
The nationalist forerunner Phan Châu Trinh (1872-1926; also known as Phan Chu Trinh) is just barely known to the non-Vietnamese public, usually being relegated to a role in the shadow of the well-known would-be revolutionary Phan Bội Châu. The semi-official anthology *Vietnamese literature* (Hanoi: Red River 1982) mentions him rather disapprovingly as a promoter of bourgeois reform who naïvely believed that Vietnam might gain from the French colonial civilizing mission. Hồ Chí Minh, who knew him in person, dismissed Trinh as conservative and narrow-minded. Nevertheless, as the present book aptly illustrates, Trinh is a figure well worth knowing in his own right. The editor and translator, Vinh Sinh, has previously translated the autobiography of Trinh’s friend/enemy Phan Bội Châu. For the present volume he has written a 55-page introductory biography of Trinh, followed by annotated translations of four of his most important pamphlets and speeches. As the author points out, Phan Châu Trinh was the first proponent of democracy and human rights in Vietnam, at the same time as he saw himself as a genuine Confucian. The interesting tension arising from these two platforms is clearly seen in the various translated texts.

The biographical sketch of Trinh reveals a quite dramatic life that included violent death in his immediate family, clandestine travel abroad, arrest, and prison terms. He lived for many years in France where he made the acquaintance of Nguyên Ai Quốc, later known as Hồ Chí Minh. In spite of these colourful details, however, Vinh Sinh’s sketch is mainly an intellectual biography where aspects of his personal life are rather briefly treated. Trinh’s personality mainly appears through his political writings, which amply highlight his struggle to combine Confucian ideals with visions of a modern democracy in an age of transition. To an extent this may have to do with the nature of the source material. As a scholar in the Confucian tradition, Trinh seldom revealed his innermost feelings and opinions in his various letters and texts. On the other hand, some interesting aspects of his life are treated strangely briefly in Vinh Sinh’s sketch, such as his encounter with French life and culture during his 14 years in Europe, and his relations with Nguyên Ai Quốc during this period. My main problem with Vinh Sinh’s introduction is, however, his rather uncritical stance towards his
subject. The author unhesitatingly lauds his ‘extraordinary intellect’ (p. 11) and never really poses any critical questions regarding his integrity or the policies his ideas led to. We are served sweeping generalizations such as: ‘The news of Phan Châu Trinh’s death shocked the Vietnamese populace. The entire country went into mourning’ (p. 37). Moreover, I feel that the text would have gained in analytical value had Vinh Sinh put the rise of Vietnamese nationalism in the context of other Asian nationalisms in the early decades of the twentieth century.

That being said, Vinh Sinh is a conscientious scholar who provides a fine background for the specific Vietnamese context. Extensive footnotes provide much valuable information, such as biographical data for the various persons whom Trinh encountered during his career. The four texts which have been translated into English present us with a good picture of the dilemmas faced by early Vietnamese nationalism. The first essay, ‘A new Vietnam following the Franco-Vietnamese alliance’, written in 1910-11, highlights the great differences between Trinh and Phan Bôi Châu. While Châu pleaded for an anti-colonial revolution and a reformed monarchy, Trinh found the idea destructive and unproductive and called for abolishing the monarchy. Reading this and the other three essays one is struck by the absence of anti-colonial rhetoric. Although steeped in a Confucian mould and born at a time when the country was still independent, he entertained hopes of French support for his ideas of modernization, ‘according to their spirit of philanthropy and equality’ (p. 81). The same impression is conveyed by the second text, ‘Letter to Emperor Khai Dinh’ from 1922, written on the occasion of the emperor’s visit to France. The letter denounces Khai Dinh as a true autocrat who abused his authority, contrasting him to French democratic ideals. Here, Trinh expounds his view that the Sinic monarchy was opposed to the original Confucian values as developed by Mencius. Seven ‘offences’ committed by Khai Dinh are enumerated and explained. Some of them may surprise a modern reader, such as the introduction of a new formal court dress with European features. At this point the reader will ask whether not Trinh is attacking the wrong figure; Western and modern Vietnamese writings usually consider Khai Dinh a submissive tool of the French colonial state. The last two texts are lectures held by Trinh after his return to Vietnam in 1925, shortly before his death. Both are interesting as combining a deep commitment to Confucian values and morality with modern national ethics and the type of democracy and civil society he
found in France. The Sinic inheritance is apparent in all the four translated pieces; Trinh indiscriminately refers to classical Chinese and Vietnamese history and uses the rhetorical techniques of classic literati. At the same time he never tires of criticizing the traditional ruling class, enjoining them in strong terms to change their corrupt ways. While the course of twentieth century Vietnamese history developed very differently from the hopes and predictions of Trinh, his attempt to bridge the gap between two civilizations reflects a broad interest, and the present book provides some valuable insights in his effort.

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