

On the publication of a commented translation of the first part of Jean-Louis Taberd's *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum*

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The *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum* “Annamese-Latin Dictionary” has been published in 1838 in Bengal. It is the work of Frenchman Jean-Louis Taberd of Paris Foreign Missions Society, bishop of Isauropolis, who relied on earlier materials left by his predecessor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Béhaine, bishop of Adraa and vicar apostolic of Cochinchina, at the end of the XVIIIth century. This dictionary is well known amongst researchers of the chũ nôm writing system as it realises early documentation of the Chinese and chũ nôm characters used in the Annamese written culture. The Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation (VNPF, USA) indeed issued in 2004 a reprint of this work augmented with the notes of Louis Malleret which briefly summarise its history.

As implied by its title, the dictionary has been written in Latin. Before reviewing the Chinese and chũ nôm characters used then in Annam, it begins with a detailed description of both the writing system and grammar of the Annamese language. This first part of the dictionary starts by going through the Romanised alphabet, chũ quốc ngữ, introduced by Jesuit missionaries, notably Alexandre de Rhodes in the XVIIth century. The syllables present in the language and orthography matters are carefully detailed therein. This prelude then continues with a grammatical description of the language based on the parts of speech found in Annamese, often referred to the Latin grammar. It is concluded by a discussion on versification in Annamese, with the oration pronounced at bishop Pigneau de Béhaine’s funeral (16 December 1799) as last example. This ultimate part is mostly written in Annamese.

This preface to the dictionary is valuable from various points of view. For instance, it gives a detailed overview of the Vietnamese grammar of the early XIXth century, providing important information for, say, language evolution analysis.¹ Furthermore, the presented orthographical and grammatical topics are supported by numerous examples mostly taken from the author’s quotidian routine, thus giving an insight into the daily life, and difficulties, not to say sufferings, of a catholic missionary in Annam at that time.

As I have been working on the Chinese character representation issue in computer systems, the *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum* has been a precious resource to obtain information on those characters that are specific to the Annamese writing system, such as 天 *tròi* “heaven” and 三 *ba* “three”—these characters are only based on Chinese characters, they are not Chinese themselves. These research works have become an incentive to carefully analyse the first part of the dictionary, and I thus produced, for the first time I believe, a commented translation of this Latin, technical text. Notably in view of history, this project has been conducted in French. The result was published thanks to the support of the Centre for Language Studies of Kanagawa University, and it seems to have been well received worldwide, notably by the VNPF.

¹ Far from being a specialist of Vietnamese myself, I was told by a native speaker that this early modern Vietnamese is now barely understandable; even “not Vietnamese”, to quote him directly.