

A Preliminary Study of  
TỰ-ĐỨC THÁNH-CHẾ TỰ-HỌC

嗣德聖製字學

A 19th-Century Chinese-Vietnamese Dictionary

Đình Hoà NGUYỄN  
Southern Illinois University (USA)

1. In traditional Vietnam, textbooks and word lists used to teach Chinese written symbols to seven-year-old pupils included those written by Chinese authors (like the “Thousand Character Classic,” “San Tzu Ching,” etc.) and those compiled by Vietnamese authors themselves. Among the most widely used school primers authored by native scholars there are such “cultural dictionaries” [D.H. Nguyen 1987] as *Nhất Thiên Tự*” The Book of 1,000 Characters” [D. H. Nguyen 1963, and 1989], *Tam Thiển Tự*” The Book of 3,000 Characters” [Nguyen 1973, and 1989 forthcoming], *Ngũ Thiên Tự*” The Book of 5,000 Characters,” etc. These often anonymous works list Chinese characters and their Vietnamese equivalents in verse form, using rhymes in either the lục-bát “six-eight” meter or the four-syllable meter as mnemonic devices to facilitate the learning process [Nguyen 1987].

Emperor Tự-Đức (1829-1883) of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945), who was on the throne between 1847 and 1883, distinguished himself as a scholar in classical Chinese, and left such a Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary in lục-bát verse. This paper attempts a preliminary analysis of the content of this bilingual dictionary by presenting a sketch of its macrostructure and microstructures and discussing briefly how the shape of individual *nôm* characters can shed light on Vietnamese pronunciation of the time and how the borrowing process affects language education in a country that was under Sinitic influence for such a long period.

2. *Tự-Đức Thánh-chế Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca* “*Tự-Đức Imperial Word List Explained in Sung Verse*” was published in 1898, but like other such materials it was just lying among the Archives that had been moved from Hanoi in 1954 and stored in the Dalat branch of South Vietnam’s National Library. Only about two decades later did two modern editions of that bilingual dictionary appear, in fully edited and annotated romanized transcriptions, one by Professor Chén Ching-ho (Hongkong, 1971) and the other by Phương-Thủ Nguyễn Hữu Quỳnh (Saigon, 1971).

Chén Ching-Ho, who between 1958 and 1962 served as Visiting Professor of History at the University of Huế (Central Vietnam) and headed a committee in

charge of the translation of historical materials of the Nguyễn dynasty, has given the romanization of the complete work in his *Tự-Đức Thánh-chế Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca Dịch-chú, Original Text and Transcription in Chữ Quốc-ngữ with Introduction and Annotation* [sic] (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1971). The other work, undertaken by Nguyễn Hữu Quỳ and published under the auspices of the Office of the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs in Saigon, South Vietnam, provides only the transcription of the first part of the two-part section on The Universe (Kham-dư) together with the original text for the first five books, which cover that section on The Universe (Kham-dư) and the three-part section on Human Affairs (Nhân-sự). Although Nguyễn Hữu Quỳ's valuable notes list several compounds under almost every main Chinese entry, our analysis is based primarily on the Chien Ching-Ho romanized text (pp. 177-392) and the accompanying notes on readings of Chinese entries (pp. 393-404).

3. Emperor Tự-Đức 嗣德 (name HỒNG-NHỆM 洪任, posthumous title Đức-tông 翼宗) was the second son of Emperor Thiệu-Trị 紹治 (posthumous title Hiến-tông 憲宗), who reigned from 1840 to 1847. Since Prince HỒNG-BẢO 洪保, his older brother, was a fun-loving youngster, while he, HỒNG-NHỆM, distinguished himself as an intelligent and studious boy, their father gave the throne to him when he was only eighteen years old. During the thirty-six years of Tự-Đức's reign the French navy bombarded Đà-nẵng in 1858, then successively conquered the three eastern provinces (1862) and the three western provinces (1867) of South Vietnam before advancing northward to attack Hanoi and complete the creation of French Indochina through the peace treaty of 1884. Like his predecessors Minh-Mạng (1820-1840) and Thiệu-Trị (1841-1847), who left books of poems, Tự-Đức was well known as much for his erudition as for his opposition to and hatred of Christianity. Truly imbued with Confucian learning, he was the author of ten books of poems about Vietnamese history *Việt-sử Tổng-vịnh* (1877) and eight other books of poems. But nowhere was his deep concern for general education more clearly shown than in his two scholarly works: his annotations in verse of *The Analects*, *Luận-ngữ Thích-nghĩa-ca*, and his Chinese word list. *Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca* was first presented to Emperor Thành-Thái (1889-1907) by the Ministry of Rites in 1896, and published two years later--or fifteen years after its initiator's death--in accordance with his last wishes. The memorial of submittal mentioned the names of the two editors, Hoàng Hữu Xứng and Ngô Huệ Liên.

4. Like "The Book of 1,000 Characters" and "The Book of 5,000 Characters," this dictionary, whose corpus was selected by Emperor Tự-Đức himself, uses the Vietnamese "six-eight" meter to give Chinese characters in Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation followed by their glosses in the vernacular, as shown in these four sample lines that juxtapose the Chinese and the Vietnamese words for "heaven, earth, throne"/ "to protect, to convey, to flow, to be full"/ "tall, broad, thick"/ "morning, evening, to revolve, to move".

Thiên = trời địa = đất vị=ngôi  
天 地 地 地 地 地

Phủ=che tải=chở lưu=trôi mãn=đầy  
覆 覆 載 載 流 溜 滿 落

Cao = cao bác = rộng hậu = dày  
高 高 博 博 厚 厚

Thần = mai mô = tối chuyển = xây di = dời  
晨 暮 暮 暉 轉 援 移 移

5. Within a couplet, the last word of the 6-word line (e.g. ngôi) rhymes with the sixth word of the following 8-word line (e.g. trôi). Then the last---or eighth---word in the second line of the couplet (e.g. đầy) rhymes with the sixth---or last---word in the first line of the next couplet (e.g. đầy), which in turn rhymes with the sixth word of the 8-word line (e.g. xây). The rules of prosody stipulate that this meter uses the “even” or “flat” (bằng) tones, and not the “oblique” or “sharp” (trắc) tones. Also, within the second line of a couplet, if the sixth word (trôi) has the level tone, the eighth word (đầy) has the falling tone, and vice versa (Huỳnh Sanh-Thông 1979:xxxii-xxxiii; Nguyen 1989). Some lines in this dictionary, however, do not obey this rule about bằng tones.

The internal structure of a “six-eight” verse couplet may be self-contained as in folk songs, or it may be repeated in a succession of hundreds or even thousands of couplets, as in the case of long narratives in verse (like *The Tale of Kiều*) or of dictionaries in verse (like *Nhất Thiên Tự*, *Ngũ Thiên Tự*, and this imperial “thesaurus.”

6. The front matter of the book contains the memorials submitted by the Ministry of Rites and the Bureau of National History (Quốc-sử-quán). The corpus comprises seven topical areas:

- |    |                 |                                     |
|----|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 球輿 | (1) Kham-dư     | “The universe” ---Books 1-2         |
| 人事 | (2) Nhân-sự     | “Human affairs” ---Books 3-5        |
| 政化 | (3) Chính - hoá | “Politics and Culture” ---Books 6-7 |
| 器用 | (4) Khí - dụng  | “Tools and utensils” ---Books 8-9   |
| 草木 | (5) Thảo - mộc  | “Plants and trees” ---Books 10-11   |

禽獸 (6) Cầm - thú "Birds and beasts" ---Book 12

蟲魚 (7) Trùng - ngư "Insects and fishes" ---Book 13

Each page is laid out in five wide columns read from right to left. Each column accommodates from three to seven Chinese characters (representing the source language). Each of these Chinese characters, printed in large typeface, is followed by one "southern" (or *nôm*) character or more (representing the target language) printed in medium typeface and appearing right below. Then some notes printed in small typeface may follow to clarify the meaning of a particular Chinese character, whose pronunciation is sometimes indicated by means of one tiny homophonous character or three tiny characters in *fanqie* style.

7. In both "The Book of 1,000 Characters" and "The Book of 5,000 Characters," the first line of a couplet teaches three Chinese characters, and the second line teaches four Chinese characters; the sample lines listed above also do that, the first line introducing the three characters thiên天, địa地, vị vị, with the second line introducing the four characters phủ phủ, tải tải, lưu lưu, mãn mãn, and the stress falling on each second, fourth, sixth or eighth syllable. However, the lines are not always structured that way: the six-word line 5 of the book introduces only two characters, since both before and after the caesura there is a three-word phrase, in which the Sino-Vietnamese word nguyệt nguyệt "moon," which receives heavy stress, is followed by its 2-syllable gloss mặt trăng trăng, and the stressed word nhật nhật "sun" by its gloss mặt trời trời.

Likewise, line 7 consists of two balanced hemistichs separated by a medial caesura: sóc sóc một một 朔朔 "first day of the month," vọng vọng ngày ngày 望望  
第第 十五 "fifteenth day of the month."

Line 10 also departs from the rule by having its medial caesura separating two equal hemistichs of four syllables each: ngũ ngũ giờ giờ 正正 午午  
"noontime" and bỏ bỏ giờ giờ 晡晡 過過 晡晡 "time past noon."

A number of lines define only one single character, as in:

Muội muội khi khi ban ban sáng sáng  
昧昧 欺欺 班班 熒熒

referring to the "dim morning light," or

Dâm dâm là là mưa mưa quá quá mười mười ngày ngày  
霖霖 霖霖 霖霖 過過 過過 過過 過過 過過

referring to "an incessant rain that lasts more than 10 days," or

Lâm lâm là là mưa mưa tự tự ba ba ngày ngày  
霖霖 霖霖 霖霖 自自 自自 自自 阻阻 連連

referring to “a rain that lasts three days or more.”

One particular strength of this dictionary is that “its author took pains in using a large number of adjectives and adverbs to define nouns and verbs, which is very useful to people who are engaged in the study of Han characters” (Nguyễn Hữu Quý 1971:6). Indeed, quite a few entries require not merely equivalents in the target language, but lengthy definitions within the confines of the “six-eight” meter. The reader gets the impression of hearing a Confucian schoolteacher who provides concise definitions of such and such a Sino-Vietnamese monosyllabic or disyllabic entry. *This lends itself beautifully to the rote-learning procedure used in the traditional classroom in Vietnam, where a privately financed elementary school used to be organized by several individuals in the same hamlet for the “opening” of their sons’ minds by a local scholar.*

8. As far as the Sino-Vietnamese corpus is concerned, this thesaurus-like lexicon introduces approximately nine thousand entries, most of which are monosyllables, and some of which are “binomials,” i.e. disyllabic compound nouns or verbs. Notable among the latter are:

long đồng 日籠瞳 defined as “The early rising sun” (mặt nhật độ gần sáng ra) (Ch’ên 183) : cf. đồng lông in Thiều Chửu (1942:276, 277).

long đồng 朧朧 defined as “the waning moon toward daybreak”(trăng mờ mờ rạng đông) (Ch’ên 185).

hàng giới 沆瀣 defined as “midnight mist” (khí mù nửa đêm ) (Ch’ên 184): cf. hăng dơi in Thiều Chửu (1942:335).

tích lịch 飈飈 defined as “sound of the wind” (tiếng gió) (Ch’ên 184).

long tông 籠從 defined as “vapor of cloud” (khí mây) (Ch’ien 184).

biệt biệt 替替 defined as ‘the sun making its way gradually into the cloud’ (mặt nhật chen chen lẫn vào) (Ch’ên 184).

phái phái 霏霏 defined as “heavy rain” (mưa lớn) (Ch’ên 184); cf. bài bài in Thiều Chửu (1942:750).

châu trương 瞍瞍 defined as “blinking of the eyes” (mắt máy) (Ch’ên 217).

liêu yếu 聒聒 defined as “popping of the ear” (tai bùng) (Ch’ien 217).

sảo xảo 軀軀 defined as “long-bodied” (dáng dài mình) (Ch’ên 217).

217). phản oán 𦉑𦉑 defined as “frowning face” (dáng mặt nhăn) (Ch’en

áo xảo 𦉑𦉑 defined as “awry-faced” (mặt méo) (Ch’en 217).

huyền vân 眩眩 defined as “blurred eyes” (mắt lòe) (Ch’en 217).

310). bát thích 襖襖 defined as “leaf-sewn raincoat” (cái áo tơ) (Ch’en

thu thiên 鞦韆 defined as “the swing” (đu rút) (Ch’en 310).

One four-syllable expression has been noted: lan lao liên lữ 蘭嘯

連嘯 defined as “chattering away” (nói bần lú lo) (Ch’en 232).

As a thesaurus or storehouse of words, this book provides a large vocabulary on physical features (eyes, teeth, hair, etc.), foodstuffs and cooking terms (Ch’en 250), kinship terms (255), ailments (261-262), over thirty kinds of boats (295), carriages and chariots (298), articles of clothing (307ff), utensils (313-315), etc. As expected of such a book that is conceptually arranged for didactic purposes and that is also bound by prosodic rules, it contains not a few rarely used and obsolete characters denoting content words. Only a few “empty” or function words have been found therein: for instance these two lines introduce seven particles of classical Chinese (Ch’en 290):

Giả = ấy dã = vậy dư = vậy  
者 意 也 不 與 為

Hồ = ôi chí = vậy tá = này ý = kia  
乎 限 只 不 此 尼 伊 冀

9. Very often equivalents in the target language are not given in this bilingual volume, and instead an explanation is shown by means of the copula là-- an “identificational marker” which serves (Thompson 1965:236) to introduce a predicate comparable to the second member of an equation used in true definition (X=Y) style:

Chí 贄 là lễ vật cầm tay “offerings presented with one’s hands” (Ch’en 283).

Giao 郊 là đắp đàn tế trời “to build a terrace for sacrifices to Heaven” (Ch’en 283).

Lũ 旅 là lễ tế sơn xuyên “sacrifices offered to mountains and rivers” (Chien 283).

Vu 雩 là lễ tế cầu mưa “sacrifices to pray for rains” (Ch’en 283).

鬚 The conjunction rằng 琅 “to say,---that” is also used in definitions: *Sào* rằng ngọn tóc “lock of hair” and Kiến 建 rằng đầu gân “nerve ending” (Ch’*en* 217).

Both là and rằng are used in this same line: Đôn 遁 là đi trốn “to escape” and nô 奴 rằng ở thuê “to live and work as a slave” (Ch’*en* 275).

The relative particle mà 麻 “and, so as to, in order to” is also used in an explanatory definition when it connects two verbs, as in: Thụy 睡 ngòì mà ngủ “to sleep in a sitting position” and lưu 留 nằm mà trông “to look while lying down” (Ch’*en* 223).

Sometimes a comparison is used, as in this descriptive line Thục 祝 hìn h như thể cái thùng “Is shaped like a barrel” (Ch’*en* 297).

In some rare cases, a line of eight words becomes one of nine words, causing anomalous rhythm: for example Mạt là nuôi ngựa, bợ người hầu ngựa xe “Mạt 末 means a servant who takes care of horses, and bợ 僕 means a servant who attends to horse and carriage” (Ch’*en* 287).

10. This ingeniously designed bilingual dictionary is more than a word list; it also sheds light on 19th-century Vietnamese lexemes and on their graphic representations in the *nôm* script. One example is the form *buông lung* 樁籠 used to define Sino-Vietnamese *dịch đảng* 倜儻 as “a non-conformist who acts inconsiderately toward people” (là kẻ buông lung khác người). Such forms as *nốc* 船 “small boat” (Ch’*en* 295) and *xấp-xoá* 習妥 “cymbals” (Ch’*en* 297) have dropped out of current usage: cf. commonly cited forms *chập-choã* / *chập-cheng*.

The two editions often present different readings of both Sino-Vietnamese characters and *nôm* characters; for instance, the two lines


胸羅晒朔脰繳  
眺羅晒晦脰羣質田

with two different *quốc-ngữ* versions:

*Nục là bũa sớ trắng non*  
*Thiếu là bũa hổi trắng còn mái tây* (Ch’*en* 182)

*Nọc đêm sớ trắng non*  
*Chiếu đêm hổi, trắng còn mái tây* (Nguyễn Hữu Quỳnh 87)

11. The *nôm* characters for “ricefield” and “well” point to an interesting aspect of the evolution of this demotic script: the graph 弄田 for *ruộng*, which is found only in *Bảng tra chữ nôm* (1976) and not in *Tự điển chữ nôm* (1971), seems to reflect a Central Vietnam pronunciation close to *lộng* 弄 whereas the

other graph , reflects the northern pronunciation of /uô/, which is closer to /-wa/ of *quáng*, the phonetic element in the *nôm* character.

12. Ch'en (1971:17) thinks that this word list is better than *Nhất Thiên Tự*, *Ngũ Thiên Tự*, on which Emperor Tự Đức "based his compilation." We agree with him that like those two anonymous lists—and *Tam Thiên Tự*, whose author is now known to be Ngô Thì Nhậm (1786-1803)—this dictionary of Sino-Vietnamese lexemes conceived by the erudite monarch of Vietnam's last imperial dynasty is rigorously put together as a useful work of reference. It can be considered "the official dictionary of the late Nguyễn dynasty," which shows the standard pronunciation of educated circles (17). Indeed it is evidence of "the desire of monarchs and scholars to reconstruct traditional phonology" and to list normatively the pronunciation that was current among the 19th-century aristocratic society of the ancient imperial capital (17). Further analyses should reveal more interesting lexical and phonological features of the Vietnamese language at the beginning of the colonial period.

## REFERENCES

- Ch'en Ching-ho, ed. 1971. *Tự-Đức Thánh-chế Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca Dịch-chú, Original Text and Transcription in Chữ Quốc-ngữ with Introduction and Annotation*. Hongkong: The Chinese University of Hongkong.
- Đào Duy Anh. 1950. *Giản-yếu Hán-Việt Từ-điển*. Paris: Minh-tân. Reprint edition.
- Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. 1979. *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. 1963. *The Book of One Thousand Characters, Văn-hoá Nguyệt-san* 12.10 (October). 1665-1678.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. 1973. *The Book of Three Thousand Characters: An 18th-Century Chinese-Vietnamese Dictionary*. Paper presented before the 183rd meeting of the American Oriental Society, Washington, DC.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. 1987. On "Cultural" Dictionaries in Vietnamese. *Lexicographica* 3.142-157.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. ed. 1989a *The Book of One Thousand Characters, Nhất Thiên Tự*. Carbondale, IL: Asia Books.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. ed., 1989b (fc) *The Book of Three Thousand Characters (Tam Thiên Tự) by Ngô Thì Nhậm*. Carbondale, IL: Asia Books.
- Nguyễn Đình-Hoà. 1990. "Graphemic Borrowings from Chinese: The Case of Chữ Nôm—Vietnam's Demotic Script." *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academic Sinica* 61:383-432.
- Nguyễn Hữu Quý, ed. 1971. *Tự-Đức Thánh-chế Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca. Tập I*. Saigon: Phủ Quốc-vu-khanh Đặc-trách Văn-hoá.
- Nguyễn Phúc Hồng-Nhậm [Tự-Đức]. 1898. *Tự-Đức Thánh-chế Tự-học Giải-nghĩa-ca*. Huế: Quốc-sử-quán.



- Nguyễn Quang Xỹ & Vũ Văn Kính. 1971. *Tự-điển Chữ Nôm*. Saigon: Trung-tâm Học-liệu.
- Thiều Chửu. 1942. *Hán-Việt Tự-điển*. Hanoi: Đuốc Tuệ. [Reprint edition: Saigon: Khai-trí, 1960.]
- Thompson, Laurence C. 1965. *A Vietnamese Grammar*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. [Reprint edition as *A Vietnamese Reference Grammar* (ed. Stephen O'Harrow), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.]
- Viện Ngôn-ngữ-học. 1976. *Bảng tra chữ nôm*. Hanoi: Khoa-học Xã-hội.

Received: 26 May 1995

720 Teresita Blvd  
San Francisco CA 94127  
USA

嗣德聖製字學解義歌卷之一

堪輿類上

天 歪地 塌位 魁覆 雲載 道流 潘滿

潛。高 高博 瓚厚 駘晨 暮暎 轉搓

移移。月 朏日 朏日 點臨 細世 茂年

字學解義歌卷之一

堪輿類上

輔。朔 蒙沒 望琳 晝尋 晦暎 諭壬 暝霖

喻日陰也 昧欺 班劇 昨徐 正晡 徐過

昧冥也夜向晨也 日當午也 晡申刻也 曠燎 耿放 咳注 燭暎 燭承

曠日光感也 耿小明 曠 陽氣 陰氣 陰 晦 霖 晴 靈

澆 壬 眩和 眩不明也 眩久陰也 脬肢 臄肢 臄肢 响羅

時 昴 羅制 脬月光 脬月不明 昴 霧 霞 霏 霏

霏 遠 噉 欺 欺 喻 導 陰 噉 日飲入也 噉 曉

最 旦 最 夕 朝 雨 霽 風 噉 星 旱 露 霰

天 歪 昴 秋 歪 飄 飄 退 噉 噉 和 天夏天也 是

風 噉 噉 晚 斜 時 夜 脬 早 最 往 戈 遠 衛

字學解義歌卷之一

堪輿類上

曠日光晚 颯 颯 動 雲 雲 暎 暎 燦 燦 燦 燦 燦 燦

日也 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉

物受風搖曳也 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉 噉

曠月光 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠

白而赤謂之虹 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠 曠