

*Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, ed. & tr. by VINH SINH. Studies on Southeast Asia 49 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009). ISBN 978 0 87727 779 8 (hard), 978 0 87727 749 1 (soft)

Phan Chau Trinh is the lesser known of the two great Vietnamese scholar-nationalists who became active at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. The other is Phan Boi Chau, the leader of the “Eastern Travel” movement to Japan that started in 1905 and the hero-patriot who masterminded several attempts at insurrection against the French. These two are often mentioned as a pair, with the result that Phan Chau Trinh’s reputation has suffered from the obligatory comparison with Phan Boi Chau, whose stirring anti-colonial appeals are better known than Trinh’s own writing. Phan Chau Trinh was, however, no less than Vietnam’s “earliest and most eloquent proponent of democracy.” (p.1) He advocated a non-violent path to self-rule, built on a foundation of cultural transformation and political modernization inspired by the thinking of Japanese and Chinese reformers. Because he was willing to work toward this goal under French tutelage, he has often been criticized as a collaborator who was naïve about French intentions.

Vinh Sinh, Professor of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, has done much to correct the imbalance in our knowledge of these two with his latest book, a compilation of Phan Chau Trinh’s essays translated into English for the first time. (His previous book,

*Overturned Chariot*, was an annotated English language version of Phan Boi Chau’s autobiography co-edited with Nicholas Wickenden, also a first in English.)

These translated documents, paired with an excellent biographical introduction that includes a historiography of Vietnamese nationalism, fill in a very large gap for non-speakers of Vietnamese. They not only clarify Trinh’s thinking on the future of the Vietnamese nation, but also provide fascinating evidence of the range of ideas that the Vietnamese intelligentsia was encountering by 1925, the year that Trinh returned from his fourteen years in France. For a Thai audience, they underline the common problems that an independent Siam shared with colonized Vietnam. The challenge that Phan Chau Trinh faced was to persuade his compatriots that they could retain their national identity without clinging to the traditions of neo-Confucianism or absolutist monarchy. He placed primary responsibility for Vietnam’s humiliating situation on Vietnamese ignorance of the modern world. Like the younger, western-educated Pridi Banomyong, he returned from a sojourn in France convinced that the rule of law should replace the rule of man.

Phan Chau Trinh was born in 1872 to a well-off family in Tay Loc village, Tien-Phuoc District, in southern Quang Nam province. This central province, home to the trading ports of Hoi An and Danang, was the first that the French attempted to conquer in 1857, before they turned their attention to the

southern provinces. The main source on Trinh's early years as an activist-scholar is the brief memoir by his fellow mandarin Huynh Thuc Khang, *Phan Tay Ho Tien Sinh Lich-su* [Biography of Phan Ho Tay].<sup>1</sup> This describes his flight to the mountains with his father during the Can Vuong [Save the King] resistance to French rule, his father's death at the hands of his fellow resisters, and his return to his burnt-out home in 1887, as the movement crumbled. His serious education began at this time with his older brother's help, and it was not until the age of 29 in 1901 that he was able to pass the regional and national exams in the Chinese classics that enabled him to become a mandarin in the government bureaucracy. He received a second-rank diploma, the result that Ho Chi Minh's father achieved in that same year. How impartially these distinctions were conferred is not clear – we should remember that Phan Boi Chau failed his only attempt at the national exam, in spite of his reputation as a brilliant stylist in Chinese. For this reason, as Vinh Sinh tells us, Phan Boi Chau refused to join the call for the abolition of the Chinese language exam system initiated by Trinh in 1903.

In 1904 he was starting his second year in the Ministry of Rites, a typical entry post in the bureaucracy, when he withdrew from the mandarinate. This is when he made what David Marr calls, “a declaration of lifelong warfare,” with the Nguyen dynastic system.<sup>2</sup> Marr and other biographers have surmised that he was influenced by the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao's writings, in particular his

newspaper, *Xinmin Congbao* [Renewing the People], published from 1902-1905 in Yokohama. Huynh Thuc Khang's memoir confirms that by 1904 this periodical was being read by scholars in Hue.<sup>3</sup> It was an outgrowth of Liang's rejection of Confucian tradition and morality as a compass for reform; its articles reflected his eclectic reading and passion for free thought.<sup>4</sup> At this point, all of Trinh's knowledge of Western political and philosophical ideas, from Rousseau to Herbert Spencer, came from reading translations or summaries in Chinese.

Phan Chau Trinh first acted on his new convictions when he undertook a “fact-finding” trip south to Phan Thiet in 1905. His talks with local scholars led to the founding of a modern school and a factory to produce fish sauce. His promotion of Vietnamese business was part of a program of self-strengthening, which bore fruit in his home province in the form of a cinnamon-producing cooperative and several new primary schools, where both boys and girls could enroll. His program probably influenced the creation of the modernizing Minh Tan Society in Saigon, as well. After the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, he travelled to China and Japan to meet

<sup>1</sup> Ho Tay is his pen name, meaning “West Lake”.

<sup>2</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, p.157.

<sup>3</sup> Marr, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch'i- Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, pp. 96-7.

Phan Boi Chau. This trip in early 1906 crystallized the disagreements between the two Phans but also exposed Trinh to a rapidly modernizing Japan. Vinh Sinh agrees with other scholars, who assume that it was a visit to Fukuzawa Yukichi's Keio Gijuku school in Tokyo that prompted Trinh to accelerate the promotion of westernized education when he returned to Vietnam. He became what Vinh Sinh calls an "enlightened thinker" who created a Vietnamese movement patterned on the Japanese *keimo* (enlightenment). (p. 9) His role in the founding of the *Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* (Eastern Capital Free School) in Hanoi and his encouragement of hair-cutting and western dress for men are the accomplishments for which he is best known. It was on his return from Japan that he also composed a strong letter of warning to Governor-General Paul Beau, to point out that the French were commonly viewed as accomplices of a corrupt mandarin elite with little regard for the popular welfare. Although he never completed his ambitious program for modernization, including a Sericulture Reform Society and a Domestic Cotton Reform Society, he did form societies to promote the "New Learning" and "Public Speech". In this regard, Vinh Sinh points out "an important omission" in the writing on Phan Chau Trinh: "the lack of an examination of Phan Chau Trinh as the founder of the Vietnamese political discourse style" (p. 10). He could write with verve in both literary Chinese and modern Romanized Vietnamese (*quoc ngu*), unlike many of his contemporaries.

The French quickly grew suspicious of the uncensored political discourse encouraged at the *Dong Kinh Free School*; they forced it to close its doors by the end of 1907. Then in the spring of 1908 anti-tax and anti-corvée demonstrations in Hue, Danang and other central Vietnamese towns spooked the colonial establishment, who blamed the reformist scholars. They believed that Trinh and Chau had coordinated the uprising, although Trinh denied any part in the affair. These unarmed peasant marches resulted in the closing down of the modernist schools in Quang Nam and the arrest of teachers and scholars, many of whom were sentenced to years of hard labor on the prison island of Con Son. Phan Chau Trinh saw his death sentence converted to hard labor, and then in 1910 to an amnesty, thanks to the intervention of French socialists. The essay he began upon release, while he lived under house arrest in My Tho, is his attempt to distance himself from Phan Boi Chau and explain his own political thinking to the French. Titled "A New Vietnam Following the Franco-Vietnamese Alliance," it describes the deterioration of his relations with Phan Boi Chau, and clearly separates his ideas on western-inspired modernization from Chau's advocacy of violence. The distinction he draws is much sharper than most contemporary Vietnamese historians would make: he claims that Chau was "thoroughly conservative" and "adamantly refuses to read New Books" (p. 75). He continues, "The books he wrote, therefore, are not based on reasoning and pay no attention to

world trends.” Trinh delineates their two positions and their followers as, “the Revolutionary Party” and his own “Self-rule Party” (p. 74).

In his analysis of the Anti-Tax protests, he credits Phan Boi Chau’s pamphlet sent from Japan, *Hai ngoai huyet thu* [*An Overseas Book Inscribed in Blood*], as the source of the tactics used by the protestors: the boycotting of taxes and forced labor (p. 86). This work had been translated into *quoc ngu* in 1907 for distribution in Vietnam, where it was incorporated into the syllabus of the Dong Kinh Free School. Trinh claimed to reject the use of active nonviolence and above all he rejected the need for underground organizing to draw the people into violent plots. However, he may have been exaggerating his differences with Phan Boi Chau for the benefit of the French; interestingly, David Marr detects the influence of the two scholars’ exchanges in Japan on the tenor of the pamphlet, which attributes blame for the loss of Vietnam to the Nguyen ruler and his mandarins.<sup>5</sup> In any case, it is clear from the French reports on the 1908 protests that they saw the reformists to be more effective than the “party of agitation” at undermining the respect for French rule, as they were “more directly in communication with the people.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1911 Phan Chau Trinh persuaded the French to allow him to travel to Paris with his son, as part of a student group. His goal was to gain freedom of action and to continue lobbying the French to change their colonial policies. The imprisonment of his fellow scholars and

the execution of his close friend Tran Quy Cap, a reformist scholar from Hoi An, had deeply distressed him. Since Tran Quy Cap’s death, he wrote, “...I have had no tasty meal and no peaceful sleep and have persistently been struck with an eternal sorrow” (p. 81). In Paris he composed his *History of the Insurrection in Central Vietnam*,<sup>7</sup> which includes a full account of the retribution meted out by the French against the modernist movement. Despite his efforts, the scholars imprisoned on Con Son would not be released until the end of the First World War.

In 1912 he teamed up with the French-educated interpreter and lawyer Phan Van Truong to form the Association of Vietnamese Patriots, which kept him under the watchful eye of the authorities in charge of “native affairs” (affaires indigènes) during his entire stay in France. At the start of the First World War, the two were accused of being part of an overseas network linked to Phan Boi Chau and the royal pretender Cuong De, which in Phan Van Truong’s case may have been true. Trinh was locked

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<sup>5</sup> Marr, op.cit., p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Phan Chau Trinh, *A Complete Account of the Peasants’ Uprising in the Central Region*, trans. Peter Baugher and Vu Ngu Chieu. Madison, Wisconsin: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Not included in this book, but available in an annotated edition translated by Peter Baugher and Vu Ngu Chieu, as *A Complete Account of the Peasants’ Uprising in the Central Region*. Madison, WI: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983.

up in the Santé Prison from September 1914 until July 1915, and after his release, his government stipend was cut off. In the years up to 1914 he spent much of his time translating a popular nationalist Japanese novel, *Encounters with Elegant Females*, into *quoc ngu* verse, working from Liang Qichao's Chinese translation. Although he only translated half the novel, the Vietnamese version is more than twice as long as the popular verse epic, *Tale of Kieu*. Vinh Sinh suggests that he may have decided not to finish the translation, as the second half of the book extols Japan's destiny as an expansionist Asian power.

Trinh's years in France turned into an enforced exile, especially after his son's death from tuberculosis. He did not receive permission or money to return to Vietnam until a socialist government came to power in 1925. In the meantime he collaborated with Phan Van Truong and a new arrival in Paris, Nguyen Ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, to write and distribute an appeal for Vietnamese rights to the post-war peace conference. This appeal made no impact on the peace settlement, and like other Asian activists, the Vietnamese then turned their attention to Moscow and the Communist International's promises to aid colonized peoples. Trinh never joined the radicals who split from the Socialists to form a new party aligned with Moscow, but he did grow increasingly disillusioned with French colonial policies and even wrote a long letter encouraging Nguyen Ai Quoc to take his new Marxist ideas back to Vietnam to try them out. Not surprisingly, his warmth

towards France had become more conditional by the time he was permitted to return to Saigon in 1925. However, the complications of his relationship with the French government, including the fact that he was constantly watched by their secret agents, who referred to him in their communications as a "rebel" [*nha phien loan*], is an aspect of his life that is little appreciated.

When Trinh finally sailed back to Saigon in 1925, he was greeted as a returning hero. Although he was weakened by tuberculosis, he gave two final speeches to packed houses in Saigon, before his death in 1926. Vinh Sinh has performed a great service by translating these in full – until now we have known more about the nation-wide days of mourning following his death than the content of these lectures. Both of them – the first on "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident", the second titled "Monarchy and Democracy" – presented a direct challenge to governing institutions. The issues of nationalism and patriotism run through these texts in a manner that cannot have reassured the French. In Europe, he explains, the transition from autocracy to "national loyalty and ethics" was accompanied by the growth of individual rights and less family control. (p. 106) This trend has been accelerated since the Great War, he says, as the "great politicians, great philosophers, and great educators all came to realize that the age of nationalism has passed... giving way to the age of social ethics" (p. 106). Social ethics, he maintains, "are based on a

sense of public justice, and public justice is in turn based on a sense of personal justice" (p. 107).

In the case of Vietnam, he maintains, national ethics do not yet exist. The people are not "aware of the distinctions between the king and the country. They know only the duty of revering the king and do not know the duty of loving their country" (pp. 110-1). He believed that Vietnam would have to pass through a nationalist phase before rising to the higher plane of "social ethics," an interesting echo of the Leninist idea that colonized nations would have to experience a national-democratic revolution before moving on to socialism. At the same time he declared that, "In order for Vietnam to have freedom and independence, in the first place the Vietnamese must have solidarity. In order to have solidarity, what can be better than circulating socialist ideas among Vietnamese?" (p. 115)

Phan Chau Trinh died in March 1926, before he could travel to Hue or Hanoi to meet old friends. His memorial service in Saigon, organized by well-known opposition figures, was attended by around 16,000 mourners. In Hue, his old colleague Phan Boi Chau presided over the service and gave a moving eulogy (pp. 37-8).

In recent years Vietnamese scholars have been showing increased interest in Phan Chau Trinh as one of the intellectual forerunners of the Doi Moi reforms. A symposium on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Trinh's death, held in March 2006 in Ho Chi Minh City,

demonstrated scholarly agreement that Trinh set an important example as a cultural modernizer, as someone who understood the need to integrate new values into Vietnamese life.

Sophie Quinn-Judge

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