

TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE HOLIDAYS

by

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Translated by Louis Andreatta

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FOREWORD

"Traditional Vietnamese Holidays" by Thai van Kiem originally appeared in French in the BULLETIN de la Société des Études Indochinoises, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1 (1st quarter, 1961), pp. 50-67. The article deals only with the traditional holidays, observed over the centuries, and does not include any Christian holiday, nor any national holidays of political origin.

In translating this article, a few minor modifications were necessary in order to clear up any obscurities which might puzzle western readers, and to present material which is essentially foreign and exotic in a readily understandable manner.

Traditional Holidays, with one exception, are determined according to the Lunar Calendar, which is based on a year of twelve lunar months. The average length of a lunar month is approximately $29\frac{1}{2}$ days, which makes the year about ten days shorter than the solar year observed in western countries. This discrepancy is dealt with by the addition of an extra month approximately every third year (or, exactly, 22 times in the sixty-year cycle). There are precise rules for the insertion of these extra months, but it is probably sufficient to point out that 1966 had an extra 3rd month, 1968 an extra 7th, and 1971 an extra 5th. A holiday is not repeated in an extra month. Those interested in a more detailed discussion of the Lunar Calendar should refer to the "Chinese-American Calendar", by Windon Chandler Welch, A.B., and published for the U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service by the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 20402 (\$1.25).

The Lunar Year commences with the day on which occurs the second new moon after the winter solstice. It therefore cannot begin earlier than January 20th, nor later than February 20th. Reference to any calendar which shows the phases of the moon will therefore reveal the date of "Tet" to those interested. The celebration of the Lunar New Year usually commences on the afternoon of the preceding day.

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TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

by
Thai van Kiem

There are ten principal Vietnamese holidays celebrated in the traditional manner: New Year (Tet); the Feast of the Learned (Le Trang Nguyen); the Cold-Foods Festival (Le Han Thuc); the Feast of Pure Light (Le Thanh Minh); the Double Five (Le Doan Ngo); the Double Seven (Le That Tich); the Feast of the Wandering Souls (Le Vu Lan); the Mid-Autumn Festival (Tet Trung Thu); the Double-Nine (Le Trung Cua); and the Feast of the Household Gods (Le Tao Quan).

1. TET NGUYEN DAN, or the New Year Festival

When, in the beginning of Time, the daughter of Flora returns with her train of promises, the Vietnamese people, like the rest of humanity, enjoy this opportunity to forget the cares of the past while celebrating the promise of the future as Nature renews itself.

The word "Tet" is a derivative of "Tiet" which means "period of a year". In this case, there are many "Tet" during the course of the year, but the most important is undoubtedly "Tet Nguyen Dan" which literally means "First Day", or, more specifically, "First Morning."

Actually, Tet symbolizes not only the beginning of a new year, but also a time when all living creatures seem to undergo a complete metamorphosis. For all peoples of the world, Spring is the natural framework for complete renewal and it is undoubtedly the reason why in Vietnam, at the approach of the new year, the faces of the people light up with a smile and why all problems which are likely to bring worry or care are forgotten.

The first week of the new year is dedicated to fun, amusements and, of course, the exchange of traditional wishes based on happiness, prosperity and long life. During the Tet period, all members of the family gather together under the same roof to receive the new year in the traditional manner. It is during this brief period that one notices the budding of the apricot, peach and plum trees, when gifts are exchanged to the accompaniment of firecrackers and when friendly games are enjoyed, while grown-ups and children feast on dishes prepared with special care long in advance.

Tet is by definition a holiday when ever one must have his share of pleasure, the rich as well as the poor, city-folk as well as farmers. And for workers whose hard life knows no respite the entire year, Tet furnishes them with the opportunity to participate in inexpensive enjoyments.

For the wise men of old, the Tet Nguyen Dan had a deeper meaning: it was, the distinctive mark that a new year was being inscribed in the notebook of Time. Thus, for them, the first twenty-four hours exerted a strong influence on the future. Thus comes the tradition that every visit, every conversation must be undertaken with due care in order that no error will be committed, for if such a thing should happen, it could have disastrous repercussions during the entire year. New Year's visits to express one's wishes, especially, have the greatest importance.

Immediately after the celebration of the rites marking the closing of the old year and the beginning of the new, each house, newly painted and whitewashed, is considered as a home to which one would go as if to a housewarming. Thus the first visitor who comes to express his wishes to the master of the house is perfumed with incense to bring him luck; in addition, this first visitor is selected well in advance from among the happy and virtuous people known to the master of the house. The visitor should be of a high social position, rich, and preferably with many descendants.

Meanwhile, in spite of all the precautions taken by the household, there is always the fear of an undesirable intrusion, something that could upset all the elaborate preparations. With a view to preventing any such catastrophe, the doors are sealed and opened only to permit the pre-selected well-wisher to enter.

It cannot be stressed too often that, with the help of superstition, the Vietnamese attach great importance to the various manifestations attendant upon the arrival of this "envoy of destiny": the hour of his arrival, his itinerary, etc., etc. In short, although everything may have been well planned in advance, the possibility always remains that some unforeseen calamity will occur and in such an event evil forces are always blamed.

It is for this reason that among the precautions taken during Tet a certain number of taboos figure prominently: One must not do anything which will disturb the harmony of the surroundings, or say any word or words which are not compatible with the festive spirit of the occasion, or discuss the least little thing, since discussion is the equivalent of disagreement. Needlework and house-cleaning are expressly forbidden, the needle and thread being the symbols of hard work. And as for the back and forth of the broom on the floor, this is tantamount to sweeping the Spirit of Prosperity out the door! Also, at this time the names of certain animals of the ape, dog or pig families are forbidden, since even pronouncing them will bring unhappiness and suffering. Finally, there are certain more or less religious rites which constitute a subsidiary cult to that rendered to the ancestors. The worker gives homage to his plow, the artisan to his tools, etc.

One particularly interesting rite concerns that rendered to the writing brush. Practiced by educated persons, this consists of a ceremony called "The Inauguration of the Writing Brush". The writer, in correct dress, writes, with the aid of a brand-new writing brush made of rabbit's fur, some florid phrases dedicated to the glory of the new year. The characters thus written must correspond to the principles governing the art of writing and must bear the imprint of true elevated thought. The paper on which these words are written must be scarlet in color; this paper is then given the place of honor in the house and remains until the following year, when it gives way to another verse also drawn from the deep recesses of wisdom (and luck).

It is hardly necessary to emphasize that educated persons make an obligation of respecting this tradition. If, for some reason, they do not adhere to this discipline they will be considered as persons who have gone back on their obligation to the spirits of literature, that is, to their great predecessors who have left them such a venerable heritage.

The afternoon of Tet is dedicated especially to exchanges of visits. Card games are played and fortunes are told from the cards. Many elderly people go to the classic Vietnamese theatre, persuaded that there they will find in the play a revelation of their future. (The youngsters are not worried about the future and so go to the movies.)

Tet is not always limited to one day; it may last several weeks, or perhaps a month, depending on the resources of the family, its state of mind, etc. One may say that the Vietnamese make their preparations for the lunar new year at least one month in advance. From the beginning of the twelfth month, one racks his brain to decide what to wear, rich as well as poor, so as to make a good impression on that fateful day.

In well-to-do families, the women and girls work constantly during this twelfth month; the traditional cookies must be baked, the rice cakes prepared, the various sweets and candies made, etc. All these good things require much work and money, but this is only one side of the coin, for what better way could be found for a mother to demonstrate her marriageable daughters' culinary arts to visitors?

To give Tet its religious flavor, the last week of the year is dedicated to preliminary rites. First the ceremony of the gods who will make their journey to report to the Jade Emperor.* These household spirits are also the watchdogs of the house--they note down all your good and bad deeds so as to report them to the Master of the World. To conciliate these powerful spirits, gifts are offered, which usually consist of a pair of wings from some fowl or bird. Thus the Household Gods are transformed into winged creatures on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunary month; their flight to the heavens is accompanied by the sound of many loud firecrackers.

Another ceremony worth mentioning is that of gratitude to education. This cult of gratitude is tendered by students who want to get good grades, so that they can continue their studies, or simply because they want to get a good job after leaving school. Businessmen and artisans celebrate a similar rite, called the "annual closing", which is a way of rewarding oneself for having worked well and hard during the year.

Until recently Tet was announced, even to the unknowing, by means of a device placed in front of the door of each family observing the holiday. This is a kind of pole called "cay neu" in Vietnamese. This bamboo pole, standing as straight as possible, was topped by a spray of greens and was intended to attract favorable spirits while at the same time keeping away evil spirits. This cay neu acted as a talisman and indicates that the property was well guarded. The custom of planting a "cay neu" at one's door is observed nowadays only in remote villages where modern ideas have not yet penetrated.

The most important religious ceremony at new year's is that of the "reception of the ancestors" which takes place on the last day of the twelfth month. The departed are in effect called upon to participate in the Tet celebrations, as they did when they were among the living. In principle they must remain with the living during the first three days of the year, a time when numerous offerings are made to them, while the altar of each one glows with the light of many candles, and while sandalwood and other incenses perfume the entire house. So that the

*See "The Feast of the Household Gods", the last holiday of the year, described on the last page.

evil spirits will not take advantage of the occasion to interfere, more fire-crackers are shot off, these being particularly hated by evil spirits.

After three days and three nights, the ancestors are led once more to the far beyond. After the farewell offerings, gold and silver votive papers are burned; these are indispensable for a comfortable journey to the other world.

Among mortals, Tet comes to an end on the seventh day of the new year; then everything is put back in order in the house and the usual daily life is taken up for another year.

II. TRANG NGUYEN, or The Feast of the Learned

This holiday, which falls on the fifteenth day of the first month of each year, is intended to commemorate the memory of a certain emperor who was a friend of arts and letters. Because he wanted to enjoy the splendors of spring, he used to gather together all the wise men of the empire on the first full moon of the year. At that time he offered them all a feast and these venerable men, anointed with drops of perfume, made it their duty to improvise poems on subjects which had been chosen by the emperor himself.* Today this holiday no longer corresponds to its original intent because there are no longer an emperor nor mandarins left and the learned no longer have any need to be honored in this way. Nevertheless, the holiday remains, but only as a beginning-of-the-year festival (Thuong Nguyen), during which time pilgrimages are made to various temples and pagodas in order to seek divine blessing on each and every one.

An old adage gives the true meaning of this ancient holiday: "Religious diligence on the 15th day of the first month is worth more than all other good habits put together." Thus this holiday may also be called the "Festival of Religious virtue." In spite of that, one must not forget that in former times it was a ceremony which honored the learned.

Actually, from earliest times, even a peasant's son in Vietnam could rise to the highest positions in spite of a lack of the necessary culture. In former times one could see adolescents, yesterday only farmhands or buffalo-drivers, presenting themselves at the examination centers to take their examinations alongside the sons of princes and mandarins. Diplomas were conferred on these candidates in the presence of the emperor himself. After the degrees had been awarded to the successful, these new doctors received from the hands of the sovereign himself their robes of honor. And finally, the greatest reward of all: they were invited to ride into the very innermost enclosure of the Palace. Once into this forbidden city, they had only to select a flower from the royal gardens and the Emperor would have a similar one made of pure gold and present it to them.

Then, on the triumphal return to his native village, the provincial chief was required to go out to meet this honored man, and accompany the procession as far as his home. The author of this article well remembers the young girls of the village lining both sides of the road to watch the man come home in dignity and honor. Moved with these many tributes, he could not suppress the thought of his aged mother whose sacrifices had made such success possible.

*Western readers will note the similarity to the annual poetry contest sponsored by the Emperor of Japan.--Ed.

III. THAN HUC, or The Festival of the Cold Foods

This holiday falls on the third day of the third month when young boys and girls gather on the banks of the rivers to cast flowers onto the water. The meeting of two flowers--one thrown by a boy and one by a girl--signifies that the fates are agreeable to their marriage.

This ceremony constitutes only the preliminaries, for the principal object of the Festival of Cold Foods is the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Gioi Tu Thoi and, secondly, worship of the two kinds of cakes which must be eaten cold on this day.

According to oral tradition, in the year 654 B. C. a Chinese prince named Tan Trung Nhi was overthrown by his people and driven from his kingdom. In his flight, he met General Gioi Tu Thoi who, after numerous battles, reinstated the prince on his throne. The prince, although he distributed rewards to his loyal troops, completely overlooked his savior, the general. Hurt by such ingratitude, Gioi Thu Thoi took his mother, an invalid, on his shoulders and plunged into the woods in self-imposed exile.

The prince, hearing this, felt remorse and sent word to the general, asking him to return to the Court to assume a high position. Gioi Tu Thoi refused the offer of the prince and continued to live in his hiding-place. Faced with this refusal, the prince ordered the forest to be set afire, not with any intention of killing the general, but merely to force him to come out. But Gioi Thu Thoi stood firm and, as the flames began to surround him, he picked up his mother once more and climbed a tall tree. This precaution was in vain: the flames reached his perch and Gioi Thu Thoi and his mother perished. When the prince learned of this self-immolation, he was filled with shame and remorse. To perpetuate the memory of the heroic soldier, Tan Trung Nhi named the forest "Thoi Son", that is, "Mount Thoi," in honor of the general. At the same time, he decreed that the memory of Gioi Thu Thoi would be forever honored on the third day of the third month of each year. Thus it is that the great majority of Asians were called to celebrate this anniversary and, in order not to remind the spirit of the general of the sufferings he had endured in the flames, only cold foods were placed on his altar; thus we have the Festival of Cold Foods.

But two different kinds of cold cakes are eaten on this day. The story of the second "cold food" is as follows: Some time during the later Han dynasty (220-250 A. D.), an emperor prescribed to his subjects that they should eat hot foods only six months out of the year, in memory of a Marshal Ngu Tu Tu who had been beheaded as a result of intrigues on the part of disloyal courtesans, and his body thrown to the flames. In the eyes of the people, this was an effront to the spirit presiding at the observance of the Feast of Cold Foods in memory of Gioi Tu Thoi, for the people wondered why a six-month sacrifice to honor the memory of one who was thrown to the flames and only one day for the memory of one who chose this death for himself.

In order to set things aright, the Emperor unified the tradition in prescribing identical offerings for the two heroes: henceforth two kinds of cake would be used. Made of rice paste, these delicacies would be boiled the night before the third day of the third month and then left to cool completely before being served on the holiday itself.

IV. THANH MINH, or The Feast of Pure Light

This holiday takes place fifteen days after the vernal equinox. It is therefore a fixed holiday in reference to the Gregorian calendar, as it always occurs on April 5th, while it is a movable feast in terms of the Lunar calendar. It is the only traditional holiday so determined. Because of the time of year, this holiday always has for its setting an exceptionally clear and sunny day, hence the name "Thanh Minh", which means "Pure Light". Because of this renewal of nature, everyone strolls outdoors to evoke the spirits of the dear departed. It is this community of sentiment which transforms this invitation to a stroll into a Feast of the Departed. Thus Thanh Minh becomes a day for adorning the tombs of the deceased.

To get some idea of this holiday, one can do no better than to read these simple verses by the great Vietnamese national poet, Nguyen Du:

The flight of days radiant with springtime is as rapid as
the flight of swallows to and fro
Of ninety days of rainbow light, sixty have already flown;
The grass unrolls its verdant carpet to infinity,
The branches of the pear trees are starry with blossoms
of immaculate whiteness
And thus the third month arrives, with the Feast of Pure Light,
Which requires all to visit the tombs, and enjoy the pleasure
of strolling through the verdure.
An unusual excitement reigns everywhere:
Two sisters prepare for their spring outing.
Along the way, throngs of young boys and girls are seen on
all sides
In an uninterrupted flow of carriages and horses,
Dresses and trousers billowing in the breeze.
Climbing hills and hillocks, the crowd is everywhere.
Golden strips of votive papers litter the ground
And their ashes are scattered by the breeze.

What an intense atmosphere full of poetry and crowds! A Nguyen Du was needed to depict the atmosphere created by the memory of the dead mingled with the attraction of a beautiful landscape; the living and the dead intermingle on this Day of Pure Light.

V. DOAN NGO, or The Double Five

The fifth day of the fifth month: The Feast of the Double Five. This requires an explanation, because it is a holiday with astrological characteristics. This precise date marks the period during which the

"Yang" (positive) principle appears in the heavens after the winter solstice reaches its apogee. At the beginning of the summer solstice the "Yang" principle declines gradually while the opposing, negative principle ("yin"), which is at the origin of the cold and the shades, begins its ascension and reaches its rival, joining with it at the autumnal equinox. "Yin" attains its highest point during the winter solstice. Astrologically speaking, it is the universal cycle of "yin" and "yang" which regulates a changing world with immutable laws.* As far as the Doan Ngo festival is concerned, it marks the precise moment when "yang," in its ascendant progression, sees "yin" appear.

*The concept of yin and yang is common throughout the Far East. The national flag of the Republic of Korea, for example, has as its center emblem a visual conception of yin and yang--a circle divided by an S-shaped curve into black and red. The two forces may signify any opposing poles, things, or ideas; e.g., black and white; good and evil; heaven and earth; etc.--Ed.

From the historical point of view, this holiday recalls the heroic trait of a mandarin of great virtue known as Khuat Binh who tried courageously, but in vain, to dissuade the King of the So from making a journey to the Kingdom of the Tan where he would be assassinated. Out of spite, Khuat Binh threw himself in the Mich-La River on the fifth day of the fifth month, after having composed a pathetic poem which he left to the conscience and judgement of posterity.

Informed too late of the action of his subject, the Emperor was overcome with remorse and ordered that a religious ceremony take place on the banks of the river for the repose of the soul of Khuat Binh. He ordered also a great festival to be served, even to the ships, as a token of his royal affection. The order was carried out to the letter but the meal was in vain because the soul of Khuat Binh had been devoured by the creatures of the river. The soul of Khuat Binh appeared in a dream to the Emperor to tell him what had taken place during the ceremony; the Sovereign ordered that the food destined for his faithful subject would henceforth be wrapped in banana leaves. Thus these cakes take form of a small pyramid, tied with multicolored threads designed to frighten away the fish. Since then, on the same day of each year an identical ceremony takes place in the Kingdom of the Spheres.

In Vietnam, the Feast of Doan Ngo carried an even more theatrical aspect: on the said day, beginning at dawn, the participants eat great amounts of fruits and raw vegetables in order to purge themselves, after which they color their fingernails with henna. So as to immunize themselves against evil spirits, the women wear amulets around the neck while children wear colored threads around their wrists. At noon, once the religious part of the day is over, everyone goes to the woods to gather green leaves which they will dry and save for the use of the family during the year.

The popular belief is that even the most common leaves, if they are gathered on this day and brewed, will have the power to cure all illness.

VI. THAT TICH, or the Feast of the Dark Seven

This holiday takes place on the evening of the seventh day of the seventh month. It is called That Tich in memory of the unhappy love of the ox-driver Nguu Lang and the spinning girl Chuc Nu. According to legend, the couple loved each other passionately. Unfortunately, because of Chuc Nu's social status (she was the daughter of the Jade Emperor) and the low station of Nguu Lang--who was nothing more than a keeper of water-buffalo--it was impossible for them to marry.

Nevertheless, the Jade Emperor recognized their great love and granted them permission to wed. From the day of their marriage, the two completely neglected their work: Nguu Lang no longer occupied himself with water-buffalo and Chuc Nu neglected her duties at the spinning wheel. So angry did the Master of the Heavens become that he ordered the separation of the two lovers. So that neither one would ever see each other again, the two were placed at apposite ends of the Milky Way. But as a special grace, he gave them permission to come together once each year, exactly on the night of the seventh day of the seventh month.

Thus it is that a little before this date the black crows built a special bridge which permitted the couple to meet midway across the Milky Way. To do this, these generous birds carried the stones for the bridge on their heads. And to this day all the crows of Vietnam are bald from carrying these stones.

On the evening of this periodic encounter, the pretty Chuc Nu begins to weep and this wave which spreads over the earth is called "mua ngau", or Tears for the Oxdriver, beneficial tears which bring the promise of a good harvest.

VII. VU'LAN, or Feast of the Wandering Souls*

There is a Buddhist book which should be better known. It is called "Muc Lien Cuu Mau" or "Muc Lien Saves His Mother". According to this work, the young La Boc (who later took the name Muc Lien) was gifted with great intelligence and his great filial piety made him the admiration of all the people of the country.

After he had left home to establish himself in the province of Khien Lien, he became rich, which enabled him to send large gifts of money to his mother. Unhappily, she wasted all the money she received from her devoted son. So as to avoid any possible reproaches from her son, Lady Thanh De--for that was her name--fled to a pagoda in order to make him believe that she was spending all the money for charitable works.

On the way to visit his mother, La Boc learned the sad truth; the sorrow he felt made him fall seriously ill. His mother attended him conscientiously, but she died of overwork and exhaustion. The son, as a demonstration of his love and respect for his mother, built a hut near her humble grave and meditated there for three years.

The conduct of La Boc touched even the animals, who rivalled each other in their efforts to raise a humble marker over the mother's grave. Each animal carried a little bit of earth to construct the mound. Is it not evident that La Boc was predestined to attain enlightenment?

At the end of the mourning period, La Boc went to Ky Do to ask Buddha to admit him as a disciple, and his wish was granted. So it was that La Boc was accorded directorship of the La Bi temple and the title of Dai Muc Khien Lien.

One day this great priest was sent on a mission to the Thien Thai pagoda, where souls await their reincarnation. There he found the soul of his father but no trace of the soul of his mother. As he was overcome with sorrow, Buddha appeared to him and said, "Your mother in her lifetime was greedy and deceitful; she must pay for her sins in the underworld."

La Boc, now known as Muc Lien, knelt at the feet of the Master and begged him for permission to enter the forbidden realms in order to see his mother. Touched by this display of filial piety, Buddha granted his wish and Muc Lien descended into Hell. After endless pilgrimages in the forbidden regions, the sensitive-hearted son finally found his mother, who rattled off the long list of tortures to which she had been subjected. She begged her son to intercede on

*One of the three important Buddhist holidays, the other being the full moons of the first and eleventh months.--Ed.

her behalf. When he returned to earth, Muc Lien performed so many good works so well that Buddha accorded him this grace: "Return to Vuong Xi and there you will find she who gave you life."

Once again at Vuong Xi, Muc Lien saw running toward him a dog who did not stop until she could lick his hands; thus he realized that his mother had been reincarnated in animal form." Now repentant, the sinning mother amended her ways so well that during the night of the fifteenth day of the seventh month, her soul flew to the heavens where Muc Lien urged her to join him. As a recompense for such zeal, Buddha accorded the entire family a remission of pain extending to the seventh generation.

It is this anecdote from olden days which was the origin of the intense filial piety which inspired Vietnamese families, and it is the reason why everyone prays fervently for his ancestors whenever there is an expiatory ceremony for the redemption of souls. This explains the double symbol of the fifteenth day of the seventh month, which is at one and the same time the Feast of the Wandering Souls--which are no longer attached to earth--and the Forgiveness of the Deceased.

VIII. TET TRUNG THU, or Mid-Autumn Festival (or "Moon Watching Festival")

If one believes in oral tradition, Emperor Minh-Hoang of the T'ang Dynasty of China was walking around his palace grounds on the night of the fifteenth day of the eighth month when the moon flooded the earth with its silvery light. In a meditative mood, the sovereign lingered in the garden when suddenly he saw before him an old Taoist with snowy hair named La Cong Vien, who suggested a walk on the moon. The Emperor accepted enthusiastically. The old man pointed his cane at the sky and suddenly a rainbow-bridge appeared, linking the earth to the moon. And thus it was that Duong Minh Hoang found himself on the moon. Spirits of incomparable beauty greeted the sovereign and danced to the sounds of celestial music. The surrounding landscape seemed enchanted and the atmosphere was indescribably light. It is not surprising that the Emperor was intoxicated by all these splendors. But in less time than it takes to tell the tale, he was once more back on earth.

Remembering the marvelous sights he had seen on that unusual night, Duong Minh Hoang wanted to commemorate the dreamy experience. And so it is that on the 15th day of the eighth month of each year there are processions of multi-colored lanterns, dancing and special cakes eaten only on that night.

For poets and novelists, the mid-autumn festival is the occasion to render homage to the Enchanting Star. It is also the time for young girls and boys to sing alternating songs to each other in order to tease each other about being taken up to the moon where the Palace of Intense Cold will shelter lovers. It is in this palace that we find the throne of the imperial goddess, Hang Nga, who became immortal thanks to the secret ingredients in a pill given her by the "Goddess Reigning in the West" (Tay Vuong Wau).

We should note in passing that the moon is also the permanent home of Nguyet Lao, the Vietnamese cupid, who spends his time in tying lovers together with strands of scarlet silk.

*It should be noted that reincarnation usually progresses from lower to higher forms; thus Muc Lien's mother's reincarnation as a dog would indicate that she was still being punished for her misdeeds as a human.--Ed.

IX. TRUNG CUU, or the Feast of the Double Nine

The proverb, "On the Double Nine, we climb mountains," express the regret of humans at the short time left to them to enjoy autumn, the poetic season par excellence, during which "The lost stag tramples the dry leaves."

It is the occasion for poets to gather together in quiet places where they drink a special rice wine while composing poems expressing the nostalgia of a marvelous season which is about to give way to dreary winter.

The Double Nine urges young people to climb mountains while others take advantage of the trade winds to fly paper kites, which are masterpieces of grace and technique.

X. TAO QUAN, or the Feast of the Household Gods

Once upon a time there lived in Vietnam two lovers known as Trong Cao and Thi Nhi. Although happily married, they had no children, and this was the cause of dissension. During one of their frequent quarrels Trong Cao struck his wife. Hurt by this injustice, Thi Nhi fled. Along the way, overcome with fatigue, she sat down to rest on a milestone. A handsome young man passed by and, intrigued by the presence of this solitary woman, he spoke to her and fell in love immediately. His name was Pham Lang.

Trong Cao finally realized that his wife had left him. Overcome with remorse, he set out in search of her, but in vain. Being of a persevering nature, he swore he would find Thi Nhi. In his wanderings one day he found himself at the door of Pham Lang's house. Thi Nhi answered the door and found herself face to face with her former husband. She invited him in and served him some refreshments. After this she urged him to hide in one of the haystacks behind the house, for her new husband would be home at any moment. She herself made preparations to return to her old home, convinced that Trong Cao really still loved her.

Pham Lang, when he returned from the fields, remembered that he needed some ashes for fertilizer, so he set fire to the haystack. Seeing the flames, Thi Nhi ran to the aid of her husband. But, alas! he had suffocated. Crazed with sorrow, Thi Nhi threw herself into the flames. Pham Lang, in trying to save her, was also burned to death.

The people saw this tragic event as the work of the Fates. So it is that the people made these three victims the spirits of the household and it is the reason why clay furnaces have three legs: they symbolize Thi Nhi, Trong Cao and Pham Lang. This menage a trois also serves to remind the Jade Emperor of the deeds and works of members of the same family during the course of the year just past.