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ABSTRACT

In the study of literary language, we often look back to examples from history and look cross-culturally to verbal art forms in literature and in the surviving oral tradition. These observations encompass genres, revealing great diversity, that reach back many centuries. We undertake this kind of study because its lessons must be relevant to understanding literary creation today. Even though art forms have changed over the years, their fundamental underpinnings have probably been preserved. One such instance, not yet sufficiently appreciated, comes from East Asia in the interaction between Chinese culture and the cultures of its neighbours, ongoing from ancient times to the present. The following discussion focuses on the interaction between China and Vietnam because, among other reasons, it was the most longstanding, and because it serves for comparison purposes in understanding crosscultural and cross-language literary contact in general. When languages come into contact it appears that the way in which the different genres of literature are affected is not the same. Prosaic and poetic texts might be affected in different ways. The following discussion will offer one example from the cultural interaction between China and Vietnam: vernacular literature in the *nôm* script.

KEYWORDS

Literary Chinese; Vietnamese poetry; music; morphosyllabic characters; *Nôm*; *Kanji*

Introduction: problems of language and verbal art

The modern study of how language is taken up to serve aesthetic purposes can be traced to two currents making their appearance during the early years of the twentieth century, but in gestation for a number of decades. First were the literary and cultural movements, tied to a veritable revolution in the realm of language and literacy in China following the 1911 overthrow of dynastic rule. In a neighbouring country, but thousands of kilometres from Beijing, the Moscow Linguistic Circle and their St. Petersburg colleagues took up the fieldwork results of researchers of language and literature in the oral tradition. Looking back today, one hundred years later, the separate lines of study, reflection and social change appear not to have been directly related. In fact, at the time, they[1] had no substantive contact, if any that we know of.

What they shared, nevertheless, were questions of how language comes to be the medium of art forms. During the years following the 1911 Revolution, the great reform in writing and literature promoted the written vernacular, based on Mandarin,

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to eventually establish Modern Standard Written Chinese, replacing Classical Chinese written in the ancient literary language, which was not spoken by any modern population of speakers. The principle that the reformers came to implement was that the new literature needed to be written such that it was aligned with the modern spoken language (aptly termed: *baihua*, 白話 [clear speech, plain language]). During the same years, the young linguists of Moscow and St. Peterburg focused their work on parallel problems of how literary forms are linked to the patterns of language. The invention of the Vietnamese written vernacular, *nôm*, paralleled the same emergence of the written vernacular in literature throughout East Asia, including the historical precursors of Modern Standard Written Chinese itself. The idea of a transition of creative writing towards what we could call 'full expression' is actually a proposal for further study, the purpose of this essay.

For writers in East Asia, Classical, or Literary, Chinese basically responded to the same needs and played the same role as Latin did in Europe. One historical difference consisted in that the neighbouring cultures (Japan, Vietnam, Korea, etc.) that received Literary Chinese ended up maintaining its special status for much longer, into, precisely, the first decades of the twentieth century. In addition, the unique features of its writing system, the morphosyllabic (or logographic) characters, came to be an important factor in the transition towards vernacular writing with interesting implications for understanding poetic expression in particular. They are interesting as well for developments in other literary forms. Importantly, the factor of orthography in East Asia was not of the same kind as that in Europe.

The focus of our discussion on Vietnam stems from its especially close historical ties with Chinese culture and language,[2] in large part due to the many hundreds of years of deep influence in the literary realm.[3] The previously independent kingdom came to be incorporated directly into the northern empires approximately from the Han to the Tang dynasties for over 1000 years, ending in the year 932. Literature across all the genres continued to gravitate around writing in Literary Chinese and the Chinese language itself until alphabetic writing was officially adopted in the 1900s, ushering in the period of the New Poetry.[4] But during the many years of direct Chinese literary influence, there appeared one important exception. Despite the overwhelming prestige value of classical literature from China, creative writing in the Vietnamese language was given birth after independence during the first millennium, developing in parallel to poetry in Literary Chinese during all these years. This vernacular literary development was the exception, a kind of cultural undercurrent, one of enduring aesthetic value motivated by an overriding need by writers to capture the linguistic structures – particularly in its sound patterns, in the details – of the language they spoke natively.[5]

The libraries and temples that harbour the historical texts of this 'undercurrent' actually represent a massive geographically distributed archive. A good part of the corpus is in the form of wood blocks. Today, a large fraction of the remaining collections of this literature, precariously scattered around the country, is in danger of irretrievable physical degrading and loss.

The languages of East Asia

An emergence of similar vernacular expression proceeded in stages in all the neighbouring cultures that came into contact with Chinese culture; importantly, 'the exception'

emerged each time. It was evidenced, in addition to Japan and Korea (the most well studied and understood literary traditions in this regard), in the Tai-speaking Guangxi Autonomous Region bordering Vietnam to the north where Zhuang religious literature flourished. Perhaps one day, pending successful decipherment, the same will be revealed in the poetry of the extinct cultures of the Khitan and Jurchen empires as well as the surviving minority language communities of present-day China that undertook an adaptation of the morphosyllabic orthography of Classical Chinese. For each instance of adaptation, the initial conception and long-term development of vernacular writing obviously fell to the educated bilingual writers who had mastered both the Chinese language and its writing system.

An important consideration to take into account is the linguistic variation from one neighbouring culture to another. Some languages belong to the same linguistic phylum as Chinese (Sino-Tibetan) while others belong to different phyla. Even among the latter, we can contrast the languages that shared typological features that were 'closer' in a number of relevant respects to Chinese (for example in the case of Vietnam) from those where the relationship was significantly more distant (Japanese and Korean).[6] Then finally, there are the interesting cases of languages that belong to the same family, the Chinese family of languages: a branch of Sino-Tibetan.[7]

Literature, language and writing

In Vietnam, even during the years following independence, to be literate implied learning the Chinese language, an integral part of the literacy learning process, that of learning the characters. Then from within this same educated minority arouse generations of writers who took up the task of creating an autonomous character system – *chữ nôm* – based on the same logic and design features of Chinese orthography, that would then encode the Vietnamese language.[8] Evidence for its autonomy turned out to be that it was only legible to a literate speaker of the language (that is, not meaningfully legible to a literate scholar, for example, from Japan or China who did not speak Vietnamese). Subject to confirmation in the study of each of the cultures that we are considering in this overview, we can assume this special language and literacy ability among writers in each case during these years, when the design features of the Chinese writing system served as a model for new writing systems. Studying this literary phenomenon will contribute to understanding what appears as a common thread throughout East Asia. This underlying thread, in turn, may shed some light on the discussions among students of literature of the early twentieth century, alluded to above. They were the pioneers of language and literary reform in China following the 1911 Revolution, their colleagues in Japan, Korea and Vietnam itself, and those concerned with different but related theoretical questions in Russia.

A unique aspect of investigations on the Vietnamese-Chinese interaction is the attention given to the possible relationship between poetry of the oral tradition (having survived into the modern day to a surprising degree) and the poetic texts of *chữ nôm* (*nôm*, for short, as is customary). The potential importance of this link has been a theme in the work of American poet, translator and researcher of Vietnamese poetry John Balaban, such that it warrants here a review and assessment. Over a period of over 40 years, including during the recent activity of the Nôm Foundation (as its president), his work on Vietnamese poetics has been divided between:

- preservation and analysis of *nôm* documents, and
- compilation and study of the vernacular poetic genres of the oral tradition, of continued vitality primarily in regions outside of the urban centres.

Not only are these two literary and linguistic sources founding antecedents of modern Vietnamese poetry, historically, but there is evidence of a special interface relationship between them in history, a kind of mutual feedback, the one having nurtured the other and vice versa. To recap, the two interacting sources are the surviving documents of vernacular writing, and the surviving oral tradition poetic genres.

For argument's sake, we can concede that Classical Chinese largely sufficed, more or less, for prose and related texts specialised for information transmission. In addition, Classical Chinese would make for a recommended medium of literary production in general, and even for poetry, for example, in the elevated styles. The characters could largely be pronounced in Vietnamese. This method of reading, in fact, has been taken to be a unique feature of morphosyllabic writing systems. That is, the characters can be read in a special way, 'cross-linguistically,' in other languages in addition to Chinese (the 'origin' language and culture). To simplify greatly, this means that while preserving the meaning of the characters, the reader could decode them in each case with the vernacular language pronunciation, even without needing to know (in theory) the original pronunciation. But recall, that, in practice, before widespread literacy in the modern Vietnamese alphabetic script, proficient readers typically would have been bilingual, having knowledge of both the Chinese characters and the Chinese language itself.

Importantly, the kind of transition to vernacular literacy and literature that we will consider is different, as was mentioned briefly above, from the adaptation of alphabetic scripts, as in the case of the daughters of Latin and the cultures that received Latin as the literary language. Each grapheme of a morphosyllabic character script corresponds to a morpheme (typically carrying meaning); in contrast, letters of the Roman alphabet correspond to phonemes (without meaning).

But for poetry that responded to and was drawn from the Vietnamese culture and its oral history, the standard character system apparently could not faithfully and completely encode the language patterns of verse and other genres of popular culture. Following the logic of the 'meaning-based' method of reading, described above, it could have been pressed into service for this purpose, but the grammatical and phonological mismatches would have produced what we could call a 'low fidelity' written version.[9] Prior to the full elaboration of *nôm* a clear and faithful medium existed in the networks of oral composition, performance, transmission and learning, but one was not available for composing, properly, so to speak, poems in written form. A similar incentive existed for correcting the misalignment in religious texts, Buddhist monks being active as well in learning and perfecting *nôm* for producing texts for teaching purposes.[10] Later, the Catholic missionaries came to appreciate the same benefit of a better match between writing and speech. Thus, for religious teaching there existed a motivation to align texts more closely with the language spoken by the common people, who were not literate and did not understand Chinese. As we will see, there existed a similar incentive, in the realm of literature inspired by the poetic discourses of popular culture, to work towards the same kind of alignment between text and the spoken language.

Adapting the Chinese characters for new literary language

Recall that everywhere in East Asia, including in China itself, there was strong motivation to adapt the characters of Classical Chinese so as to better align written literature to spoken language. In each case, this adaptation took different forms and occurred during different historical periods. But it's important to keep in mind that the so-called 'cross-linguistic' reading alternative described in the previous section, reading characters for their meaning but pronounced in Vietnamese, for example, is not an 'incorrect' way of reading. Methods for reading the Chinese characters in non-Chinese languages emerged throughout the region. For example, *kanbun* (Chinese writing) was also highly esteemed in Japan well into the twentieth century. Characters, in Japan the *kanji*, could be given two pronunciations: *on-yomi* (Chinese language reading) or *kun-yomi* (native Japanese reading). The modern orthography preserves the *kanji,* exceptions and adaptations aside, each with the same kind of optional reading of either *on-yomi* or *kun-yomi*. Inserted text in (syllabic, or moraic) *kana* script serves to complete sentences making them grammatical in Japanese (in addition to help reorder the characters for correct syntax). The solution of *kana* goes back to the early years of Chinese influence. Its precursor, *man'yōgana* (developed during the eighth century), was the method of systematically using borrowed Chinese characters for their phonetic value. It was famously used for composing the great anthology of waka poetry of the Nara period (710—794), the *Man'yōshū*.[11] Basically, modern-day *kana* are *man'yōgana* that underwent simplification and standardisation. Poems written in *kanbun* could always be read simply in Chinese (the *on-yomi* reading) for a bilingual Japanese listener. But with a *kun-yomi* reading, without rearranging the word order and with no insertion of grammatical morphemes with *kana*, it could never really be a *Japanese* poem, linguistically, even though a listener might be able to make a good guess about what the poem 'is about.'

If a 'cross-linguistic' method of reading Chinese characters in the native language could have been perfected in Vietnam, why wouldn't it have been sufficient? In fact, as we just saw, it was not sufficient for full productivity and expression in Japan either.[12] A similar mismatch presented itself in Korea. The contrasting relationship between the types of Korean adaptation of the Chinese characters, *gugyeol* (annotated Chinese text) and *hyangch'al* (phonetic use of Chinese characters), is analogous to the relationship between *kanbun* and *man'yōgana*.[13] Thus, the adaptations of Chinese characters that more faithfully represented the grammatical and sound patterns of the language, *hyangch'al* (Korea), *man'yōgana* (Japan), and *nôm* (Vietnam), are examples of the common thread. They were adaptations that the neighbouring cultures of East Asia came upon as a solution to the problem of writing down literary language of a certain provenance.

In the end, as we will see, studying the adaptation and repurposing of the characters of Literary Chinese in the receiving cultures not only helps us better understand each of the literary traditions up to and including modern times, but in turn it will help us better understand the Chinese morphosyllabic system, 'at its source' and in its own internal logic. In each case, the adaptation followed from the same purpose: to achieve a closer match between the script and the spoken language. In relation to the 'center' (as Rome was for Europe), the languages of Vietnam, the Zhuang, Korea and Japan formed part of a 'periphery' of languages that belong to different linguistic families. Then analogously, another (closer) 'periphery' of languages is arrayed around the

central standard. Mandarin, as spoken in Beijing and the northern regions, and modern written Chinese more closely aligned with it, became the standard that replaced Literary Chinese. In this case, the closer periphery of languages belong to the same linguistic family – the Chinese family of languages. They, not surprisingly, will not be aligned with Modern Standard Written Chinese to the same degree (see Note 7). This interesting problem, of research and of practical implementation for creative writers, will come up when we consider the case of literature in Cantonese (as one example).

Literacy and the oral tradition

Interestingly, the motivation for Vietnamese writers to devote the extraordinary effort to design and perfect a new script and compose in *nôm* could not have been simply to have their work circulate in written form among readers in society at large. They and other academically educated readers were proficient in Literary Chinese, and reading a text in *nôm* required knowledge of the same Literary Chinese characters from which the vernacular script was derived. In other words, as mentioned above, there did not exist (the possible exceptions aside) a wider readership among monolingual speakers of Vietnamese. In addition, *nôm* writers were typically accomplished authors in Literary Chinese, the latter often their preferred language for writing (Nguyễn Ngọc Bích xv–xxi). At the same time, serious disincentives weighed down upon the creation and promotion of works in the native Vietnamese script especially during periods of civil conflict and repression by regimes that viewed it as subversive. Both hostile (to writing independent of Literary Chinese) Vietnamese officials[14] and invading armies, most notably from the Ming Dynasty, confiscated and destroyed thousands of *nôm* documents from one historical period to another. The Ming Dynasty invasion is credited with the liquidation of the entire written production in *nôm* during its 20-year occupation leaving modern scholars barely any record to examine prior to 1427. We could say that, not only in the realm of literature, the relationship between the two cultures was one of both massive borrowing and stubborn resistance.[15]

Two related imperatives must have motivated the persistence of authors to compose in Vietnamese *nôm*:

- The need for an outlet for creative writing that departed from the classical styles, taking up new forms that drew from linguistic patterns specific to the native language and traditional genres specific to the native culture. In China writers did the same, in a similar way giving rise to the emergence of vernacular-language writing.
- To be able to put at the disposal of readers, including themselves, a high-fidelity text aligned with the grammar and sound patterns of Vietnamese for reading performance to a listening audience.[16]

Writers often resided in communities distant from the urban centres, for example, those who passed all their examinations except the final, which was a requirement for the most prestigious administrative appointments. Conversely, singer-poets from the villages performed regularly in the court and around the city centres. In all of these contexts of verse-sharing that potentially promoted the creation and use of the *nôm* script, the appeal of the traditional genres that depended specifically on speech-

related language patterns could have been an impetus for the continuing proliferation and refinement of the script.

Writers in close contact with the rural singers of tale and the famous haiku-length verses of *ca dao* and other popular verse forms would have found it difficult to meaningfully bring these forms to the composition table imposing upon them the grammar and syllable inventory of Literary Chinese. In turn, the expanding social layer of local and regional bards gave the writers an audience that became national, enriching the original versions received at readings by repeated performance over time and across the countryside. Anecdotal evidence gives evidence for this relationship of writer and audience, in this case 'in reverse': reportedly, the author of the famous verse novel *Tale of Lục Vân Tiên*, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, composed the work by dictating the verses to scribes who possessed acceptable mastery in *nôm*.[17] The early years of the nineteenth century witnessed the apogee of the verse novel composed in *nôm*, *Tale of Kiều* (the Vietnamese *Evangeline: Tale of Acadie*) remaining to this day as representative of the surge in national literature.

Preserving the manuscripts and the traditional poetry

Much of the work of documentation has been carried out by the US-based Nôm Foundation (http://www.nomfoundation.org/) in close collaboration with its counterparts in Vietnam during the 10-year period of its activity, ending in 2019. Important research partners include the National Library and the Han Nôm Research Institute in Hanoi. A recent retrospective by the Institute's director, Nguyễn Tuấn Cường, summarises previous and ongoing projects, at the same time highlighting the urgency of the task of preserving extant manuscripts through digitisation.[18] Crucially, analysts will be able to complete the one-to-one correspondences between *quốc ngữ* and *nôm*, as the systems are ultimately compatible. However, without recourse to a digital glossary, accessible online, of the over 20,000 *nôm* characters, individually and embedded in continuous text, it will be difficult to achieve a reliable transliteration given the fact that the latter was never standardised and because of the natural variation involving hand written manuscripts. The ability to search through the new databases, however, will make it possible to apply the technology of word processing to all texts. Today, only a highly select number of specialists and scholars are fully literate in *nôm*, estimated at fewer than one hundred persons worldwide.[19] With digital processing and internet sharing capabilities, the work of decoding (which includes mastering the script) and analysis will expand by orders of ten in the short term, leading to greater access to the material and new discoveries. Among speakers of the language in the general public, there is already widespread interest in reconstructing the study of this literary heritage. At the time of publication of their report, the researchers estimated that less than 10% of the recovered archive has been rendered into *quốc ngữ*.

The study today of the art of the vernacular poets, recorded and transcribed by fieldworkers, goes hand in hand with the documentation of the *nôm* archives. Across the centuries, the oral and written traditions developed together. With universal access to music on the internet and near-universal literacy, it is likely that spontaneous village-based transmission and re-creation of the traditional poetry, as opposed to the organised concert for occasional listening, will eventually begin to erode. Thus, the task of recording and preservation of *ca dao*, *hat a dao, ca trù,* and other related art forms requires a

close partnership with the documentation and preservation project of the *nôm* historical manuscripts.

To take the first traditional genre, *ca dao* are typically sung without instrumental accompaniment, creating a 14-syllable couplet. The verses typically stand alone, but can be joined for the purpose of creating a narrative, for example, the verses linked by internal rhyme. The *ca dao* form, combining in this way for composing verse narrative, attained its highest expression in *Tale of Kiều* during the second decade of the nineteenth century.[20] Importantly, *Tale of Kiều* (3254 lines) was created as a written verse novel, composed in six–eight metre (*lục bát*) – based on the plot of a seventeenth-century Chinese novel – then to later enter the Vietnamese oral tradition. Subsequently, the two 'versions,' from the written and oral lineages, circulated in parallel, in close interaction with each other. In a project that perhaps also evidences this kind of contact, directed by Nguyễn Quang Hồng at the Han Nôm Research Institute, transcriptions of *ca dao,* recorded in *nôm*, are compiled from the period during and prior to the years of the early twentieth century.

Predictably, the material of oral tradition origin contains a lower frequency of Chinese-language borrowed vocabulary as compared to poetry of written origin (not of transcription). By some estimates, the frequency of borrowed vocabulary in *ca dao* may be even lower than in some registers of conversational speech (Balaban, *Ca Dao Vietnam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry* 14). Such an interesting finding, if confirmed by analysis of representative samples, would shed additional light on the history of Vietnamese literature and language. Together with observations related to rhyme and rhythmic schema, these comparisons suggest an origin of *ca dao* many years prior to the Han Dynasty occupation beginning in 111 BCE.

The most common scale type for singing the verses is the pentatonic, pitch space varying down to a scale of two notes. The melody itself is actually an extension of lexical tone patterns following the word choice of each line. In speech and prose, tones are naturally distributed in a random way. In *ca dao*, following six–eight time, tones fall regularly (as would be expected in tone-language poetry in general): the second, sixth and eighth syllables must be of 'even' tone; fourth syllables must be any of the other tones, considered 'sharp.' In *ca dao*, rhymes fall on syllables whose vowel carries an 'even tone' (Balaban, *Ca Dao Vietnam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry* 6–7).

This device of internal rhyme linking, apparently, is also applied spontaneously, as described in one case where two couplets came to be joined to create a new poem in an impromptu performance, the singer noticing 'by accident' a potential rhyme association. Linking tones can also be implemented with the alternate metre of *song-thất* (double seven couplet) and with the addition of rhymes beyond those required. Musical features are extensively integrated into the overall metrical patterns, incorporating styles that could be described as cantillation. In these genres melody serves an important mnemonic function evident in authentic performance.[21]

Access to a native-language script allowed for the coming together of the folk genres and the learned styles (of foreign origin). This convergence, culminating in the nineteenth century, formed the core achievement of a specifically national literature that could draw from the resources of its own language. The iambic metre of *lục bát* maintaining regularity with the patterns of even and sharp tones tied to the patterns of internal

rhyme, and elements of musical structure mentioned above, made it the ideal medium for the ascendance of the verse narrative during this period.[22]

To summarise this section it would be fair to say that:

> two great traditions lie behind any Vietnamese poem: the oral folk poetry of the common people and *nôm* poetry of the elite. These two great and ancient streams of poetic tradition feed nearly every literary endeavor in Vietnam, even today, and even in prose.[23]

'[Thus] we could say that '*ca dao* is the fixed foot of the literary culture's compass' (Balaban, *Translating Vietnamese Poetry* 77). A similar observation applies to the compositions of Hồ Xuân Hương (1772—1822), in regard to:

> her own skill in composing two poems at once, one hidden in the other, which capture her audiences – from common people who hear in her verse echoes of their folk poetry, proverbs, and village common sense, to Sinophile court mandarins who bantered with her in verse, who valued her poetic skills, and who offered her their protection.[24]

Foreign influence and adaptation

Looking back in history, if we consider the entire sweep of change, the examples offered so far can be better understood in each context of contact with other cultures and in the context of internal emergence. Three prolific periods of Vietnamese literature can be studied in each case associated with a different script for creative writing. The first and the third were periods of a far-reaching external cultural influence, the second of independent adaptation. The first two, in addition to overlapping, were the longest, ending (together) with the turn of the nineteenth century – the literature of Vietnamese authors written: (1) in Classical Chinese and (2) in Vietnamese *nôm.*

With political independence from China (928 CE), we saw how the second (autochthonous and independent) period, of *nôm* composition, eventually flourished, developing in parallel with Classical Chinese. It paved the way, probably uniquely, for the Vietnamese verse novel, interesting also for the early and productive participation of women, Hồ Xuân Hương being only the most famous. In apparent contrast to China, with the verse novel experiencing its most important continuous development from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the new authors may have accounted for the introduction, to a greater extent, of previously taboo themes. Notable works such as 'Tống-Trân Cúc-Hoa' and 'Nhị Độ Mai' featured active female protagonists and heroines and the individual modelling of characters in general.[25] The verse novel was the primary genre that effected the transition from folklore poetry to literature.

While the emergence of the prose novel and the New Poetry Movement of the third period are linked to the influence of European culture (the French colony), and the alphabetic system for writing, the 1911 Revolution in China and the New Culture Movement (ironically, influence again from the northern neighbour) played an important role. The New Poetry Movement reacted not only to the rules of T'ang versification in rhyme scheme and balance of lines implemented by tone and grammatical pattern but also against the rules of *lục bát*. As poets of the early twentieth century viewed it, the new concepts and themes (e.g. deep sensibility, individual peculiarity, nonconformity, desire) required new forms.

However, analysts have pointed to a persisting continuity in modern verse with one traditional folk poetry form in particular, *hát nói* (2 or 4 consecutive lines of 8 syllables with a rhyme scheme, in a poem of indefinite length). Authors, in fact, took advantage of an interaction between European styles and native poetic melody, patterns that echoed old rules of the oral tradition in which melody is created with the regular distribution of tones and rhythm. From French poetry, caesura could be borrowed (by the poet The Lu, for example) for this purpose. Similarly, syntactic inversion was similar to a well-known folk poetry device. The underlying musical features to a certain, perceptible, degree anchored New Poetry to the vernacular tradition.[26]

For Vietnamese writers, the prose novel, written in *quốc ngữ*, eventually replaced the verse novel in the domain of published literature. The first actual works of prose fiction were versions of folk narratives, often marked by rhythm and parallelism of sentence structure. Then, with the accessible alphabetic system, there began to emerge a literate audience that did not need to rely on verse patterns for memory. Translations of foreign novels, fiction modelled on the familiar French novels, gave way to true modern novels of Vietnamese authors that were not set in China and not about the heroic deeds of feudal lords. Representative prose was the *Qua Dua Do* by Nguyễn Trọng Thuật and the short stories of Phạm Duy Tốn (1883—1924), revealing a straightforward narrative voice, departing from the oral narrative style of strict chronological order.[27]

For 2000 years, the influence of foreign culture was all encompassing. Adaptation defined the features of a distinctive national literature, first in the autochthonous genres, with their maximum expression during the nineteenth century, written in *nôm*, followed by the modern national literature of the twentieth century, the direct inheritance of the current generations.

Questions from the study of the past that are relevant today

The history of the relationship in literature between Vietnam and China, and between Vietnam and Europe, together with study of parallel developments throughout East Asia, hold lessons for the field of poetics that apply at some level to all literary cultures. Parenthetically, these include all human cultures because what 'literary' usually refers to is verbal art in general, including both the written and the oral traditions. Returning to the mention in the Introduction to the two currents of research and reform of the early 1900s, we can now see how they are more pertinent to the problem of language and poetry than what was initially suggested.

The main idea here starts with the reciprocal relationship between:

- poetic creation of the oral tradition/popular culture, and
- writing in the vernacular language of the nation and its culture.

The relationship is interesting because, regarding the latter (writing in the vernacular), the claim is that the positive effect was not restricted to the writing of poems. The claim also applies to the development of the script or writing system itself. In addition, as students of East Asian literature have pointed out, including the work of authors cited in this essay, the relationship went in both directions. To review: writers appropriated the

verse of the village to chart new directions, for which an extensive readaptation of the Chinese characters was necessary. As a proposal for further research, we can propose that the reason for this singular measure lies in the dependence of poetic discourse on the sound patterns and other language-specific grammatical features of Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and so forth. The proposal is that poetry depends on these linguistic resources in a way that prose does not to the same degree, such that for writing poems down the alignment between the language spoken and the language written must be closer. We should review again the examples from East Asia, cited in Notes (5), (6), (10) and (15), examples discussed by Taylor, Handel, Nguyễn and Huỳnh, that support this proposal. In Vietnam, there emerged an incentive to reform the standard Chinese script to create *nôm*. Then, with the new texts in circulation, new audiences were formed, even in the absence of any change in literacy in the general population, which in Vietnam did not occur until the generalised learning of *quốc ngữ*. The memory resources of oral re-creation not only popularised the works of writers, but enriched the oral tradition itself, completing the cycle.

This idea deserves the convocation of a comprehensive research programme from within the humanities in collaboration with the corresponding fields in linguistics to examine the historical evidence and evaluate the hypothesis: verbal art is tied more closely to the musical properties of the voice.[28] There is no problem of alignment in the domain of the spoken discourses, prosaic and poetic. The problem arises when the writing system of a foreign language, at a certain point in history, is still the only option for written composition. This is the sub-field in sociolinguistics known as the study of diglossia.[29]

On the question of the morphosyllabic characters, the problem of alignment can now be revisited: while there is an element of truth in the claim that the Chinese characters can be learned and read 'cross-linguistically,' there is also a limitation in regard to this capability. The conclusion would be (paraphrasing the above proposal) that we come up against this limitation sooner in some genres than others. Examples come from within the family of Chinese languages itself. What *nôm* and *man'yōgana* provided to creative writing in Vietnam and Japan many years ago finds a modern-day analogy within the different Chinese-speaking cultures. Recall that we introduced this topic above in the section: 'Adapting the Chinese characters for new literary language.' For example, regarding written composition in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong for the so-called 'new genres' (which include poetry) there has emerged a vernacular-based adaptation of the standard Chinese characters, that are Cantonese-specific. A similar discussion and debate in regard to a vernacular-based adaptation of the standard characters for literature in Minnanyu-speaking Taiwan raises the same issues.

A recent study of bilingual immigrants from Vietnam arriving to Taiwan illustrates some of the concepts in this discussion.[30] In elementary school, as speakers of Cantonese they learned reading and writing in a bilingual school or in after-school tutoring. In almost all cases, without knowledge of Mandarin, the children learned the characters via Cantonese, their native-language or their second Chinese language if they spoke Hakka or Hainanese at home, for example. Often, teachers were also Cantonese speakers with limited or no knowledge of Mandarin who used their own literacy learning materials. According to the testimony of the immigrants, learning the characters in this manner was successful, even as they recalled the almost exclusive reliance on

methods of copying and memorisation. Years later, as adults, they reflected on the process of learning Mandarin as a second language (L2) in their new country. Two observations came forward as virtually universal: first, the predictable outcome of how knowledge of the Chinese characters, learned via Cantonese, came to be a vital learning resource for learning L2 Mandarin, sparing them the difficulties of co-national immigrants who only spoke Vietnamese. The second observation was noteworthy, made by all, except for one, who commented on this topic: that even though at first Mandarin was their beginner L2, they could perceive how, in general, learning to read and write Chinese via Mandarin is 'easier' or 'more systematic' because of how the characters are aligned more closely between 'what you say' and 'what is written.'

Unique among the ancient adaptations of the Chinese characters is Zhuang writing that is still passed on from generation to generation by village priests. Its design, involving extensive recombination and adaptation, shows interesting parallels to the design of vernacular Cantonese characters.[31] Material from the oral tradition figures prominently in preserved Zhuang manuscripts: legend, folk myth and song, couplets and proverbs.[32]

Modern Standard Chinese writing itself descended from a vernacular literature that dates back hundreds of years; finally displacing Literary Chinese in the reform of the May Fourth Movement for the same reasons as in the above examples.[33] The new standard, consolidated since the first half of the twentieth century, corresponds today to the language spoken by the vast majority of the population of China and Taiwan, Mandarin, upon which the national language, *guóyǔ*, is based. In some ways, this historical development is parallel to the linguistic landscape of Vietnam, Japan and Korea years ago. The same bilingual ability obtains for writers in China whose mother tongue is another language of the Chinese-language family. The motivation for writing in the vernacular, parallel again, tends to be for expression in the 'new genres' and in related creative writing (as in the examples given by Snow in Note 29), tied to a current rise in cultural awareness. As would be expected, the less formal and more colloquial the vernacular text the greater is the need to possess knowledge of the specific language with which it is aligned. Again as in all the previous examples, non-prosaic literature appears to place itself along the key dimension: as the discourse type finds itself further and further away along the continuum from expository prose, the more difficult it becomes to compose texts exclusively with the characters of a 'foreign language.' Non-prosaic poetic language, when written, seems to demand that writers compose verses that are 'set' to the language as it is spoken, that the written version, as was mentioned in a previous section, is one of 'higher fidelity.' What 'higher fidelity' refers to here is to the patterning of sound and the patterning of parallel structures that are specific to the grammar of the language, as it is spoken. This was perhaps the reason why the Vietnamese poets who looked to *nôm* as the medium of a new national literature sought out literary material in the countryside.

The Chinese scholars of the New Culture Movement might have taken keen interest in the work of their Russian contemporaries because both would have probably shared a suspicion that a hypothesis being presented at the time (not far away in Japan) by Ernest Fenollosa was on the wrong track.

Today with the benefit of hindsight we can see how Fenollosa's idea, coming to be highly influential in literary theory for many years, that the character system was largely pictographic, took him too far afield. Such a hypothetically ideographic writing

would be capable of overriding phonology, the language's patterning of sound; that is, it would be able to cross languages in a very special way:

> 'based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature.'[34] They being more 'natural,' the Chinese language would also be more 'dramatic,' and its poetry speaking at once with the 'vividness of painting and with the mobility of sound.' Reading, then, is like 'watching things'. (Fenollosa and Pound 45)

While we can accept the proposal that morphosyllabic characters are special in some important ways, there can be no culture where *verbal* art could be disembodied (by the invention of an orthography) in the manner that Fenollosa and later Ezra Pound imagined. Poetry cannot be separated in this way from the sonorous qualities of the human voice. A line of speculation for the Russian philologists and linguists was that poetry and, the oral tradition in general, antedated writing by thousands of years. As in Russia and Eastern Europe, at the turn of the nineteenth century, non-literate East Asian poets probably outnumbered their literate counterparts by at least one order of magnitude.[35] As the researchers cited in previous sections have called attention to, the national literature of Vietnam was cultivated to a large degree by the poetic discourses of the oral tradition. If the historical evidence is able to confirm it, this proposal could be considered cross-culturally far beyond the East Asian context.

Conclusion: cross-cultural and cross-language poetics

A benefit of studying the linguistic aspects of creative writing is to gain a better understanding of the results of contact between different cultures. In addition to the linguistic domain we can study the purely sound patterning (musical) aspects of poetry. In this case, cross-cultural influences (borrowing and convergence) between the artistic genres will be important to take into account.

On the one hand, we considered the long-term contact in Vietnam with the Chinese language and culture, emphasising the poetic genres because of the roots of the national literature in the oral tradition. Then within Southeast Asia, further research on the mutual influences between Vietnam and the other cultures of the region may eventually reveal the full contours of other relationships of this kind. To take just one example, we are familiar with the important example of the contact with the southern Cham Empire, conquered by the Vietnamese in the fifteenth century, its descendants remaining today as small and isolated communities.[36]

Looking back on the discussion, with its emphasis on recovering the most complete record possible of traditional poetry, it is important to keep in mind that this verbal art tradition has been performed and passed down largely by singing the verses. This is where there might be a potential continuity with research on the modern popular culture, again in regard to its cross-cultural aspects.

Notes

1. In order of mention: (1) the historic reform of language and literature of modern China culminating in the May Fourth Movement and New Culture Movement, enacted decisively in the years to come, Chow Tse-Tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), and (2) the fieldwork of

the Russian folklorists of late nineteenth century, James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova, "The Russian Oral Epic Tradition: An Introduction," in *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), xv–xlix, and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ), Boris Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the Formal Method," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, edited by Ladislav Matejka and Ktystyna Pomorska (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971[1926]), 3–37.

2. Mark Alves, "Sino-Vietnamese Grammatical Vocabulary and Sociolinguistic Conditions for Borrowing," *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* 1 (2009): 1–9, and Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).
3. The present proposal for further research is based on still incomplete lines of investigation initiated during a two year collaboration with the Graduate Institute of Linguistics of the National Chengchi University in Taipei that included a series of four research visits to the Institute of Han Nôm Studies and the Vietnam National University in Hanoi from 2018 to 2019. See: Phan Trang and Norbert Francis, "Chữ nôm and the Cradle of Vietnamese Poetry," *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 3 (2019): 69–71.
4. Phạm Hải Văn, "The Influence of T'ang Poetry on Vietnamese Poetry Written in Nôm Characters and in the Quốc Ngữ Writing System," doctoral dissertation (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1980).
5. Keith Taylor, "Literacy in Early Seventeenth-century North Vietnam," in *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia*, edited by Michael Aung-Thwin and Kenneth Hall (London: Routledge, 2011), 183–98 and Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
6. See the study by Zev Handel, *Sinography: The Borrowing and Adaptation of the Chinese Script* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), on this important distinction and how it affected the course of vernacular writing development in each case.
7. This grouping of languages, belonging to the 'Chinese family,' follows general consensus in linguistics that languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese and Wu are independent one from the other, as they are not mutually intelligible. Alternatively, following common practice or political criteria, they are categorised as 'dialects' of one language: Chinese (according to this view, not a 'family of languages').
8. The term *chữ nôm* is often used together with the broader category of *hán nôm*. The former refers specifically to the Vietnamese adaptation of Chinese characters, creating an independent script. *Hán nôm* encompasses the entire corpus of ancient texts produced in Vietnam, written either in Chinese (*chữ hán*) or in Vietnamese (*chữ nôm*). Written materials often included both chữ hán and (Vietnamese-specific) *chữ nôm* characters in the same document, there being an important overlap between the two systems, in some instances more and in others less, depending on text type and audience. In Vietnam, today, Chinese characters, per se (referring to the script used to write the Chinese language), are called *hán văn* (Chinese script), *chữ hán* (characters-Chinese) or *chữ nho* (characters-Confucian). Literally, *chữ nôm* means 'characters-Southern.'
9. 'Low-fidelity' refers to the degrees of mismatch between the language itself, as spoken, and a script (e.g. borrowed from a foreign language/culture) in which the native language grammar and sound patterns are not represented faithfully enough.
10. Nguyễn Đình-Hoà, "Graphemic Borrowing from Chinese: The Case of Chữ Nôm – Vietnam's Demotic Script," *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* 61 (1992): 383–432; and Trần Trọng Dương, "A Mandala of Literacy Practices in Premodern Vietnam: A Study of Buddhist Temples," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 13 (2018): 88–126.
11. John Bentley, "The Origin of Man'yōgana," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64 (2001): 59–73.
12. The question about the misalignment with Literary Chinese could be rephrased: Because the Korean and Japanese languages differ typologically, to a significant extent, from Chinese, writers were compelled to account for this grammatical difference. In comparison, with Vietnamese grammar being 'closer' to Chinese, why couldn't writers simply make the necessary accommodations in reading and composing? Interestingly, the Zhuang language,

similarly compared in grammar to Chinese, and similarly contrasted to Japanese and Korean, also followed the *nôm* model.

13. Yoon Seon-Tae, "The Creation of Idu," *Korea Journal* 50 (2010): 97–123.
14. In Vietnam, a 1718 imperial order called attention to persons who had 'taken vulgar sentences from tales in the national language, and without any distinction between what could be done and what should not be done they have engraved them on woodblocks, then printed and sold.' The imperial decree stipulated that the practice 'must be prohibited.' 'Henceforth, all those who own in their homes either printing blocks or printed copies of such books must turn them in to the mandarins so that they can examine them and destroy them completely' (cited in Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 412). In contrast, during other periods *nôm* attained either official status (Hồ Dynasty 1400–1407) or widespread recognition (nineteenth century years of the Nguyễn Dynasty).
15. Huỳnh Sanh Thông (editor), *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
16. Trần Trọng Dương, personal communication, 2019.
17. Thi Nhiť-Quýnh Cao and John Schafer, "From Verse Narrative to Novel: The Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47 (1988): 756–77.
18. Nguyễn Tuấn Cường, "Research of Square Scripts in Vietnam: An Overview and Prospects," *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 3 (2019): 189–98.
19. Phan Truyen Van, Nguyễn Kha Cong and Nakagawa Masaki, "A Nôm Historical Document Recognition System for Digital Archiving," *International Journal on Document Analysis and Recognition* 19 (2016): 49–64.
20. John Balaban, *Ca Dao Vietnam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2003), 4.
21. John Balaban, "Vietnamese Oral Poetry," *Literature East and West* 16.4 (1975): 1217–243.
22. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "Introduction," in *The Tale of Kieu*, edited by Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New York: Random House, 1973), 3–29.
23. John Balaban, "Translating Vietnamese Poetry," *Manoa* 11.2 (1999): 76–80.
24. John Balaban (translator), *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2000).
25. Laszlo Szegö, "On the Genre of the Truyện," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47 (1994): 417–34.
26. Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha-Trang, "The Role of French Romanticism in the New Poetry Movement in Vietnam," in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, edited by Truong Buu Lam (Manoa: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1987), 52–61.
27. Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha-Trang, "The Emergence of Modern Vietnamese Literature," paper presented at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, UCLA (November 17, 1999): 1–8.
28. The work of recovering and documenting the vast body of oral tradition poetry is closely related to the study of the national musical traditions, Stephen Addiss, "Hat a Dao, the Sung Poetry of North Vietnam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973): 18–31. Coinciding with the emergence of the new poetic styles (in turn tied to widespread literacy in the alphabetic script, *quốc ngữ*), international influences in popular music began to be felt beginning with the founding of the Conservatoire de Musique Français d'Extreme-Orient and other European sources, Jason Gibbs, "Reform and Tradition in Early Vietnamese Popular Song," *Nhạc Việt* 6 (1997): 5–33. The *nhạc cài cách*, 'reformed music,' arose in parallel to the New Poetry movement. Rather than an opposition between traditional and modern, study of the linked literature-music developments will be able to find important continuities in each phase of transition and convergence associated, as they are, with cultural contact. Initially, discussion of musical convergence came to be highly politicised; today it is much less so.
29. The authoritative study of diglossia involving the Chinese languages is Don Snow, *Cantonese as Written Language: The Growth of a Written Chinese Vernacular* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). Two illustrations of the concept in relation to literacy would be Vietnam and the region of China where Cantonese is widely spoken. Before the

modern era, in Vietnam, among the urban elite both literacy and knowledge of Chinese coincide, and conversely in the villages non-literacy and monolingualism in Vietnamese. Today, among speakers of Cantonese, young people in Guangdong are, as a rule, bilingual and learned literacy via Mandarin. In Hong Kong, potentially there would be more interest in the use of vernacular Cantonese characters among the significant portion of the population that does not speak Mandarin. The converse, conceivably, would be the case in Guangdong, aside from the difference in using simplified and traditional characters.

30. Lê Thị-Nhâm and Norbert Francis "Language and literacy learning of Chinese-Vietnamese immigrants in Taiwan," (in preparation).
31. Robert Bauer, "The Chinese-based Writing System of the Zhuang Language," *Cahiers de linguistique Asie Orientale* 29 (2000): 223–53.
32. The remarkable method of intergenerational transmission from priest to acolyte, described in fieldwork report by David Holm, in some special way, apparently, has preserved the integrity of the Zhuang texts – the master's copy is normally burned along with personal belongings on the occasion of his death, David Holm, "A Typology of Readings of Chinese Characters in Traditional Zhuang Manuscripts," *Cahiers de Linguistique-Asie Orientale* 38 (2009): 245–92. In addition, copying by hand of the texts by apprentices is carefully supervised because, in part, many if not most apprentices do not read (decode the Zhuang characters skillfully) from the pages of manuscripts in the normal sense, but rather largely recite from memory the content that they have learned by repeated listening and reciting.
33. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, "The Origins of Modern Chinese Literature," in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, edited by Merle Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 17–36.
34. Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, a Critical Edition*, edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008 [1918]), 41–60.
35. For a fair and balanced assessment of the Fenollosa-Pound project, readers can refer to the discussion in: James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), Xie Ming, *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry: Cathay, Translation, and Imagism* (New York: Garland, 1999) and Yip Wai-Lim, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).
36. Stephen Addiss, "Music of the Cham Peoples," *Asian Music* 2 (1971): 32–38.

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