DRAFT TRANSLATION:
SOME ISSUES IN NÔM STUDIES

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We currently have two types of Nôm texts: one is printed from woodcut, and one is in handwritten format. We will discuss the first type in this paper because it has been the subject of heated discussions in recent years (such as on The Tale of Kiều, on The Song of a Soldier’s Wife, Hoa Tiến—The Betrothal Letter, …).

2/
There are several problems in texts produced by woodblock printing we have not yet fully understood:
— why, from time to time, in the middle of the text flows in The Tale of Kiều we find blank white spaces, for example, in the sentences numbered 960 [see Fig. 1], 1510, 1532, and 2523 of the 1872 Duy Minh Thi version (DMT),¹ or black squares in the sentences numbered 1656, 1682, 2738, 2740, and 2744 [see Fig. 2] of the 1871 Liêu Văn Dương version (LVD)?² or
— why there are ideograms, sentences, areas covering many sentences with ideograms in sizes a bit larger or standing out from the text environment? A few examples can be found in the LVD version: such as ideogram gio at the end of sentence 1148, 3 ideograms càng nào nhận of sentence 34 [see Fig. 3], all ideograms in sentence 2922, or the entire text area covering a series of the 8-syllable sentences, from 106 to 120.

We would like to tentatively venture some explanations for the above:
— The white spaces may represent the erroneous or corrupted squares which were taken out, but then forgotten to be replaced; the black squares are those unengraved, left for contemplation, and then forgotten;
— Ideograms, carved out of the normal text flow, and somewhat standing out of context, might have two causes:
   *** one: they were new ideograms that were carved at a later time;
   *** two: they are carved later by new cutters, replacing the regular cutters.

Obviously, the suggested explanations above are simply guesses, with little certainty.

Fig. 1. Page 25b, Duy Minh Thị, 1872.3  

Fig. 2. Page 115, Liêu Văn Dương, 1871.4  

Fig. 3. Page 2, sentence no. 34, Liêu Văn Dương, 1871.5

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5 Page 34, Truyện Kiều: Bản Nôm Liêu Văn Dương 1871, op cit.
In addition, there are many cases that resist speculations. When we compare one printed version against another of the same work, and compare changes from an earlier against the later versions, we find the following phenomena:

— How is it possible that the two printings of The Tale of Kiều by Thịnh Mỹ Đường\(^6\) from the same year, 1879, look so much different? Compare, for example, nét ngày in sentence 20, cùng … cùng… in sentence 436, ngu tình in sentence 1314 in a version found by Hoàng Xuân Hân, against those of nét ngày, dò… dò… and tả tình, of the same sentences, respectively, in the version owned by Nguyễn Khắc Bào.

— The 1866 LVD version\(^7\), only 5 years earlier than the 1871 LVD version, was printed from totally different woodblock generations, not just two or one. We know that they were not printed from one woodblock generation, because there is no page in 1866 LVD that looks exactly like the corresponding page in 1871 LVD. We also observe that the 1871 LVD version was apparently printed from worn out woodblocks (for examples, sentences 913 to 960), or from plates with patched ideograms (see above), or from blocks that were chipped (see sheet 51, at the beginning of the sentences 2440, 2442, 2444, and 2446, in the version of Đào Thái Tôn\(^8\)). There are also blocks of the same print belonging to different generations with totally different carving styles (compare 3 pages with sentences 409-432, 3097-3120, and 3121-3144). There seemed to be many different printings between the year 1866 and 1871 or even before the 1866 mark (?). These are important issues in the history of the printing of the Tale of Kiều, but it may not be possible to resolve the issue because we do not know how many copies can be printed on a set of woodblocks before they wore out? And when they were worn out, was it possible to patch in new ideograms? and how were the changes actually made? etc.

Obviously, in order to have an adequate explanation, in place of the guesses ventured above, we need to know the art of xylography. In order to understand the ancient craft, one certainly needs to investigate and learn the craft thoroughly now. If archaeologists feel there is a need to reproduce rock tools, test how these tools were used to cut trees, or to carve meat from wild animals,… then Hán Nôm studies need to send researchers to traditional craft villages, such as Liệu Trang Village, to investigate and to learn from the elder craftsmen, to buy tools, and to test cutting ideograms on woodblocks, and to print from woodblocks, in order to find their properties.

2/ Nôm is a script used to record Vietnamese language, but it was never standardized, nor formalized in important dictionaries like those of the Hán script. Moreover, since the Lý-Trần


\(^7\) Từ Đức thập cửu niên trọng xuân tận san [1866]. Tiến diện Lê tham Nguyễn hậu soạn. Kim Văn Kiều tận truyện. Liệu Văn Đường tăng bản.

period, the Vietnamese language has undergone many changes. In addition, Vietnamese differs from region to region. As a result, in order to correctly read an original document in Nôm, first, one has to determine two issues:

— In what period was this text prepared?
— And in what regional dialect was the text composed?

To establish evidence to the first point, we have to cite the well known sutra 佛說大報父母恩重經 Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mãu án trong kinh, which is well studied inside and outside of the country on its most researched Nôm translation. This version was printed by Trịnh Quán from the woodblocks done in the 18th Century, but the text was based on a version of the early Lê period in the 15th Century. One proof is on page 6/a, where there is one occurrence of ideogram lôi [image 羣, with ] whose graph is typically altered to comply with the taboo decree of this dynasty. However, the taboo compliant style accomplished by replacing the two vertical strokes of radical 1 dao by ideogram 刃 dao occurred twice as many: [禾刃] on page 25/a, and [禾刃] on page 41/b. And the phenomenon where ideogram 利 was "totally forgotten" to comply with the decree occurred even more frequently: one case each in pages 6/a, 25/b, 41/b and 44/a, and twice in page 45/a!

Even so, based on much evidence, the first printing of this sutra in the early Lê Dynasty has overwhelming traces of an even earlier original copy, compiled approximately in the Trần Dynasty. There are at least 4 pieces of evidence of taboo ideogram compliance:

— Even though column 2 of page 22/b has an ideogram [陳] tran carved normally, right in column 5 of page 42/b and column 4 of page 43/a, 2 cases are found where the family name [敷] tran was carved with a less familiar glyph. It consists of ideogram [東] dòng on the left, and radical [父] truy on the right (the vietnamese name of the radical is taken from Fr. Anthony Trần Văn Kiểm’s dictionary). We do not think this is a taboo compliance of the Lê Dynasty decree for ideogram tran, because the Lê Dynasty ordered [陳] tran to be altered to [程] trình! Here ideogram tran does not comply with the Lê decree: a less familiar glyph was used to avoid the taboo ideogram, thus intending to comply with the taboo "respectfully"!

— According to Dr. Nguyễn Đức Thọ, ideograms [乾] kiện (as in [乾坤] kiền khôn), [欲] hâm (as in [欲慕] hâm mộ), [英] anh (as in [英雄] anh hùng),… are taboo words in a decree of the Trần Dynasty.

However, this ideogram [英] anh in Nôm has always been used also to represent anh “older brother” in anh em “brothers”: for examples, please refer to the earliest [英三] anh tam in Poem 174 of Nguyễn Trãi, anh anh chú chú in Poem 80 of Nguyễn Binh Kiểm, and later, please

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9 From Xth to XIVth centuries.
further refer to four sentences 57, 838, 1596, 1643 in Hoa Tiên kí, copy AB-269, or two sentences 832 and 2538 of Hoa Tiên nhuan chinh of 1875, or section 33 in秋夜旅懷吟Thu đa lầu hoài ngấmby Đình Nhật Thần (in a handwritten family copy donated to Nguyễn Tai Chất, as well as in a wood print of 1802 under the Thanh Thái reign)... However, in this Buddhist sutra, all 5 occurrences of ideogram [英] anh (as in anh tam) avoided this spelling, and used a shorthand spelling of ideogram [嬰] anh (as in dúc anh) with an [ㄏ] á graph on top, and a graph [女] nũ (please see the images of column 3 [𡼁] and column 5 [𡼁] on page 18/b; column 4 [𡼁] on page 20/b; column 3 [𡼁] on page 22/a; and column 3 [𡼁] on page 42/a). Such a conscious and absolute avoidance of the familiar ideogram lends itself as evidence of a historical period of taboo ideogram alteration practice.

But the above was not a compliance to the 1443 taboo ideogram decree! During the Lê Dynasty, [英] anh was not as important a taboo ideogram as the three ideograms [利] lối, [陳] trấn and [學] hoc which were announced earlier in the 1428 decree. The ideogram [利] lối occurs six times without changing forms, ideogram [陳] trấn, three times without being altered to trinh, and ideogram [學] hoc, 2 times (on pages 18/a and 20/b) without changing to comply with the taboo decree of the Lê Dynasty, but [英] anh behaves in absolutely the opposite way. We think that the evidence of compliance of the taboo ideogram anh comes from the Trần Dynasty’s decree.

— Ideogram [歴] hâm can be used to represent Nôm hâm or hòm. The sounds hâm and hòm did not violate the taboo decree: perhaps because of this, at first, they were carved without alteration, as shown in hâm in column 5 of page 5/b and hòm in column 3 [pickle] of page 9/a. But strangely enough, in this same column 3 of page 9/a, in two ideograms hòm dao right below, ideogram [pickle] hâm was not carved normally as before, but was changed to something of an “un-word”: It could be the case that the editor suddenly remembered that the taboo decree was meant graphically, i.e. to avoid the glyph of hâm, and created this altered glyph on the spot. And again on page 15/b, in hòm mai, the ideogram [pickle] hâm again conforms with the taboo decree by replacing radical [欠] khirem with a symbol half resembling kiêm, and half resembling [夫] phu!

— On three occasions, the ideogram [乾] kiến does not leave any hint of compliance with the taboo decree by its pronunciation [軻] can: in columns 1 and 2 of page 14/a and column 3 of page 41/b. On the glyph level, the ideogram fortunately retains an alternative orthography, which replaces ideogram [乞] kat on its right by a straight down stroke hooking up [丿], as in column 4 of page 11/b, in column 1 of page 18/a and in column 2 of page 34/b! According to Dr. Ngô Đức Thọ¹² this is a style of taboo compliance by replacing an ideogram, such as can//kiến, by a rarely seen alternative ideogram with the same pronunciation, in this case can//kiến. This spelling is sometimes confused with [軻] yet! Yet, in this sutra, in the first column of page 14/a there are two ideograms yet representing the sound ât//wört “wet” with the meaning totally opposite to that of can “dry.” This is not a mistake.

On the linguistic level, the sutra compiled in the Trần Dynasty also shows aspects of ancient Vietnamese pronunciation, which are very different from modern Vietnamese.

— only in about 30 pages of Nôm text, two researchers, Hoàng Thị Ngo and Masaaki Shimizu, have found over 70 cases of today's monosyllabic words, which in the sutra however were represented by disyllabic words or monosyllabic words with complex initial clusters! There are also other ancient linguistic features! The Hán root sounds retain ancient pronunciations of the IVth–Vth Centuries; and the Vietnamese native sounds represented by Nôm ideograms were pronounced almost like those of the Rực ethnic language! Please compare:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern Vietnamese</th>
<th>Nôm ideogram of the Trần Dynasty</th>
<th>Comparative Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THÀY</td>
<td>xá lài [含赖]</td>
<td>sô roi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(the sound graph of <em>sr</em> has the initial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cluster <em>sr–</em>, rhyme of <em>sr</em> sounds like <em>–ai</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the IVth–Vth Century)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DÁ</td>
<td>la dã [扌打]</td>
<td>la ta (ethnic RUC word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>là dã [羅移] (in Nguyễn Trãi)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Thus, Nôm ideograms in this sutra are extremely difficult to pronounce. There are many cases about which we do not have an agreement on the pronunciations because we lack a solid understanding of the ancient Vietnamese language of that time.

4/ There are many cases where Nôm ideograms were used to record dialectal sounds, however, we will cite one case where an ideogram was written to represent a dialect sound, and one case using the dialect glyph.

— In the _Tale of Kiều_, there are two ideograms _khủng kinh_. That they form a popular word in the southern Vietnamese dialect, everyone would agree. But unfortunately, in this dialect, the rhyme _–ihn_ was changed to _–ieng/–iên_, as in _cái kinh_ > _cái kiếm_ “eye glasses”; and _–iên_ merged with _–yên_, as in _nơi chuyên > nói chiến_! Thus, in the end, on page 1734 of the 1872 DMT version, _khủng kinh_ [spelled as 嘼嘿, 恐耽, 孔頎, 共煩, 共頎,...] was printed as [共犬] _khủng khuyên_!

— In the north, the ideogram [囝] _nín_ is usually spelled as [口] _khâu_ + [囝] _nàn_: it seems totally logical because the sound graph having the rhyme _–an_ can be read as _–iên_, or _–in_, and the

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meaning graph *khẩu* is also appropriate. However, when it comes to the south, the same spelling is pronounced *then*, as in sentence 787 of the 1872 DMT version.

及咲绿咏哝红  Ngập ngừng THEN lúc e hồng

*A Nôm ideogram lookup table of the southern dialect* by Vũ Văn Kính\(^{15}\) also confirms this spelling. And it is reasonable to accept so: in the south, this ideogram is considered an [會意] associative compound consisting of two signifier graphs: [讠] *nận* in Hán with the meaning “blushed; turn red”, and *khẩu* describing timidity in speech!

Obviously, when encountering Nôm texts in different dialect regions, one has to be cautious and vigilant in their reading, because of the complications cited above.

5/

Finally, one needs to raise a point of reality: Nôm texts are harder to read than Hán texts, for many reasons:

— The mandarin scholars usually learned Hán but did not learn Nôm: when they wrote a Nôm document, besides those familiar Nôm ideograms that were often used, they might also encounter instances where they could not figure out the spelling. That might have caused them to invent new ideograms that had never been seen before. The DMT version has within it those creative moments of Nguyễn Du: spelling [讠] *khoa* to mean *thua* in sentence 22, spelling [讠] *ngày* to mean *ngay* in sentence 229, for examples.

— The confucian masters who were hired to copy documents, and the cutters who were hired to carve ideograms on woodblocks, might have contributed to the complications in the Nôm texts: because they were not familiar with the originals or were simply careless. They might sometimes have changed the original texts totally by inserting ideograms that were meaningless, or rhymeless, or even unidentifiable. Evidence shows that ideogram [讠印] on in sentence 2489 of Nguyễn Du (鈔 印 + 印 án) was miscopied to [讠] trong (鈔 long + 中 trung) by the copy maker Lâm Noa Phu;\(^{16}\) ideogram *ngày* (written as [讠] ngày in Nghệ Tĩnh) in sentence 229 was changed in the LVĐ version to [讠] buôi, syntactically irregular; ideogram *săm* [image 中] , (shorthanded ideogram sâm + combining mark cá này)\(^{17}\) in sentence 2128 was carved by cutters of the 1879 DMT version to [讠] († tâm + nại) with the sound graph nại which is totally off the mark,…

— Worst even, the experienced editors, sometimes being subjective, could contribute additional errors to the Nôm texts. For the 清明 *thanh minh* festival, Nguyễn Du created the perfect scenery in sentences 97 and 98:

\(^{15}\) Vũ Văn Kính, *Bảng tra chữ Nôm miền Nam* [A Nôm ideogram lookup table of the southern dialect], The Ho Chi Minh City Linguistics Society. 1994. P. 56.

\(^{16}\) According to *Truyện Kiều: Chữ Nôm và khảo đi* [The Tale of Kiều: Nôm ideograms and comparative differences] by Nguyễn Bá Triệu, printed at Vietnam Printing, Canada.

\(^{17}\) Unicode has two full forms of săm [扌 愣] and a simplified form [扌].
Một vùng cây bóng đá
Gió hụi hụi thổi một và NGỌN LAU

However, the editors of the two versions of Kiều Oánh Mẫu\textsuperscript{18} and VNB-60\textsuperscript{19} were obviously not happy: they changed [萏革] ngon lau to [芃革] bồng lau, thinking that they had made it read better, the scene prettier, and the air finer. But they were so wrong: reed cannot bear flowers until fall!

— Finally we have to touch on some elements that created inadequacies and difficulties in Nôm texts: the taboo ideogram decrees of the royal courts. [帖蘭亭] thiệp lan định was forced to change to [帖香亭] thiệp hương định, or, [改任南平] cái nhậm Nam Bình was forced to change to [改調南平] cái điều Nam Bình (as shown in Lâm Noạ Phu's version). This is deplorable!

6/
From the sketch above, obviously, it requires a huge effort to resolve the difficulties found in Nôm texts. But first of all it requires us to adopt and apply the experience and the modern achievements of the related scientific disciplines, even though they are independent from Hán Nôm studies: such as the experience and achievements of textual studies, taboo studies, ancient phonology, language studies, poetry studies, etc. They may be able to shed light on this type of complex script.

\[\text{\textcopyright} \]


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Kim Văn Kiều truyện}. No year was recorded.