

Sherry Garland

Children
OF THE
Dragon
Selected Tales from Vietnam



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

Trina Schart Hyman



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The stories in this collection came from many sources, including interviews with Vietnamese friends and acquaintances. The following works were also helpful:

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*In loving memory of
Desla Camp Allison
—S. G.*

*For Jean
—T. S. H.*

Introduction

TO MOST AMERICANS, the word *Vietnam* brings to mind one thing—a war fought in muddy rice fields and steamy jungles, as we’ve seen it depicted in movies and popular television programs. Very few of us know much about the history, culture, or folklore of this ancient country.

For ten years after the war ended in Vietnam, the country remained isolated from most of the Western world by its Communist government. But around 1986 Vietnam lifted its “bamboo curtain” to reveal a nation in the clutches of poverty and desperately starving for trade and tourism. The government launched a campaign to attract American dollars and to welcome visitors with open arms. Since 1986 the flow of westerners has steadily increased, and large hotels have been constructed. Reestablishment of diplomatic and economic relations between the United States and Vietnam began in 1994. Today’s tourists and businessmen are exposed to a side of the country that was not seen during the war.

As more Americans visit Vietnam they are beginning to see it not as just a place where a tragic war was fought but as a beautiful country with an ancient history and unique culture rich in poetry, art, festivals, and folklore.

The land itself is rugged and breathtaking. Mountains cover three-fourths of the country, and more than two hundred rivers cascade through its jungles and valleys. Though several large cities exist, most Vietnamese live in small farming villages in the flat river deltas (Mekong River in the south and Red River in the north), where rice farming rules their way of life.

The climate of Vietnam is hot most of the year, except in the far north, which

enjoys mild winters. Summer is the rainy season, punctuated by strong monsoon winds and torrential showers that often flood the deltas.

Vietnam's location on the eastern side of the Indochinese Peninsula, next to the South China Sea, has exposed the small country to the influences of China to the north, India to the west, and European explorers from the far northwest searching for spices. But the Vietnamese have fought fiercely for hundreds of years to retain their independence and culture.

According to legend, Vietnam's history began four thousand years ago when a dragon prince named Lac Long Quan married a fairy princess named Au Co. They had one hundred children, but this was too much for them to handle, so the parents agreed to separate. Au Co moved to the mountains with half of the children, and Lac Long Quan moved to the lowlands near the sea with the other fifty. Their oldest son founded the first Vietnamese kingdom.

Because of this legendary heritage, the dragon has always been special to the Vietnamese. They consider it to be the luckiest and wisest of all mythological creatures. The emperors sat on dragon-embellished thrones and wore robes embroidered with dragons. In poetry and literature, the Vietnamese call themselves the "children of the dragon."

Vietnamese historians show that the country's first inhabitants were Stone Age clans in northern Vietnam. Their descendants eventually developed a highly complex and sophisticated society with skilled craftsmen and artists. They called their kingdom Au Lac; ruins of their ancient citadel can be seen today near Hanoi.

Eventually the Viets, a group of Asians from southernmost China, migrated over the mountains. They intermarried with many of the people of Au Lac, forming the ethnic Vietnamese race. The kingdom spread over the northern region and became known

as Nam-Viet, which means “southern Viets.” Eventually the emperors changed the name to Viet-Nam.

In 111 B.C. China invaded Vietnam and ruled for almost one thousand years. The conquerors introduced many customs and three new philosophies: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Although China influenced Vietnam greatly, the ancient Viet culture was never completely destroyed. It is still evident in much of Vietnamese folklore.

Some of the country’s folktales are actually colorful history lessons about heroes, ancient Viet rulers, and famous battles. Magic, talking animals, and spirits were added as each generation passed the story down to the next.

Other tales teach children lessons in humility, good conduct, and compassion. In these stories the good and wise are rewarded, while the selfish and cruel pay dearly for their faults.

Many of the stories are simple, colorful legends about the origins of plants, animals, customs, or natural phenomena such as the monsoon rains.

Traditionally it is the elderly who tell these stories to children. Although today many of the tales can be found in books as reading lessons, nothing can substitute for the pleasure of hearing the stories—some funny, some scary, and some sad—as Grandmother tells them by the soft glow of the lantern. It is just one more way in which the proud descendants of the dragon prince preserve their culture.

Vietnamese is a tonal language that uses accent marks to indicate its six different tones. The meaning of a word is changed by its tone, just as in English we can change meaning by punctuation marks. For example: *Well?* *Well!* *Well...* are all spelled the same but have different meanings. For ease of reading, the diacritical marks have been left off Vietnamese words in this work.