

**PHAN CHU TRINH**  
or  
**WHERE TO BEGIN A NATIONAL REVOLUTION**

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The second half of the XIX century and the first quarter of the present century witnessed the confrontation of the Vietnamese Confucians with the West. The story of this confrontation is well known as far as war, diplomacy, and politics are concerned. Practically all the pages of the numerous books written by Vietnamese or foreigners to this date are filled with accounts of how the Confucian mandarins fought with the French admirals, argued with the French diplomats, and plead with their own people, and lost on all three counts. But behind war, diplomacy, and politics, there was the intellectual confrontation, and the story of this confrontation has so far been neglected by Vietnamese and Western historians alike. And yet, a full understanding of this Confrontation would help in the reorientation of Viet Nam and give meaning and direction to the Vietnamese national revolution to make it a success.

Every revolution rests on an intellectual base – whether explicit or implicit- and the Vietnamese revolution – including its communist variation – has failed, and this failure is essentially an intellectual failure, in both its Confucian and its modern phases. It is a failure to grasp the meaning of ideas, both old and new, Eastern and Western, by several generations of Vietnamese. Incidentally, this is true also of the Chinese, cousins of the Vietnamese. Failure to assess a situation, that is failure of the intellect to perceive correctly what goes on around us, would result in faulty policy – at the conceptual, planning and implementation stages – waste of time, energies and resources – both material and human – and worst of all loss of hope and collapse of will.

The story of the failure of the Vietnamese national revolution has been the story of an intellectual failure, or more exactly, of the failure of the Vietnamese intellectuals to perceive correctly the historical situation into which their country was drawn, and to offer correct guidance to their compatriots to move safely through the pitfalls of the modern world. To put it differently, the Vietnamese intellectuals have headed in the wrong direction – taking the country along with them – in the last 150 years and the error was cumulative: each generation moved one step, or several steps, further away from the correct path. This is a clear case of *Sai – mot ly di dam* (with error of one millimeter one lands a mile from the target) as a Vietnamese saying describes it so well. One should add that in the field of thought as basis for political and social action, with an error of one year one would lose one hundred years.

The errors of the Vietnamese previous generations were of two kinds, or rather in two directions, diametrically opposed to each another: #1) failure to judge correctly the Eastern value, or rather the vital role of ethics, and especially of Confucian ethics, in the construction. Or reconstruction – whichever way one may look at it – of the nation in the modern world; and #2) failure to grasp the nature and origin of Western power, especially to understand that this power did not grow out of the barrels of guns. But out of the inner logic of ideas, including ideas relating to ethics, although here, ethics bore a different label and preached different norms.

The errors begun in the reign of Gia-Long (1802 – 1810) became critical in the reigns of Minh – Mang (1820 – 1840) and Theiu-Tri (1841 – 1847), disastrous in the reign of **TV-dire (1884 – 1883)**, and irreparable in the reigns of the latter's successors down to and beyond Bao-Dai, who had the good luck of reigning twice (1925 – 1945) and (1948 – 1954) and missed the opportunity of correcting course both times.

Until 1925 one could blame the Confucian mandarins, but after that date these men with long hair, long beards and long nails were no longer the intellectual and moral leaders of the nation. They had yielded to their sons and grandsons, brought up in the belief in the necessity of *idy* (modernization) and *idy* (Western studies), in the new French schools teaching French or in the French universities, or if they chose the wrong side of French laws, in the modern universities, and military academics of Japan, China the Soviet Union, or more recently of America and elsewhere in the Western nation. Communist, they are the new elite and bear responsibility for the present situation of Viet Nam – war, deaths, devastations, division, and collapse of social discipline, cultural and moral degenerescence, deepening cynicism and foreign domination.

The story of the decline o Viet Nam traceable to the failure of its intellectuals to provide the nation with proper guidance is a long story remaining to be told – when the Vietnamese elite has regained enough sense to give more time to serious and honest thought than to a kind of action characterized by excessive use of the mouth and inadequate use of the mind – politics, Vietnamese current brand – The purpose of this paper is not to deal with such an immense topic. Its purpose is simply to point out that not all the intellectuals of the previous generations were blind, and that there were some who saw the dangers of the country's elite rushing in the wrong direction. The most remarkable of them was Phan Chu Trinh. That he was a Confucian trained in the purest Confucian traditions.

Phan Chu Trinh is one of the three Confucian scholar family names, the other two being Phan Phung and Phan Boi Chau, known to the Vietnamese as the revolutionary Phan **trion**. All three were confronted with the fact of foreign rule as they reached manhood, a time when Emperor Tu Duc was forced by military defeat to sign away more and more national territory and sovereignty until nothing was left, including the right of the Vietnamese Court to select its own ruler. **Tu Duc was the last independent Emperor and upholder of Vietnamese customs.** After him, the French authorities exercised effective right in choosing, deposing and exiling the Vietnamese Emperor, the apex of the Confucian system under which and for which the Phan trio had been trained.

Each of the three Phans reacted to the situations in a different way. Phan Dinh Phung (1846-1895), born when the degree in 1877, three years after the French had taken Tonkin after having secured full possession of Cochinchina –a shame felt by all the members of the Vietnamese elite. Eight years later war broke out again as result of the French authorities' insistence on being consulted about the choice of the Vietnamese emperor. Phan Dinh Phung took the lead in organizing the defense of the Emperor (then Ham-Night) and the best traditions of a Confucian, maintain his unshakable allegiance to his Emperor, fully aware that the struggle was hopeless because of French military superiority, but fight for king and country to the end because that was an honorable thing to do, and which as true Confucians they were expected to do.

If the issue was simple to Phan Dinh Phung, whose life span stopped where the history of modern Asia began – with the Japanese resounding victory over the Chinese colossus in 1895 – the second of the Phan trio was aware of the potentialities –and attendant complexities – of a modernized Asia in i9ts confrontation with the West. Phan Boi Chau (1867 – 1940) who was twenty one years younger experienced more humiliation than Phan Dinh Phung. Born six years after the French occupation of Saigon, he took his master degree in 1900, in the reign of Thanh Thai – who was to be deposed in 1907 and exiled to the Reunion Island eight years later. The treatment of the Emperor by France was the moral shock which pushed Phan Boi Chau into rebellion. But Chau's world was bigger than Phung's through Chinese translations and writings (in particular those of Kang Yu Wei, Liang Ch'ao) he became acquainted with at least one part of the western intellectual world, mostly politics – Montesquieu, Rousseau, and much later, Marx. But more than politics, Chau was interested in military and diplomatic matters. This took him to Japan – where he went secretly in 1905 and China.

Chau was mainly interested in getting arms and political support. The intellectual side of the Western world, especially science and its implications did not catch his attention, a rather strange fact, considering that he spent several years of his life in Japan which, by 1905 had mastered science to become a power strong enough to defeat the Russian giant. That Japan had achieved

This position through developing both a strong moral and a strong scientific base was lost on Phan Boi Chau. Indeed, Chau was still, consciously or unconsciously, a Confucian scholar in the Chinese tradition, and particularly in the Sung tradition as transmitted by Chau His – more interested in politics than in science, in the Li (principle) of ethics than the *li* (reasons) of nature. In the end, without science (the study of the *li* of things) the nation sovereignty, and once sovereignty was lost, the defense of the moral structure of the nation would become a difficult task – almost a viscous circle.

With Phan Chau Trinh (1875 – 1926), the story is different. Trinh's intellect was much more alert, his eyes were sharper than those of the other two of the trio: he looked at the West and its Superiority, but he also looked through this superiority, seeking to grasp its essence and deeper causes. And what he found supremely satisfied him as a Confucian scholar: the strength of the West had an intellectual and moral base. This is a rather startling discovery, if one likes, for the Confucian scholar – Chinese or Vietnamese – usually looked down on the West, considered spiritually inferior to the East.

Nothing in Trinh's schooling pointed to such a discovery. Born in Quang Nam six years after the loss of Cochinchina, one year before the loss of Tonkin, he began his intellectual training at precisely the moment when Emperor Tu Duc was forced to sign away the last shreds of national sovereignty, in 1884, when Trinh was twelve years old, that is old enough to be aware of what was going around him. In fact, he was more interested in punching and fencing than in memorizing Chinese ideograms, and took an active part in the Can Vurong (Defend king And Country) movement at the time. But soon, in 1895, the Can Vurong broke up with the death of Phan Dinh Phung and Trinh was faced with the problem of ends and means, in so far as leading the country out of its morass was concerned. He decided that to be a leader in a Confucian world, he must be first a leading Confucian and thus he returned to his studies, won his master's degree in 1900, and his doctorate the following year. He was now officially a member of the elite entitled to consideration, attention and command.

What followed graduation was revealing of Phan Chu Trinh's nature. After a spell of four years in the imperial administration he resigned from a promising career to travel throughout the country trying to rouse his compatriots to a new world as part of the guised as fruit seller he got aboard the war ships of the Russian admiral Rodojensky anchored in Cam Ranh bay. Bad luck visited him in 1908, when he was charged with inciting the people to rebellion and sentenced to death. He was saved from execution by the by the intervention of the French League for the protection of the Rights of Man. His sentenced was commute, and he was sent to the Vietnamese Alcatraz, Poulo Condore (today Con Son). Again France was more kind to him than the Vietnamese. The French Governor General Klobukowsky took him to France. Trinh stayed in France thirteen years. He was put in preventive detention for a while during the war. He returned home in 1925 and died the following year in Saigon, at the age of 56, when he was obviously entering the stage of high intellectual productivity.

During his sojourn in France, while working for a photographer, Phan Chu Trinh, much like his contemporary Nguyen Ai Quoc (later Ho Chi Minh), also spent time studying French society and politics. The results of his observation and thinking were recorded in two famous speeches he gave in Saigon in November 1925 after his return from France. One is entitled "Moral Principles and Moral Behaviour: East and West" (Dao Sirc va Luin Ly Dong va Tay), and the other "Monarchy and Democracy" (Quan Tri Chu Nghia va Dan Tri Chu Nghia). Phan Chu Trinh has also left behind two other documents of extreme importance to students of Vietnamese political thought: #1 "Letter to French Government" (August 1908) and #2 "Letter to Emperor Khai Dinh" (July 1922). It is not possible here to give a detailed analysis of each of those documents. We shall try to give only the main theme running through those highly illuminating texts.

What makes a nation strong and prosperous? This question evokes a great name in the history of political economy who, in providing a clear answer to it, became the founder of a great science, and earned universal respect and fame. But the Vietnamese scholars who asked the same question in the early years of the XX century were to experience a different fate than that of Adam Smith: they invariably landed in French jails. They landed there because they did not find the right answer, or did not find it in time, or having found it, could not get the message across to their countrymen. Phan Chu Trinh belonged to the last named group. The causes of the power

and wealth of a nation, as he saw it, were not the possession of big guns or national sovereignty, but of a strong intellectual and moral base. What caused the weakness of Viet Nam and made it an easy prey of foreign conquest was not its lack of national independence or gun, but of moral and intellectual integrity, especially among its elite.

I hope to give a full translation of these important documents together with others in a compilation of important documents by prominent revolutionary figures.

In a letter to the French Government through governor general Paul Beau he wrote:

“... in a country in which education and technology are hardly worth mentioning: in which the fine customs are no longer respected, moral and intellectual integrity are gone, knowledge nonexistent; in which fighting rages between villages, hamlets and even the members of the of the same family; how could one hope to put a united front and fight anyone.

“... Supposing now that the French give the Vietnamese independence, and turn over them a few thousand rifles and a few provinces, and let them govern themselves without interference, then within a few years, (the Vietnamese) will fight one another over honors and positions, rob each other’s property, wreck vengeance one another, kill one another without mercy. How could we hope to deal successfully with anyone (from outside)?...”

The full significance of the passage just quoted becomes clear when one remembers that the letter was written in 1908, two years after Phan Chu Trinh had returned from a secret visit to Japan with his friend Phan Boi Chau, during which he was shown the evidence of Japanese power, and introduced to prominent Japanese statesmen and Chinese revolutionaries. It was also three years only after the resounding victory of the Japanese over the Prussians in Viet Nam, the nationalist tide was rising loud and clear spurred by Phan Boi Chu from Japanese military academies, purchasing arms, and enlisting the support of important figures like Okuma Shigenobu and Okunei Tsuyolki. But Phan Chu Trinh was unimpressed. In fact, he strongly disapproved and publicly said so. To him, all that fuss was not only futile, but even dangerous. He strongly doubted that Viet Nam, as it was and with what it had, could defeat France. And even supposing the Vietnamese could get rid of the French with the help of the Japanese (or, later, Chinese) however they to get rid of the Japanese afterwards? Furthermore, once the foreign enemy had been removed, however the Vietnamese to be stopped from fighting and killing their own compatriots instead; so, the answer was not there, not abroad, not outside the Vietnamese, but at home, inside each Vietnamese, and especially inside the members of the Vietnamese elite. The answer was summed up by Phan Chu Trinh in a very brief moral character is gone that the country is lost). To him the true national revolution must be first and foremost a moral revolution. It is with moral revival that the national revolution should begin. That is Confucianism. But the Confucianism of Phan Chu Trinh was not that of the Vietnamese mandarins who had brought ruin and shame on their country, it was of a different kind, pure, deeper, truer.

Phan Chu Trinh had a deep contempt and an intense hatred for the Nho (Confucians) who formed the majority of the country’s elite at the time. To him, they were only false Nho, who did not understand the true message of the master, or who deliberately distorted it for the furtherance of their selfish interests. Together with the Emperor, they established a system of absolutism which had plied their selfish interests. Together with the Emperor, they led the country into a deep abyss. To him the essence of the message of Confucius and Mencius was *Liem Si* (moral and intellectual integrity) and a deep concern for the people. This was blandly ignored by the Emperor and the Court, with disastrous results for the country and its people.

Phan Chu Trinh had particularly harsh words for the Court. In the letter to Governor General Paul Beau cited above he called them “gangsters with official certificates doing nothing useful for the nation, “superior to no one honour or knowledge, subservient to foreigners and arrogant towards their compatriots. He assaulted them for being corruption their intrigues, their complete disregard for moral and intellectual integrity. But he also pointed out that Confucianism was responsible for such depravation, for in old Viet Nam, if the laws were not as just as one should wish them to be, the mandarins were not so abject”. Trinh did not blame the French, but held the “poisonous examinations” and the absolutist government responsible for that deplorable situation. They it was which had killed the moral substance in the Confucian mandarins, leaving

in them only a slave's mentality. Since they were bad men, they could not be good rulers, a perfect inference according to true Confucian canons.

If Phan Chu Trinh had harsh words for the false Confucian mandarins, he was still harsher for the Emperor. He accused him of using a distorted version of Confucianism to oppress and spoliage the people. His letter to Emperor Khai Dinh 1922 was so brutal that some passages of it were suppressed by the publishers after 1945 – when it was no longer a capital crime to publish such documents, the monarchy having ceased to exist – and out of consideration for Bao Dai, Khai Dinh's son, they have been kept out of the text even to this date. Trinh blamed not just Khai Dinh, but all the Asian emperors since the Chinese Shi Huang Ti, for being responsible for the weakness of Asia because they had smothered the true spirit of Confucianism as taught by the great master and his disciple Mencius. Those emperors did not care in the least for the people, but were only concerned with the preservation of their thrones by keeping their people in dire ignorance. As a result, the people knew only about the emperor but nothing about their country, while the mandarins, members of the court, knew only about emperor and nothing about the people.

Centuries of enforcement of a distorted Confucianism in the end resulted in drilling into the people the “tir chirong” (pedantic) spirit, the worship of form made neglect of substance, the cultivating of the interests of self and family at the expense of those of people and country, especially after the interpretation of Confucianism by the Sung Court became the official interpretation of Confucianism in Viet Nam also. This “tir chirong” termised generation was no better than their fathers. This new generation has abandoned all that was good in the old system without acquiring the good qualities of the new gangsters with official certificates” with them the country fared no better.

The old system had been discredited and would be difficult to maintain. But the country must have a moral basis if one hoped to bring it out of the depths into which it had sunk. What to do then? Phan Chu Trinh advocated the careful study of the West and the adoption of the best it had to offer especially in the sphere of ethics. This was a rather odd position for a Confucian to take. But the oddity was only apparent, for way of the West Phan Chu Trinh wanted to return to the principle that ethics is the basis of a strong nation. To be sure was a Confucian principle, but Trinh in contrast to the Confucian attitude, admitted that it was valid so in the Western other words the principle had universal value here broke new ground as far as Viet Nam was concerned, and opened the way for a true national revival.

Phan Chu Trinh presented his views in the two speeches he gave in Saigon on his return from France. He advocated the introduction of Western moral principles because to him moral principles mean human understanding (nhan), loyalty (nghia) manners (le). Intellectual honesty (tri), sincerity (tri), thrift (can kiem), and moral principles understood are neither old nor new, Western or Eastern, but are valid for all times, all places. In an important passage of “Moral Principles and Moral Behavior, East and West”, he said:

“Every people, every state, be it yellow or white, weak or strong, which wishes to complete with other peoples in the world, should not count on material force alone, but must have also a strong moral base. This is particularly true of a nation which has fallen; if it wishes to rise up and throw off the foreign yoke it must have a stronger moral base than the richer and stronger nation”.

Phan Chu Trinh said Viet Nam must have moral principles. Those of Confucius and Mencius were admirable and he venerated them. Confucianism did not advocate absolutism. Confucius favored constitutional monarchy and Mencius favored democracy (dan vi qui). But Confucianism had disappeared and could no longer be found. So, if Viet Nam wanted to have a strong moral base, there was nothing better than adopting Western democracy. He explained “Democracy is a very good medicine to cure absolutism in our country. To introduce Western civilization is to bring out back Confucianism, Confucius and Mencius taught the Golden mean, which we need like our daily meals. It means respecting our parents, loving men; it is not superstitious like other religious. Thus, adopting Western civilization causes no harm, but makes Confucianism shine more brightly”.

But Trinh cautioned that adopting western civilization mean adopting what was compatible with Confucianism, and not the freedom and democracy sung by the confused Westernized

Vietnamese”. He further cautioned that adopting Western moral principles was not the same as adopting western moral behavior. He made a very clear distinction between “dao dire” (moral principles) and “luan ly” (moral behavior). This is rather confusing but from the context it is clear that by moral behavior” he meant mores and social behavior. Western behavior was not all good in his eyes: too much freedom in the relations between men and women, too much difference between rich and poor excessive nationalism, heavy intellectualism, and formalism etiquette at the expense of sincerity etc.

Years of reflections and observations had convinced Chu Trinh that the real cause of the weakness of Viet Nam and its subjection to foreign yoke was its moral decade and the cause of this moral decadence was the loss of liem si and intellectual integrity. Unless liem si were restored, it would be beside hope that Viet Nam could have the strength throw foreign rule and achieve progress but the restoration of liem si leading to the awakening of patriotism and the new civicism necessary for national revival was a task requiring twenty to thirty years of determination. Here Phan Chu Trinh was rather optimistic: he thought in terms of only one generation.

But how can liem si be restored by democratic process, since to restore it would require that consent of those who would be adversely affected by it – the articulate segment of the population who hold effective power. The nation could progress only by breaking through them, and ignoring their will, or worse, going against their will. One cannot have both a true national revolution and democracy under those conditions. Yet if the revolution is not achieved now, the situation would be worse two or three generations hence, and the worsening would be cumulative. We should remember that the letter to Governor General Paul Beau was written sixty two years ago to deplore a situation which was itself the result of the mistakes of several previous generations since 1908, the situation has obviously deteriorated several fold. The necessity of achieving this true national revolution is therefore several times more urgent.

It appears that if Viet Nam is to be saved really, it will have to be saved against itself, by a very strong government with strong powers, and whose concern for the people and the nation is so unmistakable and undisputable that it will enjoy overwhelming popular support enabling it to ignore the shouts and protests of those bent on preserving outrageous privileges and, what is equally important, the criticism and opposition of those abroad who want to make Viet Nam “safe” for a kind of democracy which will reduce this nation to permanent backwardness and bondage.

It is unfortunate that Phan Chu Trinh died too early, and could not tell us how he proposed to resolve the above dilemma, for had he lived longer, he would not fail to see the incompatibility of a certain kind of democracy and a true national revolution. Had he lived, he would perhaps have been accepted as a national leader capable of pulling the country out of the abyss into which it had sunk. But that is possibility, not a certainty. What would have happened no one can tell.

One thing, however, is clear. Phan Chu Trinh, like his compatriots, was also a victim of an emotionalism which pushes towards the adoption of extreme position. His brilliant intellect had led him farther than any of his contemporaries on the path of analysis to put his finger on the basic defect of Vietnamese society. But like the Chinese Confucian Kang Yu Wei and Liang Ch’I Ch’ao, whose books had inspired him in his youth, he advocated a moral and political syncretism instead of a moral and scientific syncretism. Japanese, by arriving very early at the conclusion that real problem was not to choose between Eastern ethics Western science, or to fuse the two, but instead to pursue both parallelly. Thus they broke through the barrier had held up the Vietnamese and the Chinese onto the modernization. This is a conclusion which Trinh like of his contemporaries, had missed.

In all fairness to Phan Chu Trinh, one must say that in 1925, when he returned home from Europe, Confucianism had reached its lowest ebb. The traditional triennial examination system had been abolished for seven years. The Duy Tan and Tay Du movement was getting in its strides, and it would be idle to preach are turn to Confucianism, under whatever form, from whatever angle. Yet, ten years later, Confucianism was revived, by precisely people who had gone through European universities. Today, the revision of Confucianism goes on, and takes new

forms, it respectable again, because the modern world in finding out that society cannot achieve order and progress, and mankind cannot hope to survive, without moral principles. And Confucianism, once shorn of Chinese and Vietnamese mandarinal nonsense – true Confucianism – teaches just that.