

BOOK REVIEW: *LOST TONGUES OF THE RED RIVER* BY JOHN D. PHAN

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Lost Tongues of the Red River - Annamese Middle Chinese and the Origins of the Vietnamese Language (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2025, Harvard East Asian Monograph Series 476, ISBN 9780674297555 (hardcover), 620 pages) written by John D. Phan (henceforth: *Lost Tongues*) is an extensive monograph that accumulates the author's insights stemming from his 2013 dissertation and the recent progress of Sino-Vietnamese scholarship regarding the oldest layer of Chinese loanwords (i.e., Early Sino-Vietnamese (ESV)), and the most systemic one, that is, Literary Sino-Vietnamese or Late Sino-Vietnamese in Phan's terminology (LSV), in the last 25 years of the 21st century, in which he has proved to be one of the most prolific recent researchers (cf. Phan 2012, 2014, 2020, etc.) In this review, I will highlight some of his main insights into these two Sinitic layers and the hypothesis of a spoken (former) 'living' variety of Middle Chinese situated in the Red River Plain in the first millennium, corresponding to Chapters 3 and 5, before concluding with some general comments and suggestions for future extensions.

Elaborating on Hashimoto's (1978:8) hypothesis that Vietnamese readings of Chinese characters should be linked to a southern/south-western origin rather than a northern or north-western dialect of Middle Chinese,¹ Phan's work offers a novel interpretation of Nguyễn Tài Cẩn's (1979) insight into the source of LSV to account for not only the characteristics of two out of three essential layers of Sinitic loans found in Vietnamese (viz., ESV and LSV) but also the origin of the Vietnamese language, which is widely viewed as a heavily Siniticized Austroasiatic language as many other languages in MSEA and areas in southern China. More concretely, Phan has reinterpreted the denotation of 'a living language' that Nguyễn Tài Cẩn (1979:38) posited to be spoken/written in Giao Châu/Jiaozhou before the tenth century, which is assumed to be the donor of the LSV vocabulary. According to him, the living language here was unlikely to be the Tang koine (i.e., a Chang'an dialect of sorts, following most previous authors such as Maspero, Wang Li, among others, corresponding to Pulleyblank's Late Middle Chinese), but a regional dialect of Middle Chinese that he termed 'Annamese Middle Chinese' ('AMC').

In crucial parts of the book, Phan persuasively argues that this dialect did exist by appealing to some pieces of phonological evidence he finds distinctive of both ESV and LSV. Importantly, Phan treats ESV and LSV as chronological reflexes of the two sub-periods of AMC, namely, Early AMC and Late AMC, respectively. His general account of the timeline of Sinitic-Vietic contact is thus represented in Figure 1 (revised from Figure 0.2 on p. 14, incorporating Pulleyblank's (1984) periodization of the Chinese language on p. 144).² However, an immediate question that arises from this revised timeline is: when does the period of Early AMC begin, given that it is assumed to be a spoken variety of Middle Chinese and the donor of the ESV stratum? In other words, how do we account for the Late Old Chinese loans (i.e., the Han-Dynasty ESV) in the ESV layer if we take Phan's idea that these early Sinitic loans all come from Early AMC? This and some other issues (to be mentioned later), perhaps, deserve more scrutiny in future extensions.

¹ For instance, Marc Miyake (2013) suggests a common origin of Sino-Vietnamese and Cantonese; beyond that, Norman (2006) also provides comparative evidence that possibly allow us to speculate that Nanchang Gan and Meixian Hakka might have connections with LSV.

² Chapters 3 and 5 provide detailed descriptions of each of these layers, in addition to the discussion of recent Sinitic loans in Chapter 6.

Figure 1: Complete timeline of Sinitic-Vietic contact (adapted from Phan 2025:14)

Zhou Era Ca. 5th Cent. BCE	Qin Era 3rd Cent. BCE	Han Dynasty 202 BCE - 220 CE	Period of Disunion 220 - 589 CE	Sui-Tang Dynasties 589 - 907 CE	Song thru Qing 10th - 20th centuries
Đông Sơn cultures	Cổ Loa Polity	Nam Việt/ Nan Yue	Successive membership in Sinitic Empires		Successive independent Viet polities
Old Chinese		Early Middle Chinese		Late Middle Chinese	Early Mandarin
		Early AMC (or Giao Middle Chinese)		Late Annamese Middle Chinese	
	Proto-Vietic		Proto-Viet-Muong		Proto- Vietnamese
		Early Sino- Vietnamese		Late Sino- Vietnamese	Recent Sino- Vietnamese

Returning to the main themes of the book, in Chapter 3, Phan carefully sets ESV apart from LSV by appealing to a set of phonological indicators, including segmental and non-segmental (i.e. tonal) characteristics. In fact, Phan is not the first, and definitely not the last, author who attempts to diagnose the earliest reflexes of Sinitic loans found in Vietnamese in order to shed light into the history of both Chinese and Vietnamese (cf. Chiang 2011, Alves 2016, 2018, 2022, Cao 2025, 2026, among others). What makes his account of the ESV stand out, perhaps, is his meticulous coverage of many historical events in the Giao Chi/Jiaozhi (交趾) region, which set the stage for his linguistic analyses. Overall, this interdisciplinary approach to the different layers of Chinese lexical borrowings and the history of the Vietnamese language has made *Lost Tongues* more thorough and persuasive.

Meanwhile, in Chapter 5, Phan argues for the existence and lingering of (Late) AMC until the post-Tang era, reflected in the form of current LSV (Late Sino-Vietnamese, but no longer Literary Sino-Vietnamese), on the basis of six distinctive features below.

1. Non-modal phonation reflexes for MC voicing (p. 418)
2. Palatalization of labials in Chongniu IV syllables (p. 424)
3. Lenition of velar onsets (p. 431)
4. High-series tone in low-register syllables with sonorant initials (p. 434)
5. An h- vs. v- reflex for *hj (雲母) initials according to frontness vs. backness in the vowel (p. 436)
6. Centralization and diphthongization of high/front- and low/back- vowels (p. 439)

His logic is this: ‘if LSV demonstrates mutations not attributable either to a conservative literary set of pronunciations or to the “nativizing” effect of contemporary ANV (i.e., Ancient Northern Vietic) phonology, then only one explanation remains: there must have been a living, changing variety of Middle Chinese spoken in the Annamese protectorate, whose phonological system underwent endogenous mutations that distinguished it as one in a continuum of MC dialects [...]’ (p. 415).

Though these six characteristics may collectively constitute the uniqueness of AMC, as Phan suggests, each of them should not be regarded as unique to LSV, given that many Chinese dialects remain underdocumented. Especially when it comes to the tones (i.e., the feature that other atonal Sinoxenic languages couldn’t transmit in contact), it should not be surprising if the fourth tone-register trait regarding

LSV syllables with sonorant initials bearing high-register Pingsheng such as *long* 龍 ‘dragon’, *liêm* 簾 ‘curtain’ but not *lông*, *liêm* as expected,³ can readily be found in some under-documented southern dialects of Wu, Xiang, Gan-Hakka, Yue, and Min since this mutation is likely to happen during the period of initial devoicing of tone height development with respect to a peripheral series of voiced initials (i.e., sonorant/次濁).

Interestingly, but somewhat surprisingly, Phan remarks that, while he does not believe this phenomenon was a distinctive or unique feature of AMC, he does believe that the reflexes retained in modern Vietnamese are due to language contact, in particular an analogy, between a living AMC and ANV (p. 435). In general, Phan has convincingly argued the case for an Annamese Middle Vietnamese. If it did exist, we would have to reconstruct its phonology and lexicon to some extent. For this prospect, a Common Dialectal Chinese (CDC) reconstruction, like Norman’s (2006), might be a good start (see Table 1 for its inventory of initials with LSV typical counterparts).⁴

Table 1: CDC initial inventory with LSV typical counterparts (adapted from Norman 2006:238)

*p <ph>	*p <ph>	*b 	*m <m>		*f <ph>		*v <v>	*mv <v>	*w /w, ?/
*t <d>	*th <th>	*d <d>	*n <n>	*l <l>					
*ts <t>	*tsh <x>	*dz <t>			*s <t>		*z <t>		
*c <tr>	*ch <ch>	*j <s>	*nh <nh>		*sh <s>		*zh <th>		*y <d>
*k /k/	*kh <kh>	*g /k/	*ng <ng>		*x <h>	*h <h>			

Given the existence of this AMC, Phan further proposes that the Vietnamese language should be regarded as the daughter of the intermarriage, the sociolinguistic bilingualism in the Red River Plain back then, of a Vietic language (i.e., Proto-Viet-Muong) and AMC through the end of the Han (220 CE) to Sui-Tang dynasties (589–907 CE) (p. 14). Importantly, Phan proposes that it was this kind of bilingualism that facilitated the incorporation of both ESV and LSV layers into Vietnamese, not merely ESV as most (if not all) previous authors assume. That is the underlying reason why, according to him, the LSV layer should be reinterpreted as Late Sino-Vietnamese rather than Literary Sino-Vietnamese, since the latter term implies a solely literary origin for the Sino-Vietnamese Proper reading, i.e., transmitted through Tang koine literacy practiced in the Giao Châu/Jiaozhou (交州) region, just like the cases of “wholesale” borrowing in Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese. This novel hypothesis is plausible, given the early presence of Chinese immigrants in the Giao Chỉ region.

However, it remains puzzling how large the population was and how socioculturally powerful the group was to trigger such a massive and systemic lexical integration into a local Vietic language via bilingualism and bring it into the Sinosphere. Regarding the death of AMC, Phan speculates that “ultimately, the bilingual elites of the RRP no longer felt the impetus to maintain spoken AMC, instead speaking exclusively their sinicized dialect of ANV [...] Thus, AMC died out as a spoken language, while the sinicized dialect of ANV—i.e., Proto-Vietnamese—would spread throughout the kingdom [...]” (p. 537).

Given this reconstructed historical sociolinguistic scenario, however, his account still leaves open the question regarding the distribution of labor across the two registers (written vs. spoken) of this AMC (which Phan contextualizes to some extent in Chapter 4 on Sinitic “*Diglossia*”) in the Giao Châu region throughout the first millennium that Phan posits to be collapsed into a single form underlying the Sino-Vietnamese Proper reading. In other words, while a spoken (colloquial) AMC is well-warranted in Phan’s analysis, it seems that Phan hasn’t done the same justice to a literary (classroom) AMC in the current version of this book by remaining agnostic about how linguistically distinct this Literary AMC was from Literary Middle Chinese (or the Classical Chinese 文言) and from Spoken AMC (p.476).

³ Notice that ESV counterparts *rông* (LSV *long* ‘dragon’), *rèm* (LSV *liêm* ‘curtain’) bear exactly the opposite toneregister for these LSV items. This is thus a crucial indicator for distinguishing ESV from LSV layers (see Chapter 3 for other indicators).

⁴ Symbols for LSV initials are represented in accordance with Quốc ngữ orthography (<...>) and phonemically in cases where the spellings are complicated (/.../)

Last but not least, this current version of Phan's monograph still contains the following flaws, mostly concerning style and introductory chapters, which will hopefully be revised in future versions:

- The state-of-the-art subgrouping of Vietic languages represented in Figure 1.4 (and mentioned here and there without a proper citation) originates from Sidwell & Alves (2021), not Sidwell (2021), and this crucial work is missing in the Bibliography.
- The examples for B tones (sắc/nặng) in Table 1.3 (viz., *hát, ruột*) may be misleading since they technically bear D tones.
- The diagram of Vietnamese vowels in Figure 1.7 should be inverted (p. 114).
- The D2 tone (Nặng-nhập) in Northern Vietnamese is experimentally found to be nonglottalized (Michaud 2004:143), in contrast to the glottalized B2 (p. 115).
- Sporadically misspelled Vietnamese data/quotes, for instance: *Nghệ An*, not *Nghe An* (p. 67); Nguyễn Văn Lợi's quote on pp. 194-195; *tiết độ sử*, not *tiết độ sử* (p. 378); *chính phủ* (not *trình phụ* – p. 496)
- Mandarin Chinese *pinyin* forms are sometimes presented with tones and sometimes not.

These minor flaws, however, cannot cloud the impression that this monograph might readily become a milestone in historical Sino-Vietnamese linguistics, along the lines of Wang (1948), Mineya (1972), Nguyễn Tài Căn (1979), and Alves (2018). This could be the case because if the author's hypothesis about AMC is on the right track and AMC did exist, the subject matter of the field would have to be reoriented once and for all.

Hanoi, by the Red River, July 2026

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