

Early History & Legend

When most people think of Viet Nam, they think of the war. However, it's important to know that Viet Nam has a long history -- one that goes back long, long before there was any "Viet Nam War." As you will read, Viet Nam's history is rich with legend, tradition, determination, and adaptation. Further, in order to fully understand the history and consequences of the Viet Nam War, it's critical to first understand Viet Nam's history.

In the Beginning . . .

According to traditional legends, Viet Nam was formed when **King Lac Long Quan** (also known as the "Dragon Lord of Lac" or the "Dragon Lord of the Seas") married Princess **Au Co** (a Chinese immortal and descended from the High Mountains). She bore him 100 eggs, out of which 100 sons were born. They soon established a nation that stretched from southern China to northern Indonesia.

However, the King and the Princess became convinced that their different origins would ultimately make them unhappy, so they separated. Princess Au Co took 50 of the sons with her back into the mountains while King Lac Long Quan took the other 50 sons and ruled over the lowlands. After the King died in 2879 B.C., his eldest son, **Hung Vuong** established the **Hung** dynasty, and he is regarded as the real founder of the Vietnamese nation and of the first Vietnamese dynasty.

This legend symbolizes the importance of uniting the two main geographic and cultural areas of Viet Nam -- the mountains (representing the north) and lowlands (representing the south) in forming one united country. It is a theme that gets played out repeatedly in Viet Nam's history and is also symbolized by the **spelling of "Viet Nam" as two words**, rather than one. In fact, spelling Viet Nam using two words has a long tradition and is in keeping with the country's pre-colonized history. It wasn't until Viet Nam was colonized by France that its name was shortened to one word.

The Hung dynasty produced 18 kings, each of whom ruled for 150 years. At this time, the nation was named **Van Lang**. This dynasty was then overthrown by a neighboring king in 258 B.C. He established the new kingdom of **Au Lac** and built his capital at Phuc An, whose remains still exist today in the village of Co Loa, located west of Hanoi.

Fifty years later, a Chinese general, **Trieu Da**, conquered the kingdom and formed the new nation of **Nam Viet**. Many scholars and Vietnamese consider this to be the end of historical legend and the true beginning of modern Vietnamese history. The next 100 or so years saw much conflict between King Trieu Da and the Han emperors of China. Finally, in 111 B.C., Nam Viet was conquered and incorporated into the Chinese empire.



A Tradition of Resistance is Born

Thus began the Vietnamese people's tradition of fighting to remain free and independent. For the next 19 centuries, the people of Viet Nam continually struggled against the Chinese for their independence. The first Vietnamese rebellion occurred in 39 A.D. and was led by the legendary **Trung** sisters. They successfully drove out the Chinese and the nation lived free from Chinese rule until three years later when Viet Nam was reconquered. This next period of Chinese domination lasted until 539, when a Vietnamese scholar, **Ly Bon** again drove out the Chinese rulers, only to have Viet Nam invaded a few years later.

The Vietnamese people would continue to resist the rule of China (which renamed the nation **An Nam**). The Chinese introduced many important and beneficial agricultural, technical, and educational innovations to benefit of the Vietnamese people. However, the imposition of Chinese culture, customs, language, political institutions, and at times cruel oppression and exploitation of the nation ultimately crystallized the Vietnamese people's fierce desire to be free and independent, at all costs.

This desire was finally realized in 939, as the Tang dynasty in China was falling into decline. The Vietnamese used this as an opportunity to again fight for their independence. General **Ngo Quyen** successfully drove out the Chinese rulers and established the first of the "Great Dynasties" of Viet Nam that managed to remain largely independent of all foreign powers for the next 944 years.

The Great Dynasties of Viet Nam

Ngo Dynasty
(939–967)

Even after the Chinese were driven out, King Ngo had to deal with constant revolts by feudal lords.

Dinh Dynasty
(968–980)

Established by the dominant feudal lord who finally unified the country.

Early **Le Dynasty**
(980–1009)

Pronounced "Lay." Incorporated the northern Champa kingdom into southern Viet Nam. During this dynasty, Buddhism was established as the dominant religion of Viet Nam.

Ly Dynasty
(1009–1225)

Pronounced "Lee." According to tradition, the first Emperor Ly had a dream of a dragon rising out of the ground and ascending into heaven. This inspired him to move the capital to where he dreamt the dragon first rising out from the ground, in the city of Thang Long, which was later renamed "Hanoi." This is also why Viet Nam is sometimes called the **Land of the Rising Dragon**.

Tran Dynasty
(1225–1400)

This dynasty successfully fought off the invasion attempts of the larger Mongol army, led by Kubali Khan. Marco Polo also briefly traveled through Viet Nam in 1295.

Ho Dynasty
(1400–1428)

Toward the end of this dynasty, Ming invaders from China again briefly occupied the country.

Late **Le** Dynasty
(1428–1776)

Under the leadership of **Le Loi**, a resistance movement was formed and successfully used guerrilla warfare tactics to again drive out the Chinese invaders. This strategy involved using brief but frequent surprise attacks targeting the enemy's weakest points and avoiding direct combat against superior enemy forces -- a tactic that would be used successfully throughout Viet Nam's early and modern history. This period is also considered to be the "golden era" of Viet Nam.

Trinh and **Nguyen**
Rulers (1543–1776)

The nation was divided in half in 1600 after numerous civil wars. The Trinh lords ruled northern Viet Nam while the Nguyen lords controlled southern Viet Nam. During this period, the Le emperors had little real power. The Nguyen lords also incorporated the remaining Champa and eastern Khmer empires into Viet Nam, as the nation reached its present size and shape by 1757 (except for the southernmost Soc Trang province).

Nguyen Dynasty
(1792–1883)

Despite continuing revolts, the nation was again unified. The capital was moved to Hue and gained its current imperial splendor. This is also when the political influence of French missionaries became more prominent. However, the Nguyen rulers became increasingly suspicious of the French and ultimately became hostile toward French interests. As you'll read in the next section, this would have very serious consequences.

Origins of the Vietnamese Language

Like the origins of the Vietnamese people and culture, the history of the Vietnamese language is also a mixture of different parts and components. The monotonic Mon–Khmer language gave Vietnamese many of its basic words and the Tai languages contributed many aspects of tonality and grammar. Also, because the Chinese dominated Vietnamese culture and history for almost almost a millenium, not suprisingly, much of the Vietnamese language's political, literary, philosophical, military, and religious vocabulary comes from Chinese, although the pronunciations have changed through the years. Finally, there is a sprinkling of modern French and English words as well.



A writing system called "chu nom" was developed in the 8th century that used partly modified Chinese characters. However, it was not until the 1600s that the Vietnamese language acquired its current form. This happened when two Portugese Jesuit missionaries named Gaspar d'Amiral and Antonio Barboza romanized the language by developing a writing and spelling system using the Roman alphabet and several signs to represent the tonal accents of Vietnamese speech. This system was further codified in the first comprehensive Vietnamese dictionary (containing over 8,000 words) by Frenchman Alexandre de Rhodes in 1651.

This new Roman script, called "quoc ngu" or national language, was spread by later missionaries as a means of converting Viet Nam to Christianity and it quickly replaced the Chinese–based chu nom system as the dominant form of Vietnamese writing. It was finally declared the official language of Viet Nam by the French in 1910 and has been universally learned, used, and written by all Vietnamese since then.

Traditional Vietnamese musical instruments

Traditional Vietnamese musical instruments are the [musical instruments](#) used in the traditional and classical musics of [Vietnam](#). They comprise a wide range of string, wind, and percussion instruments, used by both the [Viet](#) (Kinh) majority as well as the nation's [ethnic minorities](#).

Figure 1: A đàn nguyệt (two-stringed Vietnamese moon lute)



Wind

Flutes

- [Sáo](#) (also called *sáo trúc*) - transverse flute made of bamboo or hardwood

Oboes

- [Kèn](#) - class of [double reed](#) instruments similar to the [oboe](#) and [shehnai](#)
 - [Kèn bầu](#) - conical oboe with gourd-shaped wooden bell
 - [Kèn đám ma](#) - conical oboe with metal bell; used for funeral music in northern Vietnam

Free reed mouth organs

- [Đing năm](#) - free-reed mouth organ with gourd body and bamboo pipes; played by upland minorities
- [M'buot](#) - free-reed mouth organ with gourd body and bamboo pipes; played by upland minorities

Horns

- [Púa](#) - valveless brass trumpet
- [Ốc](#) - conch trumpet

String

Plucked

- [Đàn bầu](#) - monochord zither
- [Đàn đáy](#) - long-necked three-stringed lute with trapezoidal body
- [Đàn nguyệt](#) (also called *nguyệt cầm* or *đàn kìm*) - moon-shaped two-string lute
- [Đàn sên](#) - two-string lute
- [Đàn tam](#) - fretless lute with snakeskin-covered body and three strings ^{photo}
- [Đàn tranh](#) - long zither
- [Đàn tỳ bà](#) - pear-shaped lute with four strings
- [Đàn đoản](#) (also called *đàn tứ*) - moon-shaped lute with short neck; little used
- [Đàn ghi-ta](#) (also called *lục huyền cầm* or *ghi-ta phím lõm*) - "Vietnamized" acoustic or electric guitar with [scalloped fretboard](#); used primarily in [cải lương](#)
- [Đàn tứ dây](#) - [bass guitar](#) in the shape of a *đàn đáy*
- [Cầm](#) - 7-stringed zither equivalent to the Chinese [guzhin](#); no longer used
- [Sắt](#) - zither with 25 strings equivalent to the Chinese [se](#); no longer used
- [Đàn tính](#) - long-necked lute with a gourd body and two or three silk strings; used by the [Tay](#), [Nung](#), and [Thai](#) ethnic groups
- [Bro](#) - fretted zither with a body made of bamboo and a gourd resonator; used by minority ethnic groups in the Central Highlands
- [Goong](#) - tube zither with a bamboo body; used by minority ethnic groups in the Central Highlands

Bowed

- [Đàn gáo](#) - two-stringed vertical violin with coconut resonator
- [Đàn hồ](#) - two-stringed vertical violin with wooden resonator; *hồ* derives from Chinese *hu*, as in [huqin](#))
- [Đàn nhị](#) - two-stringed vertical violin*[K'ni](#) (also spelled *k'ny* or *k'ny*) - one-string vertical violin; played by the [Jarai people](#) of the [Central Highlands](#)

Struck

- [Đàn tam thập lục](#) - hammered dulcimer with 36 metal strings

Percussion

Drums

- [Trống](#) - drum played with sticks
- [Nruas tuag](#) (also called [U' chua](#) - drum used by the Hmông ethnic group for funeral music
- [Trống đồng](#) (also called *trống đồng Đông Sơn*) - bronze drum played by the [Dong Son culture](#) in ancient times

Tuned percussion

Figure 2: A t'rung of the E De people



- [Cồng chiêng](#) - tuned gong (comes in both flat and knobbed varieties)
- [Tam âm la](#) - three small, high-pitched flat gongs in a frame; used primarily in [nhã nhạc](#) music
- [T'rung](#) - bamboo xylophone
- [Đàn đá](#) - lithophone, commonly having 9+ stone bars, 65cm-102cm in length. It is believed the instrument dates back to 1000 BC. Also called Goong Lú (M' nong people), Kologolo (M' nong people), Gông Luk (Mạ people).



Untuned percussion

- [Sinh tiền](#) - coin clapper
- [Song lang](#) - woodblock

Other

- [Đàn môi - jaw harp](#)
- [Klông pút](#) - set of bamboo tubes; hands are clapped near ends of tubes to produce musical tones
- [Đao long](#) - singing bowl
- [Đàn tre](#) - A hybrid form of the Vietnamese plucked string instrument similar to a Đàn tính – called a Đàn tre – was created by Minh Tam Nguyen, who escaped from Vietnam in 1982 and ultimately settled in Australia. The instrument has twenty-three 800mm-long wire strings attached to a bamboo tube with a metal hose-clamp around the top rim. A four-litre, rectangular olive oil tin, which acts as a resonator, is clamped to the base of the tube. The instrument is capable of playing both Vietnamese and Western music. The instrument can be seen and recordings of it being played by its creator can be heard at the [National Museum of Australia](#).

References:

<http://www.asian-nation.org/vietnam-history.shtml>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_Vietnamese_musical_instruments