

# Martial Arts of Vietnam

Historians of Vietnamese Martial Arts usually trace the roots to Vietnam's origin (first settlement on this territory date back to 2879 B.C.), during Hung Vuong dynasty. A more realistic date seems to be about the X-XI centuries A.D. At this time a state was founded in the area of today's northern Vietnam. Its name changed - Nam Viet, Dai Co Viet, or simply Dai Viet ("Great Viet").

Great Viet State grew and got stronger during continuous wars against mountain tribes, Khmers, Chams (their state, in the South of today's Vietnam, was finally conquered at 1471), and China. There were a lot of wars between China and Vietnam. Sometimes the Vietnamese won, sometimes the Chinese conquered Vietnam .

The threat of neighbouring Middle Empire constantly forced Vietnam to prepare its troops and, as a result of the problematic, but always intimate relationship, numerous details of Chinese state structure, Chinese philosophy, and Chinese culture were adopted. For instance, Vietnam borrowed the Chinese system of state exams. Officials had to be able to use brush as well as sword. The curriculum of military education included, in particular, hand-to-hand combat.

Since the XI century there was an academy (or university) of martial arts in the capital, Thang Long city (today's Hanoi). This academy prepared master-teachers, who had a diploma of "doctor of military science". Every candidate had to pass 11 exams, then he studied for 3-5 years until passing the graduate exam. This time also is known for its variety of competitions, and for the creation of numerous treatises on martial arts. The most widely known treatise is "Linh Nam Vo Kinh" ("On Vietnamese Martial Art") written in the XVI century.

Of course, martial arts were taught in family schools and in Buddhist temples as well. We don't know too much about people's styles of that time, but the tradition of martial dances is still alive. At that time all martial arts were known as **Vo Thuat** (art of hand-to-hand combat) or **Viet Vo Dao** (martial way of Viets).

Many martial arts were created during XVI-XVIII centuries, when Vietnam was separated in several states. It was a good situation for the developing of martial arts. Many martial arts surfaced during the Tay Son Rebellion (1771-

1788), the first serious attempt for unifying the country. The rebel's base was in Binh Dinh Province which still is a place with many martial arts.

The country was finally united at the beginning of XIX century. But during the period of 1858-1884 Vietnam was conquered by France and became its colony. During the colonisation martial arts had to be kept underground and were transferred in family schools only, from father to son. Studying was kept secret, students assured to never use their martial art without serious reason and to not divulge its secrets.

The revival of the tradition in Vietnamese martial arts is connected with **Master Nguyen Loc** (1912-1960). He was born in Son Tay (near Hanoi). In 1938, he founded the first club of **Vo Thuat** for all interested people (including foreigners!). He named his school **Vovinam Viet Vo Dao**.

In 1945, a first public demonstration of **Vovinam Viet Vo Dao** took place in Hanoi and subsequently **Viet Vo Dao** clubs aroused in all regions of northern and central Vietnam. After the death of Nguyen Loc, his successor – Master Le Sang - organized a big meeting of Masters in Saigon for fostering the plan of spreading Vietnamese martial arts worldwide. In 1973 was established the French Viet Vo Dao Federation, evolved in the International Viet Vo Dao Federation and then in the **Vietnamese Martial Arts World Federation- Vo Viet** (president: Master Phan Hoang).



**Master Nguyen Loc**



**Master Phan Hoang**

It is correct to say that while in western Countries Viet Vo Dao is the term which indicates Vietnamese Martial Arts (is more simple and effective to pronounce than “Vo Co Truyen Vietnam”- Vietnamese Ancient and Traditional Martial Arts), the same name is specific only for the Vovinam Viet Vo Dao School in Vietnam.

In Vietnam the most popular schools are **Vovinam**, **Tinh Vo Dao**, **Kim Ke** and **Vo Binh Dinh**. Also there exist about 60 schools (!), which are not so well

known, but equally extremely interesting and well-structured. In addition, there exist numerous so-called Sino-vietnamese styles.

Master Nguyen Loc created his school on the base of local schools of Shontei Province and other Vietnamese styles which he studied during extensive travelling as well as on the base of the "Linh Nam Vo Kinh" treatise.

**Vovinam** is famous for its various kicks - sweeps, blocks, "scissors" on different levels, jumping kicks, attacks with final jumping on the opponent.

**Tinh Vo Dao** means "the purity of martial arts". The Founder of the style is **Master Ho Hoa Hue** (born in 1944). Her house is one of the best "vo duong" (martial arts academy) in Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon).



**Master Ho Hoa Hue**

**Kim Ke** means "golden cock".

**Kim Ke** fighters prefer to attack from the

side. Special features are strikes, similar to strikes

by the cock's talons, two-legs jumping kick to the head or torso. Teeth also are used very often. This style is very quick, 'the best defence is offence' is a well-known saying from this style.

**Vo Binh Dinh** is a style that originated in Binh Dinh Province. It is based on the assumption that the opponent is non-Vietnamese and therefore likely taller and heavier. Hence a **Vo Binh Dinh** fighter constantly moves, changes positions, changes the directions of movement, uses counter-strikes to attacking arm or leg.

Besides pure Vietnamese styles, there are also numerous Sino-Vietnamese styles (e.g. **Thieu Lam**, **Bach My Phai**). Those schools were popular among Chinese, who lived in Vietnam. Also more recently, after the creation of People's Republic of China, some masters emigrated to Vietnam including many styles. From a structural point of view, Vietnamese martial arts are actually grouped in the **Lien Doan Vo Thuat Co Truyen Vietnam** (Federation of Ancient and Traditional Martial Arts of VN) and in the **Vovinam Viet Vo Dao Federation**.