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PHAN CHAU TRINH - THE OUTSTANDING VIETNAMESE REFORMER EARLY XX CENTURY

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Abstract. Phan Chau Trinh (1872–1926) is one of the most typical reformist in Vietnam in the early twentieth century. The article analyzes his political views and the concept of national salvation he proposed. For a more complete and objective disclosure of the role of Phan Châu Trinh, archival documents, mainly collected in France, as well as proceedings of scientific seminars and conferences of recent years, were involved. In the context of the *Đổi mới* reforms carried out since 1986 and the country's course towards international integration, reference to the history of Vietnam and the activities of famous political figures such as Phan Chau Trinh, who made a huge contribution to the struggle for independence, is of particular relevance.

Keywords: Vietnam, Phan Chau Trinh, French Indochina, national salvation, national liberation movement, democratic reforms.

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Introduction

During his lifetime, Phan Chau Trinh was renowned as an author, poet, political theorist, and activist. When he died in 1926, the testimonials and the outpouring of grief displayed at commemorations held across the country confirmed his stature as one of the nation's greatest intellectuals. Yet following his death, Phan Chau Trinh's career, political writings, and their legacy for national salvation were called into question. It was argued that Phan Chau Trinh was just a reformist politician and that he “did not believe in the people's force.” For some, his policy of “taking

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advantage of the French to raise people's intellectual level" was "completely an illusion" [Trần Văn Giàu et al. 1957: 218].

According to these critics, Phan Chau Trinh's conception of democracy was very limited. Commenting on Phan Chau Trinh's contribution to national salvation, many authors suggested that by requiring the French colonialists to take reform measures such as: "talent acquisition", "increase advantages - decrease disadvantages", and help the poor make a living and raise their voice, so that "people are assured to do business", Phan Chau Trinh "had fallen into the path of reformism unconsciously" [Nguyễn Khánh Toàn 1985: 122].

However, since the Renovation period, the evaluation of Phan Chau Trinh has gradually changed towards a development perspective and a more comprehensive and objective orientation thanks to new thinking. Not only political ideology but also works of literature as well as the entire life and career of Phan Chau Trinh had been studied by academicians and exposed in many scientific conferences, especially on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Phan Chau Trinh's death (2006), as well as in many events related to the Duy Tan (Renewal) movement in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 2001 and 2003, the author Le Thi Kinh (Phan Thi Minh) published two books [Lê Thị Kinh 2001, 2003] which introduced materials on Phan Chau Trinh's life and national salvation newly collected in the French archives, especially the National Overseas Archives in Aix-en-Provence. Based on these sources, Đà Nang Publishing House had organized and published a three volume series containing a full introduction and a complete collection of Phan Chau Trinh's writings, including many new documents about him or compiled by him when he was in France from 1911 to 1925 [Phan Châu Trinh 2005a, b, c]

Based on the above-mentioned sources, this article systematically and objectively reexamines Phan Chau Trinh's life, political theories, and legacy. It focuses on presentation of the main features of his political ideology and national salvation career, thereby contributing to the clarification of his contributions and his role in the history of nation, especially the national salvation and revival of Vietnam in the early twentieth century (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Phan Chau Trinh. *An open source photo*

Phan Chau Trinh's life and career

Phan Chau Trinh (pen name Tay Ho or Hy Ma) was born in 1872 in Tay Loc village, Tien Phuoc district, Quang Nam province. His father was Phan Van Binh, a battalion commander. His mother, Le Thi Trung, was from a family in Tien Phuoc district, Quang Nam province. His father participated in the Can Vuong (help King Ham Nghi save the country) movement and was assigned to the military, but was murdered 1887 as part of an internal struggle within the movement.

In his childhood, Phan Chau Trinh learned the Chinese classics and martial arts. In 1900, Phan Chau Trinh obtained a bachelor's degree (*Cử nhân*) at Thua Thien School. In the following year, once again he was honored as *Phó bảng* (Junior Doctor, second-rank, under Doctorate) in the National examination, together with Doctor Ngo Duc Ke and Junior Doctor Nguyen Sinh Sac, father of Nguyen Ai Quoc – Ho Chi Minh.

Having the Junior Doctor's Degree, Phan Chau Trinh was appointed to the *Thừa biện* position [承辦, Undertaker] – an official at the *Bộ Lễ* (Ministry of Ceremonies) in the Hue Court. However, the post under a corrupt government brought him neither freedom nor joy. Having worked for two years at the Ministry of Ceremonies, in 1904, he resigned and then traveled with his like-minded friends such as Huynh Thuc Khang², Tran Qui Cap, and others.

In early 1905, when they arrived in Binh Dinh province, the annual examination was held. Three of them sneaked into the exam school to write a poem in which they signed the name of the author as Dao Mong Giac. In the poem "*Chí thành thông thánh*" [志誠通聖, The Faithfulness that moves even heavenly gods], they asked the students: "All the people are servants under the yoke of power, why are you still drunk in the professional dreams? If doomed to humiliation forever, when will we escape from the cage?" [Phan Châu Trinh 2005a: 16]. The poem marks the first point at which Phan Chau Trinh publicly expressed his opposition to the monarchy and the bureaucratic system on which it rested.

Having come home from Japan in the early summer of 1906³, on 15 August 1906, Phan Chau Trinh wrote the letter "*Đầu Pháp chính phủ thư*" [A letter to the French colonial government] stating the reasons why Vietnam had to bear the yoke of foreign colonizers and sent it to Paul Beau, the Governor General of Indochina. To change the status quo of the country, he asked the French Government to implement reforms in Vietnam to make it a strong and prosperous country.

In August 1907, Phan Chau Trinh was invited to lecture at Hanoi at *Trường Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (The Tonkin Free School). This was a private school in Hanoi, teaching and learning according to the program of the colonial government, but the learners did not have to pay for tuition and books because the purpose of *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* "is broaden the people's mind without taking money".

Beside this, he also collaborated with the *Đăng cổ tùng báo* [登鼓叢報, The Newspaper of enlightenment and public voice]. In the article "Current issues" which was later reprinted by Huynh Thuc Khang in the leftist journal "*Tiếng Dân*" [People's Voice], Phan Chau Trinh set out his point of

² Huynh Thuc Khang (1876–1947) was a thinker anti-colonialist. After going out of the French colonial prison in Con Dao, he founded *Tieng Dan* newspaper. In 1926 he was elected Head of the people's representative Council in Annam (the Central Vietnam). From May to October 1946 he was the Acting President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam when Ho Chi Minh went to France.

³ This is according to Phan Chau Trinh narrated by Huynh Thuc Khang. See: [Lê Thị Kinh 2001: 154].

view of how to save the country: “Do not look for outsiders, for that is foolish; do not use violence, for that certainly leads to death”.⁴

Under the influence of his reformist thought, the Duy Tan movement from Quang Nam province began to thrive and spread to other provinces in many fields: national language schools with new learning methods were opened, trading was established, weaving started, trees were planted, people’s hair was cut short, people’s fashion changed to a more European style, and bad habits were tackled, as well. From March 1908, the Duy Tan movement had evolved into a movement that rebelled against forced labor and heavy taxes with increasingly drastic measures. Every day, there were dozens of demonstrations of farmers, some lasting for many days, and others seeing farmers surrounding entire districts (Tam Ky, Hoa Vang). To avoid the peasants’ uprising, the French government had brutally suppressed the protests, arresting the participants.

Even though there was no concrete evidence, Phan Chau Trinh, Huynh Thuc Khang, and Tran Qui Cap were accused of inciting rebellious farmers, so they were arrested by French authorities. In March 1908, Phan Chau Trinh was sent from Ha Noi to Hue to a trial at the court. Soon after, he was exiled to the Con Dao prison. In June 1910, due to the intervention of the French Human Rights Association, Phan Chau Trinh was released but detained in Mỹ Tho province. Having refused to be a detained prisoner, he required to be sent to France. In March 1911, Phan Chau Trinh went to France with his son Phan Chau Dat, a boy of 14 years old.

For 14 years in France (from 1911 to 1925) in France, Phan Chau Trinh continued to propagandize the idea of reform and, at the same time, he was active in the overseas Vietnamese community. Phan Chau Trinh’s first activity after his arrival in France was to petition the French government to amend the trial system, especially in North and Central Vietnam. Besides, Phan Chau Trinh wrote newspapers and organized speeches to acquaint the French public with the cause of the 1908 incident in Central Vietnam. His work made the colonial government consider and intervene to reduce the number of people arrested after the anti-tax movement. In the early years of living in France, Phan Chau Trinh focused time and energy to write several important works, including “*Đông Dương Chính trị luận*” [Indochina political theory] and “*Pháp Việt Liên hiệp hậu chi tân Việt Nam*” [A New Vietnam Following the Franco-Vietnamese Alliance] [Nguyễn Quang Thắng 1992: 281–285].

In addition to the press and the writings, Phan Chau Trinh also held many talks and lectures with the participation of numerous overseas Vietnamese to express the suffering of the country under the yoke of French colonial rule, criticize the injustice of the colonial government, and encourage patriotism of Vietnam expatriates. Phan Chau Trinh played a central role in creating important Vietnamese fraternal and patriotic organizations in France. In 1912, when the patriotic association was established, Phan Chau Trinh joined the board of directors. Based on this association, in 1914, Phan Chau Trinh and some other revolutionaries such as Phan Van Truong⁵ and Khanh Ky formed the Compatriotic Association. Later, this association was handed over to Nguyen Ai Quoc.

These associations were an important base for advancing the cause of Vietnamese self-rule. In early 1919, with the help of Phan Van Truong, Phan Chau Trinh wrote an eight-point “*Bản yêu*

⁴ *Tiếng Dân*, No. 613, August 1933.

⁵ Phan Van Truong (1876–1933) was a journalist, a lawyer. Studied Law at the Sorbonne University, Paris, he was the first law doctor in Vietnam. In 1912, the Compatriots' organization (*La Fraternité des compatriotes*) was established in Paris by him as its president. In 1923, he returned to the country, together with Nguyen An Ninh founded the newspaper *La Clôche Fêlée* and then *L'Annam* to claim democratic freedoms.

sách của nhân dân Việt Nam” (The Vietnamese people’s claim) which was signed by Nguyen Ai Quoc and sent to the Versailles Conference to demand democratic freedoms and the right to self-determination for the Vietnamese people. In July 1922, when Khai Dinh King went to France, Phan Chau Trinh wrote “*Thất điều thư*” [Note on the seven guilt], a letter pointed out his seven guilts: honoring monarchism, unfair rewards and punishments, preference for prostration, extravagant lifestyle, improper attire, excessive traveling, and suspicious visits to France.

In France, opposing the rule of the feudal-colonial government, Phan Chau Trinh tenaciously and persistently continued fighting against the harsh policies of the French and the Nguyen Dynasty. He repeatedly sent petitions to the Human Rights Council, M. Moutet (Senator), A. Sarraut⁶ (Minister of the Colonies), and Jules Roux⁷ criticizing the colonial administration in Indochina, and expressing opinions on the democratic freedoms that the Vietnamese people deserve.

However, having got disheartened due to his unsuccessful activity in France, in 1920s, Phan Chau Trinh asked the French government to send him home. Not until his health became exhausted did the French government approve of his returning to his motherland in June 1925. Having returned home, despite his bad health, a few months before his death, Phan Chau Trinh was trying to deliver two public lectures titled “*Quân trị chủ nghĩa và Dân trị chủ nghĩa*” [Monarchical rule and Democratic rule], and “*Đạo đức và Luân lý Đông Tây*” [Morality and Ethics of the East and West]. In these two speeches, he continued to criticize the monarchy and to praise Western democracy, two ideas that would have a great influence on the thoughts of young people at that time.

Phan Châu Trinh's political ideals with national salvation

During the early 20th century, under the impact of the new historical context domestically and internationally with the nationalist movement of the bourgeoisie in Vietnam, two tendencies emerged and existed simultaneously: a tendency towards an anti-French uprising for national independence represented by Phan Boi Chau; and the other trend promoted by Phan Chau Trinh, which advocated for the reform of the country to improve the country’s position in order to avoid the status of foreign dominion.

Compared with those who had the idea of innovation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Phan Châu Trinh’s reform ideas had a far broader influence. It could be said that Phan Chau Trinh was the first to initiate and spread the idea of democracy and civil rights in Vietnam [Nguyễn Văn Xuân 1995: 107]. But what caused Phan Châu Trinh to develop the idea of democracy and reform? There might be many causes, but the three main reasons. *First of all*, the influence of his family, and through them, his experience of violent anti-colonial resistance. Phan Chau Trinh was born in the martial-arts family. His father participated in the Can Vương resistance movement. But despite his patriotism, he had been killed by his own comrades. More generally, the Can Vương movement was inevitably defeated in the face of French technological and military advantage. *Secondly*, his hometown – Quang Nam was located close to two commercial ports in Đà Nẵng and Hoi An, the gateways with favorable conditions for gaining new ideas from outside and expressing them. Besides, Phan Chau Trinh had lived and worked in the capital for more than two years and witnessed the evil and cowardly nature of the Hue court [Trần Văn Giàu et al. 1957: 215]. These reasons prompted Phan Chau Trinh to break away from feudalism, including violent anti-French sentiment, towards more democratic ideas.

⁶ Albert Sarraut (1872–1962) was the Governor General of Indochina twice in 1911–1914 and 1917–1919.

⁷ Jules Roux was a French officer who lived in Vietnam for many years, spoke and wrote good Vietnamese.

Before encountering books, newspapers and documents containing new ideas, Phan Chau Trinh was a Confucian scholar, understood Confucian knowledge, praised the idea of respecting the king and monarchy. During his time working within the Hue dynasty, Phan Châu Trinh read books containing Western and global ideas of democracy through “new letters” from China and Japan. As a result, he learned that the feudal examination was outdated. Since then, he had been actively promoting against feudalism, especially among the Hue royal family and bureaucrats, and advocating for democracy.

Phan Chau Trinh's political opinion reached its peak (i.e., was complete) after several years of reading new books and especially with many advanced intellectuals both in Vietnam and abroad, including the time in Guangdong (China) and Japan. This idea was clearly expressed in the letter sent to the General Governor Paul Beau, which was entitled *Đầu Pháp Chính phủ thư* (A letter to the French colonial government) [Phan Châu Trinh 2005b: 51–65]⁸. The letter sent to the General Governor of Indochina dated October 1, 1906, said: “...a country with up to 20 million population has about 10 thousand educated people, but dark and weak... for many years, the South has been under the protectorate now weakening day by day...” [Phan Chau Trinh 2005b: 53]. Having exposed the three causes of the corruption of the Vietnamese feudal Dynasty, when the people lived miserably under the Vietnamese government, which disrespected the Vietnamese people and took advantage of them, Phan Chau Trinh proposed the French government to reform policy, and create an authentic revolution for the Vietnamese people. He emphasized: “If the government is willing to change all the policies, choose the gifted persons, give them the authority, treat them well; also eliminate offences, open the way to a better life for the poor, recompense strictly on merit,... even change the law, remove examination courses, open schools, pedagogic classes to study industry and taxes, gradually reform the salary; then the people will be happy to work, officials will be willing to serve the government [Phan Châu Trinh 2005b: 64]. According to Phan Chau Trinh, to oppose feudalism and to establish democracy in Vietnam, a comprehensive reform needed to be undertaken with three goals: *Khai dân trí, chấn dân khí, hậu dân sinh* [Civil education, Civil mobilization, and Civil livelihood].

Civil education means anti-learning from the *từ chương trích cú* [bookishness] (the study which does not pay attention to the content but only picks up the cliché), the removal of examination, the removal of customs; learning the native tongue; and disseminating the scientific knowledge. He advocated for opening schools, reading poetry, books, and newspapers to enlighten the human mind. Phan Châu Trinh strongly condemned monarchism; he severely criticized paternalism and conservative traditional customs. To him, for the development of society, it was necessary to put an end to all bad habits.

Beyond the horizons of knowledge of many Confucian scholars in the same period, Phan Châu Trinh said that the root of foreign domination in Vietnam was that Vietnamese people were both economically and intellectually poor. Therefore, to overcome this situation, firstly we needed to enlighten the mind. It was necessary to use the native tongue to study practical subjects and scientific knowledge to meet the requirements of life, and it was not obligatory to study the poetry of the ancients, especially the literature of Northern feudal dynasties. Phan Chau Trinh appealed: “Our

⁸ In the letter, Phan Chau Trinh asked the French to live up to their civilising mission. He blamed them for the exploitation of the countryside by Vietnamese collaborators. He called on France to develop modern legal, educational, and economic institutions in Vietnam and industrialise the country, and to remove the remnants of the mandarin system. The letter was originally written in Chinese, then translated to Vietnamese by Ngo Duc Ke in the newspaper *Tân Dân* in 24 Mars 1949 [Phan Châu Trinh 2005b: 51–65].

compatriots, our residents who love freedom, I would like to give very precious things to all of you. This is “*Chi bằng Học*” [Nothing is better than studying]” [Phan Chau Trinh 2005b: 69]. In the context of semi-feudal colonialism in Vietnam in the early 20th century, Phan Chau Trinh's idea of educating people was really a renewal making the people change their minds to rise to a new horizon, in accordance with the development of that era [Trần Mai Ước 2013: 115].

Civil mobilization is to awake the self-reliant spirit of the people, which enlightens people about their rights and obligations, and let them escape any feudal oppression. Phan Chau Trinh's ideas on civil rights had been improved over time, especially in his years of living and working in France due to his greater exposure to the pro-democracy bourgeois. In *Thất điều thư* [Note on the seven guilts] sent to Khai Dinh King in July 1922, Phan Chau Trinh wrote: “According to European theories, what is a country? It is a union of people. What is a dynasty? Those who are authorized to consent to the opinions of the people and act in the interests of the people and the country” [Phan Châu Trinh 2005c].

This idea originated from the perspective of French intellectuals such as Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau, suggesting that power was not granted by God, but by the will of the people. According to Phan Chau Trinh, history was made by the people; democracy was due to the struggle of the people, so it was necessary to make people aware of their strength. Thus, the people could fight against the power and corruption of feudalism to create a democratic society with the supreme power of the people.

Civil livelihood is the final goal but the most important one because civil education and civil mobilization are to improve the material and spiritual life of the people. According to Phan Chau Trinh, to achieve this goal, the country must eliminate all remnants and barriers of feudalism. He stood for developing industry, setting up workshops, establishing associations to explore new wastelands, starting plantations, and trade. He proposed the program of establishing associations of the plantation, cloth weaving, merchants, and domestic good manufacturing, which aimed toward economic recovery of the country. Phan Chau Trinh was aware that to be independent of foreigners, it was necessary to revive jobs and improve the economic and financial potential of the country. To improve the people's life, the country had to do away with old customs, superstition, gambling, alcoholism; and build a healthy and modern lifestyle. Phan Chau Trinh's *civil livelihood* views fundamentally changed the perception of Vietnamese scholars and people of the specific requirements of human life at that time. That view expressed the very practical spirit of “human beings”, and exposed the “spirit of radical innovation”, as the Phan family saw it.

To implement the reform of the country and make it prosperous, Phan Chau Trinh considered it necessary to rely on the French government under the motto “France for progress”. Based on the French, enlisting the help of the French government meant innovation for the country and there was no need for foreign aid or violence against the French. This view of Phan Chau Trinh is different from that of Phan Boi Chau. While Phan Boi Chau advocated for seeking external help (first of all, from Japan, then relying on the help of the Chinese government, or even of Germany) to carry out violent attacks to fight against the colonial French and take independence, Phan Chau Trinh said: “Do not look for outsiders, for that is foolish; do not use violence, for that certainly leads to death” [Phan Chau Trinh 2005b: 69].

Explaining this difference, in a conversation with the governor of Cochinchina in 1910 in Con Dao prison, Phan Chau Trinh analyzed: “The people of Vietnam have been under despotism for over a thousand years, which means that our country did not have an independent national status, and not

only under foreign rule. It's like dealing with “a different master, but still as a servant” without any benefits. Beside this, France is globally known as a pioneer of civilization, while they are protecting our country, and we should learn from them... Now, the citizens' education level has become higher, which means that independence has come nearer day by day. But if we follow the idea of “depending on foreign power”, it is winding and twisting; if we are not independent, everyone is our enemy. Korea and Taiwan are striking examples”. Phan Châu Trinh believed that the policy of relying on the French for the reform of the country was only a “trick”, in other words, a temporary measure. He confessed: “I want to make the French believe, so I have to “rely on the French” to create mutual faith”. Also, he frankly said: “I advocate the theory of “relying on the French”, so we cannot use the means of autonomy. Autonomy is a big deal; we will die if we fail ...” [Nguyễn Quang Thắng 1992: 275].

Thus, in the context of our country's weak economy and low educational level, we cannot demand independence immediately, but first of all, we need to rely on the French government to fight against the feudal government, which has too many bad habits, customs, and a backward traditional life. At the same time, we must implement the policy of reform with the motto: *Khai dân trí, chấn dân khí, hậu dân sinh* (Civil education, civil mobilization, and civil livelihood) to develop the economy, culture, and education, so that we can improve the material and spiritual life of the people and strengthen the power of the country. It is a path, a new direction to escape the slavery of a dominant country.

But the mistake of Phan Chau Trinh and Phan Boi Chau was that they were still vague about the nature of imperialism that they wanted to rely on, to get foreign aid and support from outside to save the country. That is the misconception that the two Phan patriots were later criticized by Nguyen Ai Quoc – Ho Chi Minh, and ultimately led to their project's stalemate and failure.

Phan Chau Trinh' contribution in Vietnamese history in early 20th century

Phan Chau Trinh was the first and most prominent democracy activist in Vietnam at the beginning of the 20th century. It was known that the weak and dependent government of our country was the main cause of the Nguyen Dynasty's ruin. Therefore, he advocated the idea of democracy, resolutely opposed to monarchy, and eliminated the ideologies and habits of imperialist feudalism. Phan Chau Trinh's public proclaims against feudalism show his courage and disregard for any ruling power. He said: “I do know the suspicion of French government, the resentment of the Vietnamese dynasty but I'm not afraid of danger to study abroad, when singing, crying in the foreign country, standing in the middle of four tanks with hostile, taking the self-strength to fight like hanging by a single hair, sacrificing life as the target to let them shoot in order to hold the life in death, and no regret although being near the death” [Nguyễn Quang Thắng 1992: 271].

Regarding the idea of anti-feudalism, in the past, there were many opinions that Phan Chau Trinh only propagandized against the backwardness of feudalism and did not oppose all feudal governments, moreover, he did not want to abolish feudalism [Trần Văn Giàu et al. 1957: 241]. However, as the newly collected material shows, Phan Chau Trinh supported anti-feudalism quite strongly and comprehensively, and later, his opinion was fiercer and more radical. According to the evidence of a French secret agent Jolin, during a conversation between Phan Chau Trinh, Phạm

Quynh⁹, and Nguyen Van Vinh¹⁰ in Marseille in May 1922, Phan Chau Trinh wanted to “overthrow the dynasty to form a parliament as the leader of the country, jointly with the French government. There is no need for a king anymore. We should make the people understand their rights and the law and be free like the French”.

Phan Chau Trinh’s democratic view was further developed and reflected in his lecture on monarchism and democracy in Saigon in November 1925. According to him, democracy is the rule of law; if one wants to build a state following the model of European capitalist countries, one must follow the principle of separation of power. Phan Chau Trinh said that “the legislative, executive, and judicial powers are separate and must not belong to one authority” [Nguyễn Văn Dương 1995: 817]. According to the rule of law, when there is a violation of the law, “everyone, from the president to a countryman, is equally subject to the same law” [Nguyễn Văn Dương 1995: 816]. Phan Chau Trinh’s idea of the rule of law was borrowed from the French Third Republic [Phan Châu Trinh 2005a: 41] and he had spent many years studying that state. That was a bourgeois democracy conception. Evaluating Phan Chau Trinh’s political thought, Tran Van Giau, Vietnam’s famous historian, wrote: “The line of *civil education, civil mobilization, and civil livelihood*, and the path of anti-colonialism to regain independence of France, to establish a constitutional monarchy or a democratic republic, and to develop this country like the West, are essentially bourgeois ideologies, nothing else” [Trần Văn Giàu 1975: 120].

In the early 20th century, Vietnam was in a dark time of slavery under colonial regime. With a patriotic spirit, many Vietnamese patriots tried to find a different way to save the country. Phan Boi Chau and the Confucianists had violent thoughts, a policy of gathering forces to carry out an armed uprising to gain national independence. Phan Chau Trinh said that at that time, the national economy was backward, the level of education was low, which was not sufficient to regain independence of the French. Thus, the best strategy was to develop the power to make people rich and powerful by implementing a reform of the country under the motto “*Broaden the people’s mind, invigorate the people’s spirit, then enrich the people’s well-being*”. He said: “Without opening the people’s minds to help them become rich and powerful, there is no way to reach the goal of autonomy and education, commerce, speech is a medicine or treatment” [Nguyễn Quang Thắng 1992: 276]. By doing this, Phan Chau Trinh opened a path and a new direction to bring Vietnam out of slavery. A radical change in mentalities and action was necessary to achieve the goal of national reform. In the perspective of progress, Phan Chau Trinh’s ideas and views on civil rights, democracy, and people were revolutionary, and a great step towards the search for solutions to save Vietnam, what differs him from other scholars of the early 20th century.

Phan Chau Trinh was aware that the ultimate goal of Vietnam was to achieve independence and bring freedom and happiness to the people. However, to achieve that goal, firstly, it was necessary to awaken the sense of national self-reliance, and to save people from drowning in the confusion of absolute monarchy. Phan Chau Trinh advocated the policy of “civil education, civil mobilization, and civil livelihood” to reaffirm the sense of self-reliance and to assert that the Vietnamese can build their

⁹ Pham Quynh (1892–1945), the Editor-in-chief of “*Nam Phong*” journal (“Southern wind”) from 1917. When King Bao Dai returned to rule from France in 1932, he was appointed the Minister of Education and then the Minister of the Interior in the Nguyen Dynasty.

¹⁰ Nguyen Van Vinh (1882–1936) was a Vietnamese journalist and translator of Western literature. He founded the “*Đông Dương tạp chí*” (“Indochina journal”, 1912) and then he was the Editor-in-Chief of “*Trung Bac Tan Van*” journal.

own civilization [Trần Mai Ước 2012: 92]. It is also a way to oppose the policy of “civilization” that the French and Indochina colonial governments often propagated, which disillusioned the mind of the Vietnamese people.

Looking at the policy of violence of Phan Boi Chau as a reference system, we can regard Phan Chau Trinh’s perspective as reformism [Tôn Quang Phiệt 1958: 70]. In the context of Vietnamese society at the beginning of the 20th century, Phan Chau Trinh’s ideas of democracy, civil rights, and people’s livelihood were positive and progressive. A specific piece of evidence was that his reformist views in a short time gained support from the people, from progressive scholars to industrial workers, civil servants, and farmers. The original idea of reform in peace was rapidly transformed into people’s power, which led the forces of the people to an uprising. In the uprising, the peasants fought against the corrupt feudal colonial government, for civil rights and democracy. The reality showed that Phan Chau Trinh could not be called a reformist, or that he “did not trust the people” [Chương Thâu 1982: 87].

Conclusion

Phan Chau Trinh was an enthusiastic and incisive patriot who had the most advanced ideas among the patriotic intellectuals in Vietnam in the early 20th century. He had no fear of sacrifice or hardship and disregarded rulers in power like Phan Boi Chau. Phan Chau Trinh had been active and persistent throughout the struggle for the people and the nation. His words concerning Phan Boi Chau, are also true for himself: “Phan Boi Chau is a genius who dares to do great deeds without regrets but with strong self-confidence” and he admitted that “I (Phan Chau Trinh) am like that too”. To be more objective, one could refer to the following statement of Prof. Daniel Hémery, the leading researcher of Vietnam in France: “The great Phan Chau Trinh, in my opinion, is the most remarkable figure in the history of Vietnamese culture and politics in the 20th century, because he had identified the nation’s issues of concern (les problématiques) the most clearly, which set a long-term guide that many generations of Vietnamese can follow” [Nguyễn Ngọc 2002: 71]. Despite some limitations, and even mistakes, Phan Chau Trinh spent his life to engage and persist in fighting for the future of the nation despite prison and the threat of harsh violence. To Phan Chau Trinh, national liberation needed to go hand in hand with modernization and a rupture with traditional monarchy (Nguyễn Thế Anh 2008: 387).

As expressed in his funeral eulogy in 1926 “*Ba tác lưỡi mà gươm mà súng, nhà cầm quyền trông gió cũng gai ghê; Một ngòi lông vừa trống vừa chiêng, cửa dân chủ treo đèn thêm sáng chói*” [Without guns or swords, he needs only words to make the authorities shiver at first sight; with the pen to raise his voice, he brings hope to the process of democratization].¹¹ Thus it is that Phan Chau Trinh will forever be a star, a brilliant example on the road of reform and development of the country, for the rich and powerful nation of Vietnam.

¹¹ *Điếu văn của Phan Bội Châu* [The eulogy of Phan Boi Chau], in: *Phan Bội Châu: Complete Works*, 1: 74-75.

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