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Special Issue
Plucked-up Tales
Ancient Vietnamese Narratives

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY VAN NGUYEN

INTRODUCTION

THE NATURE OF THE WORK

Using Magic to Overcome Adversity By Eric Henry



A scholar working at the compilation of *Plucked-up Tales*.

In this issue of *Rising Asia*, you will find translations of the forty-one items in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* 嶺南摭怪 (“Wonders Plucked from the Dust of Lĩnhán”), an anthology of tales written in classical Chinese many centuries ago in what is now North Vietnam. According to our best available knowledge, the first twenty-two of these tales were collected in c. 1370 by Trần Thế Pháp 陳世法, a Vietnamese Trần Dynasty Court Official, about whom almost nothing is known. The remaining nineteen tales were added to the collection in subsequent dynasties by other Vietnamese Scholar-Officials, but the substance of many of them had been known for a century or more, so in content, their antiquity was the same as that of the first twenty-two. The literal meaning of the term “Lĩnhán” (“Lĩnh Nam” in Vietnamese) is “south of the mountain range.” In medieval times, this was a geographical designation indicating the whole area now occupied by Guǎngdōng and Guǎngxī Provinces in China and all of North Vietnam, down to the midpoint of Central Vietnam. At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) the term was repurposed to refer to Guǎngdōng and Guǎngxī alone, but it seems likely that in common parlance the term continued for some time to be used to refer to the larger area. The tales collected in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* are of many types and range in length from a paragraph to many pages. They include historical legends, tales of Buddhist miracles, tales explaining the origin of customs or place names, tales about the destruction of malevolent creatures, and tales concerning religious adepts.

Vietnam’s *Plucked-up Tales* in History, and their Relationship to the Chinese Language and to the Native Vernacular

For many centuries the text remained unpublished and existed only in manually produced copies. Fourteen of these hand-copied texts still

exist in Hanoi. Ten of them are kept in the Hán Nôm Institute (Viện Hán Nôm) and bear the call numbers A.33, A.1300, A.1752, A.2107, A.2100, A.2914, A.750 (NHK), A.750 (BL), VHv.1403, and VHv.1426. Two more copies are kept in the National Library (Thư Viện Quốc Gia) with the call numbers R.6 and A.1607, and another two, HV.531 and HV.486, are kept in the Institute of History (Viện Sử Học). These copies have many small differences in detail, but only a few that influence the essential content of the stories.

In 1974 Professor Nguyễn Huệ Chi published a scholarly monograph, “An Effort to Identify an Ancient Text of Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái” (“Trên con đường đi tìm một văn bản cổ Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái”), in which he makes a careful comparison of the old manuscript copies still in existence and, on the basis of certain details arranges them on a continuum extending from “probably most ancient” to “probably least ancient.” He points out that some differences between the manuscripts can be traced to the interventions of Kiều Phú, a Lê Dynasty scholar who edited the work in 1493 and who in a postface to the work, specifies the alterations that he made. He concludes that the copies representing the earliest state of the text are A.2194, VHv.1473, A.750, and HV.486.¹

A French bureaucrat and scholar, Gustave Dumoutier (1850–1904), published a French translation of the work in 1887 in Hanoi, as *Légendes Historique de l’Annam et du Tonkin*. The first printed editions of the original Chinese texts that I am aware of appeared in 1959 and 1961. The first appeared as an appendix to a study and translation by Professor

¹ This article originally appeared in *Tạp chí văn học (Journal of Literature, issue 6 (1974): 49–60*). It appeared later in a collection of studies by Professor Huệ Chi entitled *Văn học cổ cận đại Việt Nam từ góc nhìn văn hóa đến các mã nghệ thuật* (“Ancient and Recent Vietnamese Literature from the Standpoint of Culture and Modes of Artistic Decipherment), 1,200 pages, Education Publishing House (an arm of the Vietnamese Department of Education), 2013, pp. 96–112. This version of the article had a fuller representation of the Chinese texts involved.



Lê Hữu Mục, published in Saigon by the Khai Trí publishing house in 1959. The text offered by Professor Mục is a reproduction of a handcopy made in the 1920s at the behest of the scholar Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945). The second (which I have not seen), was edited by Professors Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn and Đinh Gia Khánh and published in Hanoi. Most recently, an extremely thorough study and translation of entire work has been made by Dr. Nguyễn Thị Oanh of Thăng Long University under the title *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái—Khảo Luận—Dịch Chú—Nguyên Bản Chữ Hán* (“Wonders Plucked Up in Lĩnh Nam—Discussion—Annotated Translation—Original Chinese Text”; Hanoi, 2025). This is based on a PhD thesis that Dr. Oanh did under the direction of Professor Nguyễn Huệ Chí, mentioned above. It includes the complete original Chinese text and also has notes on the chief textual variants among the existing manuscript copies. In preparing the translations in this issue of *Rising Asia*, I have relied chiefly on the text supplied by Professor Lê Hữu Mục in his 1959 publication, but have also had occasion to refer to the textual information contained in Dr. Oanh’s recent study.

I should mention here that there exists another, even more ancient collection of Vietnamese stories written in classical Chinese that, like *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, was until the preceding century preserved and promulgated solely by means of hand-copying. This is *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* 越南幽靈集, or “Spiritual Powers of the Việt Realm.” As with *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, it was Professor Lê Hữu Mục who, in 1960, published the first printed text, study, and translation of this work. This original compilation was made by Lý Tế Xuyên 李濟川 in 1329. Lý Tế Xuyên, like Trần Thế Pháp, was a scholar-official of the Trần Dynasty. His anthology has six accounts of illustrious ancient Rulers, ten accounts of illustrious ancient Court Ministers, ten accounts of mighty spirits, and eight additional accounts, all more or less supernatural, added by subsequent

editors, making a total of thirty-two items. Of these, seventeen are versions of stories that exist also in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*. These versions often have details that differ considerably from their parallels. These will all be mentioned, where appropriate, in what follows.

Of the two collections, *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* has a greater proportion of stories that are both well-known and have a foundational relationship to the culture, so that work is the one introduced in this issue of *Rising Asia*. The concerns expressed in them are peculiarly Vietnamese and are altogether different in tone and emphasis from anything that can be found in, for example, the historical legends of China. It is nevertheless not strange that language is Chinese. A local form of Chinese was the usual language of administration in Vietnamese dynastic capitals in the Lý and Trần Dynasties, and it seems that a comprehensive system for writing native words did not yet exist in those times.² Much evidence in the work, however, points to the existence among its authors of a language readily identifiable as a direct precursor to modern Vietnamese. We see, scattered throughout the work, examples of Chinese graphs used to represent native words that have no relationship to Chinese. These include *bǔ* 逋 (or *bù* 布) used for *bố*, “father;” *lǚ* 魯 used for *lỗ*, “hole” or “declivity;” *shàng* 尚 used for “thằng,” “young fellow;” *zōu* 鄒 used for *trâu*, “water buffalo;” and *gài* 蓋 used for *cái*, “mother” or “female.” One tale, number twenty-one, has, in its concluding episode, three poems, one a couplet, and the other two quatrains, that consist *entirely* of Vietnamese words represented

² The oldest surviving object with *nôm* (Southern demotic sinographs representing Vietnamese words) dates from 1209, close to the end of the Lý Dynasty. It is a stele in Bảo Ân Temple with eighteen graphs denoting people and places. Another stele from 1343 in Mount Hồ Thành in Ninh Bình Province has a list of 20 villages, the names of which are written in *nôm*.



either by Chinese graphs or by graphs (known as *nôm*) invented especially for the purpose. For example “hai,” the Vietnamese word for “two,” is represented by the graph 𠄎. In this graph the Chinese word for two, “èr” 二, is used to suggest the meaning, while the element “tái” 台, another Chinese graph, gives a clue to the pronunciation. The graphs in these verses may well be the earliest example we have of an extended use of Chinese or Chinese-style graphs to represent Vietnamese words. The last tale in the collective has an example of the *nôm* graph 糲, used for “xôi,” cooked glutinous rice used as festival food. The earlier *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* also has occasional examples of *nôm* words. Item 3.2 in that collection, for example, has an explanatory note with a graph (𡵓) for núi, the native word for “mountain,” consisting of “shān” 山 on top and nòi 內 (Vietnamese “nội”) on the bottom.

While the forty-one *Tales* in the collection are all independent narratives, they also show a degree of interconnection and mutual awareness. Thus, for example, the figure who is the focus of attention in *Tale Number Four*, “The Tree Demon,” also plays a role in one of the subsidiary episodes of *Tale Number Twelve*, “The Việt Well.”

A Gold Mine of Vietnamese Beliefs and Practices in Pre-Modern and Early Modern Times

This work, taken as a whole, is a goldmine of information with regard to beliefs and practices of Vietnamese people of all social classes from circa 1300 to circa 1750. Though Vietnamese culture is said with some regularity to be Confucian in character, Confucian precepts and practices are almost totally absent in the lives and actions of the people depicted in this collection of *Tales*. Far more prominent in their minds are the types of assistance and guidance that might be available to them from such sources as portents, dreams, spirits, and souls of the departed. The

Confucian examination system is mentioned nowhere in the collection except in the final item, added in the mid-eighteenth century. But even there, the events narrated are thoroughly supernaturalized. Much of the action in this “Examination” *Tale* takes place in a realm beyond the world in which a group of divine spirits discuss among themselves which candidates deserve to pass, and how they should be ranked.

Quite apart from the stories in *Plucked-up Wonders*, certain local contemporary accounts bear witness to the relative insignificance of Confucianism in the lives of ordinary people compared with the great vitality of Buddhism. Lê Quát 黎括 (1319–1386), a learned disciple of the early Vietnamese Confucian scholar Chu Văn An (1292–1370), was the author of an inscription made in c. 1371 containing the following lament: “Buddhism has penetrated to people of all social classes. People eagerly contribute their money and possessions to temples and monasteries. Temples are to be found everywhere, and are constantly being repaired and renovated.” In contrast, he complains, “there is not even one hamlet that follows the teachings of Confucius,” and “nowhere in the land is there a school or shrine dedicated to classical learning.” The words here may well be an example of hyperbole used for rhetorical effect, but even so, the passage appears to indicate that Confucianism was still not socially pervasive in the late Trần Dynasty.³

A motif noticeable in many of the *Plucked-Up Tales* is the establishment of temples dedicated to powerful spirits, so that sacrificial rites may be performed in them in which offerings are presented as a

³ This inscription can be found in three forms (the original Chinese graphs, Sino-Vietnamese transcription, and Vietnamese translation) in: Thơ Văn Lý Trần, tập III, [“Poetry and Prose of the Lý and Trần Dynasties,” Vol. 3] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), pp. 144–145. I am indebted to Professor Keith W. Taylor for providing me with this reference. Professor Taylor also mentions this inscription in his *The History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156.



means of soliciting their aid in matters such as flood or drought relief, or defense against invading armies. Rulers, Generals, and common people alike show a high degree of unanimity in their enthusiasm for these activities. Temples are sometimes established at the behest of Rulers or Military Commanders—people at the top—but just as frequently they are the result of some local, popular initiative. In one story, people living in a seaside location are startled when the corpses of three women are washed up on the shore in a state of perfect preservation. Believing the dead women to be spirits, the people immediately establish a temple dedicated to them, and the spirits of the deceased women prove to be efficacious in protecting the lives of seagoing folk. As for the spirits, they themselves often express preferences with regard to the location of their temples, and the activities associated with them—they inflict storms on their would-be worshippers if they do not like the location, or the activities. Apparent everywhere is the wonder aroused by the performance of miracles—such performances as levitation, the shrinking of space, or the transmigration of souls. Also evident is the enjoyment of public spectacles of many types on the part of all observers and participants. This sort of enjoyment has persisted into modern times in Vietnam. In his *Memoirs*, the songwriter Phạm Duy recalls, among the amusements of his childhood in and around Hanoi in the 1920s and 1930s, such things as temple festivals that included a great variety of athletic activities and physical feats, and performances by traveling circus troupes in city marketplaces in which acrobats flirted with death when flying through the air or when playfully provoking responses from tigers and leopards.⁴

⁴ Phạm Duy, *The Memoirs of Phạm Duy*, 4 vols., translated by Eric Henry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2026, Vol. 1, Chapter 5).

And so, the reader is hereby invited to enter into a world of dreams, portents, monsters, magicians, nature spirits, and supernaturally powerful monks. In these tales, everything hinges on the differing efficacy of the types of magic employed.

Note on the Translator



Eric Henry was born in 1943. He obtained a PhD in Chinese Literature at Yale University in 1979, and subsequently taught at Dartmouth from 1980 to 1982, and at the University of North Carolina from 1982 to 2011. He was employed as a freelance keyboard musician from 1961 to 1980 and was in the United States Army from 1968 to 1971. His army service included a one-

year intensive course in Vietnamese at the Defense Language Institute at Fort Bliss, Texas, and a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam (1970–71). His publications include: *Chinese Amusement: The Lively Plays of Li Yu* (Archon Books, 1980), *In Whose Eyes*, a translation of the memoirs of the film director Trần Văn Thủy, and *The Garden of Eloquence* (Shuoyuan 說苑), a bilingual version of a Chinese Han Dynasty compendium of historical anecdotes. He has prepared for publication a bilingual edition of another ancient Chinese work, *Tales from the Principalities* (Guoyu 國語). He has published various articles on early Chinese history and culture in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* and other journals, and articles on Vietnamese literature and historical legend in *Vietnam Forum*, *Crossroads*, and the *Michigan Quarterly*. He is a Guest Editor of *Rising Asia Journal*. For the journal, he has translated “The Creators of South Vietnam: At Home and Abroad,” (Volume 5, Issue 2), and “Tales from the Principalities:

Ancient Chinese Stories,” (Volume 5, Issue 3). He has been retired since 2011.

Note on the Illustrator



Van Thien Nguyen (Nguyễn Thiên Văn) is currently a graduate student at North Carolina State University, where he formerly was an undergraduate with a visual arts concentration moving to a Master of Liberal Art Studies. An American raised in Vietnam, he likes his fair share of manga books and video games, and does drawing and walking in his spare time. He

hopes to visit Japan or Belgium in the future.