



RISING ASIA  
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Special Issue  
*Plucked-up Tales*  
Ancient Vietnamese Narratives

ALL STORIES TRANSLATED BY ERIC HENRY  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY VAN NGUYEN

## BOOK ONE FOUNDATIONAL LEGENDS



Âu Cơ (Mountain Goddess) and Lạc Long Quân (Ocean Lord). This image relates to Story Number 1 below.

Four tales are presented in this section, the first concerning the origin of the Vietnamese people, the second concerning a mythical victory over a mythical enemy, the third concerned with maritime trade combined with Buddhist magic as a source of wealth and power, and the fourth concerning the establishment of the semi-mythical kingdom of Âu Lạc and its subsequent overthrow by Zhào Tuó, a Qín General from what is now Hénán Province in China. Zhào Tuó establishes a new independent kingdom, Nam Việt, with its capital city located in what is now the city of Guǎngzhōu. – Eric Henry.

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.**

### **1. The Legend of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ (*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 2: “Truyện Hồng Bàng 鴻龐氏傳, Story of the Clans of Hồng and Bàng”)**

Wherever one travels along Route 1, Vietnam’s primary north-south highway, extending more than 2,300 kilometers (1,400 miles) from the Chinese border to the land’s southern tip in Cà Mau province, the landscape is apt to be dominated by some spectacular combination of ocean and mountains. This is reflected in the origin myth of the Vietnamese people, which features a dragon-like Ocean King and an immortal mountain nymph. The Vietnamese expression “con rồng cháu tiên,” “sons of the dragon and progeny the immortal” refers to this myth. In the tale below Lạc Long Quân 貉龍君, the ocean-dwelling Dragon King, steals Âu Cơ 嫗姬, the mountain nymph, from the Ruler Đế Lai 帝來 (Âu Cơ had been the favorite Concubine of Đế Lai). Âu Cơ gives birth to one hundred warriors (Bách Nam 百男) who become the ancestors of the one hundred Việt (Bách Việt 百粵). A key feature of this tale is that the union of these two mythical beings ends in a divorce. Lạc Long Quân determines that his nature, and that of Âu Cơ, are too different to allow

them to continue living as a couple, so Lạc Long Quân returns to the ocean with fifty of their warrior-sons, and Âu Cơ returns to the mountains with the other fifty. This reflects the fact that, while remarkably successful in their military conflicts with other peoples, the Vietnamese among themselves have often existed in a state of political disunity. Another key feature of the story is that, before returning to the ocean, Lạc Long Quân assures his people that he will always be available to rescue them from calamity when they address prayers to him. Several tales that follow provide examples of Lạc Long Quân's supernatural interventions. The present tale also provides mythical accounts of the origins of various customs (e.g. tattooing the body and cutting the hair short) prevalent among the early Vietnamese). – Eric Henry.

**T**he grandson of Viêm Đế 炎帝 [“Fire Lord”] of the Lineage of Thần Nông 神農 [“Spirit Farmer”], whose name was Đế Minh 帝明 [“Lord Luminous”] sired a son named Đế Nghi 帝宜 [“Lord Propriety”], then went on a southern tour to Ngũ Lĩnh 五嶺 [“Five Ranges”], where he met a young woman named Vụ Tiên [“Lovely Immortal”]. Đế Minh was pleased with her, took her as a Consort, and took her with him on his return, after which she bore him a son named Lộc Tục 祿續 [“Stipends Continue”]. Lộc Tục had a serious and refined countenance and was naturally intelligent. Đế Minh thought Lộc Tục was specially favored by the spirits and wished to make him his successor.

Lộc Tục insisted, however, on yielding the succession to his elder brother Đế Nghi, so Đế Minh established Đế Nghi as his successor in the North and enfeoffed Lộc Tục as “King of Kinh Dương” or Kinh Dương Vương 涇陽王 [“King of the Southern Bank of the Kinh River”] and gave the name Xích Quỷ Quốc 赤鬼國 [“Red Demon Nation”] to the land that Kinh Dương Vương ruled.



Kinh Dương Vương was able to descend to the underwater realm, and while there took Long Nữ 龍女 [“Dragon Maid”], the daughter of the Ruler of Lake Động Đình 洞庭君 [“Cave Palace”], as his Consort, and with her sired a son named Sùng Lãm 崇纜 [“Towering Barricade”], who is known to us as Lạc Long Quân 貉龍君 [“Otter Dragon Lord”]. Lạc Long Quân took his father’s place on the Throne; and as for Kinh Dương Vương, what became of him is not known. Lạc Long Quân taught his people how to clothe themselves and how to eat; and from this time on, his subjects began to observe the distinction between Rulers and Ministers, Nobles and commoners; and learned the rules governing the relations of fathers and sons, and husbands and wives.

Sometimes Lạc Long Quân returned to his Underwater Kingdom, but his people continued to lead a peaceful, settled life. Whenever the people had some problem to be solved, they would call upon Lạc Long Quân saying, “Why do you not come and rescue us, oh father!” [it was from this time that the people of the South started calling their fathers “bố” and their Rulers “vua”], and Lạc Long Quân would immediately appear. No one was able to fathom the depth of his supernatural powers or the extent of his responsiveness to appeals for help.

Meanwhile in the North, Đế Nghi transmitted the Throne to his son Đế Lai 帝來 [“Lord Arrival”]. Finding that his domain was free of troubles, Đế Lai remembered how his grandfather Đế Minh had gone on a tour of the South and met a female divinity. He accordingly ordered Xi Vưu 蚩尤 [“Insect Monster”] to look after his State’s affairs and went South to tour the land of Xích Quỷ 赤鬼. When he found that Lạc Long Quân had returned to his Underwater Kingdom and that the land was without a Ruler, he left his cherished Consort Âu Cơ 嫫姬 [“Crone Consort”] with her entourage of maidservants at an encampment, and

went himself on an extensive tour of the southern land, studying its topography. He saw many strange flowers and rare herbs; precious birds, and strange beasts; rhinoceroses, elephants, and tortoises; gold, silver, pearls, and jade; and such things as peppers, milk-scent, and sandalwood. No treasure of the mountains or seas was missing; and the place moreover had an equable climate through all four seasons, neither too hot nor too cold. Đế Lai was enchanted at what he saw and forgot to return.

The people of the southern land were just then beset by troubles and were no longer at ease as in former days. Hoping day and night for Lạc Long Quân's return, they led each other forth and cried, "Where are you now oh father—you must come quickly and rescue us." Lạc Long Quân suddenly appeared. Finding Âu Cơ living alone and seeing how beautiful she was, he took a fancy to her and transformed himself into a handsome youth with a large retinue of followers, whom he caused to make music, so that sounds of instruments and singing reached Âu Cơ's encampment. When Âu Cơ heard the sounds, her heart inclined to Lạc Long Quân, and he went off North with her to Long Trang Peak 龍岱岩 ["Dragon Village Crag"].

When Đế Lai returned and saw that Âu Cơ had disappeared, he sent his officers everywhere to search for her. Lạc Long Quân had magical powers and could change into hundreds of different forms, appearing sometimes as a demon, phantom, or mountain elf, and sometimes as a dragon, snake, tiger, or elephant. Those who were seeking him therefore grew fearful and abandoned their pursuit. Đế Lai went back North and his Throne passed to Đế Vu 帝榆 ["Lord Elm"]. Đế Vu fought a battle with Hoàng Đế ["Yellow Lord"] at Bản Tuyền 板泉

["Plank Bridge"], failed to prevail, and died in battle. The lineage of Thần Nông thereupon came to an end.

In the meantime, Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ lived together as a couple. After a year, she gave birth to an object like a sack. This was thought to be inauspicious, and the sack was cast aside in a field. After seven days, one hundred eggs emerged from the sack, and each egg produced a boy. Âu Cơ took them back and raised them. They all grew big and strong without suckling or nourishment, and all were wise and brave. Everyone was in awe of them and considered them an extraordinary race of brothers.

By this time Lạc Long Quân had long been living in his Underwater Palace and Âu Cơ was alone with her children. Wishing to return to the northern land, she traveled as far as the border. When Hoàng Đế heard of her approach, he grew alarmed, and dispatched soldiers to guard the frontier. Prevented from returning north, Âu Cơ and her sons called day and night upon Lạc Long Quân, saying "Where have you gone, oh father—you are causing your wife and sons much sadness!"

Lạc Long Quân then suddenly appeared and met Âu Cơ and her sons at Tương Dạ 曠野 ["the Wilds of Xiang"]. Âu Cơ said, "I am a person of the North. I lived with you and gave birth to a hundred sons. I have nothing with which to sustain them. Let us remain together and not cast each other off, so that we do not become people with no mates, living alone to no purpose."

Lạc Long Quân said, "I belong the race of dragons and grew up among sea creatures. You belong to a race of immortal beings who live upon the land. Our natures are incompatible. Though our vital principles of *âm* and *dương* [yin and yang] have commingled and produced children, we are like round and square objects that do not fit smoothly



with each other, or like mutually antagonistic elements such as fire and water. It is not possible for us to remain long together, so we must now part. I will take fifty sons back with me to the Kingdom of the Sea and have them each rule one of my domains. Fifty sons will remain with you living upon the land and each will rule a domain in your region. Whether it be upon the mountains or within the sea, if any problems should arise, we shall attend to them together, and shall not forsake each other.”

The sons all did as they were told and the two took leave of each other and departed. Âu Cơ and her fifty sons took up residence in Phong Châu 峰州 [“Mountain-peak Prefecture; the site was in present-day Bạch Hạc 白鶴 (“White Crane”) District.] She made the eldest and mightiest of her sons a King with the title Hùng Vương 雄王 [“King Hùng”] and named the land he ruled Văn Lang 文郎 [“Cultured Youth”]. The borders of this land extended to the Southern Sea [i.e. the South China Sea] in the east, and to Ba Thục 巴蜀 [“the Lands of Ba and Shu”; located in modern-day Sichuan province, China] in the West. To the North they extended as far as Lake Động Đình 洞庭 [Dòngtíng; a huge lake in modern-day Hénán Province in China; it is part of the Yángzǐ River system] and to the South as far as the Kingdom of Hồ Tôn Tinh 狐獠精 [“Ape Phantoms”; in later times, the Champa Kingdom]. The land was divided into sectors called Giao Chỉ 交趾, Chu Diên 朱鳶, Vũ Sơn 武寧, Phúc Lộc 福祿, Việt Thường 越裳, Ninh Hải 寧海, Dương Tuyền 陽泉, Quế Dương 桂陽, Vũ Ninh 武寧, Hoài Hoan 懷驩, Cửu Chân 九真, Nhật Nam 日南, Quế Lâm 桂林, and Tượng Quận 象郡, and various younger brothers of the King were sent out to rule them. Other younger brothers were made Civil and Military Officials. The Civil Officials were called Lạc Hầu 貉侯 and the military officials Lạc Tướng 貉將. Sons of the King were called Quang Lang 官郎 and daughters of the King My Nương 媚娘. Minor functionaries were called Bồ Chính

蒲正 and servants and slaves were called “nôty” 奴婢 [“Male and Female Underlings”]. Court Officers were called “khôi” 瑰. With each generation the Throne passed from father to son; this was known as the patriarchal way; and in each generation, the title of the King continued to be Hùng Vương with no change.

When the people of the forests and mountains came down to fish in the rivers, they often suffered injuries inflicted on them by dragons and serpents, so they laid the matter before the King.

The King said to them, “The creatures of the mountains and the denizens of the water are different. They all are fond of creatures that look just like them, and hate creatures that look different; that is why they attack each other.”

He, then, ordered them to use ink to tattoo images of sea monsters on their bodies, and from that time forward, they were able to avoid being bitten by dragons and serpents. The custom of tattooing the body common to all the Việt peoples had its origin in this.

In early times, the people of the land did not have enough to eat and wear. They made clothes from the bark of trees, made mats from woven curl-grass, used rice husks to make wine, used *quang lang* 桃榔 and *zōnglú* 棕櫚 trees to make cakes, used birds, beasts, fish, and shrimp to make salty condiments, and used ginger root instead of salt. They used knives to make furrows in the fields and water to plant seeds. The earth brought forth much glutinous rice. They used bamboo tubes to cook the rice. They built platforms in trees and made their homes there to avoid death from tigers and wolves. They cut their hair short to make it easier to enter the mountain forests. When babies were born, they used banana leaves as mats for them to lie on, when people were dying, they pounded pestles so that neighbors would hear and come to help. When young men and women were about to be married, they would open negotiations by

using salt as a gift to the bride's family, and then kill an ox or sheep to complete the ceremony. They would, then, take glutinous rice into a room for the bride and groom to eat, and when they finished the meal, they would consummate the marriage. They did these things because betel leaves and areca nuts were still unknown at this time.

The hundred sons of Âu Cơ were, it seems, the ancestors of the Hundred Việt Peoples.

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.**

## **2. The Legend of *Đổng Thiên Vương* (*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 7: “*Truyện Đổng Thiên Vương* 董天王傳, the Heaven-appointed King of Mount *Đổng*”)**

In the last millenium before the Common Era (from c. 1000 to c. 1 BCE), the area that now makes up north Vietnam, and parts of adjacent regions, were populated by rice-growing farmers who belonged to a culture now referred to as “*Đông Sơn*” 東山. The name comes from a village in Thanh Hóa where archeological remains of this culture were first discovered. Aside from cultivating rice, these people kept water buffalo, raised pigs, sailed in long dugout canoes, and were masters of the art of bronze casting, as evidenced by the great bronze drums that are the most distinctive artefacts of this culture. These drums produced a great sound, and perhaps played some role in the military enterprises of the *Đông Sơn* people. According to legends that arose more than a thousand years later in the *Trần* and *Lê* Dynasties, the people of the *Đông Sơn* Era inhabited a land called “*Văn Lang*” 文郎 and were ruled by a succession of fourteen Rulers, all of whom had the same designation: *Hùng Vương* (“Mighty King”). That the *Đông Sơn* culture existed is amply demonstrated by its archeological remains, but there is no evidence, aside from the stories, for the existence of the *Hùng Vương*

**Rulers.**

In this Tale, the third Hùng Vương King appeals to Lạc Long Quân for a means of opposing a group of invaders from the North, called the “Ân” 殷 (oddly enough, the graph here is the same as one used for the Chinese Shāng Dynasty). Lạc Long Quân, in the guise of a babbling and singing old man magically appears in the streets of the capital. After making a divination, he tells Hùng Vương that the attack will not occur for another three years, and that when the time arrives, he must conduct a search for a commander to lead the defense. At the appointed time, a three-year-old child, speechless and bed-bound, is found. The child suddenly gains the power of speech, promises to save the nation, grows into a giant, mounts an iron horse, destroys the enemy, and ascends to Heaven. – Eric Henry.



Đổng Thiên Vương.

**D**uring the reign of Hùng Vương 雄王 the Third, when the realm was at peace and the people free from want, the King of the State of Ân 殷 took offense because he had received no tribute gifts from the South. He, therefore, went on a pretended tour of inspection to spy out an opportunity to invade our land.

When Hùng Vương heard of this, he summoned his Court Officers for schemes, either for attack or for defense. A magician addressed the Throne, saying, “Our best course would be to address prayers to Long Vương 龍王 (Lạc Long Quân 貉龍君), so that we may rely on the powers of the spiritual world.”

Accepting this advice, Hùng Vương had a sacred space for fasting and purification created, placed silver and silk on a table, burned incense, and prayed for assistance. After he had prayed for three days, Heaven responded with thunder and rain, and an old man more than six meters tall, with a square face and a great belly, his hair and beard a silvery white, suddenly appeared in a three-way intersection, talking, laughing, singing, and dancing. Those who saw him suspected that he was someone out of the ordinary and reported the matter to the King. The King went out in person to greet the old man and conducted him back to the sacred space. The old man ate and drank nothing, nor did he say so much as a word.

Hùng Vương stood before him and said, “The troops of Ân are about to come and attack us. If you have any idea how we will fare in this battle, please tell us.”

The old man took out a slip of bamboo, made a divination, and said to the King, “The bandits will attack only after three years have passed.”

The King then asked for a plan to fight the bandits, and the old man said, “If the bandits come, you must put your weapons in order and

put your Officers and troops in a high state of training so that the State may have an air of fearsome authority. Then you must conduct a search among all the people for someone who, in return for lands and noble rank, will be able to put down the bandits. As soon as you obtain this person you will quell the bandits at once.”

Having said this, the old man rose into the air and disappeared. Only then did people realize that he was Long Quân.

Exactly three years later, urgent reports came from the border announcing that Ân troops were pouring into the land. Following the advice of the old man, Hùng Vương sent Emissaries everywhere to seek a person to put down the bandits.

One of the Emissaries came to the village of Phù Đổng 扶董 in Vũ Ninh 武寧 commandery. In this village there was a wealthy man more than sixty years old who had recently sired a son. The son was then three years old and had not yet begun to talk. He lay on his back all day long, unable to sit up. When his mother heard about the Emissary’s arrival she spoke jokingly to her son, saying, “I’ve given birth to a fellow who knows only how to eat and drink and knows nothing about fighting bandits.”

The child took this in and suddenly spoke up, saying, “Call the Emissary here, mother. I’ll ask him what this is about.”

Amazed and excited, the mother went through the village joyously exclaiming, “My son knows how to talk!”

The villagers, also amazed, conducted the Emissary to the house. The Emissary said to the child, “You are a child who has just learned to talk. Why have you told people to call me here?”

At this the child sat up and said to the Emissary, “Go at once and instruct the King to cast an iron horse for me eighteen meters high, an iron sword seven meters long, and an iron helmet. I shall mount the

horse, don the helmet, and go fight the bandits for him. The King will have nothing to worry about.”

The Emissary galloped back and made his report to the King. The King, overjoyed, said, “Then we have nothing to worry about.”

The Court Officers all said, “But how can a single person break the power of the bandits?”

“This shows that Long Quân is helping us,” said the King. “The words spoken by the old man were not uttered in vain. You should not be in doubt.”

Then he requisitioned iron and used it to forge the iron horse, the iron sword, and the iron helmet. When the Emissary delivered these items to Phù Đổng village, the child’s mother was greatly astonished. Fearing that disaster was about to overtake them, she spoke to her son about it, but he just laughed and said “Bring lots and lots of rice for me to eat, mother. I’ll fight the bandits, don’t worry.”

Then, very swiftly, the child grew great in size. His mother and father were unable to supply him with enough rice, so the people of the village cooked additional rice, slaughtered water buffalo, and supplied wine, cakes, and fruit as well, but the child still was not full. Clothes made of rough cloth and silk were inadequate to keep him covered, so it was necessary to use reeds to weave additional clothing for him.

Only when the troops of Ân had gotten as far as Trâu Sơn 鄒山 (“Buffalo Mountain”) did the child stretch out his legs and stand up. He was more than ten yards tall. Tilting his head back, he sneezed more than ten times, withdrew his sword, and in a great voice proclaimed, “I am Heaven’s General!”

Then he donned his iron helmet, and mounted his iron steed. The horse flew like the wind, and its rider brandished his sword in the air as he led a host of Officers and warriors to the encampment of the bandits



beneath Trâu Sơn. The troops of Ân were utterly put to rout and ran away in disorder. The King of Ân died at Trâu Sơn, and the scattered remnants of his followers all prostrated themselves on the ground and cried, “General of Heaven! We are utterly finished. We beg to surrender!”

Then the child went to Mount Việt Sóc 越朔, removed his garments, and flew up to Heaven on his horse, leaving only his footprint on the ground beneath the mountain.

Grateful for the child’s great accomplishment, and not knowing how else to recognize it, Hùng Vương conferred on him the title Phù Đổng Thiên Vương, or Heavenly General of Phù Đổng, and had a temple in his honor erected in a garden in Phù Đổng village, directing that a hundred hectares of land be reserved to supply the means to conduct sacrificial ceremonies there each spring and autumn.

Throughout its twenty-seven reigns and 640 years, the House of Ân did not again dare to send troops to attack our land.

When the barbarians in surrounding lands heard what had happened, they were filled with admiration and came to offer their submission to the King. Later on, King Lý Thái Tổ [reigned 1028–1054] conferred upon the warrior-child the title Xung Thiên Thần Vương, or “Charging-Up-To-Heaven Spirit General,” and established a temple in his honor in Phù Đổng village (now part of Tiên Du 仙遊 District) near the Kiên Phúc 建福 Pagoda, and had a statue of him erected by Mount Vê Linh 術靈山, where sacrificial offerings are conducted every spring and autumn.

There is a poem on this subject as follows:

From the peaceful clouds in May by Mount Vê Linh,  
 A thousand crimson rays illuminate the world.  
 His iron horse on high and his renown in history  
 Illumine all the hills and streams with his majestic might.

Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.

### 3. The Tale of the One-night Swamp (*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 6, “*Truyện Nhất Dạ Trạch*—*一夜澤傳*, Single-night Swamp”)

This multi-episode narrative opens with a strikingly unorthodox marital union of the protagonists, and in its continuation testifies implicitly to the importance to Vietnamese of the Trần Era of (1) supernatural practices mediated by Buddhist adepts, and (2) wealth obtained by means of maritime trade. Tiên Dung 仙容, daughter of the third Hùng Vương 雄王 Ruler, is allowed by her father, the King, to roam freely from place to place aboard a boat. While wandering, she comes by chance upon the naked beggar Chử Đồng Tử 褚童子 hiding in the sand by a river, treats him to a banquet in her ship, and makes him her husband, after which they become merchants, then Buddhist acolytes, then rulers of a magical kingdom, and, finally, divine spirits.

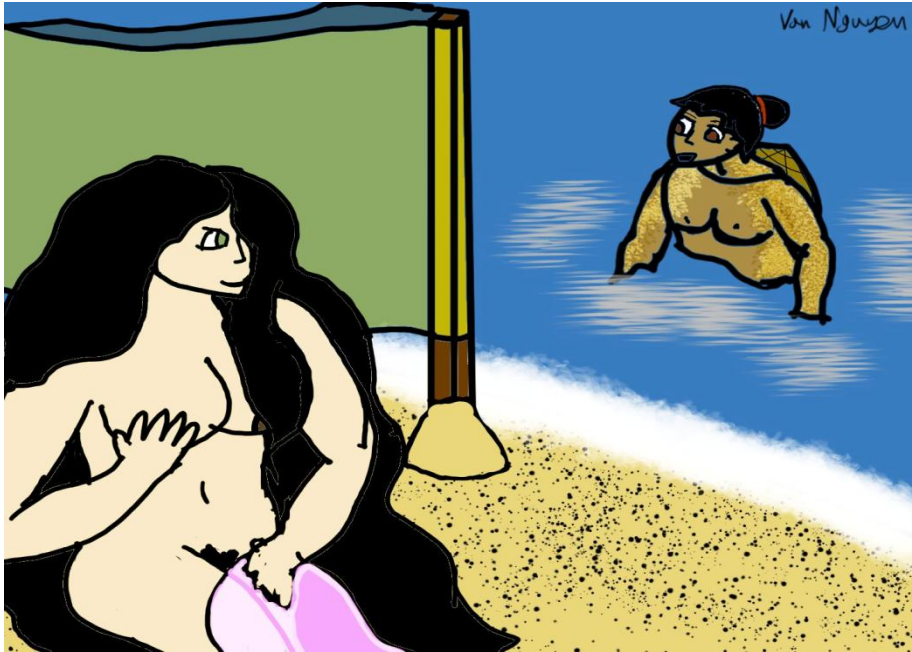
In the final phase, Tiên Dung appears as a divine being to the patriot Triệu Quang Phục, Leader of Resistance Forces against invaders sent by the Chinese Lương (Liáng) 梁 Dynasty and confers a dragon’s claw on him, which acts as a talisman that renders him invincible to his enemies. This occurs in the same swamp where, in a former era, Tiên Dung and Chử Đồng Tử had their magical palace. – Eric Henry.

The third of the Hùng Vương 雄王 Rulers had a daughter named Tiên Dung 僊容. She had just turned eighteen, was lovely to look at, and was determined not to take a husband, preferring instead to roam everywhere in the realm sightseeing. The King let his daughter do as she wished in both these matters. Every year, around the second or third month, she would get boats in readiness and drift around on the high seas, enjoying it so much that she would forget even when she was supposed to return.



At that time there was a person named Chử Vi Vân 褚微雲 [chě wéi yún], who, with his son Chử Đồng Tử 褚童子, lived in the village of Chử Xá 褚舍. They were good, honest folk, but very poor, and, after their house was destroyed by fire, had no possessions whatsoever except for a single *khố*—a cloth codpiece attached to one’s person by means of a string. The father and son took turns wearing it when they went in and out. When the father grew old and sick, he said to his son, “When I die, you can bury me naked—save the codpiece for your own use when you go out, so as to avoid shame.”

But when the father died, the son couldn’t bring himself to follow these instructions and buried his father with the codpiece in place on the corpse. The young man was, then, totally naked and suffered fiercely from cold and hunger. One day he went with a pole to angle for fish by a river. Seeing a group of merchant vessels on the river, he waded into the water to beg for food. As he was doing this, Tiên Dung’s ship suddenly came into view. When he heard sounds of chimes, drums, strings, and flutes coming from the boat, and saw all the banners and flags with which it was adorned, he grew fearful. Not knowing where to hide, and seeing a sandy area partially hidden by some clusters of reeds, he immediately sought concealment there, digging a hole in the sand to crawl into, and heaping sand over all his exposed parts. A moment or so later, Tiên Dung’s boat came to rest in the same spot and the young maiden came ashore to amuse herself in the sand. She issued an order to her attendants to surround the reedy area with screens so she could bathe. Then she went within the screens, removed her clothes, and had her attendants empty basins of water over her as she bathed. Thus, the sand was washed away, and the form of Chử Đồng Tử was revealed.



The first encounter of Tiên Dung and Chử Đồng Tử.

Realizing at length that Chử Đồng Tử was a young man, Tiên Dung said, “My wish was not to take a husband, but now I have met this person buried in a sandy hole—perhaps this was brought about by Heaven. Get up, then, and wash yourself clean.”

She, then, gave him clothes to wear, and they went down to the boat together to feast and make merry. The others in the boat thought the auspiciousness of this meeting was unparalleled in history. Đồng Tử gave Tiên Dung a clear account of his circumstances. Tiên Dung pitied him, and directed that he and she be made man and wife. When Đồng Tử strenuously declined, Tiên Dung said, “This matter was brought about by Heaven—what’s the use of refusing?”

Her attendants reported the matter to the King Hùng Vương. Hùng Vương was furious and said, “Flagrantly disregarding the public honor of her house and showing no regard for the patrimony of her



forefathers, Tiên Dung has demeaned herself by forming an attachment to a man with no possessions—what face does she have left to appear before us? From this time forward she shall be as nothing to us; she is forbidden ever again to return to our Kingdom.”

When Tiên Dung heard what her father had said, she was afraid to return, so, with Đồng Tử’s help, she founded a marketplace and township, where she engaged in trade with the local people. This market town gradually grew into a great center of commercial activity [it is the place now known as Hà Thám 河探]. Merchants from overseas came to buy and sell there, and they all looked up to Tiên Dung and Đồng Tử as masters of the place. One day a great merchant came and spoke with Tiên Dung as follows: “If you can produce an ingot of gold, ma’am, and go out on the ocean with me this year to purchase precious items, you will gain an ingot’s worth of profit from it next year.”

Tiên Dung thereupon said to Đồng Tử, “It was through the agency of Heaven that the two of us were brought together, and the things we wear are the gifts of Heaven as well. Now you should take an ingot of gold and go out on the seas with the merchant to purchase items to carry back and use in our trade.”

Đồng Tử left at once with the merchant. Out in the ocean was a mountain called Quỳnh Viên Sơn 瓊園山 [Jasper Garden Mountain], and upon this mountain there was a little Buddhist retreat. The merchant moored his boat there to replenish his store of drinking water. Đồng Tử, to amuse himself, wandered up to the little retreat. A young monk there named Phật Quang 佛光 began instructing him in Buddhist doctrines. Wishing to stay behind and hear more, Đồng Tử entrusted his gold ingot to the merchant to use for purchases and told him to stop again at the mountain whenever he should come back that way so he could return



home. Near the end of his stay, the monk gave Đồng Tử a staff and a conical hat, saying, “These things have supernatural powers.”

When Đồng Tử returned, he related to Tiên Dung all the Buddhist doctrines he had learned, and from that time forth the two of them were awakened to the true nature of the world. Forsaking their market town and giving up their career as traders, they went in search of a master to give them further instruction. One day, night arrived while they were still on their way to a Buddhist school, so they stopped where they were, planted the staff in the ground and placed the conical hat on the staff to provide a bit of shelter. Around midnight there arose before their eyes a great city wall, within which were painted dwellings and lavishly decorated temples, towers, and storehouses, all adorned with gold, silver, pearls, and jade, equipped with gorgeous mats, beds and curtains, and filled with young male and female servants with features like immortal beings, and with ranks of troops and guards arrayed everywhere before their commanders. All who saw this the next day were astonished, and competed with each other in bringing beautiful and precious items as tribute, so that they might be accepted there as Court Officers. Tiên Dung and Chủ Đồng Tử thereupon established a Court with various military and civil ranks, together with barracks for guards and troops, and thus became Rulers of a great State.

When Hùng Vương heard news of this, he assumed that his daughter was in rebellion against him and sent troops out to attack her. As these forces drew near, Tiên Dung’s Court Officers asked permission to prepare a defense. Tiên Dung laughed and said, “This affair came about through no agency of mine, but was the result rather of the prodding of Heaven. Life and death are determined by Heaven—how can I dare oppose my father? I must obey his decrees and await execution with patience.”



The miraculous palace.

At this juncture the people assembled in her Court scattered in fear, leaving behind only a few old associates. Her father's troops arrived and set up camp in the field of Tụ Nhiên 自然洲, which was separated only by a large river from Tiên Dung's city—the army did not advance further because night was about to fall. In the middle of the night, there suddenly arose a great wind that raised huge waves, overturned trees, and threw the troops into great confusion. Then Tiên Dung's retinue and all her walls and palaces were swept away into the sky, and the ground underneath collapsed, forming a great swamp. When the people of the region saw no city walls the following morning, they were sure that a supernatural event had occurred and at once established a temple there, at which they offered seasonal sacrifices. The swamp was called Nhất Dạ Trạch 一夜澤, or the "Single-night Swamp." The place is called Man Trù Prefecture 幔轎洲, and the market town Hà Thám.

Later, during the reign of Lý Nam Đế 李南帝 [544–548 C.E.], when troops of the [Chinese] House of Lương 梁 [Liáng] invaded our country, Nam Đế sent Triệu Quang Phục 趙光復 to lead troops against them. Quang Phục took his forces to the swamp and concealed them there. The swamp was deep, wide, and muddy, making movement difficult. Quang Phục went from place to place in a canoe for convenience and would often conduct raids against enemy locations under cover of night, destroying enemy matériel and seizing provisions, his objective being to wear his opponents down in a long war of attrition. The invaders were unable for several years to engage Quang Phục in a regular battle. The enemy commander Bá Tiên 霸先 said, “In former times this place was called Đầm Nhất Dạ Thăng Thiên 一夜升天澤 [“the Swamp of a Single Night’s Ascension to Heaven”]; now it’s become the Đầm Nhất Dạ Đạo Kiếp 一夜盜劫澤 [“the Swamp of Single-night Raids”].”

Later, when Hâu Cảnh 侯景 rebelled in China, the Lương Ruler summoned Bá Tiên back North and gave command of his troops to the Petty General Dương Sần 楊孱.

Quang Phục fasted and purified himself, set up an altar in the swamp, burned incense and prayed. All of a sudden, he saw a spirit riding a dragon descend from the sky to the swamp. The spirit spoke to Quang Phục as follows, “I have gone up to Heaven, but my spirit remains in this place. As you have prayed with great sincerity, I have come to help you pacify the invaders.”

The spirit then unfastened a dragon’s claw and handed it to Quang Phục, telling him that if he tied it to the end of his spear, he would win victories wherever he fought. Having said these things, the spirit flew up to the sky. Following the spirit’s instructions, Quang Phục struck again with his troops, inflicted a great defeat on the forces of Lương, and



had the Lương General Dương Săn beheaded before the assembled soldiers. The Lương Army retreated and fled.

When Quang Phục heard that Nam Đế had passed away, he at once set himself up as Triệu Vương [King Triệu] and established a capital city at Vũ Ninh 武寧 district near Trâu Sơn 鄒山 [“Buffalo Mountain”].

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.**

#### **4. The Tale of the Golden Turtle**

**(*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 13, “Truyện Kim Qui 金龜傳, Golden Turtle Tale”)**

This story tells, in several episodes, how An Dương Vương 安陽王, a wanderer from Thục (Shú 屬) defeated the last Hùng Vương King and established the Kingdom of Âu Lạc 歐貉 in the territory of the former Văn Lang 文郎, and how he is at length defeated and driven to the sea by Triệu Đà (Chinese: Zhao Tuó), who establishes the Kingdom of Nam Việt.

An Dương Vương finds, initially, that whenever he attempts to erect a wall around his capital city Việt Thường 越裳, the wall collapses. He solves the problem through the aid of a Golden Turtle from the East endowed with the gift of human speech. This creature informs him that a group of demons on top of the nearby Mount Thất Diệu have been preventing the wall from being built. With the help of the Turtle An Dương Vương manages to trick and destroy the demons, after which he successfully erects a tall capital wall in the shape of a spiral, called Luó Thành 螺城.

The Golden Turtle departs after staying in the Palace for three months, but leaves the King one of his claws, which, used as a crossbow trigger, is an infallible talisman against attack. Later Triệu Đà 趙佗 comes with a large force and attacks, but is driven off with the crossbow. An Dương Vương gives Triệu Đà a tract of territory to the North.

Triệu Đà sends his son Trọng Thủy 仲始 to seek the hand of An

Dương Vương's daughter My Châu 媚珠. Trọng Thủ tricks his new bride into giving him the tortoise claw, substitutes a false claw, and brings the real one back to his father. Triệu Đà attacks and defeats An Dương Vương. Driven from the capital, he flees with his daughter on horseback to the sea. An Dương Vương calls upon the Golden Turtle for aid, who appears and denounces My Châu as a traitor. My Châu, fearing her father's wrath, says, "If I am disloyal and schemed against you, oh father, may I turn to dust upon my death; if I was loyal to the core but fell victim to deception, may I turn into a shining pearl to wash away my shame." Decapitated, she turns into a pearl. Trọng Thủy jumps into a well where My Châu is interred to join her in death. – Eric Henry.

**K**ing An Dương of the Land of Âu Lạc was from the Ba Thục 巴蜀 [Ba and Shu; ancient lands corresponding to modern-day Sìchuān Province, China]. His surname was Thục and his given name Phán. An ancestor of his had asked to take a Hùng Vương Princess named My Nương as a Consort, but was refused, and therefore nourished a deep hatred for Hùng Vương. Phán wished to fulfill the wishes of his ancestor, so he raised troops, destroyed Văn Lang, changed the name of the land to Âu Lạc, and settled there, but whenever he raised a wall for his capital city in Việt Thường, the wall collapsed as soon as it was built, so he prepared an altar, limited his food intake and for three months prayed for guidance.

One day on the seventh day of the third month, an old man heading West passed straight by the wall and, as he passed, said:

"Who knows when this wall can ever be built!"

The King invited him into the Palace, prostrated himself and, weeping, said,

“Each time I build a wall here, it collapses, so all the labor I expend on it is wasted. Can you tell me why this is happening?”

The old man said,

“On a later day, an Emissary from Thanh Giang 清江 [“Immaculate River”] will join with you in building it. Only then, Your Majesty, will the wall be completed.” Having said this, he bade the King farewell.

The following morning, when day broke, the King saw a Spirit in the form of a Golden Turtle emerge from the river. The Turtle stood upon the waves and was able to use human speech. The Turtle told the King that he was an Emissary of the Thanh Giang River, and knew all the ways of Heaven and Earth, of *yīn* and *yáng*, and of the ghosts and spirits.

Overjoyed, the King exclaimed, “This is what the old man told me about!”

He at once ordered that a golden palanquin be used to welcome the Turtle into the palace, invited him to sit in the reception hall, and asked him why the wall could not be built. The Turtle answered:

“This is due to demons of the mountains and rivers in this area. They were established here by the son of the former King to avenge the loss of the country. There is also a thousand-year-old chicken that has turned into a malevolent ghost that lies concealed on Mount Thất Diệu (“Seven Splendors”), and on the mountain there is a demon, originally a musician, who after burial turned into a spirit. There is an inn up there where travelers can pass the night. The man in charge of it is called Ngô Không. He has a daughter and a white chicken. They, too, are forms assumed by the evil spirit. Whenever travelers come and pass the night there, the spirit assumes a thousand different forms and slaughters the guests indiscriminantly. We must now seize the chicken and the inn-keeper’s daughter and kill them; the activities of the demon will then cease. But after they are slaughtered, they will assuredly assume the

form of an evil text that will be carried by an owl to the top of a *chiên dàn* tree so that they can petition the Lord On High to destroy the wall. I, your servant, will bite the owl to make it drop the text. Only then will your majesty be able to complete the wall.”

The Golden Turtle told the King to pretend to be a traveler, and ask to spend the night there. The King had the Turtle remain at the threshold.

Ngô Không said, “This inn has a demon who often kills people at night. You should not stay here, Young Master. It has not grown dark yet. You should go elsewhere at once to avoid misfortune.”

The King laughed and said, “Life and death are determined by fate. What can ghosts and demons do? I’m not afraid.” And he remained there to pass the night.

During the night, a demon came and called from outside the door, “Who is in the room? You must open the door at once!”

The Turtle cursed the demon: “The door is tightly shut. What do you think you can do?”

At this, the demon emitted fire and changed into a thousand forms to create terror, but in the end was unable to enter the room.

By the time the rooster crowed in the morning, the demons had dispersed, and the Golden Turtle had the King chase them all to Mount Thất Diệu. When they had all vanished, the King returned to the inn.

The next day, when the innkeeper came with a group of assistants to bury the bodies of the guests, he saw the King sitting there, talking and laughing as if nothing had happened. The innkeeper came and stood before him, bowed deeply and said, “That you have survived, Young Master, proves that you are a sage. Please tell us what your methods are, so that lives may be saved.”



“You must kill the white chicken,” the King answered, “and offer it as a sacrifice. All the demons will then disappear.”

Ngô Không killed the chicken, whereupon his daughter at once dropped dead as well. The King then ordered people to go right away to Mount Thất Diệu to retrieve an old musical instrument and a set of bones, which they burned to ashes and cast into the river.

By then as dusk drew near, and the King and the Turtle returned to the top of Mount Thất Diệu, the demons had changed into an owl that flew to the top of a *chiên đàn* tree with a text in its beak.

The Turtle then changed into a rat, crawled up the tree and bit the owl’s leg. The text dropped to the earth. The King seized it and saw that more than half of it had already been eaten by worms.

From that time on, the demons were gone and their destructive actions ceased,

King An Dương built the wall again, and in half a month it was done. The wall was long, and a thousand yards wide. It was shaped like the spiral shell of a snail, so it was called Tư Long 思龍 (“Thinking of Dragons”) Wall. People of the Táng Dynasty called it the “Demon-killing Kūnlún” (Shā Guǐ Kūnlún 殺鬼崑崙) because it was so toweringly high.

The Golden Turtle remained with the King for three years, then announced that he had to return.

“Thanks to your favor,” said the King, “the wall is now firm and solid. But if a force from outside should appear, what can we do to oppose it?”

“The longevity of a State and the safety of its altars of the grain and soil,” said the Turtle, “are determined by heavenly destiny. But when men accumulate virtue, they may then last long. If you should have any wish in the future, I shall not be reluctant to grant it.”

Then the Spirit removed a claw from its foot, gave it to the King, and said, “If armed marauders should appear, use this claw as a crossbow trigger, and you will have nothing to worry about.” With this, he returned to the Eastern Ocean.

The King had Cao Lô 皋魯, one of his Court Officers, make a crossbow, using the turtle’s claw for the trigger. The weapon was called Linh Quang Kim Thần Nỗ 靈光金龜神機弩, or “Splendid Supernatural Gold Claw Crossbow.”



The Golden Turtle.

Later, Triệu Đà 趙佗 [Zhào Tuó] came with an army to invade Âu Lạc and fought a battle with King An Dương. When An Dương fired his magic crossbow, Triệu Đà’s troops were defeated and fled the field. Triệu Đà then established a base at Mount Trâu Sơn, facing the encampment of King An Dương. Realizing that his rival possessed a magic crossbow,



Triệu Đà dared not engage him in another battle, so he sent an Emissary to discuss terms of peace. King An Dương was pleased at this and proposed to let Triệu Đà rule the region North of the Tiểu Giang 小江 River, while he himself returned to the Nguyệt Đức 月德 River to rule the South.

Not long afterward, Triệu Đà sent his son Trọng Thủy 仲始 to King An Dương's Court, and asked if Trọng Thủy could have his daughter My Châu 媚珠 as a bride. King An Dương, not suspecting the motives of the father and son, consented to the match. Trọng Thủy then coaxed My Châu into taking the crossbow trigger by stealth and showing it to him. Then he artfully substituted a false trigger for the real one and, hiding the turtle's claw, announced that he had to return to pay a visit to his parents. As he explained this, he said, "I cannot bear to forget the tie of marriage that unites us, but the paternal bond cannot be forgotten either. If, while I am visiting my parents, it should happen that the peaceful relations between our states are disrupted, so that North and South are at odds with each other, what will you use as a mark so that I will be able to trace your whereabouts when I return to look for you?"

"I am a mere girl," said My Châu, "and it is hard for me to overcome my distress at this separation. I have a cape lined with goose feathers that I often wear. I shall take the goose feathers and scatter them at all the intersections as I go so that you will be able to find and rescue me."

Trọng Thủy bade her farewell, returned to the North, and made his report to Triệu Đà. Triệu Đà was overjoyed to get the trigger and at once set out with troops to attack King An Dương. An Dương took no trouble to prepare a defense and passed the time playing games of encirclement chess. "Does Triệu Đà then have no fear of the magic crossbow?" he said laughing.

Only when Triệu Đà was close to his walls did King An Dương take out the crossbow; but since the trigger was lost, his troops were defeated and ran away.

King An Dương had My Châu sit behind him on a horse and fled South. Arriving at the ocean shore, he had nowhere left to go, and no boat was there to carry him away. In a great voice, he cried out, “Has Heaven abandoned me? Where are you, Emissary of the Rivers? Come quickly to my rescue!”

The Golden Turtle rose from the surface of the water and spoke sternly to the King: “The enemy is none other than the person behind you on that horse! Kill her first if you want my aid!”

The King withdrew his sword to behead My Châu. Raising her face to the sky, My Châu prayed as follows: “If I, a mere girl, was disloyal and schemed against you, oh father, may I turn to dust and mud upon my death; but if I was loyal to the core and fell victim to deception, may I turn into a shining pearl, so that this shame may be washed away.”



The disgrace and punishment of My Châu.

My Châu died by the oceanside. Her blood flowed into the water, and the oysters, digesting it, turned it into bright pearls.

The King held a patterned, seven-inch rhinoceros horn as the Turtle Spirit opened a path in the ocean and led him into it. The spot where this occurred is said to be by Mount Mộ Dạ 暮夜 [“Nightfall”] by the village of Cáo Xá 高舍 in Diễn Prefecture 演州 [now a part of Nghệ An Province].

When the troops of Triệu Đà arrived at the spot, they saw nothing but the corpse of My Châu. Trọng Thủy embraced the body and brought it back to be buried in the capital Loa Thành, where her grave changed into a Well of Jade. Trọng Thủy grieved without cease. When he looked again at the places where My Châu had done her make-up and taken baths, it seemed as if her very form was again before his eyes. Finally, he jumped into the Jade Well and died.

In later times, whenever people found pearls in the Eastern Ocean and washed them in the water of this well, the pearls would shine with a deeper luster. In order to avoid using My Châu’s personal name, they would call these pearls Black Jade [cửu] instead of pearls [châu].

(In some versions of the story, King An Dương, instead of entering a path opened in the ocean water by the Turtle Spirit, simply dies of grief over the loss of his State, and then changes into a nightingale, whose sad calls can be heard both night and day.)