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Singer Kim Loan

The different systems of writing in Viet-Nam

“Chu Nho”

Did the Vietnamese people have their own system of writing before their cultural contact with China? This is a question which archaeology and linguistics have also so far been unable to answer.

During the centuries of Chinese occupation, Chinese was in Viet-Nam—as Latin in medieval France—the only written language, used in official documents as well as literary works. The Chinese characters were called “Chu Nho”, which literally means “the scholars’ script”. Although written in the purest tradition of Chinese calligraphy, the Chinese characters received, however, a distinctly Vietnamese pronunciation, which enriched the Vietnamese spoken language with newly-coined Sino-Vietnamese words. A great number of Chinese words, mostly philosophical terms, were thus adopted.

“ Chu Nom ”

The first stage of Viet-Nam's linguistic or rather scriptural "liberation" from China began in the mid-13th century with the development of a new system of writing which, although still based on the Chinese characters, was specifically Vietnamese—the "Chu Nom" (literally: "the vulgar system of writing"). Under this system, each Vietnamese word was transcribed by the combination of two Chinese ideograms, one used for phonetization purposes, the other to indicate the meaning.

The knowledge of Chinese was still necessary to understand "Chu Nom". Furthermore, there were no fixed and strict rules in the combination of Chinese characters, which often led to several different possible interpretations of the same word.

In spite of all these shortcomings, during six centuries, the "Chu Nom" was to be used as a literary language alongside the "Chu Nho". Han Thuyen, a mandarin and poet of the 13th century was a pioneer in its literary use.

“Quoc Ngu”

A true linguistic revolution took place in the 17th century with the "romanisation" of the Vietnamese language. The name of the French

Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes, from Avignon, is generally associated with the invention of "Quoc Ngu" (literally national script) using the Roman alphabet.

The first printed work in "quoc ngu" was Alexandre de Rhodes' "Cathechismus" published in Rome in 1649. But the development of the new script was in fact a collective undertaking which started in the early 16th century. Several generations of Catholic missionaries—Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian—took part in this undertaking. Although not often mentioned, the contribution of Vietnamese scholars, mostly Catholic catechists, was certainly not negligible.

The "quoc ngu" was codified in the late 17th century but it was not until the early part of the 20th century that it was definitely adopted and gradually superseded the "chu nho" and "chu nom".

TRƯỚC LÂU NGUNG-BÍCH

Trước lầu Ngung-bích khoá xuân,
Về non xa, tâm trăng gần ở chung.
Bên bờ bát ngát xa trông,
Cát vàng cồn nọ bụi hồng đậm kia.
Bé bằng mây sớm đèn khuya,
Nửa tình nửa cảnh như chia tâm lòng.

A passage from "Kim-Van-Kieu" by Nguyen-Du in "Chu Nom" and its transcription into "Quoc Ngu".

Vietnamese Literature in “Chu Nom”

KIM-VAN-KIEU

By NGUYEN-DU⁽¹⁾ (1765-1820)

Nguyen-Du, the author of “Kim-Van-Kieu”, a 3,254-line poem composed in the early 19th century, as their national poet.

“With this masterpiece, Nguyen-Du consecrated his mother tongue as a poetical language of an extraordinary delicacy, power and richness. He also gave to the soul of his fatherland a sensitive and prestigious mirror in which its eternal image, evolving throughout the centuries and in changing settings, is reflected.”⁽²⁾

Nguyen-Du was born in 1765 at the village of Tien-Dien, in the province of Ha-Tinh (now in North Vietnamese territory), the seventh child of a former Prime Minister under the Le dynasty. Several members of his family, including one of his brothers, were noted scholars and mandarins at the Court. At the age of 17, Nguyen-Du himself passed the traditional Chinese-style triennial competitive examination and received the title of “tu-tai”, which opened up for him prospects of a bright mandarinal career. At that time, Viet-Nam was going through one of the darkest periods of her history, torn apart, as she now is, by a protracted civil war. It was not, however, an ideological war imposed by one party upon the other—such as is the case in the present conflict—but a war between two rival feudal families.

Since the early 17th century, Viet-Nam had been partitioned into two parts along the Gianh river (19th parallel), the North under the control of the Trinh, the South under the Nguyen. The two families fought against each other while pledging allegiance to the Le dynasty, which each of them claimed to recognize as the legitimate authority. After fifty years of civil war, marked by intermittent campaigns in both parts of the country, a 100-year truce followed and lasted until 1774. But two years before, in 1772—Nguyen-Du was then 7 years old—a local rebellion led by three brothers, Nguyen-Nhac, Nguyen-Lu and Nguyen-Hue from the village of Tay Son, in the present central coastal province of Binh-Dinh, had reached the proportion of a nation-wide revolution directed against both rival houses and widely-supported by the poverty-stricken peasants and the newly-emerging small merchant class—Kieu’s father belonged to that new class, “he was neither rich nor poor”—tired by war and the exactions of corrupt officials at all levels.

The Tay Son revolt very quickly became fatal to the Nguyen: in 1776, Saigon fell and Nguyen-Anh, the heir to the Nguyen “throne”, fled the country and sought refuge in Siam. The Tay Son brothers then turned against the Trinh: Nguyen-Hue, the youngest brother, and one of the most outstanding Vietnamese generals, captured Thang-Long (Hanoi) in 1786 and deposed the



Buddha of Dong-Duong, bronze, circa 300 A.D., standing in attitude of reasoning. Found at Dong-Duong, Quang-Nam. (Saigon National Museum.)



Confucius (traditional popular engraving).

Trinh. Nguyen-Hue formally restored the Le dynasty and married the daughter of Emperor Le-Hien-Tong. Princess Ngoc-Han, a famous poetess. Le-Hien-Tong's successor Le-Chieu-Thong, asked the Mandchu rulers for help and a 200,000-man Chinese army invaded Viet-Nam but was routed by Nguyen-Hue in 1789. Le-Chieu-Thong fled to China and it was the end of the Le dynasty. For a few years, the Tay Son were going to be the masters of the whole of Viet-Nam but in 1802 they were in their turn defeated by Nguyen-Anh, supported by France. The rule of the Tay Son was brief but the unity of Viet-Nam which they had shaped survived and was to be strengthened by Nguyen-Anh, who became Emperor Gia Long.

It is necessary to keep in mind this historical and social background in order to understand both Nguyen-Du and his main work, "Kim-Van-Kieu".

One of the first lines of the poem—"Oceans turn to mulberry fields, a desolate scene", was an obvious reference to those upheavals and turmoils.

Faithful to the Le dynasty, Nguyen-Du and members of his family joined the fight against the Tay Son—although according to certain historians apparently without much conviction—but as he realized that it was of no avail, he refused to co-operate with the new regime and returned to his native village. For several years led a secluded life, hunting, reading, writing and spending long hours walking in the Hong-Linh 99-peak mountain range area.

After the collapse of the Tay Son, Nguyen-Du half-heartedly rallied Emperor Gia-Long—some historians believe that he was "drafted"—and started a brilliant mandarinal career, first as a provincial administrator, then at the Court. In 1813—he was then 48—he was appointed Can-Chanh (Grand Chancellor of the Empire) and went as Special Envoy to China.

It was during that diplomatic mission that he noticed a Chinese novel entitled "The story of Kim-Van-Kieu", written by an author under the pen-name of "Thanh-Tam Tai-Nhan" in the 16th or the early 17th century, which he later adapted into his own poem.

On his return to Viet-Nam, Nguyen-Du was promoted Le-Bo huu tam-tri (Vice-Minister of Rites) and in 1820, the first year of the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, on the point of leaving on another Embassy to China, he fell suddenly ill and died at the age of 56.

"DOAN-TRUONG TAN-THANH"

The initial title given by Nguyen-Du to "Kim-Van-Kieu" was "Doan-Truong Tan-Thanh" (New accents of a heart-rending song). It recounts the trials and tribulations of Kieu, a beautiful and talented girl, who had to sacrifice her love and sell herself—she was driven into prostitution—in order to save her father from jail, out of filial piety. According to most literary critics, Nguyen-Du saw in Kieu's life and destiny a sad replica of his own. For him and his family, Gia-Long was after all a "usurper" and serving him was, according to Confucian ethical concepts, an act of disloyalty (that tiet), if not of treason or "moral prostitution".

During his years at the Court, Nguyen-Du proved an able and honest administrator. But he gave the impression of feeling more at ease among peasants and the common people than among his colleagues. For these, he was a silent and moody man. Some of them saw in his attitude sheer arrogance and aloofness but those who knew him more intimately realized that he bore some secret wound. One day, during a Court session, Emperor Gia-Long himself reproachfully asked him why he usually remained silent while state affairs were being debated: Nguyen sobbed and offered to resign but the Emperor refused.

In a famous two-line verse, Nguyen-Du, who wrote under the pen-name of To-Nhu, in one of his pessimistic moods, wondered whether within three hundred years, there would be "someone, somewhere, who would still remember him with tenderness".

It was a mere lack of self-confidence on his part, for "Kim-Van-Kieu", after 150 years, is still the most popular poem in Viet-Nam and the foreigners who know it through translations—although translations are unable to render all its poetical beauty and flavour—readily recognize it as one of the masterpieces of universal literature.

Few are the Vietnamese—whatever their social background—who do not know one or two lines of the poem and some of them even use it as a book of oracles, finding in it, in times of difficulty and stress if not the answer, at least an echo to their own problems.

In "Kim-Van-Kieu" we find the dominant themes of Buddhism.

(1) Pronounced in the northern dialect: zoo; in the southern dialect: you.

(2) From the introduction to the translation into French of "Kim-Van-Kieu" by Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, in the "Connaissance de l'Orient" series, sponsored by UNESCO, Gallimard, Paris, 1961.

PROLOGUE

Four score and two tens, within that short span of human life,
Talent and Destiny are poised in bitter conflict.
Oceans turn to mulberry fields : a desolate scene !
More gifts, less chance, such is the law of Nature
And the blue sky is known to be jealous of rosy cheeks.

KIEU'S FAMILY

Pages of fragrant manuscripts turn under the lamplight
And the "Romances of yore",⁽¹⁾ recorded on green tablets,
Recount that, one year, under the reign of Gia Tinh⁽²⁾ of the Ming dynasty
There lived a craftsman by the name of Vuong.
He was neither rich nor poor.
His youngest child, a son, Vuong Quan, was a scholar, a proud link in the family tradition.
He had two daughters : they were as beautiful as the goddess of the Moon :
Thuy Kieu was the older sister, Thuy Van the younger one.
Both were as graceful as the "mai" flower and as pure as snow.
Each had her own charm, a perfect charm in its way.
Van was endowed with an uncommon poise,
Her face was one of harmonious features adorned with brows of a noble design.
A smile as fresh as a flower gave her a touch of natural distinction, a word she uttered was a precious stone.
Clouds could not shape the graceful fall of her hair and snow was no match for her complexion.
But there was more refinement, more glamour in Kieu's charm
And in wit and culture she outshone her sister.
Her gaze had the deep intensity of an autumn lake,
The curve of her brows was like the dreamful line of mountains in the spring.
Flowers envied her frail delicacy, willows her green youth.
A smile from her could rock empires and citadels.
Her beauty was exceptional, her talents unrivalled.
Nature had bestowed upon her bountiful gifts :
She was equally well versed in poetry, painting, singing and diction.
The five-scale tone had no secret for her.
She excelled in the playing of the lute
And her favourite piece was her composition, "The cruel fate", a poignant lament.
A fair maiden, she lived behind curtains and screens,
Approaching the age when she would adorn her hair with combs and pins,⁽³⁾
Indifferent to the bees and butterflies frolicking at the Eastern wall.

⁽¹⁾ The Chinese novel on which is based Nguyen Du's Kim-Van-Kieu.

⁽²⁾ 1522-1566.

⁽³⁾ Age when girls could marry.

Folk Songs of Viet-Nam

THANG BOM

Music by HÙNG LÂN

Thông Bờm có cái (chú) quát mồ Phú-
ông xin dồi (chú) bà bò (mà là) bò chén trâu.

Bờm rắng : Bờm chàng (mà) lấy trâu. Phú-ông xin dồi

(mà) mót xâu (mà là) xâu cá mè. Bờm rắng : Bờm chàng

(mà) lấy mè. Phú-ông xin dồi (mà) mót bè (mà là)

U mê lim Bờm rắng : Bờm chàng (mà) lấy lim. Phú-

ông xin dồi (mà) con chim (mà là) chim đồi mồ. Bờm

rắng : Bờm chàng (mà) lấy mồi. Phú-ông xin dồi (mà) nǚm

nǚ (mà là) nǚ Bờm cười. Cười tên ba tiếng (đi) Bờm ơi !

Chết lén ba tiếng (cười) gợp dồi (nǚ) lõi lõng !

LITTLE BOM

Little Bom has a fan made of a palm of an areca-nut tree.

A rich man asks him to trade it for three oxen and nine water-buffaloes.

Little Bom replies: "I don't want either oxen or buffaloes".

The rich man offers a string of fish.

Little Bom says: "I don't want any fish".

The rich man offers a raft of timber.

Little Bom says: "I don't want any timber."

The rich man offers a bird

Little Bom says: "I don't want any bird."

The rich man offers a handful of
sticky rice.

Little Bom smiles

Vietnamese Songs

Xin Lành CON XÓM LÀNG

Nhạc và lời ca: NGUYỄN-DUY QUANG

Nhịp vui - Thơ Thiết

The musical score consists of four staves of music in G major, 2/4 time. The lyrics are in Vietnamese, with some words in English. The lyrics are as follows:

(Bản) 1. Chúng con xin được yêu xóm làng. (Chung) Xin được yêu xóm làng
2. Chúng con xin đào thêm giếng ngọt. Xin đào thêm giếng ngọt

Tổng Chúng con xin kính Mẹ già nua Xin được yêu kính Mẹ ngọt
Chúng con xin vỗ nòng khai đất Xin được khai đất hoang

Chúng con xin yêu dân trẻ thơ. Xin yêu dân trẻ thơ
Chúng con xin che lèi lèi tan. Xin che lèi lèi tan

Chúng con xin bùi thôm ngọt lông. Xin lâm con xóm làng
Chúng con xin đổi thêm đòn đường Xin lâm thêm khúc đường

The following song, a modern song composed by Nguyen-Duc-Quang, is a popular illustration of the theme of rural development, a dominant theme in the pacification programme.

THE CHERISHED CHILDREN OF OUR HAMLETS AND VILLAGES

We want to voice our attachment for our villages and hamlets,
Our veneration for our old mothers,
Our love for the flocks of little children.
We want to be true villagers,
The cherished children of our villages and hamlets.
We shall dig new wells,
We shall clear the forest,
We shall reclaim waste lands,
We shall rebuild new homes,
We shall open new roads.

TRAN HUNG DAO'S PROCLAMATION TO HIS OFFICERS
Translated and adapted by George F. Schultz

The name of Prince Tran Hung Dao is one of the greatest in Vietnamese military history. It was he who twice inflicted crushing defeats on the Mongols (in 1285 and 1288) when they attempted to invade and subjugate Dai Viet.

In the tenth month of the Year of the Goat (1283) Tran Hung Dao was appointed commander-in-chief of the Dai Viet armed forces. When, in the last month of 1284, the Mongol army crossed the border at Lang Son, he issued his famous "Proclamation to the Officers (Hieh Tuong-Si). The prince was as masterful with the brush as with the sword, and his composition has remained a gem of Vietnamese literature.

The names cited in the opening paragraphs are taken from ancient Chinese history.

x
x x

I have often read the story of Ky Tin who replaced the Emperor Cao to save him from death, of Do Vu who took a blow in his back to spare King Chieu, of Du Nhuong who swallowed burning charcoal to avenge his leader, of Than Khoai who cut off an arm to save his country, of young Kinh Duc who rescued the Emperor Thai Tong besieged by The Sung, and of Cao Khanh, a subject living far from the Court, who insulted the rebel Loc Son to his face. Every century has produced heroes who have sacrificed their lives for their country. If they had remained at home to die by the fire, would their names have been inscribed on bamboo and silk to live eternally in Heaven and on the Earth?

But as descendants of warrior families, you are not well-versed in letters; on hearing about these deeds of the past, you may have some doubts. Let us speak of them no more. I shall tell you instead of several more recent events that have taken place during the years of the Tong and Nguyen dynasties.

Who was Vuong Cong Kien? And who was his lieutenant Nguyen Van Lap? They were the ones who defended the great citadel of Dieu Ngu against Mong Kha's immense army; Therefore, the Tong people will be eternally grateful to them.

Who was Cot-Ngai Ngot-Lang? And who was his lieutenant Xich Tu Tu? They were the ones who drove deep into an unhealthful country in order to put down the Nam-Chieu bandits and they did it within the space of a few weeks; therefore, their names have remained rooted in the minds of the Mongol military chieftains.

You and I were born in a period of troubles and have grown up at a time when the Fatherland is in danger. We have seen the enemy ambassadors haughtily traveling over our roads and wagging their owlish tongues to insult the Court. Despicable as dogs and goats, they boldly humiliate our high officials. Supported by the Mongol emperor, they incessantly demand the payment of pearls, silks, gold and silver. Our wealth is limited but their cupidity is infinite. To yield to their exactions would be to feed their insatiable appetites and would set a dangerous precedent for the future.

In the face of these dangers to the Fatherland, I fail to eat during the day and to sleep at night. Tears roll down my cheeks and my heart bleeds as if it were being

cut to shreds. I tremble with anger because I cannot eat our enemy's flesh, lie down in his skin, chew up his liver, and drink his blood. I would gladly surrender my life a thousand times on the field of battle if I could do these things.

You have served in the army under my orders for a long time. When you needed clothing, I clothed you; when you lacked rice, I fed you; when your rank was too low, I promoted you; when your pay was insufficient, I increased it. If you had to travel by water, I supplied you with vessels; if you had to travel by land, I supplied you with horses. In time of war, we shared the same dangers; at the banquet table our laughter resounded in unison. Indeed, even Cong-Kien and Ngot-Lang did not show more solicitude for their officers than I have displayed for you.

And now, you remain calm when your emperor is humiliated; you remain indifferent when your country is threatened! You, officers, are forced to serve the barbarians and you feel no shame! You hear the music played for their ambassadors and you do not leap up in anger. No, you amuse yourselves at the cockfights, in gambling, in the possession of your gardens and ricefields, and in the tranquility of family life. The exploitation of your personal affairs makes you forget your duties to the State; the distractions of the fields and of the hunt make you neglect military exercises; you are seduced by liquor and music. If the enemy comes, will your cocks' spurs be able to pierce his armor? Will the ruses you use in your games of chance be of use in repulsing him? Will the love of your wives and children be of any use in the Army? Your money would neither suffice to buy the enemy's death, your alcohol to besot him, nor your music to deafen him.

All of us, you and I together, would then be taken prisoner. What grief! And not only would I lose my fief, but your property too would fall into enemy hands. It would not be my family alone that would be driven out, but your wives and children would also be reduced to slavery. It would not be only the graves of my ancestors that would be trampled under the invader's heel, but those of your ancestors would also be violated. I would be humiliated in this life and in a hundred others to come, and my name would be ignominiously tarnished. Your family's honor would also be sullied forever with the shame of your defeat. Tell me: Could you then indulge yourselves in pleasures?

I say to you in all frankness: Take care as if you were piling wood by the fire or about to imbibe a hot liquid. Exercise your soldiers in the skills of archery until they are the equals of Bang Mong and Hau Nghe, those famous archers of olden times. Then we will display Tat-Liet's head at the gates of the Imperial Palace and send the King of Yunnan to the gallows.

After that, not only my fief will be safe forever, but your privileges too will be assured for the future. Not only my family will enjoy the comforts of life, but you too will be able to spend your old age with your wives and children. Not only the memory of my ancestors will be venerated from generation to generation, but yours too will be worshiped in the spring and autumn of every year. Not only will I have accomplished my aspirations in this life, but your fame too will endure for a hundred centuries to come. Not only will my name be immortalized, but yours too will find a place in our nation's history. At that moment, would you not be perfectly happy even if you did not expect to be?

I have studied every military treatise in order to write my manual entitled "Principles of Military Strategy". If you will make an effort to study it conscientiously, to instruct yourselves in its teachings, and to follow my directions, you will become my true companions-in-arms. On the other hand, if you fail to study it and ignore my advice, you will become my enemies. Why? Because the Mongols are our mortal enemies; we

cannot live under the same sky with them.

If you refuse to fight the Mongols in order to wash away the national shame, if you do not train your soldiers to drive out these barbarians, it would be to surrender to them. If that is what you want, your names will be dishonored forever. And when the enemy has finally been defeated, how will you be able to hold your head high between Heaven and Earth?

The purpose of this proclamation is to let you know any deepest thoughts.

NEWS IN BRIEF

RELATIONS WITH NORTH VIETNAM

President Nguyen Van Thieu reportedly told a group of lawmakers a few days before the lunar New Year that his administration was ready to have economic relations with North Vietnam "although we are now at war with Hanoi". On this occasion, the South Vietnamese President also declared his readiness to accept the notion of dual Vietnamese representation at the United Nations if the problem should come up at the international body.

If confirmed, the new South Vietnamese stand marks a noted divorce from Saigon's attitude in the past. Throughout the administrations of the late Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors, Saigon had been demanding monopoly of representation for the entire Vietnamese nation, and the Hanoi regime has also adopted a similar stand. And either Vietnam had been using the word "nguy" or "rebel" to describe the rival political regime.

POLICE EXPANSION

On taking over as the new Police Director General, Major General Tran Thanh Phong disclosed last week that the nation's police force would be expanded to 200,000 men and would take over some of the responsibilities so far held by the Army. Gen. Phong succeeded Brig. Gen. Tran Van Hai, whom President Nguyen Van Thieu appointed as commander of the all important 44th Special Military Zone after over two years of service as the nation's police chief.

Gen. Phong's disclosure fits in with statements recently made by other top political figures according to whom active consideration is being given schemes to reduce the strength of the 1.1 million strong Armed Forces by responsible officials at the Ministry of National Defense and members of the Armed Forces Committees in both Houses of Congress. According to one of these plans, the South Vietnamese Army may have its strength reduced to 600,000.

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