Did Nôm Script Play Any Role in the Dissemination of Quốc ngữ?

A Reappraisal of the role of Nôm characters during the scriptural transitional period
from Hán and Nôm to Quốc ngữ

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This paper is a preliminary research on the role of Nôm script during the period of disseminating quoc ngu from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Judged by its semantic-phonetic nature fully established during the last phase of its development, the demotic writing system Nôm theoretically should have had some contributions in the process of learning/teaching the Vietnamese Latinized script, quoc ngu. However, such a hypothesis has not yet been sufficiently scrutinized. By inspecting two little known materials published at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, namely the Manuel Militaire Franco-Tonkinois by G. Dumoutier (French-Tonkinese Military Manual, 1888) and the Abécédaire – Méthode d’écriture et lecture du quoc ngữ et du Français (Abécédaire – Method of Writing and Reading quoc ngu and French, 1912), the paper reveals the role that the Nôm script played in assisting those who know Han and Nôm to learn quoc ngu.

One of the common features shared by the above-cited materials is that they are printed trilingual in French, quoc ngu, and Nôm for specific purposes. The paper looks closely into the contents of the Manual, figuring out its targeted readers, lexicons, and socio-cultural elements reflected through its various lexical sections. Unlike the Manual that was composed by a single author, the Abécédaire’s authorship may be collective. Although published in Saigon and despite its linguistic locality, this textbook-like material aimed for a larger community of readers/learners who knew Han and Nôm scripts from distant and isolated locations as far as in the middle and North Vietnam. When reviewing Quốc ngữ tư pháp cải lương 國語字法改良 (Scriptural Construction Reform of the Quốc ngữ) presented in the Abécédaire, the paper goes through some sample and review lessons, and ends up with a general view of the method utilized in the Abécédaire.

Through the examination of the Manual and Abécédaire, it is possible to come up with some observations of the role of the Nôm script in popularizing quoc ngu. Consequently, the interaction between Nôm and quoc ngu appears more complicated than previously thought of. Questions of what is utilized by whom for what purposes require further investigation deeply into the scriptural transitional period taking place at that time. Of course, in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of this scriptural transition, more textual evidences are needed, and among them, materials written by French and Vietnamese scholars in French, Nôm, and quoc ngu may shed some light on the issue in question.
About the author

Nguyen Nam is a former lecturer in Vietnamese classical literature, and Han-Nom scripts of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. He earned his MA in Regional Studies – East Asia, and Doctoral degree in Chinese Literature from Harvard University. He now serves as the Manager of the Doctoral Scholarship Program of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, and as a Nom Instructor at the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations (Harvard University).

Notes:

This is a Powerpoint presentation. Excerpts from the two materials will be shown and discussed in detail during the presentation.