



Tết Festival 2005

Sự Tích Việt Nam Vietnamese Legends and Folklore

Celebrating the Year of the Rooster, Seattle Center, February 5 & 6, 2005

Festival Theme

With a cultural history of close to 5,000 years, Vietnam has a large treasure trove of legends and folklore. Beginning in antiquity, about 2,879 B.C., there was the legend of Lady Long-Nu marrying King Kinh-Duong and giving birth to Lac-Long-Quan. When Lac-Long-Quan inherited the throne, he married Au-Co, a daughter of King De-Lai. Together they gave birth to 100 eggs from which came 100 children. After the children grew up, one day 50 of them went with their mother up to the highland and the other 50 went with their father to the South China Sea, where they inhabited and cultivated the coastal land that became Vietnam. According to legend, that was the beginning of the Van-Lang kingdom.

Until about 257 B.C., the kingdom of Van-Lang was ruled and governed by at least 18 Hung Vuong kings (from Hung Vuong I to Hung Vuong XVIII), also known as the Hong-Bang dynasty. There are lots of legends and folklore about this period.

One well-known folklore in particular was about a god-like child who lived during the reign of King Hung Vuong VI. According to the story, there was a little boy in the village of Phu-Dong who did not talk at all until he was three years old. At the time, the kingdom was under attack from a neighboring country to the north called An. King Hung Vuong VI desperately recruited able men for the defense of the kingdom. When messengers of the king reached the village with the news, the boy suddenly spoke up and to the astonishment of everyone asked his parents to cook three big pots of rice for him to eat. After finishing the meal, the boy stood up, stretched himself and magically transformed into a muscular young man. The young man went to see the king and asked for an 18-meter tall metal horse and a 7-meter metal sword. With the horse and the sword, he led an army into battle and triumphed over the invaders. Victory achieved, the young man galloped away on his horse and disappeared into the sky, to the amazement of his people and the fear of the vanquished northern invaders. Today, there is apparently a memorial to the “Heavenly Prince of Phu-Dong” at the village of Phu-Dong in North Vietnam.

Some time after the victory, King Hung Vuong VI wanted to abdicate and turn over the throne to one of his 22 sons. As a test, he asked each of them to bring a gift to offer their ancestors during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year festival. Here we have the “rice cake” folklore. Tiet-Lieu, the 18th prince, created two new kinds of rice cake with different types of fillings to dedicate to the king. One cake is in a round shape to symbolize heaven, and one cake is square to symbolize earth. With their symbolic shapes and fillings, the rice cakes served well as religious offerings for the rites and rituals of the Tet festivity, and also as tasty treats and gifts for the occasion. The cakes were a hit with the



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old king, who decided to bequeath the throne to the junior prince in recognition of his creativity and thoughtfulness. These round and square rice cakes are still a traditional part of Tet festivity to the present day.

The watermelon story also dated back to the Hung Vuong period. Mai-An-Tiem was an adopted son of a Hung Vuong king. He was well-loved by the king for his talent and his intelligence. However, due to wrongful accusations, Mai-An-Tiem was exiled to a deserted island off the coast. There, he survived despite inhospitable conditions with his strength of will and patience. One day, he planted seeds dropped by a bird and in time harvested a strange type of fruit with green color on the outside and a soft, succulent, and watery red interior. He cultivated the fruit, started a thriving trade with people inland and prospered in the process. Thus was the story of the watermelon in Vietnamese culture.

The reign of King Hung Vuong XVIII was also the setting for the legend of Mountain Lord and Water Lord. The two gods of mountain and sea were both vying for the hands and heart of Princess My-Nuong, the extraordinarily beautiful daughter of King Hung Vuong XVIII.

But there were two suitors for the one lady
The king thought two were one too many.

(Nguyen-Nhuoc-Phap)

In a close race, Mountain Lord managed to edge out his rival and therefore won the hands of the princess. In anger, Water Lord raised a roaring storm to attack his rival. However, Mountain Lord successfully raised the mountain above the raging water despite repeated attempts by Water Lord to rain down the enemy. Today, during the flood season near Mt. Tan-Vien in the province of Son-Tay in North Vietnam, people still think of the myth of love won and love lost in the time of the mountain and water gods.

Five years the sea rises with the Water Lord
Boring into the mountain, roaring for My-Nuong
Who could be so relentlessly persistent,
But a god in love, whose heart is broken.

(Nguyen-Nhuoc-Phap)

Also in the Hung Vuong period, so another story goes, there were two identical twin brothers who are mirror images of each other. They both fell in love with a beautiful young maiden in their village, who chose the older brother for lack of a better choice.



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The younger brother, while happy for his twin, could not help feeling sad and bitter at losing out. One day he came to visit his brother, who happened to be away, and was greeted affectionately by his sister-in-law, who mistook him for her new husband. The temptation to play along was too much for him to resist. When he left the house, he was consumed with guilt, and ran away. Exhausted, he collapsed beside a stream and died. There, in his resting place appeared a block of limestone. Back at home, the older brother realized what had happened, and set out to find his missing brother. By chance, he happened to follow same path to the very spot where his younger brother had died. Tired and weary, he sat down by the limestone rock, fell into a deep sleep and never rose again. His body turned into a tall, slender areca tree.

The young bride, increasingly worried about her husband, could wait no longer and left the house to search for him. She, too, unwittingly followed that same path and found herself by the same stream. Too tired to go further, she sat down and leaned on the areca to rest. She closed her eyes, but never to rise again. In her place, there grew a betel vine around the trunk of the areca.

It has been a tradition at Vietnamese weddings to have ground areca nut, wrapped in a betel leaf smeared with lime. Chewed together, the betel, areca, and limestone yield a blood-red juice. The redder the juice, they say, the deeper the love.

Another love story that ended in tragedy is the story of Trong-Thuy and My-Chau, also known as the magic crossbow story. King An-Duong of Au-Lac, the successor of the Van Lang kingdom, had a magic crossbow, operated by special trigger, that helped him repel waves after waves of stronger invaders. King An-Duong had a young daughter named My-Chau. Trong-Thuy, a handsome prince from a neighboring kingdom, came to seek the hands of Princess My-Chau in marriage, but his secret mission was to steal the magic trigger. He succeeded too well, winning both the love of the princess and the magic trigger. When Au-Lac inevitably fell under the onslaught of a new wave of attack without the protection of the magic crossbow, the king fled with Princess My-Chau. When he discovered the truth, the king killed his daughter in a rage and then committed suicide. Prince Trong-Thuy searched for his wife by following a trail of goose down that she had marked her path but found her too late. Broken hearted by the loss, he buried the princess and then killed himself.

A few hundred years later, in the first century A.D., we have the legend of the extraordinary Trung sisters. Trung-Trac, wife of a village chief who was murdered by the ruling Chinese consul, decided to rally other villages to rise up against the Chinese rulers. In the spring of the year 40, she led the uprising, pledging her life in seeking belated justice for her husband and to restore the Hung Vuong kingdom. The uprising



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was a great triumph, and Trung-Trac became the first Vietnamese monarch after a long period of Chinese rule. However, the Han dynasty subsequently sent one of its leading generals, Ma Vien, to head an expeditionary force to quell the uprising. This time, the enemy was too strong. Trung-Trac and her sister fought until the end, and when all is lost, they both committed suicide by drowning themselves in the Hat- Giang River. Their deaths were dated to the 6th of February in the year 43.

Another heroine who inspired many legends was Trieu-Thi-Chinh, who hailed from the Cuu-Chan village near Mt. Tung. Enraged by the harsh Chinese rule, she started an uprising, which was also initially successful, but later ended in defeat. According to legends, she was a great martial arts expert and led troops into battle by riding an elephant. When as a young maiden, someone asked her about settling down and raising a family, she responded that she would rather conquer the world and get rid of the Chinese rulers than to look after another man.

A myth, perhaps dating to sometime near the same period, was about a young woman who faithfully awaited the return of her husband, and who turned into stone while waiting, still holding her child. Another tearful legend, which has inspired many beautiful love songs, was about disappointed love. A young beautiful daughter of an official was enchanted by the beautiful melodies that an unprepossessing and humble fisherman sang everyday while sailing by her house. She arranged a meeting, but was greatly disappointed when she found that the man of her dream did not have the appearance to match his golden voice. On the other hand, the fisherman fell hopelessly in love with her, and heart-broken by her rejection, he drowned himself one day at sea. His heart was transformed into a block of gem, which in time was found and made into a nice tea cup. The cup found its way to the young woman, who somehow heard his singing voice every time she used the cup. Moved to tears one day by the voice, one of her tear drops fell in the cup, and when that happened, the cup shattered into pieces.

Vietnam finally became an independent country in 938, after the naval battle of Bach-Dang River ended more than 1000 years of Chinese rule. There followed a series of great military heroes, such as Ly-Thuong-Kiet, who led a daring pre-emptive attack deep into Chinese territory to ward off an invasion. And perhaps the greatest military figure in Vietnamese history was the Grand Duke of Hung-Dao (Tran-Quoc-Tuan), who commanded Vietnamese forces against the mighty Mongolians during three unsuccessful invasions. His long storied career was capped by another great naval victory at the Bach-Dang River, almost a repeat of the battle a few hundred years earlier that gained Vietnam its independence. That second battle of Bach-Dang River was a crushing defeat for the Mongolian forces, who apparently decided that three tries were enough, and gave up further invasion plans.



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What now constituted Vietnam was not one single country, but for most of history was a combination of several kingdoms. South of North Vietnam (in what is now the central part of Vietnam) was the kingdom of Ciampa, which was often in state of war with North Vietnam. In the middle of the fourteenth century, a temporary truce was reached and sealed with the marriage of Princess Huyen-Tran of North Vietnam and King Che-Man of Ciampa. Unfortunately, King Che-Man died in less than a year into the marriage, and according to then prevailing customs in Ciampa, the princess was to be burned with the king so that the two of them would continue to be united in death. Faced with the shocking news, King Tran-Anh-Tong of North Vietnam ordered one of his dashing generals, Tran-Khac-Chung, who also happened to be in love with the princess, to lead a rescue mission. The rescue mission was a success, and Princess Huyen-Tran narrowly escaped a horrific death to be re-united with her family and former love. The great romantic appeal of the story and its happy ending has inspired many legends, poems and songs all down the length of history.

North Vietnam again came under Chinese rule beginning in the late fourteenth century. There followed a successful 10-year campaign led by Le Loi, a wealthy land owner near Mt. Lam Son. His victory regained independence for North Vietnam and established the Le dynasty. The long 10-year campaign was the stuff of many legends. In the early days, Le Loi and his men were surrounded by Chinese troops at Mt. Chi-Linh. One of his brave lieutenants, Le Lai, volunteered to assume the leader role and rode out with a group of men to break the encirclement. The Chinese troops concentrated their effort on Le Lai and his men, mistaking him as the leader of the uprising. Le Lai and his men all perished in the attempt, but they created enough time and distraction for Le Loi to escape and rebuild the insurrection. The names Le Loi and Le Lai are now forever linked in the popular imagination.

There is a story from the Le dynasty about a young man from the village of Nam-Xuong who was drafted and spent years in the army. At home, his wife brought up their child on her own. Each night, when her child asked about daddy, she pointed to her shadow on the wall and said that that was daddy. When the young man came home, the joyful reunion was soon marred by doubt and suspicion as his child refused to recognize him, saying that daddy only came home at night. Faced with rejection, the young mother had to leave home, and in desperation, drowned herself in the fast-flowing stream of the local river. When the truth emerged, the husband was overcome with sorrow. He and other people in the village set up a shrine for her. King Le-Thanh-Ton, perhaps the most illustrious of all the kings in the Le dynasty, was touched by the story when passing the shrine one day and wrote a poem on the occasion, blaming the husband for his thoughtless jealousy and bemoaning the fate of the wronged wife and the inadequacy of any belated justice.



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There are many more stories beside. We would like to stop here and invite you all to join us in our annual Tet-In-Seattle festival at the Seattle Center to celebrate the Vietnamese New Year and to enjoy the many legends and folklore from Vietnamese culture. Although we cannot fully explore the large treasure trove of Vietnamese legends and folklore with our limited resources, we nevertheless hope that the two-day Tet-In-Seattle event will leave you with some appreciation for the Tet festivity and Vietnamese culture. Thank you!