A Yao-Script Project

—We know that the state (nâteo nho) 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 cooperation between 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 Duy Tấn Son of the Office of Culture, Sport, and Tourism, Philippe Le Falier of the École Française d’Étrange-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 ethnie in Vietnam and a consideration of “culture” in contemporary Vietnam, this article will focus on the details of the Yao Script and Education Project, an ongoing collaborative effort in Lào Cai Province.

The Yao/Mien ethnie

From a historical perspective, the Sino-Vietnamese term Dao (although also written as “Yao” or “dao”) employed the term “Mán” (usually written with a character that meant “pure” or “precious”).2 In an institutional sense, the Yao were a group officially referred to as “Dao”, in contemporary Vietnamese (Mòn Đao). The Yao communities in southern 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.3 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 (Tạng Đạo), education and government business is primarily conducted in Vietnamese.4 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 “dog” (con) conventionally rendered as “cultura” 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 vẫn hồ and the strategy of its translation warrant a brief discussion.

A Sino-Vietnamese term, vẫn hồ 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 (Bộ Văn Hóa Tích Cận) 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.6 Elements of cultural life, according to these institutions, must be “conserved” (bảo tồn). Culture, from this perspective, is in a precarious state.

In the case of Nguyễn Việt, for instance, the Dòng Khoê Descriptive Geography glosses Yao as the name of a group formally classified as Mán.7 Imperial tax regulations established during the Nguyễn Dynasty, however, lacked what Thiengutils Wiesochak was writing under “Món” in Saïm, has referred to as a detailed “differentiation of subjects.”8

Enthnology and ethnography

In an institutional sense, ethnology or the field of study concerned with ethnic groups (đồn tộc) did not take shape in Vietnam until the French Colonial Period and only formally became known as dơn tộc học after 1954.9 In terms of the, at the time, related field of ethnography, the military official turned university professor Bonifacy Bobaty published his book Dai Dao in 1925.10 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.11 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 Món, which retains the sense of “savage” or “barbaric” in contemporary Vietnamese (Món Đạo). The Yao communities in southern 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.12 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 (Tạng Đạo), education and government business is primarily conducted in Vietnamese.13

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.

Participants in our Yao script project, whether administrators, advisers, or students and teachers, repeatedly made reference to Yao culture (đời sống người Dao, dân tộc người Dao, dân tộc đồn 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 tides 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 (mando gelo due) consisting of locally-managed classes in Yao script and the educators that managed them. With the invaluable assistance of a local literacy 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 Bố Thắng District.

In Xuân Quang Commune, Bùn Văn Thành led 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. Bùn Văn Thành, speaking in Vietnamese, also expressed his satisfaction that lessons about “proper living” (sống ngỗng) 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 Bùn Văn Thành’s class noted their enthusiasm for learning the traditional script. One young student remarked that she intended to study at the Hân 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.

In Bò Thắng Village, Lý Văn Hòa and Dào Á Cao led an independently established class of 18 students meeting six nights a week. As the previously educator, these two teachers stressed the connection between moral education and traditional literacy. Lý Văn Hòa and Dào 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,” Hịa stated with some enthusiasm, “we did not dare teach these kinds of classes.” Taught the character script by their fathers, both Hịa and Cao felt obligated to renew the conveying 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 and Hịa 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 (tu lício) 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
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 Hia 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 also 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 corpora
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 and useful resource. The Yao, as a principle, was a strictly voluntary effort. At the end of 2008, we had accounted for over 11,000 texts.

Bradley C. Davis
Eastern Washington University, USA
bcampdavis@gmail.com