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’ (‘đàn quyết’) 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.

Bradley Camp Davis

A moderniser with a firm foot in the Classical world

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 globalisation.’ (p.53) Vinh Sinh concludes that the anti-autocratic nature 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 democracy, modernity, 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-autocratic activist Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940). European thought, according to Phan, helped a modernising Vietnam resist both the historically constant threat of Chinese rule and the pervasive temptation to employ aimless violence in the name of abstract ‘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 ‘đàn đích nghiêm trọng,’ (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 incendiarist doctrine 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 Châu Trinh’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 ‘wars of chaos and death.’ The ‘dead bodies were piling up, yet he still neglected 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.48) 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 criticism 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.83) 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 Khî đê 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, this piece details the work of Diên Kiểu and the Anh xác (Laud Nguyễn) to criticise a monarch viewed by the author as enervated and autocratic. (pp.88-89) Phan’s ‘Letter’ presents an example of the anti-autocratic elements discernible within the Confucian (Mộ) scholarly tradition.

Phan enumerates the crimes perpetrated by the Nguyễn and the monarch Khî đê 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 Châu Trinh, this concludes: ‘1. Reckless promotion of autocratic monarchy;’ ‘2. Ignorance would ensure peace and prosperity.

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 ‘reserved’ 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 Khî đê Emperor for whom the Qín (164) Emperor provided a model
for governance and official behaviour. (p.102) Finally, Phan’s 
hardest bit of judgement in terms of the Emperor’s intellect 
occurs in the following: “I have added end-of-sentence 
punctuation for sentences in this letter, fearing lest it might 
take you too much time to read.” (p.102) Conventionally, 
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, a crutch.

Morbidity 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 his 
Quê nuestra modernist Vietnamese script. Phan makes a 
clear distinction between morality and ethics. Morality, 
for Phan, represents ‘true 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 (lão sáy döl) had 
a basis in a sense of ‘public justice’ (công döl) and were 
the most advanced stage in the ‘natural evolution of ethics,’ 
a process that Phan claimed also included ‘familial ethics’ (lão 
yo döl) and ‘national ethics’ (lão yu quoc) (pp.106-107) 
Public justice, the foundation of social ethics and, consequently, 
of advanced ethics, depended on a notion of ‘personal justice’ 
(vô döl). (p.107) Phan argued that the sense of personal justice 
in Vietnam had been corrupted.

Phan’s account of the corruption 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 
estabishment of Protectorate rule emanated from the gradual 
destruction of ethics caused by these 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 
similar ‘dön kli,’ a term that Viêt식 induces as ‘public 
spirit’ but might also be translated as ‘national’ or ‘popular 
essence.’ (p.115) Although somewhat outside the perspective 
of this volume, the notion of dön kli resembles the concept 
of ‘Volksgeist’ as popularised by Herder. (p.22) Phan compares 
favourably the intellectual activity in France during the 
17th and 18th centuries to that of China prior to the Qín 
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 
the practice of Monarchy and Democracy. (221-209 BCE), 
and Vietnamese society and culture is looked down upon. ‘(p.123) 

Phan’s political writings and shoulders of the Nguyễn 
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Phan’s account of the corruption 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) 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 Modernites, 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 civilizational norms.5 Phan continues to criticise the miscalculation of Confucian philosophy. He guides the reader through the 
early history of China, explaining the rise of hegemony and 
avtocrasy under the first Qin Emperor and the subsequent 
disappointment of the ideals of benevolence and gentle 
magistrates. (pp.119-122) Most significant for Phan, 
the authoritarian 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 dynasty.

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 envisages a Vietnam wherein 
the people will be made happy by democracy and self 
strengthening, a Vietnam that can be achieved partially 
through a correct understanding of philosophical traditions. 

Although Viêt식’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.119) 
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 ‘đỗ thịnh bất túc dĩ chính vi chính, đồ pháp bất 
trình gió trinh’ 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 ‘Viet Nam’ fails to mention its 
appearance in Court correspondence in the early 19th century, 
presenting instead the oft-repeated claim that its first appeared in 1945. (p.57 note 1) Also, a minor oversight appears in Viêt식’s 
translation of Phan Châu Trinh’s ‘Monarchy and Democracy.’ 
Khiton, not ‘Dutan,’ 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, Viêt식’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 colo 
nial 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-Qín 
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 extraordinarily important Vietnamese intellectual.

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