



# Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ



## STUDY GUIDE



# RHYTHMIX CULTURAL WORKS



Dear Teachers and Educators,

Rhythmix is excited to have you and your students join us for **PAL - Performance, Art & Learning**. PAL assemblies are designed to foster awareness of world cultures, stimulate a sense of pride in students' cultural heritage and deepen connections to their communities.

PAL assemblies also serve as a catalyst for arts learning and a springboard for integrating arts education into your classroom.

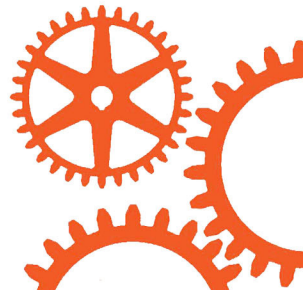
To help your students gain the most out of each PAL assembly, we suggest that the learning begin before, and continue after, every performance. Utilizing the resources provided, your students can engage more fully with the performance experience, connecting what they see and hear to their personal lives, culture, community and any school subjects you choose.

Aligning with the **California Arts Standards**, the accompanying study guides and slide sets help foster students' artistic competencies, cultivate their appreciation and understanding of the arts, and support them to fully engage in lifelong arts learning.

At Rhythmix, we believe exposure to the arts can be a transformative experience, helping us to learn about ourselves, each other, and the world.

Thank you for joining us on this journey,

Your "PALs" at Rhythmix







# RHYTHMIX CULTURAL WORKS PAL

Performance, Art & Learning Presents

## VÂN-ÁNH VANESSA VÕ

A MUSICAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE SOUNDS OF VIETNAMESE  
TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS & NEW MUSIC



*Artist Laureate Award Winner*  
*Emmy® Award Winner*  
*Oscar® Nominator, Contributor*  
*Grammy Global Music Judge*  
*Vietnamese National Champion*

## About VÂN-ÁNH VANESSA VÕ



*Artist Laureate Award Winner  
Emmy® Award Winner  
Oscar® Nominator, Contributor  
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Vietnamese National Champion*

*"To say Võ is making a splash is an understatement. Her compositions' rippling blend of musical genres and music played on her native country's instruments and often sung with her luminous vocals, have mesmerized musicians and audiences alike." —San Francisco Classical Voice*

A fearless musical explorer, Vân-Ánh Võ is an award-winning performer of the 16-string *đàn tranh* (zither) and an Emmy Award-winning composer who has collaborated with Kronos Quartet, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and Yo-Yo Ma. In addition to her mastery of the *đàn tranh*, she also plays the monochord (*đàn bầu*),

bamboo xylophone (*đàn t'rung*), traditional drums (*trống*) and many other instruments to create music that blends the wonderfully unique sounds of Vietnamese instruments with other genres, and fuses deeply rooted Vietnamese musical traditions with fresh new structures and compositions.

Coming from a family of musicians and beginning her study of the *đàn tranh* from the age of four, Vân-Ánh graduated with distinction from the Vietnamese Academy of Music, where she later taught. In 1995, Vân-Ánh won the championship title in the Vietnam National *Đàn Tranh* Competition, along with the first prize for best solo performance of modern folk music. In Hanoi, Vân-Ánh was an ensemble member of Vietnam National Music Theatre as well as a member of the traditional music group *Đồng Nội Ensemble*, which she founded and directed. She has since performed in more than twenty-seven countries and recorded many broadcast programs in and outside of Vietnam.

Since settling in San Francisco's Bay Area in 2001, Vân-Ánh has collaborated with musicians across different music genres to create new works, bringing Vietnamese traditional music to a wider audience.

Her productions are unique in that they often include a community component leading up to her performances, including community workshops that engage participants in the topic that has inspired Vân-Ánh to create these productions. Under President Obama's administration, Vân-Ánh was the first Vietnamese artist to perform at the White House and received the Artist Laureate Award for her community contributions through the arts.



## NOTES ON THE MUSIC

### *HEAVE HO - Hồ Huệ Huế*

*Vietnamese folk music.*

*Arranged by Nguyễn Lê & Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

*Performed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

Instruments include *đàn tranh*, *đàn T'rưng*, *sanh tiền* (coin clapper) and vocal. Backing track recorded by Motoko Honda on keyboard, Freddy Clarke on back up vocal, and Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ on percussions.

Heave Ho is a folk song from Huế, Central region of Vietnam. The song is sung by villagers when working on the rice field or plantations. With Vân-Ánh's mission of "develop-to-preserve" traditional arts, she has been working with other composers integrating various music genres in order to create and bring new musical language and structures for traditional instruments and folk music.

In this song, Vân-Ánh worked with the renowned French jazz guitarist, Nguyễn Lê, to integrate jazz into the song. They also designed specific solo parts to showcase various instruments or different voices like the voices of different villagers.



### *THE LEGEND - Huyền Thoại Mẹ*

*Composed & Arranged by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

*Performed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

All Vietnamese children grow up with the Legend of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân. After the immortal fairy Âu Cơ marries the dragon king Lạc Long Quân, Âu Cơ gives birth to 100 eggs. Those 100 eggs later hatch into 50 boys and 50 girls. To populate the land, the immortal fairy Âu Cơ took 50 children up to the mountain and the dragon king Lạc Long Quân took another 50 children down to the sea. According to the legend, these are the ancestors of Việt people.

Vân-Ánh composed "The Legend" to perform during her TEDx talk in 2014. This piece was influenced by the *đạo Sa Mạc* -- a musical style commonly used to accompany spoken word poetry from the Vietnamese traditional Northern opera genre.

Coming from the same family as the Chinese *guzheng*, the Korean *gayageum*, and the Japanese *koto*, the *đàn tranh* adapts Vietnamese cultural aspects especially for its 6-tone language to create the voices of its people. In this piece, Vân-Ánh uses her left hand to bend the strings, to vibrate, to hammer-on, etc. to reflect the tone changes in her language.

## **BÁNH MÌ, BÁNH MÌ, BÚN BÒ HUẾ**

*(Interactive activity using names of Vietnamese dishes.)*

*Composed & Arranged by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

*Performed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

BÁNH MÌ = Vietnamese sandwiches

BÚN BÒ HUẾ = Central Vietnamese spicy beef noodle



When speaking about Vietnamese culture, we focus on three major aspects: food, music, and language. This activity is created to tie up these three elements of Vietnamese culture together.

We all know that playing music can be quite challenging for many people in general. Playing music in odd meters (5/4, 7/4, 9/4 ...etc.) is very complicated, even for musicians. However, using the names of two of the most famous Vietnamese dishes, this activity will help all of you to move seamlessly into the odd meter of 7/4, which has seven beats, or steps, in each cycle.



## **ON SHARING A HUSBAND - Kiếp Chồng Chung**

*Lyrics by Hồ Xuân Hương*

*Composed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

*Arranged by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ & Kallan Nishimoto*

*Performed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ*

Growing up in a society where being an outspoken woman was frowned upon, I expected to have more freedom to express my opinions and to be whatever I wanted to be once I relocated to the United States in 2000. However, the 2016 election and other incidences I faced as a new immigrant revealed social limitations that have been pressing upon women and ethnic groups.

Consequently, “On Sharing A Husband” was composed to be in my production “Songs of Strength - S.O.S”. The goal of the production was to feature immigrants’ perspectives that are relevant to audiences whether they have or have not

experienced oppression and social inequality--revealing ways in which struggles for liberation are both situationally unique and ethnically, geographically, and temporally transcendent.

Placing traditional and contemporary texts and styles in conversation and exploring the timbral capabilities of my instrument (*đàn bầu* accompanied with my voice instead of its traditional role as a solo instrument), the work reflects on intersectional issues that women of color face in contemporary American society. Here, I sing a revolutionary 17th century poem by Hồ Xuân Hương to advocate for women’s rights.



## ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTS

### THE ĐÀN TRANH (zither)

The *đàn tranh* is a plucked zither from Vietnam, believed to be descended from the Chinese *guzheng*, and similar to the Japanese *koto*, and the Korean *gayageum*. It has a long wooden soundbox with steel strings, movable bridges and tuning pegs positioned on its top. A bridge is a device that supports the strings on a musical instrument and transmits the vibration of those strings to another part of the instrument— typically a soundboard, such as the top of a guitar or violin—which transfers the sound to the surrounding air.



The soundbox consists of a curved top plate, a flat bottom plate, and six side-pieces. Steel strings tuned to the pentatonic scale and consisting of varying diameters run the length of the soundbox. Bridges for each of the strings sit across the middle of the box. Musicians usually wear picks made of metal, plastic, or tortoise-shell to pluck the strings.

#### History of the Đàn Tranh

The original *đàn tranh* of the 13th and early 14th centuries had 14 strings, but by the 19th century it had evolved to 16 strings. In the mid-to-late 20th century a 17-stringed *đàn tranh* came into common use and has since become a preferred form of the instrument throughout Vietnam.

However, larger instruments with 22, 24, and 25 strings have been created since the 1980s. Today, the *đàn tranh* remains a popular Vietnamese musical instrument and is played in solo performance, to accompany a singer, or as part of various instrumental ensembles.

#### Playing the Đàn Tranh

Musicians pluck *đàn tranh* strings on one side of the instrument's bridges with their right hand to produce a melody, and on the other side of the bridges use their left hand to "bend" the notes, allowing for subtle tones with a quiet and delicate sound that reverberates through the hollow wooden box.

In traditional music, performers use 2 or 3 fingers (thumb and index, or thumb, index and middle fingers) to pluck the strings. However, in newer compositions, musicians may use four or five fingers on each hand to pluck the strings. In these new works, the musician may also use their left hand to play two simultaneous parts.

At times, the *đàn tranh* is played with a bow, traditionally the musician bows the strings to the right of the bridges with their right hand, while the left hand presses the strings on the other side of the bridges to vary the pitch and vibrato.

## THE ĐÀN T'RUNG (*vertical bamboo xylophone*)

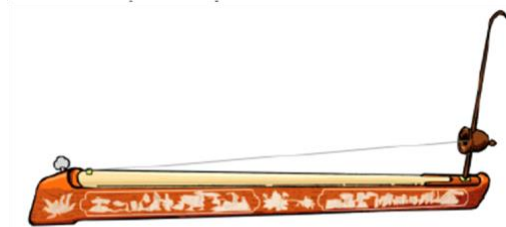
The *Đàn T'rung* or *T'rung* is a popular musical instrument from the Central Highlands of Vietnam and is closely associated with the spiritual life of the ethnic minority groups in that region, the *Bahnar*, *TSedan*, *Giarai*, and *Ede*, among others. *Đàn T'rungs* vary in size and are made of short bamboo tubes of different sizes, with a notch at one end and a slanted edge at the other. The large, long tubes produce low-pitched tones while the short, small ones make high-pitched tones. The tubes are arranged lengthwise horizontally and attached together by strings.



### History of the Đàn T'rung

One of the earliest instruments developed in Central Vietnam, the *Đàn T'rung* was often played alongside the flute and pan-pipe. After a day of farm work, villagers might gather around a fire in the communal Rong house to sing, dance, and play instruments. With its bright, upbeat sound, the instrument is often played at weddings, ceremonies, and festivals alongside drums and gongs, as the community sings and dances to traditional songs.

Over the years, the *Đàn T'rung* has evolved to hold as many as 48 tubes in multiple layers, and musicians are able to perform intricate traditional and modern songs upon it. Some performers hold a stick notched at both ends to produce two sounds at the same time, heightening the complexity of the instrument's sound. The *Đàn T'rung* is also one of the only traditional Vietnamese instruments upon which you'll hear the chromatic scale (usually found in Western music.)



## THE ĐÀN BẦU (*1-string instrument*)

If a sound were chosen to evoke Vietnam, for many it would be the sound of the *đàn bầu*, one of two traditional musical instruments that originated in Vietnam. The *đàn bầu* is a monochord, or single-stringed instrument. (*Đàn*, means a stringed instrument, and *bầu* means gourd, because the instrument was originally made with a dried gourd.)

### Instrument Description

Originally, the *đàn bầu* was a tube zither -- a stringed musical instrument with a tube that functions both as an instrument's neck and its soundbox (the hollow chamber that forms the body of a stringed musical instrument and provides resonance or heightens the sound). It was made of just four parts: a bamboo tube, a wooden rod, a dried gourd or coconut shell half, and a silk string. Strung across the bamboo, the string tied to one end of a rod that sat upright on the bamboo tube. The coconut shell or gourd was attached to the rod, serving as a resonator (the hollow part of a musical instrument.)

Over the years, a wooden soundboard has replaced the bamboo tube, a metal string is used instead of the traditional silk string, and the rod is made from buffalo horn. A decorative wood piece has replaced the gourd. A tuning peg made of wood or bamboo is located toward the bottom of the soundboard, inside the frame. The metal string threads through a small hole at the end of the instrument and attaches to the tuning peg. Musicians may also pluck the string with a pointed stick of bamboo or rattan.



## ***THE ĐÀN BẦU (continue)***

### **Playing the Đàn Bầu**

While playing the *đàn bầu* can look easy, it actually requires considerable precision. With a wooden pick, the musician plucks the string with the right hand, touching it lightly at certain points with the side or heel of the hand to produce harmonies. The left hand bends, presses, releases and vibrates the flexible rod thereby varying the tension of the metal string. This causes the pitch to rise or fall, notes to be lengthened or shortened, and allows the musician to play trills.

**Learn more about traditional Vietnamese music**

**From artist website:**

[www.vananhvo.com](http://www.vananhvo.com)

**From other sources:**

<https://medium.com/@aiminguyen7/shortguide-to-authentic-traditional-vietnamese-music-and-dance-for-tourists-459ed4375d9e>

# ABOUT VIETNAM

From National Geographic Kids:  
<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/vietnam>



## FAST FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME: Socialist Republic of Vietnam

FORM OF GOVERNMENT: Socialist republic

CAPITAL: Hanoi

POPULATION: 97,040,334

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: Vietnamese

MONEY: Dong

AREA: 127,123 square miles (329,147 square kilometers)

MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGE: Annam Cordiller

MAJOR RIVERS: Mekong, Red, Ma, Perfume

## GEOGRAPHY

Vietnam is a long, narrow nation shaped like the letter s. It is in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the peninsula known as Indochina. Its neighbors include China to the north and Laos and Cambodia to the west. The South China Sea lies to the east and south. The mountains of the Annam Cordillera rise over most of the western side of Vietnam, while a thousand-mile (1,600- kilometer) coastline dominates the east.

At its narrowest point, Vietnam is only 30 miles (48 kilometers) wide. Two of Vietnam's largest rivers, the Mekong in the south and the Red in the north, end at the South China Sea in huge swampy plains called deltas. These regions are home to most of the country's people and provide fertile ground to grow rice and many other crops.

## PEOPLE & CULTURE

Most Vietnamese people live in the countryside, mainly in the river delta regions of the north and south. Recently though, people have begun to move to the main cities of Ho Chi Minh (formerly Saigon) and Hanoi.

The most popular sports in Vietnam include soccer, table tennis, volleyball, and martial arts. Vietnamese food is a blend of Chinese and Thai styles and features seafood and homegrown fruits and vegetables.

As a communist country, Vietnam has no official religion. But people are free to worship if they want to, and many follow what's called the "Three Teachings" of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.





## NATURE

Vietnam's mountainous terrain, forests, wetlands, and long coastline contain many different habitats that support a great variety of wildlife. Some 270 types of mammals, 180 reptiles, 80 amphibians, and 800 bird species reside in Vietnam. Many rare and unusual animals live in Vietnam, including giant catfish, Indochinese tigers, Saola antelopes, and Sumatran rhinos. The government has set up 30 parks and reserves to protect its animals, but their survival is in doubt because much of their habitat has been cleared for lumber or to grow crops.



*Vietnamese farmers plant rice in the terraces carved out of the hills.*

Tropical forests once covered most of Vietnam, but over the past few hundred years, logging has reduced the forest cover to only about 19 percent. The government has launched a replanting program in an attempt to restore these woodlands.



## GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Vietnam is a socialist state governed by the Communist Party of Vietnam. A president, chosen by the National Assembly, is head of state and commander of the armed forces. An appointed prime minister runs the government.

Vietnam's main exports include crude oil, seafood, rice, shoes, wooden products, machinery, electronics, coffee, and clothing. Between 1975 and the late 1980s, Vietnam traded mainly with other communist countries, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, it has expanded trade with other nations.

## HISTORY

Vietnam's first civilizations arose in the Red River Valley some 5,000 years ago. These northern tribes flourished until 207 B.C., when their region was conquered by a Chinese lord, who established a kingdom called Nam Viet.

In 111 B.C., Nam Viet became part of the Chinese empire, which ruled the north until A.D. 939, when a Vietnamese commander named Ngo Quyen organized a revolt that drove the Chinese out. Later dynasties renamed the country Dai Viet and gradually extended their territory south. By the mid-1500s, Dai Viet was divided between rival kingdoms: the Trinh in the north and the Nguyen in the south. In 1802, a Nguyen lord, with the help of the French, defeated the Trinh and renamed the country Vietnam. By 1890, however, France had taken over Vietnam.

Japan took control briefly during World War II, and when the war ended with Japan's defeat in 1945, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party, declared Vietnam an independent nation. French attempts to retake Vietnam led to war with the communist Vietnamese, called Viet Minh.

Fighting ended in 1954 with the partition of the country into communist North and non-communist South Vietnam. In 1957, communist rebels in the south, called Viet Cong, rose up. War between the North and South ensued, and other countries, including the United States, Russia, and China, soon became involved. The fighting lasted until 1975, when the communists overran the south and took its capital, Saigon.



## VIETNAMESE RESETTLEMENT IN THE U.S

(from National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war>)

*"Some tragedies defy the imagination. Some misery so surpasses the grasp of reason that language itself breaks beneath the strain. Instead, we gasp for metaphors. Instead, we speak the inaudible dialect of the human heart...Let us do something meaningful - something profound - to stem this misery. We face a world problem. Let us fashion a world solution. History will not forgive us if we fail. History will not forget us if we succeed."*

*Walter Mondale, Vice President of the United States of America  
July 21, 1979*

On April 30, 1975, twenty months after the last American combat forces were withdrawn from Vietnam, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese armed forces. Vietnam's long civil war had ended. Fearing reprisals, thousands of people fled the country, many with the help of a hastily organized American airlift. Many more Vietnamese who had fought gallantly for the Saigon regime stayed behind.

Postwar conditions were grim. None suffered more than those who were branded as reactionaries and traitors by southern Vietnam's new regime. First a trickle and then by 1978, a flood of refugees fled Vietnam in small, ill-equipped boats. More than half a million persons died at sea. Two million more boat people found temporary sanctuary in camps in other Southeast Asian countries and China.

Reports of the horrendous conditions faced by the refugees shocked world opinion and prompted an international effort coordinated by the United Nations to improve conditions in the camps and support resettlement of the boat people in various sanctuary countries. In the years that followed, several hundred thousand men, women and children swelled the Vietnamese American community. Like the 1975 wave of refugees, they were determined to rebuild their lives. Before many years had passed, chiefly through their own tireless efforts and determination, the Vietnamese community in the United States had achieved economic security and a vigorous community cultural life.

The story of America is in large part the story of peoples who arrived here fleeing from oppression. Today, no less than the immigrant communities that arrived before them, one million-and-a-half Vietnamese Americans enrich all spheres of American life. Many have become prominent in the arts and entertainment, public policy, the armed services, business, education, and technology.



## RESOURCES

Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ's website:

<https://www.vananhvo.com>

Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ's NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y02Rv8sQzw>

### Articles

***Vân-Ánh Võ Transforms a Refugee's Odyssey into a Musical Performance:***

<https://www.kqed.org/arts/11260223/van-anh-vo-transforms-a-refugees-odyssey-into-a-musicalperformance>



***Vân-Ánh Võ: Meaningful Conduits:*** <https://www.innerviews.org/inner/vo.html>

***From Vietnam to America: Q&A with Musician and Composer Vân-Ánh Võ:***

<https://caamedia.org/blog/2016/01/20/from-vietnam-to-america-qa-with-musician-andcomposer-van-anh-vo/>

### Online Resources

Short Guide to Traditional Vietnamese Music and Dance For Tourists:

<https://medium.com/@aiminguyen7/short-guide-to-authentic-traditional-vietnamese-music-anddance-for-tourists-459ed4375d9e>

An Overview of Vietnamese Traditional Music:

<https://www.govietnam.tours/vietnamesetraditional-music/>

Examples of Traditional and Folk Music of Vietnam:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvpmcx9OI7Q>

### Books

- Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present, by Ben Kiernan
- Vietnam – Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture, by Culture Smart! and Geoffrey Murray
- The Vietnam War: An Intimate History, by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns

### Children's Books

- All About Vietnam: Stories, Songs, Crafts and Games for Kids, by Phuoc Thi Minh Tran, Dong Nguyen, et al.
- The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam, by Quang Nhuong Huynh and Vo-Dinh Mai
- Water Buffalo Days: Growing Up in Vietnam, by Huynh Quang Nhuong, Jean Tseng, et al.
- Goodbye, Vietnam, by Gloria Whelan
- Song of the Mekong River: Vietnam (Global Kids Storybooks), by Na-mi Choi and Sinae Jo
- Vietnam War: Discover the People, Places, Battles, and Weapons of America's Indochina Struggle, by DK Eyewitness Books



## Thank You!

Thank you for joining Rhythmix Cultural Works and Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ.  
We look forward to seeing you next time!



Photo by Tung Nguyen

For more information about Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ, please visit:  
<https://www.vananhvo.com/>

For more info about Rhythmix, please visit: [www.rhythmix.org](http://www.rhythmix.org)





## About Rhythmix Cultural Works

Rhythmix Cultural Works brings people of all ages together to experience and explore music, dance, visual art and educational opportunities. The organization seeks to build community by inspiring engagement in the arts as a way to learn about each other and the world. With a strong commitment to provide programming relevant to the local population, Rhythmix strives to promote cultural awareness, encourage participation in the arts, and support local artists in the presentation of their work.

Since Rhythmix opened its doors in 2007, the community-based arts facility has built its reputation through the artistic excellence and cultural depth of its programming. To date, more than 150,000 people have engaged in arts experiences, attending high-quality performances of world music, dance, theater, exhibits and community events, as well as enrolling in classes for youth and adults in the arts, crafts, and movement-based practices from other cultures.

## About PAL - Performance, Art & Learning

Rhythmix Cultural Works believes that exposure to the arts can be a transformative experience and a catalyst for cultural celebration. In support of this vision, Rhythmix developed PAL as an assembly-based youth arts education program in collaboration with the Alameda Unified School District. PAL fosters awareness of world cultures and empowers underserved youth through exposure to educational music and dance performances.

In response to the ongoing pandemic, Rhythmix launched its PAL program virtually for the 2020-21 school year, expanding its reach to all schools in Alameda County. Thanks to the belief in the power of arts education and generous support from the foundations listed below, PAL has served over 40,000 students since its inception in 2012.







# RHYTHMIX CULTURAL WORKS



## Thanks to our Funders and Partners

Christopher & Trudi  
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Foundation



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Cook

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## ... and supporters like YOU! Thank you!

This study guide was developed by Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ  
with additional editing by Rhythmix Cultural Works.

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