

The Third International Conference on Vietnamese Studies Hanoi. 4-7 December 2008 The name of Red River: an evidence of cultural diversity in Vietnam history

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1. The Red River and its names in history

1.1. The Red River plays a critical role as a spine of historical and cultural life of Ha Noi, the millennium-civilized capital, as well as of the entire Tonkin Delta. The river's trunk stream flowing through Ha Noi and its branching distributaries spread out to form a fertile delta: the Red River Delta. Until now this river has made its appearance with a variety of nominal terms in historical records and folkloristic traditions. Due to the river's great importance to the Vietnamese community, its names present more or less clear reflections of cultural traces belonging to the generator of these terms. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the differences among the river's names in origin and formation, to an extent, will shed some light on cultural diversity of the Vietnamese history at the very cradle of the national culture.



Figure of the Red River's sub-basin in Vietnamese territory

1.2. There remains a *widely*

and strongly
held view

concerning language classification that Southeast Asia is home to 5 language families, namely Sino – Tibetan, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Tai – Kadai, and Miao-Yao [emphasis TTD's, 1999]. Vietnam regarded as a linguistic miniature of Southeast Asia is a full convergence of these five families. This framework can serve as a good starting point to take the Red River's names into consideration with a hope of identifying their linguistic origin as well as eradicating their cultural divers. When giving names to the Red River in their own languages, the inhabitants of the region definitely recorded them in history. For that reason, these toponyms can provide a strong evidence to confirm the cultural convergence of a specific region like the Tonkin delta and such a concrete civilization as the Red River civilization, which is one of the main roots leading to the diversified culture of present-day Vietnam.

1.3. The Red River springs up in China's

[Yunnan](#)

province in the Ailao mountain range. Entering Vietnam at

[Lao Cai province](#)

, the river flows generally southeastward through Yen Bai, Phu Tho, Ha Tay, Vinh Phuc, Ha Noi, Hung Yen, Ha Nam, Nam Dinh and Thai Binh before emptying into the

[Gulf of Tonkin](#)

. Each section of the main channel possesses distinct names. Interestingly, a variety of terms can refer to the same section in different historical periods, which is overruled by cultural and social situations. It can serve as a firm foundation to recognize the linguistic derivation and cultural multifariousness of these river names.

1.3.1. Vietnamese historical documents [QSQTN, t4 (1997), 254], [NVS, (2003) 349] reveal that the Red River made its mark in old Chinese territory as

Lan Thāng, Nguyễn Giang, Ma Hà

(or

Lư Xá

)

, *Lê Hoa*

and

Âu

River, and it bore the name of

Thao

River when flowing into Vietnamese geographical region. Modern-day geography, however, has demonstrated that

Lan Thāng

is the name of Mekong's upstream originating in China rather than the upper course of the Red River as had been shown in traditional historical records.

1.3.2. The Red River in Vietnamese land has taken on such names as

Thao

,

Nhã/Nhĩ Hà

,

Phú Lương

,

Bách Hạc, Tam Đới, Đới Hoàng,

Xích Lương, Hoàng Giang

and

Lô

or

Lô Giang

, which are attested in classical accounts as follows:

-

Thao

River [NVS, (2003) 349; QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-

Nhã Hà/Nhĩ Hà

River [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 256].

-

Phú

Lương

River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186]. In fact, this name is cited in

An Nam chí lược

(The Concise Records of Annam) by Cao Hùng Trưng.

-

Bách

Hạc

River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186; Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-

Tam Đới

River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186; Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-
Đi i Hoàng

River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186; Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-
Xích Đàng

River

Đàng

river [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 297].

-
Lô

River or

Lô Giang

River

[QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

These official texts suggest that

Phú Lương

and

Lô

or

Lô Giang

are the two earliest toponyms. The

Phú Lương

term arose from Cao Hùng Trưng's time and had been employed in the reigns of Ly Kings. The

Lô

or

Lô Giang

name came into existence in the Tran dynasty and has been testified in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*

(

Complete Annals of Great Viet). It is also shown that the two river-names display a rather mutually successive than reciprocally exclusive order in history.

In addition to these documented terms, another name for the River which comes from oral tradition is

Cái

River. Since the French colonial period, it has taken the name of "rivière rouge" (Red River) on account of the reddish-brown heavily silt-laden water. As a consequence, we have solid grounds for supporting that the currently widespread name

Hàng

or

Hàng Hà

came along in the XIX century.

2. In brief, the Red River has been labeled with 10 different toponyms (and their allonyms) for its written and verbal identifications, which fall into three major divisions in terms of naming method and origin.

2.1. The toponyms depicting the river's peculiarities such as

Cái, Thao, Nhĩ Hà/Nhà Hà

and

Hàng/ Hàng Hà

bound together as the first type.

-
Cái

River means “Primary River” in a literal sense, whose proprietors are Austroasiatic speaking people. This specific noun is compatible with a number of Vietnamese basic words: “ngón tay

cái

” [the thickest finger = thumb], “đường

cái”

[high street]

’,
“sông

cái”

[main river], “cờ

cái”

[to be a banker (in card games)], etc. It is pretty easy to see that the river was identified by dwellers due to its vital role in the Tonkin Delta.

-
Thao

River, a Tai-Kadai originating term, also functions as a way for expressing “the Principal River”. Socio-linguistically, too, Nghe An province shows tremendous similarities, where The Tai people called

Thao

River (a.k.a

Lam

River) “n

Pao

” meaning “the chief river”. (In the conference on

Flower Tai language and culture

held by Yunnan Institute of Social Sciences in

Xinping

autonomous

county, Yuxi city, Yunnan province in 2000, we observed that the Tai people in Xinping gave name to the Red

River’s upstream in Chinese territory as “n

tao

” referring to “the main river of the region”).

-
Nh

Hà

Nh

River (or

Nh

Nh

Nh

River) is considered to date back to the Ming

Dynasty after

invading

Great

Viet.

“Đ

Great Nam) quoting from “

Đ

Geography

of the

Great Qing

Empire

) unequivocally points "The attribution of the

Nhà Hà

name may have risen from the ground that Hoàng Phúc under the Ming Dynasty paid attention to the helix-shaped river when constructing the Đồi La citadel" [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 186]. Obviously, the meander current structure of the

Nhà Hà

River gives its name in Sino and then in Sino-Vietnamese form.

-
Hàng

/

Hàng Hà

means "the red-water river". From "Đồ i Nam nhĩ t thĩ ng chí" (Geography of Unified Great Nam), it has been deduced that the toponym of

Nhà

or

Nhà Hà

had been applied to the river until the middle of the XIX century. When occupying Vietnam, to serve the need for river-name textualization, the French opted for the peculiarity of red water as priority and recorded it in their own language. There, meanwhile, still remains another point of view, though in a preliminary fashion, that the term of

Hàng

/

Hàng Hà

is produced by the Sino or Vietnamese possessors. It, however, seems only superficially true

in this account. We have not found any historical data which provide conclusive proof of the official existence of this term before the XIX century. Our reasoning gets a further confirmation from the fact that other Sino-Vietnamese names including

Nhà Hà

,

Phú Lương

,

Lô Giang

,

Đồi Hoàng

and the folkloristic name of

Cái

River had been popularly used at that time. For these arguments, we lean on the position in favor of the French origin of the

Hàng

/

Hàng Hà

name.

2.2. The second type relates to the Sino or Sino-Vietnamese toponyms indicating the geographical areas through which it flows, including

Bách Hắc

,

Tam Đồi

,

Xích Đồi

and

Đồi Hoàng

:

-
Bách Hạc

used for the river's section at the Bách Hạc confluence, where the rivers of Red and Đà meet, is certified in "Đài Nam nhứt thống chí" (Geography of Unified

Great Nam) [

citing from

"

An Nam Chí Lược"

(The Concise Records of Annam) by Cao Hùng Trưng]: "

Phủ Lộ

River (alias

Lô

River) in Đông Quan district, Giao Châu prefecture, encounters

Bách Hạc

River (Tam Đái county) at its upper stream, flowing eastwardly through

Đài Hoàng

River (Lý Nhân district) before discharging into the sea"[QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 186].

-

Tam

Đài

River

,

according to "Đài Nam nhứt thống chí" (Geography of Unified

Great Nam)

, is named after Tam Đái/Đài county where the river moves along. This classical text explains: "Being laid down by ancient custom, the river has been named for each partial chunk – for instance, ... the segmentation at Bách Hạc confluence is known as

Tam

Đài

River

,

..." [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-

Xích Lộ

has been employed for the section of river in Lộ Châu region. Ample assertions can be drawn from "Đông Khánh địa dư chí" (Geography of Lộ Khánh): "The chief river, namely

Nhà Hà

, is also known as

Xích Lộ

, which is the river flux in Khoái Châu" [QSQTN, (2003), 251]. "The prolong-history region Khoái Châu (located in present-day Hưng Yên province) is famous for such toponyms as

Đông Châu

Temple,

Xích Lộ

Estuary, being a precious reservoir of all generations and holding an indispensably strategic position" [PHC (1960), 80].

-

Đài Hoàng

(or

Hoàng Giang

) is exclusively used for the river's segmentation from Hưng Yên to the Hoàng Giang confluence (or Vông)

confluence) of the two rivers of Hồng and Trà Lý, through Lý Nhân district before flowing into the sea [QSQTN, Vo3 (1997), 340].

It is interesting to note that the second-type river-names are widely used in texts and documents. It is the usage restriction, we realize, that reflexes their exotic origin as Sino-Vietnamese terms.

2.3. The other type of names consisting of

Phú Lương

and

Lô

/

Lô Giang

cannot be beyond the scope of study. These Sino or Sino-Vietnamese terms are named after neither the river's characteristics nor the geographical regions through which it runs. As transparently represented in the authorized historical records, they, however, are the oldest and the most official and oft-cited terms in history. It seems to us that their archaic-ness and their exclusion from the two previous types hold promises from historical linguistic perspective.

Some recently declaimed accounts on originations of river-names in particular and toponyms in general by linguists including TTD (2001), (2005) lend us strong grounds to believe that

Phú Lương

and

Lô Giang

are possible outcomes of the Sinicization and then Sino-Vietnamization process of Austroasiatic-originating words.

In other words,

Phú Lương

and

Lô Giang

are formally Sino or Sino-Vietnamese, but semantically are Vietnamese indigenous names.

3. In the following section, particular emphasis is laid on proofs for the Austroasiatic origin of the two toponyms

Phú Lương

and

Lô Giang

.

3.1 In the first place, a remarkable feature can be observed in patterns of Vietnamese place-names that some disyllabic Sino and Sino-Vietnamese terms have equivalent monosyllabic original-Vietnamese nominal words (also known as

Nôm

toponyms) [TTD (2005)]. Note also, only one of the two syllables of Sino and Sino-Vietnamese toponym has historically phonetic (and lexical in some cases) relationship with the

Nôm

word. The historically phonologic closeness can be taken as a reasonable indication of indigenous-Vietnamese sources of these Sino or Sino-Vietnamese names. The following pairs are supposed to be reliably indicative of this correspondence:

Indigenous-Vietnamese Sino-Vietnamese

Rum

(River)

Lam

Giang

Ṃ c (Village) Nhân
Ṃ c

Chèm/Trèm (Village) Ṭ
Liêm

Cḥ p̣
(Village)
Cá
Ḷ p̣

Tṛ u (Village) Phù
Ḷ u

Etc.

Thoroughly considered, the Vietnamese phonological history shows us that the above indigenous-Vietnamese syllables namely

Rum, Ṃ c, Chèm/Trèm, Cḥ p̣

and

Tṛ u

display a undeniable phonetic connection to such Sino syllables as

Lam, Ṃ c, Liêm (Ṭ Liêm), Ḷ p̣ (Cá Ḷ p̣)

and

Ḷ u (Phù Ḷ u)

[NTC (1989), (1995)].

The same logic can be equally utilized for

Phú Ḷ ng

and

Lô Giang,

where one syllable in the disyllabic form is a fuller account of native-Vietnamese origination.

3.2. When considerations have been taken carefully,

Ḷ ng (Phú Ḷ ng)

and

Lô (Lô Giang)

are possibly the present-day reflexes of the older forms in Austroasiatic languages.

3.2.1. In respect of the

Lô Giang

term,

Giang

is apparently a Sino component referring to “river”, and then the entire word

Lô Giang

designates literally “

Lô

River”. Despite being Sino-bearing form, the first syllable

Lô,
therefore, may resolvedly descend from a river-denoting Austroasiatic ancestor. Further evidence can be gleaned from other original-Vietnamese hydronyms. As have been known,

Lô
River is the contiguity of Thao River to constitute the main channel of Red River. There still exists such phonetic variants of

Lô
as
La
(
La
River in Hà Tĩnh and other regions),
Rào

(
rào
Quán
in Quỳnh Trĩ;
rào Núi
, also called Gianh River, in Quỳnh Bình;
cả a rào
, the meeting place of Núi Mũi's river mouth and Cửa River in Nghệ An; and so on), which all share the same meaning "river".

Under Vietnamese phonological rules,
lô ~ la ~ rào
are probably derived from the identical root. The historical equivalence between
lô ~ la
is transparently recognized for the common liquid initial sound

l
and the similar front vowels
ô ~ a
(except a minor difference in vowel's wideness).

The correspondence between
lô/ la ~ rào
, though dimly realized, is still sufficiently indicative of a diachronic relationship
. In terms of onset, the change of [l] into [r] is a general phenomenon in Vietnamese
(lim ~ rim, lâm ~ râm, l m ~ r m, long ~ r ng, lê ~ rê, etc).

In terms of rime, the equivalence between a single rhyme (comprising of one vowel) and a double rhyme (consisting of a vowel and a semi-vowel coda) has been highly supported from the following dialectal pairs of words:

Northern Dialects North-Central Dialects

Meaning

trũ trâu
buffalo

trũ trũ
betel

River (or Chu River) in Thanh Hoá,

Phú Lũng

River in Thái Nguyên, etc. There are also adequate cues to permit the writer to infer *with considerable certainty*

that

Lũng

bears a comparative similarity to such other words as

long (

Hoàng

Long

River, Ninh Bình),

công

(

Công

River, Thái Nguyên),

rông

(

Đà Rông

River, Quảng Trị) and

rìng

(

Đà Rìng

River

, Phú Yên).

The Vietnamese phonological history conclusively proves that the evolution from Autoasiatic [*kl

ɔ

ŋ/kr

ɔ

ŋ] to its phonetic variants is a rule-governed practice. Admittedly,

sông

(designating river in general) is the first regular replacement form of *kl

ɔ

ŋ/kr

ɔ

ŋ [HTC (1964)], officiating as the generic element of nominal complexes like

sông

Hoàng Long,

sông

Phú Lũng,

sông

Lam Giang. It appears to be identical to the development from [*lo] to

rào

(

rào

Nội;

rào

Thanh, namely Bùn Hố River;

rào

Con) [For a comprehensive account, see NTC (1995)].

The second variant of the archaic [*kl

ɔ

ŋ/kr

ɔ

ŋ] is intimately associated with phonetic forms

𠵼 𠵼 *ng, long, công*

,
rông, r̄ 𠵼 ng,

which are dissimilar at first glance but historically satisfactorily related. Respecting initial consonant, the substitution of [l] with [r] and the internal disintegration

*kl/kr

into [l], [r] or [k] are fully in accordance with Vietnamese phonetic transformation rule. Concerning rhyme, the correspondences [oŋ] (ông) ~ [

o

ŋ] (ong) ~ [ãŋ] (ãng) are normal practice in Vietnamese. The equivalence between [oŋ] (ông) ~ [

o

ŋ] (ong) ~ [ãŋ] (ãng) and [

ɨ

əŋ] (𠵼 𠵼 ng), though vaguely recognized due to the different vowels, are still historically explainable. It is the popularity of parallel-functioning expressions in Vietnamese:

giông

bu 𠵼 m/

g 𠵼 𠵼 ng

bu 𠵼 m,

đàng/đ 𠵼 𠵼 ng

, màu

h 𠵼 ng/

màu

h 𠵼 𠵼 ng

,

náng

th 𠵼 t/

n 𠵼 𠵼 ng

th 𠵼 t, nói

ng 𠵼 ng

/nói

ng 𠵼 𠵼 ng, tr 𠵼 ng

ng hĩa/

tr 𠵼 𠵼 ng

ng hĩa that convincingly demonstrates the dualizability of vowels [o,

o

, ã]. All the above arguments lend further weight to the viewpoint that [*kl

o

ŋ/kr

o

ŋ] is the true ancestor of contemporary formations

𠵼 𠵼 *ng, long, công*

,

rông, r̄ 𠵼 ng.

In the final analysis, these results represent a solid affirmation about the Austroasiatic origin of the component

𠵼 𠵼 *ng (Phú 𠵼 𠵼 ng)*

. It is the consequence of Sinitification or Sino-Vietnamization treatment to the indigenous-Vietnamese ancient name, which is probably reconstructed as [*kl

o

ŋ/kr

o

ŋ] meaning 'river'. Some explanation for this hypothesis can be proposed from a historical perspective. In the Chinese dominant period, the Hán officials initially used Hán scripts

to record indigenous-Vietnamese names. The Vietnamese people, later, based on Han characters, to modify them into Sino-Vietnamese archaic toponyms in a creative way. The documentation of Red River's name as

Phú Lũng

is not an exception.

4. In summary, the Red River bears 10 toponyms and their allonyms, of which Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai originating names arose at the earliest stages of the development. After that, most of these river-names (except *Cái*) have undergone the Sinicized and/or Sino-Vietnamized handling process before shaping into modern-day substitutions.

4.1. In terms of linguistic origin, these toponyms belong to various genealogical strata.

The name

Thao

< [

**taw*

] referring to a main, principal river is supposed to transmit from Tai-Kadai languages, which is one of the most primary language families in North Vietnam, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Tai people making their homes and livelihoods in the spectacular mountains of the north with a long-history and diversified culture, left their traces in Red River's name.

Austroasiatic-originating hydronyms, in the mean time, reveal much more multifaceted issues. The toponym of *Cái*

is also named after the essential role of the river in inhabitants' life. Obviously, the same naming method of *Thao*

and

Cái

is a reflection of similar reality-mapping structure of Tai and Austroasiatic dwellers. This can be taken as a compelling indication of the two names' earliness in comparison to other terms.

The two names of

Phú Lũng

and

Lô Giang

, on the contrary, has gone a process of extreme change.

Lũng

and its variants

long, công, rông, rũng

may be originated from the obsolete [*kl

ɔ

ŋ/kr

ɔ

ŋ]. This reconstructed form possibly had shifted its function from a general noun denoting "river" to the specific element of a toponym, and then was Sinicized before shaping the present-day

Phú Lũng.

Similarly,

Lô/la/rào

are probably reconstructed as [*lo], which initially means "river". After Sinicization, this common noun became the simplex "

Lô

"River" or its dissyllabic variant "

Lô Giang

"River".

4.2. Through systematic analysis and comparison of formation and origin of the Red River's names, we come to the following conclusions about an interesting cultural phenomenon.

In age-descending order, the two Austroasiatic originating names

Phú Lương

and

Lô Giang

may be first ranked, the Tai-Kadai term

Thao

and the Austroasiatic name

Cái

stand on the second position, and the last is

Hàng/Hàng Hà.

Furthermore, as the outcome of a modification from a general noun to a proper noun,

Phú Lương

and

Lô Giang

are likely to be more ancient than such toponyms naming after the river's features as

Thao

and

Cái.

Phonetic transformation and semantic change reinforce each other in indicating the linguistic origins of these toponyms.

From cultural angle, the Red River is a conduit of mutual influence between Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai speaking inhabitants when the river seems to be the Southwestern boundaries of Tai-Kadai geographical distribution. The Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai toponyms, then, had passed through a process of Sinicization and Sino-Vietnamization. In conclusion, the Red River's names serve as a solid evidence of the cultural convergence or harmony of differently-originated inhabitants in history.

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