

Chữ Nôm Dao in Việt Nam: The Study and Sustainability of a Traditional Script

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2006, a two-year project began in the Vietnamese province of Lào Cai to study and promote the use of the traditional scripts of Dao communities. Similar to Nùng and Tày, speakers of Dao, a language that forms one half of the Hmong-Yao or Meo-Yao ethnolinguistic group, employ classical literary characters (Chữ Nho), at times changing them to reflect Dao phonetics. With this script, often referred to as Hán-Dao or Chữ Nôm Dao, literate members of Dao communities have recorded medicinal practices, marriage rituals, oral traditions, lineage histories, and other texts that offer glimpses into local life. Old Dao texts, though numerous, along with the practice of composing in the traditional script have become threatened, in a sense, by factors such as domestic and international tourism and the need for fluency in the language of the State, namely, Vietnamese (tiếng Việt, tiếng Kinh, or occasionally, tiếng chính phủ). In a country with a multi-ethnic society such as Vietnam, the literary traditions of national minority communities can not only offer us important insights into the history and cultural practices of those communities. They can also help us understand the multi-lingual history (and present) of Nôm scripts.

This paper makes the case for a multi-ethnic understanding of altered traditional scripts in Vietnam with the example of Dao communities in contemporary Lào Cai province. My discussion of Nôm Dao has two parts. The first focuses on the writings system itself and the variety of extant texts. Examples of a differentiated phonetic system for reading traditional script, arcane grammar, and graphic alterations all contribute to an argument for the existence of a Dao Nôm script similar to that used for spoken Việt, Nùng, and Tày. The texts themselves, collected by the “Handwritten Archives” project in Lào Cai province, can help us understand the migrations of Dao into present-day Vietnam and important aspects of Dao religious life. The second part of this paper discusses the contemporary situation of national ethnic minority scripts in Vietnam with an emphasis on Dao communities. Through a consideration of the achievements and setbacks of the collaborative “Handwritten Archives” project, I will comment on the challenges and contradictions facing researchers, Dao educators, and institutions of cultural authority (such as the Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin) in terms of balancing economic development with the sustainability of a fading textual tradition.

The project referenced in this abstract, which will conclude in December 2008, is a cooperative effort between the Office of Culture and Information of Lào Cai Province, Philippe Le Failler of the EFEO-Hanoi, and myself with the financial and administrative support of the Ford Foundation’s Hanoi office.

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Bio Statement

A doctoral candidate in History at the University of Washington, Bradley C. Davis has conducted archival research and fieldwork in the PRC and Vietnam since 2003. Currently, he is finishing his dissertation on post-Taiping bandit groups in the Đại Nam/Qing Empire borderlands. His plans for future research include the history of ethnological thought in Vietnam and the social history of crime during the Nguyễn 19th century. He lives in Spokane, WA where his wife practices law.