

# 3

## General Lý Thường Kiệt

**I**N THE HISTORY of armed conflicts between China and Vietnam, there was only one Vietnamese military campaign conducted on Chinese land. The bold move was made in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by General Lý Thường Kiệt who was also credited with the quatrain considered to be the first declaration of independence of Vietnam after its de facto separation from China under King Ngô Quyền in 939.

### Transition from Lê to Lý Rule

The last ruler of the Early Lê dynasty (*nhà Tiền Lê*, 980-1009) was Lê Long Đĩnh who killed his older brother on his 3<sup>rd</sup> day as king, to take the crown at the age of 20 in 1005. From historical but possibly biased accounts, he was cruel, sadistic, and depraved to the extreme despite his acquisition of 9 major Buddhist books when he offered a white rhinoceros to the Song as tribute. He was said to enjoy the spectacle of flowing blood and to have ordered to use as a cutting board the shaved head of a monk to sharply peel the rind of sugar cane. People believed that for his debauchery, Heaven punished him with paralysis, and he had to hold court in the reclining position. Also known as Lê Ngọa Triều –Lê who lay in court, his medical condition is unclear as a person with hemiplegia from a stroke can walk and a paraplegic easily sits on a chair. Possibly, he could have been afflicted with severe hemorrhoids, a large scrotal hernia or communicating hydrocele with ascites.

At the time, Buddhism was flourishing in China and Vietnam. Monks were esteemed in society and even held offices. When Lê Long Đĩnh died in 1009, prodded by Master monk Vạn Hạnh famous for his poems predicting the coming of a Lý king and an age of prosperity, and Đào Cam Mộc, an influential official, the court elected to the throne Lý Công Uẩn, a respected general who grew up as an adopted orphan in a Buddhist monastery. The new king had humble origins. His father was unknown. He was born at the Cổ Pháp pagoda in Bắc Ninh province in 974. His mother returned to the pagoda to give him up when he was 3. He was raised by monk-superior Lý Khánh Văn who later took him to the capital Hoa Lu. At the royal court, he was gradually promoted and became “Commander of the Palace Left Flank –*Tả Thân Vệ Điện Tiền Chỉ Huy Sứ*.”

As King Lý Thái Tổ (1010-1028), Lý Công Uẩn ordered to move the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La. Hoa Lư was a crowded citadel easy to defend but the new site was more favorable for commerce thanks to open access. Legend has it that while cruising on the Red River by the Đại La citadel, the king saw a dragon flying in the clouds. Interpreting the vision as a propitious sign, he renamed the capital *Thăng Long* (“ascending dragon,” present day Hanoi).



Statue of King Lý Thái Tổ in Hanoi. Courtesy of William Whyte and Wikipedia

## Family Origin

It is traditionally accepted that Lý Thường Kiệt (Li Chang Jie) was born as Ngô Tuấn in the capital Thăng Long in 1019 and was a 6<sup>th</sup> generation descendant of King Ngô Quyền. However, the discovery of circa 1159 inscriptions on the tomb stele of Đỗ Anh Vũ, a courtier whose father was a nephew of the general, seems to indicate that he came from the Quách family. According to different sources, he was only 13<sup>1</sup> when his father, a royal officer, passed away while serving in a northern frontier province.<sup>2</sup> If Thường Kiệt was actually born in 1036,<sup>3</sup> this would establish that General Quách Thịnh Dật sent to Quảng Nguyên (Cao Bằng - Lạng

<sup>1</sup> A child is 1 year-old at birth in Vietnamese customs.

<sup>2</sup> <http://come2vietnam.blogspot.com/2009/07/general-ly-thuong-kiet-ly-dynasty.html> accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> According to Professor Dương Quảng Hàm in *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu*.

Son) to (unsuccessfully) put down the Nùng Trí Cao's rebellion in 1048 was indeed his father<sup>4</sup> who died from unspecified cause during the mission. Due to his closeness with the royal family and in recognition for his services, he was awarded the king's family name, and the titles of "Nation Builder Duke –*Khai quốc công*" and posthumously, "Viet Nation Duke –*Việt quốc công*." The Annals of the Song recorded him as Lý Thượng Cát, a potentially derogatory name referring to his castration. Indeed, in Đào Duy Anh's Sino Vietnamese dictionary (*Hán-Việt từ điển*), the Chinese "cát" means "cut" (*cát ái* = severance of love or emotion).

As the young Tuấn, he served in King Lý Thái Tông's (1028-1054) entourage. Appreciated for his intelligence, his strength in martial arts, his loyalty and apparently also for his good look, he became a eunuch in order to be appointed commander of the royal guard. He distinguished himself as a leader and rapidly rose to be the Commander-in-Chief of Đại Cồ Việt (Great Great Viet). The country's name would not be changed to Đại Việt until 1054 when Lý Thánh Tông became the third Lý king.

## Early Accomplishments

In 1061, the king sent Lý Thường Kiệt to put down unrest in the southernmost provinces of Thánh Hóa - Nghệ An. As the royal representative, he sought to understand and relieve the local people's plight. He successfully regained their allegiance without resorting to military force.

In 1069, General Lý Thường Kiệt accompanied King Lý Thánh Tông in his campaign against northern Champa which had repeatedly terrorized Đại Việt's southern coast. The naval operation resulted in the capture of the port of Binnai (*Thị Lợi Bi Nai, Quảng Ngãi*) and the nearby Champa capital Phật Thệ. Lý Thường Kiệt pursued King Chế Củ for a month and captured him near the Khmer border. King Chế Củ had to buy his release by ceding three Cham districts. This marked the first time that Đại Việt had expanded its territory to the south.

## Royal Court Intrigues

In 1072, King Lý Thánh Tông passed away and Prince Càn Đức succeeded him as King Lý Nhân Tông at the age of 7. A power struggle ensued with Highest Queen Thượng Dương and High Regent Lý Đạo Thành on one side and lesser Queen Nguyên Phi Ý Lan (the young king's mother) and General Lý Thường Kiệt on the

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://vn.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090817192020AADPpbC> accessed June 26, 2011

opposite side. Four months into the young king's reign, Highest Queen Dương and 72 court ladies who had supported her were killed and buried in King Thánh Tông's mausoleum.<sup>5</sup> Her crime might have been her secret contacts with the Song through her family, an act of high treason. It could also be her role in committing young Queen Ý Lan to solitary isolation after the delivery of her first child on the pretext that he was badly deformed –a monster. This was a conspiracy to “steal” the newborn prince as Highest Queen Dương was childless. High Regent Lý Đạo Thành, a man of letters, was demoted and sent to govern the faraway southern border province of Nghệ An. Professor Hoàng Xuân Hãn, author of the book “*Lý Thường Kiệt*,”<sup>6</sup> thought that these major events could not have happened without the strong hand of the army chief. The brutal decisiveness of General Lý Thường Kiệt would manifest again in his invasion of southern China territory.

Queen Ý Lan was a commoner who received her education at the royal court after the king took her as a concubine. Thanks to her great intelligence and strength of character, she effectively ran the government for her husband-king when he was away from the capital in months long military operations, or for her son-king when he was still a child. She certainly could have played a major role in the decision to strike China first in 1075. Later, Queen Ý Lan became a devout Buddhist and repented over the deaths of Highest Queen Dương and her court ladies. She built pagodas, gave rice and clothing to the poor in time of natural disasters, and bought back enslaved young girls to afford them a decent marriage...

## Historical Background

After a millennium of Chinese domination, King Ngô Quyền (939-965) wrestled Vietnam independence from the Southern Han dynasty in 939. The Song dynasty, coming to power in China in 960, still nourished the intent to retake Giao Chi but was confronted with threats from neighboring countries.

Around the time of the Việt court's turbulent events in 1072, Song Emperor Shenzong (Tống Thần Tông) was advised by his Prime Minister Wang Anshi (Vương An Thạch) to invade Đại Việt which appeared weakened by infighting and Champa harassments. Wang Anshi thought that the campaign would be easy and lead to the subjugation of Champa as well. His strategy was to impress Song's competitors in the north (Liao, *Liêu*) and northwest (Western Xia, *Tây Hạ*), acquire Đại Việt riches to help the sagging Song finances, and distract the restive Chinese

---

<sup>5</sup> *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Comprehensive History of Dai Viet, 1697); Book 3. Pdf copy.

<sup>6</sup> Hoàng Xuân Hãn (1996), *Lý Thường Kiệt*, NXB Hà Nội

people from his unpopular reforms. To isolate Vietnam economically and prevent spying, Emperor Shenzong forbade trading with Đại Việt. However the effect was to raise the suspicion of the Lý court which intensified its intelligence gathering. In 1073, Từ Bá Tường, a disgraced Song official, informed the Lý court about the requisition of salt transport boats and the buildup of military supplies at Yongzhou (*Ung Châu* in Guangxi) in preparation for a Đại Việt invasion.

## **Dai Viet Offensive into Guangxi (1075-1076)**

Benefiting from accurate intelligence, General Lý Thường Kiệt decided to conduct a preemptive strike to disable the logistic bases for the planned invasion. The Vietnamese went north in two directions. Under Nùng General Tông Đản, they crossed the frontier to attack Yongzhou from the west, while Lý Thường Kiệt led a naval force to attack from the east and capture Qinzhou and Lianzhou (*Khâm Châu* and *Liêm Châu*) coastal prefectures where the Song ships were being gathered and also to prevent Song forces from counterattacking from the sea.

The exact sizes of warring armies are never known as opponents tend to distort<sup>7</sup> their strength to their political advantage before and after the hostilities. It was maintained that 100,000 Vietnamese troops participated in the invasion. Two Chinese garrisons were quickly overrun with minimal fight thanks to a clever psychological war. General Lý Thường Kiệt had his scouts post leaflets listing Song abuses and mistreatments of South Chinese<sup>8</sup> and claiming that South China villagers were welcoming the troops of “Father Lý from the South country –*cha họ Lý người nước Nam*” in their pursuit of Song mercenaries. A rescue column from the north (Guizhou, *Quế Châu*) commanded by General Trương Thủ Tiết (Zhang Shoujie) was destroyed by Lý Thường Kiệt at Kunlun pass (*Côn Lôn*), near Nanning. Trương Thủ Tiết and his lieutenants were captured and executed.

The most significant event was the siege of the citadel of Ung Châu (Yong Zhou, now Nanning or Nam Ninh, regional capital of Guangxi) in January 1076. The citadel was defended by Song General Tô Giám (Su Jian) with only 2,800 soldiers. Just prior to the siege, Tô Giám’s son Tô Nguyên was visiting with his family. General Tô Giám allowed his son to leave town and rejoin his unit but held back his wife and children to maintain the morale inside the citadel. He also spread the rumors that a rescue army was only 2 weeks away. After 42 days of siege and huge human loss, the Vietnamese followed the advice of a defector to pile up bags

---

<sup>7</sup> Possibly up and down by a factor of 10 considering the logistics at the time

<sup>8</sup> *Phạt Tống lộ bố văn*

of dirt up to the height of the walls to literally march into the citadel. After ensuring that all 36 members of his family had committed suicide, General Tô Giám set fire to himself to avoid falling into enemy's hands. According to the Song Annals, furious at the town's steadfast refusal to surrender and to avenge their loss estimated at 10,000 deaths during the multiple attempts to scale the high ramparts, the Vietnamese killed the entire citadel population of 58,000.



**Tô Giám (Su Jian).** Courtesy of Wikipedia

After achieving his objectives of destroying the Song logistic bases, General Lý Thường Kiệt pulled his forces out of China in March 1076 along with an enormous booty and thousands of prisoners that would be sent to develop the wild and remote south of Đại Việt (Hoan – Ái districts, provinces of Thanh-Nghệ).

### **The Song Invasion of 1077**

To avenge the humiliation, Song Emperor Shenzong quickly mobilized troops and supplies then ordered General Quách Quỳ (Guo Kui) to attack Đại Việt a few months later (1077). Guo Kui had distinguished himself in north China battles and was seconded by General Triệu Tiết. Reportedly, the invading army consisted of 100,000 soldiers and 10,000 horses and was supported by a labor force of 200,000.

Under the command of Dương Tiến Tùng, a naval force of several hundred boats with 50,000 fighters and ample supplies would enter Vietnam by the Bạch Đằng estuary. Champa and the Khmer Empire were urged by Emperor Shenzong to join in the invasion from the south...<sup>9</sup>

...

*Please read on in the book “VIETNAM HISTORY: Stories Retold for a New Generation” by Ho V. Hien and Chat V. Dang (available on the Internet).*

---

<sup>9</sup> Accessed June 25, 2011

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Song\\_Dynasty#Relations\\_with\\_L.C3.BD\\_of\\_Vietnam\\_and\\_border\\_conflict](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Song_Dynasty#Relations_with_L.C3.BD_of_Vietnam_and_border_conflict)