

# Neologisms in Japanese and Vietnamese Focusing on New Chinese-based Vocabulary

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## Abstract

In modern East Asia, including Vietnam and Japan, many Chinese-based neologisms combining two Chinese characters have been coined to indicate new scientific and abstract concepts derived from the West. Even today, these new terms, both national and regional, continue to be used throughout East Asia. Previously, such a large-scale reconstruction of vocabulary without loanwords was rare. For the last 30 years, many Japanese, Chinese and, recently, Korean scholars have investigated this phenomenon, especially the role of Japanese intellectuals in the invention of several important terms. In this article, I will briefly introduce the process of coining these neologisms, in particular focusing on Vietnam, to which few outside scholars have referred. I will concentrate on the diversity rather than the parallelism within this phenomenon.

## Keywords

Chinese characters, East Asia, modern neologisms, loanword, Vietnam

## 1. Historical background

Vietnam and Japan share a common cultural background with China, unlike other Southeast Asian countries. In both countries, classical Chinese was used as the formal written language and, subsequently, the countries developed their own original writing systems based on Chinese characters. With its polysyllabic morpheme structure, Japanese invented *hiragana* and *katakana* (syllabic phonograms). In contrast, Vietnamese, having a monosyllabic morphology similar to that of Chinese, independently combined radicals of Chinese characters and created new characters, called *chữ nôm* (字喃, “vulgar characters”) in Vietnamese, for the local vocabulary. In the second half of

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the nineteenth century, East Asian countries, including Vietnam and Japan, were occupied by Western powers, not only militarily but also culturally. The East Asian literati translated many works on Western ideas into classical Chinese; these works were widely shared among the supranational intellectual community in East Asia at the time.

To designate Western scientific concepts, many new words consisting of two or three Chinese characters, such as *seiji* (政治, “politics”), *keizai* (經濟, “economy”), *jiyū* (自由, “liberty or freedom”), *shakai* (社会, “society or community”), and *byōdō* (平等, “equality”), were coined by authors and journalists in China and Japan. In China, Yán Fù (嚴復, 1854–1921) translated *Evolution and Ethics* (originally published in 1894) by Thomas Henry Huxley and published it in 1895. In the book, he coined many original Chinese-based terms for concepts of social Darwinism. Meanwhile, in Japan many writers, such as Nishi Amane (西周, 1829–1897), Fukuzawa Yukichi (福澤諭吉, 1835–1901), Nakae Chōmin (中江兆民, 1847–1901) and Katō Hiroyuki (加藤弘之, 1836–1916), competitively coined new words.

Some of the neologisms varied among authors, and they certainly differed between Chinese and Japanese. For example, the term “evolution” was translated as *tiānyǎn* 天演 (天 = heaven; 演 = enlargement) by Yán Fù, whereas in Japanese it was translated as *shinka* 進化 (進 = advance; 化 = change); “natural selection” and “struggle for existence” were *tiānzé* 天擇 (天 = heaven; 擇 = selection) and *wùjìng* 物競 (物 = creation, things; 競 = competition) in Yán Fù’s translation, and *shizen-tōta* 自然淘汰 (自 = naturally; 然 = a particle for adjectivalization; 淘 = wash; 汰 = pour) and *seizon-kyōsō* 生存競争 (生 = life; 存 = existence; 競 = competition; 争 = struggle) in Japanese, respectively. There was much opposition among conservative intellectuals in both China and Japan to these strange, newly coined words. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when many Chinese intellectuals, politicians and students, such as Liáng Qíchāo (梁啟超, 1873–1929) and Zhāng Bǐnglín (章炳麟, 1869–1936), emigrated to Japan after the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reform, these neologisms in Japanese came to be used in (classical) Chinese books and magazines published in Tokyo and Yokohama to spread their messages of anti-Manchurian nationalism and revolution, which were illegal in China.

Interestingly, at the time, the Japanese language was in the process of developing a more colloquial written style, different from the traditional style influenced by classical Chinese. All of the Japanese intellectuals mentioned above were well acquainted with the Chinese classics, and some even wrote articles in classical Chinese. However, they gradually shifted to using the more colloquial style of the new Japanese national language (国語, *Ko-kugo*), which was considered to be a combination of written and spoken

styles and easier to understand. This colloquializing process was soon imitated in other East Asian countries.

East Asia, and especially Japan, was thus in a transition process of merging mutually different and mixed language styles into a so-called unified language. As a result, Chinese neologisms were easily absorbed into both the literary and colloquial styles of Japanese. These words were also borrowed by Chinese, Korean (given further impetus by the Japanese occupation), and Vietnamese.

Some Japanese scholars, Ōno Susumu (1983: 9–12) and Suzuki Shūji (1981: i–vi) among them, have insisted that the spread of a “made-in-Japan” vocabulary was the country’s great contribution to East Asian intelligentsia. However, I am sceptical about this view. This phenomenon involved many complex and even random factors with regard to not only the domestic situation in Japan, but also the manner in which information circulated throughout the whole of East Asia, which was going through major changes at the time.

## 2. Vietnam in the nineteenth century

French colonial rule (1867–1954) divided Vietnam into three regions: Tonkin to the north, Annam in the centre, and Cochinchina in the south. The government of French Indochina suppressed a rebellion by Vietnamese royalists approximately 30 years after the beginning of the French occupation.

The French administration tightly controlled the Vietnamese literati, who had an intellectual background in classical Chinese, which was incomprehensible to the French officers. The administration attempted to abolish Vietnamese scholarship based on classical Chinese by replacing it with Western, in particular French, civilization. Vietnamese intellectuals were thus advised to use French or a Romanized Vietnamese script as alternatives. Resisting this pressure from the French regime, the Vietnamese literati continued to seek to obtain information about the outside world from publications written in classical Chinese by Japanese and Chinese reformists.

Although Romanized Vietnamese script had begun to be known as *chữ quốc ngữ* (国語字, “letters for the national language”), the majority of traditional Vietnamese intellectuals neither understood it, nor had any intention of learning it. At the same time, it appears that the French colonizers avoided sharing the ideas of the French Enlightenment with the Vietnamese. In Table 1 below, I provide a few examples of French terms used in the social and natural sciences along with their Vietnamese translations, as found in the French-Vietnamese dictionaries compiled by the French or their Vietnamese collaborators in the nineteenth century. For the more abstract and modern meanings of these terms, there are also interpretations.

TABLE 1: Examples of Vietnamese translations of French words in the nineteenth century\*

French (translation in contemporary Vietnamese and written in Chinese characters)	Truong, Vĩnh Ký (1884)	P.-G. V (1898)	Dronet, J. B. (1903)
liberté ( <u>tự do</u> , 自由)	<i>thong thả, thong dong</i> [gentleness, softness]	<i>Sự thong dong, phép ở mặc ý mình</i> [gentleness, to be suited to one's will]	<i>Sự thong dong, phép rộng</i> [softness]
égalité ( <u>bình đẳng</u> , 平等)	<i>Sự bằng nhau, sự đều (đồng-đều) nhau</i> [equality]	<i>Sự bằng, sự bằng phẳng</i> [equality, flat]	<i>Sự bằng, sự bằng phẳng</i> [equality, flat]
fraternité ( <u>bác ái</u> , 博愛)	<i>Tình anh-em, nghĩa-thiết</i> [義切] [warm relationship among brothers]	<i>Tình anh em, sự thân huynh</i> [親兄], <i>cùng nhau</i> [warm heart among brothers, coexistence of parent and brother]	<i>Tình anh em, tình nghĩa</i> [情義] [warm relationship among brothers]
nature ( <u>tự nhiên</u> , 自然)	<i>Tự nhiên</i> [自然], <i>trời đất muôn vật, tính (tánh), tính khí</i> [性氣] [all things under the sun, characters]	essence des choses; <i>Bản tính tự nhiên</i> [自然天生] [essence of things]	<i>Tính; sự tự nhiên</i> [自然], <i>giời đất; đấng tạo hóa</i> [characters, the sun and the earth, God]
religion ( <u>tôn giáo</u> , 宗教)	<i>Đạo</i> [道] [the way]	<i>Đạo</i> [道], <i>giáo</i> [教] [the way, the teaching]	<i>Sự đạo</i> [道], <i>sự thờ phượng, lòng đạo đức</i> [道德], <i>nhà dòng, lòng ngay</i> [to pray and offer, morality, heart, sincerity]
société ( <u>xã hội</u> , 社会)	<i>Hội</i> [会] <i>phường</i> [坊], <i>công-ti</i> (công-xí v.) [公司] <i>bạn, phe; sự chung nhau; sự làm bạn (làm quen)</i> [colleague, to possess jointly, to make friends or to get acquainted with]	<i>Hội</i> [会], <i>phường</i> [坊]	<i>Hội</i> [会], <i>phường</i> [坊], <i>sự ở chung, phép mọi người giữ cùng nhau</i> [to coexist, the state in which everyone coexists in the same place]

\* Underlined words ( ) are Chinese-based, followed by their equivalents written in Chinese characters. Bracketed words ([ ]) are English translations of Vietnamese or French interpretations.

Recently, Murakami Ryūtarō and Imai Akio (2010) published a thesis on the Chinese-based words in modern Vietnamese, concluding that most of the neologisms in Japan were not used by Romanized Vietnamese before the twentieth century. According to their research, of the 188 terms originating from Japan, only ten examples (機械, “machine”, 具体, “concrete”, 闘争, “struggle”, 化学, “chemistry”, 原子, “atom”, 方法, “method”, 生理 [various meanings], 生産, “birth of a child” [different from other East Asian languages], 知識, “intelligence” and 意味, “meaning”) appeared in the French-Vietnamese dictionaries published in the nineteenth century; 25 were found in textbooks in the 1900s; and only 102 were in use after 1931. I think this was because the Vietnamese literati initially seldom referred to publications in Romanized script and only began to become acquainted with *chữ quốc ngữ* after they realized the importance of spreading advanced scientific knowledge and patriotism among the masses who read neither Chinese characters nor *chữ nôm*.

In the 1900s, the Vietnamese literati no longer hesitated to use Chinese-based vocabulary in Romanized Vietnamese. Phan Bội Châu (潘佩珠, 1867–1940) and Phan Chu Trinh (潘周楨, 1872–1926) were typical anti-French nationalists who travelled to Japan to seek political and financial aid from the Japanese. Phan Bội Châu also sent roughly 200 young students to Japan (*Đông-Du 東遊*, the “Visit the East!” Movement). Although these students were all expelled by the Japanese government at France’s request, it is difficult to examine whether they introduced Japanese neologisms directly into the Vietnamese language or not.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. The difficulty of unifying romanized and Hán nôm<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese

In modern East Asia, where intellectuals began writing in a more colloquial style, they commonly faced criticism from the masses, who found it difficult to understand the terminology. This conflict often led to language purism

<sup>1</sup> One of the candidates for the last Imperial Examination (科挙, *kējū* in Chinese, *khoa cử* in Vietnamese) at the court in Hue in 1919 returned from Japan and took the examination under a pseudonym (Ngô Đức Thọ 2006: 811).

<sup>2</sup> *Hán nôm* (漢喃) means “Chinese characters and *chữ nôm*”, consisting of two morphemes *hán* (Chinese characters) and *nôm* (domestic and “vulgar” Vietnamese). Originally *nôm* only implied “vulgarness”, but after the appearance of the Roman alphabet the Chinese characters began to denote “ideographicity” or “abstruseness”. Thus, *hán nôm* has ambivalent connotations because the two morphemes could be either antonymous or synonymous, depending on the context.

movements that refused to accept borrowed words (especially those from Chinese characters).

Students in Vietnam continued to sit the Imperial Examination until 1919. As new subjects such as essay writing on contemporary issues were regularly added, the new Chinese-based loanwords became more familiar to the traditional (but pro-French) literati than to the masses and the new Vietnamese elite, who were well trained in French and Romanized Vietnamese.

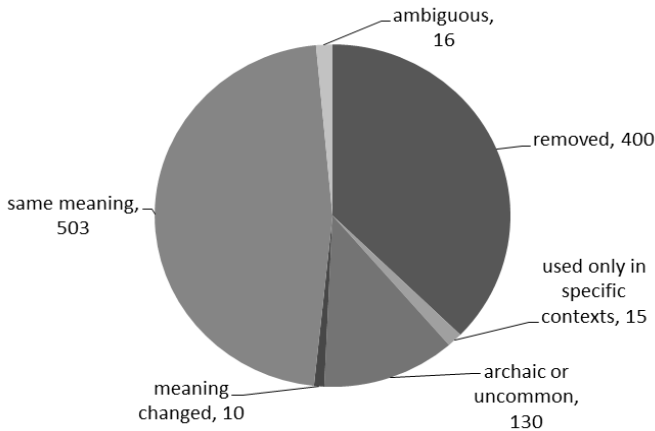
A division thus occurred between Romanized Vietnamese and *Hán nôm* Vietnamese. Whereas the former was written only in the Latin alphabet, the latter was written in Chinese characters and *chữ nôm* (see Figure 1). One could be transliterated into the other, but the two styles were rooted in different cultural communities. People using Chinese-based loanwords in Romanized Vietnamese were accused of pedantry. If a person was using a Western pronoun in *Hán nôm* Vietnamese, the Latin alphabet could not be used because it could not be understood; instead, the form had to be borrowed from Chinese, the pronunciation of which was completely different from that of the original French (or other Western languages).

To fill this gap and create a single unified Vietnamese language, some intellectuals began to compile a comprehensive Vietnamese dictionary written and explained in Romanized Vietnamese, which contained the entire group of abstract terms borrowed from Chinese characters. The first of these achievements was the lexicon of neologisms by Phạm Quỳnh (范瓊, 1892–1945), published serially in the journal *Nam Phong* in 1917–1918. I compared all of the 1,074 terms recorded in the lexicon with the interpretations found in the *Vietnamese Dictionary* (Viện Ngôn ngữ học 1992), which is the authoritative dictionary in contemporary Vietnam. The results are presented in Figure 2.



roduced as “doctoral degree (from modern universities)” in the *Nam Phong* lexicon, with similar meanings currently found in other East Asian languages (*hakushi* in Japanese, *bóshì* in Chinese, and *paksa* in Korean). However, today it has the meaning of “medical doctor” in contemporary Vietnamese, whereas “doctoral degree” is *tiến sĩ* 進士, which corresponds to the name of the degree awarded for the highest grade of the Imperial Examination.

FIGURE 2: Usage in Vietnam in 1992 of modern Chinese-based words used in Vietnam in 1917



The first comprehensive Vietnamese dictionary was published in 1931 based on this *Nam Phong* lexicon (Hội Khai Trí Tiến Đức (ed.) 1931). However, most of the Vietnamese specialists in the natural sciences, who were gradually increasing in number despite the reluctance of the French administration, preferred to communicate in French, which means that they did not write in or translate their findings into Vietnamese. A breakthrough occurred in 1942, when the interdisciplinary scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn (1908–1996) published a lexicon entitled *Vocabulaire Scientifique* in French and *Danh từ Khoa học* in Vietnamese (Hoàng Xuân Hãn 1942). He compiled and compared many specialist terms in French and Chinese in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, mechanics and astronomy in order to introduce them into Vietnamese. This achievement contributed to the rapid substitution of Vietnamese for French in all of Vietnam as the medium of instruction in primary education after 1945 and subsequently in higher education in the North after the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements.



Interestingly, Hoàng Xuân Hãn mentions in the preface of *Vocabulaire Scientifique* his use of certain Japanese specialist lexicons and textbooks<sup>3</sup> in addition to many Chinese ones. Hence, we find further evidence of the direct influence of Japanese terminology on the development of Vietnamese vocabulary.

#### 4. Current situation and conclusion

The vocabulary-building process observed in Vietnam occurred simultaneously in other East Asian countries; at the same time, the process in each country gradually became increasingly independent of developments in other countries as intellectuals began to rely more on their own national languages and less on the classical Chinese that had been common in East Asia. Thus, some Chinese-based neologisms began to take on different meanings in each language, as I noted in the case of the examples 博士 and 進士 above. It is difficult for us to clarify the stabilizing process of each word. However, we can still find some interesting examples. The word 配合, *haigō* in Japanese, *pèihé* in Chinese, *paehap* in Korean, and *phối hợp* in Vietnamese, originally meant “to compound, to mix (medicine),” but it also means that two or more organs cooperate to complete their common duty. Today, the second meaning is common only in the Communist bloc (China, North Korea, and Vietnam), so it seems that the meaning spread as jargon among communists in East Asia, perhaps not through classical, but contemporary Chinese.

Furthermore, as mentioned above regarding Vietnam, a language purism movement that rejected Chinese-based vocabulary developed in Korea (both North and South) and North Vietnam, and some words were replaced by native equivalents, for example in Vietnamese, *nhà nước* instead of *quốc gia* (国家, state or nation) and *máy bay* instead of *phi cơ* (飛機, “airplane”). However, since the *Đổi-mới* (“renovation”) reforms in 1986, the status of Chinese-based vocabulary in contemporary Vietnamese has gradually revived. The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam: 院科学社会越南) was renamed as the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (Trung tâm Khoa học xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia: 中心科学社会 và 人文国家) in 1993;<sup>4</sup> the Vietnam National University in

<sup>3</sup> He referred to three Japanese lexicons, 理化学辞典 (*Lexicon of Physics and Chemistry*), 幾何辞典 (*Lexicon of Geometry*), and 代数辞典 (*Lexicon of Algebra*), the bibliographical information for which has not been identified.

<sup>4</sup> The old name “Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam)” was restored in 2003, and a word, “Hàn lâm 翰林 (academy)”, was added (Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam) in 2013.

Hanoi (Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội: 大学国家河内) was established in 1996; and the Vietnam National Bank (Ngân hàng Nhà nước Việt Nam: 銀行Nhà nước 越南) was left unchanged. It is possible that this tendency is associated with the restoration of traditional customs, such as rituals and festivals of ancestor worship, or with Confucianism.

Numerous Chinese-based terms have been coined and spread independently in contemporary Vietnamese. For example, *khả thi* 可施 means “feasible” in Vietnamese but is unintelligible in other East Asian countries. It is translated as *kéxing* 可行 in Chinese and *jitsugen-kanō* or *shilhyeonganeung* 實現可能 in Japanese and Korean (although the English loanwords *fjibiritī* in Japanese and *p’ijibillit’i* in (South) Korean are more popular). “Digital” is *kỹ thuật số* 技術數 in Vietnamese, whereas it is *shùmǎ* 数码 in mainland China, *shùwèi* 數位 in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and *dejitaru* and *tijit’eol* in Japan and Korea, respectively. Thus, East Asian countries are coining their own new words within their national languages, regardless of whether they use Chinese-derived stems or not. Japanese and (South) Korean prefer loanwords, that is to say, phonetic transcriptions of foreign, especially English, words, whereas Chinese and Vietnamese tend to use loan translations by substituting native (or Chinese) words or etyma because of the constraints of their monosyllabic morpheme structures.

As seen above, Vietnam and Japan once shared the same linguistic approach as they introduced scientific terms by coining Chinese-based vocabulary, a rapid process during the period of language transition from universal classical Chinese to more colloquial, but nationally distinct languages. It thus appears that the four East Asian Countries, including Vietnam and Japan, still constitute a linguistic community, but that we should pay more attention to the complex variety in the semantics of Chinese-based vocabulary than to the homogeneity or the one-way influence from Japan to other nations.

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