MISSIONARY SCRIPTS FROM VIENTNAM AND TAIWAN

Wi-vun Taiffalo Chiung
The University of Texas at Arlington

1. Introduction

In 1492, Christopher Columbus encountered the New World, and a few years later in 1498 the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama opened the sea route between Europe and India by way of The Cape of Good Hope. The end of the fifteenth century was the beginning of the great voyages, and the era of ‘great discoveries’ from the European point of view. In Asia, following the great discoveries were Western missionary activities, international trades between Asia and Europe, and later Western colonialism.

Accompanying missionary activities was the design of romanized systems for local languages. Both Vietnam and Taiwan were introduced to the romanized writing systems by Western missionaries in the seventeenth century. In Vietnam, the romanized Chu Quoc Ngu system eventually replaced the traditional Chu Nom and Han characters, and became the official national orthography in 1945. However, the use of romanization in Taiwan is still mainly limited to church activities. Moreover, the later imported Han writing system is much more widely spread and has obtained dominant status in contemporary Taiwanese society.
This paper\textsuperscript{1} examines the missionary scripts, i.e. Vietnamese Chu Quoc Ngu and Taiwanese Peh-oe-ji, in terms of linguistics and orthography. Due to page limits, this paper focuses on the demonstration of how romanization works for these two isolating languages. For more discussions on socio-political factors effecting the development of romanization in Vietnam and Taiwan, readers may refer to Chiung’s paper (2001a).

2. Historical Background

2.1. Vietnamese Writing Systems and Chu Quoc Ngu

Han characters and Han writing were first employed in the writing system of Vietnam when Vietnam was under China’s direct domination. Later on, a domestic script Chu Nom ( chữ nôm), which has similar structure as Han characters, was documented in the tenth century. Romanized writing system was introduced to Vietnam by missionaries in the seventeen century, and it eventually became the official writing system Chu Quoc Ngu (literally, national language orthography) in 1945 when Ho Chi Minh declared the birth of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. Since then, romanized Chu Quoc Ngu has reached national status, and is taught through the national education system (DeFrancis 1977, 1996). It was reported that the literacy rate in Vietnam is somewhere between 78\% and 88\% (Grimes 2000). Nowadays, most Vietnamese people read and write in romanized Vietnamese. Only a few professionals in Han Nom studies still have knowledge of Han characters and Chu Nom.
In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, and French missionaries gradually came to preach in Vietnam. To get their ideas across to the local people, it was recognized that knowledge of the spoken Vietnamese was essential. Romanized writing was thus devised to assist missionaries to acquire the Vietnamese language. It is apparent that the Vietnamese romanization resulted from collective efforts reflecting the influences of the missionaries’ diverse backgrounds (Thompson 1987:54-55). For example, gi [z] is borrowed from Italian spelling (Thompson 1987:62), nh [n] from Portuguese (Edmondson; Silva; personal communication), and ph [f] from ancient Greek (DeFrancis 1977:58). Among the variants of Vietnamese romanization, Alexandre de Rhodes is usually referred to as the person who provided the first systematic work of Vietnamese romanization (DeFrancis 1977:54). In 1624, the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes arrived in central Vietnam. He used Roman scripts as a writing system to describe the Vietnamese language and later published the first Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary, Dictionarium Anna-miticum, Lusitanum et Latinum, and a Vietnamese catechism Cathechismus in 1651. De Rhodes’ romanized system with some later changes became the foundation of present Quoc Ngu, the national writing system of Vietnam (DeFrancis 1977:48-66; Thompson 1987:52-77).

How did Vietnam successfully replace Han characters and Chu Nom with romanized Quoc Ngu? Chiung (2001a) attributes the consequence to two crucial factors: 1) external factor of political interaction between Vietnam and China in the international situation of the first half of the twentieth century, and 2) internal factor of social demand for literacy.
2.2. Taiwanese Writing Systems and Peh-oe-ji

The first written language in Taiwan was the so-called Sinkang Manuscripts, a romanized system to write the vernacular of indigenous Siraya tribes during Dutch occupation (1624-1661) of Taiwan in the seventeenth century. Nowadays, the language of Siraya has become extinct and along with it, the ability to read the manuscripts written in Sinkang. Thereafter, during the Koxinga (1661-1683) and the Qing (1683-1895) occupations, the classical Han writing was adopted as an official language by government, and Koa-a-chheh was treated as the popular writing for the public. In the nineteenth century, another romanized system Peh-oe-ji was devised by missionaries to write Taiwanese and Hakka. Today, there are still a few among the elder generations, especially women, who read only Peh-oe-ji. After Taiwan became a part of Japan (1895-1945), Japanese writing became the official written language in Taiwan. After World War II, Modern Written Chinese (MWC), based on the colloquial speech of Beijing Mandarin, became the orthodoxy of writing under Chinese KMT’s occupation (1945-2000) of Taiwan. By year 2000, the MWC was exclusively taught through Taiwan’s national education, while written Taiwanese in either Han characters or romanization was not taught in public schooling. Although several grass roots organizations such as Tai-bun Thong-sin-sia and Tai-bun Bong-po-sia have promoted Taiwanese writing, writing in Taiwanese is currently still far away from mainstream (Ang 1996; Cheng and Cheng 1977; Chiung 1999, 2000, 2001b; Tiu 1998).