A Preliminary Study of
TU-DUC THANH-CHÉ TU-HỌC
嗣德聖製字學
A 19th-Century Chinese-Vietnamese Dictionary

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1. In traditional Vietnam, textbooks and word lists used to teach Chinese written symbols to seven-year-old pupils included those written by Chinese authors (like the “Thousand Character Classic,” “San Tzu Ching,” etc.) and those compiled by Vietnamese authors themselves. Among the most widely used school primers authored by native scholars there are such “cultural dictionaries” [D.H. Nguyên 1987] as Nhật Thiên Tự” The Book of 1,000 Characters” [D. H. Nguyên 1963, and 1989], Tam Thiên Tự” The Book of 3,000 Characters” [Nguyên 1973, and 1989 forthcoming], Ngũ Thiên Tự” The Book of 5,000 Characters,” etc. These often anonymous works list Chinese characters and their Vietnamese equivalents in verse form, using rhymes in either the lúc-bát “six-eight” meter or the four-syllable meter as mnemonic devices to facilitate the learning process [Nguyen 1987].

Emperor Từ-Dực (1829-1883) of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945), who was on the throne between 1847 and 1883, distinguished himself as a scholar in classical Chinese, and left such a Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary in lúc-bát verse. This paper attempts a preliminary analysis of the content of this bilingual dictionary by presenting a sketch of its macrostructure and microstructures and discussing briefly how the shape of individual nôm characters can shed light on Vietnamese pronunciation of the time and how the borrowing process affects language education in a country that was under Sinitic influence for such a long period.

2. Từ-Dực Thánh-chế Từ-học Giải-nghĩa-ca “Từ-Dực Imperial Word List Explained in Sung Verse” was published in 1898, but like other such materials it was just lying among the Archives that had been moved from Hanoi in 1954 and stored in the Dalat branch of South Vietnam’s National Library. Only about two decades later did two modern editions of that bilingual dictionary appear, in fully edited and annotated romanized transcriptions, one by Professor Chiến Ching-ho (Hongkong, 1971) and the other by Phương-Thú Nguyên Hữu Quý (Saigon, 1971).

Chiến Ching-Ho, who between 1958 and 1962 served as Visiting Professor of History at the University of Huế (Central Vietnam) and headed a committee in
charge of the translation of historical materials of the Nguyễn dynasty, has given
the romanization of the complete work in his Tự-Dực Thánh-chê Tự-học Giải-
nghiạ-ca Dách-chú, Original Text and Transcription in Chữ Quốc-ngữ with
Introduction and Annotation [sic] (The Chinese University of Hong Kong,
1971). The other work, undertaken by Nguyễn Hữu Quy and published under the
auspices of the Office of the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs in Saigon, South
Vietnam, provides only the transcription of the first part of the two-part section on
The Universe (Kham-du) together with the original text for the first five books,
which cover that section on The Universe (Kham-du) and the three-part section on
Human Affairs (Nhân-sự). Although Nguyễn Hữu Quy’s valuable notes list
several compounds under almost every main Chinese entry, our analysis is based
primarily on the Chien Ching-Ho romanized text (pp. 177-392) and the
accompanying notes on readings of Chinese entries (pp. 393-404).

3. Emperor Tự-Dực嗣德 (name Hồng-Nham洪侯, posthumous title
Dực-tông嗣宗) was the second son of Emperor Thiệu-Tripp绍治 (posthumous
title Hiền-tông惠宗), who reigned from 1840 to 1847. Since Prince Hồng-Bảo
洪保, his older brother, was a fun-loving youngster, while he, Hồng-Nham, distinguished himself as an intelligent and studious boy, their father gave the throne
to him when he was only eighteen years old. During the thirty-six years of Tự-
Dực’s reign the French navy bombarded Đà-nâng in 1858, then successively
conquered the three eastern provinces (1862) and the three western provinces
(1867) of South Vietnam before advancing northward to attack Hanoi and complete
the creation of French Indochina through the peace treaty of 1884. Like his
predecessors Minh-Mạng (1820-1840) and Thiệu-Tripp (1841-1847), who left books
of poems, Tự-Dực was well known as much for his erudition as for his opposition
to and hatred of Christianity. Truly imbued with Confucian learning, he was the
author of ten books of poems about Vietnamese history Việt-sựTống-vinh (1877)
and eight other books of poems. But nowhere was his deep concern for general
education more clearly shown than in his two scholarly works: his annotations in
verse of The Analects, Luận-ngữThích-nghiạ-ca, and his Chinese word list. Tự-
hoc Giải-nghiạ-ca was first presented to Emperor Thành-Thai (1889-1907) by the
Ministry of Rites in 1896, and published two years later—or fifteen years after its
initiator’s death—in accordance with his last wishes. The memorial of submittal
mentioned the names of the two editors, Hoàng Hữu Xưng and Ngô Huệ Liên.

4. Like “The Book of 1,000 Characters” and “The Book of 5,000
Characters,” this dictionary, whose corpus was selected by Emperor Tự-Dực
himself, uses the Vietnamese “six-eight” meter to give Chinese characters in Sino-
Vietnamese pronunciation followed by their glosses in the vernacular, as shown in
these four sample lines that juxtapose the Chinese and the Vietnamese words for
“heaven, earth, throne”/“to protect, to convey, to flow, to be full”/“tall, broad,
thick”/“morning, evening, to revolve, to move”.


Thiên = trời  diâ = đất  vị=ngồi

Phú=che  tài=chợ  lưu=trời  mần=dây

Cao = cao  bác = ròng  hâu = dây

Thần = mai  mồ = tối  chuyên = xây  đi = dời

5. Within a couplet, the last word of the 6-word line (e.g. ngồi) rhymes with the sixth word of the following 8-word line (e.g. trời). Then the last---or eighth---word in the second line of the couplet (e.g. dây) rhymes with the sixth---or last---word in the first line of the next couplet (e.g. dây), which in turn rhymes with the sixth word of the 8-word line (e.g. xây). The rules of prosody stipulate that this meter uses the “even” or “flat” (bằng) tones, and not the “oblique” or “sharp” (trắc) tones. Also, within the second line of a couplet, if the sixth word (trời) has the level tone, the eighth word (dây) has the falling tone, and vice versa (Huỳnh Sanh-Thông 1979:xiii-xxiii; Nguyễn 1989). Some lines in this dictionary, however, do not obey this rule about bằng tones.

The internal structure of a “six-eight” verse couplet may be self-contained as in folk songs, or it may be repeated in a succession of hundreds or even thousands of couplets, as in the case of long narratives in verse (like The Tale of Kiều) or of dictionaries in verse (like Nhật Thiên Tự, Ngữ Thiên Tự, and this imperial “thesaurus.”

6. The front matter of the book contains the memorials submitted by the Ministry of Rites and the Bureau of National History (Quốc-sứ-quán). The corpus comprises seven topical areas:

(1) Kham-du “The universe” ---Books 1-2
(2) Nhân-sự “Human affairs” ---Books 3-5
(3) Chính - hoà “Politics and Culture” ---Books 6-7
(4) Khí - dụng “Tools and utensils” ---Books 8-9
(5) Thảo - mộc “Plants and trees” ---Books 10-11
Each page is laid out in five wide columns read from right to left. Each column accommodates from three to seven Chinese characters (representing the source language). Each of these Chinese characters, printed in large typeface, is followed by one “southern” (or nôm) character or more (representing the target language) printed in medium typeface and appearing right below. Then some notes printed in small typeface may follow to clarify the meaning of a particular Chinese character, whose pronunciation is sometimes indicated by means of one tiny homophonous character or three tiny characters in fanqie style.

7. In both “The Book of 1,000 Characters” and “The Book of 5,000 Characters,” the first line of a couplet teaches three Chinese characters, and the second line teaches four Chinese characters; the sample lines listed above also do that, the first line introducing the three characters thiên, địa, và với, with the second line introducing the four characters phú, tân, luân, và mẫn, and the stress falling on each second, fourth, sixth or eighth syllable. However, the lines are not always structured that way: the six-word line 5 of the book introduces only two characters, since both before and after the caesura there is a three-word phrase, in which the Sino-Vietnamese word ngày meteor “moon,” which receives heavy stress, is followed by its 2-syllable gloss mặt trăng, and the stressed word nhật “sun” by its gloss mặt trời.

Likewise, line 7 consists of two balanced hemistichs separated by a medial caesura: sóc mồng một “first day of the month,” vàng ngày râm 望 “fifteenth day of the month.”

Line 10 also departs from the rule by having its medial caesura separating two equal hemistichs of four syllables each: ngũ giờ chính ngọ 癸 “noon” and bò giờ quá trưa 昼 “time past noon.”

A number of lines define only one single character, as in:

Muội khi ban sáng lẻ là

referring to the “dim morning light,” or

Đầm là mưa quá muội ngày chưa thời

referring to “an incessant rain that lasts more than 10 days,” or

Lắm là mưa tự ban ngày trở lên

referring to “the rain that has been pouring down.”
referring to “a rain that lasts three days or more.”

One particular strength of this dictionary is that “its author took pains in using a large number of adjectives and adverbs to define nouns and verbs, which is very useful to people who are engaged in the study of Han characters” (Nguyễn Hữu Quy 1971:6). Indeed, quite a few entries require not merely equivalents in the target language, but lengthy definitions within the confines of the “six-eight” meter. The reader gets the impression of hearing a Confucian schoolteacher who provides concise definitions of such and such a Sino-Vietnamese monosyllabic or disyllabic entry. This lends itself beautifully to the rote-learning procedure used in the traditional classroom in Vietnam, where a privately financed elementary school used to be organized by several individuals in the same hamlet for the “opening” of their sons’ minds by a local scholar.

8. As far as the Sino-Vietnamese corpus is concerned, this thesaurus-like lexicon introduces approximately nine thousand entries, most of which are monosyllables, and some of which are “binomials,” i.e. disyllabic compound nouns or verbs. Notable among the latter are:

long dòng 虹ının defined as “The early rising sun” (mặt nhật đồ gần sáng ra) (Ch’en 183): cf. dông lồng in Thiệu Châu (1942:276, 277).

long dòng 虹ingroup defined as “the waning moon toward daybreak”(trăng mới lở mờ rạng đông) (Ch’en 185).

hàng giới 沌ingroup defined as “midnight mist” (khí mù nửa đêm ) (Ch’en 184): cf. hàng doi in Thiệu Châu (1942:335).

tích lịch 龍依 defined as “sound of the wind” (tiếng gió) (Ch’en 184).

long tòng 龍依 defined as “vapor of cloud” (khí mây ) (Chién 184).

biết biết 龍依 defined as ‘the sun making its way gradually into the cloud” (mặt nhật chen chen lần vào) (Ch’en 184).

phải phải 龍依 defined as “heavy rain” (mưa lớn) (Ch’en 184); cf. bái bài in Thiệu Châu (1942:750).

châu truong 龍依 defined as “blinking of the eyes” (mắt mây) (Ch’en 217).

liêu yu 龍依 defined as “popping of the ear” (tai bưng) (Chién 217).

sáo sáo 龍依 defined as “long-bodied” (đáng dài mình) (Ch’en 217).
phan noan 酢餡 defined as “frowning face” (dáng mặt nhăn) (Ch’en 217).

ao xao 睏魵 defined as “awry-faced” (mặt méo) (Ch’en 217).

huyen van 眼眠 defined as “blurred eyes” (mắt loã) (Ch’en 217).

bat thich 機楔 defined as “leaf-sewn raincoat” (cái áo tổ) (Ch’en 310).

thu thien 鞍鞬 defined as “the swing” (đu rút) (Ch’en 310).

One four-syllable expression has been noted: lan lao liên lữ 喢喤 defined as “chattering away” (nói bàn liều lo) (Ch’en 232).

As a thesaurus or storehouse of words, this book provides a large vocabulary on physical features (eyes, teeth, hair, etc.), foodstuffs and cooking terms (Ch’en 250), kinship terms (255), ailments (261-262), over thirty kinds of boats (295), carriages and chariots (298), articles of clothing (307ff), utensils (313-315), etc. As expected of such a book that is conceptually arranged for didactic purposes and that is also bound by prosodic rules, it contains not a few rarely used and obsolete characters denoting content words. Only a few “empty” or function words have been found therein: for instance these two lines introduce seven particles of classical Chinese (Ch’en 290):

Giá = ấy dâ = vây du = vay

Hở = ơi chí = vây tá = nay y = kia

9. Very often equivalents in the target language are not given in this bilingual volume, and instead an explanation is shown by means of the copula là— an “identificational marker” which serves (Thompson 1965:236) to introduce a predicate comparable to the second member of an equation used in true definition (X=Y) style:

Chí 器 là lề vật cầm tay “offerings presented with one’s hands” (Ch’en 283).

Giao 尝 là đắp dân tế trời “to build a terrace for sacrifices to Heaven” (Ch’en 283).

Lũ lụ “sacrifices offered to mountains and rivers” (Chie 283).

Vu 賴 là lề tế cau mủa “sacrifices to pray for rains” (Ch’en 283).
The conjunction ràng “to say,---that” is also used in definitions: Sào ràng ngọn tóc “lock of hair” and Kiến ràng đầu gan “nerve ending” (Ch’en 217).

Both là and ràng are used in this same line: Đơn là đitron “to escape” and nô ràng ông thue “to live and work as a slave” (Ch’en 275).

The relative particle mà “and, so as to, in order to” is also used in an explanatory definition when it connects two verbs, as in: Thủy misogyn mà ngủ “to sleep in a sitting position” and Lưu ngồi mà trông “to look while lying down” (Ch’en 223).

Sometimes a comparison is used, as in this descriptive line Thực hình h như thể cái thùng “Is shaped like a barrel” (Ch’en 297).

In some rare cases, a line of eight words becomes one of nine words, causing anomalous rhythm: for example Mạt là nuôi nghĩa, bộ người hâu nghĩa xe “Mạt means a servant who takes care of horses, and bộ means a servant who attends to horse and carriage” (Ch’en 287).

10. This ingeniously designed bilingual dictionary is more than a word list; it also sheds light on 19th-century Vietnamese lexemes and on their graphic representations in the nôm script. One example is the form buồng lung used to define Sino-Vietnamese diệc dâng as “a non-conformist who acts inconsiderately toward people” (là kẻ buồng lung khác người). Such forms as nọc “small boat” (Ch’en 295) and xập-xoá “cymbals” (Ch’en 297) have dropped out of current usage: cf. commonly cited forms chập-chôm / chập-cheng.

The two editions often present different readings of both Sino-Vietnamese characters and nôm characters; for instance, the two lines

胸羅昭脰微
眺羅昭脰麾麾面

with two different quốc-ngữ versions:

Nước là bưa soc trang non
Thieu là bưa hoi trang cong mai tay (Ch’en 182)

Nước dem soc trang non
Chieu dem hoi, trang cong mai tay (Nguyen Hưu Quy 87)

11. The nôm characters for “ricefield” and “well” point to an interesting aspect of the evolution of this demotic script: the graph 田 for ruộng, which is found only in Bảng tra chữ nôm (1976) and not in Từ điển chữ nôm (1971), seems to reflect a Central Vietnam pronunciation close to lòng whereas the
other graph represents the northern pronunciation of /uô/, which is closer to /-wa/ of quang, the phonetic element in the nôm character.

12. Ch’en (1971:17) thinks that this word list is better than Nhật Thiện Tự, Ngữ Thiện Tự’, on which Emperor Tự Đức “based his compilation.” We agree with him that like those two anonymous lists—and Tam Thiện Tự’, whose author is now known to be Ngô Thời Nhậm (1786-1803)—this dictionary of Sino-Vietnamese lexemes conceived by the erudite monarch of Vietnam’s last imperial dynasty is rigorously put together as a useful work of reference. It can be considered “the official dictionary of the late Nguyễn dynasty,” which shows the standard pronunciation of educated circles (17). Indeed it is evidence of “the desire of monarchs and scholars to reconstruct traditional phonology” and to list normatively the pronunciation that was current among the 19th-century aristocratic society of the ancient imperial capital (17). Further analyses should reveal more interesting lexical and phonological features of the Vietnamese language at the beginning of the colonial period.

REFERENCES


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