

HÀN ZÌ and HÀN ZÌ Dictionary Compilation in Vietnam: Current Situations and Prospects

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■ Abstract ■

Hànzi(Han script : 汉字) was not only one of the official written characters of the Vietnamese language, but also the basis for the formation of Nom script(a type of Vietnamese people's typography). This article presents some essential issues about current situation and prospects of Hànzi as well as Hànzi dictionary compilation in Vietnam. The author like to propose a project for collaborative compilation of a Han script dictionary on Sino-Korean, Sino-Vietnamese, Sino-Japanese.

[Key words] Han script; Nom script; Hànzi dictionary

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I . Introduction

Hànzi (Han script) was not only one of the official written characters of the Vietnamese language, but also the basis for the formation of Nom script (a type of Vietnamese people's typography). Hànzi not only functioned as a written form but also brought Chinese civilization, culture into Vietnam. Thus, it can be said that Hànzi played an important role not only in

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development of Vietnamese language, but also contributes to the integration of Vietnamese culture into Eastern culture in general and Chinese one in particular.

With such an importance, Vietnamese people learn, use, study Sino language and to serve these tasks, a Hànzì dictionary is an indispensable tool.

This article presents some essential issues about current situation and prospects of Hànzì as well as Hànzì dictionary compilation in Vietnam.

II. Current Situations of Hànzì and Hànzì Dictionary Compilation in Vietnam

1. Current situations of Hànzì in Vietnam

(1) *There are two questions that have not been properly answered about Hànzì in Vietnam so far:*

Question 1: “How long has Hànzì been officially used in Vietnam?”. At present, there are at least two views:

- + The first states that Hànzì came into Vietnam around the end of the third century BC.
- + The second states that Hànzì came into Vietnam between 208-179 BC.

Question 2: “Before Hànzì, had Vietnamese language got other scripts yet?”. There have also been at least two views:

- + The first points out that before Hànzì, ancient Vietnamese people had had their own script writing or primal form of a script, which was kēdǒu script (蝌蚪) “the characters were shaped like tadpoles”.
- + The second shows that Hànzì was the first written form of Vietnamese language.

Our presentation on the above two questions is to emphasize that Hànzì once played a role of an official form of Vietnamese language, which has dated thousands of years.

As mentioned above, Hànzì also played an important role in forming the Nom script.

Nom script(字喃, 𡵓喃, 𡵔喃, 𡵕喃, 𡵖喃, 𡵗喃) was the official form of writing which was created by Vietnamese people, originated from the beginning of Curent Era and flourished in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vietnamese people used Hànzì and Hànzì radical sets (bù shǒu) to create Nom script. In Nom characters, it is clearly seen that there are both Nom characters which were actually Sino ones and Nom characters which were built on the basis of

Sino ones. It is noticeable that quite a large number of Hànzì characters were borrowed to be used as Nom ones, but they are pronounced differently (compared to Sino-Vietnamese sounds) and their meanings are also different, specifically:

- Those which were completely in Hànzì, with meanings from Sino language, with pronunciation from Sino-Vietnamese. For example: 婆 “grandmother”, 翁 “grandfather”, 順利 “favorably”.
- Those which were completely in Hànzì, with meanings from Sino language, with pronunciation from ancient Sino-Vietnamese. For example: 飛 (fly), 房 (room), 務 (season).
- Those which were completely in Hànzì, with meanings from Sino language, with pronunciation from Vietnamese language. For example: 几 (chair), 巾 (towel), 家 (house), 添 (add).
- Those which were completely in Hànzì, with pronunciation from Vietnamese language, with Vietnamese meanings (different from their meanings in Sino language):
 - + taking advantage of the Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese homophones. For example: 卒 (*good as opposite of bad*), 昌 (animal bones-bones), 戈 (yesterday-over).
 - + taking advantage of the Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese near-homophones. For example: 這 (*gió (wind)* [storm] is a near-homophone of *giá (price)*), 舉 (*cửa (door)* is a near-homophone of *củ (elect)*), “night”店 (*đêm (night)* is a near-homophone of *điểm (watch point)*).
- Those which were completely in Hànzì, with Sino language’s meanings, with pronunciation from ancient Sino-Vietnamese. For example: 斧 (*hammer*, its pronunciation in Sino-Vietnamese is *phủ (fủ)*); 膠 (*keo (glue)* its pronunciation in Sino-Vietnamese is *giao (jião)*).
- Those which were created on the basis of Hànzì or its radical sets (bù shǒu). For example: (6), 槐 (smoke), 屾 (moon).

As a generalized view, Vietnamese typography can be divided into three phases with three different types of writing:

- Hànzì : From before Christ to earlier than the tenth century, Han ideograms were used in the same way as Mandarin language in China. From the tenth century, Vietnam was an independent nation, accordingly, Hànzì characters were used by Vietnamese people in a “Vietized” way, and had a different development path away from Mandarin language in China (signified in Hànzì characters with Sino-Viet pronunciation and a development of meanings)

- Nom script survived alongside with Sino one, flourished around the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries and prolonged up to the nineteenth century. Nom script was mainly used to compose literary works, in which “the Tale of Kieu” by Nguyen Du was among the most prominent ones which were written in Nom script(傳翹: the original name was斷腸新聲 “A New Lament for a Broken Heart”(Doan trung tan thanh”). This work has been translated into more than 20 languages in the world and the author Nguyen Du was honored as “Great Man of Culture” by UNESCO in 1965.

Below is one of the verses in the Tale of Kieu written in Nom script:

Nom script	𣎵	辭	勉	埃	𣎵	嗟
In Chinese	百	年	中	尘世	人 类	
	人类在 百年寿 那段时间的 生活					
In English	hundred	year	in	the realm	human	
	As evidenced by centuries of human existence					
In modern Vietnamese (Quoc ngu script)	Trăm năm trong cõi người ta					

Nom script	𠂔	才	𠂔	命	靠	羅	怙	饒
In Chinese	字	才	字	命	恰巧	是	恨	相互
	才 和命 (才能与运命) 这两个字 互相冲突							
In English	script/ word	clever	是cript/ word	destiny	true that	is/are	hate	each other
	Destiny and genius are apt to feud							
In modern Vietnamese (Quoc ngu script)	Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau							

Nom script	𠂔	戈	沒	局	液	桃
In Chinese	经历	过	一	阵	海	桑
	经历一阵沧海桑田 的生活					
In English	experience		one	time/the	sea	strawberry
	Having endured an upheaval					
In modern Vietnamese (Quoc ngu script)	Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu					

Nom script	仍	調	覷	覷	罵	疔	疽	悉
In Chinese	一些	事	见	到	而	疼	痛	心
	为所遇到的事情而感到心疼							
In English	some	events	see		so	pained		heart
	The sights observed must wrench one's heart							
In modern Vietnamese (Quoc ngu script)	Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng							

- Quoc ngu (the National language) script was built on the basis of Latin alphabet and was formed around the beginning of the seventeenth century. At present, Vietnamese is the national language and the national language script is the only official script of Vietnamese language.

It should be added that the above timeline is only considered approximate, as there were interferences between the phases.

(2) Although Hànzì has gone to the “past”, it can not be denied that its imprint is still very deep in Vietnamese language-culture:

As an official script of the state for thousands of years, Hànzì was used to record the court affairs, in administrative documents, in composing poems, in education, in court examinations. Even in the periods of Nom or of parallel existence with Nom, Hànzì was still widely used. Thus, in Vietnam today, there is a huge quantity of works in Sino and Nom scripts, which have had and will have to be “decoded” (translated into Vietnamese) to be accessible to those who do not know Sino and Nom scripts.

With such a long history, Sino and Nom scripts have become a testament to the history of Sino-Vietnamese bilingual-cultural contact, Hànzì characters appear everywhere from the city to the countryside, in pagodas, temples; on altars of ancestors; on gravestones. Vietnamese people regard Hànzì characters with great respect, even “divinize” them, consider them “the words of sages”; see them as a part of spiritual culture. So, now, when building new pagodas, communal house, clan ancestral houses, new houses, a lot of people still prefer to use Hànzì characters on the horizontal lacquered board and parallel sentences. Vietnamese traditional culture of “collecting calligraphic characters”, especially during traditional Vietnamese New Year days, is still in vogue: a lot of Vietnamese people are collecting such calligraphic characters of the words: *happiness*,

wealth, peace, patience, progress,... not in Quoc Ngu script (the national language script), but in Hànzì. Those who collect these characters put faith in the givers (because they do not know Hànzì at all) and honor, take good care of those Hànzì characters that they have collected. Sorcerers write ritual petitions in Hànzì characters; fortune tellers make their divinations in Hànzì characters, etc.

(3) *Han-Vietnamese bilingual-cultural contact has left a large number of Han words in Vietnamese language.*

As far as the history goes, there are four types of words borrowed from Han in Vietnamese: ancient Sino-Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese words, “Vietized” Sino-Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese words pronounced in Han dialect’s way. Among those words, a majority is Sino-Vietnamese because they have a system of specific reading ways which are called Sino-Vietnamese reading ways. With such many variants of reading ways, a Han word can become several Vietnamese words which are synonymous to each other. For example: *mộ, mỗ, mã* (tomb/grave) are lexical variants of the same Han word 墓 but their nuances of meaning are different.

biên (border), *bên* (side), *ven* (edge), *viền* (rim) are lexical variants of the same Han word 边 and they have become synonyms.

chính, chánh (main) are lexical variants of the same Han word 政/正 and they have become synonyms.

However, it is worth noting that since the beginning of national language, the words borrowed from Han have been replaced by words in the national language script. This can be considered a high unification of the Vietnamese script, but it leads to fairly big problems. For example, as a known fact, there is a very widespread phenomenon of different-character-homophones and near-character-homophones in Han-Chinese. When used in Vietnamese, the words borrowed from Han were not written in Hànzì so it is difficult to identify the homonyms. Different Han words have become homonyms in Vietnamese with only one way of writing in the national language script. For example:

While written and read the same in the national script, *kỷ* can be realized in many different Han ideograms: 几 纪已.

While written and read the same in the national script, *liên* can be realized in many different Han ideograms: 连 联 莲 怜 链.

(4) *Because of the aboved-mentioned situation related to Hànzì, in Vietnam, debates are always occurring about the use of Hànzì.*

Typically there are two debates which remain open in terms of resolutions as follows:

First, should Hànzì be taught to school and university students? There are two flows of views on this:

- + The first flow of views focuses on the claim that there is no need to teach Hànzì. The reason is: Vietnamese script does not use Hànzì at all; If Hànzì was taught, it would add another burden to students (because now school students are in knowledge “overload” state).
- + The second flow of views asserts that Hànzì should be taught to students. The reason is: there is a large number of Sino-Vietnamese words in Vietnamese language. Therefore, it is necessary to teach Hànzì for the students to better understand and master Vietnamese language.

If Hànzì was to be taught, then how many which characters should be taught? This question was also posed but it has received no concrete answer so far.

Second, the Buddhist Association of Vietnam recently has implemented a program of surveying and studying the orientation of Buddhist culture in Vietnam. Buddhist language was one of the contents that should have orientation. Regarding the issues of Buddhist language, one was put forward: In the newly constructed pagodas, should their horizontal lacquered board and parallel sentences be written in Han, Nom or Vietnamese script? For the existing pagodas, should their horizontal lacquered board and parallel sentences which were written in Han or Nom script be transformed into Vietnamese script and how?

Such instances of issues are mentioned here to show that Hànzì in Vietnam is still an entire problem.

2. *The situations of Hànzì dictionaries in Vietnam*

Since Han and Nom scripts play such an important role in Vietnamese language, Vietnamese people’s need to learn Han and Nom scripts is indispensable. Accordingly, many Han, Nom script dictionaries have been compiled and published. For instants:

- Some Han script dictionaries: *Three Thousand Ideograms* 三千字, *Five Thousand Ideograms* 五千字, *500 Han Characters* 五百字, *Sino-Vietnamese Simplified Dictionary* 汉越辞典简要,

Dictionary of Sino-Vietnamese Everyday Usage Elements 常用漢越要素辭典, etc.

- Some Nom script dictionaries: *Nom Script Great Dictionary* 大字典喃 (喃字大字典), *Nom Script Dictionary of Citings* 字典喃摘引 | (喃字摘引字典), *Han-Nom Script Dictionary*, *Nom Script Dictionary*, etc.
- Some dictionaries have been compiled in both Han and Nom scripts. For example, the *Five Thousand Ideograms* was only a Hànzì dictionary of 5,000 Han characters with their Sino-Vietnamese ways of reading and their equivalent meanings in Vietnamese at first but then Nom script have been supplemented, and was called *Five Thousand Ideograms Noted in National Language* 五千字譯國語 (1909). This book is introduced as “the best, most complete Han Nom textbook,” *Self-study Interpretation of Songs* 自學解義歌 is regarded as “a Han Nom vocabulary book as well as a self-taught textbook of Han and Nom scripts”.

When the National Language script (Vietnamese people’s script created from Latin characters) began to be used in the seventeenth century, Vietnamese dictionaries were also compiled, such as: Dai Nam National Language’s Vocabulary Dictionary, Dictionary of Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin and later were Vietnamese dictionaries. It is noteworthy that, all Vietnamese dictionaries published before the 50s of the twentieth century were noted in Han and Nom scripts: Han and Nom characters were written right next to the word items. For example: *trời* (*heaven*) 月屨.

We introduce below the compilation of three Han and Nom script dictionaries which are widely used in Vietnam.

(1) *Tam thiên tự* (*Three Thousand Ideograms*) 三千字

The most widely mentioned dictionary of which the value is still intact until today is “Three Thousand Ideograms” 三千字. Many claim that the book was printed in 1831, and its author is Ngo Thi Nham. At first the book was called 自學纂要. Later, a person named Doan Trung Con reprinted it and from then on whenever this dictionary is mentioned, his name is mentioned.

This book includes 3,000 basic Han ideograms. Its contents include Han characters, Sino-Vietnamese sounds and Vietnamese meanings. For example: 天 *thiên*: *trời* (*heaven*); 地 *địa*: *đất* (*land*). It should be emphasized that in this dictionary all the Sino-Vietnamese sounds of 3,000 Han characters are combined in a rhymed poem so it is very fast and easy to learn by heart and memorize. For example:

舉 *cử*: cất (put away)

存 *tồn*: còn (exist)

子 *tử*: con (child)

孫 *tôn*: cháu (grandchild)

六 <i>lục</i> : <u>sáu</u> (six)	三 <i>tam</i> : <u>ba</u> (three)
家 <i>gia</i> : nh <u>à</u> (family)	國 <i>quốc</i> : n <u>ước</u> (nation)
前 <i>tiền</i> : tr <u>ước</u> (front)	後 <i>hậu</i> : s <u>au</u> (back)
牛 <i>ngưu</i> : tr <u>âu</u> (buffalo)	馬 <i>mã</i> : ng <u>ựa</u> (horse)
距 <i>cự</i> : c <u>ựa</u> (heel)	牙 <i>nha</i> : r <u>ăng</u> (tooth)
無 <i>vô</i> : ch <u>ẳng</u> (no, do not have)	有 <i>hữu</i> : c <u>ó</u> (yes, have)
犬 <i>khuyển</i> : ch <u>ó</u> (dog)	羊 <i>dương</i> : d <u>ê</u> (goat)
...	

(2) Dictionary of Sino-Vietnamese Everyday Usage Elements 常用汉越要素辞典

This dictionary was compiled and published in 1992 by 4 authors (I am one of these four). The dictionary was sponsored by Toyota Foundation.

The book consists of about 4,000 single-syllable Vietnamese words borrowed from Han language. Each of these Sino-Vietnamese elements has a Han character next to it. The content of each entry includes its Vietnamese script (a Sino-Vietnamese sound), a Han character and that element's meaning: the meaning borrowed from Han language, the meaning developed in Vietnamese; meaning used as a word, meaning used only as a word-forming element; combinations in which the element participates as a constituent unit. For example:

ẢO (Fantasy) 幻

See HUYỀN (ILLUSORY). I. adj. 1. *Like the real but is not real.* Ảo ảnh, ảo ờ ảng, ảo giác, ảo huyền, ảo tưởng, ảo vọng // Mơ ảo // 2. (V.). *Described with an imaginary number.* Vòng tròn ảo. Đường thẳng ảo. Không gian ảo // II. *Chimerical, unrealistic.* Ảo mộng // Diễm ảo, huyền ảo, huyền ảo, hư ảo, kì ảo, mộng ảo // III. *Transformed, make changes.* Ảo hóa, ảo thuật // Biến ảo //

*Clarification:

In Vietnamese, there are two ways to read the character 幻: ẢO, HUYỀN.; [2, (V)]: This meaning is only in Vietnamese. Symbols I,II: Different in word classifications.

(3) Nom Script Dictionary 辞典字喃

This is the largest and most elaborate Nom script dictionary compiled by Nguyen Quang Hong, completed and published in 2013. The dictionary is 2,213 pages thick (sized 14x16 cm). The most

prominent point of this dictionary is: In each entry there are variants of the Nom script for a single-syllable Sino-Vietnamese word. For example: 字 孛孛孛孛孛; Each meaning is supported by examples taken from classical literary works.

Together with compiling vocabulary dictionaries/character dictionaries, some Chinese works on Han script have been translated for content searching and Hànzì learning. For example, the book *Three-Character Classic/Trimetric Classic* (by Wang Yinglin 王應麟; 1223~296): Han characters and Sino-Vietnamese sounds. Similar to *Three Thousand Ideograms*, all the sentences in Sino-Vietnamese are rhymed to one another so it is easy to learn and memorize. For example:

人之初, 性本善

Nhân chi sơ; Tính bản thiện.

(Man's nature at birth is good)

性相近, 習相遠

Tính tương cận; Tập tương viễn.

By nature, humans are similar; through habitual conduct, they diverge widely)

苟不教, 性乃遷

Cẩu bất giáo; Tính nãi thiên.

(If foolishly there is no teaching, the nature will deteriorate)

教之道, 貴以專

Giáo chi đạo; Quý dĩ chuyên

(The right way in teaching, is to attach the utmost importance in thoroughness)

III. Some Issues about Prospects of Hànzì and Hànzì Dictionary Compilation in Vietnam

1. *As presented above, Hànzì and Nom scripts are part of Vietnamese typography*

A series of Vietnam's cultural properties are written in Hànzì characters and Nom scripts. In terms of language items, a large number, nearly 70%, of Vietnamese vocabulary comes from the Mandarin language. As a foreign language, Mandarin is always the second one, after English. From these facts, we would like to emphasize that despite different perspectives, the role of Hànzì and the need to know Hànzì characters in Vietnam are undeniable.

As reality in Vietnam has shown, dictionaries in Vietnam in general, such as "Vietnamese language dictionary", Vietnamese-foreign language bilingual dictionary (English-Vietnamese dictionary,

Russian-Vietnamese dictionary, French-Vietnamese dictionary, Korean-Vietnamese dictionary, etc.) are still paper-based, but not “digitized”. Among those dictionaries, Sino-Vietnamese bilingual ones in general, and Hànzì ones in particular are also in the same status.

Recently, however, some good signals have appeared in the way that several dictionaries have been published online in PDF format, including such Hànzì dictionaries as: the Sino-Vietnamese Simplified Dictionary, Tam Thien Tu (Three Thousand Ideograms). Some other Nom script dictionaries and documents have also posted. For example: 古籍文献典藏数位化计划. It seems that copyrights or more specifically “copyright maintaining” is still a problem. We hope to gain related experience from this workshop.

2. At the same time, we would also like to propose a project for collaborative compilation of a Han script dictionary on Sino-Korean, Sino-Vietnamese, Sino-Japanese.

Our ideas are as follows.

- 1) In Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese languages, a number of Hànzì units are shared (written in one Hànzì character. Therefore, choose a common quantity of these units (about 3,000 units).
- 2) Indicate their different pronunciation in each language.
- 3) Indicate their meaning and usage in each language.

This can be seen as a dictionary contrasting Hànzì units (Hànzì characters) in modern Han language with those in Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese languages.

If this dictionary is compiled successfully, it will be useful in a lot of ways: it helps those who learn their native languages, other languages as foreign languages. Furthermore, through similarities and differences in phonetics, semantics, usage, etc., it is feasible to study each ethnicity’s linguistic-cultural issues and their way of thinking.

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 2018년 4월 2일까지 심사위원이 심사하고,
 2018년 4월 11일에 편집위원회에서 게재가 결정되었음.

■ 要約 ■

越南汉字使用与汉字辞书编纂的现状与展望

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在越南汉字不仅曾经是越南语正式文字而且还是越南喃字形成的基本组成单位。越南一系列文化遗产都被汉字或喃字所记录。汉字在越南语言文字发展史上占有极为重要的地位，同时在越南接受包括中华文化在内的东方文化过程中起着举足轻重的作用。就因为这样，越南人由古至今一直没有放弃汉字学习、汉字使用与汉字研究等工作。汉字辞书也因此而成为越南语言文化研究中必不可少的工具书。

在越南编纂的越南语辞典以及英-越词典、俄-越词典、法-越词典、汉-越词典等外-越词典主要是纸制版的。汉字辞书的也不例外。最近这方面也出现一些可喜的情况。在越南有一部分辞典以PDF形式上网了，其中也有汉字、喃字辞书。

【關鍵詞】 漢字，越南喃字，漢字辭典

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