

A Yao Script Project

—We know that the state (nhà nước) has an interest in this, but this is our class. We did this on our own.

Đặng Văn Cao, Educator, Lào Cai Province

Bradley C. Davis



IN 2006, THE FORD FOUNDATION, through their former Hanoi Office, began funding a project that combined the establishment of an educational network with an effort to account for texts conserved by members of the Yao (Dao) ethnic group in Vietnam.¹ An act of cross-institutional co-operation took place that, over the next two years, resulted in a project that combined textual collection with education in the northern Vietnamese province of Lào Cai. A Yao script project was managed by Trần Hữu Sơn of the Office of Culture, Sport, and Tourism, Philippe Le Failler of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in Hanoi, and myself in an attempt to forge a new context for a traditional form of literacy.

Following some brief historical background to the Yao ethnics in Vietnam and a consideration of “culture” in contemporary Vietnam, this article will discuss some details of the Yao Script and Education Project, an ongoing collaborative effort in Lào Cai Province.

The Yao/Mien ethnics

From a historical perspective, the Sino-Vietnamese term *Dao* (獠, although also written 瑶 in the PRC), pronounced “Yao” in standard Chinese, provides a clear example of administrative ethnogenesis.² It first appeared during the Tang Dynasty (618-905) as a label indicating exemption from corvée labor service and liberty of movement in the hills of southern China.³ Originally an “imperial political designation,”⁴ Yao also became a term of self-reference for communities negotiating their position relative to state authority.

In China and Southeast Asia, these communities have a history of migration in reaction to catastrophic events. Many Yao migrations into territory that is today governed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam resulted from the political and economic changes in China. Researchers in the People's Republic of China recently reconstructed Yao migrations out of China on the basis of linguistic changes that indicate the approximate time and area from which Yao communities traveled.⁵ In Vietnam, historians and ethnologists have portrayed these migrations as direct results of social disruptions in southern China.⁶ Within contemporary Yao communities themselves, oral and literary traditions record stories of hardship, flight, and resettlement compelled by circumstances beyond their control.⁷ During the early 20th century, ethnographers in China noted that many Yao communities kept written records of their historical status of corvée exemption along with lineage histories of migration.⁸

As Fan Honggui has noted with respect to other non-Han communities, linguistic reformers in China attempted to strip the labels of certain groups of their epithetical content. Consequently, Yao communities in southern China were officially referred to as 瑶 rather than 獠, the latter transmitting denigration via the inclusion of an initial marking (also known as a classifier or “radical”) that meant “dog.”⁹ The official name for the Yao in southern China thus became written with a character that meant “pure” or “precious.”¹⁰

Official terminology for national ethnic minorities in Vietnam inherited a somewhat different legacy from the distant past. Although the “dog” marking in reference to non-Việt (or non-Kinh) populations appears in administrative records, royal chronicles, and other texts detailing the history of Vietnam before French Colonial Rule, the last legal documents to mention communities that we would today refer to as “Yao” or “Dao” employed the term “Mán.” Usually written as 蠻, *Mán* described communities that, conceptually, resided outside the realm of lowland, sedentary civilization and, administratively, existed on somewhat remote terms with the state's routines of taxation. In the 19th century Nguyễn Imperial Code, *Mán* became an administrative label applied to groups that, according to 21st century categories, would include the Hmong and the Yao in Vietnam.¹¹ However, as Jonsson has noted for other parts of Southeast Asia,

the term Yao often carried more or less exact connotations.¹² In the case of Nguyễn Vietnam, for instance, the *Đông Khánh Descriptive Geography* glosses Yao as the name of a group formally classified as *Mán*.¹³ Imperial tax regulations established during the Nguyễn Dynasty, however, lacked what Thongchai Winichakul, writing about 19th century Siam, has referred to as a detailed “differentiation of subjects.”¹⁴

Enthnology and ethnography

In an institutional sense, *ethnology* or the field of study concerned with ethnic groups (*dân tộc học*) did not take shape in Vietnam until the French Colonial Period and only formally became known as *dân tộc học* after 1954.¹⁵ In terms of the, at the time, related field of *ethnography*, the military official turned university professor Bonifacy published his *Cours d'Ethnographie Indochinoise* in 1919.¹⁶ As Jean Michaud reminds us, much of the foundational work that supported the professional effort to establish ethnology and ethnography as discrete fields of knowledge was “incidentally” carried out by missionaries.¹⁷

With the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in 1976, the contemporary ethnological vocabulary of Vietnam began to take shape. In 1979, Decision 121 eliminated the term *Mán*, which retains the sense of “savage” or “barbaric” in contemporary Vietnamese (*Mán Di*). The Yao communities in northern Vietnam became officially known as “Dao”, the Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation of the same character employed by most Yao people to refer to themselves in a multicultural context.¹⁸

Perhaps the most significant element of cultural life in the Vietnam for the Yao was the language of political power: Vietnamese. Yao speakers traditionally, and for some presently, employ a character-based writing system that would be familiar to readers of Classical or Modern Chinese. The official language of Vietnam, Vietnamese, features a Romanized script (*Quốc Ngữ*). Although a similarly Romanized script was developed for recording the sound of spoken Yao (*tiếng Dao*), education and government business is primarily conducted in Vietnamese.¹⁹

At a time when the language of power had eroded traditional literacy, our project attempted to contribute to the continuance of the Yao script. We soon became concerned with a larger and more difficult issue: contrasting and competing notions of culture.

Notions of culture

In the Vietnamese-language paperwork involved with the planning and implementation of this project, the word “văn hóa”, conventionally rendered as “culture” in English, appeared with great frequency. While a full historical and socio-cultural treatment of this term and its English analogue lies well beyond the scope of this essay, in terms of our project văn hóa and the strategy of its translation warrant a brief discussion.

A Sino-Vietnamese term, *văn hóa* appears quite frequently within the titles of state institutions at multiple levels in Vietnam. From Hanoi, the Ministry of Culture and Information (*Bộ Văn Hóa Thông Tin*) and the Ministerial Department of National Culture (*Vụ Văn Hóa Dân Tộc*) supervise the work of provincial-level offices dedicated to issues of culture.

Specifically regarding ethnic communities such as the Yao, these central state institutions of culture in Vietnam express their mission in terms of conservation. In 2005, a conference hosted by the Department of National Culture focused on the issue of popular festivals among ethnic minorities. For the participants of the conference, the “cultural life” (*đời sống văn hóa*) that such festivals nourished has increasingly come under threat since the initiation of economic reforms in the late 1980s.²⁰ Elements of cultural life, according to these institutions, must be “conserved” (*bảo tồn*). Culture, from this perspective, is in a precarious state.

Left: Bridge on road to village school. Photo by the author. Right: Yao script class. Photo by the author.

Participants in our Yao script project, whether administrators, advisers, or students and teachers, repeatedly made reference to Yao culture (*văn hóa người Dao, cái văn hóa người Dao, văn hóa dân tộc Dao, di tích văn hóa Dao*). Yao culture, in this sense, described a set of practices that differentiated one group from others. For the Lào Cai Office of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (*Sở Văn Hóa Thể Thao, Du Lịch*), culture was something of vital importance. It represented both an officially-defined concept and an endangered, distinctive ethnic minority “cultural life.”

Rather than adhering to a conservationist approach towards culture or viewing culture as an ossified set of attributes under assault from the homogenizing tide(s) of modernization, nationalism, or state standardization, our intention was to provide a new context for Yao culture and Yao cultural practices in contemporary Vietnam.

An “educational network” and Yao texts

Our project established an “educational network” (*mạng lưới giáo dục*) consisting of locally-managed classes in Yao script and the educators that managed them. With the invaluable assistance of the late Hoàng Sĩ Lực, a literary scholar and expert on both the varieties of spoken Yao and the idiosyncrasies of the character script, we assembled a curriculum development panel. Leaders of Yao script classes were able to meet and exchange ideas and experiences.

The educational network also involved field evaluations. During the first year of the project, due partly to the rhythms of administration in Lào Cai, the establishment of classes in villages and communes occurred at a glacial pace. However, by 2008 we were able to conduct several evaluations of active classes. Following are excerpts from evaluations of two classes in Bảo Thắng District.

In Xuân Quang Commune, Bàn Văn Thanh leads a 26-student class that convenes three times a week in the evening. He emphasized that the Yao community in the surrounding area valued the opportunity to teach the traditional script in a formal setting. Bàn Văn Thanh, speaking in Vietnamese, also expressed his satisfaction that lessons about “proper living” (*sống hiền*) and “maturity” (*trở thành người*) that appear in traditional texts can now be read directly by Yao youth, without the medium of phonetic transliteration. The students in Bàn Văn Thanh's class noted their enthusiasm for learning the traditional script. One young student remarked that she intended to study at the Hán Nôm Institute in Hanoi, which also has occasional programs on character scripts used by ethnic minorities. Such an education, she hoped, would enable her to further the revival of traditional literacy in her community.

Also in Bảo Thắng, Lý Văn Hòa and Đặng Á Cao led an independently established class of 18 students meeting six nights a week. As did the previous educator, these two teachers stressed the connection between moral education and traditional literacy. Lý Văn Hòa and Đặng Á Cao also included singing as part of their curriculum, commenting that this is a vital skill for weddings and other ceremonies.

“Before this project,” Hòa stated with some enthusiasm, “we did not dare teach these kinds of classes.” Taught the character script by their fathers, both Hòa and Cao felt obligated to renew the convening of classes for the youth of the community. Despite their excitement for receiving assistance from the project, which involved consulting with members of the Lào Cai government, both instructors remained adamant about the autonomy of their classes. As Cao asserted, “we know that the state has an interest in this, but this is our class. We did this on our own.”

The fact that their class was independently established (*tự lập*) indicated a larger trend in Lào Cai Province. By the end of 2008, we had accounted for sixteen independently founded classes out of a total of nineteen. When we consulted with the provincial and commune-level authorities, we learned that many Yao

“Culture”, Texts, and Literacy in Contemporary Vietnam

communities had begun setting up classes on their own without the involvement of the project or the local government. For these independent classes, the project was a convenient source of classroom supplies, but the impetus came from within the communities themselves.

Although generally shy, some students in Hòa and Cao's class volunteered to discuss their experiences. One young student remarked that, within his own family, only his grandparents still remember the character script. His education in the class had facilitated a closer relationship with his grandparents, he claimed. Also, he found himself developing an improved ability in reading contemporary Chinese, an ability that, as he savvily reminded us, the Vietnamese government currently attempts to cultivate among its citizens.

A Yao text corpus

Coupled with the educational network was a cooperative attempt to account for Yao texts. Using flashless digital photography, we recorded texts in the traditional character script that members of Yao communities willingly shared. Although many people were keen to permit their texts to be recorded, on several occasions members of the project were politely denied permission. The collection of texts, as a principle, was a strictly voluntary effort. At the end of 2008, we had accounted for over 11,000 texts.

These texts covered a wide variety of subject matter related to Yao communities. Contents included songs for children, epic poems, lineage stories, guidelines related to customs and cultural practices, traditional handicrafts, weather forecasting according to traditional methods, and animal husbandry. Other books discussed matrimonial customs, descriptions of ceremonies, rites to be performed to ensure a felicitous marriage, family mores, and funerary practices. A specific category of text dealt with disease prevention, remedies for illnesses, and recipes for folk medicines. While some of these 11,614 books each addressed only one subject, the majority of books were compilations that contained chapters dedicated to different topics.

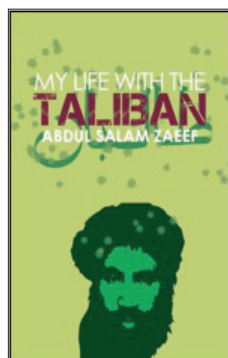
Currently, we are developing an analytical index for the digital collection as well as pursuing plans to publish the entire corpus on CD format. We hope to contribute to the body of knowledge about Yao cultural practices, religious culture, and history with a widely-accessible resource. Our relatively small effort will supplement the excellent work already done by the Yao Texts Project at Munich University and other projects currently underway around the world.

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Notes

- 1 In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the ethnonym “Dao” refers to any one of seven ethnolinguistic subgroups the members of which all speak a mutually intelligible Sino-Tibetan language. They share this ethnolinguistic orientation with other communities in the Peoples Republic of China (Yao), Thailand (Mien), as well as other peoples living in France, French Guyana, Réunion, and North America. Within Vietnam, while the *standard* Vietnamese pronunciation of Dao has an initial consonant similar to the English z or the German s in *Sie*, most people who fall under this administrative label pronounce the term “Yao,” a reading that coincidentally resonates with Vietnamese as it is spoken in the southern region of the country. Depending on the particular subgroup, people officially known as “Dao” might also refer to themselves as “Mien” or “Mun.” For the sake of clarity, I will use the term *Yao* except when quoting Vietnamese language terminology, in which case I will use *Dao*.
- 2 For approaches to ethnogenesis in historical and anthropological research, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. pp238-282.
- 3 Ralph A. Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. pp9-10.
- 4 Ibid. p10. For historical studies of the Yao, see also Jacques Lemoine and Chao Chien (ed), *The Yao of South China: Recent International Studies*. Paris: Pangu, Editions de l'AFÉY, 1991; and Richard Cushman, “Rebel Haunts and Lotus Huts,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Yale University, 1970.) In Chinese, some important studies include: Huang Yu and Li Weixin, *Guangxi Yaozu shehui lishi diaocha*. Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1983; and Fan Honggui, “Yaozu Cong Zhongguo Jinru Yuenan Qiantan” in Fan Honggui (ed), *Huanan yu Dongnan Ya Xiang'guan Minzu*. Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2004.
- 5 Fan Honggui, “Yaozu Cong Zhongguo Jinru Yuenan Qiantan” in Fan Honggui (ed), *Huanan yu Dongnan Ya Xiang'guan Minzu*. Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2004. pp 278-288 and
- 6 For instance, Bế Viết Đăng “Dân Tộc Dao” in Nguyễn Văn Huy (ed), *Bế Viết Đăng: Dân Tộc Học Việt Nam, Định Hướng và Thành Tựu Nghiên Cứu 1973-1998*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2006. pp331-373.

- 7 A recent volume contains examples of these stories in the form of song. “Thơ Ca Thiên Di” (A Song of Displacement) in Tran Huu Son (ed), *Thơ Ca Dân Gian Người Dao Tuyền*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Dân Tộc, 2005. pp275-316.
- 8 Litzinger, *ibid*.
- 9 Fan Honggui, “Fengjian-Zhiminde Shidaide Yuenan Minzu” in Fan Honggui (ed), *Yuenan Minzu yu Minzu Wenti*. Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1999. pp1-3.
- 10 R.H. Mathews, *Chinese-English Dictionary*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. p1090, entry 7288. Entry 7287 defines the older Yao appellation as “the name of a tribe.” (*ibid*)
- 11 Viện Sử Học (edit), *Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Điển*. Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1993. quyển 44. pp312-339
- 12 Hjørleifur Jonsson, “Does the House Hold? History and the Shape of Mien (Yao) Society,” *Ethnohistory* 48:4 (Fall 2001), pp613-654.
- 13 Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, Philippe Papin (ed); *Đống Khánh Địa Dư Chí [同慶地輿志]*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 2003. Hưng Hóa section, 63A-B
- 14 Hội Điển and Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910,” in Andrew Turton (ed), *Civility and Savagery: Ethnic Identity in Tai States*. Richmond, Surrey (UK): Curzon Press, 2000. pp38-62.
- 15 Pelley, *ibid*. pp87-111.
- 16 Lieutenant-General Bonifacy, *Cours d'Ethnographie Indochinoise: professe aux élèves de l'École Supérieure d'Agriculture et de Sylviculture*. Hanoi: Impremiere d'Extrême-Orient, 1919.
- 17 Jean Michaud, *“Incidental Ethnographers:” French Catholic Missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan Frontier, 1888-1930*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- 18 For a succinct summary of “Decision 121,” see Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. pp103-112.
- 19 “Tiếng Dao” has been used to document songs and epic poems, thus making them somewhat more accessible to a Vietnamese-speaking audience. However, linguists in the SRV have engaged in extensive research using the International Phonetic Alphabet. See Đoàn Thiện Thuật and Mai Ngọc Chừ, *Tiếng Dao*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1992.
- 20 Bộ Văn Hóa Thông Tin and Vụ Văn Hóa Dân Tộc, *Báo Tôn Lễ Hội Dân Gian Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2007. p7.



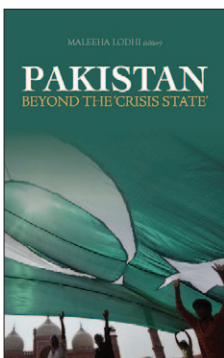
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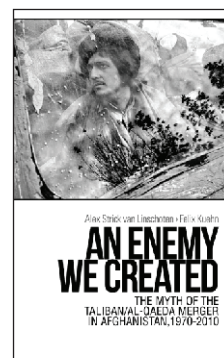
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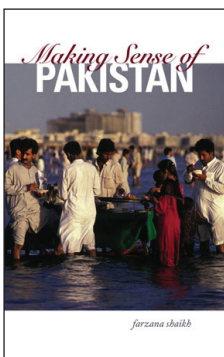
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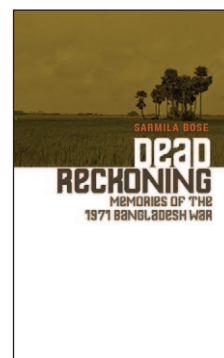
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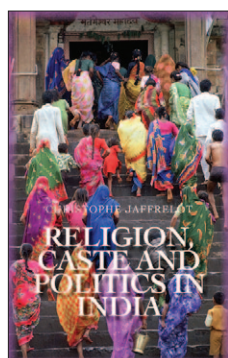
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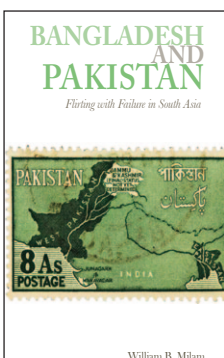


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