THE STUDY OF S.E.ASIAN LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM

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1. Since the decision of the Committee of Social Sciences of Vietnam for the foundation of the Department of SEA (5-1973) the Institute for S.E.Asian studies has lasted more than 17 years. For the first time in Social Sciences of Vietnam side by side with special branches, a branch was born for the study of a region. This fact proves a new need in the development of the country and of social sciences. The branch of S.E.Asian studies, since its beginning has received the collaboration of many scientific organs at home and abroad for SEA is a historicocultural area in which Vietnam was born and developed with her neighbours whose relations of origin and of contact with her have been very close. At present this cultural community has become a modern strategic area having vital relations to each country in the area and attracted the concern of all countries in the present day world. S.E.Asian studies as a branch of basic science will contribute to the understanding, discovering spiritual values, laws of development and relations between Vietnam and SEA, to the awakening of national pride, friendly cooperation for building a peaceful, stable SEA. At the same time, by making use of scientific data, this study will contribute to a more enlarged, study on problems of Vietnam’s social sciences by a comparison, of achievements in surrounding countries to enrich the common theoretical treasure. The Institute for S.E.Asian studies is a place for experiencing a global view by an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach. It will enable to understand SEA as a whole in which history is a frame for the analysis, economy and sociology are the basis together will other disciplines studying culture which are different systems of explanation. As a result, we has a common system of reference for the discovery of laws governing the movement and the development of the whole area as well as of each country from the past to modern times. On the other side, from the angle of Vietnam we can look at the situation in SEA, in Asia and in the world to discover relations, behaviours of all peoples, countries in the past and at present. With this approach we can start from the present to study the past and foresee the
future by a dialectical combination of synchrony and diachrony, the whole and the part.

At present, with new achievements of many basic disciplines, human sciences have determined a SEA as a historical, cultural zone by the side of other great civilizations of Asia (of China, India etc...). This zone in the north had reached both riversides of Yangtse, in the west a part of Northeast India (Assam), in the East and the South it had included peninsulas and the insular world near Oceania and extended to Madagascar in Africa. This civilization had special sources and characteristics. It is the wet rice agriculture civilization with a complex of three elements: the culture of the mountain, the sea and of the plain whose last element of later appearance is the main factor. Processes of divergence and convergence had taken place and had led to new common complexes of the whole region, the later convergence step being higher than the former one at the same trine many local shades appeared. A striking characteristic of S.E. Asian culture is a "unity in its diversity" and the convergence process started from different centres, therefore its culture did not have a unilinear character but a multilinear one (despite the different role of each line) in which contacts created convergent lines, different ethno-cultural mechanisms. The development of languages did not exceed the limit of this cultural background (1). To study such a culture, a description of each culture in isolation, then a comparison between different cultures will prove insufficient. We should have a global view and make use of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary methods to build up ethno-cultural structures and put forth hypotheses on the origin, the cultural history of each ethnic group, of each country. This method will allow us to make use of different documents from different disciplines and their decoding will discover secrets in the system we have to study. Linguistics plays a very important role in this approach.

2. Vietnam is so to speak a SEA in miniature. Here we find almost all ethnic groups speaking great language families of SEA: Austroasiatic, Thung-Thai, Malay families with fairly typical branches like Miao-Yao, Viet Muong, Cham..., which despite discussions during two centuries cannot find a suitable place in the classification of languages. On ethno-linguistic viewpoint, many peoples have undergone different evolutions. A people had been master of an ancient country whose culture was famous in history and whose influence had spread all over indochinese peninsula: the Cham whose language of Malay substratum yet
functions according to a mon-khmer mechanism. Cham had been the language of Champa kingdom with an early writing, many epigraphies, manuscripts. At present, owing to the change of the social function, in contact with Vietnamese this language develops within the frame of an ethnic minority, and is undergoing a process of monosyllabization to become a language having a tone system. By the side of the Cham, there exists a many ethnic groups of continental Malay branch like the Ede, the Yarai, the Raglai, the Choan together with ethnic minorities of Mon-Khmer branch in Truong Son mountain of Tay Nguyen highland still preserving many old cultural vestiges of "Proto-Indochinese" culture.

The Khmer in Mekong Plaín (South Vietnam) despite a long life in the community of peoples of Vietnam, still keep relationship with their relatives in Kampuchea who are masters of the Republic of Kampuchea. They still make use of Khmer language and writing, the writing of Angkor Kingdom whose culture has been the object of admiration of all the world.

Some ethnic groups like the group Tay-Nung-Thai live on a very large area belonging to many countries (from China to India) whose languages despite differences are still fairly unified: they can easily understand one another not like mon-khmer peoples. The social function of these languages are different: Thailand and Lao are national languages, Shan and Chwang are languages of autonomous regions. Thai in Vietnam is the language of an ethnic minority whose writing is used by many ethnic groups in North-West Vietnam as a common means of intercourse.

Many ethnic minorities live mixed with one another especially many little groups have the danger of losing their mothertongues which are very important in determining the origin of great branches. Examples: the Laha, the Pupeo, the Klao, the Lachi, that group called by P. Benedict as the Kadai group and used by him to build the Austro-Thai family in opposition to the Austroasiatic family, the group May, Ruc, Sach, Malieng, Arem, Poong... belonging to the Viet-Muong group whose the author of this article has borrowed documents to reconstruct the Proto Viet-Muong, Khang of Mon-Khmer substratum and of Thai mechanism corresponding to Viet-Muong languages still maintains many old elements very important for the study of the origin of Vietnamese and Thai. Other ethnic groups on account of their nomadic life have given up their mothertongues: the Yao have given up their tongue to speak either Chwang (they are called Caolan) or Cantonese (they are called Sanchi) or Hakka, a Han
dialect (they are called San Yiu); whereas the Tong (Thung-Thai group) has given up Tay-Thai language to speak Yao. The vast majority of Red Klao, Tudi speaks Kwanhoa, and Klao language remains but in some prayers unknown even by the natives. The Sec in Ban Tong (Central Lao) have given up their mothertongue (belonging to Viet-Muong groups) to speak Phu-Thay.

With rich and various documents of ethnic group languages in their long and complex contacts in Vietnam which are then compared with languages in other countries in SEA we try to reconstruct the panorama of S.E.Asian languages by a dialectic combination of synchrony and diachrony, to find typologic characteristics contributing to general linguistics. These documents, especially those of ethnic minorities are useful to reconstruct the history of area languages.

As F. de Saussure said "In a fairly important measure, language makes up the people" (2). Otherly speaking, the history of a language is closely bound to that of the people. As a characteristic feature of an ethnic group, a main means of intercourse, a sign system in all cultural signs, language contains vestiges of the development of a people and of his culture. S.E.Asian ethnologists in order to study ethnic groups begin to by a study of languages to put forth hypotheses on relations between ethnic groups. A study of ethnonyms is a valuable document on their process of formation.

The toponymy with its phonetic form more or less altered and with the meaning either lost or explained by popular etymology is a useful document to reconstruct the ancient dwelling place of ethnic groups. If we base ourselves on typology in North Vietnam like Dương river (in Tay duong means "great"), Nhà Nam district (which in Tay means water herb), Dinh Bằng village (which in Tay means sugar-palm)... we may suppose that the area around Hanoi was inhabited by the ancient Tay.

We have also found that the system of words for wet rice culture in present day Vietnamese language is common with Tay, Thai. Together with the professor of history Trần Quốc Vương, the professor of ethnology Tù Chi and the professor of agronomy Đào Thế Tuấn we have built up agricultural ecosystems and a pre-state and primitive-state power structure of ancient Vietnam corresponding to the wet rice ecosystem of Tay-Thai type in the valleys" (3).

We have made use of the interdisciplinary method to study relationships of Tibeto-Burman group of languages in Vietnam and have come to this result: