

“Vietnameseness” in the Vietnamese language: Introduction to Vietnamese Chữ Nôm and Chữ Quốc Ngữ

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Introduction

- Vietnam:**
- A Southeast Asian country, sharing land borders with China to the North
 - Thousand-year Chinese domination and acculturation → the collective Vietnamese mindset resisting *the Northern occupation*
 - “Nôm script” = means “the script of the South.”



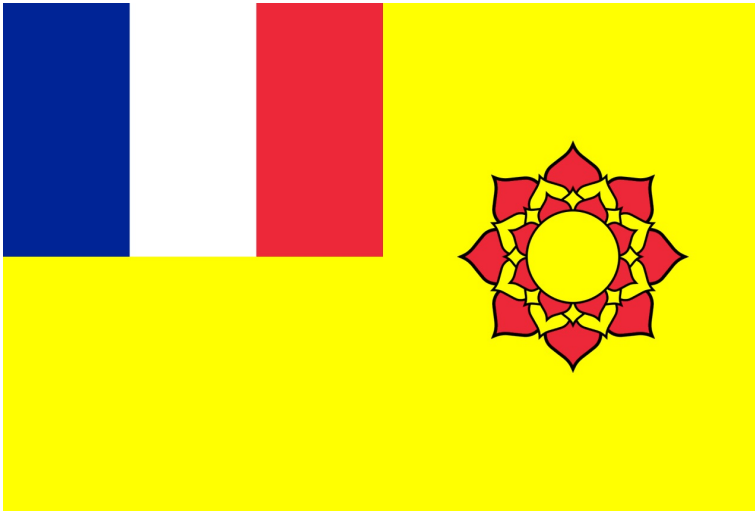
3 writing systems (not including Braille):

Language	TIMEFRAME (CENTURY)				
	10 th century	13 th century	17 th century	19 th century	20 th century
Chinese + Vietnamese (vernacular)	Chinese characters/ Hán characters				
Chinese + Vietnamese		Nôm Script			
Vietnamese			Vietnamese Alphabet		

Production of a Hybrid Model

- Vietnam under Chinese rule (北屬):** four historical periods when Vietnam was under the rule of various Chinese
- Vietnamese adopted classical Chinese (middle Chinese) as a part of Chinese cultural imperialism
 - Logosyllabary script was promoted in royal courts, national administration, and imperial examination to enter bureaucracy.

- French Indochina (Indochine française):** During WWI and WWII, Vietnam was colonized by France and was a part of the protectorate of the French empire. The legacy of Francophone colonialism:
- French as a language was forced upon the people in education.
 - The French promoted Romanizing the traditional logographic system in Classical Chinese, resulting in the Vietnamese national alphabet today.

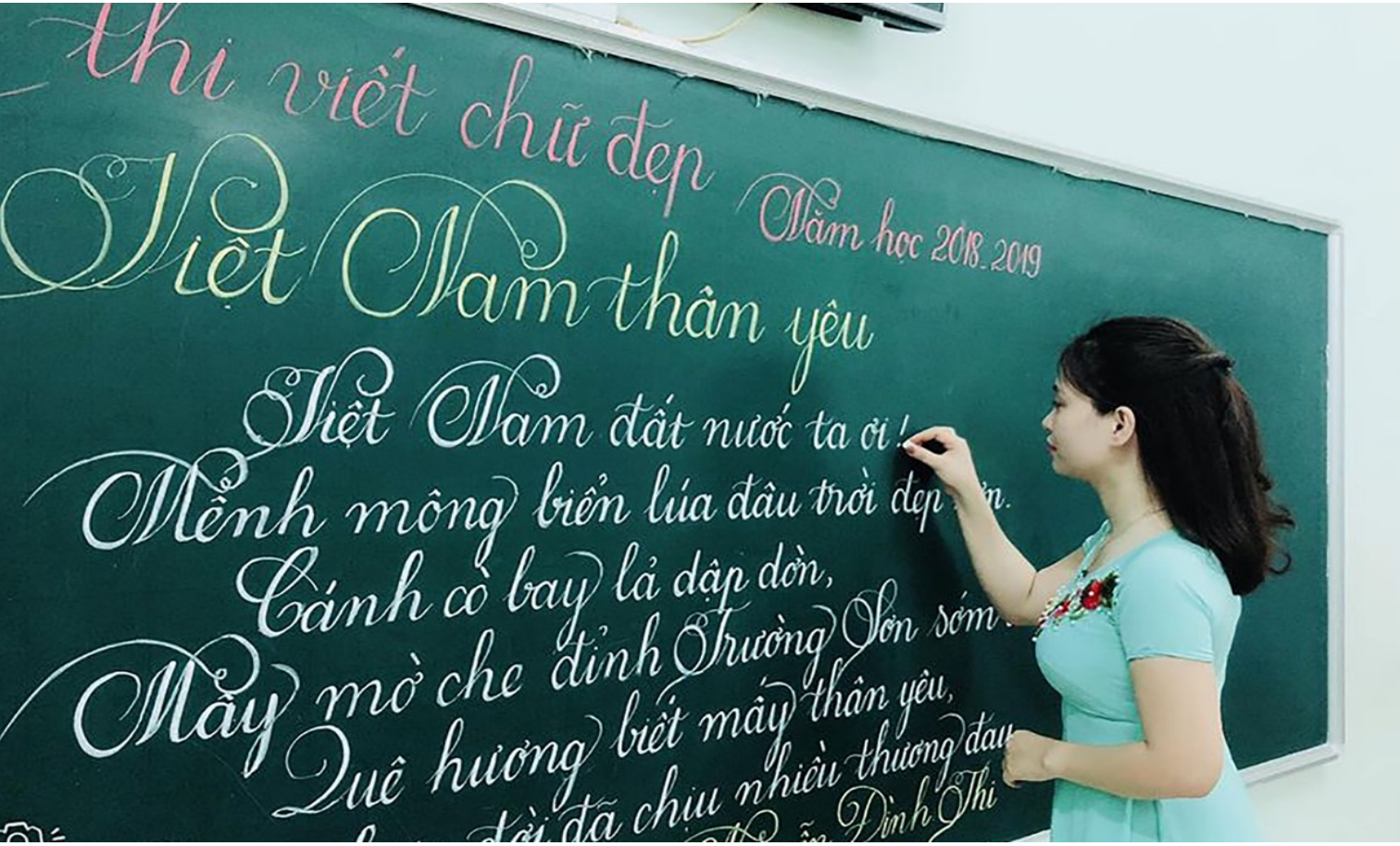


Vietnamese Alphabet and Nôm Script

- The Vietnamese Language (Chữ Quốc Ngữ):** The official language of Vietnam
- Belongs to the *Austroasiatic* (“South” and “Asia”) language family
 - Including the long-established languages like Khmer (Cambodia), Mon and Vietnamese.
 - Spoken by 70 million people

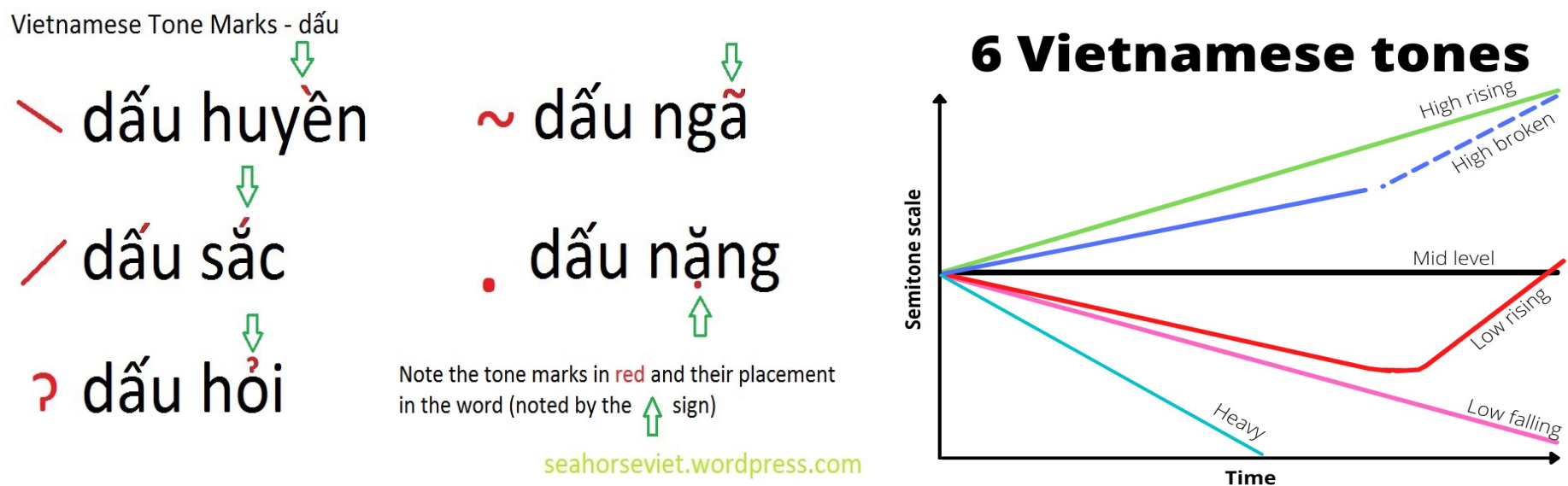
Some features of the Vietnamese Alphabet:

- Authorized as the sole *official and national* script of Vietnam
- Romanization* of the Vietnamese language:
 - Early 17th century, Jesuit missionaries used Latin script to transcribe the Vietnamese language only based on its phonetics to propagate Catholicism.
 - Later, the French colonial administration enforced Vietnamese Alphabet in mass education → A language of colonization



About the Vietnamese Language:

- Analytic language:** primary conveys relationship between words in sentences by way of helper words and word order
- Vietnamese discourse:** Topic-prominent, pro-drop, head-initial language with null elements, wh-in-situ, verb-serialization, less explicit cohesive devices, and paratactic construction
- Phonemic tones:** 10 diacritics (the mark of a glyph added to a letter). 6 are tones (ngang, sắc, huyền, hỏi, ngã, nặng)



- Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (60%):** a layer of words and morphemes of the Vietnamese language used from Vietnamese from Literary Chinese with consistent pronunciations based on Annamese Middle Chinese.
- Issue about homonyms:**
 - Homophones (words that share the same pronunciation but differ in meanings) can be distinguished in chữ Nôm because they have different graphemes (different characters). Therefore, these homonyms are only **homophones but not homographs**.
 - Romanization (phonetic transcription) takes away the logographic dimension and writes only the sound. These homophones are now spelled the same using the Vietnamese alphabet. They are words that are **both homographs and homophones**.

- Nôm script (Chữ Nôm):** a logographic writing system formerly used to write the Vietnamese language before the National Vietnamese Alphabet.
- Original borrowed classical Chinese characters to represent *Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary*
 - New characters to represent *vernacular, native vocabulary*.

Some features of the Nôm Script:

- Never been sanctioned or standardized as the national script. Was traced back to as early as in the 8th century.
- Most contemporary Vietnamese people can't read or write in Nôm script--only for research purposes in universities and institutes or citing Buddhist sutras in temples and pagodas

Chinese loan words									
山	son (mountain)	火	hoa (fire)	花	hoa (flower)	家庭	gia đình (family)	島	đảo (island)
山	shān / shān	火	huǒ / fǒ	花	huā / fā	家庭	jiā tíng / gà tưng	島	dǎo / dǎu
湖	hồ (lake)	貓	mèo (cat)	羊	đương (sheep)	國語	quốc ngữ	廟	miếu (temple)
湖	hú / vruh	貓	māo / mǎu	羊	yáng / yēuhung	國語	gúo yǔ / gwrok yuh	廟	miao / mǎu
頭	đầu (head)	北	bắc (north)	南	nam (south)	東	đông (east)	西	tây (west)
頭	tou / tūh	北	běi / bǎk	南	nán / nàhuh	東	đōng / đung	西	xī / sái
New Chữ nôm characters									
爹	cha (father)	媽	me (mother)	搵	con (children)	手	tay (hand)	口	miệng (mouth)
聰	ai (ear)	蹠	đùi chân (leg)	稜	rừng (forest)	崗	núi (mountain)	鴿	chim (bird)
騾	gà (chicken)	輔	bò (cow)	狂	chó (dog)	獵	heo (pig)	蝨	nhện (spider)
晷	hôm (day)	脣	tháng (mouth)	辭	năm (year)	仨	hai (two)	匹	ba (three)
罽	bốn (four)	𪔐	năm (five)	𪔑	bảy (seven)	𪔒	tám (eight)	𪔓	chín (nine)

Methods of forming Nôm characters: 5000 distinct syllables in Vietnamese. In Nôm, each Vietnamese monosyllabic word was represented by a character. 2 ways to construct a character in the Nôm script:

- Borrow unmodified characters directly from Chinese** (take the *meanings* of some of the *logograms* and supplemented them with the *sounds* of the *syllabograms*) in order to
 - Code the Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary
 - Represent native Vietnamese words (with a diacritic added to the character to indicate the “indigenous” reading)
 - Represent Vietnamese words that share a similar sound with the corresponding Chinese characters, regardless of the meaning of the Chinese words
- Locally invent new characters**, using the structure and formation of Chinese characters to code the vernacular, native Vietnamese words that do not have utterances in the Sino-Vietnamese vocab.:
 - Phonetic characters:* Phono-semantic compound (two characters/components, one suggesting the word's meaning and the other approximate sound)
 - Semantic characters:* Two Chinese characters representing words of similar meaning

The situatedness of Vietnam

The situatedness of Vietnam:

- Geographically and economically, Vietnam belongs to the *Southeast Asian region*
- Culturally and linguistically, Vietnam belongs to the *East Asian cultural sphere* (縫文化東亞), also called Sinitic World.
 - Sinosphere* encompasses three cultures that were historically influenced by Chinese culture: Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese
 - Sinicization:* the processes of assimilation, acculturations, or cultural imperialism of norms from China, which includes adopting the writing system and language

East Asian cultural sphere



Results of the situatedness of Vietnam:

- Classical Chinese language became *a lingua franca* in the written form → a primary facilitator of cultural exchange throughout the sphere = *diglossic cultures* of medieval and early modern era
- Vietnam not only received the Chinese writing system, but also actively participated in the process of culturally creative interaction, exchange, reinvention → the establishment of Nôm script (similar to *Katakana* from Japan and *Hangul* from Korea)
- Vietnamese Nôm script resembles that of Chinese rather than other Sanskrit or Pali derivative script in the same Austroasiatic family language of Khmer and Mon

Conclusion

Even though both scripts were originally based on the production of the oppressors (namely Chinese dynasties and the French empire), Vietnamese people, carrying Sinophobia and anti-French efforts, took advantage of the scripts to resist occupations. Nôm script is considered “the script of ethnicity” because it is the first and the only script that codes the Vietnamese language and was invented by Vietnamese themselves.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese alphabet was enforced after the French colonial rule in Popular Education (Binh Dân Học Vụ) to eradicate illiteracy caused by century-long warfare. Both scripts represent the long-enduring historicity of Vietnamese and “Vietnameseness” in the context of a purportedly nationalistic imagination due to countless foreign incursions, starting even from the time Vietnam incubated its first tribal groups (Hùng Vương era) until now.

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