Three writing systems in the Vietnamese philology

Prof. Dr.Sci. Nguyễn Quang Hồng
Hà Nội, Việt Nam

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Department of East Asian Languages & Civilizations
Harvard University
Introduction

There is not enough evidence to establish a native writing system before Vietnam had contacts with the Hán or the Sanskrit scripts.

There have been three writing systems coexisting in the history of the Vietnamese culture exerting important roles in the Vietnamese written culture:

— chữ Hán was borrowed together with the Hán philology from China,
— chữ Nôm was built from the materials of, and modeled after the Hán script,
— chữ Quốc ngữ was created from the latin alphabet and modeled after the European phonemic scripts.
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*Three writing systems in Vietnam*
Formation and development

- **Contact of the Vietnamese Hán Việt and Hán texts**
  - First contact between Vietnamese and Hán.
  - Vietnamese texts in Hán
- **From chữ Hán to chữ Nôm.**
  - The formation of chữ Nôm for the Vietnamese language
  - Parallel existence of chữ Hán and chữ Nôm.
- **Chữ Quốc ngữ and its status.**
  - European missionaries with chữ Nôm and chữ Quốc ngữ.
  - Chữ Quốc ngữ with the French colonial regime and the Nguyễn Dynasty
  - Chữ quốc ngữ with the revolutionary movements of the early XXth Century.
Before the Xth Century

- In 207 BCE, Triệu Đà founded Nam Việt (covering the areas south of Ngũ Lĩnh down to the middle of Central Vietnam).
- In 112 BCE, the Hán Dynasty occupied Nam Việt, created Giao Chỉ Region, with 9 districts, 6 of which covered an area in Quảng Đông–Quảng Tây, and 3 of which were in the today’s Vietnam (i.e. Giao Chỉ (north), Cửu Chấn (from Thanh Hóa to Quảng Bình) and Nhật Nam (from Quảng Trị to Quảng Nam).
After the Xth Century

- In 939 AD, Vietnam won its independence and self-determination by Ngô Quyền and built a Đại Việt culture through many feudal dynasties thereafter.

- From the beginning of the Common Era, for 1,000 years under Chinese domination, Vietnamese ethnic communities lived together with other ethnic communities in southern China, and later with the Hán migrating from the heartland China.
The Hán migration to Vietnam

- The Hán officials of all ranks and armies were sent by the Chinese authorities to govern Vietnam.
- Many Hán intellectuals who could not stay with the Chinese central government, found their way south to exert their talents, like 劉熙 Lưu Hy, 程炳 Trịnh Bình, and others.
- Many “ordinary” people migrated south to build their lives in the new land: some “exiled” by China as “criminals”, while other ordinary people who volunteered to migrate.
- The Hán people, with different goals and different means, contributed to the introduction of the Hán language and the Hán script to native people in Vietnam.
Literary texts in Vietnam before the Xth Century

- Chữ Hán came into Vietnam thanked to the activities of Sĩ Nhiếp 士燮 (136–226 AD) in his school in Luy Lâu (Bắc Ninh) teaching Confucian books to the Vietnamese. The ealiest Vietnamese Confucianists who passed the Chinese mandarin examination were Trương Trọng 張重 (Ist C. AD), and Lý Tiền 李進 (IIInd C. AD), etc.

- Chữ Hán was used by Vietnamese in Giao Châu in concurrence with the propagation of Buddhism (and Taoism). The City of Luy Lâu during the V–VIth C. had been the center of translation and printing of Buddhist sutras in Hán. Typical figures included Thích Đạo Cao 釋道高 and Thích Pháp Minh 釋法明, both lived in the Vth C. who were well versed in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. They left behind a buddhist work named Lý hoạch luận 理惑論.
During the Chinese domination, Vietnamese learned the Hán script with the current Hán pronunciation, and wrote Hán texts according to the Chinese philology.

Thus, Hán to the Vietnamese at that time was a “foreign language”. In essence, it was not different from Hán used in the Chinese territories (or perhaps it had traces of the Hán spoken in Lĩnh Nam).
Literary works in Hán after the Xth Century

- The Vietnamese dynasties, under Đinh–Lê–Lý–Trần, founded the state following the Chinese model, using Confucianism as the foundation. For that reason, chữ Hán and Hán literature were highly esteemed in Vietnam.

- Vietnamese dynasties from the Xth to the XXth Century considered Hán as the official script of the state.

- At first, chữ Hán was used in Confucian and Buddhist teachings, and gradually used to build a Vietnamese culture in Hán script in all aspects of social life: folk culture, religions and beliefs, science and education, politics and administration, literature and arts.
From the Xth Century…

- At the beginning of the Xth C., the Vietnamese read chữ Hán with the *Hán–Việt pronunciation*—a nativized phonological system that was different from the Chinese phonological system.
- Thus, chữ Hán and Hán texts in Vietnam ceased to be a “foreign language”, and had become familiar to the Vietnamese language and the Vietnamese people.
From Hán to Nôm: formation

- *The formation of chữ Nôm to represent Vietnamese language.*
- The seed of the formation of chữ Nôm can be found in many Hán texts, where there were Hán ideograms or semi Hán ideograms that represented Vietnamese words, chiefly, personal or geographic names, or local object names. For example, the texts of the 7 steles of the Lý Dynasty (1010–1225).
Tombstone of Lady Lê

- The tombstone *Phùng Thánh phu nhân Lê thị mô chí* 奉圣夫人黎氏墓誌 bears no author’s name, but its content reveals that it was erected not long after the 11th year of Emperor Chinh Long Bảo Ứng (1174) of the Lý Anh Tông’s reign.
- The tombstone was found in the Dien Linh Phúc Thánh Temple, near Hương Nộn Village, Tam Thanh District, Phú Thọ Province.

- (1) 頭停 Ðầu định: 壹坐落池頭停處 (Nhất tòa lạc trì Ðầu định xú) ‘One located at Ðầu định’.
- (2) 舉午 Cự ngọ: 壹田坐落舉午處 (Nhất diễn tòa lạc cựa ngọ xú). ‘A ricefield is located at Ðầu ngọ’.

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A ricefield is located by the river bank [bến sông]".

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Tháp Ми́у stele

- The stele Báo ân thiên tự bi ký 報恩禪寺碑記 found at Tháp Ми́у Temple, Vĩnh Yên Province, was dated at the 6th year of the Emperor Trị Bình Long Úng (1210) of the Lý Cao Tông’s reign.

- Chữ Nôm borrowed from Hán ideograms:
  - 尚 Thắng: 尚 咸 Thắng Hầm, 尚 豸 Thắng Chày, 尚 造 Thặng Tạo, ...
  - 豳 Trải (read chạy): 豳 豳 Thặng Chày.
Newly formed Nôm ideograms

- [_revision [revision] Boì {radical Thủy+Bi}: [revision] Boì FLICT (Boì ricefield).
- Chài {radical Mịch+Tai}: Chài Đông Chài.
- [土而] Nhe {radical Thô+Nhi}: Nhe Đông Nhe.
- Oân {bộ Mễ+Uyển}: Oân [sweet rice cake].

The presence of these Nôm ideograms in the stele texts at the end of the XIIth or the beginning of the XIIIth C. gives us the clearest evidence of the formative stage of chữ Nôm.
Stele Báo ấn thiên tự bị ký 報恩禪寺碑記 at Tháp Miếu Temple, Bạch Trữ prefecture, Yên Lắng District, Vĩnh Yên Province, was dated in the 12th lunar month of the 5th year of Emperor Trị Bình Long Ứng (1210) during the reign of Lý Cao Tông.

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An earliest Nôm text

- A Nôm translation of the sutra in Hán Phật thuyết đại báo phữ mẫu ăn trọng kinh 佛說大報父母恩重經 [Sutra of the Buddha’s teachings on pious duty to their parents’ great sacrifice].

- The sutra was carved on woodblocks and printed at the end of the XVIIth or the beginning of the XVIIIth Century by Duke Trịnh Quán.
Middle Vietnamese Cv–CVC and CCVC syllable structures

- Many Nôm ideograms in the sutra have the oldest structure of Vietnamese language compared to those in the texts printed at the time.
- There are 74 words written in 2 separate Hán ideograms (Cv–CVC), and 63 words by two Hán ideograms combined into one (CCVC). They reflect the time when Vietnamese was not yet strictly monosyllabic.
- We may not have exact date for this sutra, but the Nôm translation in Phật thuyết cannot be done later than the XIth Century, when Vietnamese began to lose these complex syllable structures.
Cv-CVC

- {阿 贬} [a-biẽm] > Bǎm (31b)
- {阿 賀} {阿 至} [a-chạ́t] [a-chí] > Giất giắ (43b)
- {巴 遽} [ba-la] > Trả́ (8b)
- {破 散} [phá-tán] > Rản (29a)
- {个 禺} [cá-lung] > Trông (3a)
- {車 莽} [cự-măng] > Măng nghe) (5b) (6b) (8b) (28a) (30b)
- {多 默} [đa-măc] {多 甫} [đa-phủ] > Mộc mó́ (19b)
- {歿 彽} (3a) /{ ㄕ 彽} (11a) (30a) [la-ngạn] > Ngàn
- {麻 郦} [ma-lân] {麻 碌} [ma-lục] > Lăn lóc (19b)
- {舍 赖} [xá-lạ́i] > Thầy (7a) (18b).

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CCVC

- □{阿+普} [a-phô] □{阿+批} [a-phê] > Võ vẻ (p. 14a)
- □{阿+洪} [a+hông] > Ngỏng (p. 46a)
- □{巴+例} [ba+lệ] > Trời (pp. 16b, 20a, 34a, 34b, 43b)
- □{林+个} [lâm+cá] > Trằm (p. 3a)
- □{可+重} [khả+trùng] > Chằmg (p. 22a)
Hán Buddhist sutra Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu an trọng kinh 佛說大報父母恩重經 and Nôm translation.
Hán Nôm philology

- *Hán Nôm philology* consists of all works using chữ Hán and chữ Nôm by the Vietnamese people.
Three types of Hán Nôm texts from linguistics/grammatology

- Hán masterpieces (written solely in Hán), e.g. Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư 大越史記全書 [A complete history of Đại Việt] during the reign of Chính Hoà of the Lê Dynasty; historical novel Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí 皇黎壹統誌 [Records on Unification of Royal Lê] of the Ngô Family Literary Group at the junction of Lê – Nguyễn Dynasties.

- Nôm masterpieces (written solely in Nôm), e.g. Cự tran lạc đạo phủ 居塵樂道賦 [Prose on Living on Earth, Enjoying the Way] by King Trần Nhân Tông (Trần Khâm: 1258–1308); or Đoạn trường tàn thanh [The Tale of Kiều] 斷腸新聲 by Nguyễn Du (1765–1820).
Three types...

Hán and Nôm

- Therefore, in order to read a Nôm text, one cannot avoid learning Hán, and in order to read Vietnamese Hán texts, one cannot avoid learning Nôm. Perhaps this is the reason people call the chữ Hán and chữ Nôm, and the two “languages” Hán and Việt as “Hán–Nôm” to distinguish the ideographic script from the quốc ngữ (and French).

- In this interaction, the Vietnamese have created a cultural treasure in Hán–Nôm worthy of being revered in the written culture of all Vietnamese nationalities.
Status of chữ Nôm

- Chữ Nôm was a national script used to write literary masterpieces in Vietnam, esp. in T’ang genre, and a series of epics in the 6–8 syllable stanzas (e.g. *The Tale of Kiều*) and 7–7–6–8 syllable stanzas (e.g. *The Song of A Soldier’s Wife*). It was also used together with chữ Hán in all aspects of social, political and administrative life of the country.

- History does not fail to mention Hồ Quý Ly 胡季犛 (1336–1407?), the first emperor who wanted to promote Nôm in education and court records. And later, Emperor Nguyễn Huệ 阮惠 (1753–1792), who established Sùng Chính Institute to translate Confucian books into Nôm, and who loved to use Nôm in royal court process. However, their terms were so short that their policies were yet to fully implemented. Accordingly, chữ Nôm never became the official script of the state.
European missionaries

- At the highest development of Hán Nôm, at the beginning of the XVIIth Century, the Catholic missionaries began to arrive in Vietnam. Most of them were fluent in Hán (and Japanese) script. It was natural for them to rely on Hán and Nôm to propagate the bible and stories of the saints.

- The clearest evidence lies in a series of books and manuscripts composed by an Italian missionary named Girolamo Maiorica (1591–1656), the most typical among which was Các Thánh truyện 各聖傳 [Stories of the Saints] with more than 2,000 pages in Nôm prose, completed in the 4th year of Emperor Phúc Thái (1646).
First use of Latin quốc ngữ

- Even before 1646, the Portuguese missionaries Francisco de Pina, Gaspar do Amaral and António Barbosa were in Vietnam, learning the language and the culture of the Vietnamese.
- They were the first Europeans thinking of using the Latin alphabet to write Vietnamese sounds, which was later called chữ Quốc ngữ.
First publications in quốc ngữ

- The first texts in quốc ngữ were printed by a French missionary named Alexandre de Rhodes (1593–1660) in 1651 in Roma: Phép giảng tám ngày; Văn phạm Việt ngữ and Tự điển Việt–Bồ–La (Dictionarium Annamiticum, Lusitanum et latinum).
- One detail: A. de Rhodes came to Vietnam with G. Maiorica on the same ship in 1624. Maiorica focused on writing catholic books in Nôm, while A. de Rhodes focused on speaking Vietnamese fluently and on creating a European phonetic writing system for Vietnamese to preach directly to the population.
- Thus in the middle of the XVIIth Century, chữ Quốc ngữ was formed as a phonemic script with the European alphabet.
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The French colonial regime and the Nguyễn Dynasty

- After taking Nam Kỳ, the French authorities gradually limited the teaching of chữ Nho, and promoted the use of chữ Quốc ngữ (together with French).

- In 1878, A Decision signed by Governor J. Lafont in Sài Gòn on 4/6/1878 states: “Whereas the use of ‘quocngu’ can only help to assimilate the population into our regime, and by the way, it is a good political measure to institute ‘quocngu’ to be used in official communications”, and therefore, it was decided “From the above-mentioned date [1–1–1882], no appointment made, and no promotion allowed if the officials at the ward, district and prefecture level if they cannot communicate in ‘quocngu’.”
Circular of the French governor

In 1882 French Cochinchinese Governor Le Myre de Vilers signed a *Decision* in Saigon on 1/30/1882, chữ Nho was nullified in Cochinchina to be replaced by the writing system for the Cochinchinese language by a latin script called ‘Quocngu’ and French.”
Agreement between the French & the Nguyễn Dynasty

- The Patenôtre Agreement (6/6/1884) established the French protectorate over the central and northern Vietnam.
- On 12/21/1917 Governor Albert Sarraut promulgated a *General Regulation of the Indochinese Public Instruction* restricting the teaching of chữ Nho in French–Vietnamese schools.
- On 7/14/1919, the Huế Royal Court promulgated a *Royal Decree* to merge the traditional Confucian learning into the French–Indigenous educational system, consistent with the Regulation by Governor Albert Sarraut.
- Thus, the Hướng examination in the north occurred in Nam Định in 1915, and the Hội examination in Huế in 1918 were the last Confucian examinations in Vietnam.
The demise of Hán Nôm?

- From then on, chữ Hán did not enjoy a dominant state status, and was replaced by chữ Quốc ngữ and French. Nevertheless, Hán literature was not absent from the French–Vietnamese protectorate schools and the learning of chữ Hán (and chữ Nôm) continued to occur in private homes, esp. in families with a Confucian tradition.

- Many intellectuals at that time were not only well versed in Quốc ngữ and French, but also well imbued with a Hán Nôm cultural foundation from the family and national tradition.

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Quốc ngữ and patriotic movements

- Chữ Quốc ngữ was further institutionalized at the beginning of the XXth Century with totally different goals. The patriotic movements against the French had significant contributions.

- The Động Kinh Nghĩa Thục Movement: While still using chữ Nôm and chữ Hán, the Confucian elders highlighted the usefulness of chữ Quốc ngữ in the enlightenment of the population, calling on every one to learn chữ Quốc ngữ, because “Chữ Quốc ngữ is the soul of the country”.

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Before and right after the August Revolution in 1945, there were a series of campaigns, such as “Eradication of illiteracy” (i.e. in chữ Quốc ngữ), “Eradication of Hunger” and “Eradication of Foreign Aggressors” called by President Hồ Chí Minh. The patriotic intellectuals joined to “spread literacy in quốc ngữ” [truyền bá quốc ngữ] among the poor and working population.
The rise of quốc ngữ

- Thus, not only the French colonialists, but also the patriotic intellectuals and a large section of the population in Vietnam realized the convenience of chữ Quốc ngữ for their use and their works.

- In other words, chữ Quốc ngữ has won its official status as the national writing system of Vietnam since the beginning of the XXth Century, not because of the power of any governmental decision or regulation, but because of the natural/objective selection of the contemporary historical process in Vietnam.
Characteristics of the 3 scripts

- **Ideographic and phonographic representation**
- Both Hán and Nôm are syllabo-morphemic writing systems: each ideogram is written in a square representing sound and/or meaning of a syllabo-morphemic unit for two monosyllabic languages: Hán and Vietnamese.

- The phonetic expressiveness of Nôm is far better than that of chữ Hán. On the other hand, the semantic expressiveness of chữ Nôm is less compared to that of chữ Hán. Both of these Nôm abilities are built on the graph, meaning and sound (Hán Việt) elements of chữ Hán.
Characteristics of quốc ngữ

- Chữ Quốc ngữ is a phonemic script composed of Latin letters (characters) of the alphabet in a left-to-right directed path. The sound is arranged phonemically by the letters modelling the European writing systems, but with its own composition patterns.

- Chữ Quốc ngữ does not have an ability to represent meaning (similar to the European scripts). However, in some cases the spelling can differentiate meanings of homophones, e.g. da vs. gia, dü vs. giử,...
Inheritance

- Chữ Nôm was formed and composed in the manner of chữ Hán. A Nôm text has a high frequency of Hán ideograms: either from borrowing of Hán words, or to record the sounds of Vietnamese words. Thus to read a Nôm text, one needs to know a certain number of Hán ideograms with Hán Việt pronunciation.

- Chữ Quốc ngữ was formed and composed in the manner of the phonemic European scripts. A quốc ngữ text cannot create Nôm or Hán ideograms. Thus one does not need to know Hán or Nôm to learn chữ Quốc ngữ.
The similarity

The only similarity between chữ Nôm and chữ quốc ngữ is: chữ quốc ngữ does not mechanically copy the European writing systems, which adjoin polysyllabic words together into continuous strings. It instead inherits the monosyllabicity of chữ Hán and chữ Nôm: each syllable is written in a syllabo–morphemic square.
Today, when chữ Quốc ngữ enjoys the “dominant” and popular position, it does not mean that chữ Nôm (and chữ Hán) – the national traditional script, has been “eradicated” in the Vietnamese soil.

Chữ “Hán Nôm” continues to exist as a traditional cultural heritage, and when needed, they were used in its appropriate role. Because script is not just a communication tool, rather, the longer its history of existence, the more it became a carrier of the traditional culture of the people who own it.
Concerns over the fate of chữ Hán and chữ Nôm

- Right after the ban of chữ Hán and Confucian teachings by the French protectorate regime with the agreement of the Nguyễn feudal regime in 1919, many intellectuals showed their concerns about the fate of chữ Hán (and chữ Nôm) in the Vietnamese cultural life. Few people rejected Hán education, however the majority felt that the country:
  - must eliminate career oriented education geared towards memorization and examinations.
  - must retain and develop a knowledge education of the Chinese culture which was in contact with the Vietnamese culture for centuries, an education that is part and parcel with the formation and development of the Vietnamese culture.
A cultural heritage element

Chữ Hán and chữ Nôm had truly been an integral part of the cultural life of the Vietnamese people, a fact that chữ Quốc ngữ or a European script can never achieve. For example, at the end of 1919, *Journal Nam Phong* printed an opinion of Mr. Phạm Huy Hổ, saying “the deep roots of chữ Hán in our people can never be disentangled” and that “the altars of the village gods, ancestral deities, procession prose of worship and reports, religious prayers, texts and charms all in chữ Nho, who dare think of changing the text direction from vertical to horizontal, or turning the heaven reports into abcd?” [*Journal Nam Phong*, no. 29 (11–1919): 418–419].
The living strength of Nôm

At the beginning of the XXth Century, after Confucian teachings were disbanded, many Hán–Nôm works were published together with chữ quốc ngữ, sometimes Nôm and Quốc ngữ side by side, sometimes in three scripts. The books were usually in folk poetry and folk songs, or on Catholic and Buddhist and even Taoist topics. For example, Taoist Văn Xương đề quan khuyên hiếu văn [Advices on piety] printed from woodblocks at Liên Phái Temple (Hà Nội) in the lunar year Nhâm Thân under Emperor Bảo Đại (1932). Each page is divided into three parts: Hán on top, Nôm in the middle and quốc ngữ on the bottom of the page.
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A marriage licence

Even after the August Revolution, we still find cases where chữ Nôm was used together with chữ quốc ngữ, even in administrative records, e.g. the marriage license  Giấy khai gia thú
結開嫁証 of Mr. Nguyễn Cơ Thạch (Phạm Văn Cựong – 24) and Ms. Phan Thị Phúc (18) in 1946 under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
A marriage license of 1946.

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A marriage license of 1946

- Tên, họ, tuổi và chổ ở người chồng
- Tên, họ, tuổi và chổ ở người vợ
- Vợ cả hay vợ thứ máy
- Tên, họ, tuổi, nghề-nghề nghiệp và chổ ở bố mẹ chồng hay người đứng thay.
- Còn sống hay chết
- Vợ chồng có khai nhận con hoang làm con chính không

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Nôm stele erected in 1976

- At Linh Trường Temple 廚靈長 (with a Nôm name, Mỗ Lào 廚慕牢), Yên Mô Ward, town of Hà Đông, carved on January 26, 1976. The author of the Nôm text on the stele is Tuệ Kiểm 慧劍, of the buddhist temple congregation, with the calligraphy of Vư Quốc Bằng 武國憑.
Nôm stele at the Mỗ Lao Temple (1976)

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The text of Mỗ Lao stele

- The text contains 534 Nôm ideograms, on the subject of history and the scenery at Mỗ Lao Temple, specially praising the head monk at the time, elder monk Đàm Phúc 葚福 who was well known in the recent two wars against aggressors.

- This may not be the latest Nôm stele, because there have been reconstructions of family temples, buddhist temples,... which are in need of Hán Nôm texts, usually Hán (to be “formal” and “learned”) and Nôm (to be “folksy, intimate”), as if nothing was ever changed.
Peppermint soft gum

Chữ Nôm may be developed to be used in the national artistic activities, like stage decoration for tuồng and chèo, subscription in artificial antiques, labels or paintings of historical nature, ... This is a label for peppermint soft gum appeared in Hanoi around 1985–1986 with the two Nôm words Kéo Gôm 粼. Unfortunately this potential is still unrealized in arts.

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A new life

- Every year on the first day at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, we find, not the elder calligraphy artists, Hán Nôm teachers from different universities, or cultural club artists, young and old, displaying their calligraphy in parallel verses in Hán, Nôm and also in quốc ngữ for visitors and tourists.

- Many young ideographic calligraphers, such as the Tiễn vẽ Group, with the slogan “Đến hiện đại tự truyền thông” [Modernity from Tradition].
The contemporary calligraphic art of Lê Quốc Việt (Hà Nội, 2007).
Conclusion

- We may say from the above presentation that: *Hán, Nôm and Quốc ngữ scripts have different dates of appearance and use, different types and script characteristics, different roles and status in the written national cultural heritage, but they also complement each other throughout their functions in the Vietnamese social life.*

- To the intellectuals and general population in Vietnam, quốc ngữ is not the only modern script, nor Nôm the only traditional script, they simply exist at different shades in their spiritual life.