

FUNAN (Phu Nam) from a new perspective

Minh Giang Vu*

Vietnam National University - Hanoi,
144 Xuan Thuy Street, Dich Vong Hau Ward, Cau Giay District, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract:

Funan (Phu Nam) is a historical entity that existed during the first seven centuries CE and left a tremendous cultural heritage. For different reasons, many historical aspects of this kingdom remain unexplored. For a long time, it was studied mainly through scattered and sketchy records collected from ancient Chinese bibliographies. Only after the archaeological discovery of the Oc Eo by Louis Malleret did the historical understanding of the Funan kingdom become fuller. However, due to the war, the research was unable to progress further. After 1975, Funan was revived mainly within circles of archaeological studies. Using novel archaeological evidence, this article reconstructs the lives of Funan inhabitants. It sees Oc Eo as a culture of indigenous origin with a community speaking Malayo-Polynesian languages. It also shows that the Oc Eo indigenous culture had lasting vitality. Despite the fact that the Funan state collapsed in the seventh century, archaeological evidence demonstrates many of its cultural traditions preserved and developed by later southern communities.

Keywords: Funan, Oc Eo, Southern Vietnam.

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1. Historical understanding of the Funan Kingdom

There has been a long history of studying Funan. Before Louis Malleret discovered the Oc Eo archaeological site in 1944, we could only trace vestiges of this ancient Kingdom, which was located in Southern Vietnam, according to Chinese records and ancient stele. French researchers have also raised questions about ancient irrigation works found on pictomaps since the 1930s. In ancient Chinese records, Duong Phu's *Di Vat Chi* from Eastern Han (23-220) is the earliest reference to the Kingdom, but the record was very vague [1]. There are other documents showing that in the following years traders and emissaries of

Funan regularly had exchanges with Giao Chau's counterparts in the North. For more than half a century under the rule of Dong Wu (210-263), activities in Giao Chau, including interactions with Funan, were documented in official historical files such as the *Ngo Thu* of the Three Kingdoms [2]. In this account, names and titles like Phu Nam Quoc (Funan Kingdom, 扶南国) and Phu Nam King (Funan King, 扶南王) were used to refer to the population and leader of a country in Southern Vietnam, respectively. Based on information in ancient Chinese records from the late nineteenth century, some European scholars have theorized the existence of a kingdom called Funan between

*Email: giangvuminh@gmail.com

the beginning of the first millennia to around the sixth and seventh century [3]. Later, understanding of the Kingdom was also supplemented with epigraphical documents written in Sanskrit [4] based on which researchers could indicate the location of Funan, which was mainly in the lower Mekong and partly in the southeast border region of Cambodia.

When French archaeologist Louis Malleret excavated Oc Eo (today's Thoai Son district, An Giang province), a series of architectural vestiges were found and many artifacts were unearthed. The discoveries were largely foundations of Indian-style architectures. Gradually, with much more architectural materials found on the extended archaeological sites, researchers were able to postulate about the existence of an ancient city. These materials reflected a high level of achievements in terms of both the material and spiritual life. The existence of many gold, silver, and zinc currencies is also an indicator of trade developments. One discovery that attracted special attention was two gold coins that resembled those with inscribed images of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Although the existence of these artifacts in Oc Eo with origins from Southern Europe remains a mystery that needs further extensive research, the availability of Roman monies is a compelling evidence of a highly developed international trading port.

After Malleret's discovery, because of the war, archaeological research made almost no significant progress over the next 30 years. Publications related to Funan were mainly based on ancient writings, and the French already published epigraphical materials or general historical studies of the area. The major limitation of research before 1975 is that they have not delved into the relationship between ancient legends and records of Funan and the archaeological findings of Malleret and French scholars on the Oc Eo culture. This research found almost no fundamental difference between the two periods before and after the destruction of the

Kingdom of Funan [4]. After 1975, archaeological excavations were reorganized, but they were mainly carried out based on historical and cultural presuppositions of the southern provincial governments. The results of these excavations verified and expanded Malleret's research achievements, establishing a relatively complete picture of the area and periodizing major stages of development of the Oc Eo culture, and providing a more concrete view about the inhabitants [5]. Nonetheless, there was a lack of attention to the origin of the owners of the Oc Eo culture and the historical evolutions of Funan.

A new feature in the study of the Oc Eo culture after 1995 was the participation of foreign archaeologists including French, German, and Japanese scholars, especially Piere-Yves Manguin, the representative of the French School of the Far East (École française d'Extrême-Orient - EFEO). New findings at archaeological sites on both Vietnamese and Cambodian territories have revealed a close linkage between Oc Eo cultural cores and Angkor Borei (Takeo Province). At the workshop "The Oc Eo Culture and The Kingdom of Funan," held in 2004, an important research direction on Funan was launched. It cut the development of Funan into two periods: the Kingdom era (from the beginning of the first millennia AD to the beginning of the third century) and the Empire era (from the third century to the beginning of the seventh century). This periodization is substantiated by both historical and archaeological evidence, paving the way for the study of Funan's history in relation to the lands outside Vietnam's territory [6].

Important aspects for understanding Funan are the characteristics of the population and the "post-Funan" era. In 2006, the Vietnamese Historical Science Association published a book titled *A History of Vietnam's Southern Land* in which the authors relied on linguistic and cultural evidence to argue that the inhabitants of Funan mainly spoke a language from the Malay-Polynesian family.

Most of the inhabitants of the Mon-Khmer group came to the south in the seventh century, after Funan was defeated by Chenla. This book also points out that for ten centuries (from the seventh to seventeenth centuries), the land was virtually unmanaged, completely devoid of administrative units and almost abandoned, sparsely populated, and underdeveloped [7]. An important step toward a more scientific understanding of the Kingdom came from interdisciplinary research about the formation and development of the land, which was published in ten monographs in 2017, including a focus on the history of the land before the seventh century corresponding to the formation and development of Funan [8].

So far, researchers have not found reliable evidence to estimate the beginning of Funan. Most researchers rely on mythical accounts recorded in ancient Chinese about the marriage of an indigenous “queen” to a character from India. The core of this story is later supported by archaeological evidence. The remains of what is believed to be an Oc Eo port show that this is not just an imported product. Approaching the Oc Eo era, this area had developed high-yielding rice cultivation reaching the level of a true agricultural civilization. Clearly, there was a combination of an indigenous rice farming culture with external commercial and religious factors. Founded upon a highly developed rice agriculture, the emergence of a city around the first and second century AD with architectural density, including large-scale religious buildings, a system of canals, and many sophisticated ornaments made of rare materials, is vivid evidence of a material infrastructure, social foundation, and spiritual life. All of these must be supported by a well-developed state organization.

Based on existing research evidence, it may be assumed that the archaeological findings at Oc Eo and other sites are vestiges of the Kingdom of Funan that was mentioned in varying ancient texts and epigraphical documents. The state of Funan emerged around the first century AD. It resulted

from the interactions between endogenous factors, a highly developed rice agriculture supported by well-organized social structures, and exogenous elements like commercial and religious activities arriving from the Indic civilization [8]. Before the Common Era, interregional trade between the Indian and Pacific Oceans had been quite bustling, leading to the formation of a cross-cultural relationship between the two civilizations of India and China. In the process, there was a strip of land that occupied a very important role. It was the Kra strait, a narrow area on the Malacca Peninsula that separates the Gulf of Thailand from the Andaman Sea in the area sandwiched between the Kra Buri river and Sawi bay (about 40 km wide). Under the contemporary conditions of waterway traffic, it took roughly ten days to travel from southern Vietnam to the Andaman sea and then across the Strait of Malacca to reach India. Meanwhile, it only took a day to travel from the Southwest Sea to the Kra strait. Traders would transport their goods through Kra not only to save time but also to avoid rough seas. The Kra strait became the largest transit zone as a consequence. Indian traders soon realized that close to the Kra strait was a wealthy area with dense population and especially well-developed agricultural production. This area is part of today’s southwest Vietnam. They settled and developed this area into an important base for trades and cultural disseminations. The state of Funan was a product of this process.

2. State and territory during the Kingdom era

In 2008, Phan Huy Le established a process of two-stage development of the Funan state, namely the Funan Kingdom and Funan Empire¹. This is a very important identification, which is not only a simple periodization but also a new research direction for understanding the Oc Eo and Funan cultures in spaces outside the South of Vietnam.

¹Authors used ‘empire’, instead of ‘imperial’ to avoid conflation with the scale of the Ottoman, Roman and Han Chinese. In this essay, we use ‘empire’ to indicate Funan when it began its military conquests.

From a purely archaeological approach, scholars also point to the differences between the two periods according to stratigraphical developments. In this perspective, Pierre-Yves Manguin clarified further the two-stage development of Oc Eo-Funan. According to him, the vestiges related to trade, irrigation, and traveling were younger than the third century, while architectural monuments, burial sites, and religious statues mostly appeared from the fourth and fifth centuries [9]. The work of foreign scholars, either based on ancient texts, epigraphical documents, or recent archaeological evidence, also segmented the history of Funan into two stages with different social characteristics². The early stage is equivalent to the Kingdom era and the latter corresponds to the Empire era.

Existing historical documents do not allow us to have a detailed picture of the structure, nature, and function of the Funan state during the Kingdom era. Even information about the leaders of Funan was not systematically recorded. Based on the scattered evidence in ancient Chinese writings, compared with the epigraphic information, researchers have produced a list of Funan leaders of state during the Kingdom era (from the first to the third century AD), but this information is not entirely accurate, especially the name and duration of each reign. Having said that, the following table (Table 1) may give readers a rough picture of the Funan Kingdom.

Table 1. The Kings of Funan during the Kingdom era³.

	Names in Vietnamese	Original Chinese	Length of reign	Notes
1	Hồn Điền - Liễu Diệp	混填 - 葉柳	First century AD	During first three centuries AD, activities and lengths of reigns were not exact.
2	Hồn Bàn Hương	混盤況	Second century AD	
3	Hồn Bàn	混盤盤	Third century AD	

According to the above speculation, the first leaders of Funan were a collaboration between Liễu Diệp, the indigenous leader, and Hồn Điền, a foreigner. The couple ruled the kingdom together and may have passed it on to their children. It is unusual for the first name 'Hon' to appear only in the next two generations for nearly two centuries. There may have been many changes in leadership during that period, but Chinese documents record only long-reigning monarchs or prominent activities. Michael Vickery made an important remark that the transmission of the throne began on the patriarchal principle (first name Hon), but changes took place relatively often and were not fully recorded in Chinese historical accounts [10].

In ancient Chinese texts, the words *quoc* (國) and *vuong* (王) were used to discuss Funan and its leaders, but from other relevant documents it is not difficult to notice that the structure and organization of the state in Funan was different from the Chinese model. Thus, there may have been many hypothetical assumptions about Funan state formation. Researchers agree that the state of Funan was an authoritative organization influenced by Indian civilization. The early and widely influential author who produced this idea was George Coedès, the director of the EFEO. Accordingly, Funan was among the Southeast Asian states that were formed during Indianization. This

²See, for example: M. Vickery (2003), "Funan Reviewed: Deconstructing the Ancients", *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, pp.90-91 and pp. 101-143: Vickery relied on ancient texts and epigraphic documents to segment Funan into two periods: The first marks by rulership with indigenous titles and last name, i.e., Hon (Hun) and Pham (Pan? Pong) and is considered pre-historic; The second came with Indian titles, i.e., Chandra (Chien Dan), Kaundinya (Kieu Tran Nhu), and varman (Bat Ma). Manguin, Pierre-Yves 2009, *The Archaeology of Funan in the Mekong River Delta: The Oc Eo Culture of Vietnam* made similar argument: The first period is marked with "control of flood plains and urban development"; The second began with "Indianization".

³Georges Coedès, *La Stele de Ta-Prohm*, *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)*, Hanoi, 1906; *Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d'Extrême-Orient*, Hanoi, 1944; *Les états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, Paris, 1948; Le Huong (1974), *Su Lieu Phu Nam*, Nguyen Nhie Publisher, Saigon; Luong Ninh (2006), *Nuoc Phu Nam*, Vietnam National University HCM Publisher.

is often conceptually referred to as Indianized states (*État hindouisé*) [11]. However, the specific shape of this type of state remains a dispute. Majority of scholars use "kingdom" as an ad hoc concept to describe Funan-related historical events. They, however, have not delved into the state structure or operation.

In 1985, K.R. Hall attempted to generalize the characteristics of states in Southeast Asia by introducing the concept of hegemony, according to which these countries had no clear borders but depended on state authority. This differed greatly from the "territorial state" that appeared very early in Northeast Asia [12]. This idea has also been developed by O.W. Wolters (1999) [13], a Southeast Asia expert, with the concept of Mandala. In Sanskrit, Mandala (मण्डल) means a centre in a complete system⁴. Hinduism and Buddhism have used mandalas as a sacred symbol with lotus-winged shapes or circles radiating from the central ring. Different Buddhist sects see Mandala as a perfect cosmological model.

Wolter's Mandala gained wide purchase with many scholars using the concept to characterize a unique state form for Southeast Asia, including Funan. According to this concept, during the Kingdom period, Funan had a centralized state located right at the middle of the Oc Eo trading area.

When introducing Mandala, Wolters implies an unstable political situation riddled with political factions. It was because of the naturally dispersed, fragmented, sparsely populated conditions and loose power relations. However, this concept is only from a power politics perspective. The strength of the Funan state in the first stage was lying in its economic foundation. With the location of an international trading port, Oc Eo has a potent attraction in the coastal regions, creating

a complete system and close organic connection. A Mandala-style state organization, with its flexibility, was very suitable for trading activities.

Vestiges of Funan during its Kingdom era are mainly located in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle area. The national territory at that time did not have a definite border but fluctuated depending on the strength of the central government. The "core" space of this kingdom corresponds to the Long Xuyen Quadrangle region today. In this cultural space, between the first and fourth centuries AD, there appeared a rather affluent society at the foot of Mount Ba The and the high ground of Oc Eo. Here, researchers have discovered archaeological sites of Go Cay Me, Go Tu Tram, Go Cay Thi, and Go Oc Eo. Especially on the slopes of Linh Son Mountain, a tomb containing coal ash has been found. This type of tomb has many typical features of Arikamendu (India) pottery style⁵. This discovery allows us to think about the arrivals of the first monks in the area. Most likely, this was the tomb of one of those who used to work in the temples on the Linh Son Mountain.

It is noticeable that during this period, besides residential vestiges, there was a system of land moats surrounding Go Cay Thi, Go Oc Eo, and their transporting canals. Digging a section of a canal in that area, archaeologists discovered a wooden paddle. Most likely, this came out of the system of moats of the Oc Eo - Funan trading port in the early days. Based on archaeological evidence, the distribution of the Funan population during the Kingdom era mainly followed the thriving economic area in Oc Eo, corresponding to the region that was later known as the Long Xuyen Quadrangle. The first capital of Funan mentioned in historical documents was Na Phat

⁴Mandala in Kanji is read Man Da La (曼陀羅), can be translated as Luan vien cu tuc (輪圓具足) or a perfect circle.

⁵Arikamendu was a seaport at the southeast of India, near Bengal Bay. Archaeologists have noticed the importance of this seaport in the development of trading linkages from the Mediterranean, through the Indian Ocean, Bengal Bay, to Southeast Asia. Archaeological evidence showed that there were multiple exchanges of ceramic commodity from Arikamendu.

Na (Naravarangara), which is assumed to be within this area.

The owners of the Oc Eo culture were mainly Funan inhabitants. The findings at Go Cay Tung (today's An Giang), an archaeological site, are important in determining the cultural characteristics of the pre-Oc Eo inhabitants. Here, there were densely populated with various artifacts that had been discovered. Among them was a quadrangle stone axe with an extruded ledge in the middle of the blade. This type of axe is almost identical to the 'beaked adze' found in Malaysia and Indonesia. Southeast Asian scholars believe that 'beaked adze' is a product of Malay-Polynesian culture. Its distribution area has been identified as the living area of Malay-speaking inhabitants - Da Dao or Nam Dao (Austronesian). Along with the axe-like tools, at Go Cay Tung, archaeologists also found ceramic items that are very similar to those found in Malaysia such as containers with bell mouths and ledges. From other archaeological sites such as Gong Ca Vo, Giong Phet, Long Buu (Ho Chi Minh City), Go Cao Su (Long An), and Loc Giang (An Giang), among others, excavated burial relics all confirm that Oc Eo was a culture of indigenous origin, closely related to Sa Huynh culture in the Central region whose owners were mainly Malay-Da Dao inhabitants.

Along with the discovery of Oc Eo, Malleret and Bouscarde also found an archaeological site in Rach Gia with many ceramic objects similar to those found in Oc Eo. This provides an understanding of osteoarchaeological characteristics of Oc Eo inhabitants, especially from the six skulls and many human bones found here. Anthropologist Génét Varcin discovered that these skulls were proto-Malay human, similar to the Upper Malay-Da Dao speaking inhabitants of the Central Highlands. Recently, at Go Thap (Dong Thap) and Oc Eo (An Giang), Vietnamese archaeologists also found two ancient skulls that carry Indonesian (another name for proto-Malay) osteoarchaeological properties [14]. Burial vestiges left in the tombs

were very close to the typical burials of Central inhabitants, where the cultural traits of Malay-Da Dao were well-grounded. This further attests to the information recorded in ancient Chinese texts. According to *Tan Thu*, Funan's funerals and marriages were almost identical to those of Lam Ap.

In terms of language, the authors of *Luong Thu* made a very important comment, accordingly, the speaking language of Funan inhabitants was not very different from the language of Ti Kien, which was a Chinese name of Pekan, a region in the southeast Malay peninsula. This is a reliable assessment because *Luong Thu* is the official historical account of a Chinese dynasty with frequent interactions and close ties with Funan and other countries in Southeast Asia. In terms of writing characters, Funan used Sanskrit, which originated in India. Many Southeast Asia study experts in the last decades of the twentieth century also argue that most Funan's inhabitants were Malay-Da Dao [15]. These people settled in Southern Vietnam very early on and were able to create a developed agricultural product conditioning state formation at the beginning of the Common Era. There may have been other groups of inhabitants at that time, but they were the key inhabitants of Funan.

The main inhabitants of Funan Kingdom comprise five divisions:

Aristocrats, royal members: This is the group with unique political statuses and enjoyed special privileges. From the jewels and artifacts found in the monuments, we can notice a high level of enjoyment among the aristocrats and royal members during this period.

Clergy: The density of religious architecture substantiates the fact that clergy had a significant social role in Funan society. Ecclesiastical power was closely associated with state power in the tradition of Brahmin.

Merchant: Funan state formed under the powerful influence of foreign traders and the rapid economic growth of the country was also associated with trading activities, so traders were a wealthy population and exerted a significant influence on social life.

Artisan and the urban poor: They were labourers whose lives depended on the development of the economy and state rulership.

Farmers and fishers in rural and coastal areas: They were those who contributed the most important products to feed society and create a foundation for economic development but had a relatively poor life. According to Khang Thai and Chu Ung who were sent to Funan by the Dong Wu in the early third century, the people here “remain naked, except for women wearing clothes with holes to put their heads in”. The two further remarked that this was a beautiful country, but it was not good to leave people with nothing to wear [16].

Besides gold jewellerys, jewels and other precious materials that were obviously owned by wealthy castes, ordinary ceramic materials were also quite common. For example, some human statues, including lamp legs found in Oc Eo, show a marked difference in the livelihood of people living in Funan.

3. Funan during the Empire era

Located on an ancient route of international maritime trading, Funan, with abundant food sources, forest products, and handicrafts, became a wealthy city after a few centuries. With its economic power, Funan gradually dominated commodity transactions coming from its neighbours. An all-around development of the state ensued.

From the time of Hon Ban, Funan had a talented army general in charge of major state affairs. He was Pham Su Man, a person with a different first name from the reigning king. This event was a milestone in Funan state formation. From here,

there was a shift in the reigning family line, from Hon (混) to Pham (范), and it also marked the beginning of Funan military expansions. After ascending to the throne, Pham Su Dang “built large ships, subdued over ten countries at sea, expanded the land to five or six thousand miles wide, and self-titled “Funan King” [17].

Between the third century and 627, when Funan collapsed, state structure experienced various changes, but because of the lack of information, researchers cannot restore much of the information about the state leaders. Based on a variety of documentations, a list of state leaders can be compiled as follows:

Table 2. The state leaders of the Funan Empire.

No	Name	Chinese originals	Length of reign (AD)	Note
1	Pham Su Man	范師曼	220-225	
2	Pham Kim Sinh	范金生	3rd century	Pham Su Man's son
3	Pham Chien	范旃	230-243	
4	Pham Truong	范長	243-250	Pham Su Man's son
5	Pham Tam	范尋	250-287	
6	Truc Chien Dan	竺旃檀	357	Candana
7	Kieu Tran Nhu	僑陳如	420-434	Kaundinya
8	Tri Le Ba Dat Ma	持梨陀跋摩	434-440	Śrī Indravarman
9	Kieu Tran Nhu Xa Gia Bat Ma	僑陳如闍耶跋摩	484-514	Kaundinya Jayavarman
10	Luu Da Bat Ma	留陀跋摩	514-550	Rudravarman

From the Table 2 above, we can observe two periods without information, before and after the reign of Truc Chien Dan (about 135 years). Similarly, the identity of the state leader after Rudravarman until the complete collapse of the empire (as early as 627) remains unknown.

Pham Su Man ascending the throne can be considered as the beginning of Funan Empire. Along with the rise of the central court, there were fierce battles for political powers. According to the Tale of Funan in *Kang Thai*, there was a conflict between the children of Pham Su Man (范師曼),

Pham Kim Sinh (范金生), Pham Truong (范長), and his niece and nephew Pham Chien (范旃) and Pham Tam (范尋)⁶. As a result, kings with the first name Pham came from both sides and took turns ruling Funan until the middle of the third century.

During the Empire era, the power and size of the central state significantly increased but the nature of the Funan state remained essentially mandala-like, under which the method of governing remained largely based on the ability to dominate minor states (small Mandalas) rather than a direct rule with military power as in a territorial state⁷. This does not mean that the central state was loosely organized. Along with its economic power, the state was also backed by the clergy. During the reign of Pham Su Man, the leader of the Funan Empire was deified according to the Hindu Deva-Raja (God and King are one) model⁸.

In order to manage a vast empire, Funan's capital was moved westward to Angkor Borei (today's Takeo Province, Cambodia)⁹, about 100 km from the former in Oc Eo. Here, archaeologists discovered many architectural vestiges of citadels. Between the two capitals there was an over 80 km-long canal, which was dug at the end of the third century [18]. Although the archaeological site is not large (only about 300 hectares), the

density of architectural artifacts, including fortified ramparts, moats, and also freshwater reservoirs (Baray), show that state formation in Angkor Borei was more complete than in Oc Eo.

Around the end of the fifth century, from the specific descriptions of the Funan state in *Dieu Tu Liem*, the author of *Luong Thuy*, the king's palace had stone floors and the court attendance was held upstairs. During court meetings, the king wore a long robe with a gold belt, a string of jewels around his neck, a tall hat, and a gold sword on his back. The king sat on the throne with a dragon-shaped ornament overhead, in front of which was a carpet of gold vases. Every time he travelled, the king rode an elephant and was surrounded by a parasol-holding retinue. His escorts, both guards and concubines, also rode elephants. The convoy also used drummers and horns. The court met three, sometimes four, times a day.

Although Funan had grown to the level of an empire and the court was quite organized with abundant material resources, there was almost no sign of law, an extremely important tool for state control. According to the Book of Nam Te, until the reign of Kieu Tran Nhu Xa Gia Bat Ma (Kaundinya Jayavarman (484-514)) in Funan, there was no prison. When disputes arose, the community responded by resorting to divine settlement. In one example, they would put a ring or an egg in a pot of boiling water and make the accused reach in. In another, the suspect had to walk seven steps holding a hot metal wire. The suspect may also have been thrown into the water. If, after these tests, the suspect remained unharmed; they were declared innocent. If he was burned or did not float on the water, he would be deemed guilty and was castigated. It was customary for offenders to be dismembered, enslaved, or even beheaded. This type of punishment was based primarily on religious beliefs. In ancient times, in the places where religion reigned, similar punishments were applied. Westerners called this the Ordeal. This further confirms that religion played a huge role

⁶Pham (范), as a first name, is often found in the title of king and royal members of Southeast Asian countries influenced by Indic civilisation. It did not represent bloodline relationships but a translation of the word Varman (वरमन्) in Sanskrit originally meaning shield or protection. It was then sacralised as godly protection and used for royal titles. More frequently, Varman could be translated as Bat Ma (跋摩).

⁷Luong Ninh in many of his research, mostly Nuoc Phu Nam, argues that Funan state, by the time of its expansion was not a Mandala polity. Critiques tend to portrait Mandala as a loosely organized institution.

⁸In Sanskrit, Deva (देव) means God and Raja/Rajan (राजन्) means ruler, leader, king, or prince. Deva-Raja was a unity of sacred and secular power.

⁹Based on the assumptions of several French authors, the capital of Funan after the third century was located in Prei Veng. However, according to recent archaeological evidence, it was Vyadrapuna in Angkor Borei, Takeo province, Cambodia.

even when Funan had entered the Empire era. Also, according to *Luong Thu*, Funan inhabitants worshiped “gods in heaven”. They cast bronze statues, some with two faces and four hands, some with four faces and eight hands, each holding an object like a child. From this description, we can recognize the religion that was described in *Dieu Tu Liem* was Hinduism. The statues with many hands were variants of Trimurti (the three Hindu gods) including Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The statue with many faces is Brahma, the Creator [17].

4. Imperial expansions of Funan

Within the currents of the international trade networks, along with Funan, there were other economic centres with Mandala-style institutions. As Funan grew, many small states were annexed. Around the third century, Pham Su Manh had acquired more than one hundred kingdoms including Do Con (都昆), Cuu Tri (九稚), Dien Ton (典孙), etc. and ruled an expansive territory of 5.6 thousand miles [19]. Small states such as Don Ton, Xich Tho, Ban, Dan Dan, Cat Miet...¹⁰ were all parts of the Funan Empire. Among these locations, with the exceptions of Cat Miet, an ancient kingdom of the Khmer located to the south of Lake Tonle Sap (Cambodia), and Don Ton, near Kra strait (northern Malay Island, locations are only conjecture). Based on the information collected from ancient Chinese texts about Pham Su Man’s expansion of his territory to 5.6 thousand miles, which was about 2,500-3,000 km (1 mile is roughly 500 m), his kingdom could have encompassed the entire area of Southern Vietnam, South Central, southern Thailand, Cambodia, and part of the northern Malay Peninsula near the Kra strait.

The concept of “empire” has been introduced recently and was mainly to support stage-based understanding of Funan state formation and cultural influence rather than establishing a new concept of

“empire”. Although historical accounts mentioned that Pham Su Manh “built large sailboats that could carry a few hundred soldiers, crossed the sea to Don Ton”, and that General Chieu Dan under Pham Kim Sinh had up to 2,000 troops under his command, of all the relics that were excavated, there is little material evidence showing that the Funan “empire” was a powerful military force. So far, there were not many archaeological artifacts at Oc Eo that can be categorized as weapons. This differs from Angkor, where there were well-equipped armies with horses and elephants. Their unsheathed weapons can be easily found on the walls of Angkor Thom, Angkor Vat, and the parade grounds in front of the ancient royal palace. This is very compelling evidence of a powerful military empire. When excavating Phum Snay, a city that existed roughly from the first to fourth centuries (pre-Angkor era) in north-western Cambodia (today’s Banteay Meanchey), corresponding to the period of the Funan Kingdom, archaeologists discovered both men and women were buried with swords, spears, axes, or weapons forged with iron. Even women often carried swords when they died [20, 21]. This is one of the typical vestiges of those who are believed to be the direct ancestors of the later Chenla.

There is not much ground to postulate about the military power of Funan during its Empire era. Despite having a powerful army, the state had to rely more on beliefs in sacred forces. In the area that was once the territory of Funan, among the remaining monuments, religious architectures such as temples and shrines account for a very high proportion. The number of statues of Vishnu, Linga, wooden and stone-made Buddha statues, along with the system of temples, towers, or tower tombs, create a rich spiritual environment in Funan. Together with a powerful team of monks, the Deva-Raja institution and ecclesiastical and monarchical power united and gained legitimacy in a region heavily influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. It was an important ideological platform for the Funan Empire.

¹⁰Cat Miet (吉蔑) is a transliteration of Khmer, a small state later becoming Chenla, former Cambodia.

Other than sacred authority, Funan's strength lied in the wealth brought about by international trade. Since becoming a centre of international trade, Oc Eo quickly turned into a busy and wealthy port. Its position and economic strength affected other parts of the Southeast and the Gulf of Siam. Under the effects of international trade, many communities moved out of rice farming, fishing, logging, and mining and approached Mandala-style state formation to better integrate into the network of foreign trade activities. Thanks to the direct holding of trading ports that were also supported by merchants and foreign monks (India and China), Oc Eo aristocrats assumed commanding power and then developed into conquerors establishing a dominant empire. However, the core power of Funan came not only from Oc Eo inhabitants but also from the participation of many sub-communities scattered from the Tien river and Hau river up to Long An and Can Gio. Under Pham Su Man, Funan was strong enough to dominate further states located around the Gulf of Siam, including small port cities on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand, Malaysia, and parts of Java and Sumatra. Funan became the dominant force in the East-West trade route and could coordinate import and export transactions across the entire Southern Vietnam and ports along the Gulf of Siam.

5. Funan's foreign relations

The inhabitants of Oc Eo had contact with Indian merchants and clergies very early on and, since the early days of Funan state formation, foreign interactions were mainly with these agents. According to several historical documents, it was not until the Three Kingdoms (220-280) when Funan established foreign relations with the Dong Wu. This may be the first official diplomatic relationship recorded in history. From here, Funan began exchanging messengers with foreign countries, especially those outside the Indian world. According to *Luong Thu*, Chu Ung (朱應)

and Khang Thai (康泰), the authors of *Phu Nam tho tuc* (The indigenous custom of Funan) or *Phu Nam Truyen* (The Tale of Funan), were Dong Wu's emissaries sent by Sun Quan (229-252) to southern countries, including Funan. It is not clear exactly what year the Dong Wu delegation came to Funan, but according to the Book of Wu, it is said that in December of the sixth year of Xich O (243), the last year of Pham Chien's reign, Funan also sent messengers to Dong Wu to offer musicians and tributes. These were documented rather clearly thanks to the official nature of the relationship. Long before that, when Sun Quan gained control of Giao Chau (after 229), Funan had a regular and close relationship with Dong Wu through the land of the Viet. During this period, along with merchants, many Indian monks came to Luy Lau and Hop Pho. In return, the Oc Eo culture observed the imprint of Han culture in Giao Chau such as construction tiles with clown faces imprinted on the tips, metal bowls with high tin content, and engraved copper knobs in the lap and surrounding sunken lines. These artifacts were associated with spreading Buddhism to mainland Southeast Asia. A favourite Han product was bronze mirrors, which were found rather abundantly in Oc Eo, Khao Sam Keo, and Phu Khao Thong (near Kra strait), which was believed to be a territory of Don Ton, a kingdom of Funan. Giao Chau played an important role in the relationship between feudal China and Funan. From the third century onwards, official relations were carried out here.

Around the mid-30s of the third century, the struggle for power in Funan ended with Pham Chien ascending to the throne. Soon after, the king sent two missions to India and China in between 240 and 243. The Funan leader was made "An Nam Phu Nam King" by Dong Wu. In the subsequent periods from the third to the seventh centuries, relations with Funan were also recorded in many official documents of Twenty-Four Histories (*Nhi thap tu su*) of the Chinese

official dynastic history. Funan's relations with China took place in the context of China not yet becoming a unified empire but was frequently divided into small states during the Luc Trieu era (220-589). Funan was relatively far away and had sufficient wealth, hence, the relationship with Dong Wu, Tan, Liang, Chen, Song... was quite lenient. During the reign of Kieu Tran Nhu Xa Gia Bat Ma, the Funan Empire reached its height. The king was particularly interested in relations with China. Shortly after the founding of Liang, in the second *Thien Giam* year (503), Kieu Tran Nhu sent a mission to the capital of Kien Khang to establish diplomatic relations with the new dynasty. The delegation was warmly received by the Wu of Liang, was offered many items as gifts, and was granted the title of *An Nam tuong quan Phu Nam vuong*. The Liang emperor also noted that Funan, although a distant country, constantly sent envoys and always maintained peaceful relations with the North [17].

From the third to the seventh centuries, Funan continued expanding its relations with India. Further west, Funan also established relations with Mediterranean countries. In Oc Eo, archaeological evidence, from the fourth to seventh centuries, shows that there are many artifacts of Western Asian and southern European origin.

6. Living style during the Empire era

According to the records of Chu Ung and Khang Thai, when they arrived (in the third century), "the Kingdom of Funan is 399 miles wide, has many cities, has high walls and houses inside. [Funan inhabitants] have dark skin, curly hair... women wear blankets from neck to toe, wear earrings... Their [lifestyle] is simple but no stealing. They cultivated in old manners, planting one and harvest in all three years. Along with rice, they grow vegetables, beans, sugar cane, cotton and raise silkworms. They are good at sculpting and skilfully using chisels. Many of the utensils are made of silver. People pay taxes by gold,

silver, pearls, and aromatherapy oil. They know how to read and have written documents. Their written characters are like those of the Ho..."¹¹ The scenery of the country is beautiful". In the rural areas, besides farming, people also went fishing and practised animal husbandry, raising pigs, chickens, cows, sheep, and elephants [22].

After Funan had expanded its territory and become a vast empire, Chinese authors' attitude towards the country changed. According to *Luong Thu*, besides the quality of honesty and kindness, people in Funan were insidious and cunning. They were good at trading but often attacked neighbouring towns if the latter chose not to submit. In urban cities, craftsmanship such as copper casting, pottery, jewellery, sugar making, and weaving... had grown to a high level. People lived in stilt houses made of wood and roofed with leaves in the middle of a chessboard-like canal system. They did not dig wells but created freshwater reservoirs. Transport was mainly by boats.

They are very good at fighting with weapons like swords, javelins, bows, and crossbows. Warriors wore armour made of animal skin. Losers were enslaved. In Funan society during this period, besides aristocrats and merchants, there was a community of labourers with the slavery status. Most of them were used in public works such as in the construction of religious structures, citadels, and, especially, digging canals. Canals, sometimes up to nearly 100 km long, show that the labour force involved was not small.

In Funan, when someone died, the male mourner must be high-headed and shaved. The whole family was dressed in white mourning clothes. They had different burial styles depending on each region and family, which was usually cremation. The dead were burned with firewood, then ashes

¹¹Ho Nhan (胡人) was a Chinese name for communities living in the West and North. Some used Nam Phan writing system (Pali पाण्डि). Community in Funan used Sanskrit (संस्कृत वाक्).

were put into a jar for burial. Fishers used the method of water burial. After the ceremony, they released the body into the river to feed the fish. There was also land burial. The body was put in a box, and after the ceremony, it was buried deep in the ground. This form is quite similar to practices of the Vietnamese and Chinese. However, the Funan did not have reburial practice. The most special one was sky burial. The dead were given rituals, taken into forests or desolate places to feed the animals. All four burial practices were very popular in ancient India [17]. The practice of sky burial is still maintained today in Tibet.

7. Decline

The major factor conditioning Funan development into the Empire era was trade, especially foreign trade, but the foundation for that development was agriculture. Since the pre-Oc Eo period, the South of Vietnam has been a region with highly productive agriculture. This was an attractive condition for foreign traders to base their trade activities. This area was a relatively young delta, newly formed over 8,000 years ago with many depressions. Along with nine large river mouths, there was a dense man-made canal system that was made, which was highly vulnerable to rising saltwater. Around the fourth century, a geological event took place that had detrimental impacts on Southern agriculture: the local encroaching sea. According to recent research, by the middle of the fourth century, sea levels had risen by 0.5 m and peaked at 1 m in the 30s of the seventh century. The rising levels stopped for about half a century, then gradually lowered until the mid-twelfth century, when it returned to prior levels [23]. As a result, most of arable land in the coastal region of Funan was flooded and salinized, not only causing rice farming to be destroyed but also turning many areas into wastelands in later centuries. Rice was an important commodity in ancient time, and more importantly, food sources ensured a large workforce operating in non-agricultural sectors

such as trade, crafts, construction, urban services, and the military. Local encroaching seas was a natural phenomenon but had huge socio-political impacts. Salinization reduced the productivity of rice production in the region, creating an imbalance between two social forces in Funan. Coastal port power had its dominance dwindle while the highland forces, including Chenla, who had been in a dependent position, had increasing leverage. This may also be one reason Funan was increasingly focusing on developing its capital in the high ground at today's Angkor Borei.

While its colonies were constantly growing, the centralised power of Funan state was exercised primarily when the king forbade them from trading with outsiders, but at the time this power did not limit the dynamic of economic activities, just like India's multi-port city or multi-polity system. Funan colonies were originally small towns mainly formed under the influence of international trade at the Strait of Kra, a major point of commodity transactions. Among these, Chenla was a country with traditions differing from the Oc Eo culture, the foundation of Funan, while the Cat Miet were highland inhabitants who relied on agriculture and hunting. At the burial sites of Oc Eo, weapons were rare, meanwhile, at Phum Snay (Prey Veng, Cambodia), archaeologists discovered many weapons made of iron such as swords, knives, and axes. This evidence indicates that Phum Snay communities were not of the same origin as those from Oc Eo and Funan. They were closer to the residents of Mun River basin (Thailand) such as Noen U-Lok and Non Muang Kao, who originally belonged to the Mon-Khmer culture and were battle tested [24, 25]. At its height, the Funan Empire was able to subdue Chenla and turned it into a northern colony. Dynastic marriage was a typical trust-building institution.

Along with the growth of the colonized states, Funan's centrality also suffered because the Kra strait lost its importance. Merchant vessels traveling between the Pacific and Indian

Ocean were less likely to use inroad method for transporting goods at intermediate hubs. There were also emergences of Madala polities in the areas surrounding the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, a Malaysian peninsula, including Sumatra, Java, and the southwestern part of Borneo (Kalimantan). These polities formed an alliance and created a shared port system. A large centre with increasing power was formed in Palembang on the island of Sumatra. Smaller port cities were placed under the control of the Sumatra power centre known as Srivijaya¹², a powerful empire that later acquired a partial territory of the Southeast Asian mainland. The power of the Funan Empire was mainly built on commercial foundations, supported by trading activities on both sides of Kra. As this area gradually lost the role of an inter-world bridge, it led to the weakening of Funan.

Unlike the Funan region, which was a low plain near the sea, the imperial capital of Vyadhapura was relatively high and dry. This was the traditional land of the Khmer. When the Chenla state was formed, the Mandala of battle-tested Khmer used to be a strong military support for Funan. However, with the local encroaching sea salinizing arable lands in the low section of the Mekong, highland agriculture, not affected by sea level rise, gradually prevailed. This strengthened Chenla, leading to its political separation from Funan.

With already burning desires for a separation, conflicts in Funan politics became bitter after Kaundinya Jayavarman's death in 514. Competitions for the throne took place and weakened the regime. In this context, secession tendencies among colonies increased. Taking advantage of a weakening Funan, Chenla repeatedly attacked Vyadhapura. In 550, Bhavavarman, along with his brother Citrasena,

staged a large-scale attack forcing the Funan court to flee the capital to Na Phat Na. Shortly after this victory, Bhavavarman ascended to the throne of Chenla and moved the capital to Isanapura (now in Kampong Thom Province, Cambodia). He ruled the kingdom for 50 years.

Na Phat Na (Naravaranagara) located in Oc Eo became the homeland of Funan. The state of Funan continued to exist here for nearly eight more decades. During this time, Chinese history recorded that more Chenla envoys than Funan came to visit China. This shows that since 550, Chenla had indeed become an independent kingdom, but Funan was not yet eradicated. The last Funan envoy to China was recorded in the second year of the Tang Dynasty (627) [26].

Although there is no available document accurately indicating the time of Funan's demise, based on the above materials, most researchers agree this event did not occur earlier than 627.

8. Southern Lands in the post-Funan Empire

The fact that the Vyadhapura court had to abandon the citadel of Dac Muc¹³ in 550 marked the end of Funan Empire. Prior to this moment, Funan had already experienced a tough period. There are few records of this period, even the names of state leaders since the death of King Rudravarman in 550 remain unknown. The lack of information in the ancient Chinese texts indirectly confirms that Funan virtually had no communication with China during the late South-North Dynastic era and later Sui and Tang Dynasties.

Oc Eo originally had sufficient conditions to help Funan prosper, but when scions and descendants of Rudravarman returned, the land was no longer the same. Most trading activities had moved to the vicinity of the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, driving Oc Eo into inevitable decline. Rising

¹²Srivijaya was an imperial centre surrounded by small states in the Southeast Asian Islands. It existed until the end of the thirteenth century. In Sanskrit, sri means 'lightning' and Vijaya means 'honour.' In ancient Chinese texts, this word was recorded as That Loi Phat The (室利佛逝) or Tam Phat Te (三佛齊).

¹³Dac Muc (特牧): The capital of Funan from the third century was recorded in Chinese ancient texts. Researchers agree the name was translated into Chinese of "Vyadhapura", a Sanskrit word appearing in epigraphic documents meaning "hunter city".

sea levels salinised arable land and agricultural production struggled. Meanwhile, rising Chenla was showing its imperial intentions.

Although absent from historical records for a long time, the fact that in 627, as recorded in *Duong Thu*, Funan still sent envoy and tribute to Trang An. This showed that Funan state continued to exist for another 80 years. It is possible that the state settled in Na Phat Na. This also meant that the Funan state placed great expectations on the Tang Dynasty, a rising dynasty, something the nobles in Funan did not look for during the late South-North era.

Unlike politics, culture had a strong and lasting vitality. Oc Eo was a prosperous culture underpinning not only the foundation of the Funan civilisation but also radiated to external domains. Funan disappeared from the political stage after losing to Chenla, one of its former colonies in the seventh century, but the imprint of the Oc Eo culture persisted for a long time afterwards.

9. Conclusions

Funan was one of the three ancient states that experienced significant achievement in Vietnam's history. For a long time, Funan was known only through scattered evidence recorded in ancient Chinese texts, information recorded in Sanskrit epigraphical documents, and some partly tarnished relics found in archaeological sites. After Louis Malleret's 1944 archaeological discovery in Oc Eo, there have been varying studies linking written documents with material evidence to provide a clearer view of Funan. However, over 30 years of the Anti - American resistance war hindered further research, especially archaeological excavation and field research.

Important new findings are foremost about Funan inhabitants. In the past, for many reasons, mainly because of the lack of information, identification of the origin of Funan was limited. In fact, from ancient writings, Funan was clearly distinguished

from Chenla, but the differences were difficult to systematise. With interdisciplinary approaches, Vietnamese and international scholars over the past thirty years have attempted to excavate myriads of historical resources and have made significant progresses. From archaeological and written documents, Oc Eo was a culture of indigenous origin, a member of Malay-Polynesian linguistic group. They had many commonalities with the inhabitants of the central coast in Vietnam. After many historical changes, the Chenla of Mon-Khmer origin were the latecomers, possibly by the seventh century when Funan was in decline.

Another important finding is the two-stage periodisation of Funan. The first era lasted from the founding of Funan during the early years of the Common Era to the third century. This was the period when rice cultivators from Southern Vietnam had an audience with traders from India, China, the Romans, and southeast Asians, which quickly led to the establishment of Funan. Different from polities commonly found in Northeast Asia, the Funan state acted as a hub and attracted those at the peripheries. Thanks to its prime location, Funan quickly developed into a centre of dominant power reaching beyond the original Oc Eo, approaching the lower Chao Phraya River and the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia, around the Kra strait, a trading zone for both Chinese and Indian worlds.

One of the new aspects of Funan study is the combination of the analysis of historical documents with geomorphological and paleontological data. Findings on the local encroaching sea, along with geopolitical and geo-economic analyses, help explain the decline and demise of Funan. This also tells us why Southern Vietnam, until the seventeenth century, was still a desolate region.

These new findings, especially in archaeology, have shown the powerful vitality of the Oc Eo culture. Although Funan state has been destroyed since the seventh century, archaeological evidence

showed that the Oc Eo culture survived into later eras. From the tenth century onwards, Angkorian culture showed its influence on the land, now named Thuy Chenla, according to Chinese records.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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