COMMENTS ON DEMOTIC CHARACTERS
THROUGH LƯC VÂN TIÊN

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When and by whom demotic characters were invented is a mystery yet to be solved. The fact is that Hán Thuyên was the first to use demotic characters in his literary writing, and in the Trần dynasty other authors like Nguyễn Sĩ Cỏ, Chu Văn An, Hồ Quý Ly followed his example. When the Lê dynasty was first established, Nguyễn Trãi was the next author to succeed them. Many others under Lê Thánh Tôn’s reign also composed in demotic characters and their works are still available now in the collection entitled Hồng Đức Quốc Âm Thi Tập. The next Mạc dynasty saw the coming of Bạch Văn Quốc Ngữ Thi by Nguyễn Bính Kiệm. However, not until the Lê Trưng Hưng period were the most famous works in demotic characters. Those included Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc by Nguyễn Gia Thiều, Chính Phụ Ngâm Khúc (translated by Đoàn Thị Điểm), Hoa Tiên truyện (composed by Nguyễn Huy Tự and revised by Nguyễn Thiên), Sơ Kính Tần Trạng by Phạm Thái, The Tale of Kiều by Nguyễn Dư and other anonymous works like Phan Trần, Nhi Đỗ Mai, Bích Câu Kỷ Ngộ, Phạm Công Cúc Hoa …

In the above-mentioned works of the North, demotic characters already displayed some systematic order, though still far from perfect. More notably, when they were transported to the South, many words were misspelt due to the Southerners’ unusual accent.

Here are some examples to illustrate the point:

1. Mistake in tone.

廬(lúc) was mispelt as 隬(lúc) in
Chăng may mà gặp lục nghèo (v. 35)

2. The initial consonant v— was mispelt as d—:

錄 or 綠 or 綠(vòng) was mispelt as 沔(dòng)
Bốn người ngồi lại mất vòng làm thơ (v. 476)

3. The final consonant –t was mispelt as –c:

妲 (dát) was mispelt as 得(dác)
Ai từng bán dát mà ngồi chờ trưa (v. 1550)

4. The final consonant –c was mispelt as –t:

碧 (biéc) was mispelt as 別 (biệt)
Trải qua mấy dâm biếc ngàn (v. 2003)

5. The final consonant –n was mispelt as –ng:

半 (ban) was mispelt as 邦 (bang)
Ban mai ngàn dấm bằng trình mới an (v. 48)

6. The final consonant –ng was mispelt as –n:
聲 (thiểng) was mispelt as 天 (thiên)
Bây lâu thờ có linh thiêng việc gì (v. 1574)

The misspelling is totally due to the inaccuracy of the southern accent. Other examples of such misspelling can be found in Trương Vĩnh Ký’s version of The Tale of Luc Văn Tiên (published by Claude & Cie in Saigon, 1901–4th edition) and of The Tale of Kiều (1875, 1st edition) written in quốc ngữ, the latin Vietnamese script. The following examples are found in The Tale of Kiều:

1. Trương Vĩnh Ký mispelt “giă” (return) in “Đoạn trường thơ phải đếm mà giă nhau” as “giā” (good-bye); thus misled Abel des Michels into translating it as “adieu”.
2. “Thang” (hot water) in “Thang lan rù bục trường hống tâm hoa” was mispelt as “than” by Trương Vĩnh Ký, who misunderstood that it meant a kind of coal for burning water.

In conclusion, the wrong forms of some demotic characters and the misspelling in the Vietnamese national language (quốc ngữ) in the South have led to serious consequences. Even Trương Vĩnh Ký, the scholar, made the same mistakes. More clarifications are to be seen in the complete presentation.

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