

# Journey through the Land of Lotus



There is power in little pieces of postal paper. Stamps serve as miniature documents of a country's history, natural heritage and culture. An album of Vietnamese stamps can reveal much about life in a revolutionary state, as they mark special events, pay homage to heroes, promote national campaigns and even act as promotional tools to attract tourists to the country.

## From myth to history

According to legend, the Vietnamese people trace their origin to the wedding of Lạc Long Quân (the Dragon Lord of Lạc) with the Chinese immortal Âu Cơ. Their oldest son, Hùng Vương, established the first Vietnamese dynasty – the Hồng Bàng – which produced 18 Kings, who each ruled for about 150 years. The country was called Văn Lang (Land of the Tattooed Men). The dynasty came to an end when its neighbour Thục conquered Văn Lang to form Âu Lạc. Âu Lạc was later taken over by the Chinese General Triệu Đà and merged into Nam Việt. The fall of Âu Lạc in 207 BC is significant as it marks the end of legend and the start of Chinese historical records.

## Occupation and war

A Vietnamese identity slowly emerged amidst a thousand years of Chinese presence. This millennium of repeated Chinese occupation, resistance to French rule (1883 to 1954), and intense warfare between Communist forces and the US-

aided South Vietnam produced numerous national heroes and heroines. After its reunification in 1973, Vietnam issued many stamps to commemorate the battles that led to independence and the patriotic acts of many brave citizens.

Philatelic catalogues date Vietnamese stamps from 1951 when the country was united but under French control. These stamps often depict buildings and monuments that escaped the ravages of war and display architecture styles of either oriental or occidental influence.

## The land, people and culture

Vietnam is a long and narrow country that stretches over 1,600 km between China in the north to the Gulf of Siam in the south. The Red River and the Mekong

River are extremely important rice growing areas and the fertile land also yields a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Today, the majority of the people live in the cities, but there are still numerous communities who dwell in the highland plateaus as well as the river valleys. These people have been classified into 54 ethnic groups based on eight language groups: Mon-Khmer, Tay-Thai, Tibeto-Burmese, Malayo-Polynesian, Viet-Muong, Kaday, Mong-Doi, and Han.

In the villages, the minority groups live in thatched wooden houses raised on stilts. The area below provides penning quarters for animals, storage space as well as areas for weaving and dyeing. The predominant agricultural activity of rice cultivation is supplemented with intri-





cate handicrafts such as bamboo and rattan weaving, woodcraft, ceramics, lacquerware and cloth weaving.

Religion is a way of life for many Vietnamese. Rites of passage such as birth, childhood, marriage, house-building, travel and death are pegged to prayers and offerings at pagodas, monasteries, 'spirit' houses and communal houses. Ancestor veneration is keenly observed during religious occasions such as *Tet*, which heralds the beginning of Spring and the Lunar New Year. The Mid-Autumn Festival or Children's Festival is a celebration of completeness and the fullness of life. Before the 15th day of the 8th lunar month, parents buy lanterns, toys and masks for their children. Music plays an important role in religious

ceremonies. Dong Son drums engraved with courtly dancers indicate the existence of music and dance as early as the Bronze age. Throughout its history, Vietnamese music has reflected Chinese influences and to some extent the Hindu features of the ancient Champa Kingdom.

However, unique forms of artistic expression have also emerged. Echoing a rice-growing community's close association with water, Vietnamese water puppets are a distinct form of wooden puppetry performed by hidden manipulators behind a screen in a pool of water. Combining traditional cultural beliefs and ancient painting methods, Vietnamese woodblock printings of folk paintings are commonly used to represent deities for worship purposes.

## Vietnam today

In 1986, Vietnam implemented a series of economic reforms to revitalise its economy. This set the path for Vietnam's admission into ASEAN in 1995 and the World Trade Organisation in 2007. Now a rising member of the international community, Vietnam records and transmits much of its rich history in stamps that adorn letters and parcels to all corners of the world.

*To learn more about this heritage, come join the Singapore Philatelic Museum this May for a 'Journey through the Land of Lotus', a special exhibition of Vietnamese stamps that is part of the NHB Vietnam Festival.*