face of natural disasters or calamities, clan members are the first to offer aid and support.

Many clans have traditional crafts, forming traditional craft villages in many parts of Vietnam. The experiences and know-how in production are passed on to each other, creating high-quality brands and products that embody local cultural identity, such as villages specializing in woodworking, pottery, mat weaving and folk painting. In these clans, the bond between members is evident in their economic relationships, with a spirit of "trading with friends, selling amongst guilds," creating a crucial driving force for local economic development.

A form of mutual support, collaborative development that many clans have maintained so far is establishing funds to provide loans for members facing financial difficulties or seeking to invest in businesses. These funds are contributed by descendants within the clan, including successful ones both domestically and internationally. For many families, these funds serve as a vital lifeline for their economic endeavors, enabling them to overcome challenges. More importantly, receiving support from their clan instills a sense of appreciation and responsibility in each individual, encouraging them to manage investments

effectively and repay the clan promptly. Many descendants who have become prosperous entrepreneurs, in turn, become pillars of support for their clans, creating employment opportunities not only for clan members but also for those in the village and community. The prosperity of the clan significantly contributes to the overall development and prosperity of the locality.

In the social aspect, clan culture is a leading factor that contributes to maintaining stability in society. A family with a strong tradition will produce ethical, virtuous individuals, fostering harmonious and happy families. It is the foundation for social peace.

In Vietnam, the role of clan culture also has a great influence on local political issues. Many clans have successful descendants who hold high positions in the government apparatus at all levels. In these clans, the role of clan culture in educating their descendants to comply with the guidelines and policies of the State, act with integrity in their official duties, and refrain from corruption and exploitation of the people is emphasized. However, this aspect also presents challenges, as it can lead to factionalism and competition among clans for positions of power within the local government, resulting in undesirable consequences.

2.3. Clan Culture in Vietnam in the Current Context

In the context of the rapid integration and globalization process in Vietnam, culture in general and clan culture in particular are facing many challenges to preserve their identity against the influx of foreign cultural influences. The challenge for clan culture lies in leveraging its inherent positive values while mitigating its negative aspects, such as remnants of feudalistic thinking, gender inequality, and jealousy and rivalry among clans.

The study of clan culture in the current period of industrialization, modernization and globalization should broaden its scope beyond the family and clan levels to aim at higher goals. These goals include strengthening national solidarity both within the country and among overseas Vietnamese communities, fostering national reconciliation and harmony as the nation integrates globally, and promoting cultural tolerance, "tolerance today embodies the symbiosis between the individual and the collective, between the singular and the diverse, and between the endogenous and the foreign, based on a deep humanistic philosophy in all major and minor cultures on this earth, from which creativity emerges" (Vinh & Tuan, 1997).

One of the critical practical issues facing clan culture today is the disappearance of traditional living spaces due to urban expansion. Village culture is being disrupted, and the traditional gathering spaces of clans around their institutions are disappearing due to relocation and clearance projects. The rapid geographical dispersion of clan members and the "demolition" - "reconstruction" of tangible clan assets like ancestral halls and tombs, coupled with the loosening of bonds between clan members due to modern lifestyles, pose significant challenges to clan culture in contemporary Vietnam.

3. Conclusion

In the overall framework of Vietnamese culture, it can be said that clan culture holds a special position. Throughout the millennia-long history of the nation, with its many ups and downs, clan culture has demonstrated a resilient vitality, deeply rooted in the consciousness of every Vietnamese person. The significant roles of clan culture in historical, cultural, economic, political, and social life vividly illustrate its irreplaceable position in the past, present and future.

In the current context of integration and development, village culture in general, and clan culture in particular, continue to play their important roles, contributing to the sustainable development of the country's culture, education, economy, and society. In addition to the advantages, it is evident that culture in general, and clan culture in particular, face the challenges of the new era, including the rapid urbanization that leads to transformations in many aspects. Therefore, studies on clans and clan culture need more attention and support. Additionally, policies to support clans, build cultural clans and foster coordination among clans should be implemented. The role of clan culture in mobilizing its descendants to build a new cultural life, develop the economy, maintain social order, and promote education and talent must continue to be emphasized. This will ensure that clan culture remains a solid foundation for local authorities and relevant agencies in implementing policies, maintaining stability, and fostering development within communities. Accurately assessing the current state of clan culture in Vietnam is crucial to developing appropriate solutions for preserving and promoting its valuable aspects. This is a practical and critical task requiring the collective efforts of society as a whole, including the political system, with the goal of achieving sustainable national development in the new era.

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