ARTS OF ANCIENT VIETNAM

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Photographs by Kaz Tsuruta unless indicated otherwise

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VIETNAM’S COASTLINE extends for over 2000 miles from north to south, narrowing at some points to as little as 37 miles, then broadening in the north with the Hong (Red) River delta, and in the far south with the Mekong River delta. Mountains create its western border, while its eastern coastline links with China in the north and insular Southeast Asia to the south. As early as the 1st millennium BC, ships bearing goods plied these waters; the region functioned as the conduit for trade goods arriving from ever-increasing distances. Ports along the coast supplied traders with forest products, sheltered ships from storms, and offered restocking of provisions and water. Along with the advantages of these commercial transactions came the exchange of technologies, ideas and beliefs, the introduction of foreign religions, and concepts of statecraft. Pre-modern trade was a function of certain variables: an area or community might possess a technological advantage that could not be diffused or copied; certain commodities had unique sources, and thus had to be purchased at the source; while consumer tastes played an important role in creating a market for goods.

The four sections of the exhibition, “Arts of Ancient Viet Nam [Vietnam]: From River Plain to Open Sea”, explore the varying roles that trade and cultural exchange played in Vietnam in the early cultures of Dong Son in the north and Sa Huynh in central and southern Vietnam; the trading cities of Fu Nan; the polities of Champa; and the port city of Hoi An.

Early Cultures: 1st millennium BC to 2nd century AD

One of the strongest indicators of widespread trade throughout Southeast Asia during the second half of the 1st millennium BC is the broad distribution of bronze drums of the characteristic Dong Son type, which were produced in large numbers mostly in north Vietnam and south China, and probably in some areas farther south as well. These elaborately decorated drums (1) generally believed to have been used as regalia, have been found in the Malay peninsula, Thailand, Cambodia, and throughout Indonesia.

The Vietnamese believe that they are descended from Lac Long Quan, a prince who arrived from the sea, and Au Co, a princess of the mountains. According to legend, and now indicated by dozens of excavations in the area, eighteen generations of their descendants, the Hung kings, lived in the Hong (Red) River valley. The Dong Son period, which arose in the 7th century BC and lasted through the 2nd century AD, saw the culmination of the Bronze Age in this region. Bronzes of many forms — ploughshares, axes, and the massive bronze drums repre-
sentative of the culture—have been found in large numbers at these sites, some in ship burials (2, 3).

Our knowledge of the trade in Vietnam at the end of the Dong Son and during the early historical period derives from Chinese texts. Even as early as the 3rd century BC, the Chinese emperor’s interest in the south was recognised as commercial: “Ch’in Shih Huang Ti [Qin Shi Huangdi, 222 BC] was interested in the rhinoceros horn,
1 Drum (see lead page)
Dong Son period, 5th–3rd century BC
Noi Thon village, Hoang Ha, Phu Xuyen commune,
Ha Tay province
Bronze, height 48 cm, diameter 81 cm
National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hanoi

2 Ship burial
Photograph by Nancy Tingley

3 Dipper
Dong Son period, 3rd century BC
Ngoc Khe village, Phu Minh commune, Thuy Nguyen
district, Hai Phong City
Bronze, length 14 cm
National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hanoi

4 Lidded vessel
Han type, 2nd–3rd century AD
Nghi Ve, Bac Ninh province
Bronze, height 47.5 cm
National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hanoi

5 Burial urn with cover
Sa Huynh culture, 4th–2nd century BC
An Bang, Hoi An district, Quang Nam province
Earthenware, height 120 cm
Museum of Sa Huynh, Hoi An

6 Bicephalous ear ornament
Sa Huynh culture, 3rd–1st century BC
Giong Ca Vo site, Long Hoa village, Can Gio district,
Ho Chi Minh City
Nephrite, height 3.7 cm
Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City
the elephant tusks, the kingfisher plumes, and the pearls of the land of Yueh..."\(^1\)

Though there was a Han presence in the region from 111 BC, not until 40 AD, when the general Ma Yuan quelled a rebellion mounted by the Trung sisters, did Chinese rule become more political. The Dong Son culture came to an end. The Chinese presence in the north influenced not only the political and economic arena, but also the arts. Han-style brick subterranean tombs, oriented in the cardinal directions, included burial furniture—house models, jars, incense burners, basins, vessels (4)—that incorporate both Chinese and Vietnamese stylistic elements.

While the Dong Son culture thrived in the Hong River valley, the Sa Huynh culture (5th century BC–1st century AD) followed a similar course in central and south coastal Vietnam. In the early 20th century, scholars first discovered the secondary burial jars containing pottery and unusual jewellery that characterise the culture. Excavations of over 1000 burials since the 1970s have revealed the culture’s extent: artefacts have been found as far north as Quang Tri province and as far south as Can Gio district east of Ho Chi Minh City (see maps).

The peoples of the Sa Huynh culture are believed to be of Austronesian descent and therefore linguistically related to the peoples of insular Southeast Asia. Their jar burial practices (5) relate to other areas of the oceanic region, as do their earthenware ceramics, particularly with ceramics of the Kalanay culture of the Philippines. Specific types of jewellery, the ling ling-o and the bicephalous ear ornaments (6) found in excavations of the Sa Huynh culture have also been found in the Philippines, Thailand, and in Taiwan, while foreign objects, such as Indo-Roman rouletted ware, have been found at Sa Huynh sites.

The Thu Bon River area in Quang Nam province existed as a thriving trading centre from this period to modern times. As Andreas Reinecke has pointed out in the exhibition catalogue essay “Early Cultures (1st millennium BC to 2nd century AD)”, the Thu Bon River plain is very fertile and able to support one of the larger populations of central Vietnam. Recent excavations of sites in central Vietnam have begun to reveal the extent of trade with China during the Sa Huynh period, as Chinese bronzes, seals, and ceramics have been uncovered.\(^2\)


The Archaeology of Fu Nan in the Mekong River Delta

A period of increased oceanic trade began in the early centuries AD. What confluence of events brought about this increase? Disturbances in the overland route through the central Asian steppes eliminated Western access to the gold of that region; Southeast Asian gold drew traders; and the Western “discovery” of the monsoon winds and the subsequent development of sailing ships were all factors. With the shift from coastal trading (with ships hugging the coast) to transoceanic journeys, trade routes changed. Our knowledge of earlier trade routes in Southeast Asia is slim, but from the 1st century the ports of Fu Nan, which lay in the Mekong delta in present-day Vietnam and Cambodia, controlled a good bit of the trade through the 5th century.

By the 6th to 7th century, cultural affinities in the area can best be called pre-Khmer. The Chinese mentioned tribute missions from Fu Nan during the 3rd century. A 3rd century account of ships describes a large vessel from an unknown location in maritime Southeast Asia: “The men from foreign lands call their boats p’o. The large ones are over 200 feet long, and are twenty to thirty feet high (above the water-level)...they can hold 600 to 700 men, and a cargo of over 10,000 ho (a Chinese corn measure about 10 pecks).”

The three hundred Fu Nan sites are characterised by domestic architecture built on stilts, typical pottery, gold jewellery, and Hindu and Buddhist architecture with a preponderance of Vaishnavite and related imagery (7). Oc Eo is the best known of the cities, as it has been more thoroughly excavated than other sites, with results published in Western languages, and also because along with rich local remains (8) were found a few examples of international contact—Roman coins and jewellery, Chinese
7 Surya  
Fu Nan period, 7th–8th century  
Ba The village, An Giang province  
Stone, height 89.5 cm  
Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City

8 Pendant  
Fu Nan period, 7th–8th century  
Go Xoai, Duc Hoa District, Long An province  
Gold and amethyst, height 2.6 cm  
Long An Museum

9 Buddha  
China, 5th century  
Linh Son pagoda, in the village of Vong The, Long Xuyen province  
Bronze, height 29.3 cm  
Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City

sculpture (9), and Indian beads. A system of canals connected Oc Eo to other Funanese sites, one of which was the port of Nen Chua.

The monsoon winds, blowing as they did in a single direction for part of the year, meant traders were forced to stay in port for extended periods of time. Located in the wet-rice cultivation region of the delta that, even in this early period, produced a surplus of rice, the rulers of Fu Nan were able to provide for the traders. A functioning entrepôt possessed certain requisites: adequate food and lodging for the merchants, storage and market places for goods. Since ports competed, it was to the advantage of local administrators to fairly tax the ships that entered their ports, and to offer all provisioning that the traders needed.

Situated in the Mekong basin, Oc Eo and Nen Chua had access not only to ships engaged in international trade and travelling the Gulf of Thailand, but also to the goods and traders of the hinterland. These inland traders brought the forest goods for which Southeast Asia was renowned—kingfisher feathers, aromatic and hardwoods, and elephant tusks—to the bustling entrepôts where international merchants converged.

As Pierre-Yves Manguin has elaborated in his catalogue essay, the extensive system of man-made canals, established in the Fu Nan region by the 1st century AD, suggests a sophisticated local trade network that pre-dates the period of Indianisation of the 4th to 5th centuries, when the ports in this region thrived. The importance of ports rose and fell owing to a variety of factors, not the least of which was the silting of rivers and bays. Always foremost was a port’s reputation for fairness and safety, the knowledge that their goods would not be confiscated or suffer at the hands of thieves or pirates.

In the 6th century, the primary sea route seems to have changed. The period of prosperity that the ports of Fu Nan had enjoyed now passed to the “kingdom” of Srivijaya of insular Southeast Asia. Scholars become increasingly convinced that Srivijaya, along with other coastal-riverine polities of Southeast Asia, consisted of a series of loosely connected riverine ports; another similarly organised political entity was the kingdom of Champa, which lay along the central and southern coast of Vietnam.6


4 There are earlier, prehistoric levels to these sites beginning in the 5th century BC. See Vo Si Khai, “The Kingdom of Fu Nan and the Culture of Oc Eo”, in James C. M. Khoo, ed., *Art and Archaeology of Fu Nan: Pre-Khmer Kingdom of the Lower Mekong Valley* (Bangkok: Southeast Asian Ceramic Society and Orchid Press, 2003), pp. 64–69 and 85; also Pierre-Yves Manguin essay in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition.

3 As quoted in Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, p. 38, from *Tai Ping Yu Lan*, chapter 769; Feng Ch’eng-chun.

Champa: Riverine Politics, Ports of Call

On their northward journey to China, ships needed to sail near Vietnam’s coastline to avoid the perilous waters of the Paracel and Hainan islands. The Cham, an Austronesian peoples who had come to Vietnam during the 1st millennium BC, occupied the coastal stretch of Vietnam from Quang Tri province to Ninh Thuan province and the city of Phan Rang, an area well suited to the maritime commerce in which they engaged. The first mention of Champa in Chinese texts occurs in the 9th century, though vestiges, sculpture (10), and inscriptions exist from an earlier period. These Chinese sources, along with later Vietnamese chronicles, continued to tell the story of commerce in the region.\(^9\)

The Chinese sources are particularly useful in their descriptions of Southeast Asian tribute missions that arrived in China. For instance, in 992 AD, a Cham mission arrived at the Chinese court with medicinal and ornamental rhinoceros horns, ivory tusks, areca nuts, textiles, and camphor as gifts for the emperor. In exchange, the Chinese sent horses, flags, silver swords, silver spears, and sets of bows and arrows back to the Cham king.\(^9\) The trade component of those tribute missions, in terms of what was exchanged between king and emperor as well as between trader and emperor, formed an important part of the trade of the time and region.

While the Chinese histories detail missions between the two countries, the north Vietnamese chronicles record the frequent conflicts that occurred between themselves and the Cham from the 5th to the 15th centuries. Located along the narrow length of central and southern coastal Vietnam, the polities of Champa had neither a strong agrarian base nor extensive natural resources. Their greatest source of wealth came from commerce, but during periods of instability, if their ports were considered unsafe by foreign traders who therefore avoided them, they were unable to collect the taxes that undoubtedly formed a large part of their income. They sometimes resorted to plunder of the cities of the north and of Cambodia, or piracy of passing ships. Little is known of their ports, though one important centre lay on the Thu Bon River, where Sa Huynh sites had earlier existed.

Through the 11th and 12th centuries, Southeast Asian ships had carried the products of the South China Sea to and from China. But in the 13th century, the Southern Song (1127–1279) administration initiated a policy of trading with their own ships. This must have been a blow to the economy of the Champa polities, which had suffered from the wars that were being fought with the Cambodians throughout the 13th century. The Mongol incursions into Southeast Asia at the end of the 13th century further opened the area to Chinese shipping, and in the course of the 14th century, it appears the Chinese traded directly with the eastern Indonesian islands.\(^10\)

While our knowledge of the Cham’s commercial activities is drawn from descriptions, rather than goods shipped out of the country, Cham reliance on Indian
10 Male divinity
Champa period, 7th century
Tra Kieu, Quang Nam province
Stone, height 68 cm
Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture

11 Shiva
Champa period, 8th century
My Son C1, Quang Nam province
Stone, height 246 cm
Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture

12 Female figure
Champa period, 11th century
Chanh Lo, Quang Ngai province
Stone, height 99 cm
Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture

theories of statecraft and religious texts are clear from the formulation of their inscriptions and extant temple and sculptural remains. From the 5th century inscription of Bhadravarman that dedicates a temple to the god Bhadravara (a name that combines his name with Shiva, a name for the Hindu god Shiva) (11), Hindu gods and goddesses, along with Buddhist Buddhas and bodhisattvas, are invoked. Most Cham temples are dedicated to Shiva, who is frequently depicted in his dancing form. Female imagery is also pervasive (12).
In 1471, the Vietnamese conquered the Champa city of Vijaya (Quy Nhơn), thus pushing the Cham farther south. Throughout the 20th century, Western scholars believed that 1471 marked the end of the Champa polities; recent scholarship has shown, however, that they continued as a force in the region of Panduranga (Phan Rang) until the 19th century, though increasingly under the sway of the Vietnamese. Western reports at the end of the 16th century still spoke of a thriving Champa kingdom, but by the early 17th century, writings about the region turned to the Nguyen and the city of Hội An at the mouth of the Thu Bon River in central Việt Nam.


9 Song Hui Yao, as quoted in Grace Wong, “A Comment on the Tributary Trade between China and Southeast Asia, and the Place of Porcelain in this Trade, During the Period of the Song Dynasty in China”, Chinese Celadons and Other Related Wares in Southeast Asia, in conjunction with an exhibition held at the National Museum, Singapore (Singapore: Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, 1979), p. 76.

10 Anthony Reid, Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 1999), p. 61.

Trade and Exchange in the 16th–18th centuries through the Prism of Hội An

At the end of the 16th century, the Trịnh and Nguyễn clans overthrew the Mac, who had been in power in the north since 1527, and restored the Lê, who became the nominal rulers until 1788. The Nguyễn established themselves in the south (their kingdom was called Dang Trong) in Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam provinces with their capital near Hue, while in the north, the Trịnh retained power. The Trịnh’s trade centred at the port of Phố Hien, while in the south, in the kingdom of Dang Trong, the ruler Nguyễn Hoàng early recognised trade as a means of raising revenue for the state and promoted the port city of Hội An (known as Faifo to the Europeans).

Hội An’s location on the Thu Bon River proved not only an ideal location for oceanic trade, but allowed for inland access. A good deal of the commerce that occurred took place in smaller crafts that trafficked the thoroughfare of the rivers, lagoons, and streams of the littoral, and that carried the goods of the hinterland to the coast. Hội An developed rapidly, becoming the port of choice first for the Japanese, then the Chinese, and eventually the Europeans. Because of the monsoon winds, ships had to spend approximately half a year in port.

From the 16th century, Hội An became a city dominated by foreigners, many of whom married local women who facilitated commerce with their knowledge of the local language and customs. All manner of goods were traded during the lengthy fair that took place during the six month period when foreigners were in residence in
Hoi An. Among the local goods listed were: pepper, nutmeg, various pharmaceutical products, rhino horn, birds’ nests, deer ligaments, shark fins, dried shrimp, tortoise-shells, elephant tusks, hemp, sugar, gold fabric, cinnamon, and red sandalwood. Examples of the foreign goods included Chinese silk, silver, copper, and copper coinage. The trade in perishable goods, such as silk, or metals that were reused and reworked over the centuries, leaves us with few clues to the goods themselves. The one exception is the ceramics that poured out of north Vietnam principally in the 15th century.

The recent excavation of a shipwreck off Cu Lao Cham island elucidates the nature of trade in the region. The shipwreck contained a cargo of over 200,000 pieces of late 15th century blue and white underglaze (13) and monochrome ceramics (14) produced in the Hong River delta. If these ceramics had been the only cargo aboard, we might surmise the ship had pulled into Cu Lao Cham’s harbour merely to board supplies and water, but the presence of Cham storage jars (15) suggests that in addition to the blue and white pieces, local products stored in the jars were included, or alternately, that the jars contained the supplies that they boarded. An appendix to the exhibition catalogue, “Ceramics from Shipwrecks off Vietnam” by Nguyen Dinh Chien, illustrates Chinese ceramics contemporary to the Vietnamese wares being traded as well as the works from the Cu Lao Cham shipwreck.

Ships coming to shore were steered toward an offshore island where locals offered supplies and services; after receiving clearance, the ship was then brought into the harbour and boarded by customs agents. The revenues they claimed were handed directly to the Nguyen, who relied on them for their political survival. The Nguyen monopolised “all of the most valuable commodities”, in particular the gold being panned in the Truong Son mountain range.11 Trade continued to be as crucial for their political success as it had been for the polities of Fu Nan and Champa. By the 18th century, foreign trade was less important than interregional trade.