Chữ nôm or the former Vietnamese script
and its past Contributions
to Vietnamese literature

字喃と昔の越南文学に対する字喃の貢献

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Chữ nôm (Chữ 'script,' and nôm < nam 'south, Vietnamese') is the name given by the Vietnamese to one of their two former systems of writing created by the modification of the Chinese characters. It was called so, as opposed both to Chữ Hán or the Han Chinese script 1) and to Chữ Nho or the script of Vietnamese confucianist scholars. In the latter connotation, it means the demotic or vulgar script in traditional Vietnam.2)

The date of its invention has not been so far established beyond controversy. According to Ngô Thị Nhâm "our National language was most used from Thuyên." 3) Thuyên was Nguyễn Thuyên 阮詠, a scholar who lived at the end of the thirteenth century, under the Trần 陳 dynasty. "He received his doctorate under the reign of Emperor Trần Thái Tông 陳太宗 (1225-1257). In the fall of 1282, while holding the post of Minister of Justice, he was commissioned by Emperor Trần Nhân Tông 陳仁宗 to write a message to a crocodile which had come to the Red River. After his writing drove the animal away, the emperor allowed him to change his family name from Nguyễn 阮 to Hàn 韓, because a similar incident had occurred before in China to the poet-scholar Hàn Yu 韓愈 (768-824). The anecdote was related in Khâm định Việt-sũ Thông-giâm Cương-mục 欽定越史通鑑綱目, 7.26a 4) according to which, Hàn Thuyên 韓詠 was skilled in writing Shih fu 詩賦, and many people took model after him.5)

On the basis of these facts, Hàn Thuyên was claimed to be the inventor of Chữ nôm. Such was the opinion of P. Pelliot 6) and H. Maspero. The latter who shared P. Pelliot's views, also mentioned a stele discovered in Hồ Thành sơn 護城山, Ninh Bình province 寧平省, North Vietnam.7) This stele bore an inscription dating from the year 1343 and on which could be read twenty Vietnamese village and hamlet names in Chữ nôm.

The above hypothesis has not been accepted without reserve by other scholars. Nguyễn văn Tố presumed that Chữ nôm had probably existed as early as at the end of the eighth century when the title of Bố Cai Đại Vương 布蓋大王 (Father and mother of the people) was given by his successor and his subjects to Phương Hưng 馮興, who, in 791, overthrew the then Chinese governor and seized upon the Protectorate of Annam.8) Such was also the opinion of Dương Quảng Hàm in his Short history of Vietnamese literature.9) A third hypothesis was advanced in 1932 by another Vietnamese scholar, Sở Cuông, who tried to prove that Chữ nôm dated back from Shih-Hsieh 師 여 (187-226 A.D.). His arguments rested mainly on a statement by a Vietnamese confucianist scholar under the reign of Emperor Tự Đức 嗣德, known under the name of Nguyễn văn San 阮文珊 and the pseudonym of Văn Ðại cu-sĩ 文多居士. In his book entitled Đại-Nam Quốc-.large

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大南國話, this scholar stated that Shih Wang 師王, was the first to try translating Chinese Classics into Vietnamese by using the Chinese characters as phonetic symbols to
transcribe Vietnamese native words. Among the difficulties allegedly encountered by Shih Hsieh in his attempts, he quoted two examples: *sui chiu* 候鳴, (the osprey) and *yang táo* 楊桃, (tha carambola or willow peach), to which he did not know what kind of bird and what kind of fruit might correspond in Vietnamese. Sở Cuồng subscribed to Văn-Da cu-siê’s opinion, although he regretted that this author did not give any references to his statement. In support of it, he put forward the following arguments:

1) At the time of Shih Hsieh, when the first Vietnamese made Chinese studies, they could understand only through the Vietnamese language and their Chinese teachers must have used such Chinese characters as having sounds similar to the Vietnamese words to teach the Vietnamese how to read some Chinese characters. On the other hand, as the Chinese sounds and symbols could not transcribe all the Vietnamese native words, the then Vietnamese students must have tried to fill the vacancies by combining together various components of the Chinese characters to form new characters on the basis of such principles of Chinese writing as Hsiai shêng 諦聲, chiah chieh 假借, and hui-i 會意. It is in this way that Chữ nôm was likely to have been devised.

2) Furthermore, Shih Hsieh was a native of Kuang-Hsin 廣信, where, according to the Ling wai tai ta 僑外代答, by Chu ch’u Fei 朱去非, under the Sung 宋, there had existed from the remotest times, a local script very similar to the Vietnamese Chữ nôm. For instances, 細 (= small) and 宿 (= quiet).

3) The two Vietnamese Bố, father and Cái, mother as found in the posthumous title of Bố-Cái Đại-Vương bestowed upon Phùng-Hiئت were historically the earliest evidences for the use of Chữ nôm in the eighth century. Later, under the Đinh 丁, Đại Cổ Việt 大瞿越, the official name of the then Vietnam included also a nôm character 瞿. Under the Trần 陳, there was a very common use of Chữ nôm as evidenced by the practice of the then Court Minister called Hành Khiể 行逵, who used to annotate royal decrees with Chữ nôm so as to make them better understood by the people.10)

All the views as just outlined above have each some good points. However, anyone is authoritative enough to be adopted as conclusive on the date of the invention of Chữ nôm.

In fact, Chữ nôm, far from being devised by an individual sometimes in Vietnamese history, should be rather considered as the product of many centuries of patient and obscure elaboration. Such is the most reasonable conclusion mostly reached by scholars quite recently dealing with research on Chữ nôm.

As previously defined, Chữ nôm consisted essentially of Vietnamese adaptation of borrowed Chinese characters. Accordingly, its invention could be realized only at a stage when the knowledge of Chinese characters had been enough wide-spread in Vietnam.

The first Vietnamese who commanded the use of Chinese characters were a few entirely sinicized intellectuals. Such was the case with Lý-Tiền 李逵, Lý Cẩm 李琴, Trưởng Trọng 張重 (second century A.D.). Later, some of these intellectuals came to make poeties and prosa poetries in Chinese after the Chinese models. Such was the case with Phùng Đại Tri 馮載之 whose poetic compostion was lauded by the Chinese emperor Kao Tsu 高祖 of T'ang 唐 (618-626), Khương Công Phú 姜公輔 a prosa-poetry of whom can still be found in Chinese anthologies.11)

During the period from the Han to the T'ang some Chữ nôm patterns might have been devised to represent some native words especially the names of places, persons and official titles in Vietnam. Only a few remains of these attempts have subsisted so far.
Such are Bồ and Cái transcribed by two Chinese characters whose Vietnamese reading is similar to the sounds of the two corresponding Vietnamese native words.

From the tenth century to the thirteenth century, although the Vietnamese had gained back their national independence from China, the Chinese script always enjoyed an exclusive privilege strengthened by the system of civil service examination patterned after the Chinese system. For that reason, Vietnamese intellectuals continued to express their thoughts and feelings in Chinese characters. Not only poetries, prosa-poetries and historical records but also royal edicts, memorials to the Kings, laws, and regulations etc... were written in Chinese characters. However, all of these Vietnamese writings in the Chinese script might have been not the same as those of the first Vietnamese intellectuals mentioned above. The form was Chinese but the substance was Vietnamese. In another respect, various genres of Chinese literature in which Vietnamese writers tried their hands were definitive acquisitions for the forthcoming Vietnamese literature in chữ nôm. As far as the nôm script is especially concerned, the official use of the two nôm characters Bồ and Cái late in the eighth century and that of the nôm character Cồ in the tenth century are fair indications that some patterns of chữ nôm were devised by the Vietnamese at the latest from the eighth to the tenth century. Besides such nôm characters as Bồ, Cái, Cồ, others might have been created about at the same periods both by the phonetic and by the semantic use of Chinese characters. For example, Vietnamese native words môt (one), and ta (I, we) are respectively transcribed by Chinese characters 没 and 厝 with their phonetic reading. Vietnamese native words, cây, cây, ruộng, bèp are respectively transcribed by Chinese characters 耕, 稼, 田, and 灼 with their semantic reading. As to such other more refined patterns of chữ nôm as those coined on the basis of the principles of Chinese writing hui-i and hsieh-shêng, they must have been invented only later, probably after the Sino-Vietnamese had taken a definitive shape.

To summarize, chữ nôm was not invented overnight to be put at the disposal of Hàn Thuyên for writing poetry and prosa poetry but its formation process must have stretched over many centuries by starting at the latest from the eighth century before reaching a certain degree of completion under the Trần陈. It was later improved successively by its users from the Lê黎, to the Nguyễn阮 before attaining to a relative fixity in such a popular long narrative poems as Kim Vân Kiều 金雲嬋 and Lục Văn Tiên 陸雲儂 etc...

As far as can be judged from these master-pieces of Vietnamese literature in chữ nôm, this script is not so fanciful and irrational as some of its critics have claimed. In fact, it was governed by rather precise and even rigid rules.

In our previous study on Foreign borrowings in Vietnamese we have given some examples of its main patterns. We will take advantage of this opportunity to describe its structure as fully as we could with materials we have access to.

As rightly observed by Prof. Rokurō Konō, the Vietnamese chữ nôm shows striking similarities to the Japanese Kana and the Japanese Kokuji 国字. Following are some examples given by him. In the Kojiki 古事記, the phonetic and semantic readings of Chinese characters which also are made use of in chữ nôm are both employed by its compiler Ōno Yasumaro. Thus the phonetic representation is used in such proper names as 須佐 for/susa/of 速須佐之男命, 須賀 for/suga/of 須賀宮. This phonetic method is completely adopted in the famous song beginning with "yakumo tatu..." The phonetic representation is not a dominant current except in proper names and songs. Even in
proper names the phonetic method is not always adopted. 速須佐之男 (hayasusanowo) is represented by the semantic method except 須佐 /susa/, which is also prevalent in such examples as in 足名椎 (Asinaduti) 稻田宮主 (Inada-no Miyanusi) etc. Besides the two examples mentioned above, Prof. Rokurô Konô quoted also the instances 今 {ima, 今}, 初 {fazime, 今}, 音 {kumo, 歌}, 叫 {uta, 神}, 首 {kubi}. The hui-i characters newly created are found both in Japan and Vietnam, e.g. 肆, giỏi is created by compounding the character 天 and 上. The characters invented in Japan, the so-called Kokuji 國字 (National character) e.g. 神 (sasaki), 塘 (tauge), 杜 (mori) etc... are the developments of the hui-i characters in the same way as the nôm character 肆, giỏi.

Despite all these apparent similarities, in view of the differences between the Japanese and the Vietnamese languages as to their phonetic system and the historical background of the Chinese writing influences, the structure of Chữ nôm preserved its distinctive originality, as clearly shown hereafter by its various formation patterns.

Chinese characters borrowed by Chữ nôm to represent a single morpheme in Vietnamese may be used singly or in combination.

I. A single Chinese character is used to represent

1) a Vietnamese morpheme of Chinese origin, which has exactly the Sino-Vietnamese reading and the meaning of the corresponding Chinese character. Ex. 头 dâu (head), 袖 áo (robe, tunic).

2) a Vietnamese morpheme of Chinese origin which has preserved the meaning of the corresponding Chinese character but whose Vietnamese reading has been slightly different from the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the corresponding Chinese character. Ex. Chinese character 法, Sino-Vietnamese reading: pháp is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme phép (law, rule). Chinese character 旗, Sino-Vietnamese reading kỳ is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme cờ (flag). Chinese character 橋, Sino-Vietnamese reading: kiều is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme cầu (bridge).

3) a Vietnamese morpheme probably of Chinese origin, whose meaning is the same as that of the corresponding Chinese character but whose reading compared to the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the Chinese character has been strongly altered. Ex. Chinese character 捲, Sino-Vietnamese reading: quayen is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme cuốn (to roll). Chinese character 本, Sino-Vietnamese reading bản, bồn is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme vốn (capital, funds).

4) a Vietnamese morpheme of the same meaning as the corresponding Chinese character but whose reading is quite different from the Sino-Vietnamese reading of it. Ex. 稽, Sino-Vietnamese reading: dịch, is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme việc (work, job, occupation).

5) a Vietnamese morpheme whose reading is the same as of similar to the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the corresponding Chinese character but whose meaning is completely different. Ex. Chinese character 戈, Sino-Vietnamese reading: quả (lance, spear) is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme qua (to pass by). Chinese character 沒, Sino-Vietnamese reading:موت (to disappear under water, to be submerged) is used to represent Vietnamese morpheme một (one). In these two examples, the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the Chinese character is exactly the same as the reading of the Vietnamese morpheme represented. Ex. Chinese character 朱, Sino-Vietnamese reading chu (red, vermilion) is used to represent the Vietnamese morpheme cho (to give). Chinese character 篮, Sino-Vietnamese reading ky or cơ (crible, sieve) is used to represent
Vietnamese morpheme *mia* (over there, that). In the last two examples, the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the Chinese character is almost similar to the reading of the Vietnamese morpheme represented.

Such *Chữ nôm* as included in the second, third, fourth and fifth categories above by *Đặng Quang Hán* were considered by Hồ Ngọc Can as belonging to the same category of *Chữ nôm* represented by Chinese characters whose Sino-Vietnamese reading offers sound similarities with their Vietnamese reading. There are, according to the latter, several cases of these sound similarities as follows:

1) Sound similarities between the Sino-Vietnamese reading of a Chinese character and the reading of one or several Vietnamese morphemes except for the initial consonant. Ex. Chinese character 板, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *bạn* may represent *phản* in Nôm.
2) Sound similarities only as the final syllable or only as the vowel or the vowel cluster before the final consonant. Ex. 合, may be read *hợp, hap, hiệp or hợp*.
3) Sometimes, the Sino-Vietnamese reading of the Chinese character used to represent a Vietnamese morpheme differs from the latter both by the initial consonant and the final syllable. Ex. 職, Sino-Vietnamese: *chức* may also represent, in Nôm, *chắc* or *giắc*.
4) Sound similarities considered as such despite the difference of tones. Ex. 今, Sino-Vietnamese *ngâm* is also used to represent, in Nôm, *ngâm, ngám* or *ngầm*.

To understand the above and other similar examples of *Chữ nôm*, we should know which initial consonants, which vowels or vowel clusters, which final syllables in the Sino-Vietnamese word corresponding to a Chinese character and in the Vietnamese morpheme to be represented in Nôm used to be considered as interchangeable.

A) Initial consonants considered as interchangeable for representation in Nôm.
   a) Initial consonants b-, ph-, v-. Ex. 木, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *bỗ* which represents in Nôm such Vietnamese morphemes as *bóc* and *bỗ* may also represent *vóc*; 板, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *bạn* may also represent in Nôm *phàn, bàn or vân*.
   b) Initial consonants c-, k-, gh-, qu- used to be interchangeable. Ex. 等, Sino-Vietnamese reading *cáp* may also represent, in Nôm, *capellido* or *kip*; 群, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *quần* may also represent *cọn* in Nôm.
   c) Initial consonants d-, t-, v- used to be interchangeable. Ex. 性, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *tính* or *tánh* may also represent *dính* in Nôm; 停, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *dính* may also represent, in Nôm, *dành* or *đành*.
   d) Initial consonants ch-, gi- and less frequently tr-, x- used to be interchangeable. Ex. 軌, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *cháp* may also represent, in Nôm, *chup, giüp, xúp, or xop*.
   e) Initial consonants l-, r-, tr- used to be interchangeable. Ex. 律, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *luật* may also represent, in Nôm, *lọt, luật, lờ*, or *rótr*.

B) Syllables considered as interchangeable for representation in *Chữ nôm*.
   a) *ác, ác, ác, ức, ức* used to be interchangeable. Ex. 木, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *bóc* may also represent, in Nôm, *bắc, buóc* or *bước*.
   b) *ach, ạch, iệc, ịch* used to be interchangeable. Ex. 職, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *dịch* may also represent *việc* in Nôm; 赤, Sino-Vietnamese reading: *xích* may also represent, in Nôm, *xếch* or *xèch*. 
c) ai, ay, ây, oai, oay, uây, oi, ôi, uôi, uôi, ui, ụi, e, ê, i, ia and sometimes ua are interchangeable. Ex. 支, Sino-Vietnamese reading: chi may also represent chia in Nôm; 皮, Sino-Vietnamese reading: bi may also represent, in Nôm, bè or vi ra.
d) âm, âm, âm, âm, âm, âm, âm, âm, um, um, um used to be interchangeable. Ex. 兆, Sino-Vietnamese reading: dam may also represent, in Nôm, dâm, dâm or đóm.
e) an, án, ân, en, ên, ụn, uên, in, uân, on, ọn, um, un, un, uón used to be interchangeable. Ex. 郊, Sino-Vietnamese reading: lâm was also used to represent lân in Nôm.19)
f) ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng, ơng were interchangeable. Ex. 登, Sino-Vietnamese reading: dâng was also used to represent, in Nôm, dãng or chăng.
g) ông, ông, ông and sometimes ơng were interchangeable. Ex. 用, Sino-Vietnamese reading: dung was also used to represent, in Nôm, dòng, dường.
h) anh, ênh, inh, iêng, ang, ông, ông, ông used to be interchangeable. Ex. 生, Sino-Vietnamese reading: sinh or sanh was also used to represent siêng in Nôm.
i) ao, au, âu, o, ơ, ơ, ur, ura, ura used to be interchangeable. Ex. 俘, Sino-Vietnamese reading: lao was also used as hsiat-shêng to represent lao, lau, trao or trau.
j) ap, âp, âp, ep, èp, iêp, ip, op, ơp, op, up, up, uop were interchangeable. Ex. 及, Sino-Vietnamese reading: cüp was also used to represent, in Nôm, gáp, gáp or kıp.
k) ct, ât, ât, ọt, ot, ọt, ut, ut, ut, ọt, ọt, it were interchangeable. Ex. 乙, Sino-Vietnamese reading: ât was also used to represent in Nôm, ât, ọt or it.
l) et, ẹt, iêt, it were interchangeable. Ex. 歌, Sino-Vietnamese reading: hiêt was also used to represent in Nôm hêt or hit.

N.B. From the above examples, we see that several chữ nôm were made up by changing not only initial consonants, but also final syllables and sometimes even tones. Ex. 及 could be read cüp, gáp, kıp or kıp; 诃 could be read ngâm, ngâm or gâm.

II. Chinese characters used in combination for representation in chữ nôm.

Whenever a single Chinese character could not represent a chữ nôm with its Sino-Vietnamese reading or sound similarities of its Sino-Vietnamese reading, two Chinese characters were used, the one as signific, the other as phonetic. The choice of the Chinese character to be used as phonetic was based upon the twelve rules given above by Hồ Ngọc Cẩn about sound similarities. As to the signific, it used to be represented either by a Chinese character or a Chinese radical (部首). Ex. Nôm character 三十 (ba, three) is made up of the phonetic (read ba) and the signific 三 meaning three. Nôm character 手 (tay, hand) is made up of the signific 手 (hand) and the phonetic 手 (read tay). Nôm character 三千 (trăm, hundred) is made up of the signific 一千 (hundred) and the phonetic 林 (read lâm). Nôm character 去 (ra, to go out) is made up of the phonetic 去 (read la) and the signific 去 (to go out). These examples show that the signific does not have a fixed position. In principle, it is placed on the left hand side. Such is the case with the above second example. However, for reason of esthetics, the signific may change its position. Thus it is placed on the right side in the first example, on the top in the third one and at the bottom in the fourth one. In this last one, always for the same reason, it may also be placed on the right side as follows 去. In case it is constituted by one of the 214 radicals
of the Chinese lexicon, its position is the same as would have normally a radical in the
Chinese character concerned. Ex. Nôm character 𠬊 nôi (to speak) where the radical 口 is
on the left side, Nôm character 汫 quạ (raven, crow) where the radical 飞 is on the
right side, Nôm character 𠬆 nong (flat, large winowing basket) where the radical 丿 is
on the top, Nôm character 𠬇 lòng (entrails, heart) where the radical 丶 is at the bottom.21)
Exceptionally, in a few Chữ nôm made up of two Chinese characters used in
combination, both of their components may indicate the meaning. We then have a pure
Chữ nôm. Thus Vietnamese morpheme giatan or trôi (sky, heaven) is represented by the
Chữ nôm 𠬊, itself a combination of two Chinese characters 𠬊 and 上. There is not
even a most remote hint on pronunciation.22) Some Chữ nôm may also consist of a
signific from Chữ Nho or Chinese character with a Sino-Vietnamese reading and a
phonetic compound from Chữ nôm. Thus Vietnamese morpheme lôi (word, speech,
statement) is represented in Nôm by the complicated grapheme 𠬊 which consists of the
Chinese radical 口 used as signific and of Chữ nôm 𠬊 (giatan or trôi) used as phonetic.23)
With these few exceptions, Chữ nôm of this second type are made up of signific and a
phonetic, both being taken from Chinese characters. 24) However some texts in Chữ nôm
especially those of Catholic missionaries and those reproduced by copyists reveal a
tendency to retain only the phonetic by suppression the signific. Here is an example
quoted by Hồ Ngọc Cân. The phrase: Có xua nay (There exists before and now) was
represented in Nôm by Catholic missionaries as follows: 国初尼 while it would have
been transcribed normally in Nôm as follows: 億題 according to Hồ Ngọc Cân or as
follows: 靳題 according to Prof. Nguyễn Quang Xây and Prof. Vũ Văn Kính.25) This
simplification of Chữ nôm may be generally accounted for by the necessity for the
copyists of Nôm texts to save time. According to Dương Quảng Hàm, the same
motivation might have underlain some specifically Vietnamese abbreviated forms of
Chinese characters used for representation in Chữ nôm. Ex. Vietnamese morpheme làm
(to do) is represented in Nôm by 𠬊, abbreviated form of Chinese character 吕.
Vietnamese morpheme là (to be) is represented in Nôm by 𠬊, abbreviated form of
Chinese character 吕. 26)

In addition to the above types of Chữ nôm, namely that of Chữ nôm transcribed by a
single Chinese character and that of Chữ nôm transcribed by a combination of several
Chinese characters, a special mention should be made of the following Chữ nôm 𠬊 (khê-khâ, [of voice] to drawling and hoarse) and 吕 (khênh-khang, to be awkward;
to walk slowly like an important person, put on airs).27) These Chữ nôm of a unique type
were found by Prof. Nguyễn Quang Xây and Prof. Vũ Văn Kính in a poem in Chữ nôm by
Cao Bá Quát, a poet scholar under Emperor Tự Đức. According to the authors of Tự-
Diên Chữ nôm (Dictionary of Chữ nôm), these two Chữ nôm would defy any analysis as
to their structure. Personally we wonder whether they were created by the Vietnamese on
the basis of the same principle of construction as the modern Chinese character 𠬊 ping
pāng or ping pong or whether such is only a mere case of pure coincidence.28)

Chữ nôm whose structure has just been described above 29) is not without
imperfections.

Following are some of these as pointed to by Dương Quảng Hàm.

1) One Vietnamese morpheme may be represented by two different nôm graphemes.
Ex. đột (to burn) is transcribed sometimes by the grapheme 𠬊 sometimes by the
grapheme 𠬊.
2) The same nôm grapheme may represent two or several different morphemes.
   a) Two homophones, a Sino-Vietnamese word mải (to buy) and a Vietnamese native word mãi (always) may be represented by the same grapheme 鬓.
   b) A Sino-Vietnamese word bàn (capital, funds) and a Vietnamese native word with the same meaning but with a different reading (vốn) are represented by the same grapheme 本.
   c) A Sino-Vietnamese word quán (a group, a band) and a Vietnamese native word còn (still) having each a quite different meaning may be represented by the same grapheme 羣.
   d) Two or several words of different meanings but the reading of one of which suggests that of the other or the others are represented by the same grapheme. Ex. 鬓 mài (to buy) is used to transcribed sometimes mái (always), sometimes mới (new, then) or also mầy (some, a few, how many?)
   e) Two or several Vietnamese words having in common the same final vowel or vowel cluster but not having the same initial consonant are represented by the same grapheme. Ex. 江, Sino-Vietnamese: du may represent Vietnamese word dầu (oil; although) or Vietnamese word râu (to be sad, depressed).
   f) Two or several Vietnamese words with the same sounds but with different tones may be represented by only one grapheme. Ex. màng, Sino-Vietnamese manh (to sprout) represents not only the Sino-Vietnamese word itself but also such Vietnamese native words as manh (in mong-manh, to be thin, frail), manh (piece, bit, fragment), mành (in mình khoẻ, trick, artifice), màn (blind, shades). This use of the same grapheme to transcribe several words of the same sounds is due to the out-numbering of Chinese tones by Vietnamese tones. That is why, to compensate vacancies in Chinese tones, some diacritical marks were invented by the Vietnamese. Such as  ꒤ placed in the upper right and a small ꒬ placed in the upper left of the Chinese character used to represent a Vietnamese native word. Ex. mộc (to be mildewed, musty, moldy) is transcribed by the Chinese character 木 (Sino-Vietnamese mộc) with the adjunction of one of the above three diacritical marks. As a result, we have 木 ꒤ or 木 ꒬ or also 木 ꒬.

With such imperfections, Chữ nôm could not indeed compare with the present Chữ quốc ngữ or the romanized script which is a phonetic script par excellence. It must be said however to its credit that, long before the invention of the latter system of writing, it had found out some devices of its own to phoneticize Vietnamese native sounds as accurately as feasible. Edouard Diguet showed that the ambiguity possible in the romanized script because of innumerable homophones could be avoided in Chữ nôm.31) Quite recently, Prof. Bưu Cầm brought other strong points of Chữ nôm which a few exceptions, succeeded in making clear a distinction between initial consonants d- and gi-, between initial consonants ch- and tr-, between final consonants -n and -ng, between final consonants -c(k) and -t.32)

As can just be seen, Chữ nôm despite its unavoidable shortcomings, proved to be of some value even in terms of phonemics.

In another respect, from the end of the thirteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, it has played an effective role in the expression and the transmission of Vietnamese literature.
The history of Vietnamese literature in nôm which covered nearly seven centuries may be divided in the following main periods: 1) The Trần-Hồ 陈胡 period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). 2) The Lê-Mạc 黎莫 period fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). 3) The Lê trung hưng 黎中兴 or North-South struggle period (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). 4) The Nguyễn 阮 period (nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century).

1) The Trần-Hồ period

According to Khâm-dịnh Việt-sự thông-giám Cương-mục 钦定越史通鉴纲目, the first writer have used chữ nôm in poetry was Nguyễn Thuyên 阮説 or Hán Thuyên 黎説 and others were said to have followed his example. Such were Nguyễn Sĩ Có 阮士固, and Chu An 朱安. The latter and Nguyễn Thuyên were reported to have been respectively the authors of Quốc ngữ thi tập 国语诗集 and Phi sa tập 披沙集. Unfortunately, both of these collections of nôm verses were lost. According to Bùi Huy Bích 袁辉壁 (1744-1818), Trẻ Cốc 鳥哥 or The story in verses of the Catfish and the Toad also dated from the Trần 陈, but the exact date of this satirical fable in lục-bát meter 六八詩, has not been so far conclusively determined. In addition, Trịnh Thự 貞鼠 or the virtuous mouse a narrative poem in nôm, the Story in verses of Vương Triệu 王巋傳, and six other writings in nôm related to the Story of Nguyễn Biểu 阮表彰 were also presumed to have dated from the end of the Trần. However, there has been so far much controversy about their true date.

Concerning writings in nôm under the Hậu Trần 後陳 and the Hồ 胡 it was also reported that in 1387 under the reign of King Trần Đế Nghịến 陳帝𬀪, the King's Father Trần Nghệ Tôn 陈艺宗, having granted to Hồ Quí Ly 胡季犛 then Lê Quí Ly 黎季犛, a sword bearing the inscription 文武全才君臣同德 (Both a scholar and a warrior, a virtuous subject serving a virtuous King) and two other writings in nôm related to the Story of Nguyễn Biểu 阮表彰 were also presumed to have dated from the end of the Trần. However, there has been so far much controversy about their true date.

The same Nguyễn Trãi was also said to have left some writings in nôm, such as Úc trai thi tập 抑齋詩集, an improvised poem in the vernacular addressed to Thi Lộ 氏路, a girl seller of sleeping mats who later became his concubine and didactic poem in nôm, Gia huấn ca 家訓歌 or family instructions. The so-called improvised poem to Thi Lộ is of dubious authenticity. As to Gia huấn ca, this poem in 796 lines may have been composed later by one or several successive authors. The only writing in nôm by Nguyễn Trãi available at present is the Collection of poems in the National language (Quốc âm thi tập 国音诗集) which forms the chapter seven of Úc trai dì tập 抑齋递集.

If the outset of the Lê dynasty was marked with no other important nôm literary work than this collection of poems by Nguyễn Trãi and two Thề ngôn 誦言 by Lê Lợi recently brought to light by Hoàng Xuân Hãn, the reign of King Lê Thánh Tông 黎聖宗 (1460-1497) witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of Vietnamese literature in the vernacular. King Lê Thánh Tông who was gifted with the rare faculty of composing poetry and was very fond of belles-lettres, founded a literary circle known as Hội Tao Đàn 会骚坛 with as members 28 Court officials called Nhị thập bát tứ 二十八宿 or the 28 Constellations
and with himself as Chairman 阮师, and as vice Chairman 副元, Thành Nhán Trung
申仁忠 and Đỗ Nhạn 杜潤. Within this Hội Tao Đàn, himself and his courtiers
exchanged poems in nôm which were collected later to form the Collections of
Vietnamese poems under the reign of Hùng Đức 洪德 i.e. the reign of Lê Thanh Tông. 39
Besides this Hùng Đức quốc âm thi tập 洪德國音詩集, mentioned should be made of
such writings in nôm as Hùng Châu quốc ngữ thi tập 洪州國語詩集, by Lương Nhữ Học
梁汝浠, Kim Làng Ký 金陵記 by Đỗ Càn 杜坎. In the next century, under the Mạc 莫,
Vietnamese literature in nôm showed much more originality in the famous Collection of
poems by Nguyễn Bình Kiệm 阮秉謙 (1492-1587) known as Bạch văn thi tập
白雲詩集, Bạch Vân (White Clouds) being the literary appellation of this poet. Among
nôm writings under the Mạc, we should also mention Đại Đông phong cảnh phú
大同風景賦, Tam Ngụng đồng phú 三賦同賦, and Tích cự nhân thể 特居寧體 by
Nguyễn Hạng 阮沆; Sử Bắc quốc ngữ thi tập 使國語詩集, Sử trình Khúc 使程曲, Tứ
thời Khúc 四時曲, Tiểu dục lạc phú 小燭樂賦, by Hoàng Si Khải 黃仕憬 and, finally,
Ngự phú nhập Đạo nguyên truyền 漁父入桃源傳, by Phùng Khắc Khoan 阮克宽. 39

3) The Lê trung hưng or North South Struggle period

From the death of Lê Thành Tông in 1497, Đại Việt 大越 or the then Vietnam went on
to be plagued with social troubles and a permanent state of political unrest which led to
the usurpation by Mạc Đặng Dung 莫登庸 (1527). After the short lived dynasty of the
Mạc, war broke out in 1627 between the Trịnh 王 in the North and the Nguyễn 阮 in the
South, both claiming to be followers of the Lê黎. It ended only in 1672 with the
agreement to use the River of Linh (Linh giang 滬江) as the demarcation line between the
two territories. But in 1775, taking advantage of the Tây Sơn 西山, revolt in the South,
the Trịnh attacked and took Phú Xuân 富春, the capital of the Nguyễn in the South.
However, both the Trịnh and the Nguyễn were finally overthrown by the Tây Sơn 西山 one of
the leaders of whom Nguyễn Huệ 阮惠 proclaimed himself Emperor by the end of 1787.
Despite the historic triumph of Emperor Quang Trung 光中 over the Chinese in 1789 and
many of its remarkable achievements, the Tây Sơn regime was short-lived and brought to
an end in 1802 when Nguyễn Ánh 阮再 proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long 嘉隆 of
the Nguyễn after capturing Emperor Cảnh Thịnh 景盛 of the Tây Sơn and his brothers.

The social and political background of this long period covering the seventeenth and
the eighteenth centuries had a great impact on the development of the Vietnamese
literature in nôm. Most of the writers were military leaders or Court officials mostly
involved in the events of their times. All of them wrote in Chinese characters. However
they chose to write also in nôm which enabled them to spread more widely their personal
political convictions far beyond the traditional academic circle and, at the same time, to
enlarge their sphere of influence in the country. Besides such Chinese borrowed literary
genres as the Thất ngôn thị 七言詩 or seven beat meter poetry, the Phú 賦 or prose-
poetry, the Kinh Nghia 經義 or explanations of Chinese Classics, the Văn sách 文策 or
dissertation which continued to be in high favour, some long narratives in lục bát 六八 or
Six eight meter and in Song thất lục bát 双七六八 or the 7-7-6-8 meter which made their
apparition toward the end of the eighteenth century, materialized the new creative spirit
of Vietnamese writers in nôm. Following are the most representative works of
Vietnamese nôm literature during these two centuries in the then North Vietnam, South
Vietnam and under the Tây Sơn.
a) Let us mention, as main nôm writings in North Vietnam under the Trịnh: *Giải cảnh hứng tình phủ* 佳景興情賦, *Ngế ba hóa phủ* by Nguyễn Bá Lân 阮伯麟, *Chính phủ ngâm* 徵婦吟 translated into nôm by Đoàn thị Diễm 段氏點. *Cửu ơn Óm Khúc* 宮怨吟曲 by Nguyễn Gia Thiều 阮嘉昭. *Hoàng Tiên Truyền* 花葉傳 by Nguyễn Huy Tự阮輝似, *Trừ tình Văn* 故情挽, or two short poems by Nguyễn thị Ngọc Vịnh 阮氏玉蓉, a concubine of Lord Trịnh Doanh 鄭樵. Lý Triều Đệ tam Hoàng thái hậu cõ lực thân tích quố nghệ diện ca 李朝第三皇太后古錄神蹟國語演歌 by Trường Ngọc Trọng 隆, a maid of honor at the time of Lord Trịnh Cương鄭梴, Ngu đế Thiện hoa doanh Bách vịnh thị tập 御題天和嬴百詠詩集 by Lord Trịnh Cảnh 鄭根. Kiến Nguyễn thị Tập 乾元詩集 by Lord Trịnh Doanh, Tâm thanh tôn duy tập 心聲存詩集 by Lord Trịnh Sẩm 鄭森. 40) Besides these nôm writings of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, we would like to make a special mention of the Trịnh Lords whose authors supported or opposed this regime: *Trích tùng Tây hồ phủ* 戰須西胡賦 and the narrative in nôm *So Kinh Tấn Trang* 神鏡新妝 by Phạm Thái 范彩. 31) Besides these nôm writings of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, we would like to make a special mention of the Thiên Nam mình giảm 天南明譜, an anonymous long historical poem in the 7-7-6-8 meter which according to Prof. Phạm văn Diệu might have been composed between 1623 to 1657 42) and the Thiên Nam Ngữ lạc 天南語錄, another anonymous historical poem which might have been written between 1787 and 1800 according to Nguyễn văn Tổ or between 1682 and 1709 according to Hoàng Xuân Hãn. 43)

Vietnamese literature in nôm under the Nguyễn (1802-1862)

This period which covered about sixty years has been justly considered to be the golden age of Vietnamese literature in nôm. This great flourishing of nôm literary works was not after all due to the cultural policy of the Nguyễn who with the exception of Emperors Gia Long 嘉隆 and Tự Đức 嗣德 neither composed verses in nôm like the Lords Trịnh 鄭 nor exhorted their subjects to write in nôm. It was, to some extent, both a heritage from and a kind of outgrowth of the nôm literature in the eighteenth century. In another respect, it authorizes to suppose that readers of nôm especially on nôm narratives in verses must have been more and more on the increase in Vietnam. In any case, the fact
is that most of the master-pieces of nôm literature precisely dated from the Nguyễn Ại dynasty. For lack of space, we will merely mention a few book titles and authors’ names without pretending to give an exhaustive list of the profusion of writings in nôm which were produced during the nineteenth century. First of all, a place of honor should be reserved for our National poem of Kim Văn Kiều 金雲翘 a 3254 olec bò line poem by the famous poet Nguyễn Du 阮攸 (1765-1820), of which several translations in foreign languages are available. Next come such writings both in nôm prosa and in verses as Xuân Hương thì tập 春香詩集 by Poetess Hồ Xuân Hương 胡春香 (early in the nineteenth century), Như thập tự hiếu diễn ấm 二十四孝演音, Phù châm tiến làm 婦箴便覧, Sử trị chinh tiến làm Khúc 使程便覧曲 by Lý văn Phúc 李文馥 (1785-1840), Mai đình mộng Kỷ 梅庭夢記 by Nguyễn Huy Họi 阮輝琥 (1783-1841), Kim Thạch Kỷ Duyên 金石奇緣 by Bùi Hữu Nghĩa 裴有義 (1807-1872), Lục văn Tiến 陸雲僑, Dương Tử Hà Mẫu 楊徐荷茂, Ngư Tiểu văn đập y thuật 漁樵問答醫術 by Nguyễn Đình Chiến 阮廷炤 (1822-1888) Thanh ché Thập điều diễn ca 聖製十條演歌, Thanh ché Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca 聖製論語釋義歌 by Tư Đức (1829-1883), politics inspired poems by Tôn Thọ Trương 孫壽祥 and Phan Văn Trọng 藩文重, Chinh Khi Ca 正氣歌 by Nguyễn văn Giai 阮文階, Đại Nam Quốc sử diễn Ca 大南國史演歌 by Lê Ngọc Cát 梁吳吉 and Phạm Đình Tổ 范廷佐, Hành Thục Ca 行詠歌 by Nguyễn Như Quốc Thị 阮若氏 (1830-1909), poems and songs called Hát Nói by Nguyễn Công Trứ 阮公著 (1778-1858), Cao Bát Quán 高伯康 (?-1854) and Nguyễn Quí Tân 阮貴新 (1811-1858), various poems by Nguyễn Khuyên 阮勤 (1835-1909), Trần Thế Xưởng 陳濟昌 (1870-1907) etc.

Finally, a special mention should be made of such anonymous narratives in nôm verses as Như do mai 二度梅, Tông Trần 宋珍, Thạch Sanh 石生, Nũ Tứ Tài 女秀才, Phương Hoa芳花, Lý Công 李公, Hoàng Trầu 黃鮑, Bích Câu 碧詠, Phan Trần 藩陳, Quan Âm Thị Kính 観音氏敬, Hoa Điều tranh nằng 花鳥爭能等... other nôm narratives and nôm writings continued to be produced mostly underground even after 1862 until at least the forties and despite the official adoption of the Quốc Ngữ script 國語字. 40

All the nôm literary works mentioned above have been integrally or partly transcribed in the romanized script. However, such is not the case with a prodigious number of other nôm texts now stored in Vietnamese and some foreign libraries. 45 They are always waiting for transcription in Quốc Ngữ 國語 to be made by specialists. In another respect, nôm texts which have been already transcribed have not been free from transcription errors. Under these conditions, textual criticism is indispensable and it would be possible only through collation of all the versions available both in nôm and in Quốc Ngữ. As rightly observed by Dương Quang Hâm “a true history of Vietnamese literature could be really undertaken only when all these documents in nôm have been deciphered and transcribed in Quốc Ngữ.” 46 But, all the nôm texts especially those which require transcription in Quốc Ngữ are not exclusively limited to literature and there are many important nôm documents related to Vietnamese history and Vietnamese folklore.

In effect, Chúa nôm was not only used by Vietnamese writers for literature but also by other people for various purposes as early as from the seventeenth century. For example here is a letter in nôm addressed in 1670 to the Lord Nguyễn Phước Trần 阮福継 by a Japanese named Kadoya Shichirobei 角室七郎兵衛 also known under his Vietnamese name as Cha Chánh 吳正 (Father Chánh): 翁門罪因蔑掩碎於坦安南宜浪邑作碎翁明 廉油門理時色忌龍恩翁門歲 (注: 原文中碎ノ碎ノ誤なり).
Following is its transcription in Quốc Ngữ “Ông muốn tuổi. Có một em tôi ở đất Annam nghe rằng đã làm tôi ông, nhưng làm. Đâu muốn lẽ thời đã cây lồng (or trồng) ơn. Ông muốn tuổi” [English translation: I wish you ten thousands years of life. I heard that one of my young brothers [i.e. Shichirojiro 七郞次郎] who is living in Annam has become one of your subjects. I feel much pleasure for it. May I recommend him to your benevolence under any circumstances. I wish you ten thousands years of life].

Always concerning the seventeenth century, let us mention several manuscripts in nôm from Italian Catholic Father J. Maiorica (1591-1651) found by Prof. Hoàng Xuân Hãn at the French National Library (Bibliothèque Nationale) in Paris. The titles of these manuscripts have been transcribed by him as follows. 1) Thiên-Chúa Thánh-giao Hội tôi Kinh. 2) Thiên-Chúa Thánh-giao Khai-mông. 3) Đức Chúa Chi-thu. 4) Truyền Đức Chúa Chit-thu. 5) Thiên-Chúa Thánh-Mẫu. 6) Các Thánh truyện. 7) Vita sanctorum (No title in nôm). 8) Ông Thánh I-na-xu. 9) Ông Thánh Phan-chi-cô Xa-vi-ê truyền. 10) Ngâm lễ trong mùa Phúc-sinh đến tháng bảy. 11) Những điều ngâm trong các lễ trọng. 12) Kinh những lễ mùa Phúc sinh.

As just can be seen, Chữ nôm which has so richly and diversely contributed to the past Vietnamese literature, will remain an indispensable tool of research not only for the students of the past Vietnamese literature but also for researches on Vietnamese history and Vietnamese culture.
NOTES

3) Ngô Thị Nhậm 吳時任. 海東誌略 (Hải Đông chí lược).
5) 《阮詮海陽青林人善為詩賦人多效之後為國音詩曰韓律者以此》頌定越史通鑑綱目。
15) Mineya Toru, 三根谷徹, 越南漢字音の研究, 東洋文庫, 昭和 47年 3月25日.
17) Dương Quảng Hàm, “Le chữ nôm ou écriture démotique. Son importance dans l’étude de l’ancienne littérature Annamite.” Bulletin de l’Instruction Publique de l’Indochine No 7, Mars 1942. N.B. Among the examples of this fourth category of chữ nôm, Dương Quảng Hàm quoted also the grapheme 味, Sino-Vietnamese reading: vị (savor, taste) as being used to transcribe the Vietnamese morpheme mùi. However, this writer thinks that the Chinese character might have been read mùi by the Vietnamese as early as the beginning of the Chinese T’ang dynasty in imitation of the Chinese reading. (cf. H. Maspero, “Quelques mots Annamites d’origine Chinoise” B.E.F.E.O, no 3, 1916,
Accordingly it might have been a chữ nôm whose date was prior to the eighth century.


19) This example is given by this writer instead of 喻 which, according to Hồ Ngọc Cân, was used to represent in nôm răn, răn or rên.

20) This example is given by this writer instead of 拶 which according to Hồ Ngọc Cân could be read lao, lau, trao or trau.

21) Dương Quảng Hàm, op. cited, pp. 279-279b.
    (Hồ Ngọc Cân, op. cited, pp. 162-166).

22) Dương Quảng Hàm, page 103.

23) Dương Quảng Hàm, op. cited, page 103.

24) According to Prof. Hoàng Xuân Hãn, chữ nôm was originally based on phonetic principle. Later only, it became ideographic by joining together two elements: a phonetic and a signific, but prior to this last stage, it had made use of few peculiar signs which, added to the phonetic, indicated that the Chinese character employed as phonetic was different in meaning from the Vietnamese morpheme to be represented by it in nôm. Here is an excerpt from his study on Girolamo Maiorica’s nôm works concerning the matter: “Les Vietnamiens ont cherché à améliorer le système en distinguant la deuxième catégorie de caractères de la première catégorie par l’accolement aux caractères phonétiques” d’un signe particulier dont le sens nous reste encore mystérieux. Enfin la dernière amélioration consiste à remplacer ce signe par une partie idéographique qui est un caractère chinois ayant le même sens que le mot Vietnamien qu’on veut transcrire ou ayant un sens générique se rapportant à ce mot Vietnamien. Voici quelques exemples illustrant cette méthode. Le sud se dit nam en Vietnamien, mot provenant du caractère chinois qui se prononce nan en Chinois actuel. Les Vietnamiens utilisent ce caractère pour transcrire le son et le mot nam. Or il existe en Vietnamien des sons voisins de ce dernier, par exemples nam qui a deux sens: cinq et année. Les Vietnamiens ont transcrit ce son par le même caractère Chinois qui veut dire Sud, parfois en lui accolant un signe particulier. C’est la méthode purement phonétique. Pour faciliter la lecture et la compréhension du texte, souvent ils adjoignent au caractère précédent, soit le caractère Chinois qui veut dire cinq pour le sens cinq, soit le caractère Chinois qui veut dire année pour le sens année.” Concerning the peculiar sign above, Prof. Hoàng Xuân Hãn has added the following foot-note “J’ai décelé sept de ces signes, dont deux semblent se retrouver dans les caractère de Si-Hia (西夏) pays qui existait au Nord-ouest de la Chine de l’époque des T’ang jus-qu’à la fin des Song, ce qui me fait penser que les écritures locales des pays limitrophes de la Chine du temps des T’ang pourraient avoir une origine commune d’ordre administratif”.

25) Hồ Ngọc Cân, op. cited page 166.

Nguyễn Quang Xỹ, Vũ Văn Kính, op. cited, pp. 165, 508, 859.
26) According to Prof. Kono Rokuro, the Vietnamese abbreviated form 諭 resembles the abbreviated form 나 of the character 냐 for the Korean verb { ha “to do”} in the so-called theo in Ancient Korea. The chữ nôm character 諭, he added, is an abbreviated form of the character 難 which was used for the word {là “to be”}. This also reminds us the similar abbreviation in the Korean theo ( Offering). Kono Rokuro, op. cited page 101.

27) Nguyễn Quang Xy, Vũ Văn Kinh, op. cited, Lời Nói đầu (foreword) page viii.


29) For further details about the structure of Chữ nôm, see

30) Dương Quang Ham, Le Chữ nôm ou écriture démotique etc… pp. 283-284a.


32) Bùi Cẩm, Uu diem va Khuyet diem Cua Chữ nôm (Strong points and weak points of Chữ nôm) Việt Nam Khảo Cổ tap san, Saigon 1960, no 1, pp. 50-64.


34) cf. Shu-King 書經. 泰始中, 6:《受有億兆夷民離心維德子有亂臣十人同心同德雖有周親不如仁人》Kinh-Thurs, Vietnamese translation by Prof. Thâm Quỳnh. Saigon 1968 page 206.


37) Hoàng Xuân Hân, Nghịêm Toàn, op. cited pp. 49-69. Trường Văn Giáp, Phạm Trọng Diệm: Nguyễn Trãi, Quốc Âm Thi Tập (Hanoi, 1956). Văn-Dân Tập chí, Sổ Đặc biệt về Nguyễn Trãi, Bố IV, số 10 (3/1-9/1, 1963) A symposium about Nguyễn Trãi and his works, with as participants Phạm Đình Tấn, Thái...
Bàng, Vũ Hạnh, Phạm Đình Khiêm, Nguyễn Khắc-Kham and Nguyễn Trọng Huy, a 16th generation descendant from Nguyễn Trãi.

38) Dương Quang Hâm, op. cited pp. 98, 99, 280.


Tome XIV, no 2, Avril-Juin 1934, pp. 182-190.

Tome XIV, no 3, Juillet-Sept. 1934, pp. 460-463.


N.B. Concerning the true names of Hồ Xuân Hương and Bà Huyên Thanh Quan presumed to have been respectively called Hồ thị Mai and Nguyễn thị Hính, see Introduction à la littérature Vietnamiennne (Collection U.N.E.S.C.O, Introduction aux litteratures Orientales G. Maisonneuve et Larose Paris, 1969) by Maurice M. Durand and Nguyễn Trần Huân, pp. 181, 189.


46) Dương Quang Hâm, Le chữ nôm ou Ecriture demotique etc… page 285.

47) Kawashima Motojiro, 川島元次郎: 朱印貿易史, 大正十年九月十日印刷, 大正十年九月十五日發行, 内外出版株式會社, page 469.

48) Hoàng Xuân Hãn, Girolamo Maiorica etc… op. cited pp. 208-213.
字喃と昔の越南文学に対する字喃の貢献

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越南には大昔から文字があったかどらかは今も解らないが、中国の支配下にあった頃漢字の外には何の文字もなかった事は確かな事である。数人の学者の説によれば、字喃は西暦二世紀又は八世紀又は十三世紀末に発明されていたとの説が末だにある。字喃発見の年代に就いて、新しい見解を提出し、その造字のルールを出来るだけ詳しく述べて見た。又越南の文学に対する貢献に重きを置いに、字喃によって七世紀近くに亘る長い間の豊富な文学が出来上って、今までに多くの字喃作品を残して来た。更に残っている字喃文獻は越南の歴史や民俗に関するものが多くある。それ故に字喃は昔の越南文学を勉強する為になくてはならない大きな役目を持っている。又越南の歴史や文化を研究する為にも必要な道具である。