

EXCERPTS FROM THE COMPLETE COMPILATION OF THE COLLECTED WRITINGS ABOUT THE DEPARTED SPIRITS OF THE VIỆT REALM: SOVEREIGNS, THE TRUNG SISTERS

Introduction

The Han empire of China conquered what is now northern Vietnam from a warlord of Chinese descent in 111 BCE. For almost a century and a half, the Han control was relatively loose and local Lạc lords retained their position and influence in local society. Then, the Wang Mang seizure of power in China sent many refugees south. This increased northern pressure on local society and tipped the balance with the Lạc lords. The result was a large scale uprising led by the two Trưng sisters, Trắc and Nhị, daughters of one of the lords. Their success lasted for a couple of years until the Han sent their great general Ma Yuan (Mã Viện) south to crush the resistance. The sisters are believed to have killed themselves upon their defeat. Their spirits have continued as powerful cult figures to the present day.

The following text is a translation of an early-twentieth-century manuscript based on a fourteenth-century compilation of spirit tales attributed to the scholar Lý Tế Xuyên.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Lý Tế Xuyên: Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm*, translated by Brian E. Ostrowski and Brian A. Zottoli (Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1999), 22-23. The PDF version of this book can be found online in its entirety: <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/SoutheastAsia/outreach/resources/departed/departedspirits.pdf>

***Excerpts from The Complete Compilation of the Collected Writings
about the Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm: Sovereigns, The Trưng Sisters***

History records the elder sister's name as Trắc and the younger sister's name as Nhị. They were originally of the Lạc line, and were daughters of Lạc generals in our Giao province. They were from the sub-prefecture of Mê Linh in Phong province.

The elder sister was wedded to Thi Sách, a man from Chu Diên sub-prefecture who had courageous strength, as well as a heroic spirit, and who manifested an auspicious birth. Governor Tô Định [the Chinese governor of the area] arranged to use his power to bring Thi Sách down. The elder sister was furious. Together with her younger sister, she raised an army and ran out Tô Định, attacking and taking our province of Giao. Because of this, Nhật Nam, Hợp Phố, and Cửu Chân¹ looked to their fame and responded by taking more than sixty-five towns in Lĩnh Ngoại. The sisters installed themselves as Queens of Việt, ruling from Chu Diên, and took the surname of Trưng. At that time, Tô Định fled to Nam Hải.

¹ Old names of regions in modern northern Vietnam.

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
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Hán Quang Vũ [Han emperor, 25-58 CE] heard of this and was furious. He banished Đinh to Đạm Nhĩ and sent Mã Viện and Lưu Long to bring a large army to strike them. When they reached Lã ng Bạc, the ladies fought back. Their followers were few and did not withstand the attack; they retreated to defend Cấm Khê. The band became more dispersed by the day. The ladies were isolated, and died in battle.

The local people pitied them, and built a temple for their worship. On many occasions its divine responsiveness has been manifest. Now the temple is in An Hát sub-prefecture. Lý Anh Tông [1138-1175], because of drought, ordered meditation masters who strictly kept Buddhist principles to pray there for rain. The sought-for rain was obtained, and refreshing air spread among people. The emperor was delighted to see this. Suddenly, when he was sleeping, he saw two women. Their faces were fair and their brows like willows. Their robes were green and their trousers red. Their hats were red and they wore belts. They rode atop steel horses with the rain to have an audience. The emperor was taken aback and asked who they were. They replied, "We are the two Trung sisters. By the order of God on High, we have made rain." The emperor awoke and, being moved by this, he ordered the restoration of the temple and the preparation of ceremonial offerings for a sacrifice. He then sent an official to carry them in procession to the north of the city citadel, where the Vũ Sư temple was built to worship the sisters. Later, they again appeared in a dream to the king, asking that a temple be built at Cổ Lai. The sovereign complied with this, and appointed them Chaste Divine Ladies.

In the fourth year of Trùng Hưng [1288], the elder sister was appointed Victorious Lady Strategist. In the twenty-first year of Hung Long [1313], the words "Sincerely Chaste" were added. The words "Keeping Obedience" were added for the younger sister. Their divine responsiveness has been manifest for ages.

Questions:

1. Where did leadership lie with the Lạc people in northern Vietnam two millennia ago?
2. Why did the Lạc respond to the call of the two sisters?
3. What did this say about gender in Vietnam?
4. What was the relation between this world and the after life?
5. What are spirit cults and how do they affect people?
6. What did the defeat of the Trưng Sisters mean for the Vietnamese?