

BODY & SOUL

Vietnamese martial arts are unique in their own way and many foreigners respect and admire them greatly.



● **Story:** LE DIEM
Photos: provided by Augustus Roe, ToiyeuVovinam

When talk turns to Vietnam, the first image to pop into the minds of many would be of young women dressed in *ao dai*, the traditional dress. A common sight, though, is people dressed in pyjama-type outfits. And groups of foreigners sometimes dress likewise, not because they are fans of pyjamas but because they are fans of martial arts.

It's easy to see people around Vietnam, man or woman, young or old, dressed in the pyjama-type outfit and training in martial arts on footpaths or in the parks and gardens. That's how Kevin Raison, an American consultant on foreign studies in the US, began to learn Vietnamese martial arts.

Despite already knowing judo, American karate, Brazilian jujitsu, taekwondo, and aikido, his jaw dropped when he first saw a Vovinam (Vietnamese martial art) instructor show off his speed of movement. 'I've never seen such fast moves. I was impressed,' he said.

Vovinam has gone through its ups and downs, started by a patriot who combined the best styles and techniques he learned from other martial arts to create a national identity for Vietnam.

It also has a lot of 'brothers and sisters' who were born in the same circumstances, drawing martial arts lovers from all over the world to discover not only their special features but also an interesting feature of Vietnam's history and culture.

Early days

From the country's very early days, Vietnamese learned how to fight against foreign invaders. Most types of traditional martial arts were studied and also created over thousands of years of fighting, 'as a means of self-preservation for rural farming communities who faced near-constant threats of invasion and battles between various warring factions,' as Augustus Roe, a teacher from England wrote in his book 'The Martial Arts of Vietnam - An Overview of the History and Styles'. 'Typically, martial arts practices were passed down through generations of families and religious orders. Through centuries of trial and error, these combat practices evolved, until eventually becoming a practical, defined system.'

As there is little material on Vietnamese martial arts available in English, his book is considered a handy overview on the subject. Starting with evidence of weapons found in archaeological digs, including stone tools such as daggers, swords, spears, axes, bows and arrows and traditional bronze drums dating back to 2,000-1,200 BC, the book takes readers on a short tour of an important period of the country's history and geography and reveals a connection between the development of martial arts in combat training and the southward expansion,

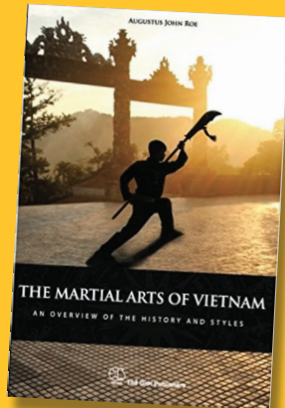


Interested in martial arts?

* Citadel Training, offered by Augustus and Kevin Quang Ba Park, Tay Ho District, Hanoi
Contact: Augustus at gusroe222@gmail.com or Kevin at kevin.citadeldefense@gmail.com.

* Other popular venues for different styles of Vietnamese martial arts are listed in 'The Martial Arts of Vietnam - An Overview of the History and Styles', available in Vietnam at: Bookworm Hanoi: 44 Chau Long, Ba Dinh Dist., Hanoi
Nha Xuat Ban The Gioi (The Gioi Publishing House): 46 Tran Hung Dao, Hoan Kiem Dist., Hanoi

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www.amazon.com
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with historical heroes such as Tran Hung Dao, who famously unified Vietnam and its population to defeat the Mongol invaders on three separate occasions, Le Dynasty emperors who drove away Chinese invaders and furthered the conquest of the Champa kingdom, and the three brothers of the Tay Son Rebellion in the late 18th century who created a new dynasty for the poor, all of whom were trained in regions famous for their martial arts.

Martial arts have also been incorporated into festivals and celebrations, both as performance pieces and as methods of exercise.

Thanks to Augustus's love of and research into Vietnamese martial arts over two years, where he met with masters around the country, the history and characteristics of dozens of famous styles and popular martial arts schools in different regions are presented with pictures, such as the Nhat Nam school, Vietnamese traditional wrestling, the Nam Hong Son school, and Vovinam in the north, Binh Dinh province martial arts (also known as martial arts from Tay Son district, Binh Dinh) in the south-central region, and the Ba Tra Tan Khanh (Lady Tra of Tan Khanh village, Binh Duong province) style, Sa Long Cuong Martial Arts, That Son Than Quyen (Seven Mountains Martial Arts), and Tinh Vo Dao (The Way of Martial Purity) in the south.

Unique forms

Though influenced by other types of martial arts, those in Vietnam are nonetheless unique.

One features different moves resulting from adaptation to an environment with mountains and forests, according to Augustus. Moreover, the small frame of Vietnamese people plays an important role in high jumps and low stances.

Kevin, meanwhile, appreciated the standardisation of Vietnamese martial arts, especially Vovinam, which he said was standardised everywhere. In the US and Korea, slightly different types of karate and taekwondo can be found due to a lack of standardisation. There is 'Mc Dojo' in the US (Dojo being a Japanese word for a room to practice martial arts), with a quality like McDonalds,



where people can go for three years but not really participate or practice in reaching the level of black belt.

It's different with Vovinam, which is standardised for people to maintain their skill level and remain on the same page. A person with a yellow belt in Hanoi could go to Los Angeles and find a school with virtually identical training and standards.

Another feature of Vietnamese martial arts appreciated by foreigners is its 'peaceful' spirit. Unlike martial arts in Western countries, Vietnamese versions are learned and practiced not to harm someone but to keep the mind and body strong, according to Rodion Fedorov, a Russian consultant on foreign investment projects in Vietnam. In competitions, artists show a smoothness and beauty, with no actual contact.

Vietnamese martial arts also hold special meaning for Rodion, as a magical cure. A weak child, he was sent to learn taekwondo at the age of seven by his mother, so he could protect himself from schoolyard bullies. At 15, he earned a junior black belt but also picked up a back injury in competition, which required he take a break from sports for a while. He then became dedicated to music. When he came to Vietnam to study, he had a serious motorbike accident and damaged nerves in his right arm, which a doctor told him would never return to normal. But he revisited martial arts, in a belief it could help. He tried many styles, but none felt right. Then he started learning Hong Gia Quyen (Hong Gia Martial Arts), and his arm improved with every session of hard training from a strict instructor. 'It's one of my most unforgettable memories from Vietnamese martial arts,' he said.

Hong Gia Quyen is based on the kung fu style, focusing on the spiritual and mental work of the student and using relaxed leverage rather than unrefined leverage. It combines hardness and softness, stiffness and compliance, relaxation and tension. It has a unique set of so-called noi cong - exercises to reveal and develop the inner energy of every human being that possesses, unlike khi cong (qigong), which uses flows of 'qi' energy. 'In my opinion, it is unique and one of the most efficient martial arts for strengthening your body and clearing your mind,' he said.

He added that he has practiced Hong Gia Quyen in Russia as well, where it is even more popular than in Vietnam, and also in a lot of other former Soviet Union countries, thanks to Lam Thanh Khanh, the head of the Hong Gia Quyen Vietnam Association, who spent a couple of years training and promoting the style in the Soviet Union at the end of 1980s.

New experience


Their overall novelty is also what many foreigners find appealing about Vietnamese martial arts.

When beginning to learn Vovinam, Kevin had to unlearn the other types of martial arts he already knew, due to how different it is. 'I can go to karate or judo clubs, which I'm so familiar with,' he said. 'There is no pressure, but it's boring. I choose Vovinam for its challenge and also because it's fun.'

Agreeing, Jack Francis, another teacher from England who practiced tai chi before, learns different things from Buu Son Phat Mon Quyen (Dharma Mountain Martial Arts) every week. Influenced by Buddhism, the new style shares some commonalities with tai chi but is much faster, combining complex and simple features. He also has a new environment in which to practice, at Quang Ba Park with local people and foreigners of different stripes. 'At night, it's fresh at the park,' he said. 'It feels good, calming, and isn't stressful, and for me it's the best thing about living in Vietnam.'

Discovering a different way of thinking about martial arts has also been good for Rodion. The other styles he knows are very physical. 'Most Russians view martial arts as nothing but a way of hitting people, but I recognise that Vietnamese types are more "art" and less "martial",' he said. The most difficult thing for him was the exercises his master told him he must do for hours, days, and weeks at a time. He asked himself why he had to keep doing the same things over and over again. 'Then, in an instant, you realise that what you are doing is actually the quintessence of martial arts. Then you set your mind to total concentration on each move and each step, you hear your body, you feel how it reacts to the flows of energy inside, and you get a totally new perception of what martial arts are.'

The social aspect is another positive feature of Vietnamese martial arts, the foreigners agree. Training in a group works, because nobody wants to be the first to stop, so everyone pushes themselves, according to Kevin. It's also a good venue for socialising. 'It gives you a feeling of brotherhood and unity, which binds followers together,' Rodion said. 'It doesn't matter how old you are, how long you have been training or what your background is. Now you've entered a school, you are the part of a family.'

The passion for local martial arts among these foreigners has become a form of devotion as well. Augustus and Kevin hold classes in Vietnamese martial arts, in different styles but all for self-defence, to introduce them and encourage others to discover the joy they provide. 





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