VIETNAM’S WOMEN WARRIORS: 
THE TRUNG SISTERS
(Vietnam, circa 40 C.E.)

In Vietnam women have always been in the forefront in resisting foreign domination. Two of the most popular heroines are the Trung sisters who led the first national uprising against the Chinese, who had conquered them, in the year 40 C.E. The Vietnamese had been suffering under the harsh rule of a Chinese governor called To Dinh. Some feel that if the sisters had not resisted the Chinese when they did, there would be no Vietnamese nation today.

The sisters were daughters of a powerful lord. Trung Trac was the elder; Trung Nhi, her constant companion, the younger. They lived in a time when Vietnamese women enjoyed freedoms forbidden them in later centuries. For example, women could inherit property through their mother's line and become political leaders, judges, traders, and warriors.

Trung Trac was married to Thi Sach, another powerful lord. Chinese records note that Trac had a "brave and fearless disposition." It was she who mobilized the Vietnamese lords to rebel against the Chinese. Legend says that to gain the confidence of the people, the Trung sisters committed acts of bravery, such as killing a fearful people-eating tiger - and used the tiger's skin as paper to write a proclamation urging the people to follow them against the Chinese.

The Trungs gathered an army of 80,000 people to help drive the Chinese from their lands. From among those who came forward to fight the Chinese, the Trung sisters chose thirty-six women, including their mother. They trained them to be generals. Many names of leaders of the uprising recorded in temples dedicated to Trung Trac are women. These women led a people's army of 80,000 which drove the Chinese out of Viet Nam in 40 C.E. The Trung sisters, of whom Nhi proved to be the better warrior, liberated six-five fortresses.

After their victory, the people proclaimed Trung Trac to be their ruler. They renamed her "Trung Vuong" or "She-king Trung." She established her royal court in Me-linh, an ancient political center in the Hong River plain. As queen she abolished the hated tribute taxes which had been imposed by the Chinese. She also attempted to restore a simpler form of government more in line with traditional Vietnamese values.

For the next three years the Trung sisters engaged in constant battles with the Chinese government in Vietnam. Out armed, their troops were badly defeated in 43 C.E. Rather than accept defeat, popular lore says that both Trung sisters chose the traditional Vietnamese way of
maintaining honor - they committed suicide. Some stories say they drowned themselves in a river; others claim they disappeared into the clouds.

Over time the Trungs became the stuff of legends and poems and a source of pride for women who lived more restricted lives. Today, stories, poems, plays, postage stamps, posters and monuments still glorify the heroism of the Trung sisters.

"All the male heroes bowed their heads in submission; Only the two sisters proudly stood up to avenge the country."

15th century Poem

A woodcut portraying the Trung sisters

A postage stamp from Vietnam portraying the Trung sisters

ANSWER QUESTIONS ON A SEPARATE PIECE OF PAPER WITH YOUR NAME AND PERIOD ON IT.

1. What was the attitude toward women at the time the Trung sisters were born?
2. How did the Trung sisters gain the confidence and respect of people?
3. Who served as generals in the Trung sisters’ army?
4. What did Trung Vuong (the older of the sisters) do during her reign as queen?
5. What did the sisters do when faced with the reality of defeat by the Chinese?
6. Why would women today find inspiration in the story of the Trung sisters?