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Special Issue
Plucked-up Tales
Ancient Vietnamese Narratives

ALL STORIES TRANSLATED BY ERIC HENRY
ILLUSTRATIONS BY VAN NGUYEN

BOOK EIGHT **ORIGINS OF NAMES AND CUSTOMS**



Rock and Tree. This illustration relates to the first tale below.

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The three tales in this section are devoted to legends that purport to explain the early origins of objects and customs in everyday life.—Eric Henry.

Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.

1. The Legend of the Betel Vine and the Areca Nut (*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 5, “Truyện Trầu Cau 檳榔傳, Story of the Betel Vine and Areca Nut”)

A young maiden, Lưu Thị 劉氏, wishes to obtain a mate. Two brothers, Cao Tân 高欝 and Cao Lang 高榔 come to study with her father. After determining that Tân is the elder, she makes her desires known to her parents, who arrange her betrothal to Tân. Lang is sad, wanders off, dies, and turns into an areca palm. Tân, missing his younger brother and feeling sad, wanders off to the spot where his brother died, dies, and turns into a great limestone boulder. Lưu Thị, feeling sad as well, wanders off to where her husband and brother-in-law died, dies, and turns into a betel vine growing over the tree and the boulder. The three essential ingredients for the betel mixture are thus created: betel leaves, areca nuts, and limestone.

This is one of two well-known Vietnamese stories that culminate in the creation of a supernatural family of three, consisting of a loyal and devoted wife, and two loyal and devoted husbands. The other story could be called “The Tale of the Three Kitchen Gods (Ba Ông Tào).” It purports to explain the origin of the three soot-blackened stones or pieces of tile that were used to support the big cooking cauldron in native kitchens: There was once a woman who, because she failed to please her husband, abandoned him and took a different husband. One day, the first husband came to see the woman in her new home, and the two began making explanations and recounting what they had been doing recently. As they were talking, the woman’s current husband suddenly returned from a

hunting expedition carrying some game over his shoulder. Afraid that her current husband would see the two of them together and draw the wrong conclusions, the woman hid her first husband in a heap of straw. Not realizing that there was a person in the heap of straw, the hunter set it on fire so as to barbecue the game for a meal, causing the first husband to be set afire. The woman was deeply pained when she saw that her first husband was being burned to death as a consequence of her own actions, and she was also moved at the tact he was displaying in not revealing himself, so she jumped into the fire to follow him in death. The hunter had no idea what was going on, but when he saw his wife writhing in the flames, he felt that he must be somehow at fault, so he also jumped into the flames to die with his wife, with the result that all three died due to an unresolved love relationship. Moved at their loyalty to each other, the Jade Emperor of Heaven conferred the title of “Kitchen God” upon all three, so they could live together in one family with two husbands and one wife. — Eric Henry.

In ancient times there was a young man named Quang Lang 光郎 who was handsome and of large stature. The King conferred on him the surname Cao [“tall”]. He had two sons, the elder named Tân 欝 and the younger Lang 榔. They were both students of a Daoist master surnamed Lưu 劉.

In Master Lưu’s family there was a girl aged seventeen or eighteen who wished to find a marriage partner. Not knowing which of the brothers was the elder, she set a bowl of soup with one pair of chopsticks before them and invited them to eat, so she could see which was the senior brother. When she saw that Lang invited Tân to eat first, she took note of it and explained the situation to her parents. Her parents

gave her in marriage to the elder brother Tân, and the two came to be deeply attached to each other.

Later, however, when the younger brother Lang saw that Tân no longer treated him as well as he used to, he grew resentful and left his brother. Upon coming to a wild place in the countryside, he found a large freshwater spring blocking his path. Since there was no boat to take him across, he sat down where he was and wept until he died and turned into a tree. When the elder brother saw that Lang had gone elsewhere, he left his wife and went in search of him. When he found that his brother had died, he threw himself on the ground next to the tree and ended his existence, after which he turned into a great rock wrapped around the base of the tree.

Afterwards, when the wife began to think it strange that her husband had been away so long without returning, she left home and went in search of him. When she saw that her husband had died, she threw herself on the rock at the base of the tree and turned into a vine climbing up from the rock, the leaves of which were fragrant and had a peppery flavor. Master Lư and his wife then went in search of their daughter. When they came to the place where the three had died, they wept and erected a temple there to worship them. Whenever people of the region passed that way, they would burn incense and bow before the tablet in the Temple and praise the deceased as affectionate siblings and devoted spouses.

In the seventh or eighth month, when it was still hot, the King Hùng Vương was touring the area and stopped to rest there to escape the bright sun. Seeing that it looked cool and shady beneath the thick foliage in front of the Temple, the King got up on the rock to gaze at the surroundings and, upon making inquiries, learned what had happened. He, at once, ordered his attendants to pick a nut from the tree and a leaf

from the vine. He chewed them for a while, and then spat some juice on the rock, and saw that it turned a fresh red color, from which he knew that the flavor would be good. He accordingly took some nuts, leaves, and rock back with him and ordered that the rock be burned to make lime, which he then had mixed with the nuts and leaves. Eating this mixture, he found it sweet, satisfying, hot, and fragrant; and the edges of his lips turned red. He then had an edict promulgated throughout his realm directing that in all marriages and in all meetings, great or small, this substance be used before the commencement of formalities. The custom of chewing betel that we have in our Southern Land had its inception in this.

Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.

2. The Legend of the Rice Cakes (*Lĩnh Nam Chí* Quái, Narrative 8, “Truyện Bánh Chưng 蒸餅傳, Story of the Rice Cakes”)

Lang Liêu 郎燎, the ninth of twenty-two sons of Hùng Vương the Third, follows supernatural advice, invents bánh chưng (rice cakes), and is appointed heir to the Throne.

The yearly offering of bánh chưng to the Ancestors is still called “Tiết Liêu,” the Liêu Festival.

After Hùng Vương destroyed the Ân 殷 invaders, and the land was again at peace, he began to think about transmitting the Throne to a son. To that end, he summoned his twenty-two Princes and spoke to them as follows,

“I wish to transmit the Throne to that son who, by the end of the year, can please me and fulfill their filial duty by bringing me a delicious dish that can be offered to our Royal Ancestors. I will bestow the Throne upon that person.”



The Princes all sought precious and exotic flavors. Some went hunting, some spread nets, and some purchased items in the markets, and by these means obtained more delicacies than could be counted. Prince Number Nine bore the name Lang Liệu 郎爇. His mother had enjoyed little favor and had passed away already. He, moreover, had few associates, so it was difficult to come up with a plan. He worried night and day and found it hard to eat and sleep.

Suddenly, a Spirit appeared to him in a dream and gave him this advice,

“There is nothing in Heaven and Earth as precious than rice, because rice is what nourishes the people; our folk eat it ceaselessly without ever tiring of it. Nothing can take precedence before it. If you take some glutinous rice and wrap it so as to make it circular, to represent Heaven, or wrap it into a square to represent Earth, and put a filling in the middle to make it truly delicious, in imitation of Heaven and Earth that contain all the beings of the natural world, suggesting that these beings are produced through the favor of Heaven and Earth, your father will be very pleased, and you will surely gain the honored position you desire.”

Lang Liệu woke startled, and said to himself with joy, “A bright spirit is helping me—I must do exactly as he says.”

So Lang Liệu chose pure white grains of glutinous rice, throwing away any grains that were cracked, set them out to dry, used banana leaves to turn the rice into wrapped squares, put a delicious filling into each, baked them until they were well-done, and called them “baked cakes” [bánh chưng]. Then, he took more glutinous rice, kneaded the grains till they were perfectly soft, and made them into rounded shapes representing Heaven. He called these “thick cakes” [bánh dày].

When the appointed time arrived, the King summoned all his sons to present their creations. The sons all offered up their dishes with no omissions; only Lang Liêu had round and square cakes to present to the King. Marveling at this, Hùng Vương questioned Lang Liêu about the cakes. Lang Liêu related what the Spirit had said to him. The King Vương raised the cakes to his lips and found the flavor so agreeable that he could eat them without tiring of them. None of the other dishes offered by the princes could surpass the cakes in this. The King praised them for a few moments, and then awarded the first prize to Lang Liêu.

At year's end, the King, used the cakes as offerings in the Ancestral Temple presenting them himself to his father and mother. Everyone in the realm imitated him in this, continuing the practice till the present day, and took to calling Lang Liêu “Festival Liêu” [Tiết Liêu].

Hùng Vương passed the Throne to Láng Liêu, and the twenty-one brothers all held the border towns, formed a party, and defended the mountains and rivers as a stronghold.

Later, they always competed to be the leader, so each person built up wooden fences [mộc sách] to keep others out, so the terms sách [柵, fenced-in area], trại [寨, “camp”], trang [庄, “farm”], and phường [坊, “ward”] originated from that time.

Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.

3. The Legend of the Watermelon

(Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái, Narrative 9, “Truyện Tây Qua 西瓜傳, Story of the Watermelon”)

This story tells of the pride and consequent banishment to a barren island of the foreign youth Mai An Tiêm 枚安暹. A bird from the West flies by, drops a melon seed. The vine proliferates and produces melons. This is the origin of the custom of using *tây qua* 西瓜 in ancestral sacrifices.

A prize-winning novel based on this legend, *The Red Watermelon*



(Quả Dưa Đỏ), by Nguyễn Trọng Thuật, was published in Vietnam in 1925. - Eric Henry.



Ricecakes and watermelon.

In former days, in the time of the Hùng Vương Kings, there was a person named Mai An Tiêm 枚安遷, a foreigner, who was brought to our land by a merchant ship when he had just turned seven. The King purchased him from the merchants and made him a servant. By the time he reached adulthood, he had grown to be a person with a correct and composed expression with a good understanding and memory of many things.

They bestowed the name “Yến” 偃 upon him, or more formally “An Tiêm,” and gave him a wife who bore him a son. The King cherished him and gave him many tasks to carry out, so that gradually Yến came to be wealthy and occupied a high position. Everyone honored and obeyed him, and vied with each other to present him with gifts of every sort. Yến grew proud, and often said to himself,

“These things were given me by my former relations; I have never relied on the King’s favor to acquire them.”

When Hùng Vương heard of this, he fell into a rage and said,

“He is a mere Court servant who, forgetting his Lord’s favor, has grown proud, saying that his possessions all came from his Ancestors. I shall have him taken to the ocean and cast off in some place where no one lives, so we can see if he still enjoys the belongings of his Ancestors.”

He, at once, had Mai Yển brought to a sandy desert in the Nga Sơn 峨山 sea. No footprints were to be seen anywhere in the place, and he had provisions sufficient only for four years. After consuming them, he would die of hunger. His wife gave way to tears, saying that the place held no possibility for their survival.

Tiêm said,

“What Heaven creates, Heaven nourishes. Why worry?”

Not long afterward, in the month of April, a white crane appeared, flying from the West. It alighted on a high mountain, and emitted three or four cries, whereupon six or seven melon seeds fell to the mountain’s sandy surface. They sprouted and grew, spread across the sand, green and plentiful, and then formed melons too numerous to count.

Overjoyed, An Tiêm said,

“This is not some monstrous phenomenon. It is just something Heaven has given to nourish us.”

When he chopped the melons open and ate them, he found them fragrant and delicious. On eating them, he felt his spirits grow strong, and he continued to prune the plants every year, and when he was unable to eat them all, he exchanged them for rice to feed his wife and children. But he didn’t know what the melons were called. Since the bird that



dropped the seeds had flown in from the West, he said that they were to be called “Western Melons” [“tây qua”].

Net-fishermen and other seagoing merchants loved the melons’ flavor and all brought goods to exchange for them. People far and near, both in the forests and on the seashore vied with each other to buy the melons, and began to cultivate them themselves, and An Tiêm came to be known among the people as “The Parent of Watermelons.”

A long time later, the King remembered An Tiêm and sent a man out to the place where he had been abandoned to ask if he were still alive or not.

The man returned and gave his report to the King. The King sighed repeatedly, then said:

“He told me that his belongings were those of his Ancestors. That was no lie.”

The King at once summoned An Tiêm back to Court, restored him to his previous position, gave him servants and Concubines, and bestowed upon the place the name “Sa Prefecture of An Tiêm” [“An Tiêm Sa Châu.”]. The island came to be called Mai An, and to this day watermelons are offered there to Ancestors, a practice that began with An Tiêm.