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# History of Hue: Travelers' Cliff Notes

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The events in Hue between 1802-1946 forever changed Vietnam. It's a story worth reading, if you want to better understand the country.



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# Introduction

Hue, Vietnam, is often described as the “ancient” capital of Vietnam. If you consider Philadelphia as the “ancient” capital of the United States, then the descriptor is an accurate one. Otherwise, a more apt adjective for Hue might be “short-lived” capital of Vietnam. Semantics aside, the events in Hue roughly 200 years ago altered the country’s trajectory and shaped Vietnam’s modern destiny.

To understand Vietnam, you need to understand how the Nguyen family dynasty came to power (and clung to power) with the help of the French. This short e-book gives you the low-down on who’s who in Hue, providing historical context when you visit the Citadel, Imperial Tombs, and Thien Mu Pagoda.

## Two Dynasties Become One

A sleepy land for most of the country’s chronological record, Hue’s chapter of Vietnamese history became significant around 1802. Until 1802, there was no unified country named Viet Nam. Instead, there were two dominant empires that fought each other for centuries: the Le Dynasty ruled Dai Viet, which was the Red River Delta region in the north (today’s cities of Hanoi and Haiphong). The House of Nguyen ruled the Cham Pa (aka Champa) region in the central and southern areas (encompassing today’s cities of Hue and Saigon).

Both empires were feudal societies with rich aristocracies built upon the backs of peasants. Their fate was the outcome of all feudal systems: a constantly increasing levy of taxes to fund local war efforts and a bloated privileged class eventually led to peasant uprisings and revolts in both the north and the south.

Three Robin Hood heroes from Tay Son led the most significant of these rebellions, beginning in 1772. Their motto was “seize the property of the rich and distribute it to the poor.” Wherever they conquered, oppression was punished, prisoners freed, taxes abolished.

The Tay Son rebellion gained enough momentum to eventually overthrow the leaders of both dynasties. The eldest of the three brothers, Quang Trung, became king of the northern region and his two brothers ruled the central and southern

areas. Trung and his brothers organized the government along military lines and resettled the peasants into village communes.

## Establishing the French Connection

Let's back up for just a second. When the Tay Son rebels destroyed the Nguyen ruling clan in the south, all Nguyen family members were killed with the exception of a sixteen-year-old boy named Nguyen Ahn, who escaped and took refuge on an island. There he met Bishop Pigneau de Behaine, a French missionary.

Pigneau believed that by helping the deposed ruler regain his kingdom, he could further the cause of the Christian missionaries in the region. Through Pigneau's connections in France and India, the bishop supplied Nguyen with ships, weapons, and European advisors. Nguyen Ahn set to work building forts, shipyards, and munition factories in the area around modern-day Saigon under the direction of European experts. . During Quan Trung's reign, Nguyen Ahn re-took Saigon (called Gia Dinh at the time).

Quan Trung died in 1792 without a successor and his brothers were not strong enough to maintain control. Nguyen Ahn marched north with his modern army, quickly overtaking Hue and then the Red River Delta cities in the north. For the first time in history, the country was unified under a single ruler.

## Reign of Gia Long

Nguyen Ahn took the name Gia Long when he became emperor, expressing the country's unification from **Gia** (Gia Dinh / Saigon) to Thang **Long** (Hanoi). He also changed the name of the country to Viet Nam (actually Nam Viet, but the Chinese flipped it to Viet Nam...).

Gia Long adopted the Confucianist Mandarin Chinese bureaucratic model and Qing code of laws. Taxes that had been abolished under Quan Trung were re-instituted. Land that had been given to the peasants was re-distributed back to the Nguyen family. Peasants were put to work building roads, bridges, ports, palaces, and elaborate palatial tombs. They were also transcribed into the Vietnamese Imperial Army. The country was sealed off from foreign trade.

Needless to say, Gia Long was not popular with the common people. To protect himself and his wealth from rebellions, he built the Imperial Citadel and ruled from the Purple City (modeled after Beijing's Forbidden City). Bishop Pigneau remained a trusted advisor and Christian missionaries were tolerated.

## Tu Duc: Christians Become a Threat

The throne passed father to son for several generations, from Gia Long to **Ming Manh** to **Thieu Tri** (who commissioned the Thien Mu pagoda in honor of his grandmother's 80th birthday) to Tu Duc, each continuing the harsh policies of his predecessor; each building elaborate, expensive tombs at taxpayer expense; each growing increasingly agitated by the Christians. Missionaries had been active in the country for about 100 years, with over 300,000 converts by 1845. The foreign church leaders and their converts were starting to become a political threat. Courtesans (concubines), for example, who were influential within the palace, feared for their status in a society that was increasingly monogamous.

Under **Tu Duc** (who had hundreds of concubines), persecution of Christians began, with imprisonment and executions. In 1848, Tu Duc commanded all Vietnamese Catholic converts to abolish their faith or be branded on the face as a heretic. In 1857, he executed two Spanish Catholic missionaries.

In colonial times, persecution of missionaries was a handy justification for invading a country. Tu Duc's timing was really bad. France had just sent a military expedition to China to join forces with the British in the Second Opium War. *(Ha! Some things never change – Britain was fighting for open and fair trade policies with China, which kept reneging on its agreements to protect against piracy and reduce import tariffs.)*

Anyways, since France had troops in the region, they were dispatched to join a Spanish envoy headed to Annam (Da Nang) to retaliate against the executions. The joint force quickly captured the town. France then went on to capture Saigon in 1861.

# Dong Khanh: Era of French Puppets

Skirmishes with foreign mercenaries occurred for another five years. Tu Duc's bigger threat, however, was internal discontent among his subjects. Rebellions were violent and factions developed within the ruling mandarin class. Tu Duc, fearing for his throne and life, cut a deal with the French. In exchange for their help against the "rebels", he would open Viet Nam to trade with western nations and cede territory in the south to the French colony of Cochinchina.

In 1883, Tu Duc died without leaving a legitimate heir. In the ensuing power vacuum, the French invaded Hue and overran the Purple City inside the Imperial Citadel. After a tumultuous couple of months wherein a cast of Nguyen family members claimed the throne, the French appointed **Dong Khanh**, a cooperative nephew of Tu Duc, as emperor.

Owing his crown to the French, Dong Khanh became a puppet leader. Under his brief 3-year reign, France completed its colonization of Viet Nam in 1887, becoming French Indochina when it gained the northern half of the country after defeating China in the Sino-French War. Dong Khanh reinstituted a policy of religious tolerance towards the Christians to appease the French. The Vietnamese people hated Dong Khanh and he constantly feared for his life.

## Exiling the Uncooperative

Dong Khanh suffered various illnesses and lost four of eight of his children. The French worried about the health of his lineage and, upon his death in 1889, were reluctant to appoint his son as his successor. Instead, they chose a distant nephew within the Nguyen royal lineage. **Thanh Thai** was plucked from a poor village and crowned Viet Nam's ruler when he was just 10 years old. He hated the French and worked in secret to build a resistance movement against them.

Emperor Thanh Thai is described as "The People's Leader", holding town hall meetings in the villages to understand what the people wanted; he is also described as "a mentally disabled sadist". Some accounts say he fabricated mental

illness to trick the French; others say the French made up stories about his mental instability to minimize his influence.

In 1907, the French downgraded his role to a Duke and appointed his son, **Duy Tan**, Emperor. After attempting a revolt against the French in 1916, French administrators shipped Duy Tan and his father to a remote island in the Indian Ocean. Neither has an honorable tomb in Hue.

## Khai Dinh: The Ultimate Puppet

After 25 years of uncooperative rule in Viet Nam, the French reassessed their initial hesitation with Dong Khanh's heirs and finally appointed his son, **Khai Dinh**, as emperor in 1916. Living in imperial luxury while France exploited the land and people of Vietnam, Khai Dinh was ridiculed and loathed. Nguyen Ai Quoc (aka Ho Chi Minh) wrote a play that mocked the emperor as a "Bamboo Dragon", all pomp and show but merely a powerless puppet.

In 1919, he replaced Chinese with romanized Vietnamese as the formal written language of Viet Nam. During his reign, the Hoa Loa prison (infamous Hanoi Hilton) - built by the French to imprison and torture political prisoners - expanded to triple its original capacity. This prison became the incubator for the communist movement of the 1930's and 40's.

Khai Dinh died of drug addiction and tuberculosis and is now buried in an opulent tomb built by conscripted laborers with Vietnamese tax dollars. It looks like a French chalet and is decorated with French vases.

## Bao Dai: The Last Emperor

The son of Khai Dinh naturally ascended the throne after the death of his father. **Bao Dai** was educated in France and served the French (and later the pro-German French Vichy) dutifully from 1930 until 1941, when the French Vichy ceded Indochina to Japan during World War II. Then he served his Japanese masters until they surrendered in August 1945, at which point Bao Dai abdicated his throne. He would return for an encore as head of the State of Vietnam in 1949.



# First Indochina War

When the Japanese surrendered, the Viet Minh – a communist organization led by Ho Chi Minh – seized the city of Hanoi and declared independence as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Allied powers in Potsdam, Germany, however, saw France as the rightful “owner” of Indochina. During a tumultuous period in 1946, France re-occupied Vietnam with the help of British-Indian and Chinese forces. To create an alternative to the Viet Minh, France declared the State of Vietnam in 1949, with former-emperor Bao Dai as its head.

The Viet Minh used guerrilla war and terrorist tactics to provoke continuous attacks on British and French forces, eventually escalating to full-scale war with France (First Indochina War). The Viet Minh were aided during the war by Communist China. The war lasted until 1954, when the French pulled out of Vietnam after a loss of 14,000 troops and a six-month siege at Dien Bien Phu.

## Full Circle: A Country Divided

At the 1954 Geneva Conference, France and the Viet Minh agreed to partition Vietnam temporarily, separating the Viet Minh-controlled north from the State of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The treaty called for a reunification election to be held, which Ho Chi Minh expected to win. However, the strongly anti-Communist government in the south, backed by the United States, refused to abide by the terms of the treaty and delayed elections. After 150 years of turbulent unity, Vietnam was once again a divided state.