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The Olov Janse Collection: Material Evidence for the Han-Viet Burial Tradition

Abstract: In the 1930s, the Swedish archeologist Olov Robert Thure Janse conducted excavation expeditions in Indochina. His expeditions revealed brick tombs in North Vietnam during a period when Vietnam was under the occupation of imperial China. The discoveries allowed scholars to gain new knowledge about the ceramic tradition in Vietnam and are one of the most important collections in dating the Han-Vietnamese ceramic wares. The Han-Viet ceramic wares and burial goods in particular are not well researched. To improve this situation and to encourage further research, this article will introduce some of the burial goods of the Olov Janse collection and the burial tradition in the area, which, among other things, followed the Đông Sơn culture. Furthermore, besides the burial goods of the Olov Janse collection, the article also offers a short critical reading of the historical background of the period in which the excavations were conducted, which was dominated by Eurocentrism and a colonialist approach to archaeology. The article concludes that on the whole, the abundant discoveries in the brick tombs are evidence for the influence of Chinese culture in northern Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnam; China; Han-Viet Social Class; Đông Sơn; ceramics; burial tradition; brick tombs

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1 Introduction

The collection of Olov Robert Thure Janse is one of the most important collections in dating the so-called Sino-Vietnamese¹ or Han-Vietnamese² ceramic wares. Janse's excavation expeditions revealed brick tombs in North Vietnam, during a time period when Vietnam was historically under the occupation of imperial China. His expedition allowed scholars to gain new knowledge about the ceramic tradition in Vietnam. Furthermore, the Han-Vietnamese ceramic wares from this time period and collection, which are mainly burial goods, reflect the direct influence of China on the Vietnamese ceramic culture. Through this collection we are able to study the burial tradition at the time and which kind of ceramic types were used. Besides helping to date this specific ceramic group, the expeditions and excavations of Olov Janse in Indochina³ are the material evidence for the existence of the so-called Han-Vietnamese social class. Although the Janse collection is one of the most important collections in dating the Han-Vietnamese social class, little research on it has been realized so far. This article emerged from the work on the current author's dissertation, which focuses on Vietnamese ceramic culture, and only briefly engages with the Janse collection and the burial tradition at that time. As such, it is the goal of this contribution to initiate further research on the Han-Viet social class and its associated burial goods. Furthermore, this article aims to provide food for thought for subsequent critical discussions of the Olov Janse expeditions to Indochina, as they occurred during French colonization of Vietnam.

First of all, because of his contribution to Vietnamese ceramic culture, this article will shortly illustrate Olov Janse's biography and how his expeditions to Indochina came about. In this context, the article cursorily deals with the political situation of Vietnam during the times of the expeditions. Following Janse's career in archaeology and a critical discussion of his expeditions, the development of the Han-Viet social class and the nature of burial traditions in

¹ The term 'Sino-Vietnamese' pertains to the Chinese-derived elements in Vietnamese culture.

² The term '*Han Hàn* 漢' refers to the Han dynasty 漢朝 (206 BCE – 220 CE), which ruled over Imperial China. Furthermore, the Han Chinese are also an ethnic group in present-day China (they are the largest ethnic group in China). Because of the dynasty's prominence in Chinese history, Chinese people began identifying themselves as the 'people of Han *Hàn*rén 漢人'.

³ The term 'Indochina' was coined in the early 19th century, emphasizing the cultural influence of Indian and Chinese civilizations on the area. The term was later adopted as the name of the colony of French Indochina. French Indochina, also referred to since 1887 as L'Union Indochinoise, comprised present-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. At that time Vietnam was divided into Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. See Helen West, *Insight Guides Vietnam* (London: APA Publications Ltd, 1995), 30.

Han China and *Đông Sơn* Vietnam will be explained. Finally, the article will delve into detail about the objects that were found during the excavations of Janse and his team.

2 Janse's Archaeology Career and His Indochina Expeditions

Olov Robert Thure Janse was born in 1892 in Norrköping, Sweden. His first archaeological work in Indochina was from 1934 to 1935 when he was the director of an expedition sponsored by 'La Direction des Musées Nationaux of France', the 'École du Louvre' in Paris, the 'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)' in Hà Nội, and the French colonial government of Indochina. His second expedition to Indochina, supported by the same sponsors, took place from 1936 to 1938. Janse is best known for his excavations at Đông Sơn⁴ and nearby related sites during these two expeditions, as well as for his three-volume publication on this work. His third expedition included both Indochina and the Philippines, sponsored by the Harvard Yenching Institute and the EFEO.⁵

The first volume of his survey is the result of the archeological excavations in Indochina from 1934 to 1939. The purpose of his campaign was to study Chinese civilizations in Indochina, especially under the Han dynasty, and its possible connections with the West. They explored several tombs in present-day North Vietnam. The most numerous tombs were discovered in the province of Thanh Hóa 清化 in northeastern Vietnam in the districts of Hà Trung, Hậu Lộc, Đông Sơn, and Quảng Xương, whereas in the region of Lạch Trường in Hậu Lộc and Bìm Sơn in Hà Trung, the most important groups of tombs were discovered. Their fieldwork brought to light many bronze, ceramic, lacquer, and wooden objects as well as some textiles, but in the destructive humid climate of Vietnam, wood, leather, bone, or any other organic material decayed rapidly.⁶

To go back to the thought that the purpose of all of his expeditions was to research the possible connections with the West, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the political situation at the time, as Janse's motivations were quite Eu-

⁴ The *Đông Sơn* culture was a Bronze Age civilization in the Red River Delta. This culture was characterized by the manufacture of richly decorated bronze drums, which were used as musical instruments. These kinds of drums were also found in different places in mainland South-East Asia and China. See William J. Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow, 1998), 71.

⁵ Wilhelm G. Solheim II, "Olov R. T. Janse 1895–1985," *Asian Perspectives* 26 (1984): 9–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42928101>.

⁶ Olov R. T. Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), preface, V–X.

rocentric. The expeditions occurred during a time period when Vietnam was administered by a French governor, and as such, the natural resources of Vietnam and its people were exploited to the benefit of the French government. Thus, there was a close entanglement amongst archaeology, imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. This type of colonial archaeology resulted in the Indigenous populations falling victim to imperialism while simultaneously seeing their lands confiscated, artifacts looted, and ancient remains commodified. This was also the case during the expeditions conducted by Janse; in the end, the excavated objects were shipped to several museums outside of Vietnam. After Janse and his team finished the first expedition, they returned to Paris in May 1935, where a collection of the most typical objects was placed on display for about a year in an exhibit that took place in the Musée Cernuschi. The objects were then divided between the EFEO (Hà Nội) and the museums of Paris (the Louvre, Guimet, and Cernuschi), with the majority of the objects remaining at the Musée Cernuschi. On the occasion of the visit of Crown Prince Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, the Prince received a small collection of the most characteristic objects from their findings on behalf of the Museums of Paris. As a token of appreciation for their financial support, another small collection was presented to the Musée du Cinquantenaire (present Musée Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire) in Brussels.

The first mission was sponsored by the French Department of National Education, the Museums of Paris, the government General of Indochina, and the EFEO. The excavated objects from the second expedition, with few exceptions, were sent to the Musée Guimet in Paris in 1938. The third expedition was sponsored by the Harvard-Yenching Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts, with all of the finds being shipped there. Initially, they were unpacked and placed on display in the Semitic Museum in Cambridge. In April 1941, an exhibit of more spectacular finds was opened in the Fogg Museum in Cambridge. In April 1942 another exhibit with special emphasis on the historical and documentary interest of the collection was opened at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge.⁷

As demonstrated, most of the artifacts that Janse excavated during his three expeditions in Vietnam can be found in museum collections around the world today. In the 1930s/1940s, most of the artifacts were located at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris. At that time, René Grousset (1885–1952) – a close friend of Janse – was the director of the museum. Grousset's continuous support of Janse's expeditions surely account for why the artifacts were shipped and archived there. The Musée Cernuschi holds about 1,300 objects of bronze and pottery from Janse's first expedition, as well as other objects of stone, iron,

⁷ See Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, preface, V–X.

glass, and bone. Some artifacts from Janse's expedition are also on display at the Musée Guimet in Paris, the National History Museum and the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, both in Hà Nội. Part of the aforementioned collection offered as a gift to the Crown Prince Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden includes one complete ceramic vessel, 72 potsherds, 25 stone artifacts, 23 bronze objects, 34 beads, and 30 other artifacts. The Prince would later donate these artifacts to the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm.⁸

Despite this Eurocentric and colonial background of the expeditions and the displacement of the objects found, the excavated materials remain highly relevant to research on the Han-Viet group.

3 The Emergence of the Han-Viet Social Class

The emergence of the Han-Viet social class is historically related to the occupation of Vietnam by China. With the defeat of the rebellion of the "Trung sisters" 仝婆徵⁹ in 43 CE by Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BCE – 49 CE) and his troops, the Han-Viet Era began. Ma Yuan was a Chinese military general who led the Han army through difficult terrain towards the Red River Delta where they arrived in early 43 CE.¹⁰ The intrusion of Ma Yuan and his troops had far-reaching consequences for Vietnam. Before Ma Yuan, the southward expansion of the Chinese government held Vietnam under its control, but it was still an indirect administration through the local Vietnamese aristocracy. After repressing the Vietnamese revolt, the Han tightened their control over the rebellious people and forced their integration into the Chinese empire. Vietnam was no longer a semi-autonomous territory, but directly incorporated into the Chinese administrative structure, and as such, was fully exposed to Chinese political institutions, art, architecture, literature, and the written language.¹¹

Besides these major changes on the administrative levels, Han soldiers were deployed to protect the Han officials. These adjustments relocated thou-

⁸ Anna Källén and Johan Hegardt, *The Archaeologist in-between Olov Janse 1892–1985*, (Göteborg & Stockholm: Makadam Publishers, 2021), 453–455.

⁹ The two sisters, Trưng Trắc 徵側 and Trưng Nhị 徵貳, were two highly educated daughters of a Lạc lord. They led the revolt against the Chinese administrators, after the dissatisfaction of the Vietnamese people when taxes were raised. The older sister Trưng Trắc declared herself queen when she successfully banished the Chinese administrators. Although the rebellion of the "Trung sisters" did only last for approximately three years, they became cult figures in Vietnamese history for their role as heroic patriots. See Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam*, 258.

¹⁰ Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 39–43.

¹¹ See William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986), 3–4.

sands of Han Chinese to Vietnam and thus were considered to be one of the first major establishments of Han immigrants in Vietnamese society. Before Ma Yuan's strategy to relocate thousands of Han Chinese to Vietnam, there had already been occasional relocations of Chinese in Vietnam every time Vietnam was occupied by China, but not to this extent. Under Ma Yuan's strategy, not only did Han officials immigrate to Vietnam, but also soldiers settled there. However, this massive number of immigrants led to a certain problem: the formation of their own families. Some men married women who came from northern China and were sent there just for the marriage. Others married women who were of Chinese descent, though most married local women.¹²

Besides the emerging Han soldiers and local Vietnamese groups, another group was formed: the Han-Vietnamese social class. Han officials and Vietnamese locals built this new social class, which, over time, became increasingly characterized by local concerns, partly reflected through their engagement in periodic revolts. Despite the passage of time and the alleged benefits of Chinese rule, many Vietnamese refused the occupation outright, and the full integration of the Han-Viet people into Vietnamese society resulted in them turning against their former home country.¹³

4 Burial Traditions

Tombs in ancient China can be categorized into different groups by means of materials (timber, brick, stone), locations (open-pit, cave, rock), structural type (flat-roofed, arched, vaulted), layout design (single-chamber, multiple-chamber, front-rear), and decorative details (pictorial-bricks, stone-relief, mural-painting).¹⁴ During the Han dynasty, the center of ancestral worship shifted away from royal temples to tombs of powerful local rulers and finally to individual tombs. Consequently, tomb construction and burial goods became more important, and, over time, the construction of these tombs acquired temple-like architecture.¹⁵

Generally, a Han tomb consisted of a substructure and a superstructure complex. The underground chambers varied in material, form, layout, and construction. During the Han dynasty, timber tombs were gradually replaced by

¹² Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 45–49.

¹³ Duiker, *China and Vietnam*, 4.

¹⁴ Qinghua Guo, "Tomb Architecture of Dynastic China: Old and New Questions," *Architectural History* 47 (2004): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1568814>.

¹⁵ Hung Wu, "Enlivening the Soul in Chinese Tombs," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 55/56 (2009): 22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608834>.

masonry tombs. The number of subsidiary spaces increased and the tombs and were equipped with daily household objects as well as miniature versions of those objects. The Han Chinese believed that the afterlife was similar to the present life in the manner of living; consequently, the deceased was treated as if alive, and provided with all necessities, including a kitchen and bathroom.¹⁶

Before the arrival of Han immigrants, the burial tradition in the area followed the Đông Sơn culture (ca. 10,000 BCE – 200 CE), where the deceased was buried in an earthen tomb. In these earthen tombs, the deceased was either buried without a casket, in a boat-shaped coffin, in a bamboo basket, or even in ceramic jars.¹⁷ According to Nguyễn Văn Cường, director of the National Museum of History: “Burial is an important ritual in Đông Sơn culture, as people believe that each death marks the beginning of a new life in another world. As such, they buried the dead with their tools, weapons, musical instruments, jewelry, etc.”¹⁸

After the settling of Han officials and Han soldiers in Vietnam, they eventually gained extensive influence over the local burial traditions. The new Han-Viet social class combined the Han and local traditions with funerary customs exemplifying this combination, with the introduction of brick tombs being a case in point. More than 100 Han-style brick tombs have been excavated in northern Vietnam, though notably, no brick tombs have been discovered further south than the Thanh Hóa province, in present northeastern Vietnam.¹⁹ This is due to the extent of Vietnamese territory at that time, which reached no further than what is now Central Vietnam.

The composition, material, and especially the burial goods offer an insight into the new Han-Viet social class, with certain objects made especially for burial as a symbolic reminder of the world of the living. Architectural models, implements of funerary offerings, and ceramics imitating everyday objects belonged to this tradition, representing the wealth of the deceased.²⁰ Among the

¹⁶ Guo, “Tomb Architecture of Dynastic China,” 1, 16, 20–21.

¹⁷ The use of boat-shaped coffins reflected the idea that the life of a person is connected to the water, while the burial of corpses in the earth was meant to give back to the cycle of life. Văn Đoàn Nguyễn, “Dong Son culture,” last modified July 25, 2022, <http://baotanglichsu.vn/en/Articles/3188/16726/dong-son-culture-in-vietnam-90-years-of-discovery-and-study-part-2.html>.

¹⁸ Trinh Nguyen, “Dong Son artifacts,” last modified July 25, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220127204034/http://www.thanhniennews.com/arts-culture/dong-son-artifacts-on-display-in-vietnams-capital-34115.html#:~:text=%20E2%80%9CBurial%20is%20an%20important%20ritual,%2C%20etc.%E2%80%9D%20he%20said>.

¹⁹ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 54.

²⁰ Helen Loveday, *Việt Nam: Collection vietnamienne du musée Cernuschi* (Paris: Findakly/Paris Musées, 2006), 61.

burial goods, the durable ceramic objects depict Han-style ceramic patterns produced with materials from northern Vietnam. The Han-style ceramics differ from the Đông Sơn ceramics, which were simpler and not as sophisticated as its bronze vessels, for which it is famous. The ceramic objects were usually unglazed earthen wares with imprinted comb or wave patterns, whereas the Han-style ceramics usually featured a grayish white glaze, sometimes with green glaze spots. The most common Han-style ceramic shape was the so-called *hu* (壺), a baluster-shaped vase, which copied bronze vessels.

Besides the imitation of bronze vessels, the Han-style ceramics also copied lacquerware. For instance, it seems that lacquered wood cups with two handles were too expensive to be burial goods and hence ceramic versions were produced (Fig. 1). Janse and his team excavated these ceramic wood cups with two handles but did not find any ‘lacquer version’ of these cups in the Han-Viet tombs. However, such lacquered wooden cups with two handles were discovered in the famous Mawangdui tomb, which belongs to the open-pit timber tomb category. This and other tombs belonged to the family of the Chancellor of the Changsha Kingdom Li Cang 利蒼.²¹ The artifacts of this tomb show a high level of craftsmanship and provide a good example that no expense had been spared for the upper class.



Fig. 1: Ceramic wood cups with two handles, 2nd to 3rd century, Vietnam National History Museum (photo by Ngọc Hân Lê).

²¹ Mawangdui (馬王堆; lit. ‘Mound of the Horse King’) is an archaeological site located in Changsha, China. The site consists of two saddle-shaped hills and contained the tombs of three people from the Changsha Kingdom during the western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE). The site was excavated from 1972 to 1974. See David D. Buck, “Three Han dynasty tombs at Ma-wang-tui,” *World Archaeology* 7, no. 1 (1975), 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1975.9979619>.

The brick tombs and their burial objects are evidence of the material culture of the Han-Viet social class (Fig. 2). However, one must bear in mind that these brick tombs, along with their burial goods, were reserved for the aristocratic class. Even if the burial goods imitated expensive bronze vessels and lacquerwares, they were nonetheless costly. Therefore, it should be taken into account that not all Han immigrants were from a ruling class, with the majority of the immigrants of the Ma Yuan era being soldiers, laborers, and technicians.²² While the emerging Han-Viet social class and their burial tradition suggests that Vietnamese people completely assimilated to the new rule of the Han Chinese, the discovery of ancient villages and earthen graves in Hà Nội demonstrates that the Vietnamese still maintained aspects of Đông Sơn culture. The ancient Vietnamese villagers maintained the traditional lifestyle associated with rice cultivation and fishing, and, importantly, they buried their deceased within the settlement site. The Han brick tombs and the indigenous earthen graves co-existed, interfered with each other, and continuously changed.²³



Fig. 2: Han tomb excavated in Nghi Vệ (Bắc Ninh province) (photo courtesy of the Vietnam National History Museum).

²² Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 52–54.

²³ Tống Trung Tín, *Văn hiến Thăng Long: Bằng chứng khảo cổ học Thăng Long Civilization: Archaeological Evidence* (Hanoi: Hanoi Publishing House, 2020), 129, 137.

5 The Brick Tombs

The tombs that Olov Janse and his team excavated were mainly constructed of bricks and date back to the Han 漢朝 (206 BCE – 220 CE), Tang 唐朝 (618 – 907 CE) and Song 宋朝 (960 CE – 1279 CE) dynasties. In his report, he described the tombs as being comprised of a mound or tumulus covering a hypogeum or subterranean construction, which were generally made of bricks. Usually, the hypogeum was covered by a mound of sand, or clay mixed with sand or soil. In close proximity to the tombs, there were occasionally one or more wooden houses or shelters intended for the cult of the deceased.²⁴

The excavation in North Vietnam revealed that the mound likely had the shape of a truncated pyramid on a rectangular base. Janse described this kind of tomb as being typical for the Qin 秦朝 (221 BCE – 206 BCE) and Han periods. In North Vietnam and China, the mound and the trench contained the hypogeum. They were often oriented to the cardinal points, but the orientations of the mound and of the hypogeum were not always exactly in the same axis. He noticed some differences between the tombs in China and those that he discovered in North Vietnam. The Chinese tumuli (mostly tombs for the upper-class people) were bordered by a trench or an enclosure, forming a rectangle and having four entrances which marked the cardinal points, whereas the North Vietnam tombs had no trace of such trenches or enclosures. Until today there has been no more evidence contradicting Janse's observations on that matter.

The size of the tumuli apparently corresponded to the rank of the deceased. The average size of the tumuli in North Vietnam was about 18 to 21 meters in length by 15 to 18 meters in width with a height of about 1.5 to 2 meters.²⁵ Most of the brick tombs are in the shape of a funnel or two semi-cylinders placed on the same axis. The entire construction measures about 6 to 8 meters in length, about 2 meters in width, and 1.5 to 2 meters in height. Above the tombs of the deceased could have been a cabin or a shelter made of bamboo and provided with a roof, where, during the period of mourning, relatives gathered to pay their respects and tributes to the deceased. However, because of the perishable nature of the materials, none of them have been preserved, though it is likely that this custom existed then, as it is a funerary custom in North Vietnam today.

The interior of the hypogeum was generally divided into two or three compartments or chambers, usually separated by arches. Because of the fact that a

²⁴ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–5.

few of the tombs²⁶ that Janse and his team excavated were untouched since the time of burial, with each funerary object being found in its original position, it was easy for the team to determine the purpose of the different compartments. When there was only one compartment, it was certainly intended for a coffin. Usually, food vessels were placed around the coffin or at one end of the tomb. When there were two compartments, the larger one was intended to house the coffin, and the food vessels were placed at its sides. The second compartment may also have been used as an offering hall. When there were three compartments, the central one was intended for housing the coffin, the compartment at the far end of the tomb was intended for storing the food, and the other compartment at the tomb's entrance was an offering hall. A tomb having more than three compartments was uncommon, and in those cases, Janse was not sure what purposes they served.²⁷ As of yet there is no research indicating their purpose.

The material used in the constructions of the hypogeum was overall brick, but in some cases, wood was used for the construction of walls and roofs. Unlike the Chinese tombs, which were made mainly of stone, the North Vietnamese tombs were constructed of bricks and wood. The bricks, which were rather brittle, were red and undecorated and measured 35 x 15 x 3.5 centimeters. Janse observed that no mortar was used, with the interstices rather being filled with a very thin layer of sand or earth.²⁸

Generally, there was only one hypogeum under each mound, but in some cases, two tombs were covered by the same mound, which may have belonged to a married couple, with the larger of the two possibly belonging to the husband. In some cases, the larger tomb was emptied of its funerary deposits and the body and the smaller construction were left untouched. This phenomenon could be explained by the rule that requires the bones of ruling-class Han Chinese men to be returned to their homes for burial, regardless of where they died. As such, the remains of the wife were probably left behind while those of the husband were sent to China to be buried amongst his departed relatives.²⁹ Another explanation for why the tombs often contained no skeletal remains is the fact that bones and any other perishable material disintegrated due to the corrosive soil and harsh climatic environment of North Vietnam.

The place and orientation of a tomb are very important in Chinese and Vietnamese culture, and therefore, the location of the brick tombs was likely cho-

²⁶ Tombs that were discovered untouched since the burial have been found: *Lạch Trường* 3, 4, 13A, *Hoà Chung* 1B, *Thung Thôn* 1A, 1B and *Mân Thôn* 1A (according to Janse's categorization).

²⁷ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 16–17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

sen very carefully. Some factors may have been the connection to streams, aerial currents as well as hills and mountains – the so-called *Yin* and *Yang* principle.³⁰ The choice is considered to be very important not only for the deceased but also for the relatives still alive. It is believed to this day that the deceased one, on entering a posthumous life, becomes a powerful spirit who is capable of influencing the welfare of the entire family. It is still customary among the Vietnamese to impute misfortune in the family to a parent inadequately buried. In such cases, an exhumation of the body is conducted and the remains of the deceased are buried elsewhere in a place carefully selected by a geomancer, who consults a special compass.³¹ Despite the current cultural weight of burial places, the orientation of the brick tombs seems to have followed no general pattern, though it might be expected that the old Chinese rule of orientation in the direction of north and south would be prevalent, with the dead facing south.

One tomb that stood out from the others because of its size was the tomb from Đại Khối, a district in Thanh Hóa. This tomb has five compartments: a central one, square in cross-section, and four diametrically arranged elongated ones at each side. The central compartment was perhaps the offering hall, the first compartment may have been intended for food storage, the second and third compartments may have been intended to house the coffin of a man and a woman, and the last compartment may have been intended as the entrance.³²

The untouched tomb Lạch Trường 4 was very helpful regarding the classification of the compartments. This tomb was divided into three compartments: a large central one for the coffin and western and eastern compartments. The former was used for food storage while the latter was used for offerings. The offering hall contained a few objects, like vases, dishes and a lamp. It is possible that these objects were placed like this for the altar of the ancestors. A wooden or lacquered wood table or a tray for offerings have not been found, maybe because its material may have decayed. In general, the putative offering hall was larger or higher than the food storage compartment. Often there was found a niche or alcove formed by an arch supporting the far wall, but its purpose is unknown.³³

³⁰ The concept of *Yin* and *Yang* is associated in Chinese thought with the idea of a cyclical theory of becoming and dissolution and interdependence between the world of nature and human events. Thus, the surroundings (streams, aerial currents as well as hills and mountains) play an essential role in how the location and orientation of a tomb are decided. See “Yinyang,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified September 3, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yinyang>.

³¹ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 21–24.

³² *Ibid.*, 13, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

Other untouched tombs besides Lạch Trường 4 are Lạch Trường 3, 13A, Hoà Chung 1B, Thung Thôn 1A, 1B and Mân Thôn 1A. These untouched tombs allowed Janse to identify the position and contents of the funerary goods. Funerary goods are clothes and objects of personal adornment, such as rings, coin charms, and beads. Other personal belongings were also excavated, such as a few bowls, and in some exceptional cases a sword and a mirror and a few objects of iron. Food and drink were also placed in the tombs preserved in jars, vases, cooking vessels, or imitations of such. Miniature house models were placed in one end of the tombs, often in a special storage room, among the jars. Most of the objects are made of terracotta, but a few are of bronze. Besides the rare bronze objects, various objects of lacquered wood, terracotta and sometimes of iron were discovered, probably connected with the idea of worship and sacrifices as lamps, incense burners, cups, and so on. These objects, of which the wooden and perishable ones were not preserved, were originally positioned near the false entrance of the tomb, and in many cases in a special compartment separated from the coffin by an arch.³⁴

Of all the tombs that Janse and his team excavated in North Vietnam, only once did they discover parts of a wooden coffin (Lạch Trường 8). It was discovered placed on two transversal levels, but most likely it had been removed from its original position during a violation of the tomb. The original shape of the coffin is unknown because only the lower part of the coffin had been preserved. It could have been made from a hollowed trunk of a tree. According to the *Liji* 禮記 ('Book of Rites') the custom of burying the deceased in wooden coffins became common during the Shang dynasty 商朝 (1600 BCE – 1046 BCE).³⁵

According to Chinese rituals, High Officials were supposed to be buried in coffins placed inside one or two others and the empty space between the coffins was filled with shells. In the tomb Đông-ta'c 1 they discovered large shells, which may indicate that this tomb followed this particular Chinese custom.³⁶

³⁴ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China, Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 24–25.

³⁵ In Chapter 35 'Questions About Mourning Rites 問喪' (*Wèn sàng*), the second passage stated: “三日而斂·在床曰尸·在棺曰柩·動尸舉柩·哭踊無數。” (*Sān rì ér liǎn, zài chuáng yuē shī, zài guān yuē jiù, dòng shī jǔ jiù, kǔ yǒng wúshù*) the following is relevant: ‘在棺曰柩·動尸舉柩’ (*zài guān yuē jiù, dòng shī jǔ jiù*). This means that the deceased is placed in a wood coffin. The *Liji* 禮記 ('Book of Rites') is one of the Five Classics of the Confucian canon. The book was rewritten and edited by the disciples of Confucius and their students after the 'Burning of the Books' during the rule of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, around 213 BCE. The work describes the social forms, governmental system, and ceremonial rites. Confucius, Lu Deming, approximately 550–630 Annotator, and Xuan Zheng, Li Ji, [Jian'an, Fujian, China, 1194, 1190] Pdf, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021666359/>.

³⁶ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 19–20.

The materials used for the construction of the brick tombs are also material evidence of the Han-Viet social class. As stated before, the large brick vaults, which were used for the tombs in the province of Thanh Hóa were introduced by Chinese burial customs. For instance, Chinese burial customs followed the belief that there is a spiritual afterlife to which the soul journeys after death. As mentioned, it was believed that the dead would need physical objects in the afterlife and so were buried with prized possessions, such as gold, jewelry, and pottery. These brick tombs coexisted for a time with the simpler graves of the Đông Sơn culture.

The cultural influence of the Đông Sơn appeared in the form of decorative motifs stamped on bricks. It is very likely that this type of stamped decoration did not exist in imperial China, which in turn suggests that these tombs were not necessarily of Han Chinese officials who came to administrate the region but may have been of local or mixed Han-Viet residents. These stamped bricks may be material evidence for the assimilation of Vietnamese residents into Chinese customs.³⁷

6 Ceramic Objects

Among all objects found in the tombs, ceramic objects are the most common. The shape of the ceramic objects varies greatly. The most common vessels are jars, vases, large bowls and other containers for food and drink, like cups and dishes, trays or low tables for serving food or offering food, imitation of cooking vessels, kettles, steam pots, sauce pans and tripods. There are several kinds of wares, with the red ware being the most common, comprising jars, vases, cups, and house models. There are also white or almost white wares that are well-baked and were originally covered with a cream colored or slightly greenish glaze that often formed blisters. The forms of this kind of ware comprise vases, bowls, incense burners, and lamps. There are several ceramic jars, lamps, cups of a well-fired blue-grayish or grayish ware of unknown origin. There are also very soft and badly fired whitish, slightly pink-, and cream-colored wares (jars, vases, house models, miniature furniture, etc.) of unknown origin. In addition, there are a few specimens of hard, well-fired brownish ware, covered with a brownish glaze, perhaps imported from China. Lastly, there are a few objects of grayish, very soft, unglazed and badly-fired ware. The interior is

³⁷ Monique Crick, *Việt Nam: Collection vietnamienne du musée Cernuschi*, (Paris: Musées Association, 2006), 72–73.

black, owing to the low temperature of firing, and the shape is mainly globular.³⁸

The so-called tripod ceramic objects, which were discovered in the brick tombs, clearly demonstrate the influence of Chinese culture in Vietnam. Before the cultural encounter with China, this shape may have not existed in Vietnam, because no tripod ceramic objects have been discovered before the excavation of the brick tombs. The tripod is a three-legged vessel, which was one of the most typical ceramic products of ancient China. It appeared in Neolithic times in the Yangshao culture 仰韶文化 (5000 BCE – 3000 BCE) in Central China. Two main types that occurred are the ‘*Li li* 鬲 tripod’, the legs of which are hollow, and ‘*Ding ding* 鼎’, with solid legs. The ‘*Li* tripod’ was placed directly into the fire where its contents could be heated and cooked more efficiently than in earlier vessels. Over time tripods of the ‘*Ding*’ type replaced the ‘*Li* tripods’, and notably, only the ‘*Ding*’ type tripod is represented in the Han tombs in Vietnam. The *ding* vessels appeared in China during the early to middle Neolithic period, about 9000 BCE.³⁹ Its body is bowl-shaped and on the belly is a horizontal dish-shaped rim. At the mouth there are two diametrically placed vertical handles, each in the shape of a band, and at the top is an elliptic opening. The vessel is grayish, hard pasted, and covered with a light-colored glaze. Since the Bronze Age in the Erlitou culture 二里头 (1900 BCE – 1350 BCE),⁴⁰ the classic legged vessels were used for ancestor worship, divinatory ceremonies for sacrificial offerings, or was buried with its owner in a tomb. The rank in the social and political hierarchy of a person determined the number of *ding* a person owned.⁴¹ The shape of the contemporary *ding* vessels do not differentiate drastically from the *ding* vessels found by Janse. From that point onward, they appear both in ceramic and bronze. In the Han tombs the tripods were made out of ceramic (Fig. 3). They could have been imitations of bronze vessels used for cooking food and were probably not meant for any practical use, but were meant to be part of the funerary deposit and a symbolic reminder of the world of the living.⁴²

³⁸ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 27–29.

³⁹ “Ding,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 26 Jul. 2018, last modified October 16, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/art/ding>.

⁴⁰ “Erlitou culture,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Jul. 2013, last modified February 13, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Erlitou-culture>.

⁴¹ “Ding,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁴² Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 33–34.



Fig. 3: Ceramic *ding* vessel, 2nd to 3rd century, Vietnam National History Museum (photo by Ngọc Hân Lê).

House models represent an important group among the ceramic objects (Fig. 4). Although the house models found in North Vietnam are generally less elaborate and less skillfully made than those found in China, they still are of great documentary interest, as they provide detailed information about the architecture of the Han-Viet period. The houses are often accompanied by models of enclosures and of different household utensils and furniture and sometimes there are imitations of stoves, ladders, wells, and so on. In general, the house models give a good idea of what daily life looked like for both Chinese farmers who settled in Vietnam during the Han period as well as for an average person during the Han-Viet period.⁴³

⁴³ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 41–43.



Fig. 4: Terracotta house model, ca. 1st century, Vietnam National History Museum (photo by Ngọc Hân Lê).

According to Taylor, these house models indeed depict farmhouses, which indicates that the owners of the house models were once landowners whose wealth derived from agriculture. Furthermore, Taylor states that these models resemble those found in China and strongly suggest that the landlord families in China had their counterparts in Vietnam. These landlord families were probably wealthy merchants or powerful officials who accumulated land.⁴⁴

The general plan of these residences is simple: there is a square court with a wall (in several cases two parallel walls) with the entrance, which possibly faced south. The enclosure was originally protected by narrow saddle roofs and the exterior of the walls was occasionally decorated with horizontal and vertical strokes. The parallel walls were divided by walls into small rooms, probably intended for the servants, slaves, and cattle, with the upper floor reserved for the masters of the house. A small structure that was sometimes placed above the entrance of the enclosure may have served as an outlook or

⁴⁴ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 50.

watchtower. The houses are almost cubical in shape, but the walls sometimes lean slightly outwards. They are generally one story, in a few cases two. The roof was constructed of split bamboo stems. The main entrance to the house is generally a square and on the walls are holes in the shape of a keyhole, a triangle, an upside-down T, or a narrow elongated horizontal or vertical rectangle, which probably served as windows. To reach the second story, an opening either in the wall or in the floor was inserted to place a staircase, which could be taken out in case of danger. The reason why the Chinese placed these miniature houses in the tombs may be that these models, with their various accompanying objects, were to remind the deceased one of their earthly residences and the duties they must continue to fulfil in their posthumous life. Alternatively, it could have been meant as a residence for the beyond. Even to this day, the Vietnamese and Chinese funerary traditions offer the deceased a house model, but nowadays they are made of multicolored paper and are burned at the burial.⁴⁵

The abundant pottery discoveries in Han tombs allows the categorization of the pottery from that period as follows: objects imported from China, Han style objects made in Vietnam, and Han-Vietnamese objects exhibiting both Chinese and Vietnamese elements. These objects can also be categorized as unglazed earthenware, glazed earthenware and stoneware.⁴⁶

7 Bronze Objects

The quantity of bronze objects is not as numerous as ceramic objects due to many tombs having been looted. The bronze objects are often rather brittle. They are generally greenish or greenish-gray and the surface is often corroded. A mold for casting axes, an unfinished axe and an unfinished vase were discovered in Đông Sơn and may indicate the existence of a local bronze industry.⁴⁷

A bronze lampstand in tomb Lạch Trường 3 depicts a kneeling human figure (Fig. 5) with indeterminate, non-Chinese facial features accompanied by ten dwarfish musicians. This could be the product of a local artistic tradition in Vietnam. In general, the discovery of lampstands indicates the use of leisure time with night time entertainment.⁴⁸

Besides the objects mentioned above, the excavation team discovered objects of iron, silver and gold, lacquer, textiles, wood, glass, jade, beads, and

⁴⁵ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 41–43.

⁴⁶ John Stevenson and John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics: A separate Tradition*, (Chicago: Art Media Resources, 1997), 102.

⁴⁷ Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, 45–47.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 50–51.



Fig. 5: Bronze lamp in the shape of a kneeling man, 3rd century, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum (photo by Ngọc Hân Lê).

stone, though these discoveries were not numerous due to the fact that organic objects like lacquer, textiles and wood do not survive well in the destructive climate of North Vietnam. However, in a few cases lacquered objects were preserved. For instance, in tomb Thung Thôn 1B, a lacquered wooden box was discovered near a bronze mirror in the north-eastern part of the tomb. It is possi-

ble that the bronze mirror was placed inside the lacquered wooden box and the metallic salts of the bronze preserved the wood and surrounding soil. Also, in tombs Bím Sơn 3, 9 and 10, fragments of red and black lacquer wooden bowls and boxes were discovered. Textiles were even more rare. In tomb Mán Thôn 1 and Lạch Trường 3 fragments of textiles that were found, some of which seemed to be silk, were too small to detect any patterns.⁴⁹

The numerous burial objects show a combination of Chinese influence as well as local Vietnamese customs. The *Ding*-shaped tripod (a three-legged vessel) and the house models as burial objects are clearly influenced by Chinese culture, whereas the kneeling human figurines with indeterminate non-Chinese facial features show the influence of the Đông Sơn culture.

8 Conclusion

During the excavation of these brick tombs, Olov Janse was not aware of the importance of the ceramics he and his team unearthed. He intended to study Chinese civilizations in Indochina, especially under the Han dynasty and its possible connections with the West. His intentions and perspective were Eurocentric and of a colonialist influence. Nevertheless, his expeditions revealed important burial goods as well as evidence demonstrating that the brick tombs and the indigenous earthen graves co-existed, interfered with each other, and continuously changed. Although it is not clearly proven that these brick tombs are the final resting place of Han-Chinese immigrants, the numerous objects at least reflect the slow intermingling of Đông Sơn and Chinese traditions, with the ceramic wares of the tombs reflecting a high material culture. The durable ceramic objects reveal Han-style ceramic patterns produced with materials from northern Vietnam. The emerging Han-Viet social class and the associated burial tradition suggest that some people from the ruling class in Vietnam had adapted the material culture of China, but at the same time, the discovery of ancient villages and earthen graves in Hà Nội demonstrates that some Vietnamese still maintained parts of the Đông Sơn culture with the tradition of burying their deceased within the settlement site in earthen graves. These brick tombs might be related to Han-Chinese immigrants and local Vietnamese who may have intermarried, producing new or hybrid burial traditions. The Han-Chinese people, who settled down in North Vietnam, may have considered this area as their home, but without human remains it is difficult to prove. No complete human remains have been discovered in these brick tombs; only in Mán Thôn 1 some teeth were discovered. As mentioned before, the corrosive

⁴⁹ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 53.

soil and harsh environment of North Vietnam is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the lack of preserved human remains.⁵⁰

The abundant discoveries in the brick tombs are at least evidence of the influence of Chinese culture in northern Vietnam. The numerous shapes, decorative elements and motifs in the tomb furnishings in North Vietnam demonstrate the impact of Chinese artistic influence there, while also maintaining traditionally Vietnamese characteristics.

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⁵⁰ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 50–55.

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