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 truck 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 Th□□ng, Nguyên Giang, Ma Hà
(or
L□ 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 Th□□ng
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
,
Nh□/Nhĩ Hà
,
Phú L□□ng
,
B□ch H□c, Tam Đ□i, Đ□i Hoàng,
Xích Đ□ng, 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].

-
Nh□ Hà/Nhĩ Hà
River [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 256].

-
Phú
L□□ng
River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186]. In fact, this name is cited in
An Nam chí l□□c
(The Concise Records of Annam) by Cao Hùng Tr□ng.

-
B□ch
H□c
River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186; Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-
Tam Đ□i

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

-
Đ□i Hoàng
River [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 186; Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-
Xích Đ□ng
River
Đ□ng
river [QSQTN, Vo.3 (1997), 297].

-
Lô
River or
Lô Giang
River
[QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

These official texts suggest that
Phú L□□ng
and
Lô
or
Lô Giang
are the two earliest toponyms. The
Phú L□□ng
term arose from Cao Hùng Tr□ng'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 Đ□i Vi□t s□ ký toàn th□
(
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
H□ng
or
H□ng 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/Nh□ Hà
and
H□ng/ H□ng 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], “đ□□ng
cái”
[high street]
,
“sông
cái”
[main river], “c□m
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
C□
River (a.k.a
Lam
River) “n□m
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□m
tao
” referring to “the main river of the region”).

-
Nh□ Hà
/
Nhĩ Hà
River (or
Nh□
/
Nhĩ
River) is considered to date back to the Ming
Dynasty after
invading
Great
Viet.
“Đ□i Nam nh□t th□ng chí (Geography of Unified
Great Nam) quoting from “
Đ□i Thanh nh□t th□ng chí” (Comprehensive
Geography
of the
Great Qing

Empire
) unequivocally points “The attribution of the
Nh 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 Đ i La citadel” [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 186]. Obviously, the meander current structure of the
Nh Hà
River gives its name in Sino and then in Sino-Vietnamese form.

-
H ng
/
H ng Hà
means “the red-water river”. From “Đ i Nam nh t th ng chí” (Geography of Unified
Great Nam), it has been deduced that the toponym of
Nh
or
Nh 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
H ng
/
H ng 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
Nh Hà
,
Phú L ng
,
Lô Giang
,
Đ i 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
H ng
/
H ng Hà
name.

2.2. The second type relates to the Sino or Sino-Vietnamese toponyms indicating the geographical areas through which it flows, including
B ch H c
,
Tam Đ i
,
Xích Đ ng
and
Đ i Hoàng
:

-
B□ch H□c
used for the river's section at the B□ch H□c confluence, where the rivers of Red and Đà meet, is certified in "Đ□i Nam nh□t th□ng chí" (Geography of Unified
Great Nam) [
citing from
"
An Nam Chí L□□c"
(The Concise Records of Annam) by Cao Hùng Tr□ng]: "
Phú L□□ng
River (alias
Lô
River) in Đông Quan district, Giao Châu prefecture, encounters
B□ch H□c
River (Tam Đái county) at its upper stream, flowing eastwardly through
Đ□i Hoàng
River (Lý Nhân district) before discharging into the sea"[QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 186].

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Tam
Đ□i
River
,
according to "Đ□i Nam nh□t th□ng chí" (Geography of Unified
Great Nam)
, is named after Tam Đái/Đ□i 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 B□ch H□c confluence is known as
Tam
Đ□i
River
,
…" [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-
Xích Đ□ng
has been employed for the section of river in Đ□ng Châu region. Ample assertions can be drawn from "Đ□ng Khánh đ□a d□ chí" (Geography of Đ□ng Khánh): "The chief river, namely
Nh□ Hà
, is also known as
Xích Đ□ng
, which is the river flux in Khoái Châu" [QSQTN, (2003), 251]. "The prolong-history region Khoái Châu (located in present-day H□ng Yên province) is famous for such toponyms as
Đ□ng Châu
Temple,
Xích Đ□ng
Estuary, being a precious reservoir of all generations and holding an indispensably strategic position" [PHC (1960), 80].

-
Đ□i Hoàng
(or
Hoàng Giang
) is exclusively used for the river's segmentation from H□ng Yên to the Hoàng Giang confluence (or V□□ng

confluence) of the two rivers of H□ng 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 L□□ng
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 L□□ng
and
Lô Giang
are possible outcomes of the Sinicization and then Sino-Vietnamization process of Austroasiatic-originating words. In other words,
Phú L□□ng
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 Autroasiastic origin of the two toponyms
Phú L□□ng
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

M□c
(Village) Nhân
M□c

Chèm/Trèm
(Village) T□
Liêm

Ch□p□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
(Village)
□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
Cá
L□p

Tr□u
(Village) Phù
L□u

Etc.

Thoroughly considered, the Vietnamese phonological history shows us that the above indigenous-Vietnamese syllables namely
Rum, M□c, Chèm/Trèm, Ch□p
and
Tr□u
display a undeniable phonetic connection to such Sino syllables as
Lam, M□c, Liêm (T□ Liêm), L□p (Cá L□p)
and
L□u (Phù L□u)
[NTC (1989), (1995)].

The same logic can be equally utilized for
Phú L□□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,
L□□ng (Phú L□□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 Qu□ng Tr□;
rào N□y
, also called Gianh River, in Qu□ng Bình;
c□a rào
, the meeting place of N□m N□n's river mouth and C□ River in Ngh□ 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, lè ~ rè, 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

*tru□□□□□□□□□

gú *gấu*
bear

gi *giây*
second, moment

chí *chấy*
louse

mi *mày*
you (informal)

A dialect geographical study, consequently, lends further weight to the view that preference is given to their historically phonetic and lexical familiarity.
La/lô/rào
are likely to be younger evolutions from the same obsolete form *lo (meaning ‘river’)
,
whose substitution forms can function as the specific element (
Lô
River,
La
River,
Lô
Giang
River) or the generic element
rào
(
rào
Quán,
rào
Nậy,
rào
Con in Hà Tĩnh) in some contemporary toponyms. Given Vietnamese dialectal features and Southeast Asian language families’ geographical scope, we have a well-founded conclusion about the Austroasiatic- originating ancient [*lo].

3.2.2. Regarding
Phú Lương
toponym, the situation is moderately different. The historically phonetic link hereby attaches to the second syllable
Lương,
which is the modern-day heir of the original Austroasiatic form [*kl
ɔ
ŋ/kr
ɔ
ŋ]. It may be more than coincidental that Lươngmakes its mark in a chain of hydronyms as follows:
Hiền Lương
/
Minh Lương
River (alias Bến Hải River),
Lương
Stream (Vĩnh Linh) in Quảng Trị;
Lương

River (or Chu River) in Thanh Hoá,
Phú L□□ng
River in Thái Nguyên, etc. There are also adequate cues to permit the writer to infer
with considerable certainty
that
L□□ng
bears a comparative similarity to such other words as
long (
Hoàng
Long
River, Ninh Bình),
công
(
Công
River, Thái Nguyên),
rông
(
Đ□c Rông
River, Qu□ng Tr□) and
r□ng
(
Đà R□ng
River
, Phú Yên).

The Vietnamese phonological history conclusively proves that the evolution from Autroasiatic [*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 L□□ng,
sông
Lam Giang. It appears to be identical to the development from [*lo] to
rào
(
rào
N□y;
rào
Thanh, namely B□n H□i 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
l□□ng, long, công
,
rông, r□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) ~ [
ɔ
ŋ] (ong) ~ [ăŋ] (ăng) are normal practice in Vietnamese. The equivalence between [oŋ] (ông) ~ [
ɔ
ŋ] (ong) ~ [ăŋ] (ăng) and [
ɨ
əŋ] (□□ng), though vaguely recognized due to the different vowels, are still historically explainable. It is the popularity of parallel-functioning expressions in Vietnamese:
giong
bu□m/
gi□□ng
bu□m,
đàng/đ□□ng
, màu
h□ng/
màu
h□□ng
,
náng
th□t/
n□□ng
th□t, nói
ng□ng
/nói
ng□□ng, tr□ng
nghĩa/
tr□□ng
nghĩa that convincingly demonstrates the dualizability of vowels [o,
ɔ
, ă]. All the above arguments lend further weight to the viewpoint that [*kl
ɔ
ŋ/kr
ɔ
ŋ] is the true ancestor of contemporary formations
l□□ng, long, công
,
rông, r□ng.

In the final analysis, these results represent a solid affirmation about the Austroasiatic orign of the component
l□□ng (Phú L□□ng)
. It is the consequence of Sinification or Sino-Vietnamization treatment to the indigenous-Vietnamese ancient name, which is probably reconstructed as [*kl
ɔ
ŋ/kr
ɔ
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 L□□ng* 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' earlierness in comparison to other terms.

The two names of *Phú L□□ng* and *Lô Giang*, on the contrary, has gone a process of extreme change. *L□□ng* and its variants *long, công, rông, r□ng* 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 Sinificated before shaping the present-day *Phú L□□ng*. 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 L□□ng
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
H□ng/H□ng Hà.
Furthermore, as the outcome of a modification from a general noun to a proper noun,
Phú L□□ng
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 originsof 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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