



NATIONAL HISTORIC CHARACTERS IN PRINTS FROM TONKIN

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The tradition of producing prints in Tonkin dates back to the beginning of the 11th century, i.e. the reign of the Late Ly dynasty (1010–1125). During its reign, this dynasty (although by no means the first national dynasty) managed to lay the foundations of a developed feudal state and advance culture and education. The first references to prints are preserved in historic annals from this period.¹ The oldest themes displayed in prints were *auspicious* and *religious* topics, and these developed swiftly. Another broad thematic group of prints and ink paintings covers significant *characters in national history*.

The specifics of Vietnamese national mythology allow some deserving real figures in history to enter the open mythological pantheon. Examples include the Trung sisters, Lady Trieu, General Trung Hung Dao, and the ruler Quang Trung. All these characters are united by specific properties very important for gaining entry to the pantheon: courage, a feeling of national consciousness, the struggle for the independence of the nation, and efforts to defend the country from foreign supremacy. This is an element appearing in the past few millennia in Vietnamese history, with shorter or longer breaks.

Some real historic figures, such as General Tran Hung Dao, are also classified in the cult of mediums. The group of depicted national historic characters could, in a way, be included among auspicious motifs, although not where the auspicious motif is clear to the overwhelming majority of the population at first glance (e.g. the peach as a symbol of longevity, the carp as a symbol of plenty, the pork as a symbol of well-being, the child as a symbol of numerous descendants, etc.), but where the moral qualities of the depicted figure must be known. I am thinking specifically here of bravery, courage, a feeling of national consciousness, and the capacity of leadership and organization. This is how real historic characters could be briefly characterized. Therefore, giving a print, during a specific festival, to someone we esteem and to whom we wish the same qualities could also be explained as an auspicious motif.

A significant uprising that has etched itself indelibly into national history is undoubt-

¹ Bui Van Vuong, p. 107.

edly the insurrection organized and led by the Trung sisters (Hai Bà Trưng) around 40 AD. What is today Tonkin, an area called Giao Chi (Giao Chi) in contemporary Chinese sources, was under Chinese control as of the first century BC. Giao Chi was severely exploited economically, mainly in the form of a regular tribute composed of goods and slaves. In the first century AD Chinese nobles, officers, and farmers started settling in Giao Chi, escaping from the internal commotion in China stirred up by the Empire of the Early Chans.² Here they became the buttress of Chinese control, driving the local tribal chiefs out of their positions and, with time, trying to force Chinese customs, laws, and the like on to the local population. It was under these circumstances that an uprising broke out in the region of Me Linh, led by the daughters of the Chief of the Lacviets (i.e. the local population) Trung Trac (Trung Trắc) and Trung Nhi (Trung Nhị). The immediate stimulus for the insurrection was the imprisonment of Lady Trung Trac's husband, Thi Sach (Thi Sách), by the Chinese administrator of the Giao Chi territory. Lady Trung Trac stirred up a rebellion, which was quickly made all the larger when the populations of the neighbouring administrative areas of Cuu Chan (Cửu Chân), Nhat Nam (Nhật Nam), and Hop Pho (Hợp Phố) joined the cause. Gradually they managed to conquer several fortresses and Lady Trung Trac was declared queen.

It is worth mentioning that she appointed women to important commanding positions in the army as generals, e.g. Lady Le Chan (Lê Chân), Vu Thuc Nuong (Vũ Thúc Nương), and Thieu Hoa (Thiếu Hoa).³ The uprising, which probably lasted three years, was controlled by women. That a woman is able to take over the reigns of power and hold on to them for a fairly long time is a quite isolated feat in the history of countries both in and out of the Far East. A significant aspect of the uprising was that, while it lasted, the Trung sisters and other women (generals) commanded the respect of the men.

The insurrection was so grave that the Chinese General Ma Juan (Mã Viện in Vietnamese) was deployed to Giao Chi with an army of twenty thousand soldiers in order to quell the rebellion. The Chinese army entered the territory over dry land and water, sailing over the sea and up the estuary of the River Bach Dang (Bạch Đằng) deep into the interior, where both parts of the army joined up again. Whenever the Chinese army entered Vietnam in the following centuries, it usually used similar access routes, although by then the Vietnamese were fully able to exploit the advantages offered to them by the local geographic conditions and on occasion defeat an enemy stronger in numbers.⁴ In the end the Trung sisters' uprising was suppressed and both women died. Most historians have a deep-rooted opinion that the women committed suicide by jumping into the River Hat (sông Hát), but Chinese sources claim that, after a number of severe struggles, the Trung sisters were beheaded and their heads were dispatched to China as proof that the rebellion had been quelled for good.⁵

The Trung sisters are always depicted on prints riding elephants. The women sit in litters on the elephants and, swords aloft, they command the battle. However, in no historic annals is there any talk of elephants used in battle. I believe that the association between the queens and elephants comes from the time of the Late Le and Nguyen dynasties, when

² Vasiljev, p. 86.

³ See Truong Huu Quynh, p. 86

⁴ cf. The following battles led by national heroes against invasions from the north: 938 Ngo Quyen, 1010 Ly Thuong Kiet, 1282 Tran Hung Dao.

⁵ cf. Truong Huu Quynh, p. 88, and Vasiljev, pp. 88–89.

the elephant was evidently associated with the head of state.⁶ The attributes of the sisters on the prints are their raised swords, the symbol of the beginning of the uprising and status of leader in society.

Another woman who has carved out an eternal niche for herself in national history is Lady Trieu (Bà Triệu), whole name Trieu Thi Trinh (Triệu Thị Trinh).⁷ In 248 AD, when she was nineteen, she stood at the head of a huge rebellion requiring suppression by the deployment of eight thousand troops from China. From the hub of the uprising, the administrative territory of Cuu Chan (Cửu Chân), military action spread to the territory of the whole of Giao Chi (Giao Chỉ). Lady Trieu is usually depicted in the same way as the Trung sisters, sitting in a litter on an elephant. Her attribute is a magnificent royal diadem.

The man standing at the birth of the unified independent Vietnamese state in the 10th century is Dinh Bo Linh (Đinh Bộ Lĩnh), who lived from 924 to 979. He was one of the twelve princes who, after the gaining of national independence, controlled the land and fought with each other for power. In 968 Dinh Bo Linh was declared Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang (Đinh Tiên Hoàng), and called the country Dai Co Viet (Đại Cồ Việt, Great Viet). The united nobility subsequently managed to beat off an attack by the Songs in 981 and secure the country's independence.⁸ The figure of Dinh Tien Hoang is a favourite theme of the Dong Ho workshops. The emperor is depicted standing on the back of a dragon, with a palm leaf resting against his shoulders. This scene is a reference to the emperor's childhood: he was playing at soldiers with the buffalo herding boys from his native village and after the 'winning battle' the boys killed and ate a buffalo. The furious owner of the buffalo chased the boys to the bank of the river, from which the Water Dragon emerged and carried Dinh Tien Hoang to the opposite bank on its back. This is the scene (i.e. the end of the story) portrayed in the print. It is not by chance that the background colour of the graphic print is yellow, the imperial colour. The attribute of the emperor depicted in the popular concept is a palm leaf. The five yellow clouds with black dots that partially cover the dragon's body symbolize waves.⁹

One of the key figures of the 13th century is General Tran Hung Dao (Trần Hưng Đạo). He has gone down in history as an exceptionally able general who managed to counter the Mongolian invasions into the country. In 1280, after conquering the whole of China, the Mongolians founded the Yuan dynasty (Nguyên or Mông Cổ in Vietnamese), and its first ruler was Kublai. General Tran Hung Dao became famous for the military tactics used during the second invasion in 1285 (the first invasion took place in 1258), when the Mongolian troops were commanded by Kublai's son Togan, and especially for the trap laid during the third invasion of Mongolian soldiers in 1287, again led by Togan. General Tran Hung Dao had thick pointed wooden stakes hammered into the bottom of one of the branches of the River Bach Dang; these were camouflaged at high tide. However, when the tide went out the enemy boats became caught up among the stakes and the Vietnamese army quickly neutralized them. This definitive defeat of the Mongolian army took place in April 1288. The strategic move used by General Tran Hung Dao was not, however, original: he was re-

⁶ The only „negative“ portrayal of elephants not relating to a rulinh line that I have found in art exists on prints and photograph of French travellers from the 19th century. These are military elephants and animals used to execute people. See *Vietnam trong qua khu...*, Illustrations nos. 154, 164, 170.

⁷ *Truong Huu Quynh*, p. 89.

⁸ *Tu dien...*, pp. 229–230.

⁹ cf. *Truong Huu Quynh*, pp. 108–112.

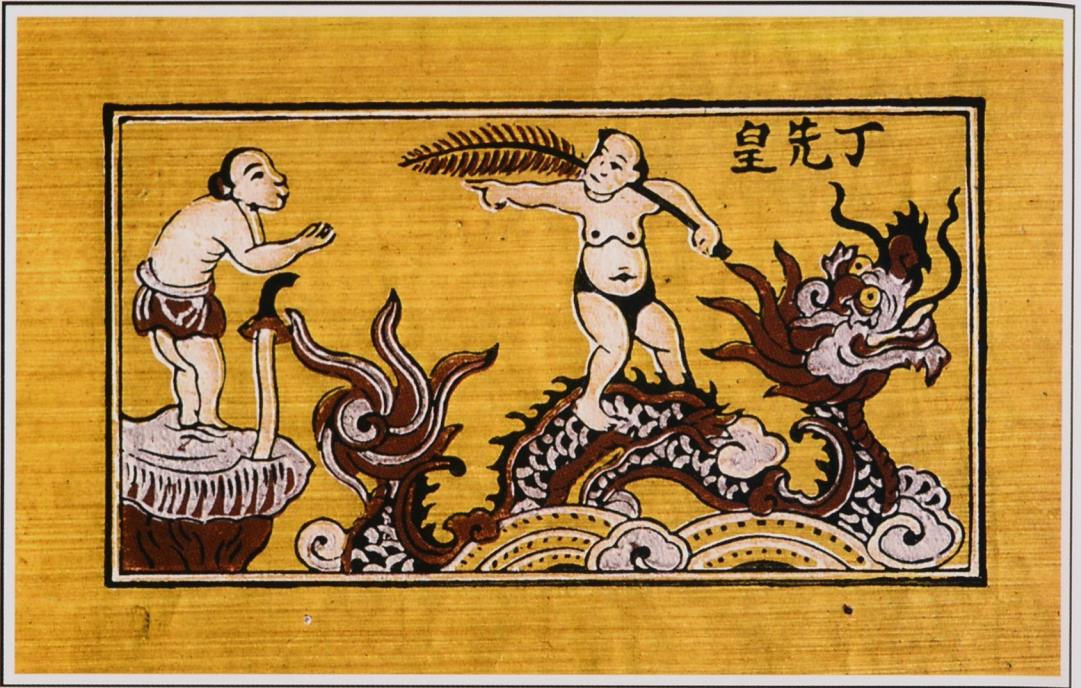


Fig. 1 – Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang



Fig. 2 – The Trung Sisters



Fig. 3 – Lady Tieu

peating the ingenious military tactic of Ngo Quyen from 936 AD. Ngo Quyen's victory on the River Bach Dang is also a frequent motif of prints. In the winning battle, the army of General Tran Hung Dao managed to destroy up to a hundred and pillage four hundred enemy junks.¹⁰ General Tran Hung Dao died in 1300; shortly before his death he emphasized the extreme importance of keeping the army unified and of cooperating with the civilian population.

The print from the Dong Ho workshops depicts the Battle on the River Bach Dang (Bạch Đằng): General Tran Hung Dao stands, sword in hand, on the commander's battleship. It is not by chance that part of the general's uniform is decorated with the same ornaments as the body of the wooden dragon forming the side of the ship: they evoke the dragon's ethereal power and, especially, favour. The bow of the ship ends with a menacing dragon's head, which probably has two meanings. It symbolizes the ship on which the ruler or highest positioned person in the country can sail, and the dragon's appearance is meant to discourage all monsters from the depths and ensure a tranquil voyage. The custom of painting water dragons or at least fish eyes and mouths on the bow of fishing boats, or wood-carving used to decorate the bow, has been preserved up to the present day, and can be evidenced with numerous examples of ships on the coast from the north to the south of Vietnam. A battle junk with five ordinary soldiers is painted not far from the general's ship. An eye is painted on the side of the junk. We have reason to assume, then, that the ships of ordinary soldiers were also decorated with simple drawings designed to repel all evil water elements. The enemy ships depicted in the upper right-hand part of the print are smaller than General Tran Hung Dao's ships, not only because of the perspective of the picture, but also because this is the defeated army, a fact which must be made clear to the viewer at first glance. Several soldiers are swimming or drowning in the waves between the two armies.

Estate owner Le Loi (Lê Lợi) entered the history of the country in the 15th century by organizing an uprising against the Ming occupation (1406–1427). This period was notorious for its immense cultural oppression, whereby plinths with inscriptions were destroyed and books confiscated and burned. Backed by two thousand supporters, in February 1418 Le Loi launched his anti-Chinese uprising on Mount Lam Son, which was soon to become a nationwide rebellion. In autumn 1427, after years of protracted fighting, the army under Le Loi's leadership was definitely victorious and the independence of the Vietnamese state was ensured until the end of the 18th century. In 1428 Le Loi assumed the royal name of Le Thai To (Lê Thái Tổ) and became the founder of the Late Le dynasty.

Le Loi's decisive battle with his Chinese opponents occurred in the Chi Lang Pass, lying on the route from the mountain province of Lang Son to the royal seat of Thang Long.¹¹ The direct-coloured print from the Dong Ho workshops depicts the battle in the mountainous terrain: Le Loi, on horseback, expels the Chinese soldiers. The large national army (in the upper right-hand section of the picture), symbolized by conical hats, raised swords, and sticks, comes to his assistance.

A prominent figure from the end of the 18th century was the ruler Quang Trung (Quang Trung), who managed to drive the Qing army of over a quarter of a million soldiers out of the country. At the beginning of the 16th century a social crisis broke out in Dai Viet, accompanied by a number of peasant uprisings. Formally, the whole state was ruled from

¹⁰ Truong Huu Quynh, p. 246.

¹¹ Truong Huu Quynh, pp. 282–316.

1428 by the Late Le dynasty (Nhà Lê Sơ), but starting around the middle of the 16th century the real power was concentrated in the hands of the powerful noble families of Mac, Trinh, and later Nguyen, which rivalled each other for a leading position in the country. In the end the state was divided into two parts: Dang Trong (Đàng Trong), i.e. North Vietnam, and Dang Ngoài (Đàng Ngoài), i.e. South Vietnam. Dai Viet also absorbed the remainder of the Cham Empire, extending over the territory of Dang Ngoài. In the 17th and 18th centuries the countries were caught up in the throes of war, economic crisis, and social unrest. As a result of natural disasters and protracted economic crises, there were numerous famines at the end of the 18th century. In 1771, the Tay Son uprising broke out in Qui Nhon, which by turns overthrew the reign of the Nguyen and Trinh lines and united the whole country after a division lasting more than two hundred and fifty years. Right at the end of the 18th century, Vietnam took on the form as we know it today. The uprising was led by three brothers: Nguyen Nhac (Nguyễn Nhạc), Nguyen Lu (Nguyễn Lữ), and Nguyen Hue (Nguyễn Huệ). The Chinese Qing dynasty, on the pretext of helping the Late Le dynasty, deployed an army to Thang Long, which was controlled by the rebels. Nguyen Hue heard this news in the city of Hue, declared himself Emperor Quang Trung here, and immediately marched his army north. In several battles near Thang Long, the Chinese army suffered a heavy defeat and was forced to retreat to its homeland.

Not only did Quang Trung succeed in driving out the Chinese army from the country, but he also expelled the Siamese army from the southern part of the state. His main achievement was to unify the state. During his short reign (he died suddenly in 1792), he managed to develop trade with China and with missionaries coming to the country from Europe. In the world of culture, he is mainly noted for introducing the national lettering *chu nom* (chữ Nôm) the 'southern signs', into official correspondence. It is also worth mentioning that Catholic missions were not persecuted during the reign of Quang Trung.

Emperor Quang Trung is usually depicted on prints at the head of the army that drove the Qings out of the country, who are portrayed in headlong flight. As a rule, Quang Trung is astride a horse and holds a raised sword.¹²

All the mentioned historic characters are popular in traditional Vietnamese society as well as the theme of traditional prints.

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¹² See Müllerová, *Pictures from the Land...*, p. 54, later-coloured print from the Hang Trong workshops, No. A 14 177, from the Collection of Náprstek Museum.

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Fig. 4 – General Tran Hung Dao; Fig. 5 – King Le Loi

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