

# History of Administrative Documents in Vietnam - From the 10th Century to Present

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## Abstract

*The formation and transformation of the administrative document system in Vietnam throughout history have always been closely associated with the changes and development of the country, holding a very important position. The historical context, content, significance, characteristics, and experiences of this process are of great significance not only in Vietnam but also on an international scale. The formation and transformation of the administrative document system during the feudal period in Vietnam were influenced and impacted by Chinese characters and the administrative document systems of Chinese feudal dynasties. The formation and transformation of administrative documents based on the National language script (Quốc ngữ) were influenced and impacted by the Latin script system from many centuries ago and the administrative document systems of France and Western countries during the modern period. The administrative document system in Vietnam throughout history is deeply imbued with Vietnamese identity and is based on the influence, exchange, and mutual impact with the cultures of China, the French Republic, and many countries around the world. This foundation provides significant similarity and advantages, helping Vietnam integrate into the world and cooperate with other countries for mutual development.*

**Keywords:** *History of Vietnam, Administrative Documents, Documents, History of Documents.*

## Introduction

Vietnamese history has spanned thousands of years with many changes and developments, making positive contributions to the development of humanity. One such development is the administrative document system – a tool and product of state agencies throughout Vietnam's history. Although each historical period had different types of administrative documents with distinct characteristics, the continuity of Vietnam's administrative documents shows a consistent exchange and reference to the administrative documents of other countries around the world, creatively applying them to the country's practical needs. The history of Vietnam's administrative documents is part of the transformation and development of Vietnam's rich and advanced culture, imbued with national identity; contributing to cultural exchange, connection, and economic development between Vietnam and other countries globally.

### *Research Methods*

The subjects of this article are the formation, transformation, position, and significance of the administrative document system in Vietnam's history. The research methods used include the historical method, logical method, comparative method, and interdisciplinary method.

## Results and Discussion

### *Overview of Vietnamese History*

Vietnam is a country in Southeast Asia, with a history spanning thousands of years since the arrival of humans, marked by the development of wet rice cultivation and bronze casting, as evidenced by numerous archaeological sites along the major river plains. Around the 6th century BC, the first state, Van Lang, was established by the Lac Viet people. By the 3rd century BC, Thuc Phan from the state of Shu seized the throne from the 18th Hùng King and founded the state of Au Lac. This period is often referred to as the Van Lang – Au Lac state.

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In 111 BC, Han Wudi's army invaded Nam Viet and annexed it into the Han empire. From this point, Vietnam was under the domination of various Northern feudal dynasties for more than 10 centuries. From the 10th century onwards, Vietnam became an independent and autonomous country, experiencing a feudal period with many dynasties lasting until the mid-20th century. Significant and long-lasting dynasties during this period included the Ly Dynasty (1010 – 1225), the Tran Dynasty (1226 – 1400), the Early Le – Later Le Dynasty (1428 – 1527), and the Nguyen Dynasty (1802 – 1945) (Ngoc, 2000).

In 1858, the French Navy landed at Da Nang port and later occupied Saigon. In 1862, Emperor Tu Duc signed a treaty ceding three provinces of Eastern Cochinchina to France, marking the beginning of French colonization in Vietnam. In 1945, immediately after Japan surrendered to the Allies, the Viet Minh successfully organized the August Revolution. On September 2, 1945, President Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

From 1945 to the present, Vietnam has been an independent and unified country. However, there were still wars such as the war against French colonialists (1945 – 1954), the war against American imperialists (1954 – 1975), the Southwest border war, and the Northern border war in 1979.

### *The Formation of Writing Systems in Vietnam*

Writing is an essential component of documents. When discussing documents, writing must be mentioned. Many research materials about the Van Lang state period have not convincingly proven the existence of writing in Vietnam. According to recognized historical sources and research, writing and administrative documents in Vietnam were formed, developed, and transformed through various historical periods such as: administrative documents before the 10th century; administrative documents during the feudal period from the early 10th century to 1945; administrative documents of the French colonial government from 1862 to 1945; and administrative documents in Vietnam from 1945 to the present.

Research results from many ancient Chinese and Vietnamese texts show that Chinese characters a type of writing created by the Han people, a majority ethnic group in China were unified in their writing style and widely used to enact laws and as a tool in governance. These were introduced to Vietnam around the late 2nd century, early 3rd century BC, along with the dissemination of Han culture, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The ruling authorities used documents in governance, with Chinese characters being the script of choice.

Research on Vietnamese history also acknowledges: "Van Lang and Au Lac have not been found to have writing. During the period of Northern domination, our people accepted Chinese characters and various forms of Han and Tang literature (poetry, prose, declarations, announcements...)" (Le, 1985).

Entering the 10th century, Vietnam overthrew Chinese feudal domination and entered a period of independence and autonomy. The Vietnamese feudal dynasties formed, developed, and continued to rule the country. Chinese characters were the first type of script used in Vietnam's history and continued to be used by the feudal dynasties, becoming the official script of the country. They were used as a means of enacting laws and state management from the 10th century to the mid-20th century.

The second type of script used in Vietnam was Nom script. Nom script was created by the Vietnamese and was used relatively steadily from around the late 12th century to the early 13th century. This script used Chinese characters to record Vietnamese sounds, addressing the limitations of Chinese characters and reflecting the Vietnamese people's need to create a unique writing system to capture their language. However, in practice, Nom script was primarily used for recording Buddhist scriptures, literature, bookkeeping, and inscribing merit on steles. Although some dynasties, such as the Ho Dynasty (1400 – 1407) and the Quang Trung Dynasty (1788 – 1792), promoted Nôm script and used it to some extent for enacting laws and administrative activities, in reality, this script occupied a very small proportion of the administrative documents of Vietnam's feudal dynasties (Anh, 1985).

The third type of script used during the feudal period in Vietnam was the National Language Script. This script is linked to the process of Catholic missionaries from the West propagating the faith around the 16th century. The person credited with the primary creation of the National Language Script is the missionary Alexandre de Rhodes a Frenchman of Jewish descent. After arriving in Vietnam, Alexandre de Rhodes studied the Vietnamese language and used the Latin alphabet to transcribe Vietnamese sounds. In 1651, two books written by Alexandre de Rhodes *Dictionnaire Anamite Latin Portugais* and *Catechisme en Latin et en Annamite* were published in Rome, Italy. In the early centuries after its creation, Quoc ngu (script Quoc Ngu) was mainly used within the church and among the faithful. Later, Quoc ngu gradually began to be used to a small extent in the administrative documents of the Nguyen Dynasty.

In addition to these three types of writing, other scripts were also used in Vietnam, influenced by nearly a century of French colonial rule (1858 – 1945), such as French, or English in relations with many Western countries.

### Administrative Documents and the Formation, Development, and Transformation of Administrative Documents in Vietnam's History

In the broadest sense, documents are understood to include information carriers that are recorded using linguistic symbols. This is a broad concept accepted in many scientific fields such as history, document studies, and linguistics. In a narrower sense, documents are understood as papers and materials created during the activities of organizations and institutions.

Vietnam's history has spanned many centuries with different political regimes and management systems such as feudalism, colonialism with the French colonial administration, and the period after the August Revolution of 1945 under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Therefore, in this study, the author uses the concept of administrative documents in the broad sense, as employed by several scientific fields such as document studies and linguistics, to refer to various types of documents created in the process of directing activities, establishing legal norms, managing, and resolving work by the organs of the state apparatus in Vietnam's history, regardless of the historical period, social regime, or the techniques used to create these administrative documents.

#### *Administrative Texts of the Feudal Dynasties in Vietnam from the 10th Century to 1945*

The transition into the 10th century marked the time when Vietnam entered a period of independence and self-determination. Despite undergoing various dynasties and the ups and downs of history, this era in Vietnam fundamentally maintained a monarchical system, adhering to the principle of centralized power, with the king as the head of the state apparatus, holding legislative, executive, and judicial authority. The state apparatus was organized with reference to, and modeled after, the feudal dynasties of China, adapted to the conditions of Vietnam, and structured into central and local government levels.

The system of administrative texts from the feudal dynasties in Vietnam served as a means of governance for the feudal government and was the clearest reflection of the activities of both the central and local authorities. This system included various types of documents such as laws, edicts, regulations, orders, decrees, announcements, proclamations, memorials, petitions, reports, proposals, and official letters, along with administrative records like household registers, land registries, and tax records (Quyen, 2001).

From the beginning of the 10th century, Vietnam transitioned into a period of independence and self-governance. Classical Chinese, which had been introduced to Vietnam in previous centuries, continued to be used by the Vietnamese feudal dynasties and remained the official language for administrative texts until 1945 the year marking the end of the feudal system in Vietnam. “Nom”, a writing system created by the Vietnamese, was not recognized by the feudal states as an official language in administrative texts. The National Language Script which developed in the 16th century, was primarily used for missionary activities. Some administrative texts during the feudal period in Vietnam utilized Nom, often alongside Classical Chinese. The National Language Script began to be used in administrative documents during the late Nguyen dynasty.

The system of administrative texts throughout the feudal dynasties in Vietnam has seen an increasingly clear classification regarding the authority of issuance, functions, and purposes of each type of administrative document. Among these are texts that have become well-known in Vietnamese and world history, such as the "Edict on Moving the Capital" by Ly Cong Uan in 1010, the "Criminal Law" which was the first written law in Vietnam issued during the Lý dynasty in 1042, the "Hong Duc Law" promulgated under Le Thanh Tong in the late 15th century, the "Gia Long Code" issued during the Nguyễn dynasty in 1815, the "Military Proclamation" by Tran Quoc Tuan around 1284-1285, and the "Binh Ngo Dai Cao" by Nguyen Trai written in 1428, among others.

Although the system of administrative texts under the feudal dynasties in Vietnam is quite diverse, documents with high legal validity were predominantly issued by the king, clearly reflecting the centralized power structure of the state. Administrative texts from central authorities, such as ministries and officials, as well as local governments, mainly served to convey, inform, exchange, and reflect actual situations (Tham et al., 2012).

Most types of administrative texts from the feudal dynasties in Vietnam originated from China and were modeled after the administrative text system of Chinese feudal dynasties, regarding the usage of document titles, authority to issue documents, functions, and purposes of administrative texts (Quyen, 2001).

Research on administrative texts in Vietnam during the feudal period can yield many valuable insights. The feudal dynasties of Vietnam gradually paid attention to and implemented specific measures for building a legal system, reflected through a system of documents that provided a framework for managing the state. They established regulations governing the issuance of documents, serving as standards and methods for the bureaucratic workforce. The content, quality, drafting techniques, and, more broadly, the legislative skills demonstrated in many documents were quite advanced. Numerous texts issued during this time illustrate the foresight of the feudal dynasties in state management.

In particular, the substantial collection of administrative documents from the feudal period stored and preserved in national archives in Vietnam represents a highly reliable and accurate source for studying various issues in Vietnamese and regional history (Phung, 2005).

#### *Administrative Texts of the French Colonial Government in Vietnam from 1862 to 1945*

In 1858, French colonists officially launched their invasion of Vietnam. Subsequently, 1862 is considered the year when the French established their governing apparatus in Vietnam and Indochina, which lasted until 1945. The government set up by the French during this period became the entity responsible for issuing a new type of administrative text in Vietnam, coexisting alongside the administrative texts of the Nguyen dynasty.

Based on the system of administrative texts from France and other capitalist European countries, the French colonial government in Vietnam enacted a system of administrative documents that were similar in type, meaning, and function. This system can be relatively clearly categorized into two types: regulatory texts and non-regulatory texts.

The regulatory administrative texts of the French colonial government included types such as decrees, decisions, directives, and circulars. Non-regulatory administrative texts included types such as official letters, minutes, reports, and communications. This system of documents was formed and existed in connection with the establishment and operation of the French colonial government in Vietnam from 1862 to 1945.

The system of administrative texts of the French colonial government in Vietnam from 1862 to 1945 is characterized by its origins and imitation of the administrative text system of France and other capitalist European countries. It was subject to regulations and adjustments regarding the authority to issue documents, legal validity, and the format of administrative texts in the mother country. A prominent feature of the French administrative text system is that it serves as a means and a product that authentically and

objectively reflects the nature of colonialism; it illustrates the exercise of legislative, executive, and judicial powers in Vietnam by the French colonial government. This system of documents coexisted and significantly influenced the administrative texts of the Nguyễn dynasty.

Administrative texts from the French colonial government primarily used the French language, along with some Latin-script Quoc Ngu (Vietnamese) and Classical Chinese. The content of the documents could be expressed using different writing systems, intermingling republican constitutional expressions with the language style of the centralized monarchic feudal state.

The formation of the administrative text system of the French colonial government in Vietnam brought about significant changes and coexisted alongside the text system of the Nguyễn dynasty. Along with the development of Quốc Ngữ, the parallel existence and changes in the administrative text system of the French colonial government laid the foundation for the establishment of the administrative text system in the post-independence period after Vietnam gained independence in 1945.

Currently, the administrative texts of the French colonial government in Vietnam from 1862 to 1945 are stored in significant quantities and preserved in national archives in Vietnam and overseas archives in France, serving as a reliable and accurate source for researching various issues in the history of Vietnam and modern French history (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, 2014).

Administrative Texts in Vietnam from 1945 to Present. The Period of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945 – 1976). The August Revolution of 1945 was a monumental event in the history of the Vietnamese nation: the chains of French colonialism that had lasted for nearly a century were shattered, and the centuries-old monarchic dictatorship was overthrown. Vietnam transitioned from a colonial state to an independent nation with a Democratic Republic, with the Vietnamese people rising from the status of slaves to become free individuals who owned their country.

With this historic turning point, the millennium-old feudal court system came to an end, signifying the dissolution of the feudal administrative text system. The French colonial government ceased its activities on Vietnamese territory, which also marked the end of the colonial administrative text system.

The state apparatus of Vietnam under the democratic republican regime was established, forming a system that spanned from the central to local levels, particularly after the adoption of the Constitution in 1946 (Hoc, 2024). With the emergence of this new state apparatus, a new system of administrative texts was also established. This system includes fundamental types such as the Constitution, laws, ordinances, decrees, circulars, decisions, official letters, minutes, and more. The Constitution and certain laws regulate various areas related to the organization of the state apparatus, military obligations, marriage and family, criminal law, etc.

A prominent feature of the administrative text system of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is that it reflects a new state regime unprecedented in the country's history: a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. This system employs the official and sole language of Quoc Ngu, a writing system that was fully developed in Vietnam after many centuries. The administrative text system of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is directly inherited from the system of texts used by the French colonial government and the text systems of Western capitalist countries, in terms of authority of issuance, document types, content, and format. This aligns with the socio-economic transformation in Vietnam from the feudal period to the Democratic Republic and the transition to socialism. The administrative text system during this period reflects the activities of the newly established state apparatus, with a legal framework that was still lacking, resulting in a wide range of authorities having the power to issue documents with high legal validity across various types of documents.

Administrative Texts of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam in Southern Vietnam (1954–1975). Immediately after the historic victory at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Agreement was signed on July 21,

1954, temporarily dividing Vietnam into two regions by a “temporary military demarcation line” along the Ben Hai River at the 17th parallel. During the Geneva Conference, the United States did not sign the Agreement to facilitate its scheme of dividing Vietnam. On June 16, 1954, the U.S. government pressured King Bao Dai (who was living abroad) to sign Decree 38/QT, “inviting” Ngo Dinh Diem to become Prime Minister to establish a puppet government in Southern Vietnam.

The government of the Republic of Vietnam a political apparatus modeled after that of the United States officially emerged on October 26, 1955, led by Ngo Dinh Diem under the provisional constitution No. 1. A year later, the first Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam was promulgated on October 26, 1956.

Along with the establishment and consolidation of the government of the Republic of Vietnam, an administrative document system was issued to support the management and governance of the state apparatus and societal control in Southern Vietnam. This included legal documents such as decrees, laws, ordinances, and executive orders, as well as regulatory and individual documents like ordinances, decrees, decisions, circulars, and other types of administrative texts.

The process of forming the document system of the government of the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) was closely tied to the political events of the Republic of Vietnam from its establishment on October 26, 1955, until the fall of the regime on April 30, 1975. Notable milestones included the promulgation of the provisional constitutions on October 26, 1955, the 1956 Constitution, the provisional constitution on November 4, 1963, and the 1967 Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam.

The document system of the Republic of Vietnam embodies the nature of neo-colonialism, representing a regime that was fiercely anti-communist in Southern Vietnam. This document system is closely linked to the process of establishing and perfecting the governmental apparatus. The formation, change, and refinement of the government structure have influenced the transformation of the document system (in terms of issuing authority and legal value) across various levels within the government of the Republic of Vietnam. Each level of government has the authority to issue specific types of documents according to established regulations to fulfill its management and governance functions (Hoc & Thoa, 2014, p.99-117).

The document system of the Republic of Vietnam served as a means to implement political objectives and to bring Southern Vietnamese society under the framework of a neo-colonial regime, under the control and domination of the Republic of Vietnam government.

The management document system of the Republic of Vietnam is a valuable resource for studying various aspects of state management, including the history of administration, the history of documents, and the history of archival practices in Southern Vietnam from 1954 to 1975.

The Period of National Unification from 1976 to present. April 30, 1975, is a historic milestone for Vietnam and the world: the day of liberation in the South and national unification; a brilliant beacon of justice and peace in the world. On April 25, 1976, the entire nation held a general election to elect the National Assembly of unified Vietnam. From June 24 to July 3, 1976, the National Assembly convened in Hanoi to discuss and pass many important decisions. Among them, the Assembly decided to change the name of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; established six committees of the Assembly; renamed the city of Saigon - Gia Dinh to Ho Chi Minh City; and formed a committee to draft the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This was the first session of the unified National Assembly the 6th Assembly completing the national unification in terms of statehood. The Assembly decided that legal unity must follow the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1959 until a new Constitution was adopted; it identified basic and long-term measures to urgently build a Constitution and new legal documents that aligned with the actual situation of the country.

During this period, the administrative document system of Vietnam was primarily inherited from the administrative document system of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1976. The early period from 1976 to 1986 was followed by the later period from 1986 onwards, when the country embarked on its reform process. The administrative document system includes various types of documents such as

constitutions, laws, codes, decrees, circulars, resolutions, decisions, directives, official letters, reports, and proposals. Some types previously used, such as ordinances, decrees, and notifications, were no longer utilized. Before the reforms (1986), the proportion of administrative documents containing legal provisions was very low, with legally effective documents concentrated in certain fields such as state organization, criminal law, military obligations, and land management (General Catalog of Legal Normative Documents of Vietnam 1945 - 2002, 2003).

The development of the system of administrative documents, especially since the country's renewal (1986), has gradually replaced the system of documents produced prior to that time; it has laid the foundation for comprehensive national renewal and the legal basis for the development of a multi-sector commodity economy with socialist orientation.

In Vietnam's history, the people have never had as many rights, particularly in terms of freedoms and the right to participate in state management activities, as they do during the period of renewal. Conversely, the people have also shown increasing interest and active participation in the democratization of social life. The system of administrative documents has established a legal basis for protecting national sovereignty while expanding foreign relations and actively integrating into the international community; it has created a legal foundation for gradually achieving social equity, developing culture, society, education, science, and technology; it has provided a legal basis for reforming the state administrative apparatus, progressively clarifying the functions, tasks, and powers of the state, the agencies within the state apparatus, the functions of non-state organizations, and the activities of enterprises, allowing the state to focus on macro-management functions while promoting the autonomy of organizations and enterprises. As the Vietnamese economy integrates with the international economy, international treaties are gradually becoming an integral part of the Vietnamese legal system (Hoc, 2023).

The techniques for drafting documents, especially legal documents, have seen significant advancements compared to the period before the country's renewal and have become one of the important, regular activities not only of the National Assembly and the Government but also of many agencies, departments, sectors, organizations, and individuals throughout the country (Tam & Nga, 2006).

## **Conclusions and Some Insights from the Formation and Transformation of the Administrative Document System in Vietnam Throughout History**

The history of administrative documents in Vietnam is closely intertwined with many major cultures around the world. Vietnam has gone through thousands of years of ups and downs, closely linked with wars against foreign invasions. Alongside the heavy influence of these wars, Vietnam has been shaped by cultural exchanges in various fields such as political systems, state apparatus organization, religion, beliefs, and architecture. Among these, writing and administrative documents issued by state agencies have been particularly influenced by China, France, and several other countries over many centuries. This characteristic is a significant strength and advantage for Vietnam in its current process of nation-building and development, as it seeks to expand cooperation not only within Asia but also with Western countries. Moreover, countries around the world that cooperate and work with Vietnam share many similarities and intersections across various aspects of life, despite possible differences. Thus, a highlight of Vietnamese culture is that it encompasses many of the world's refined cultural values.

The history of administrative documents in Vietnam offers many lessons for the present and future. Research into the history of administrative documents shows that various feudal dynasties and modern state authorities (since 1945) have increasingly focused on and implemented specific measures regarding the issuance of administrative documents, especially those with high legal validity. State agencies have established regulations for the issuance of documents, clearly defining the authority, format, and content of the documents, as well as the procedures for their issuance. They have set knowledge and skill requirements for document drafters and established sanctions related to document issuance. Many of these experiences have been studied, summarized, applied, and proven in practice.

Administrative documents in Vietnam constitute a diverse and rich source of historical data that has been preserved for centuries. This documentation is an invaluable resource for studying the history of Vietnam in general and issues related to its economy, culture, society, and education in particular. Furthermore, through this source of data, various regional and global issues can be studied, such as the cultural exchange process between China and Vietnam, as well as between Western countries like France, the U.S., and others with Vietnam; issues related to the sea, islands, national sovereignty, ethnicity, religion, and migration to and from Vietnam. Thus, the administrative documents formed in the history of Vietnam are a highly reliable, accurate, and objective source for researching many aspects of Vietnamese history in relation to regional and global contexts (Nham & Thuy, 2015).

The formation and transformation of writing and the system of administrative documents in Vietnam throughout history show that the Vietnamese people are very proactive and flexible in absorbing and learning from the achievements of human civilization. On the other hand, this absorption and learning, when applied to Vietnam's conditions, exhibit creativity and appropriate adaptation to practical circumstances. This is evident in the adoption of Chinese characters and the Latin alphabet; the application of political models and state organization; and the incorporation of Chinese, French, and many other cultures. Creative adaptation to Vietnam's context is reflected in the development of Nôm script and the creation of Quốc ngữ; the establishment of political institutions and the organization of the Vietnamese state, as well as various aspects of social life. This has contributed to shaping the image of the Vietnamese people as possessing a strong national spirit, self-reliance, and resilience, while also being proactive, active, and creative in integrating into the world (Them, 1996).

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