Vietnamese Phonology and Graphemic Borrowings from Chinese: The Book of 3,000 Characters Revisited

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Whereas the other three books use the typically Vietnamese lục-bát "six-eight" meter, Tam Thiên Từ uses lines of four words (tứ-tự) with the following rhyming scheme:

THIÊN giới DỊA dát
CỦ cát TỐN còn
TỨ con TỐN cháu
LỰC sáu TAM ba
GIA nhà QUỐC nước
TIỀN trước HẨU sau
etc.

In his review of the Nguyễn emperor’s Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary entitled Tự-Dực Thánh-chê Tự-học Giái-nghĩa-ca [Nguyễn Dinh-Hoà 1988],

MON-KHMER STUDIES 20: 163-182

To my knowledge there are two other editions: one edited by the polyglot scholar Петрус Trưởng Vinh-Ký in Saigon in 1898, and the other edited by Buddhist scholar Đoàn Trung Côn and published by Tri-dúc Tòng-thọ in Saigon in 1959. Lê Văn Quán [1981:168-169] disclosed that the Social Sciences Library in Hanoi has as many as six editions with the title *Tam Thiên Từ Giai-dích Quốc-ngữ*, blockprinted under the reign of Emperor Duy Tân, in addition to an earlier text (found in the back of *Dạo-giao Nguyễn-lưu* by Monk Phúc-Điển). This latter text, he said, is entitled *Tam Thiên Từ Toản-yểu*, and shows the printing date as the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Thiệu-Tri, i.e. 1845.

For my 1973 paper, I used the manuscript graciously lent to me by Mr. Đỗ Lĩnh Thông of Vienna, Virginia, entitled *Tam Thiên Từ Giai-dích Quốc-ngữ*, edited by Father Vũ Khoa of the Phát-diệm Cathedral in North Vietnam, and published in late summer of the second year of the reign of Emperor Duy-Tân, the Year of the Monkey Mậu-Thần, i.e. 1908. The title page indicates that the book came from a second printing of the woodblock kept at the above cathedral and that it sold for 0.30 piasters.

In his 52-line Preface written in both Chinese and Vietnamese, Father Vũ Khoa confessed [1908: 1-4] that he did not know the identity of the author of this Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary, who must have been "an extremely erudite scholar" [Preface, lines 1-2]. But actually *Tam Thiên Từ* was not the work of an anonymous author. In an article which appeared in Hanoi in the review of the Institute of Historical Studies, the late scholar Trần Văn Giáp, while discussing the origin of *chữ nôm* [Trần 1969: 7-24], revealed that the author of *Tam Thiên Từ* or *Tự-học Toản-yểu* was the scholar-poet-historian Ngô Thị Nhiệm [Trần 1969: 14-17], and not his father Ngô Thị Sĩ, as mentioned with appropriate reservation in Nguyễn-Trần Huấn's book review of 1974. This matter of authorship has been confirmed by Đào Duy Anh in his monograph on *chữ nôm* [1975:123] as well as in Trần 1990 [Entry 215: 14-17]. Ngô Thị Nhiệm (1746-1803), like his father Ngô Thị Sĩ (1726-1780), came from an illustrious family of the Village of Tà Thanh-oai in Hà-dông Province (popularly known as Tô Village and famous for its lichee orchards as well as for its numerous Confucian scholars) [Trần 1984: 324-325].

2. The several quởc-ngữ editions of this popular primer which Lê Văn Quán mentioned in his 1981 monograph and which I have seen in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, were all published after the Trưởng Vinh-Ký edition of 1898, and before the more recent Tri-dúc Tòng-thọ edition of 1959. Like the one translated and edited by Trưởng Vinh-Ký, the Tri-dúc Tòng-thọ edition does not cite the nôm characters but gives only French glosses and Vietnamese definitions transcribed in quởc-ngữ. I was therefore

No editor's name appears on the cover of this book, printed at Thuy-Ky Press and sold at Quang-Thinh Bookstore (115 Hemp Street, Pho Hang Gai, in Hanoi). The price was listed as one Indochinese piaster. Each of its 150 pages accommodates twenty Chinese characters lined up in four columns to be read from top to bottom, but the columns started from the lefthand side of each page. In each column, each entry consists of (1) a Chinese character, e.g. 天 (2) its Sino-Vietnamese reading, in this case thien, followed by (3) the nôm character 𠤄 used to write down its Vietnamese meaning, (4) the quoc-ngu romanization, gioi, and (5) the French equivalent ciel, thus:

天 天

Thiên 𠤄 Gioi ciel

地 地

Địa

坦 坦

Dất terre

My comparison between that 1939 edition and the 1908 edition concentrates on the nôm characters used in each of them to transcribe the Vietnamese glosses and pertinent explanations.

3. We will, however, examine first the Preface by Ngo Thi Nhiem in order to see what he had in mind when he started his compilation.

"In my childhood I had the opportunity to study literature. Now while serving as an official in the imperial court, each time I have some doubt about the meaning of a character, I ask the eminent scholars and we discuss and consult one another regarding the matter. Lately in carrying out my duties in the Prime Minister's office I have been able to read interesting books, so I looked up the words in various documents; those which I understood, I collected them and filed them away, then transcribed them and gave explanations, each meaning listed next to the word, with rhyming characters. I have called this total corpus of three thousand characters Tự-học Toàn-yêu, and after completing the book I had the woodblocks made and the volume printed." [Tran 1969:16; 1990:14-16]

Although this word list "is only a tree branch amidst the forest and a spoonful of water from the sea," as Ngo Thi Nhiem modestly put it [Tran 1969:16; 1990:16], this distinctly Vietnamese creation differs from both the Chinese San ch'ien tsu "Three Thousand Characters" by Su Kun Yue [Tu Con Ngoc] and the Chinese Ch'ien tsu wen "One Thousand Characters" by Chou Hing Tsu [Chu Hung-Tu] in that it uses medial rimes, with the fourth syllable of a line rhyming with the second syllable of the following line, and so forth
throughout 750 lines.

4.1. First of all, the book shows several archaic words that are either no longer used nowadays or used only in compounds. Examples are:

- **bôm** 婢 'prostitute' 28b
- **bui** 悖 'only' 36a
- **chiều** 昭 'left—opp. of right' 61b
- **chính** 今 'very, really' 37a
- **chung** 恭 'at, because' 26a
- **đa** 色 'to recover [from illness]' 53b
- **đàng** 帝 'stool' 13a
- **dau-dâu** 困囲 'worried' 50a
- **đùm** 捕 'sac, package' 27a
- **gã** 技 'to distinguish' 64a
- **ghịn** 警 'cautious, polite' 12b
- **gìn** 墨 'to hold, keep' 51a
- **hen** 喘 'to cough' 56b
- **kín** 譚 'to carry [water]' 28a
- **lệt** 倜 'to glance casually' 13a
- **lưỡng** 假 'to waste [efforts]' 38a
- **mắng** 嘆 'to hear' 48b
- **nâu** 閹 'to hide' 27b
- **nha tro** 菖路 'actor, clown' 29b
- **nịp** 撈 'basket' 23b
- **tơi** 擤 'to look for' 51b
- **thằng mo** 起謎 'fortune teller' 24b
thùa  'its..., his...' 25b

va  'to walk a long distance' 33a

vài  'to sow [seeds], broadcast' 38b; etc.

4.2. The 1908 edition contains some words that could be lexical localisms peculiar to the Catholic communities of Phát-diệm and Bùi-chu. Examples are:

把 [lả (3b, Preface); lả sách lại là sách] with là meaning 'to pay back' under báo (15b); 'to return [object]' under hoàn [19a], and 'to return [hospitality]' under thù [49b]. This verb is obviously the same as blả [De Rhodes 1651];

lái (28a) 'fruit' under quá [cf. blái in De Rhodes 1651]

vuội (3a, 4b, 49a) 'together with'

4.3. All words beginning with /r-/ are transcribed with characters that contain a Sino-Vietnamese character pronounced with /l-/:

ra  'to exit' 2b, 4a;

rau  'vegetable' 15b, 17a;

rau  'placenta' 27b;

(rẻ) ràng  'radiant' 25a;

ràn  'to admonish' 30b;

rằng  'tooth' 29b;

rǎi  'very' 49a;

râu  'beard' 15a;

rẽ  'cold' 49b;

rẽ  'root' 11b, 12b;

rẽu  'moss' 64a;

rính  'to watch' 35b;
4.4. Next, one notices that there was an alternation between initials /l-/ and /n-/: thus, the editor Vũ Khoa has loan for the Sino-Vietnamese entry noăn (page 27b) glossed as trúng.

5. The Sino-Vietnamese entries themselves are interesting because in several cases, including those of rare characters, the meaning(s) in Vietnamese are broader than the original meaning in Chinese. For examples,

 ratt hằng 'species of silkworm' (52b) is glossed as thần-làn 'lizard';

 砭 biêm 'stone needle used in acupuncture' (53a) is glossed as mài 'to polish, whet [blade]';

 彼 phát 'orang utang, cynocephalus hamadryas' (55b) is glossed as lăn lởi 'boar';

 祖 thích 'thorn' (62b) is glossed as buôn cây 'boss, excrescence on tree';

 练 tướng 'light yellow silk' (64b) is glossed as vang 'yellow'.
the pronunciation of the time, using the 假借 giả-từ "loan characters" method, characters in Tam Thiên Tự often use the 形聲 hình-thanh "phonetic compounds" method by adding a signific element, usually a radical:

踵 chân 'foot' (16b), cf. 在 in BV [Bách-văn-am Quốc-ngữ Thi-tập by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm];

犢 con 'child, offspring' (11a), cf. 在 in BV, or in TKML [Truyện-ký Man-lúc];

懊 dại 'unwise' (15a), cf. 电 in BV;

薇 dỏ 'red' (17a), cf. 觀 in BV;

殊 dủ 'sufficient' (11a), cf. 堆 in TKML;

詁 giặc 'to urge' (33b), cf. 逐 in TKML;

誚 khen 'to praise' (19b), cf. 看 in TKML;

時 mai 'praise' (13b), cf. 埋 in BV;

owered ngùa 'to raise one's head' (13b), cf. 諾 in Taberd's dictionary, or TKML;

恩 nhìn 'to abstain' (28a), cf. 忍 in TKML;

飽 no 'full [from eating]' (21a), cf. 友 in BV;

探 thăm 'to visit' (30a), cf. 探 in TKML;

 이러 thây 'to see' (23b), cf. 体 in TKML;

事 thơ 'poetry' (25b), cf. 事 in BV;

誰 thốt 'to try' (42b), cf. 体 in TKML;

青 xanh 'blue, green', cf. 茵 in BV; etc.

7. All the words beginning with the retroflex tr- in modern Vietnamese are represented by characters that contain the /l-/ element, which scholars agree is the second member of a consonant cluster in Middle Vietnamese, as recorded in De Rhodes’ dictionary of 1651 [Gregerson 1969; Nguyễn 1986]:

蝦 for (con) trai 'oyster' (16b)

祀 for trẻ 'young' (11b)
for treo 'to hang' (27b)
for trêu 'to tease' (30b)
for trôn 'round' (21b)
for trống 'inside' (12b)
for trôi 'to drift' (20a, 20b)
for trôi 'to leave last wishes' (51a)
for trống 'drum' (13b)
for trồng 'to plant' (22b)
for trọn 'slippery' (33b)
for trúc 'in front, before' (48a), etc.

8. Moreover, many words whose initial is /s-/ in Hanoi and /ʂ-/ in Saigon are transcribed by means of combinations which contain an /l/ element, attesting to the earlier cluster /sl-/, as in:

for sách 'clean' (27a)
for sân 'courtyard' (20b)
for sâu 'deep' (15b, 66a)
for sâu 'insect' (22a)
for soi 'to light up' (19b, 37b)
for sỏi 'pebble' (51b)
for sông 'wave' (21b, 45b)
for sôi 'to boil' (34b)
for sông 'river' (18a, 24a)
for sống 'alive, living' (20a, 39a)
for sớm 'early' (23a, 29b)
for sung 'swollen' (29a), etc.
In the case of for sáng 'bright' (25a, 30b), one can posit a cluster /kl-/ being a diacritic just like Nguyễn 1989:19-21.

9. Regarding reduplicative forms, of which the book lists many, we can say that, in addition to the complete reduplications such as âm âm (64a), đa đa (56b), mành mành (66a), le le (58b), mở mở (59b), đ đ (61b), etc., a number of forms (a) reflect their respective tone registers, the level tone ngang/bàng occurring with hỏi, sác, and the falling tone huyền occurring with nga, nàng; (b) show alternance between homorganic stops and nasals; or (c) show parallelism of vowel height (u - i, ō - ö, o - e):

(a) châm châm < châm châm (55b)
    dau dau < dau dau (60b)
    năm năm < năm năm (55b)
    ông ông < ông ông (64a)
    phó phó < phó phó (64a)
    rây rây < rây rây (60b)
    vô vô < vô vô (55b)
    vốn vốn < vốn vốn (55a)

(b) cun-cút < cút-cút (56b)

(c) thùng-thình (58b, 62a)
    mộng mếnh (56b)

10. The 1908 and 1939 editions represent the Phát-diệm and the Hanoi dialects respectively, as shown in the following pairs of chú nôm:

短 轉 vs. 見, under DOAN
把 報 vs. 者, under BAO
籠 筆 vs. 罩, under TOAN
 tua vs. 轉, under TU
 nau vs. 見, under ÁN
 lái vs. 報, under QUÁ
11. The 1908 edition shows more rigorous editing than the 1939 edition, which at times does not obey the rhyme scheme. Thus, under mi, misspelled as chí [p. 22], it gives the gloss châm, which would not fit into the rhyme -dy:

速 TÔC 擊 chông 迟 TRỊ 翻 chây
雲 VÃN 梅火 HOÁ 女 (1908:18b)

Elsewhere, in the sequence

必 TÂT 乙 ái 須 TU 須 tua
寺 TỬ 厨 chuà 垂BUU 驿 dích,

the 1908 edition (22b) uses for TU the gloss tua, an archaic form which is more tolerable than the gloss nên, in 1939:32.

In another sequence,

剝 UY 官剝 (quan) uý 招 THÀNG 官丞 (quan) thảng
齒 XI 齒 rắng 眸 MÃU 相 mái,

the 1939 edition (p. 50) gives the reading thủa for the Chinese character 丞, to which Vũ Khoa gives the reading thùng, i.e. thặng, rhyming with rắng (29b).

As for the Chinese character 炒 sao, the gloss rang (1939:68) although accurate is not so good as the gloss thui (1908:36a) because the latter word rhymes with doi in the following 4-word line:

燎 LIỀU 烈 doi 炒 SAO 燎 thui
巖 NHAM 瀦 doi 穴 HUYỆT 魚 lồ.

12. It is well known that the nòm script allowed an individual scribe to choose the first variant form of a character that came to his mind. However, the anonymous editor of the 1939 book, despite the initiative of providing French glosses, shows many inconsistencies and certainly lacks rigor -- on page 61, the third and the fourth columns have the ten Chinese characters and their nòm equivalents all mixed up -- so it can be said that this printed edition does not do justice to Ngô Thị Nhiệm's great contribution, and that the earlier book, with its scholarly apparatus, including its front matter, is more
valuable both as a teaching tool and as a research tool.

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The Book of 3,000 Characters Revisited
Title page of the 1908 edition
Tam Thiên Tự giải-dịch quốc-ngữ
Đàn riồng máy dien cần trước.
(Sách này in lần trước thì làm sai nhiều;
lần này ta thảo lại kỹ hơn và in lần thứ hai.)

1° Các chủ nhân thường đúng hàng ngày tổ tam hay là một nghìn là cùng mà sách này những ba nghìn chủ, ít là sách này như biết cho dễ xem nhiều sách khác; song ai muốn đọc ITHER CHI
chẳng những phải học thuộc lòng, lại cần phải ý tế nhân lấy từng chi tiết
nhà cho mình bậc, rồi thi viết am tài, nhà là viết thuộc lòng, chi nếu nghĩa
ay một hai liubit, hệ mà nhân và nhờ hết các chủ mới thời, dụ có tổn một
năm bảy tháng, thì chẳng mất công vở icher đầu: vì tập chủ mới thế, đến khi
hoc sách khác, thấy nhà mình làm: vì
thông phải hơi máy chủ mưa, bằng
chẳng chi thứ như thế, chỉ học thuộc lòng không, thì chủ sách lại là sách
chẳng được ích là bao nhiêu.

2° Ne phan con tre mới với lòng thì cùng nên ciec cach ấy: mới ngày cho nó.

Introduction to the 1908 edition by Vũ Khoa
(in quốc-ngữ)
Introduction to the 1908 edition by Vũ Khoa (in Nôm)
Preface in Chinese and in Vietnamese by Rev. Vũ Khoa
End of preface by Rev. Vũ Khoa in Chinese and Vietnamese
First page of Tam Thiên Tự (1908) edition by Vũ Khoa