

Preface

This book represents the extension into Viet Nam of an interest that began with sociolinguistic aspects of the writing system in China. My initial interest led to several publications dealing with the traditional Chinese script and its possible replacement by an alphabetical system of writing (DeFrancis 1943, 1950, 1967). Subsequently, I began to look into the fate of Chinese characters in other countries which had adopted them as the basis for their own systems of writing. A preliminary examination of the problem in Japan resulted in an article on the ill-fated romanization movement in that country (DeFrancis 1947).

During the course of a sabbatical in 1973–1974, I was able to continue my research on China and Japan and to extend it also to Korea and Viet Nam. My original intention was to do a book in which a chapter would be devoted to each of the four countries and one or more additional chapters would provide a contrastive or comparative analysis. Although I made considerable progress toward this goal, it transpired that in the case of Viet Nam so little work had been done and the problem was so complex that a much more extended effort was needed to research the subject and present the findings. As a result, the chapter on Viet Nam has grown into the present book.

In the course of the research it soon became evident that the most critical period in the history of writing in Viet Nam was the era of French colonialism which began with the conquest of the 1860s. This was also the

period when source material began to become relatively abundant. As a result most attention – approximately sixty percent of the book – has been devoted to this period.

French materials comprise by far the most abundant sources used in the writing of this book. In part this reflects the greater availability of French sources for the whole history of writing in Viet Nam, most especially for the crucial period just noted. It also reflects the fact that I do not command Vietnamese and hence do not have direct access to the unquestionably important materials in that language.

Fully aware of the possible danger in dealing with a Vietnamese subject without a command of the language, I have attempted to counter and minimize the danger in various ways. I have requested criticism of my manuscript from several scholars with a knowledge of Vietnamese, have bombarded them and others knowledgeable in the area with questions bearing on many points in my study and have requested and received help of specialists on specific points where the literature accessible to me seemed inadequate. This ranged from locating and translating relevant passages in various Vietnamese works to trying to find material on such puzzling problems as the apparent lack of nationalistic opposition to the adoption of romanized writing in Viet Nam. I have pressed especially hard on this last point because the lacuna in the case of Vietnamese contrasts so sharply with the abundant references I have collected to opposition to such a change in the case of Chinese, Korean and Japanese. It may be that conditions peculiar to Viet Nam, e.g., French censorship and unfavorable climatic conditions, prevented opposition views from surviving.

I believe that the precautions taken have effectively removed the danger that the study presented here seriously suffers from my inability to make direct use of Vietnamese-language materials. Should it turn out, however, that material has been overlooked that calls for modification of my presentation, I trust it will be made available in detail and with despatch.

It need hardly be added that any shortcomings that may exist in this work are my responsibility alone and not that of the many persons who have so generously provided help of one sort or another.

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