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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

remains a  
*idely*  
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 Th̄ng, Nguyên Giang, Ma Hà*

(or

*L̄ 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 Th̄ng*

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*

,

*Nh̄/Nhĩ Hà*

,

*Phú L̄ng*

,

*B̄ch H̄c, Tam Đ̄i, Đ̄i Hoàng,*

*Xích Đ̄ng, 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].

-

*Nhà Hà/Nhĩ Hà*

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

-

*Phú*

*Lũng*

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*

*Hạ*

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

-

*Tam Đới*

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

-

*Đới Hoàng*

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

-

*Xích Đĩnh*

River

*Đĩnh*

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

-

*Lô*

River or

*Lô Giang*

River

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

These official texts suggest that

*Phú Lũng*

and

*Lô*

or

*Lô Giang*

are the two earliest toponyms. The

*Phủ Lộ Giang*

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], "cơm

*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 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 Nam nhứt thống 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*

,

*Phủ Lạng*

,

*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 Hạc*

,

*Tam Đái*

,  
*Xích Đằng*

and

*Đái 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 “*Đái 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

*Đái Hoàng*

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

-

*Tam*

*Đái*

River

,

according to “*Đái Nam nhứt thống chí*” (Geography of Unified

*Great Nam*)

, is named after Tam Đái/Đái 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*

*Đái*

River

,

...” [QSQTN, Vo.4 (1997), 253].

-

*Xích Đằng*

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

*Nhà*

, is also known as

*Xích Đòng*

, 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

*Đòng Châu*

Temple,

*Xích Đòng*

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

-

*Đội 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 Hưng 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.





*Ḷ u*

Etc.

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

*Rum, Ṃ c, Chèm/Trèm, Cḥ p*

and

*Tṛ u*

display a undeniable phonetic connection to such Sino syllables as

*Lam, Ṃ c, Liêm (Ṭ Liêm), Ḷ p (Cá Ḷ p)*

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 Quảng Trị;  
*rào Mây*  
 , also called Gianh River, in Quảng Bình;  
*cà a rào*  
 , the meeting place of Nam Nôn's river mouth and Cờ 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, 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* ~ *trâu*  
 ~

buffalo

~ *trù* ~ *trũ*  
 ~

betel

~

*gú* *g* *u*  
bear

*gi* *giây*  
second, moment

*chí* *ch* *y*  
louse

*mì* *mà*  
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*
- Ny,
- 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 L* *ng*  
toponym, the situation is moderately different. The historically phonetic link hereby attaches to the second syllable

*L* *ng*,  
which is the modern-day heir of the original Austroasiatic form [\*kl

o  
n/kr  
o  
n]. It may be more than coincidental that L<sup>o</sup>ng makes its mark in a chain of hydronyms as follows:

*H<sup>o</sup>n L<sup>o</sup>ng*

/

*Minh L<sup>o</sup>ng*

River (alias B<sup>o</sup>n H<sup>o</sup>i River),

*L<sup>o</sup>ng*

Stream (V<sup>o</sup>nh Linh) in Qu<sup>o</sup>ng Tr<sup>o</sup>;

*L<sup>o</sup>ng*

River (or Chu River) in Thanh Ho<sup>a</sup>,

*Ph<sup>u</sup> L<sup>o</sup>ng*

River in Th<sup>a</sup>i Nguy<sup>e</sup>n, etc. There are also adequate cues to permit the writer to infer *with considerable certainty*

that

*L<sup>o</sup>ng*

bears a comparative similarity to such other words as

*long* (

Ho<sup>a</sup>ng

*Long*

River, Ninh B<sup>o</sup>nh),

*c<sup>o</sup>ng*

(

*C<sup>o</sup>ng*

River, Th<sup>a</sup>i Nguy<sup>e</sup>n),

*r<sup>o</sup>ng*

(

*Đ<sup>o</sup>c R<sup>o</sup>ng*

River, Qu<sup>o</sup>ng Tr<sup>o</sup>) and

*r<sup>o</sup>ng*

(

*Đ<sup>a</sup> R<sup>o</sup>ng*

River

, Ph<sup>u</sup> Y<sup>e</sup>n).

The Vietnamese phonological history conclusively proves that the evolution from Autroasiatic

[\*kl

o

n/kr

o

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

*s<sup>o</sup>ng*

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

o

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*

Nhảy;

*rào*

Thanh, namely Bùn Hời 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

*lũng, long, công*

,

*rông, rũng,*

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) ~ [ǎŋ] (ǎng) are normal practice in Vietnamese. The equivalence between [oŋ] (ông) ~ [

ɔ

ŋ] (ong) ~ [ǎŋ] (ǎng) and [

ɨ

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

*giông*

buồm/

*giông*

buồm,

*đàng/đàng*

, màu

*hàng*

màu

h<sub>1</sub> ng

,  
náng

th<sub>1</sub> t/

n<sub>1</sub> ng

th<sub>1</sub> t, nói

ng<sub>1</sub> ng

/nói

ng<sub>1</sub> ng, tr<sub>1</sub> ng

nghĩa/

tr<sub>1</sub> ng

nghĩa that convincingly demonstrates the dualizability of vowels [o,

o

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

o

ŋ/kr

o

ŋ] is the true ancestor of contemporary formations

l<sub>1</sub> ng, long, công

,  
rông, r<sub>1</sub> ng.

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

l<sub>1</sub> ng (Phú L<sub>1</sub> ng)

. It is the consequence of Sinification 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 L<sub>1</sub> 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' 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 Siniticized before shaping the present-day

*Phú Lũng*.

Similarly,

*Lô/la/rào*

are probably reconstructed as [\*lo], which initially means "river". After Siniticization, 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 Lũng*

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 Lũng*

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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