

Legends

THE BETEL QUID:

Long ago, in the time of the reign of king Hùng Vương the 4th, there were twin brothers, Cao Tân and Cao Lang. They looked so much alike that it was almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. They both attended the school of an old teacher in the village, whose single daughter was so beautiful, she attracted the homage of all the young men in the area.

The old teacher liked both brothers. He decided to grant his daughter's hand to one of them. He preferred the elder because, according to Vietnamese custom, the elder brother should get married first. In order to be able to distinguish them, he relied on a little trick. Inviting them for dinner, the teacher knew the one who first picked up the chopsticks would be the elder. So Cao Tân was offered the hand of the teacher's daughter and accepted, although he had no doubt that his younger brother held a devoted and ardent love for her. Cao Tân and his new wife went on to live together in a complete harmony and happiness. Cao Tân continued to love his younger brother no less than ever before and would do anything to make him happy.

In spite of the filial love shown to him, the younger brother could not rid himself of the pain in his heart. He decided to leave them and went out seeking adventure. After many days of walking, he ended up falling exhausted to the road and was transformed into a block of immaculate white limestone .

The elder brother became increasingly worried for his younger brother and left in search of him. He followed the same road taken by Cao Lang. One beautiful morning, after many days of walking, he arrived at the limestone block. Exhausted to the point of death, he sat on it and succumbed to his final place of rest. He metamorphosed in to a betel nut tree, growing tall and strong with its green palms and little oval fruits. The tree began to extend its branches and shadow over the lime stone mass as if to protect it from the changes of weather.

Still at home without any news from her husband, the young wife in turn left the house and went in search of her spouse. She roamed fields, crossed villages and finally one day, she came close to the tree. Tired by the long walk, she leaned back at the foot of the tree. Taking her turn to die, she changed into a vine whose stems curled around the trunk of the tree with large, intensely green leaves in the form of a heart.

This is one of Vietnamese customs to be observed at a marriage ceremony. There is always betel, with betel nut and intensely green leaves in the shape of a heart forming part of the wedding gifts that symbolize an eternal union.

THE MAGIC CROSSBOW:

Thanks to the magic bow given to him by a god, King An Duong Vuong succeeded in defeating the Chinese army. Without the advantage of magical weapons, general Trieu Đà was forced to make peace with the king and send his son Trong Thuy to the court of Âu Lạc in order to secure a good relationship between the two countries.

Trong Thuy succeeded in winning the heart of King An Duong Vuong's daughter and so became the close adviser to the king. Despite the affection and love he shared with his wife, Trong Thuy did not lose sight of his mission vested in him by his father: to neutralize the magic weapon that helped assure the king's supremacy. This miraculous device was well guarded at a place known only by the king and his daughter.

The latter, after much cajoling by Trong Thuy, showed him the magic weapon. The bow featured a trigger fashioned from the Golden Turtle's claw. Taking advantage of a moment of inattention of the princess, Trong Thuy succeeded in unhooking the Golden Turtle's claw and replaced it with an imitation. Shortly thereafter, using his father's ill health as a pretext, he asked the king for permission to return to his country.

Before his departure, he asked his wife "How will we find each other in case of a sudden separation?" "You shall easily find me. Should an emergency arise, I will throw the goose down of my coat along my way", she replied. Convinced that the magic weapon no longer possessed its devastating quality, the Chinese general launched offensive attacks on kingdom Âu Lạc. Always confident in the power of his magic bow, king An Duong Vuong went for his weapon to destroy his enemy.

Realizing that the weapon had been tampered with, the king fled on horseback taking his daughter with him behind, in the direction of the sea. Arriving near the shore, he called out: "God of Golden Turtle, please come for help!" The god appeared

at once and pointing his index finger at the king he said "The enemy is behind you, on the back of your horse".

The king looked back, saw his daughter with a trail of white feathers scattered on the road he had taken. Furious, he pulled out his sword, killed his daughter, My Châu, and followed the god of Golden Turtle to the sea. Guided by the goose down, Trong Thuy found the body of his wife, dead on the beach. The blood that flowed down was swallowed by oysters and turned into pearls. Desperate, Trong Thuy took his wife's body to Co Loa and committed suicide by jumping in a well near the tomb of My Châu.

THE GOD OF MOUNTAINS AND THE GOD OF RIVERS:

King Hùng Vương the 18th had an extraordinarily beautiful daughter called My Nuong. When she reached the age of marriage, her reputation had stretched far and wide. The king decided to choose a talented husband for her. One day, two young men, both brilliant in their intelligence and handsomeness arrived unexpectedly at the same time. Each requested to marry Mi Nuong. One called himself Son Tinh, the God of High Mountains and Profound Forests, the other, Thuy Tinh, the God of Rivers and Immense Seas.

Embarrassed, the king did not know which to choose as each had incomparable talents and infinite powers. After a moment of thinking, the king ordered a challenge: one hundred plates of sweet rice, one elephant with nine tusks, one rooster with nine cockcombs and one horse with nine red manes. Who ever could bring them first would be the spouse of Mi Nuong.

The following day, at dawn, Son Tinh arrived first complete with all the presents and took the belle to his mountain home. Thuy Tinh showed up shortly after, also loaded with all the gifts but the princess had already gone. Confused and furious, Thuy Tinh decided to penetrate the mountains to get Mi Nuong back. Lashing out, he caused the rivers and seas to rise ever higher. But Son Tinh raised the mountains higher still.

Thuy Tinh deployed all his talents, calling in winds, tempests, lightning and storms, shaking the mountains and forests. Son Tinh's mountains remained unshaken. Thuy Tinh resorted to his fiercest marine troops and lashed out with the current, mounting massive assaults. Son Tinh, with his iron nets, cut reinforcing routes and rolled rocks down to suppress the spirits and crush the marine monsters sent by Thuy Tinh.

After three days and three nights of constant beatings, Thuy Tinh gave up, withdrew his troops and recalled the waves. To assure his tranquility Son Tinh performed a miracle, raising the two mountains of him and his wife higher even than the place of the Gods. In time, people came to know them as the Mountain of the Lord and the Mountain of the Lady. At the foot of these mountains a temple was dedicated to Son Tinh and Mi Nuong.

STORY OF MUC KIEN LIEN:

Like Europeans, Vietnamese people celebrate Mothers' Day, at the Vu Lan festival on the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar. The story of how this festival came about goes something like this:

Once upon a time there was a naughty lady by the name of Thanh Đề. She was without pity toward the poor and above all the beggars. She never gave alms and chased away any beggars who showed up at the gate of her house.

She did not hesitate to trample on the rice grains picked up by the poor peasants toiling all year long on their land. She made fun of Buddhist priests and nuns, trying to disturb their quietness. She blasphemed Buddha, was in contempt of the spirits and offered to the pagodas foods mixed with forbidden meat.

She rarely listened to the advice of her son Muc Kien Liên, a monk of high virtue. After her death, she entered the Kingdom of the Dead and had to pay for all the faults she had committed in the living world. She was forced to sit on a nail studded bed, balancing a bucket full of blood on her head, with no relief for her hunger or thirst: any food that was brought to her mouth melted into blood and turned into flame.

When Muc Kien Liên became enlightened, he could go down enter the Kingdom of the Dead to see his mother. He witnessed the punishments she suffered. He could not do anything to change the course of justice by the heavenly decree nor could he

substitute for his mother. He had to go and see Buddha and request grace from the latter. Buddha ordered him to arrange the Vu Lan ceremony on the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar, during which he could solicit the withdrawing of sentence for his mother with prayers and alms.

He arrived back to earth and, when the day arrived, an austere and fervent Muc Kien Liên set up an altar in honor of Buddha, giving alms and performing the ceremonies. In the Kingdom of the Dead, Thanh Đe understood the sufferings as she, too, had suffered both hunger and thirst. The hardships that she encountered gradually drew her naturally naughty nature from her, replacing it with sincere remorse.

News of Muc Kien Liên's piety reached the gates of Heaven. The Holy Father reviewed Thanh Đe's case, found that she had truly repented and thus acquit her. Muc Kien Liên was allowed to go down to hell to bring his mother back to life. From then on, Thanh Đe honored Buddha with all her heart, respected Buddhist priests, and helped the poor. Inspired by this example and according to Vietnamese custom, pious children set up an altar in memory of the dead and give alms to the poor, on the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar.

THE SWEET RICE CAKE:

The son of the first king of Van Lang, the Vietnam of long time ago, reigned under the name of Hùng Vương. He had three wives and each of them gave birth to a boy. The son of the first wife, Long, married Kim who was arrogant and jealous. The son of the second, Ho, married Ngoc who was naughty and sharp tongued toward her husband. The son of the deceased third wife, Vân, lived with his maternal grandmother and farmed for a living. He practiced the slash and burn agriculture, grew vegetables or went fishing in his spare time. His grandmother married Van to Xuân, a wise and hard working young woman in the village. The couple led a modest but happy life.

One day, summoned by the king, they had to sell their buffaloes to prepare for a trip to the court. There, they saw their elder brothers and their wives elegantly dressed and adorned with jewels. Van and Xuan felt confused. Everyone mocked and scorned them for going to see the king in such simple apparel.

However, the king showed affection to Vân, an orphan of mother. Burdened by old age and a reign of 50 years, the king wanted to leave the throne to whoever could prepare the tastiest foods. The spouses of the elder brothers, confident of their talent, each vied for their husbands to claim the throne. Only Vân and Xuan were worried because they were very poor.

One night, in a dream, Vân saw his mother who let him know he would be selected for the throne. It would be sufficient for him to make a sweet rice cake in the form of a square with meat and bacon in the middle to symbolise the heart. The square cake represented the earth because at that time people thought the earth was square. Vân woke up and to his wife the dream. The couple decided to follow the advice of their mother to make the cake and to boil it in a terracotta pot.

On the scheduled day, the two brothers Kim and Ngoc offered the king expensive and exotic dishes. But the latter did not find anything exceptional. As for the cakes offered by Vân and Xuân, the king was excited by its delicacy and meaning - one should govern the country with wisdom. He showered Van with praise and appointed him as his successor. For his generosity, Vân did not hesitate to give his brothers the title of viscount.

The sweet rice cake , bánh chưng in Vietnamese, is one of the traditional delicacies of the Vietnamese people during the Tet festival. It is eaten with caramel marinated stewed pork.

THE WOMAN OF NAM XUONG:

A long time ago, there was a couple who lived in perfect happiness. They had just had a baby when the war broke out. The husband was drafted and sent to combat at the frontier. As the days and nights passed, his wife waited for the return of her husband, putting all her energy into raising her child. The child grew and began to speak. One evening, a violent storm broke out. The thunder rumbled deafeningly, shaking windows and doors. Seized by panic, the child started to scream. To calm him, his mother told him his father was there to protect him. Pointing to her shadow on the wall, she told him: "Don't be afraid, your father is there." The child looked at the shadow and said to it: "Good evening, daddy". Reassured, the child went to sleep. From that day on, the child had the habit of wanting to wish his father goodnight. Each night, when putting

her child to bed, the woman would lean in front of the lamp, creating a shadow to comfort the child.

Finally the war ended and the husband returned home. The man discovered with tenderness and emotion the child he had left when he was still a baby. Instead of hugging his father, the child pushed him away, crying "Leave me alone, you're not my father. My dad only comes at night". The husband, overwhelmed with grief and hurt, thought that his wife had deceived him by taking another man and decided not to inquire further. From then on he kept a frigid distance from his wife and child, not returning the love and affection they continued to show towards him. Eventually, the unhappiness stemming from the misunderstanding incited the man to depart one day without leaving any address.

Time passed and the worried wife wondered at her husband's actions and continued to wait for his return. Unfortunately, one beautiful day, sorrow and despair overcame the young woman. She decided to put an end to her sorrow by drowning herself in the river, having entrusted her child to the care of his kin.

Learning of the death of his wife and overcome by remorse, the man once again returned home. In the evening, he lit the lamp. His son was overjoyed to see the shadow reappear on the wall and cried "Look, there: my daddy". The man then knew his terrible mistake. The next day, he took his son to the riverside to implore forgiveness from his wife. The man promised to himself to stay single until the end of his life to take care of the child and that no other women would replace her in his heart.

THE WAITING ROCK:

A long time ago, in a village in the highland region, lived two orphans, a young man about twenty years old and his seven year old sister. All alone in this world, they were very devoted to each other. One beautiful day, a traveling astrologer passed their way. Upon consultation with the young man, the astrologer revealed the future of the two orphans:

"If I'm not mistaken, according to the days and hours of your births, you were fated to marry your sister. Nothing can turn the course of your destiny".

Tormented by this terrible prediction, he decided to kill his sister. One morning, he suggested she come to the forest with him to cut wood. Taking advantage of his sister's inattention, he felled her with a single stroke of his axe and fled. He decided to change his name and resettled in Lang Son. Many years went by. One fine day, many years later, he married a merchant's daughter who gave him a son and made him very happy.

One spring morning, he found his wife sitting in the backyard drying her long black hair in the sunshine. As she ran the comb through her long, black hair, lifting it from her neck with her other hand, he discovered a long scar above the back of her neck. Surprised, he asked her how she came about such a vicious scar. Hesitating, she began to tell the story crying:

"I am only the adopted daughter of the merchant. Orphaned, I lived with my brother. Fifteen years ago for unknown reasons, he injured me with a blow of an axe and abandoned me in the forest. I was rescued by robbers who sold me to a merchant who, having just lost his daughter, felt pity for me and my predicament. I don't know what happened to my brother and it is hard for me to explain his insensitive act; we had loved each other very much".

The husband mastered his emotions and asked his wife for information concerning her father's and brother's names and her native village. Overcome with horror, shame and remorse, he realised at she was indeed his sister. Desperate to keep his fearful secret, he tried to avoid his wife and son. He took advantage of the military draft and enrolled in the army, hoping to find delivery on the battleground.

From the day of his departure, in ignorance of the truth, his wife waited for him with patience and mounting resignation. Every evening, she took her son in her arms and climbed up the mountain looking out for the return of her husband. She made the same gesture every night as the weeks stretched into months and the months into years. One day, upon reaching the top of the mountain, her devotion and sorrow exhausted her. With her eyes fixed on the horizon, she was changed into rock, immobile in her eternal wait.