

THE 80<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF PHAN CHAU TRINH'S DEATH (1926-2006)

## PHAN CHAU TRINH - LIFE AND CAREER

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Phan Chau Trinh was a typical historical personage in the Vietnam revolutionary movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So far many Vietnamese and foreigners have done research on Him. It is thought that, at the incense offering in memory of his death, a review of his life and cause is a deed of necessity and use.

Phan Chau Trinh was born in Tay Loc village of the mountainous district of Tien Phuoc (now Tam Loc, Phu Ninh, Quang Nam) in 1872, when the French colonialists had occupied the South of Vietnam (1867) and was urgently staging the occupation of the whole country. The two Treaties in the year of the Goat (August 25<sup>th</sup> 1883) and the year of the Monkey (June 6<sup>th</sup> 1884) marked the Vietnamese feudalism's surrender to the French imperialists. Vietnamese patriots, however, had not laid down their arms. The high tide of Can Vuong armed struggle, with the participation of the people in the whole country, broke out immediately, lasting for many years (1885-1896). Quang Nam, Phan Chau Trinh's native land, soon responded to the movement. His father, Phan Van Binh, a military mandarin, also took part in the movement but two years later he died suddenly without any

known cause. The movement in the province then received an early setback with the failure of the uprising by Nguyen Huy Dieu after two years of action. This made Phan Chau Trinh, then only 15 years of age, think hard of the effectiveness of armed uprisings. After that the two high tides of the nation wide Can Vuong movement of Ba Dinh- Hung Linh (Thanh Hoa) and Huong Son-Huong Khe (Ha Tinh) saw failures one after another due to the brutal suppression by the French colonialists with the support of feudal henchmen. The situation clarified Phan's awareness of the helpless uprisings in Vietnam at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a force balance unfavourable to us. In fact, with the failure of Can Vuong movement the old-style armed uprising was an absolute illusion. From 1897 French capitalists were able to push up their exploitation of Vietnam on a large scale, basically changing the country's economic structures. This change would direct the long-term development of Vietnam as a colony. At the same time there appeared division in Vietnamese society. The seeds of economy and new social foundations of Quang Nam appeared earlier and developed better than those of other provinces owing to its favourable conditions. The real

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situation enabled Phan Chau Trinh, a patriot with a radical intellectual thought, to better realize the enemy's source of power as well as the cause of our failure and choose an appropriate way of national salvation. The situation in Southeast Asia then changed a lot and deeply affected that of Vietnam. At the end of 19th century, Japan - an Asian feudalist country - started its capitalist development after the Minh Tri modernization in 1868. China formed its national capitalist economy. The rising up of industrialists and traders in China at the end of the 19th century created conditions for the modernization movement in the country. These situations had deep impacts on patriotic feudal intellectuals who were looking for a new way of national salvation after the failure of Can Vuong movement. Chinese newspapers introducing Western capitalist revolutionary ideology were brought to Quang Nam through the sea-ports of Da Nang and Hoi An. Feudal intellectuals in the province were affected by the Western ideology with different levels due to their subjective conditions. The whole country shared the same situation and in Vietnam's revolutionary movement at the beginning of the 20th century there were two trends: uprising and reform. Phan Chau Trinh sided with the latter being fully aware of its urgent need and final aim. As a low-rank official in a very short time he was bitterly disappointed with the corruptive officials who were the firm support for the exploitation of his people by the French colonialists. It

was during his stay in Hue that he got into company with many patriots such as Phan Boi Chau, Nguyen Thuong Hien..., he also read reports by Nguyen Truong To, Nguyen Lo Trach, Pham Phu Thu and newspapers brought from China and Japan. Eventually he sent in his resignation of a mandarin and returned home to his intimate friends (like Tran Quy Cap, Huynh Thuc Khang) spreading the ideas of reform among scholars and people in his province. Returning from his Southern fieldtrip he agreed with Tran Quy Cap and Huynh Thuc Khang about the immediate need for launching a modernist movement among people in hope of long-term success, without intense anxiety for early uprisings. With this in mind, he only approved of "writing books,... initiating human rights" in Phan Boi Chau's Eastern study tour. According to him, 'once people are awake to their rights they can think of doing any other things'[4, p.72]. In 1906 meeting Phan Boi Chau in Japan, Phan Chau Trinh strongly criticized his policy of uprising and hope for foreign aids with an incisive verse which says:

*"Don't rise up, uprising means death  
Don't be xenophilous, being  
xenophilous is stupid".*

"Being xenophilous" is an old way of saying that waiting for foreign military aids, which is an extremely dangerous thing to do. Phan Chau Trinh's attitude toward the Nguyen feudal dynasty was more peremptory at that time. In his opinion, 'restoring the country without

abolishing its monarchy could not bring happiness to its people' [4, p.70].

After his return from Japan, with this idea in mind, he enthusiastically promoted the civilization of his people. First of all, he set it as a policy to rely on the French to carry out some necessary reforms, overthrow the monarchy and build up human rights. In his letter to the Governor-General of Indochina he described the situation in Vietnam asking the French Government for a political reform and civilization to the Vietnamese. That was obviously a political illusion. Like any other imperialists, the French imperialists were never willing to make a colony stronger and then liberate itself. It could not be concluded, however, through his actions that he completely refused uprisings. His writings did not show his prohibition of uprisings. What he meant was that uprising was only possible in favourable conditions and we were powerful enough, otherwise it would be premature. The phrase 'a sudden clap of hands' in his letter dated February 18<sup>th</sup> 1922 to Nguyen Ai Quoc clearly showed his thoughts. The reform campaign failed, but as it met the urgent demands of the masses, the reform expanded widely in the province. Peasant and trader associations, textile workshops, new style schools came into being. People competed to wear their hair short, give up drinking, abolish superstitions and old-dated customs, encourage the use of home-made goods... Everything just began but new spirits and a new will were manifested.

The propagation of patriotic prose and verse to call for solidarity, to educate national traditions, to support the reform made the new thoughts get rooted into the masses, mainly farmers who had a long-held hatred for high taxes. The new thoughts had a profound impact on them, getting them involved in the struggle. There was a move in the reform movement in Quang Nam and other central provinces. The year 1908 saw great anti-taxation demonstrations with tens of thousands of people involving in the struggle against the French colonialists and their henchmen.

It could be seen in the revolutionary movement development that in Vietnam there appeared two trends of reform and uprising at the same time. That the two trends depended on and supported each other was sensible and useful. Reform was not contradictory to uprising, but after all, the former was an active preparation for the latter. Therefore, when suppressing the movement, the French colonialists could not see the differences between reform and uprising as they were both dangerous to them. At this time Phan Chau Trinh was arrested and sentenced to exile in Con Dao though when 'xin xau' took place in Quang Nam (March 1903) he was in Hanoi.

Thanks to the Alliance of Human Rights in France Phan Chau Trinh was granted early amnesty and in March 1911 he took up residence in France. With this decision the French rulers wanted to isolate him from Vietnamese people, who after their failure were in

need of long-term preparations through a both spiritual and material reform. This was a good chance for Phan Chau Trinh to run the reform campaign right in France where he thought to be the origin of human rights. Through documents and correspondence collected in France and Vietnam it was found that from 1911 to 1914 he worked very hard expanding contacts with the French Social Party, the Alliance of Human Rights and the press circle writing reports... At the same time he had relations with Nguyen Tat Thanh (later Nguyen Ai Quoc), who was in London.

Alleged to be in league with Germany by the French rulers, he was put into prison during World War I. He was not released until August 1915 for lack of accusations. Getting out of prison in wartime he had to work very hard to cover the high cost of living. From 1915-1919 an event worth mentioning was that in Paris he met Nguyen Tat Thanh coming from England in mid-1917. There began the period during which the two lived together with effective and mutual co-ordinations. It was during this period that the level of influences between the two could be assessed. On the basis of "Claims by the Vietnamese" in 1919 "not yet in need of revolutionary changes for Vietnam" with the contents similar to the 14 points by the American President Wilson, which to some extent was an practical application to circumstances in Vietnam [1, pg.24] it was affirmed that during 1917-1919 Phan Chau Trinh had influence on Nguyen Ai Quoc. This was quite easy to

understand because for Nguyen Ai Quoc - a direction finder - these were the first steps on his way to look for suitable procedures of action, so he took every opportunities and every possible ways to struggle for the benefits of his country and people. That Nguyen Ai Quoc was first influenced by Phan Chau Trinh was an undeniable historical fact because the former was a young patriot looking for ways of national salvation in France, a democratic country and realizing the failure of the old way of national salvation while the latter was already a clear democratic thinker. Dealing with this point a foreign researcher acknowledged: "Before 1920, Ho Chi Minh admired Phan Chau Trinh greatly. He was also confident in the pre-eminence of the civilized model on a scientific and democratic basis, very much like the well known claims sent to the 1919 Peace Conference by him and other Vietnamese patriots"[2]. The main point was that working in the patriotic movement of the Vietnamese nationals in France and joining the anti-war struggle and French workers' post-war movement Nguyen Ai Quoc's political thoughts changed quickly. The division within Phan and Nguyen's thought became more obvious. It was reported by the French secret police that in 1919 at No. 6 Villa des Bobelins there had been controversial arguments between Phan Chau Trinh and Nguyen Ai Quoc about their attitudes toward the French colonialists and a necessary policy of action. It was important to see Phan Chau Trinh's attitudes to the changes in

Nguyen Ai Quoc's thoughts. It was known that 'in Paris, Nguyen Ai Quoc soon became the head of the small community of Vietnamese nationals there' [1, pg.21]. It was also acknowledged by the French secret police that "the soul of Vietnamese nationals movement" in Paris was Nguyen Ai Quoc"<sup>(1)</sup>. In spite of this, Phan Chau Trinh stuck to his way showed his confidence in and admiration for the intelligence and ability of Nguyen Ai Quoc, a youth of his children's age. In his letter to Nguyen dated February 18<sup>th</sup> 1922, he wrote: "I am now like a fish or a bird in captivity. I am an absent-minded old man, like a wind-shaken old tree or a crumbling flower. While our country is under foreign rule, I only raise my voice to my heart's content in hope of consciousness. Like a mature' buddy tree, you have a strong will, much experience and good theories..." [6, pg. 40].

This heartfelt statement, on the one hand, showed his persistence in his chosen way, which was still useful for the cause of national salvation. On the other hand, it showed his willingness to transfer responsibility to a younger generation with a more appropriate policy when history entered a new page.

During his last years and months in France, Phan Chau Trinh went on with his activities when there was a chance. In July 1922 when the puppet king Khai Dinh came to France with shady schemes, Phan publicized his 7 crimes to

his country and people, which made him worthy of being guillotined.

Then in 1924, after the failure of the assassination of Governor General Martial Merlin by Tam tam xa in Sa Dien (China) Indochinese issues were brought up in the French Parliament and the French imperialists found it necessary to relax their severity and soothe people in their colonies. Then the revolutionary movement in Vietnam was turning to a new direction with the growth of the post-war working class. Phan Chau Trinh sent French rulers a request for returning home to his country after 15 years living in exile abroad (May 1925).

Two imprisonments at home and abroad, years of hard work for a living in foreign land, the impasse in political intention, a grief at his son's death <sup>(2)</sup>, all made his health decline greatly. However, his feelings for his people and thoughtful help from friends gave him much encouragement to continue his activities in his homeland. In his letter to Nguyen Ai Quoc dated February 18<sup>th</sup> 1922 Phan Chau Trinh wrote: "I may have a chance to come back to my homeland, then I will try my best to encourage people throughout our country to join forces to overthrow the old regime..." [6, pg.40]. The old revolutionist did series of actions as if competing with time. He gave talks in Sai Gon against the monarchy and for human rights. He telephoned the

<sup>(1)</sup> Quoted by Nguyen Phan Quang in: "*Về một số tư liệu hoạt động của Nguyễn Ái Quốc ở Pháp 1917-1923*"

<sup>(2)</sup> His son Phan Chau Dat went to France with him in 1911, then had to returned home due to a serious illness and died of lung disease in 1921.

Governor General Alexandre Varenne asking for amnesty to Phan Boi Chau. He telephoned the French Resident Superior in Central Vietnam Pierre Pasquier to stop finding the successor to King Khai Dinh and set up a council to study necessary reforms. The post-war revolutionary movement in Vietnam was entering a new stage and the working class advancing to master the leadership. Appreciating Phan Chau Trinh's patriotism highly, people nationwide showed their profound respect to him. He died on March 24<sup>th</sup> 1926 in Sai Gon. His funeral attended by hundreds of thousands of people from North, Central and South Vietnam and Vietnamese nationals from Thailand, in fact, became a demonstration of great patriotism of the people who wanted national liberation. The great significance of his funeral was expressed in the parallel sentences as a homage to Phan Chau Trinh by Tran Quang Tang working for Bach Thai Buoï shipping company in Nam Dinh, which meant 'the day of memorial service for Phan Chau Trinh changed the whole people's spirits'. Nguyen Ai Quoc acknowledged: "The year 1926 saw the nationwide enlightenment following the death of the old nationalist Phan Chau Trinh"[3, pg.20].

Indeed, the funeral of the patriot, the moving memorial services for him and the seething strikes after that urged the whole new generation to march on the revolutionary path.

To review Phan Chau Trinh's revolutionary life, it can be concluded that under the circumstances of Vietnam history at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century his political tendency and activities had positive impacts on the revolutionary movement at the time. That was because the request for democracy and the thirst for civil rights initiated by him were suitable with the moves of Vietnam revolution and the time. Under the influence of his political tendency and activities a democratic reform campaign was launched in Central Vietnam and rapidly spread across the country. As a result, the feudal ideology was attacked, customs were renewed, industry and trade were developed... No doubt, Phan Chau Trinh was the first man with democratic thoughts in Vietnam.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Phan Chau Trinh appeared in our national political arena as a brave, truthful and indomitable patriot, a progressive feudal intellectual who devoted all his life to the promotion of democracy and civil rights in our country. With such qualifications Phan Chau Trinh deserves a high position in the history of our people's struggle for national salvation. More than ever before, in our people's present renovation under the Party's leadership, the lessons of democracy and civil rights from Phan Chau Trinh's time are still valuable and significant.

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