

# Vietnam, an Old and New Nation

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## Mythological Origin

The Vietnamese often take pride in their ancestry from a sea dragon and a mountain angel and in 4000 years of civilization<sup>1</sup>. As it is true for most nation origins, part of that noble heritage belongs to the realm of legends, some sharing the same sources as Chinese cosmo-mythology. Indeed, the God of Agriculture Thần Nông (Shennong), considered an ancestor of the Việt people, was among the first Three August Rulers and Five Emperors of China. This common ancestor legacy reflects the powerful influence of a millennium of Chinese cultural assimilation, and the sub-consciousness of the ancient Vietnamese to set themselves equal in birthright to their formal rulers.

According to tradition, Shennong's fifth-generation grandson<sup>2</sup>, Lạc Long Quân –Dragon Lord of Lạc, was the son of Kinh Dương Vương who ruled over the South China territory of Xích Quỷ. Kinh Dương Vương had married Long Nữ, the daughter of the dragon ruling the depths of Động Đình Hồ (Dongting Lake in Hunan, China<sup>3</sup>). One day, as Long Quân was strolling in the fields, he saw a large black bird snatch a small white heron<sup>4</sup>. He skillfully threw a stone at the predator, hitting it in flight. The ugly monster let go of its victim which was stunned for a moment when it fell on the grass. But as the prince approached, the bird shook loose of its white feathers, and out from the feathery cloud emerged a beautiful girl, the Fairy Âu Cơ<sup>5</sup>.

After their union, Âu Cơ gave birth to a pouch containing 100

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1 4000 năm văn hiến

2 <http://library.thinkquest.org/25734/h/history1.html> accessed 12-03-2007

3 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dongting\\_Lake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dongting_Lake) accessed 12-27-2007

4 This is just one of several versions of the story.

5 <http://www.pathfind.org/pf/Journey/viet%20nam/legend.ht> accessed 12-02-07

eggs which hatched into 100 sons, the ancestors of the Bách Việt (Bai Yue, 100 Việt) tribes of South China History. After years of happy life together, because of irreconcilable difference in their fundamental nature of mountain bird and sea dragon, the couple agreed to separate. Fifty children stayed with their mother on solid land, and the other fifty followed their father to take to the South Sea<sup>6</sup>. They vowed to assist each other in times of need. The eldest son became King Hùng Vương I of the Hồng Bàng dynasty, ruling over Văn Lang and its people, the Lạc Việt (Luoyue)<sup>7</sup>.

### Assigning Dates to a Legendary Dynasty

The Chinese calendar adopted by the Vietnamese can be traced back to around 1400 BC based on inscriptions found on oracle bones and turtle shells of the Shang dynasty<sup>8</sup>. The calendar is solar-lunar with months following the phases of the moon. Well codified adjustments with leap months create leap years of 13 months. Complex calculations account for the position of the sun to accurately determine the start of the four seasons, a vital information for agriculture. The calendar is not infinitely sequential and goes by cycles of 60 years. The years were associated with the name and reign year of the monarch, allowing for correlation with the Gregorian calendar. Supposedly, the Chinese calendar was introduced in 2637 BC<sup>9</sup> by Emperor Huangdi or Yellow Emperor who succeeded Shennong. Using that mythical date for reference, the legendary Hồng Bàng dynasty started circa 2879 BC and ended in 258 BC with Hùng Vương the 18<sup>th</sup>, or an average of 145 fabled years per king<sup>10</sup>!

The number “18” was likely chosen by ancient Sino-Vietnamese psyches to signify “many” and “majestic” because it is a multiple of “9”, a number commonly believed to be auspicious and very large<sup>11</sup>.

6. This supports the hypothesis that some Lạc Việt, fleeing Ma Yuan’s Chinese invaders, sailed to the Indonesian Archipelago (<http://forums.thuyngaonline.com/printable.aspx?m=718865> accessed 12-18-07).

7. Circa 2880 BC

8. In Vietnamese “nhà Thương”

9 <http://webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar-chinese.html> accessed 12-06-2007

10 131 years if we include Lạc Long Quân and his father and divide by 20 and not 18.

11 <http://vnthuquan.net/truyen/truyen.aspx?tid=2qtv3m3237ntn3n1n2n31n343tq83a3q3m3237nvn> accessed 12-26-2007

Interestingly, “Hùng” may have come from “Zhuang” (Tráng). The Zhuang people, a major Baiyue tribe with a matriarchal society from the time of Triệu Đà’s Nam Việt<sup>12</sup>, had supported the Trưng Sisters<sup>13</sup>. They are the largest minority ethnic group of Communist China, live mainly in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and still play bronze drums during festivities. “Hùng” (*hùng cường*, powerful) and “tráng” (*tráng cường*, robust) are etymologically related words<sup>14</sup>: *hùng tráng* means brave and strong. As Vietnamese and Korean oral traditions were highly influenced by Han Chinese beliefs<sup>15</sup>, the legend of the 18 Hùng Kings is fascinatingly similar to the fable of the 18 Hwanung<sup>16</sup> Supreme Regents ruling over the mythical Korean empire of Baedalguk (3897 – 2333 BC?)<sup>17</sup>.

### St Giông, Hero of Independence

During the reign of Hùng Vương VI, Văn Lang was invaded by Ân armies (giặc Ân<sup>18</sup>) of the Yin Dynasty<sup>19</sup> from the North. The King sent emissaries throughout the country to recruit warriors as in these feudal times of local chieftains, there was no standing national army. In the village of Phù Đổng, there was a three-year old boy who had not smiled, laughed or uttered a word since birth. When the King’s call to arms was read in the courtyard of the communal temple (đình), suddenly the boy started to speak to his mother, asking her to call the envoy to their modest mud and thatch home. He told the envoy to request the King to build him a large iron horse and a sturdy iron rod, and he would fight the invaders. The King, pre-warned by a favorable oracle, gladly

12 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuang> accessed 1-03-2008

13. <http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/zhuang/id/1894588> accessed 1-05-08

14 <http://www.chinahistoryforum.com/index.php?showtopic=5367> accessed 1-04-2008

15 <http://www.khoahoc.net/baivo/nguyennghuyen/191006-hungvuongvanguoivietnam.htm> acc’d 1-04-2008

16. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hwanung> accessed 1-04-2008

17. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_legendary\\_monarchs\\_of\\_Korea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_legendary_monarchs_of_Korea) accessed 1-04-2008

18. 20th century historian Trần Trọng Kim noted that there is no mention of this tale in Chinese archives, and doubted that Ân aggressors were actually involved as they lived at that time way up North, in the Huang He River basin, too far away to wage war with such a small tribe-nation as Văn Lang (Hien V Ho). A second view maintains that it was possible as the Văn Lang territory of Lạc Long Quân extended to Động Đình Hồ (Dongting Lake in Hunan, China).

19. Also called Shang Dynasty, ca 1600-1046 BC

obliged. He ordered his blacksmiths to work day and night to forge the impressive fighting gear. The boy then asked the villagers to bring him 100 cauldrons of white rice, in effect confirming Vietnam's early notion of "It takes a village to raise a child." He consumed all the rice specially cooked for him, then stretched his shoulders, and miraculously grew to a tall and strong young man. With his iron horse spitting flames, he rallied the Lạc Việt troops and quickly routed the Northern invaders.

His mission accomplished, Phù Đổng Thiên Vương<sup>20</sup> –Divine Lord of Phù Đổng, rode his horse to the summit of Sóc Sơn Mountain and then up into the firmament. Sóc Sơn Mountain still bears imprints of the iron horse hoofs on its rocky terrain in the form of a succession of round water holes. The Phù Đổng village, also called "làng Gióng" in Bắc Ninh, North Vietnam, celebrates yearly its legendary hero Thánh Gióng (Saint Gióng). The jubilant celebration takes place over several days, with colorful reenactment of the battles against the invaders. It became a major cultural event for old and young, and an opportunity for young men and women to meet each other, leading to these verses:

*Ai ơi mông chín tháng tư*

*Không đi hội Gióng thì hư một đời.*

Hear ye, on the ninth of the fourth month,

Not going to *Gióng* festival turns life all wrong.

## **The Tale of Enduring the Elements**

The other fable associated with the Hồng Bàng dynasty also raises many unsettled questions about dates, underscoring the imaginary nature of the story and of the dynasty itself. This is the tale of Sơn Tinh (Mountain Deity) and Thủy Tinh (Water Deity) competing for the hand of Mỵ Nương, the charming daughter of King Hùng Vương the 18<sup>th</sup>, whose reign ended in 258 BC when historical facts could be recorded.

The young men were both witty and handsome, and came from noble families. The King could not decide on his future son-in-law, so promised to give the princess' hand to the first suitor

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20. Title conferred by King Hùng Vương VI

to return the next day with offerings worthy of his status. Early the next morning, Son Tinh came to the palace bringing with him treasures from lofty mountains and deep forests ranging from precious stones of all shapes and colors, life-enhancing rhinoceros horns, majestic elephant tusks, rare hardwoods sculpted with exquisite mountain landscapes, perfectly seasoned venison jerky, lovely singing canaries in finely crafted bamboo cages, to the most fragrant tea available anywhere complete with a set of tea cups carved from solid cinnamon wood. The King was very pleased with the magnificent gifts, and Son Tinh and his young wife happily made the trip back to Tản Viên Mountain, in Sơn Tây province.

After the couple left, Thủy Tinh presented with the most precious products from the depth of the oceans, but he was too late. Furious, he declared war on Sơn Tinh, calling in hurricane winds, pouring down the heaviest rains in human memories and raising the level of the sea day after day. But as the water level rose, Sơn Tinh simply made his mountain taller and taller. He also fired lightning bolts at the hideous marine monsters unleashed by his enemy. Finally, realizing the futility of his attacks, Thủy Tinh pulled back. The two powerful opponents still fight their thunderous battles every year around July-August, during the monsoon season, inundating the land and destroying the crops with unexpected rushes of water coming from all directions.

### **Legend of the Magic Crossbow**

In 258 BC, Thục Phán, a talented warlord from neighboring Tây Âu, overthrew the last Lạc Việt king, Hùng Vương the 18<sup>th</sup>, and created the state of **Âu Lạc**, unifying the Lạc Việt with the Âu Việt. At the dawn of History when national identity was a vague notion, the local inhabitants might have called the place they lived on Đất (land) and Nước (water) which became in Chinese characters Ou Luo, Âu Lạc<sup>21</sup>. In contemporary Vietnamese, “đất nước” is “nation,” and “nước Việt Nam” is the state (country) of Vietnam.

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21. <http://www.viethoc.org/phorum/read.php?10,7679> accessed 12-03-2007

Thục Phán took the name of King An Dương Vương (258-207 BC). He was able to protect his kingdom against Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BC) thanks to a well equipped army of archers and new weapon systems that provided him military superiority. Legend has it that he had a magic crossbow (nỏ thần) that could fire multiple arrows at the same time thanks to a special trigger made with the magic claw given by Thần Kim Quy, the Golden Turtle Genie. In addition, he embarked on massive defensive works for his capital Cổ Loa, but the hard labor was undone every night by mean ghosts until he received guidance from the Golden Turtle. The saga of structures crumbling nightly might have referred to a learning curve in adobe construction<sup>22</sup>. Archeological findings show that the ramparts of Cổ Loa were erected with unbaked, sun-dried mud bricks<sup>23</sup>, the same material used for the famous Bam Citadel in Iran<sup>24</sup>, built around the same period by the Parthian Persian Empire (250 BC - 226 AD)<sup>25</sup>.

Besides the establishment of numerous fortresses, Âu Lạc military strength could have come from the strategic use of long-range archers well protected by the thick walls of their fortifications. The archers would become infantry soldiers for close combat. It is possible that instead of the slow crossbow, An Dương Vương might have armed his archers with a compact longbow, allowing for faster firing of arrows with improved accuracy and lethality. Indeed, troves of well-crafted bronze-tipped arrows<sup>26</sup> have been recovered in the ruins of the ancient spiral-shaped Cổ Loa Citadel, in the outskirts of Hanoi. More than 1500 years later, the fast-firing longbow gave the English their edge over the French at the battle of Crécy<sup>27</sup> (1346) and Poitiers (1356), and most famously at the Battle of Agincourt (1415)<sup>28</sup> in the Hundred Years War (Guerre de Cent Ans, 1337-1453) of Europe chivalric Middle Age.

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22 <http://vietsciences.free.fr/vietnam/danhnhan/vua/anduongvuong.htm> accessed 12-19-07

23 [http://www.viettouch.com/arch/vietnam\\_architecture\\_military.html](http://www.viettouch.com/arch/vietnam_architecture_military.html) accessed 12-19-07

24 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3349353.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3349353.stm) accessed 12-19-2007

25 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bam,\\_Iran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bam,_Iran) accessed 12-26-2007

26 Tens of thousands of arrows according to several sources

27 <http://www.archeryweb.com/archery/crecy.htm> accessed 12-03-2007

28 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_longbow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_longbow) accessed 11-30-2007



Bronze barbed arrows unearthed at Cồ Loa Citadel<sup>29</sup>, the ancient capital of Âu Lạc

### **Hundred Yue and the “Red Devils”**

A little more than two millennia ago, there were two mighty civilizations on the surface of the Earth, the Roman Empire in the West<sup>30</sup> and the Chinese Empire of Tần Thủy Hoàng or Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BC) in the East. Although Shi Huang De or First Emperor was known to have burned books and cruelly buried Confucian scholars alive, he ruled a unified and modernized China. Chinese historians referred to the diverse tribes south of the Yangtze River as Hundred Yue or Bách Việt. Claiming they were the Center of Civilization, the Han Chinese also called the people living in the remote southern part of China “Nam Man” –Savages of the South, or “Xích Quỷ” –Red Devils, most likely because they decorated their body with ocher or were fierce and bloody warriors. Alternatively, because Chinese characters are ideograms that evolved with time, Xích pointed to the South<sup>31</sup> and Quỷ also meant “star in the Southern sky” or “ownership”, so

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29 [http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%ACnh:M%C5%A9i\\_t%C3%AA\\_n\\_%C4%91%E1%BB%93ng.jpg](http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%ACnh:M%C5%A9i_t%C3%AA_n_%C4%91%E1%BB%93ng.jpg) accessed 12-13-2007

30 Julius Cesar (102-44 BC)

31 Xích Đạo is the Equator

Xích Quỷ could be interpreted as the “Southern Civilization with a Leader”<sup>32</sup>.

### **Early Espionage and Creation of Nam Việt (207-111 BC)**

Tần Thủy Hoàng died in 210 BC. His dynasty quickly collapsed within four years. Qin general Triệu Đà (Zhao Tuo, 207-136 BC), taking advantage of weakened central authority, self-proclaimed Emperor of territories around Nanhai in the South. He then attempted to annex neighboring rice-rich Âu Lạc, but miserably failed in successive military campaigns. According to tradition, the first use of female espionage occurred when he proposed for his son Trọng Thủy (Zhong Shi) to marry the daughter of King An Dương Vương, My Châu. The marriage was to seal the peace between the two warring countries. Because Âu Lạc had a matriarchal society, it was not suspicious for Trọng Thủy to reside at Cổ Loa capital. While there, he learned Âu Lạc’s defense strategy and tactics. Vietnamese folklore fancied that My Châu allowed access to the magic crossbow to her husband who stole the magic claw trigger and took it back to his father. Fresh with the spied information, Triệu Đà was able to modernize his army and conquer Âu Lạc. He then combined Âu Lạc with his own territories into the state of **Nam Việt** (Nan Yue or Nanyue). Thus the name of the Vietnamese nation dated from 207 BC.

### **Chữ Nôm Ancient Vietnamese Writing**

The ancient Vietnamese did not have their own writing. Their spoken language seems to be disyllabic (Vietnam, Saigon, Hanoi, Giadinh, Danang, Cantho, Cali for California) and not monosyllabic as reflected by its script (Viet Nam, Sai Gon, Ha Noi...). The current monosyllabic appearance was acquired after a thousand years of Sinicization, and reflects the earlier use of Han Chinese characters to represent the oral language. Indeed, for hundreds of years under Chinese domination, Han characters were solely used in literature or for recording any official business.

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32 This is controversial. [http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/X%C3%ADch\\_Qu%E1%BB%B7](http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/X%C3%ADch_Qu%E1%BB%B7) accessed 12-02-07

Even though it may have been used earlier<sup>33</sup>, evidence of Chử Nôm transliteration to represent the Vietnamese language started to be found only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup>. Briefly, Chử Nôm writing uses a Chinese character for meaning and another one next to it for the sound. Vietnamese is believed to be originally an atonal Austroasian language like the Khmer language, but acquired its tone from the Chinese<sup>35</sup>. As a result, similar sounding words can mean different things depending on the tone change. This may explain the origin of the legend of Trọng Thủy and My Châu. Written in Chinese characters, Trọng means Center, Thủy means Origin (as in *thủy tổ*, ancestor), and My or mị means lovable. However, Vietnamese listening to the pronunciation of Trọng Thủy and My Châu could have misinterpreted the words as Clear Water for the prince and Pretty Pearl for the princess. As a result, they fantasized their love story which has been recounted with minor variations over the centuries.

### **Trọng Thủy - My Châu's Love Story**

Before he went back to visit his father Triệu Đà, Trọng Thủy told his wife "My love, I will miss you day and night. Now, as the future remains uncertain, war could resurge any time. If that happens, how will I be able to find you?" The princess replied "I have a winter coat made of swan feathers. Wherever I go, I will pluck a feather and leave a white trail for you to find me." When Triệu Đà attacked, King An Dương Vương realized that his magic crossbow had lost its fantastic power. He fled on his best stallion with his daughter on the croup, and galloped without rest heading South. Hotly pursued by the enemy, they reached an uncrossable sea of rough waters. The King lamented "O God, what have I done to merit this destiny?" Suddenly, the waters became calm, and the Turtle Genie emerged, its wet shell glistening like gold under the warm rays of the setting sun "You have dutifully followed my advices. It's not your fault. The enemy is sitting

33 <http://www.khoahoc.net/baivo/nguyennguyen/bocaidaivuongvachunom.htm> accessed 12-31-2007

34 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chu\\_nom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chu_nom) accessed 12-17-2007

35 [http://vietsciences.free.fr/lichsu/lichsucacnuoc/nguongoctantocviet\\_diadangphuong-dong.htm](http://vietsciences.free.fr/lichsu/lichsucacnuoc/nguongoctantocviet_diadangphuong-dong.htm) accessed 12-31-2007

behind you, your Majesty.” The King turned and saw My Châu in tears. Realizing that his own daughter had betrayed him, he drew his sword and killed her. He then rode the Golden Turtle to the Underwater World –the Oriental concept of Atlantis. Drops of the princess’ blood spilled into the ocean, rolled into oyster’s shells, and transformed into South Sea pearls.

Trọng Thủy, following the scattered white feathers, soon reached the end of the trail to find the lifeless princess. He took her body back to the capital Cổ Loa and buried her with all the pomp and dignity due to a princess. Inconsolable, he sat for days by the well where she used to wash her hair. One day, looking into the well, he saw her face at the bottom and jumped in to rejoin her, ending his life. Ever since, if a South Sea pearl is rinsed with water from the well, its luster shines brighter. The well still exists today. When you pass by Cổ Loa, don’t forget to visit the romantic Giếng Ngọc, Pearl Well.



Lake Giếng Ngọc or Ngọc Tinh, Pearl Well.

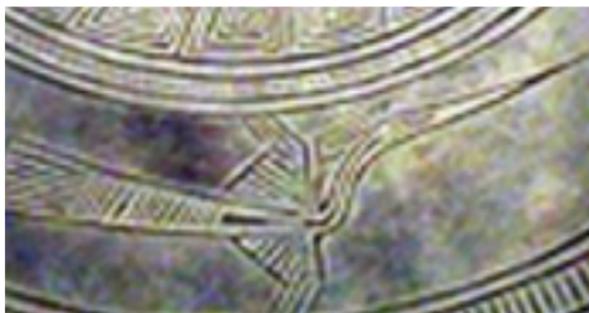
### **The Lạc Việt People**

The ancestors of the Vietnamese were the Lạc Việt, living in the valley and delta of the Hồng Hà or Red River. Lạc is usually interpreted as “water”, but it might have come from “lố” or Chinese for “lúa” –rice<sup>36</sup>. Lạc is also the name of a bird –*chim lạc*, probably an egret, frequently depicted on ceremonial Đông

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36 <http://www.vietspring.org/legend/goldenage.html> accessed 12-20-2007

Son bronze drums that survived to modern times.



According to archeologist William Meacham, “the term Yue [Việt] occurs fairly frequently in the oracle bone writings of the late Shang dynasty, ca 1200 BC.”<sup>37</sup> Its meaning is unclear but it has been suggested that “Việt” might have come from “Vuợt” to point to the people found after “crossing” the Yangtze River<sup>38</sup> or living “beyond” the Han Chinese civilized world. In Vietnamese, *vuợt sông* is crossing the river, *vuợt sức tưởng tượng* is beyond imagination, *vuợt ngục* is breaking from jail.



Vietnamese American 2001 Rose Parade float in Pasadena, California, figuring a boat with the Lạc Bird in the front and motifs of a bronze drum in the back. Courtesy of David Moore from MIT

The Lạc Việt could be considered one or several related tribes of the Bách Việt, but were more likely indigenous to Văn Lang. They were originally Austro-Melanesians or South-East Asians similar to indigenous Philipinos and Indonesians or the Thais<sup>39</sup>. They later intermarried with their Northern Yue neighbors migrating

37 <http://e-cadao.com/tieuluan/VietLevanan2.htm> accessed 12-02-2007

38 <http://www.chinahistoryforum.com/index.php?showtopic=5367> accessed 1-04-2008

39 [http://www.tuvy.com/Countries/vietnamese/origins\\_of\\_the\\_vietnamese\\_people.htm](http://www.tuvy.com/Countries/vietnamese/origins_of_the_vietnamese_people.htm) accessed 12-02-07

South to become the modern Vietnamese. Some Vietnamese customs such as totemism, the chewing of betel leaves and areca nuts, the blackening of teeth are also observed in Indonesian tribes. In addition, the Lạc Việt had a matriarchal society similar to other matriarchal societies in Southeast Asia<sup>40</sup> and the Pacific islands. This explains the well accepted authority of the Trưng Sisters whose army included many female generals. After successfully leading a revolt against Chinese domination, Queen Trưng Nữ Vương reigned from 40 to 43 AD, when Chinese general Mã Viện (Ma Yuan) headed a large army to retake Giao Chi.

### Mayuan's Bronze Column

In all likelihood, the Lạc Việt Đông Sơn bronze drums were used to communicate and rally the Vietnamese people against the Northern invaders. Imagine their bright metallic clamor surrounding Chinese troops in battle, wrecking havoc on their morale, and we could understand why General Mã Viện had attempted to collect and destroy all bronze drums. In fact, he melt them down to erect an imposing bronze column marked with the inscription "*Đông trụ chiết, Giao Chỉ diệt* –If the bronze column falls, Giao Chỉ [Vietnam] will perish"<sup>41</sup>. The true meaning of the inscription is debatable. Popular folklore relates that the Vietnamese despised the column so much that they threw stones at it when passing by, making it disappear under a mountain of rocks<sup>42</sup>. Nobody could find it since. Some 1200 years later, Emperor Kublai Khan attempted to invade Vietnam on the pretext of recovering Ma Yuan's bronze column, but his Sino-Mongol fleet was completely destroyed by General Trần Hưng Đạo on Bạch Đằng River in 1288 AD<sup>43</sup>.

Similar to the marble Trajan Column erected in Rome (106-113 AD) to commemorate Emperor Trajan's victory in the two Dacian Wars<sup>44</sup>, the Ma Yuan Column was a victory celebration (over the

40 The Minangkabau of West Sumatra and the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan

41 <http://www.viethoc.org/phorum/read.php?10,7679> accessed 12-03-2007

42 The alternate version was that they reinforced the column with the rocks, fearing that its fall may lead to the collapse of their country.

43 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Bach\\_Dang\\_\(1288\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Bach_Dang_(1288)) accessed 12-03-2007

44 The Dacians "barbarians" occupied the land north of the Danube River.

Trung Sisters) and a symbol of the conqueror might<sup>45</sup>, so its past existence cannot be doubted. What happened to the bronze column could only be tentatively surmised. It was not moved or removed officially because this important event would have been recorded in Chinese or Vietnamese Histories. Conceivably, the Vietnamese simply whisked it away in a perfectly planned, executed and top secret major operation. This feat, likely realized with well-trained elephants but without the support of modern technology, could be finer in conception and execution than the remarkable Operation Rooster 53 nearly 2000 years later. In that mission, elite Israeli Special Forces swooped onto Egyptian land on December 26, 1969, disassembled and lifted back to Israel the brand new and highly sophisticated Soviet P-12 radar system<sup>46</sup> using gigantic Sikorsky CH-53 helicopters.

When local Chinese authorities found out about the loss of the column, they simply kept a tight lip on the situation to hide it from their superiors (for their own safety) and from the Giao Chi population, fearing a possible uprising. That they were able to hide the earth-shattering news is explicable in those times of minimal means of mass communication. Indeed, Chinese Prime Minister Li Si was able to conceal the death of Emperor Qin Shi Huang for two months for fear of a coup in the capital Xianyang<sup>47</sup>.

### **Recorded History**

Nam Việt's history was written by Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian (Tư Mã Thiên, ca 145-90 BC) in the Records of the Grand Historian. Although Triệu Đà was a Chinese general, he adopted Lạc Việt customs and declared his independence from the Western Han Emperor. Non-Vietnamese historians tend to view his rule as the first period of Chinese domination over Giao Chi. However, because the Lạc Việt people were oppressed by their Northern conquerors after the fall of the Triệu Dynasty in

45 Other interpretations were that the column served as a marker of the southernmost frontier of the Chinese Empire or as an astronomical instrument to calculate the position of the sun. Furthermore, because the inscription consisted of two sentences, many believe that there were two bronze columns.

46 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Rooster\\_53](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Rooster_53) accessed 12-04-2007

47 The death occurred while the Emperor and his close court were touring the country

111 BC, Vietnamese considered him to be the first historic ruler –and protector, of their nation.

In 1983, the tomb of the second ruler of Nam Việt, Triệu Văn Vương<sup>48</sup> (Wen Di or Văn Đế, 137-122 BC), was found in Quảng Đông (Guangdong), giving us a direct view into that early period. Over 1,000 pieces were discovered including the remains of the king in a burial uniform made of 2291 pieces of jade bound together with silk thread<sup>49</sup>, his gold seal, bronze bells, vessels and mirrors, terra cotta ware, “imported” items, and unfortunately, evidence of 15 human sacrifices to serve him in the after-life, in defiance of a ban by the Han Emperor.



Gold seal of Zhao Mei Triệu Văn Vương and rhinoceros horn-shaped jade cup displayed at the Museum of the Western Han Dynasty Mausoleum of the Nanyue King, Guangzhou<sup>50</sup>.

In 111 BC, Nam Việt was conquered by troops of Emperor Han Wudi (Hán Vũ Đế), and became the Chinese province Giao Chỉ. The Việt people would regain true independence only at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century under Ngô Quyền. Although the Vietnamese could have come from one or several of the South China Bách Việt ethnic groups, they could never be assimilated even after a thousand years of Chinese rule. Possibly, the Lạc Việt came from an advanced Southeast Asian population as demonstrated by archeological findings<sup>51</sup> at Hoà Bình, North Vietnam (Hoabinhian industry<sup>52</sup>) and the decorations on the Đồng Sơn bronze drums which clearly depicted a water-oriented, non-Han Chinese culture.

48 Triệu Đà's grandson or son of Triệu Trọng Thủy who committed suicide.

49 <http://www.achinatravel.com/china-travel/china-guangdong-guangzhou-western-han-nanyue-king-tomb-museum.asp> accessed 12-09-2007

50 [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Jiaoxing\\_yubei.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Jiaoxing_yubei.JPG) accessed 12-02-2007

51 <http://www.mevietnam.org/NguonGoc/fv-newlight.html> accessed 12-03-07

52 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoabinhian> accessed 12-03-2007



Decorative motifs of Đông Sơn bronze drums, courtesy of Wikipedia and David Moore (MIT)

Over the history of Vietnam, the land next assumed the names of Giao Chỉ, Giao Châu or An Nam (Pacified South) under Chinese rule. Queen Trưng Nữ Vương did not chose a name for the country, but subsequent Vietnamese Kings named their independent state Vạn Xuân (10,000 Springs, 544-602), Đại Cồ Việt (Great Great Viet 967-1009), Đại Việt (Great Viet 1010-1400), Đại Ngu for seven years under Hồ Quý Ly<sup>53</sup>, and Đại Việt again under Lê Lợi in 1428.

When Nguyễn Phúc Ánh became King Gia Long in 1802, he sought China's approval of his intention to name again the country Nam Việt. However, to avoid confusion with Triệu Đà's ancient kingdom which included Chinese territory that Emperor Nguyễn Huệ had threatened to reclaim, the Qing emperor (Nhà Thanh) recommended that the name be switched to **Việt Nam** in 1804. Interestingly, the words Việt Nam had been used by King Lê Lợi's renowned strategist Nguyễn Trãi in 1435<sup>54</sup>, nearly four centuries before it became official. However, King Minh Mạng renamed the country to Đại Nam in 1839 to underscore the greatness of his rule. Under French colonization for more than half of a century, the country lost some of its identity as it was divided into Tonkin in the North, Annam in the Center and Cochinchine in the South. With Laos and Cambodia, it was part of Indochina. It was not until 1945, that the country is known again as Việt Nam or Vietnam in

53 Because “ngu” in lay Vietnamese means “idiot”, an explanation is in order. Đại Ngu is generally understood as “Great Peace,” but when he dropped his former name of Lê Quý Ly, King Hồ Quý Ly could have used Ngu to establish his noble lineage. Indeed, the Hồ were descendants of the Ngu Thuần dynasty in China (dòng dõi nhà Ngu bên Tàu) according to Trần Trọng Kim in Việt Nam Sử Lược (1919).

54 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam> accessed 12-25-2007

the Western World.

Exposed to ideals such as the right to freedom, learning “people power” from the French and the American Revolutions, the Vietnamese organized to fight French colonialism. Their struggle for independence fueled a newly rediscovered nationalism until the communists eliminated their nationalist allies to seize power<sup>55</sup>. In 1954, Vietnamese identity and unity were further damaged when Vietnam was divided into two states separated at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. One million people fled proletarian revolution to resettle in the newly created Republic of Vietnam under President Ngô Đình Diệm. The ensuing 20-year Vietnam War was a dark period which saw again *Vietnamese fighting Vietnamese*, until the unconditional surrender of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

Four years after the Vietnam War, in 1979, the People’s Republic of China attacked its former ally, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, while the latter was busy pacifying Kampuchea reeling from Pol Pot’s “killing fields<sup>56</sup>.” China occupied Nam Quan Pass<sup>57</sup> and acquired more frontier land in a 1999 border treaty kept secret until it surfaced in 2001, causing an uproar among overseas Việt Kiều<sup>58</sup>.

In 2007, China’s decisions to consolidate its administrative hold on the disputed Hoàng Sa (Paracel) and Trường Sa (Spratly) Islands<sup>59</sup> –where vast undersea reserves of oil and natural gas are believed to exist, have resulted in a surge of Vietnamese patriotism with demonstrations led by students in Saigon and Hanoi<sup>60</sup>. The expressions of popular anger in December 2007 were understandably authorized by Vietnam communist leaders. At the same time, there were flurries of articles and emails from alarmed Vietnamese expatriates<sup>61</sup> protesting Chinese imperialism. Vietnam is far from being capable of militarily winning back the archipelagos. The immediate benefit was to show on worldwide

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55 <http://www.vietquoc.com/history.htm> accessed 1-08-2008

56 <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/pol-pot.htm> accessed 1-11-2008

57 <http://hqvnch.net/default.asp?id=632&lstid=178> accessed 1-07-2008

58 <http://www.ptntdt.org/movement/Khang%20thu%20PTClaim%20.htm> accessed 1-06-2008

59 <http://hoangsa.org/diendan/viewtopic.php?f=28&t=949> accessed 1-09-2008

60 <http://blog.360.yahoo.com/blog-XLtlMAg7c6Nz50itUrR5> accessed 1-03-08

61 [http://thongtin.brinkster.net/chinhtri/Ban\\_Len\\_Tieng.pdf](http://thongtin.brinkster.net/chinhtri/Ban_Len_Tieng.pdf) accessed 1-03-2008

television the communist red flag with a yellow star (*cờ đỏ sao vàng*) instead of the yellow flag with three red stripes (*cờ vàng ba sọc đỏ*) that has come to represent the Vietnamese nation with its North, Central and South regions.

## The Future

In 2008, the state of the Vietnamese nation is strong as its people, living in the homeland<sup>62</sup> or overseas<sup>63</sup>, remain determined to preserve their cultural and geographical patrimony. Over its 90 years in power, at the cost of gulags and human lives, communism was able to stabilize and bring many countries out from marasmus. At its apogee, the Soviet Union led the early space race by putting the first satellite in orbit in 1957, even though this feat might have been realized with German scientists captured at the end of WWII<sup>64</sup>. In the late 1980s, the pace of education and knowledge quickened thanks to the openness of the Internet. However, the quality of life of the people failed to improve, revealing the economic irrelevance of communism. It disappeared in Eastern Europe and in Russia by the early 1990s. In Asia, China and Vietnam struggled against democratic aspirations, but successfully instituted free market economy and individual ownership reforms. *What the future holds will soon depend on a new generation of Vietnamese leaders* who watched the "War on Terror" but did not experience the emotions of the "Cold War" or the "American War." From within, communism will be replaced in a democratic, non-violent way, or will be transformed by mature and wise leaders to accept political pluralism and more freedom for their people.

Throughout its long and tumultuous history, Vietnam has always preserved and expanded its cultural patrimony, while at the same time defended its territorial sovereignty with courage and resilience. When faced with temporary crises, its destiny remains bright as dedicated and visionary leaders will surely emerge as they always did when their country needed them the most.

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62 87 million <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam> accessed 1-31-2008

63 About 3 million [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overseas\\_Vietnamese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overseas_Vietnamese) accessed 1-31-08

64 <http://www.ericweisstein.com/encyclopedias/rockets/SovietUnion.html> accessed 2-13-2008