

COMMENTS ON DEMOTIC CHARACTERS THROUGH LỤC VÂN TIÊN

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When and by whom demotic characters were invented is a mystery yet to be solved. The fact is that Hàn Thuyên was the first to use demotic characters in his literary writing, and in the Trần dynasty other authors like Nguyễn Sĩ Cố, Chu Văn An, Hồ Quý Ly followed his example. When the Lê dynasty was first established, Nguyễn Trãi was the next author to succeed them. Many others under Lê Thánh Tông's reign also composed in demotic characters and their works are still available now in the collection entitled *Hồng Đức Quốc Âm Thi Tập*. The next Mạc dynasty saw the coming of *Bạch Vân Quốc Ngữ Thi* by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm. However, not until the Lê Trung Hưng period were the most famous works written in demotic characters. Those included *Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc* by Nguyễn Gia Thiều, *Chinh Phụ Ngâm Khúc* (translated by Đoàn Thị Điểm), *Hoa Tiên truyện* (composed by Nguyễn Huy Tụ and revised by Nguyễn Thiện), *Sơ Kinh Tân Trang* by Phạm Thái, *The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du and other anonymous works like *Phan Trần*, *Nhị Độ Mai*, *Bích Câu Kỳ Ngộ*, *Phạm Công Cúc Hoa* ...

In the above-mentioned works of the North, demotic characters already displayed some systematic order, though still far from perfect. More notably, when they were transported to the South, many words were misspelt due to the Southerners' unusual accent.

Here are some examples to illustrate the point:

1. Mistake in tone.

畧 (lúc) was misspelt as 陸 (lục) in
*Chẳng may mà gặp **lúc** nghèo* (v. 35)

2. The initial consonant *v-* was misspelt as *d-*:

鋏 or 琰 or 緜 (vòng) was misspelt as 泐 (dòng)
*Bốn người ngồi lại một **vòng** làm thơ* (v. 476)

3. The final consonant *-t* was misspelt as *-c*:

坦 (đắt) was misspelt as 得 (đắc)
*Ai từng bán **đắt** mà ngồi chợ trua* (v. 1550)

4. The final consonant *-c* was misspelt as *-t*:

碧 (biéc) was misspelt as 別 (biết)
*Trải qua mấy dặm **biéc** ngàn* (v. 2003)

5. The final consonant *-n* was misspelt as *-ng*:

半 (ban) was misspelt as 邦 (bang)
***Ban** mai ngàn dặm băng trình mới an* (v. 48)

6. The final consonant *-ng* was misspelt as *-n*:

聲 (thiêng) was misspelt as 天 (thiên)
*Bấy lâu thờ có linh **thiêng** việc gì* (v. 1574)

The misspelling is totally due to the inaccuracy of the southern accent. Other examples of such misspelling can be found in Trương Vĩnh Ký's version of *The Tale of Lục Vân Tiên* (published by Claude & Cie in Saigon, 1901– 4th edition) and of *The Tale of Kiều* (1875, 1st edition) written in quốc ngữ, the latin Vietnamese script. The following examples are found in *The Tale of Kiều*:

1. Trương Vĩnh Ký misspelt “giã” (return) in “*Đoạn trường thơ phải đem mà **giã** nhau*” as “**giã**” (good-bye); thus misled Abel des Michels into translating it as “adieu”.
2. “Thang” (hot water) in “***Thang** lan rủ bức trường hồng tẩm hoa*” was misspelt as “**than**” by Trương Vĩnh Ký, who misunderstood that it meant a kind of coal for burning water.

In conclusion, the wrong forms of some demotic characters and the misspelling in the Vietnamese national language (quốc ngữ) in the South have led to serious consequences. Even Trương Vĩnh Ký, the scholar, made the same mistakes. More clarifications are to be seen in the complete presentation.

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