



Review Paper

Vietnamese cultural identification as reflected in three writing systems

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 15th August 2017, revised 4th November 2017, accepted 16th December 2017

Abstract

The culture of Vietnam, one of the oldest in Southeast Asia, develops through different ages: Mesolithic Hòa Bình culture, Neolithic Bắc Sơn culture, Đông Sơn culture, Chinese culture with the revelation of Confucianism and Taoism, Hindu culture with the influence of Buddhism, Western culture with the implantation of Christianity and the welcome to occidental thought etc. In the long history of Vietnam, many writing systems are found and more or less 30 different systems have been still in use but in the scale of this article, I will focus on only three writing systems: 漢字 Hanzi, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ. It is interesting to study the history of written symbols (Hanzi: 文字; Vietnamese: văn tự or chữ viết) of certain Vietnamese ethnicities because these special cultural artifacts maintain obviously many cultural patrimonies of the nation, or in other words, they reflect gracefully the national cultural history.

Keywords: Acculturation, Vietnamese Cultural Identification, Three Writing Systems, 漢字 Hanzi, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm, Chữ Quốc ngữ.

Introduction

Culture is noticed as an open connotative concept with many different interpretations so it is difficult for international researchers from all over the world to find a definitive definition. Not only various aspects of material life but also many invisible values in the heart, mind and soul of a person or an ethnic group or a nation are belonging to the term culture. That is why culture is considered as an important element of the sustainable development of any country in the era of globalization. In other words, cultural identification - like culture - should be regarded as a process of creative constructions and successful integration and envisaged in terms of a better growth for human beings. Since there exist uncountable different cultures on the earth, effective intercultural dialogues and international acculturations are methods to understand not only us but also them.

In every culture, language (speech and writing) is the most important means of cultural transfer, meaning that culture can be passed from generation to generation. The most noticeable distinction between spoken and written language is their different concrete forms: speech uses waves of sound compression travelling through the air, and writing uses markings on some surface. Writing is a system of standard symbols, transferring meanings to help members of one society or different societies communicate with each other¹. Language not only affect, directly or indirectly, the human feeling and thinking about the world of beings, but also transmit to individuals the normative values, the most important essence of a culture, paving the way for human creativities and

developments. Therefore, changing or introducing a new language in a society has become a very sensitive issue anywhere in the world because it can spark explosions of many cultural clashes and be a focal point for endless debates on many social issues. Concerning this topic, besides the presence of 漢字 Hanzi is considered as a sine qua non in the history of Vietnam, there are two major turning points extremely impacting on Vietnamese culture, of which lifestyle, literature, and art lasting for centuries in the long ago past until the present day should be mentioned and analyzed. The two milestones were the formation of 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ.

The background of 漢字 Hanzi, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm and Chữ Quốc Ngữ in Vietnamese contexts

In Vietnamese history, three different scripts have played important roles in the development of the literature, culture and civilization of Vietnam². Traditional Chinese characters, also known as 漢字 Hanzi, are one of the earliest forms of written language in the world³. Chinese characters have played a significant role in the development of a Sino cultural sphere of which Vietnam was a part since. As is well known, Chinese is written using a logographic not an alphabetic script. Han (漢) in 漢字 Hanzi should not be understood as the 漢朝 Han Dynasty the second imperial dynasty of China (206 BC–220 AD). Rather, Han (漢) in 漢字 Hanzi is the Han Chinese, Han people or simply Han (漢族 pinyin: Hànzú, literally “Han ethnicity” or “Han ethnic group”; or 漢人 pinyin: Hànrén, literally “Han people”). To this day, China's majority ethnic group calls to themselves as the “Han people” and the Chinese

writing system is referred to as “Han characters”. It should be highlighted here that the formation and development of 漢字Hanzi is a long process during an extended period of time, many centuries, before the Han dynasty.

𐤮喃 chữ Nôm or 𐤮漢喃 Chữ Hán-Nôm or Sino-Vietnamese writing systems is all referring to the same logographic script of the Vietnamese language. It is based on the Chinese writing system but creates a high number of new scripts to fit the Vietnamese language. By all means, 𐤮喃 chữ Nôm is just as rich and diverse as 漢字 Hanzi. 𐤮喃 chữ Nôm is the combination of (1) 漢字 Hanzi + (2) Vietnamese phonetic features.

According to different sources from notable experts and researchers⁴, when 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm was born has not received consensus yet. There is a hypothesis that 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm emerged parallel to the process of learning 漢字 Hanzi of Vietnamese people since proper human or local names etc. had not existed in 漢字 Hanzi yet during the administration of Shi Xie (137-226)⁵. Another argument is that right after when Vietnam got rid of the yoke of the North (Chinese domination) in 939, the script was initially invented, but gradually popularly used in the literature and many other fields of Vietnamese culture since the XIII centuries until the replacement of chữ Quốc ngữ in 1920.

Unlike the fact of the life of 喃字 chữ Nôm - an expression of the survival spiritual willing for a national written language - Chữ Quốc ngữ, firstly, was born in a completely different situation. The formation of chữ Quốc ngữ was initially under the direction of Western missionaries, they would like to Latinize the Asian languages⁶ for the reasons of Christian evangelism in the local places, and Vietnam is included, opening the prelude to the bereavement of Vietnam under the French colonization for nearly 100 years. Chữ Quốc ngữ is a synthesis of (1) Latin alphabet + (2) Vietnamese phonetic features.

Neither 喃字 chữ Nôm nor chữ Quốc ngữ represents a new language: They are two different ways to transcribe the same spoken language of the Vietnamese people. The two writing systems contain many other cultural heritages including various styles and genres in Vietnamese literature. We can say that the Vietnamese national scripts are two major coherent

categorizations which comprise many other smaller cultural artifacts.

A chart and a table will help us understand the linguistic history of Vietnam⁷.

Vietnamese cultural identity through 漢字 Hanzi, 字喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ

A brief history of the three scripts and the Vietnamese cultural aspects that are reflected in the process of receiving, creating and using these 漢字 Hanzi, 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ will help us to better understand the Vietnamese linguistic and philological history including why and how many literary master pieces were firstly written in 漢字 Hanzi but has been transliterated in Sino-Vietnamese and then translated into chữ Quốc ngữ or were firstly written in 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm and then also translated into chữ Quốc ngữ.

漢字 - Chinese domination and Vietnamese dependence:

Scholars do not agree on the question of when Chinese domination of Vietnam (Vietnamese: bắc thuộc, “belonging to the North”) began. Some say it began in 207 BC and some say it began in 111 BC. According to Lê Văn Hưu a thirteenth-century scholar and Trần Trọng Kim⁸ et al. (twentieth century), Triệu Đà was an emperor of Vietnam and therefore the period of the Triệu dynasties should be regarded as a time when Vietnam enjoyed independence. In other words, the Triệu dynasties solitarily and autonomously ruled Nam Việt until the year 111 BC, when the Chinese army invaded the country and merged it into the Chinese Han Empire. However, this argument is widely and strictly denied and criticized by some other Vietnamese historians including Ngô Thì Sĩ (eighteenth century)⁹. In the view of these scholars, Triệu Đà was a foreign invader because he was 100% Han-Chinese and came from northern China. The period of Chinese domination of Vietnam is normally considered to have ended in 1427 AD with Lê Lợi's victory over the Chinese army of the Ming Empire¹⁰. “Việt Nam” means “the Việt people of the South (of China)”¹¹. During their history, centuries before they encountered European colonialism, the Việt people of the South (of China) had to confront cultural differences between themselves and their northern neighbor.

Table-1: Vietnamese writing developments.[illegible]

dashed lines: unofficial writing, solid lines: official writing

During the “belonging to the North” period, the Chinese dynasties constantly assimilated Vietnamese people and turned Vietnam into a district of China. Besides the government and making Chinese the language of administration, the long period of Chinese domination introduced different facets of various Chinese ways of thinking according to Henri Maspero, Nguyễn Tài Căn, Nguyễn Thiện Giáp, Nguyễn Đình Hoà and Keith W. Taylors¹² et al., different aspects of Chinese civilization, including the three religions Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, were introduced to Vietnam. In the very early contact, Shi Xie (137-226), the Administrator of Jiaozhi (present-day northern Vietnam), played a major role in developing 漢字 Hanzi and Confucianism which were considered backgrounds and foundations for feudal mandarins in Vietnam. During the long history, many Chinese people immigrated to Vietnam, stayed, eventually married Vietnamese people and socially integrated into the host society, and as consequence their next generations become Vietnamese. Chinese culture, having been influenced the mandarin class, remained the dominant current among that elite circle for more than the next 1000 years until the loss of independence under French colonization (1870s).

As one part of China therefore Vietnamese civilization, culture and literature were forced to integrate into the great cultural empire. For historical centuries of acculturation, 漢字 Hanzi was once considered the official writing system in Vietnam. Although many 漢字 Hanzi texts written by the Vietnamese were destroyed or confiscated, and were lost for more than one thousand years while Vietnam was dependent on China¹³, a few invaluable fragments are extant today due to having been circulated and preserved in folklore. One of the most prominent canons of Vietnamese literature will be presented so you can see how 漢字 Hanzi was used and written by Vietnamese people.

Example 1:

漢字 Hanzi

南國山河

南國山河南帝居

截然分定在天書

如何逆虜來侵犯

汝等行看取敗虛

Sino-Vietnamese transliteration

Nam quốc sơn hà

Nam quốc sơn hà nam đế cư,

Tiệt nhiên phân định tại thiên thư.

Như hà nghịch lỗ lai xâm phạm,

Nhữ đẳng hành khan thủ bại hư.

Vietnamese translation by Trần Trọng Kim

Sông núi nước Nam

Sông núi nước Nam, vua Nam ở,

Rành rành định phận tại sách trời

Cớ sao lũ giặc sang xâm phạm

Chúng bay sẽ bị đánh tơi bời

English translations by Đào Tuyết Thảo

Southern mountain and river Southern Emperor governs

Absolutely is written in the Empyrean Book

How to reverse against your criminal violation

Over and over again, you are defeated

or

Southern Mountain River where Southern Emperor lives

Completely is divided in the Book of Heaven

How dare your bandits come to invade?

You wait and see take your defeat

The short poem above verifies how Vietnamese elites have mastered 漢字 Hanzi to write down their own poems. Surprisingly an early declaration of Vietnam's independence, which was also an early example of Vietnamese literature, was written in 漢字 Hanzi in 1076¹⁴ in the style of *Đường luật*—a Vietnamese variant of Chinese Tang poetry. This work, “南國山河 *Nam Quốc Sơn Hà*,” a masterpiece of classical Vietnamese poetry, has been called “the God's poem” by later generations. We Vietnamese continuously learn and study “南國山河 *Nam Quốc Sơn Hà*” in order to explore the rules for a *Đường luật* poetic writing. This venerable experience of poem composition has greatly enriched Vietnamese traditional poetry. This poem is in a regulated form that Vietnamese call *Thất ngôn tứ cú*, a type of seven-word quatrain written in the Tang poetry style. This patriotic poem is four lines long and must have seven syllables in each of its four lines. The First Declaration of Independence of Vietnam has been written in 漢字 Hanzi, but the tonal laws of Tang Poetry are only fully respected on one sole way that the Vietnamese people have ever read their 漢字 Hanzi¹⁵.

𣎵喃 chữ Nôm - Vietnamese independence with Chinese influences:

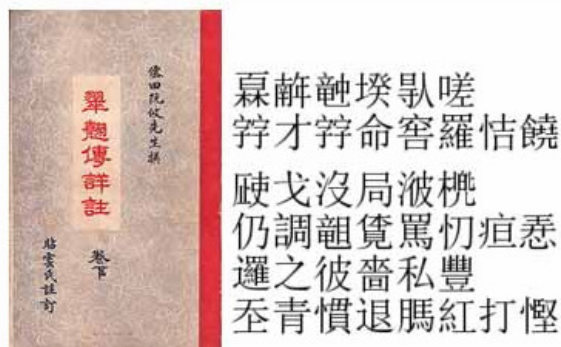
As a result of a thousand years of Chinese domination (except for brief rebellions), and a further thousand years of powerful Chinese influence, Vietnamese people used to write in 漢字 Hanzi. The only significant exceptions to this were the ten years of the strongly anti-Chinese Hồ dynasty (1400-1406), and 14 years of the heroic reign of Tây Sơn (1788-1802)¹⁶. The two brief interludes eliminated the use of 漢字 Hanzi (among many other actions triggering the Chinese invasions) but promoted the vernacular 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm as official writing of Vietnam.

If Chinese is considered a subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman linguistic family group¹⁷, Vietnamese language (Tiếng Việt) comes from Austroasiatic family¹⁸. Vietnamese possesses a richer sound register (with 6 different tones) than some other Sino-xenic languages and was therefore unsuited to be written in Chinese writing systems. That is why Vietnamese elite circle in those days created 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm firstly to write down Vietnamese proper human or local names, but increasingly, the script became more popular and played an irreplaceable role in the cultural life of the Vietnamese people. The creation, formation and development of 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm

constituted the first turning point in the history of the written language of Vietnam and also a breakthrough in the history of Vietnamese culture and literature. 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm was created to meet the demands of the direct record or self-expression of the thoughts and feelings of Vietnamese people.

One of the most reputable pieces of Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* (English: *the Tale of Kiều*), was composed in 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm in six-eight style (Vietnamese: *lục bát*). Several first verses of the best-known literary work will be presented here so together we can have a closer look at this 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm.

Example 2:



Ảnh văn Nôm *Truyện Kiều* bản Chiêm Văn Thị dưới tựa *Thúy Kiều Truyện* tường chú và 6 câu thơ đầu

Figure-1¹⁹: The first 6 verses in *Truyện Kiều* in the version of Chiêm Văn Thị.

In chữ Quốc ngữ:

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta,
Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau.
Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu,
Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng.
Lạ gì bỉ sắc tư phong,
Trời xanh quen thói má hồng đánh ghen.

English translation:

From Lê Xuân Thủy's *Kim Vân Kiều*
Within the span of hundred years of human existence,
what a bitter struggle is waged between genius and destiny!
How many harrowing events have occurred while mulberries
cover the conquered sea!
Rich in beauty, unlucky in life!
Strange indeed, but little wonder,
since casting hatred upon rosy cheeks is a habit of the blue sky

Etymologically, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm: As mentioned above, 𡵓 Chữ is 'characters', 喃 Nôm = 口 mouth (Khẩu in Sino-Vietnamese) here should be understood as language + 南 South (Nam in Vietnamese) so the word "𡵓 nôm" is generally acknowledged "the language of the South". Moreover, 喃 Nôm could be recognized as 'Southern'. Vietnam is an independent country in

the South of China. 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm simply is the writing system of the *Southern* language, an independent country in the South of China.

Thanks to the writing system, Vietnamese people have their own scripts to write down their own historical story reflecting the heroic spirit of the nation through glorious history, praise the country with beautiful sceneries, and describe Vietnamese's rich customs, traditions, depicting meticulously and poetically the ordinary people as well as ordinary things that are found in daily life. Vietnamese writers from different generations, through their life works, wanted to show the cultural identity of Vietnam, an independent country with its unique characteristics.

Since the first time in the history, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm was recognized as the national script to write down national language (國音 quốc âm) of Vietnam. Only in the field of literature, this writing system has been playing a particularly important role in literal creativity meaning that Vietnamese literature brilliantly shined throughout the centuries. From 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm, three different regulated verse forms originated in Vietnam literature: *Lục bát* (Six-eight), *Song thất lục bát* (雙七六八, literally "double seven, six eight") and *Ca trù* (歌籌) "Tally Card Songs". The creative 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm has left behind an uncountable invaluable poetic legacy in Vietnamese literature²⁰. Although the history of the formation of 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm is still controversial in both scientific and academic circles – every synthesis should be clarified, the researchers reach a consensus that the birth of this script plays a significant role in Vietnamese culture. They conclude that during the period of its popular usage, 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm is a unique tool, recorded the history and culture of Vietnamese people. 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm is a vivid evidence of Vietnamese nationalism against Chinese cultural imposition. In summary, the formation and development of 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm were a turning point in the history of Vietnamese culture. 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm has made brilliant achievements enriching the cultural treasures of Vietnam, and played an undeniable and irreplaceable role that 漢字 Hanzi could not fulfill in the Southern land. Facing the real-life needs and requirements that a writing system is necessary to note down Vietnamese spoken syllables and sounds, Vietnamese people have created and developed 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm. In this script, we find the vitality of the nation, from the depths of thousands of years of their own cultural identity. 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm has contributed greatly in preserving and promoting the identity of the Vietnamese people on the way to assert themselves.

Although 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm plays a very important role in the cultural history of Vietnam, the writing systems could not be popularly spread because of their complexity: you should master 漢字 Hanzi somehow before you can compose your own 𡵓喃 chữ Nôm and the fact show that it is only used within Vietnamese elite circles of a very restricted number. Tireless efforts with the

hope to bring 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm back to modern life, a group of 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm experts have tried their best to blow a modern breath into this writing system: The Vietnamese Nôm script can be accessed widely thanks to the new multilingual Unicode and ISO/IEC 10646 computer character standard, specifically, the UniHan²¹. However, the most major value of 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm presumably to refer to the ancient literature only. In consequence, another modern writing system is constructed and developed to continue the flow of Vietnamese cultural history.

Chữ Quốc ngữ - a bridge between East-West cultures: The secular prestige of 漢字 Hanzi and 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm did not withdraw until long after the promotion of chữ Quốc ngữ, however, their diminution occurred first in the South of Vietnam, where Chinese classical control was less signified, and Western influence was greater. At first, Confucian scholars resisted the adoption of chữ Quốc ngữ. The spread of this easy to learn script might undermine their power, which was based on traditional scholarship written in 漢字 Hanzi or 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm. Later, conservative nationalists also had a bad impression on chữ Quốc ngữ, calling it a “worm-or-cricket-like script created by imperialists”. However, the other reformed nationalists and anti-colonialists realized that chữ Quốc ngữ could be an invaluable fundamental base for the cultural development and globally-civilized process of Vietnam. They realized that it could be not only a useful weapon to fight back the colonial power of France but also a tool to use against the great Chinese neighbor’s culture that Vietnamese people have never intended to fall down or melt into. In fact, a widespread alteration transpired throughout Vietnam, especially among the expanding reading public, after chữ Quốc ngữ became popular, and it was applied in every aspect of social life in Vietnam, replacing the 漢字 Hanzi Chinese logograms and 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm that had been in use for two millennia. Chữ Quốc ngữ has served as a connecting, technical, educational, cultural, literal, religious and possibly economical and political power between the two isolating East vs. West worlds and between Vietnam and the faraway territories and unknown lands.

If 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm is created by Vietnamese right from the beginning of this writing system formation, in other words, then the Vietnamese are the creators of this script. Those Vietnamese, mastered 漢字 Hanzi, used different methods of ligature, usually at least two 漢字 Hanzi morphological elements are combined to create a new 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm to write down new sounds and words only exist in the Vietnamese language. Chữ Quốc ngữ is initiated by Jesuits, for the original purpose to record Vietnamese spoken language with their Latin alphabet symbols to learn Vietnamese themselves and write down their understandings which may help other missionaries more easily access Vietnamese language and culture. They understand and propose that the use of the vernacular language makes them closer to local people and helps them preach more effectively. Perhaps those Western missionaries did not expect

that their conceived writing system would be thankfully received, fully developed by the local people and become their national script in Vietnam.

Chữ Quốc ngữ also has been suffering the same arduous trek as Christians when they wished to enter Vietnam. Meanwhile 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm, created by local scholars, popularly welcomed by Vietnamese people, triumphantly opened and paved the way for the robust growth of Vietnamese literature in several centuries (from XIII until the middle of XX century). Chữ Quốc ngữ was initially created by a group of Fathers, trying to spread Catholicism in Vietnam. It is easy to see that the demand to transcribe the Vietnamese sounds/words into Latin alphabet system firstly comes from religious motives. Chữ Quốc ngữ derived from the primary tools to transfer the missionary work of Christianization to liberate successfully Vietnamese national from the dark of the illiteracy. Chữ Quốc ngữ is formed within the general trend of Western Catholicism over the countries located in East Asia. China and Japan are initially principal targets with a hypothesis that if the Jesuits are successful in preaching there, the smaller nations in Sino-sphere will be easily influenced. These Jesuits had had experiences of Oriental indigenous culture and certain understanding of Chinese and Japanese languages^{22,23}.

On January 5th 1615, the first small group of Jesuits, bringing with them experiences of more than twenty years of Japanese language and cultural studies, led by the famous professor of theology, the Neapolitan Francisco Buzomi, departed from Macau to Cochinchina, a region of southern Vietnam²⁴. From then on, the place would haunt the spirit of the young men, who were looking at it as a possible alternative to the Japanese project that failed.

In Vietnam, as in other places, missionary efforts were carried out in parallel with the elevation of the understanding of East-Asia cultural sphere. It is useful and time-saving for the young Jesuits when they compare some similarities between Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese languages and the way to Latinize these three different square scripts. The Romanization of the Vietnamese writing system chữ Quốc ngữ was partly inherited from the previous Chinese and Japanese transliteration into Latin alphabet when Catholic missionaries needed to transcribe holy passages for their new catechumen. In Vietnam, as 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm was used only by the elite, the Jesuits wanted to introduce religious texts to a larger-scale community, including lower-class people who would not have been able to read 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm ideographs. The invention of chữ Quốc ngữ was initially experimented by a group of Jesuits mentioned above but the principal roles of Francisco de Pina (Portugal) and Alexandre de Rhodes (French) should be emphasized.

Since 1618, the first earliest translation of essential Christian texts into Vietnamese chữ Quốc ngữ was done mainly by Francisco de Pina. He graduated from St. Paul’s College of

Macau, the first Western university in East Asia. During Pina's school time in Macau, it was supposed that he met and learned Japanese from Rodrigues Tçuzzu, who helped him shorten the time learning Vietnamese by associating the method to transliterate Japanese into Latin script with the way to Romanize the Vietnamese language²⁵. It was only a skipping movement from that to the endeavor to Latinize the Vietnamese language. Thus, on the pattern of the Japanese romaji, chữ Quốc ngữ was created.

For greater efficiency in spreading the Christian faith in Cochinchina, Francisco de Pina, aided by some Vietnamese and Japanese preachers²⁶, knew that he should change the situation. Vietnamese language ought to be easier to learn... In fact, he was the first European to be interested in the study of the local language and speak it fluently, which was not easy because it has six tones and most of the words are the same, defined only by the accents. Almost all words are monosyllabic, no declensions or conjugations but small particles that determine the gender of words and tenses of verbs. It is a language with its own sound and its own musicality, appearing to be spoken and sung at the same time.

In 1624, new missionaries from Portugal, Italy and France kept arriving on the shores of Hội An to avoid the bitter rejection and brutal punishment over the Christians in both China and Japan. The Romanization task of the Vietnamese language became more complex and time-consuming for Francisco de Pina since at the same time he had to not only continue his transliteration between his Latin and Portuguese into the Vietnamese but also teach local language to the new disciples. Soon the fruits of his labor became evident: more and more priests were able to speak the local language, among them, there were many prominent students who would continue his work, of those Alexander de Rhodes' special position, should be mentioned.

We can say that the birth of chữ Quốc ngữ (the phonetic system of the national language of Vietnam) crystallized the historic meeting between the Vietnamese and the Portuguese²⁷. Chữ Quốc ngữ is a new writing system for the Vietnamese language, which use the Latin script, based on its employment in the alphabets of Romance languages, in particular the Portuguese alphabet, with some digraphs and the addition of nine accent marks or diacritics – four of them to create additional sounds, and the other five to indicate the tone of each word. The many diacritics, often two on the same letter, make the Vietnamese script easily recognizable²⁸. Nowadays, more and more scholars all over the world understand the importance of missionaries such as Francisco de Pina and his compatriots²⁹ - assuming here a prominent role of Alexander of Rhodes³⁰, the great popularizer of chữ Quốc ngữ.

Originated from the Christian faith, with the divine reason and holy purpose, chữ Quốc ngữ was initially made by a collective group, might have been started since the first European missionaries arrived in Vietnam, with the invaluable

collaboration of Vietnamese catechists and Christians. The main target of the Jesuits was converting the population. Learning the local language was a practical way to communicate and transmit the Word of God. This system of transcription of chữ Quốc ngữ had a practical purpose for the Catholic missionaries: it facilitated the translation and dissemination of religious texts and was therefore directly at the service of their propaganda. For a long time, chữ Quốc ngữ was rarely used outside the circumstance.

Chữ Quốc ngữ met many difficulties at the beginnings of its development. In a long period of time, it remained the dedicated instrument of the Catholic community, and the outsiders continued not to pay attention to this special writing of Latin alphabet. The knowledge of the traditional scripts, 漢字 Hanzi and 喃字 chữ Nôm, was essential for anyone who wanted to present himself for the triennial examinations in Vietnamese feudality at that time. It took a long time for chữ Quốc ngữ to have the opportunity to grow and eventually to displace totally 漢字 Hanzi and 喃字 chữ Nôm as an effective, comprehensive written expression in Vietnam. For the next two centuries, even Christian catechisms and tracts were published not only in Romanized script chữ Quốc ngữ but also in 漢字 Hanzi, 喃字 chữ Nôm, or Latin. The most famous Vietnamese literary work, *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kieu), was written in classic 喃字 chữ Nôm about two centuries after chữ Quốc ngữ was invented.

Chữ Quốc ngữ was adopted and officially became popular only when Vietnam was colonized by French (1864-1945). During the "protectorate over Vietnam of mother country", chữ Quốc ngữ was extensively assigned to have been invented by Alexandre de Rhodes in the field of linguistic and cultural studies to magnify the superiority and value of the French influence on Vietnamese civilization. The incorrect vaunted concept prevailed for decades and still prevails in the minds of many people. Until recently when some international publications were released, with the investigations of the French philologist Jacques Roland, the French political-cultural guise about chữ Quốc ngữ was clarified. "After many years of searching documents in the library of the Ajuda Palace in Lisbon, particularly in the collection "Jesuits in Asia," Jacques Roland found two important manuscripts: i. A letter of seven pages of Francisco de Pina addressed to Jerónimo Rodrigues, ii. The other document is a kind of manual, with a language learning method entitled "*Manuductio ad linguam Tunckinensem*." Those two works, written by Francisco de Pina before any publication about chữ Quốc ngữ of Alexandre de Rhodes, were the incontrovertible shreds of evidence that Pina was the first to promote the Romanization of Vietnamese language³¹."

In effect, from the beginning of French colonization in the mid-19th century until the independence under the Geneva Accords of 1954, to strengthen the position of the French culture and colonial administration in Indochina, French was the official

language of Vietnam and maintained de facto official status in South Vietnam until its collapse in 1975. In Indochina, Vietnam encompasses the largest of the three Francophone sections in comparison with Laos and Cambodia. French is spoken by over 5% of the local population, a negligible number³².

At the beginning of the French authorities in Indochina, chữ Quốc ngữ, the script of the missionaries was not noticed at all. The cultural policy of the French imperialism is an absolute obscurantism in every colonized country. To foster all their excogitations of colonization in Vietnam, they first thought that Vietnamese people could be easily converted into French language and culture. Such dominated natives would use French not only as the official language both in public places and international trades but also as the language of their everyday life. This “mother country” ideology had been successfully promulgated in other French colonized places in other continents. The French expected to stay indefinitely in Indochina and had no exit strategy. In what the French scholar Paul Mus has called the “monologue of colonialism”, they made no sustained effort to prepare local people for self-sufficiency, higher education, free trade, relations with other countries, political participation, or independence. The process of domination involved infantilizing their colonial protégés. Quarantined in theory (and by the French police) from politics and drastic change, local people were forbidden to grow up, meaning that the civilizing mission could never be completed³³.

However, the French colonists soon realized that these “native barbarians”, with their high national consciousness, had been the creators and owners of some most ancient cultures and civilizations in Southeast Asian history. It was difficult to use French to impose the ruling apparatus and implement their urgent tasks forcing the Vietnamese nation to serve France in a shortest possible time³⁴. In consequence, besides French, the language of the “mother land”, colonial authorities popularized chữ Quốc ngữ with the aim of eradicating both 漢字 Hanzi and the Chinese-type 喃字 chữ Nôm, and thereby simplifying problems of publication and drawing Vietnam closer to Western practices. Additionally, instead of 漢字 Hanzi traditionally used by the former royal court, chữ Quốc ngữ became exceptionally promoted by the French colonial government to get rid of Chinese domination on the Vietnamese education system by imposing a French-based control. “Just as Rome civilized the barbarians beyond its borders, we too have a duty to extend French culture and religion to the backward people of the world.” Paul Domer (Governor of Vietnam) declared. The French colonists wanted to banish the millennial Chinese cultural presence and influence in their new territory, and needed a replacement, which at least temporarily, would serve the need of the administration until French was fully implemented. However, under French colonial rule (1864–1945), despite the fact that chữ Quốc ngữ made it possible to expand literacy and spread education more quickly to a larger population, it didn’t become the official writing system of the territory. In Sài Gòn, Gia Định Báo (嘉定報), the first chữ Quốc

ngữ newspaper was published on April 15th, 1865³⁵. In 1906, the French administration set up the Council for Improvement of Education, which ordered the study of chữ Quốc ngữ as a secondary subject in schools. In 1908, the Royal Court of Huế established the Ministry of Education, had the task of applying the new educational curriculum in chữ Quốc ngữ. After 11 years, since 1898 to 1909, a decree, signed by Paul Domer, definitively put the use of chữ Quốc ngữ in civil service examinations into effect³⁶. In 1917, an imperial proclamation eradicated old forms of educations in favor of those based on French and the new script of chữ Quốc ngữ. At last, from 1915 to 1919, a series of decrees were promulgated which abolished triennial literary examinations for the recruitment of governmental officials³⁷. In 1915, the last examination in 漢字 Hanzi was held in North Vietnam, and in 1919, the last one was organized in the Central Vietnam’s Imperial City of Huế. From then on, chữ Quốc ngữ became the recognized utilization of popular national writing, putting an end to the use of the Chinese-square-type 喃字 chữ Nôm.

Vietnamese and its writing system chữ Quốc ngữ based on Latin script is both official and national language of Vietnam. This script has a very special history. Initially, the writing system chữ Quốc ngữ is the invention of international linguistic integration and tireless efforts toward Catholic religious orientation. It is surprising that it becomes a practical writing system for those who have not shared Christian beliefs and practices.

In many other countries, “official” language and “national” language are the same. In some special periods of Vietnam, we have not only an official language and its writing system but also national language and its own scripts. There are many diversities and distinction between the two terms, here the difference shall be clearly distinguished in the Vietnamese context. Vietnam is a country with a special linguistic history because under the domination of China and France, Chinese and French used to be the official language but the literacy rate was negligible in the population. In any period in the history of Vietnam, Vietnamese is always the language used by Vietnamese people in their everyday life whether it has had a writing system or not. So what is the difference between “official” language and “national” language and their writing systems?

The two East-West cultures are forever deeply connected because Vietnamese was a Southeast Asian Nation used to one part of the Sino-sphere culture, colonized by French once the country called Indochina³⁸. However there is more to it - an affinity, mutual fascination and fondness between some of the oldest cultures in Southeast Asia, Chinese and Indian approaches and Western movements. Chữ Quốc ngữ is the specific cultural artifact of the intersection of the distinguished cultures³⁹.

While the Romanization obtained an extraordinary success and development in Vietnam, it is not welcomed in China and Japan.

Chữ Quốc ngữ gave the country a unique method of cultural and intellectual development. Among the East Asia countries under Sino cultural sphere of influence; only Vietnam got rid completely of 漢字 Hanzi. Among three Indochina countries, only Vietnam has totally changed its national writing system during French colonization. 漢字 Hanzi and the Chinese-type 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm, used for centuries, were scrapped and replaced by chữ Quốc ngữ, a Latin phonetic alphabet. Whether this was a blessing or a curse on Vietnamese cultural heritage, it cannot be denied that chữ Quốc ngữ has an important position on the development of modern Vietnamese identity in the world. Vietnamese people have eventually chosen chữ Quốc ngữ as their national script recently in the 20th century.

Chữ Quốc ngữ used European Latin alphabet to record accurately the sounds of Vietnam, an Asian language. We can say that this is a successful bridge between the East and the West: The system uses both Asian and European features. The people of Vietnam and Vietnamese writing systems are not assimilated completely but only change and transform themselves by acquiring a new ways of thinking and culture⁴⁰ in this case is the Latin alphabet.

Chữ Quốc ngữ played an important role to open a new colorful era in the history of Vietnamese literature. At the beginning of the third decades of the 19th century occurs a romantic tendency of poetry called *Thơ mới* (literally “New Poetry”). It establishes not only a new way but also a new epoch for the development of Vietnamese poetry. In this movement, the classical style of Sinosphere poetry and 𣎵喃 chữ Nôm was abandoned for free verse in Latin-alphabet chữ Quốc ngữ. *Thơ mới* did not only depart from Sino-Vietnamese traditional poetic forms and script, it also introduced more lyrical, emotional and individualistic expression. *Thơ mới* opens the way for Vietnamese poets not only escape from the center of Eastern China, but also be more adapted to the Western French culture and literature. “*Tiếng thu*” of Lưu Trọng Lư, one of the most notable representatives of *Thơ mới* is recommended so we can have the feeling of the East-West cultural combination in this remarkable New Poetry Movement of Vietnamese literature:

Tiếng Thu

*Em không nghe mùa thu
Dưới trăng mờ thỏn thức?
Em không nghe rạo rức
Hình ảnh kẻ chinh phu
Trong lòng người cô phụ?
Em không nghe rừng thu
Lá thu rơi xào xạc
Con nai vàng ngơ ngác
Đạp trên lá vàng khô?*

English translation by *Nhien Nguyen*⁴¹
*Sounds of Autumn
Don't you hear Autumn*

*Under dim sobbing moon?
Don't you hear distress
The image of a warrior
In the heart of his lonely wife?
Don't you hear Autumn forest
Scattered sounds of falling Autumn leaves
A bewildered amber deer
Steps on dry amber leaves?*

Chữ Quốc ngữ is a bridge between East and West and the successful tool for *Thơ mới* because it uses somehow the Latin alphabet forms to refer Vietnamese historical linguistic roots and cultural contents. It's one of the rarely successful East-vs.-West cultural acculturations in Asia. This East-West transformation is a process where the cultural features of the majority culture are reconstructed without losing the traditions and customs of the minority culture. This process presented a multidimensional and quantitative model of acculturation that relied on two major factors: cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. According to this model, cultural awareness represents the implicit knowledge that individuals have of their cultures of origin and of their dominant cultures. The fact that chữ Quốc ngữ is easier to learn and understand brings Vietnam 94.5% in literacy ability⁴², an encouraging number in comparison with the recorded rates during Chinese domination and French colonization over the nation.

Conclusion

Vietnam, a multiethnic country, comprises 54 ethnic groups divided into dozens of subgroups hence giving Vietnam the richest and most complex ethnic make-up in the whole of South-east Asia. Fruitfully, Vietnamese culture is various diversities of origins, each distinct group with its own language, lifestyle, and cultural heritage. It can be said that there were three layers of culture overlapping each other during the history of Vietnam: i. local culture such as Mesolithic Hòa Bình culture, Neolithic Bắc Sơn culture and Đông Sơn culture, ii. the culture that mixed with China, influenced from India, and integrated into other countries in the region, iii. the culture that interacted with Western culture. The most prominent characteristic of the Vietnamese culture is that it was not totally assimilated by foreign features thanks to the strong local cultural foundations. On the contrary, it was able to utilize and localize those from abroad to enrich the national culture.

The Vietnamese people represent a combination of races, languages, and cultures, the elements of which are still being investigated by archaeologists, ethnologists and linguists. As was true for most areas of Southeast Asia, the Indochina Peninsula was a crossroads for many migrations of peoples, including speakers of Mường, Chinese, Austronesian, Môn-Khmer, and Tai languages etc.

Originated from ancient linguistic roots having undergone a long construction, the Vietnamese language and its writing

systems provide many clues to the cultural mixture of the people. The special vitality proves the Vietnamese creative spirit in their heroic struggle to formulate and develop their national language. Although a separate and distinct language, Vietnamese borrows much of its basic vocabulary from Mường and Môn-Khmer, tonality from the Tai languages, and some grammatical features of Mường, Môn-Khmer and Tai. Vietnamese also performs some influence from Austronesian languages, as well as large infusions of Chinese literary, political, and philosophical terminology of a later period. The most spectacular landmark then in Vietnamese linguistic revolution is the successful transcription the Vietnamese spoken language into Latin alphabet, a constructive East-West combination thanks to an effective cross-cultural exchange between Asia and Europe.

Vietnamese linguistic and philological facts and figures shown in the three writing systems 漢字 Hanzi, 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ are always associated with the cultural identity of Vietnamese people, a resilient nation usually found a way to survive, resist and defeat its enemies many times in the long national history. In the cultural field, the Vietnamese people are always successfully integrated into a bigger culture but keep their own cultural value⁴³ reflected in their internationally recognized literary works. In thousands of years of history of different ethnic writing systems, Vietnamese people always learn various cultural features from those who colonized their nation to enrich their own Vietnamese scripts 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ by retaining their many different features such as the tones that Alexandre de Rhodes called birdsongs when he first heard the native women talking to each other⁴⁴.

Chinese and then French rulers used both hard and soft powers to impose their culture (language, religions, beliefs, customs, traditions etc.) on colonized people in Vietnam with their firm beliefs that the ruled nation would be surrendered totally in every field and all aspects. The Vietnamese people would be droughty in their hearts, their minds and their ideas: their own culture was withered made them completely forget their origin and identity. Vietnamese cultural roots can best be understood or interpreted through the eyes of the culture that they pertain to, otherwise they may lose their unique significance. However, many invaluable cultural artifacts in history such as “南國山河 Nam quốc sơn hà” in 漢字 Hanzi and the well-known piece “Truyện Kiều” (The tale of Kiều) in 𣪠喃 chữ Nôm and Thơ mới (the New Poetry Movement) in chữ Quốc ngữ have shown that in the reality the rulers failed when they tried to simulate our small Vietnamese culture into their great Chinese or French culture. The native culture is so deep and profound in the Vietnamese hearts, souls and minds that it is very difficult to force a “whirl log” expansion.

I hope that this study will open a new approach for further acculturation studies between Chinese vs. Vietnam and between East vs. West via three Vietnamese scripts and literary works. In

globalization era, acculturation is a phenomenon may attract and invite more and more researchers from different cultures. The Vietnamese writing system is still a very open topic for every interested researcher from anywhere in the world because of its history, authenticity and convenience.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Ngô Thanh Nhân at New York University for his enlightening guidance and inspiring instruction in the development and completion of this study. I would like to show my faithful admiration to Prof. John C. Schafer of Humboldt State University and Prof. Ngô Vĩnh Long of the University of Maine who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research, although they may not agree with all of the interpretations and conclusions of this paper. I appreciate Columbia University and their Prof. John D. Phan's comments that greatly improved the manuscript.

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