

A moderniser with a firm foot in the Classical world

Phan Châu Trinh (1872-1926) was a Vietnamese intellectual and educator whose life coincided with the establishment of French Protectorate rule over his native country. He advocated for engagement with the French colonial regime in order to transform Vietnamese society. His subsequent activism for ‘popular rights’ (*‘dân quyền’*) led to his arrest in Central Vietnam and eventual exile in France from 1911 to 1925. In the final months of his life, Phan delivered two landmark lectures, which Vinh Sinh has included in a carefully assembled volume which is sure to become the standard English language work on the life and thought of Phan Châu Trinh.

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Far Left:
A temple at Hue,
Vietnam's feudal
capital from 1802
to 1945 under the
rule of the Nguyễn
dynasty.

Left:
Phan Châu Trinh.

Phan Châu Trinh and his Political Writings.
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PHAN CHÂU TRINH and his *Political Writings* is a work that rewards the reader with insightful analysis and provocative questions. As Phan Châu Trinh composed in both literary (Classical) Chinese and romanised Vietnamese (*Quốc Ngữ*), this volume also displays Vinh Sinh's acumen for translation. Few other scholars are suited for the challenge of representing Phan Châu Trinh's life and thought in such a learned manner.

An introduction (pp.1-56) follows some selected photographs and a useful biological chronology. Vinh Sinh provides four translated works in this volume: ‘A New Vietnam Following the Franco-Vietnamese Alliance’ (pp.57-86), ‘Letter to Emperor Khải Định’ (pp.87-102), ‘Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident’ (pp.103-124), and ‘Monarchy and Democracy’ (pp.125-140).

Vinh Sinh places Phan Châu Trinh in a historical context and traces the emergence of Phan's intellectual outlook in the early 20th century. The revocation of financial power from the imperial government, left in place by the French administration, stripped the Vietnamese monarchy (*Nguyễn*) of legitimacy, thus contributing to Phan's view of the *Nguyễn* Dynasty as venal, ineffectual cowards. (p.5) While the Introduction also repeats some perhaps more contestable claims about French rule in Vietnam, such as the notion that it ‘prohibited the development of an entrepreneurial middle class’ (p.6) and exacerbated the impoverishment of the ‘peasantry’ (p.6), Vinh Sinh's adroit narration of historical context provides useful background for a re-examination of Phan Châu Trinh's thought.

Phan's intellectual outlook is the chief concern of not only the Introduction but of the entire volume. As a part of the ‘Enlightenment Movement,’ Phan Châu Trinh belongs to an intellectual/activist strata which includes Liang Qichao in China and Fukuzawa Yukichi in Japan; thinkers who emerged from the traditional literary elite and sought to promote

‘modernisation’ through various reforms. (pp.8-9) Fukuzawa, who coined a translation of the term ‘democracy’ into Classical Chinese (the shared literary and administrative idiom of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), hosted Phan Châu Trinh in Japan where his work on educational reform took him in 1906. When Phan returned to Vietnam later that year, he carried with him designs to foster an Enlightenment Movement to strengthen the morality of the Vietnamese nation and rescue its people from the corrupt rule of the predatory *Nguyễn* dynasty.

As Vinh Sinh reminds us, Phan Châu Trinh displayed a fondness for the works of Mencius (*Manh Tử/Mengzi*), a philosopher and statesman active in China during the 4th century BCE.¹ (p.12) Along with the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao, Phan participated in a Yokohama-based intellectual movement that excoriated the traditional elites of China and Vietnam. In Phan's estimation: ‘pedants and self-serving, greedy, ‘white-robe’ mandarins found it possible to ignore the humiliating loss of their nation's independence’ (p.14). In a sense, this betrayal of the people by their rulers resulted from an abandonment of traditional, Mencian notions of good governance.

In ‘Letter to Emperor Khải Định (1922),’ composed on the occasion of the Emperor's visit to France for the Marseilles Expedition, Phan Châu Trinh takes aim at the *Nguyễn* monarch. Phan's politically engaged ‘Confucianism’ contrasts, as he describes it, with the Emperor's ‘reckless promotion of autocracy.’ (pp.45-47) Pressing this point, Phan mocks the Emperor for emulating failed autocrats of French history such as Louis XIV. (p.47) Officials and the *Nguyễn* monarchy have, as Phan sees it, forgotten ‘true Confucian philosophy’ (*tổ thuật Nho Giáo*). (p.49) The abuses of *Nguyễn* Dynasty rulers and their obsequious lackeys stemmed from their malicious neglect of the reciprocal relationship between king and subject (*vua/tôi*). (p.50) As he was educated in European political philosophy as well as the works of Mencius, Phan's criticisms also exhibit the influence of Montesquieu, who wrote that those with autocratic tendencies and contempt for ‘subjects’ tend to ‘neglect(s) the management of public affairs.’ (Montesquieu, p.19)

To counteract the corrosive effects of imperial autocracy on the people of Vietnam, Phan Châu Trinh argued for a modernising movement. For Phan, modernisation referred to the strengthening of Vietnamese society through the introduction of ‘democracy.’ (p.53) The translated materials in this volume provide an opportunity for investigating Phan's particular notions of democracy, which resonate today ‘in a world transformed by increasing globalization.’ (p.53) Vinh Sinh concludes his introduction to the life and thought of Phan Châu Trinh by hailing him as ‘the first and most eloquent proponent of democracy and popular rights in Vietnam.’ (p.55)

The translations of Phan Châu Trinh's work in this volume contain elaborations on the themes of autocracy, democracy, and the need for modernising reform.

A New Vietnam Following the Franco-Vietnamese Alliance, 1910-1911

Originally written in Classical Chinese, this piece posits that Vietnam, as a nation forged through persistent historical struggle against China, must take advantage of the French Protectorate system to modernise itself. Phan Châu Trinh clearly sets himself apart from his famous contemporary, the celebrated anti-colonial activist Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940). European thought, according to Phan Châu Trinh, can help a modernising Vietnam resist both the historically constant threat of Chinese rule and the puerile temptation to employ aimless violence in the name of national independence. ‘Nationalism,’ Phan Châu Trinh states, ‘is rooted in human nature.’ (p.58) He credits ‘the Europeans’ with identifying this truth, the universal presence of what Phan, in Vietnamese, refers to as *‘dân tộc chủ nghĩa.’* (p.58) Phan Châu Trinh's appreciation for the ‘vigorous and forward-looking European political theories’ contrasts with both the ‘weak-kneed scholars’ of Vietnam and the incendiary rhetoric of Phan Bội Châu. (pp.60-61) Phan Châu Trinh, who lived in France for a time, characterises Phan Bội Châu as ‘ignorant of world trends.’ (p.75) Phan Bội Châu's lack of worldly knowledge manifests itself, according to Phan Châu Trinh, in a complete disregard for European thought. Instead of a measured consideration of diverse philosophies and their relative merits for improving the situation in Vietnam, Phan Bội Châu, in his critic's estimation, has a ‘penchant for destruction.’ (p.76) His ideas, according to Phan Châu Trinh, amount to a worship of chaos and death: ‘The dead bodies were piling up, yet he still regretted that the deaths caused by the dynamite were not sufficient [to provoke the French].’ (p.81)

Regarding the French occupation of Vietnam, the thing against which Phan Bội Châu so ardently struggled, Phan Châu Trinh offers a unique analysis: ‘During the past several decades, the French have not adopted an enlightened policy in Vietnam because they have believed that the Vietnamese are contented with their ignorance...’ (p.481) The burden for changing the oppression experienced under French rule, for Phan Châu Trinh, fell squarely on the shoulders of the Vietnamese people. His high expectations for the populous, and his criticisms of Phan Bội Châu, also rely to a certain extent on Phan Châu Trinh's rather paternalistic view of the people as ignorant and aimless. (p.80) With the cooperation of the French, the leaders of Vietnam could cultivate an educated, mature Vietnamese population. In Phan Châu Trinh's view, a people cured of ignorance would ensure peace and prosperity.

Letter to the Emperor (July 15, 1922)

The next translation in Vinh Sinh's volume is a heated excoriation of the Khải Định Emperor (1916-1925) by Phan Châu Trinh, originally composed on the occasion of the Emperor's visit to France during Phan's exile. Written in Classical Chinese, Phan's ‘Letter’ cites the work of Mencius and the *Analec*s (*Lun Ngữ*) to criticise a monarch viewed by the author as venal and autocratic.² (pp.88-89) Phan's ‘Letter’ presents an example of the anti-authoritarian elements discernable within the Confucian (*Nho*) scholarly tradition.

Phan enumerates the crimes perpetrated by the *Nguyễn* and the monarch Khải Định against the Vietnamese people. ‘If one applied universal justice’ he warns, ‘it would be impossible for Your Majesty to escape punishment from our people.’ (p.88) According to Phan, the crimes are as follows: ‘1. Reckless promotion of autocratic monarchy;’ ‘2. Unfair rewards and punishments;’ ‘3. Reckless demand for kowtow;’ ‘4. Reckless extravagance;’ ‘5. Improper dressing;’ ‘6. Excessive pleasure outings;’ ‘7. Shady deals behind the present visit to France.’ (pp.88, 92, 93, 95, 96, 97).

Perhaps the most biting criticism in Phan's ‘Letter’ comes after the conclusion. In a Notes section, Phan remarks that his term of address for the Emperor indicates a ‘severed’ relationship and the fact that they now communicate ‘on equal terms.’ (p.102) He also, in note ‘c,’ elaborated on the corruption of Confucian philosophy by autocrats such as the Khải Định Emperor for whom the Qin (*Tấn*) Emperor provided a model

for governance and official behaviour. (p.102) Finally, Phan's harshest bit of judgement in terms of the Emperor's intellect occurs in note 'd' as follows: 'I have added end-of-sentence punctuations for sentences in this letter, fearing lest it might take you too much time to read.' (p.102) Conventionally, notation marking the end of sentences was absent in Classical Chinese texts, as the discernment of breaks in prose depended on the erudition of the reader. Punctuation was, and still is in a sense, regarded as a crutch.

Morality and Ethics in the Orient and Occident (1925)

The next translation in this volume also displays Phan Châu Trinh's sustained tirade against the corruption of traditional morality in Vietnam. Delivered as a public address in 1925, this piece is based on an original lecture composed by Phan in *Quốc Ngữ*, the contemporary romanised Vietnamese script. Phan makes a clear distinction between morality and ethics. Morality, for Phan, represents 'fine values and superior qualities handed down by ancestors' (p.103) and 'can never be changed.' (p.105) Ethics, by contrast, 'are often variable.' (p.105) Phan elucidates an understanding of the evolution of ethics that both explains the subjugation of Vietnamese society by a foreign power and offers a way forward toward an independent Vietnam.

For Phan, the end of World War One brought about the 'passing of the Age of Nationalism' and the beginning of the 'Age of Social Ethics.' (p.106) Social ethics (*luân lý xã hội*) had a basis in a sense of 'public justice' (*công đức*) and were the most advanced stage in the 'natural evolution of ethics,' a process that Phan claimed also included 'familial ethics' (*luân lý gia đình*) and 'national ethics' (*luân lý quốc gia*). (pp.106-107) Public justice, the foundation of social ethics and, consequently, of advanced ethics, depended on a notion of 'personal justice' (*tự đức*). (p.107) Phan argued that the sense of personal justice in Vietnam had been corrupted.

Phan's account of the corrosion of personal justice in Vietnam places the responsibility firmly on the shoulders of the *Nguyễn* monarchy. 'Autocratic monarchs,' not unlike the first Qin Emperor (221-209 BCE), had misused the teachings of Confucius and Mencius to deceive the people. (p.107) Prior dynasties, in Phan's estimation, treated the people of Vietnam in a manner that accorded with the Mencian/Confucian ideal to a much greater degree. (p.111) The *Nguyễn*, according to Phan, merely couched their rule in the cosmetic dress of classical philosophy to win the support of privileged scholar-officials. The fact that the French, after the late 19th century, controlled Vietnam as a series of Protectorates only strengthens the case against the *Nguyễn*. Phan notes that Vietnamese people should 'hold no grudges against the French' because the cowardice that enabled the establishment of Protectorate rule emanated from the gradual destruction of ethics caused by those in power. (pp.113-114)

This essay also contains an interesting summary of Phan's ideas about European ethics and morality. At the outset, he posits an essential difference between European and Vietnamese people. Phan notes that the two possess very distinct '*dân khí*,' a term that Vinh Sinh renders as 'public spirit' but might also be translated as 'national' or 'popular essence.' (p.115) Although somewhat outside the purview of this volume, the notion of *dân khí* resembles the concept of '*Volksgeist*' as popularised by Herder.³ Phan compares favourably the intellectual activity in France during the 17th and 18th centuries to that of China prior to the Qin Dynasty. (p.116) European thought, which for Phan includes Montesquieu and Rousseau, can 'enhance the teachings of Confucius and Mencius.' (118) However, Phan cautions against blind worship of 'Western Learning' (*Tây Học*), pointing out instead that the idea of 'democracy' (*chủ nghĩa dân chủ*) also appeared in the work of Mencius. (p.118) The philosophical traditions of Europe, for Phan, largely resonate with the true, uncorrupted, pre-Qin Dynasty Mencian/Confucian philosophical tradition despite the essential difference separating the populations of Europe and Vietnam.

Phan's passionate plea for a new ethics involves nothing less than the survival of the Vietnamese nation. In contrast to violent revolt, Phan advocates the cultivation of an ethical sensibility that could revive the internal moral universe of Vietnam. 'We have lost our national independence because of our ethics,' he concluded. (p.122) Phan's goal is a wealthy and strong Vietnam, an aspiration that connects him to other reformers in Japan, Korea, and China. If a new ethics takes root, 'no matter who will come to live with us on this land, they will no longer look down on us.' (p.123)

Monarchy and Democracy (1925)

The theme of national respectability appears in the final translated work in this volume, 'Monarchy and Democracy.' In this piece, Phan Châu Trinh clearly explains his ideas regarding the abuse of Confucian philosophy by autocratic rulers and the advantages of democracy for strengthening Vietnamese society.

Phan's political writings and thought were heavily influenced by both Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Mencius (372-289 BCE) arguably the most famous Confucian after Confucius himself.

Right: Confucius
Inset: Mencius



This essay raises a point that deserves some emphasis. Phan argues that the sharp contrast between Confucian philosophy and 'modern civilization' results from the mendacious work of misguided people. (p.125) Especially in light of Alexander Woodside's recent work (*Lost Modernities*), scholars engaged in research about Vietnam should take this insight quite seriously.⁴ A more nuanced picture of modernity must take into account the mutual co-figuring of civilisational norms.⁵

Phan continues to criticise the mischaracterisation of Confucian philosophy. He guides the reader through the early history of China, explaining the rise of hegemony and autocracy under the first Qin Emperor and the subsequent disappointment of the ideals of benevolence and gentlemanly cultivation. (pp.130-132) Most significant for Phan, the autocracy that typified 'East Asian' countries neglected the reciprocity of the sovereign/subject relationship. (p.132) As in earlier chapters of this work, Phan views the work of Mencius as an effective foil to the authoritarian abuses visited upon the Confucian tradition by the *Nguyễn* monarchy.

Phan closes this piece with a brisk account of democracy in European history. He contrasts the supremacy of the rule of law in France with the rule of men under the *Nguyễn*. (pp.138-139) Ultimately, Phan envisions a Vietnam wherein the people will be made happier by democracy and self-strengthening, a Vietnam that can be achieved partially through a correct understanding of philosophical traditions.

Although Vinh Sinh's work is laudable for its achievements, it also contains some minor errors. French military officer Francis Garnier, identified as a 'French pioneering explorer' (p.4 note 6), died during a battle with the Black Flag Army in 1873, not 'during China's Taiping Rebellion.' (ibid) A line from Mencius as quoted by Phan Châu Trinh suffers from a lamentable typographical error, causing 'Đồ thiện bất túc dĩ chính vi chính, đồ pháp bất năng dĩ tự hành' to be rendered into English as 'Virtue alone is sufficient for the exercise of government; laws alone cannot carry themselves into practice.' (p.51, emphasis added) A footnote that explains the origins of '*Việt Nam*' fails to mention its appearance in Court correspondence in the early 19th century, positing instead the oft-repeated claim that its first appeared in 1945.

(p.57 note 1) Also, a minor oversight appears in Vinh Sinh's translation of Phan Châu Trinh's 'Monarchy and Democracy.' *Khitan*, not 'Qietan,' is the standard English-language rendering for the rulers of the Liao Dynasty. (p.132) However, these are minor blemishes on an otherwise well-crafted work.

Impressive and inspiring, Vinh Sinh's *Phan Châu Trinh and his Political Writings* should be read by anyone with an interest in the philosophical discourses of political and societal reform in colonial contexts, Vietnamese intellectual history, and the history of early 20th century reform movements in East and Southeast Asia. The issues raised by Phan Châu Trinh concerning pre-Qin philosophical traditions, democracy, and social transformation still reverberate in the present day. All readers will finish this volume with a fresh appreciation for the work of a frequently overlooked but inarguably important Vietnamese intellectual.

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Notes

1. For an English translation of *Mencius*, see D.C. Lau (tr.), 1987. *Mencius*. New York: Penguin.
2. D.C. Lau (tr.), 1979. *Confucius: The Analects*. New York: Penguin.
3. F.C. von Savigny is credited with this first articulation of the idea of *Volksgeist*. See G. A. Wells, 1959. *Herder and After: A Study in the Development of Sociology*. The Hague: Mouton and Company. pp199-202; Robert Reinhold Ergang, 1966. *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*. New York: Octagon Books. pp85-86 ('national soul'); and Isaiah Berlin, 1976. *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*. New York: The Viking Press. p149.
4. Alexander Woodside, 2006. *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
5. For one discussion of alternative or 'multiple modernities,' see Frederick Cooper, 2005. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp113-149.