

ON PHAN CHAU TRINH'S ACTIVITIES IN FRANCE (1911 - 1925)

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1. Familiar but Highly Efficient Activities in France

Making petitions, writing reports, delivering speeches, creating associations (of trades, learning, etc) were Phan Chau Trinh's famous activities at home. During his 14-year stay in France, he concentrated mainly on these activities, but with much greater efforts in the more favorable political environment with freedom of speech and meeting in France, and with the supports from the other patriotic political activists such as Phan Van Truong, Nguyen Ai Quoc, ... and from his French friends such as major Roux, Mr Presenté (Human Right Society), Mr Marius Moutet (left-wing member of House of Representatives). These brought about much greater effectiveness.

The petitions which Phan Chau Trinh sent to the Ministry of Colonies were turned down, which at times disappointed him. However, thanks to these petitions, at least, the French Protectorate Government together with the Nguyen Imperial Court had to reconsider the convicts detained in the

year of 1908 in connection with the requests for lower taxes, declare non-criminals for a lot of people and reduce the sentences made on the rest. Also due to these petitions (in coordination with journals and newspapers) the bad customs and habits of the colonialists' authorities in Indochina and their unfair treatments in France towards himself and the other patriotic Vietnamese residents were revealed to public opinion which caused acute and heated debates in the French Parliament session on December 22nd 1924 between Moutet (leftist House of Representative member) and Outrey, (formerly an exprovincial head in Indochina and currently a rightist H.R. member). The quarrel focused on the administrative policies in the Indochinese colony in connection with Phan Chau Trinh, a Vietnamese patriot and the pretext that unleashed the quarrel was the problem of granting passports to three Vietnamese residents in France, among whom Phan Chau Trinh was one.

The debate was reported in the journal *Quotidien* and then was repeated in the paper "Native Tribune", the organ

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of the Constitution Party (the organization founded by Grandean and Phan Chau Trinh in early 1925) with the title: "The scandal on Indochina in the Parliament - Outrey appearing to be openly operated on - the restoration of honor". The article was initiated by Georges Grand Jean's words. The debate was also reported in detail in the journal "Officiel" and reiterated in "Courier d'Haiphong" in its Sunday issue of February 1st, 1925. In this very debate, representative Moutet strongly provoked and criticized the Indochinese colonialist administration's brutal policies, of which the typical case was the death sentence on Phan Chau Trinh and some of his friends, life-long imprisonments and deportations on some other people without any court sessions; and now they sought measures to declare them, distortionally, as communists and intended to kill Phan Chau Trinh personally, who had been rescued by the Human Right Association from Con Lon Jail, and was living and working legally in France. In the heated discussion, Moutet used his words of deep sympathy and moving support, strongly rejecting Outrey's distortive condemnation. After reviewing Phan Chau Trinh's process of activities, the unfair treatment towards him by the Indochinese authorities and by the French government, representative Moutet stated: "When he came among us he was a royalist. Accidentally, in this very atmosphere he has become a republican".

"On arriving in our country he understood that this so-called "Protection" by the "mother country" is only imaginary, that our government, or more accurately, a small number of our officials know how to play the puppet. With his deep knowledge he said "I'm a republican". I know that he is not a communist at all. He may be a communist, this being his own choice. Freedom of thinking does exist in our country anyway!"

"This very man has lived an eventful life, who arrived in France to see that his own son died of intestinal tuberculosis and his relative in Indochina had passed away. He lived alone on this planet who only desired that he would rest with his ancestors in his own country in the ceremonial customs which he was closely associated with. He said: "I want to return home with the protection and defense by France's own laws, as a French citizen". This is the very man, who was accused by you yourself, dear Mr. Outrey, and whom I would like to defend. Together with the Human Right Society, we have to defend him, which belong to our policies with our natives. We have no reasons to refute this and should ask our government to implement this policy".

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After this, he recalled: "The first condition to carry out a good policy toward the aborigines (of the colonies) is to grant them justice, fairness particularly when they pronounce this in the name of France. You should not forget that our country's great prestige with the world is affectionism and fraternalism which our country has proclaimed to the world at large".⁽¹⁾

Without Phan Chau Trinh's persevering and frank petitions there wouldn't have been such a special event at the French Parliament through which the evils of the rulers' policies in Indochina had been exposed so hard to the very eyes of the VIPs of the French administrative machine.

Writing articles and reportages for the journals and newspaper had been Phan Chau Trinh's own advantage, and during his 14-year stay in France this had been promoted to the utmost. Khai Dinh's fast escape from Phan's thunder storming hit by the latter's articles was an evidence. In the field of Vietnam's patriotic journalism up till this point, such effectiveness had been extremely scarce. It should be added that in this professional area Phan Chau Trinh's articles, either read in the originals or in the translated version, were the models in the styles' (registers) and in the genre which should have been learnt by journalistic researchers and reporters themselves. The articles that had been

printed and published or passed on manually, together with his petitions and other essays were of particularly literary values. He might have been considered to be a great writer of political commentaries and editorials. Phan Chau Trinh was thus not only an important historical figure of Vietnam's late modern history but also one who should have occupied a worthy place in the history of Vietnam's literature and journalism.

Delivering speech was the strength of Phan Chau Trinh. Those who had a chance to talk to him or to listen to his speech, either the French or Vietnamese, couldn't help admiring him for his grace, his talent for oration and knowledge how to attract the listeners. In France at that time there was also a large number of people who were highly educated and showed great talent of speech-making, but there was scarcely such a person who had attracted the listeners so strongly as Phan Chau Trinh. Moreover, Phan was so enthusiastic in this kind of activities and so aware of taking the advantage to do this. In fact, there were not any Vietnamese residents in Paris who could match Phan in this respect. In the announcements for his orations' attendance, his name and fame were introduced with very great respect. On his speech delivered on August 22nd, 1922 in Marseille, the journal *Le Provençal* noted:

"Next Thursday, at 21 o'clock, in Cours Saint Louis, there will be a grand

⁽¹⁾ For more detail cf. Document N°178, p17, vol.1 (conserved sources at Aix-en - Provence - in French).

this evening (August 24th, 1922) at Cours Saint Louis, room 6, 1st floor.

All the members of the (Human Rights) Alliance, all the party members of the party cells (the Socialist Party) should consider it their duty to attend the lecture delivered by an orator of high prestige and evaluation who would surely make it the most interesting speech of highest educational values".

Phan Chau Trinh availed himself of the opportunities to make the speeches to keep in touch with the Vietnamese residents in France and with the French citizens, through which he could denounce the evils of the rulers in the colonies in the so-called Protectorate Government, the decadences of the Southern (Nguyen's) Court, presenting and justifying the significance of the reforms which he requested the French government to carry out. As far as the Vietnamese patriotic residents in France were concerned, they had been able to listen to his discourses and to keep in direct contacts with him and felt greater love and association with their fatherland, and therefore, less lonely on the distant country. They also felt the needs to unite with one another to go on persisting and assisting their fatherland to their greatest power.

Phan Chau Trinh's presence and participation in the friendly and political organizations in France, often as a leader, offered us an assurance for the lucidity, strength and unselfishness of

these organizations, thus creating beliefs among the participants directing people's ideology and activities to their just routes, separating themselves away from the ordinary inducements by the free capitalist society and the attraction from the Vietnamese residents with bad political attitude. Phan Chau Trinh's presence in the role of the leader of the Association of Friendly Vietnamese Compatriots at the side of Phan Van Truong was the insurance for this organization's attractive power to have useful activities which made the enemy worry, alert and always cope with it. By reading the reports, decrees, orders and letters written by the government officials in France and in Indochina we can realize how important Phan was in his role as the leader of this organization. His role was also embodied in his managing the Society of Vietnamese Patriots together with Phan Van Truong and Nguyen Ai Quoc to propose the Eight-Point Demand to be sent to the Versailles Agreements of 1919.

2. Fourteen Years of Keeping Exposure of the Same Character and Quality

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2. Fourteen Years of Keeping Exposure of the Same Character and Quality

Phan Chau Trinh was a figure of salient characters, which were his high self-conviction in his own avocations of saving his country which had been formulated when he was at home. That was his guideline of dependence on the French, requesting their assistance to enhance the Vietnamese people's awareness, to restore their own tradition, to foster the nation's talents, develop its economy, and mend its political regime (first and foremost to readjust the ruling machinery by the Southern Nguyen's Court, and later on, when he lived in France, to advocate the elaboration of royalist) so that Vietnam could become an autonomous and democratic country of comprehensive development under the French protection and shield and finally become an independent prosperous and strong nation. He absolutely believed that this is the only right way to save the Vietnamese people from the foreign slavery, and that France, with its own tradition of democracy and freedom, has sufficient volition to do this. That was the reason why he didn't approve of the use of violence which, in his opinion, would cause useless death, and desired to make full use of the assistance from the Frenchmen who were then present in Vietnam so as not to fall under the rule of another nation with ill intention

to expand its power in East Asia (with reference to Japan in this situation).

After 14 years of living and working untiringly in France in various fields, keeping in touch with different ideological crosscurrents, with famous politicians, though at times he showed sympathy with communism, taking part in the regular meetings of the party cells of District 13 of the French Socialist Party, his advocated guideline did not change at all. Right at the beginning of 1925 he, together with Grandjean, founded the "Constitutional Group", using the newspaper "Tribune" as its organ to achieve all the aborigines' demands to be submitted to the Minister (of the Ministry of Colonial Affairs - the office which directly solved all the colonial affairs).

More concretely, after 1919, although he supported Nguyen Ai Quoc in his joining the French Communist Party and always showed affection to this patriotic youth, he time and again criticized Nguyen Ai Quoc's manner of action and advised Nguyen to take his own mode of action. In defiance of the fact that he sometimes felt disappointed at the French government's indifference and even admitted that he himself had "for long lived in an illusion but did not know it" ⁽²⁾; he nourished the hope that one day, when the leftists made up the majority in the Parliament, there would be improvement in the policies of ruling

⁽²⁾ See the letter to Minister A. Saraut on December, 19th of 1922.

time consciously defended to the maximum the interests of the motherland's bourgeoisie. Despite the fact that from 1919 to 1923 Nguyen Ai Quoc actively helped Phan to get out of the illusion, Nguyen was unsuccessful.

The second salient point in his tempers was his straight forwardness and frankness, permanently embodied in his daily speeches and wording, and in his actions as well, during his 14 years of staying in France.

It is this frankness and sincerity that enabled him to say out straightly, frankly and openly all the evils of the protection government in Indochina, the decadence of the Southern Court's administrative machinery, so that they would not be able to conceal them from the public opinion and take some action to soothe it. Right at the time when exchanging letter or conversing with high-ranking officials (Minister of Colonial Affairs or Indochinese governor, etc.) Phan Chau Trinh kept remaining frank and straight, expressing bluntness and directness without being timid so that they could not evade the main problems or beak about the bust. This was not what any Vietnamese resident could do then.

In his treatment with such close and intimate contemporary of his as Phan Van Truong and Nguyen Ai Quoc, he maintained his permanent tempers, and even pushed them to abnormal levels.

Bui Ky, another intimate contemporary with Phan Chau Trinh, said "Mr Phan was too frank", if anyone intended to debate against his volition "he bluntly refuted him, or even cut off his speaking terms with him". I often said this to him: "We arrived in France not to be a historic mandarin!". In fact, he knew his mistake but it was hard to make it good, to try to evade the way of being a sky hawk to hunt after a lark. This was really hard to rectify this manner".⁽³⁾

To some extent, this temper influenced the effectiveness of Phan Chau Trinh's activities, didn't it?

During his stay in France, Phan's good qualities had been fully promoted. At home, he had already been famous as an ardent patriot, who had courageously singly fought against the Hue Imperial Court and its rotten machinery of mandarins of all ranks, and always ready to confront orally with the top-ranking officials of the protection government. The Southern Court's unfair sentence on him of three-year imprisonment in Con Dao (Paulo Condor) had, in no ways, disappointed him. He insisted on being admitted to visit France to go on implementing his own aspiration.

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⁽³⁾ Dossier SPCE: 374 by Ngo Duc Ke - Material N°23.

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Having already been a famous patriotic scholar at home, when arriving in France, he was often kept a vigilant eye on, always surrounded and prevented from any acts by the Ministry of Colonial Affairs officials. In 1914, with a brazen distortion he was detained for nearly a year. When getting out of jail, the very small sum of allowance for him and his son (Phan Huu Dat who was studying in France) was cut off. He got into a desperate situation; then his wife passed away at home, and Phan Huu Dat was affected with retinal TB and had to return home (1920) and died in Hue 1921. Under such circumstances Phan Chu Trinh did not flinch at all. Together with his compatriots - the patriotic Vietnamese residents-activated enthusiastically (as mentioned in Section 2). He did not only persist in his ardent patriotism and heroism in fighting, but added with high self-control at his great personal losses and depression, hence his ever greater prestige in France and at home. It is possible to say that in the 1920s, Phan

Chau Trinh and Phan Boi Chau were two typical patriots in the cause of our national liberation in defiance of their different modes of affectivities. This was for sure the reason why his death in 1926 nearly one year after his repatriation (April 24, 1926) also one year after the struggle for the amnesty on Phan Boi Chau, caused the nationwide emotional movement of the year and "the movement of paying homage to Phan Chau Trinh" became a symbol of our nation's patriotism of the time.

3. Beloved and Respected by Compatriots and Friends, and Admired by the Enemy

With his enthusiastic and energetic activities of high efficacy during his 14-year stay in France, Phan Chau Trinh was respected by the patriotic Vietnamese residents, living in France. All the people, including pupils, students, soldiers, workers, sailors, cooks, etc. showed great respect to him and wanted to live near him for frequent behests and teaching. This sentiment, expressed by a great number of Vietnamese residents, was noted down by the French secret detectives.

The report made by directive Josselme in May 1920 read:

During May 1920 the An Nam aborigines wrote much about the so-called life affairs, i.e. the international political affairs. They always wrote about their admiration for an Annamite called Phan Chau Trinh whose name

nation "to refer to Phan Chau Trinh. This is not a term for propagation but is much like a remark about an obvious unequivocal state of affair".⁽⁵⁾

In some other documents, Josselme wrote (in his report dated January 24, 1921): "Phan Chu Trinh was highly respected among the Indochinese who demanded autonomy. He is the only man in France who was called 'cụ Phan' - old granddad Phan - the word being not quite equivalent to Monsieur".⁽⁶⁾

French secret agent, Desire, in his report dated May 12, 1925, wrote "Mr Phan Chau Trinh is beloved to all of his compatriots in Paris and in France as well. He has been considered to be a great scholar, and most particularly the most particularly the most ardent patriot of Indochina".⁽⁷⁾

The afore-said affection by the Vietnamese residents in France was also the same sentiment his friends and co-activists in France such as Phan Van Truong, Nguyen An Ninh, although the latter two people did not share Phan Chau Trinh's points of view and had sometimes made acute debates with him.

The Frenchmen who knew him or kept in touch with him showed great respect and love towards him. Among them worth mentioning the most was Representative Moutet and major Roux.

Right in 1909 when he had not yet met Phan Chau Trinh and knew his name through reading the letter Phan sent to the Indochinese Governor and the sentence the Nguyen Court reserved for him. Mutet expressed his particular respect for Phan; in the very meeting of the Central Committee of the Alliance for Human Right on February 1st 1909, he considered Phan Chau Trinh as "the man whose name we should remember, though it is hard for us, Europeans, to memorize the name, simply because he is the real hero".

During the time Phan Chau Trinh stayed in France Moutet who was the high-ranking official in the French authorities had intimate relation with Phan in the role of a friend, an adviser and a protector.

Major Roux was an army officer who had previously served in Vietnam, who was expert at speaking and writing Chinese and Vietnamese. Back in France, Roux was appointed a teacher of Vietnamese in an Oriental Language school and also held important positions in the military branch. He was a rare French officer who especially sympathized with the Vietnamese people and showed greatest respect for Phan Chau Trinh's personality and cause so that he swore brotherhood with Phan, calling him adopted brother. He acted as the interpreter for Phan in his conversations with the French officials and was the translator of many of Phan's

⁽⁵⁾ - (86) - conserved CAOM: SPCE 372

⁽⁶⁾ Document N° 117.

⁽⁷⁾ Document N° 196.

Major Roux was an army officer who had previously served in Vietnam, who was expert at speaking and writing Chinese and Vietnamese. Back in France, Roux was appointed a teacher of Vietnamese in an Oriental Language school and also held important positions in the military branch. He was a rare French officer who especially sympathized with the Vietnamese people and showed greatest respect for Phan Chau Trinh's personality and cause so that he swore brotherhood with Phan, calling him adopted brother. He acted as the interpreter for Phan in his conversations with the French officials and was the translator of many of Phan's writings (letters, journal articles, petitions, etc.) into French. He was the sole Frenchman who assisted and took great care of Phan Chau Trinh's activities and his personal life in France, and shared his weal and woes.

On the part of the rivals (enemy) (the French officials and mandarins of Nguyen Court) it is certain to say that all the French officials, from the high-ranking ones such as the Minister of Colonial Affairs, the Indochinese Governor, the French Ambassador in Hue, to those officials in the Ministry of Colonial Affairs, they all considered, on the one hand, Phan as the most dangerous opponent, but, on the other hand, respected Phan's lucid and staunchness qualities. Some of them even advised the French government to

choose him as the cooperator and adviser for the ruling affairs in Indochina.

The Vietnamese mandarins who cooperated with the protection government, as a matter of course, had enmity with Phan because their evils had been disclosed by him in a merciless way. However, a rather small number of them expressed their deep respect to Phan. Take Luong Khac Ninh for example. He was a member of the Southern Vietnam Consultation Council, and also director of the stage ensemble at Marseille Exposition. After King Khai Dinh's escape from the Marseille Exposition because he had been provoked and accused by Phan, Luong Khac Ninh sent to Phan Chau Trinh a letter and also a poem in praising. Here below are the letter and the poem in the original:

To his Excellency Mr. Phan Chau Trinh

Dear sir,

You are endowed with a wonderful wisdom, and an unmovable strength by the Creator. In the old days, learned men and intelligent people used to work with courage and wide vision and thought. Only the stupid and lazy loafers desire to feed themselves with good food already available.

Oh! All you have done are very appropriate with what and, in the manner that, real scholars did. Your righteous cause has been obvious and

At the end of the letter, Luong Khac Ninh wrote a poem to praise Phan's talent, personality and sacrifice for the people's cause of national human right.

Generally speaking, during his fourteen-year stay in France Phan Chau Trinh did not make any change in his fundamental doctrine of national salvation, except his open declaration of himself to be a republican. This is his major limitation.

But on the whole, his untiring activities during this period of 14 years in France showed his great and rare energy and enthusiasm in various fields, which should be considered as his great contribution to nurturing and inspiring

the Vietnamese people both at home and in France. Through his activities, he set a bright example of great patience, sacrifice and gallantry in the struggle for the future of the nation. This should be Phan Chau Trinh's most fundamental achievement that his fourteen-year stay in France had brought about. Consequently, it is quite possible to say that Phan Chau Trinh and Phan Boi Chau, each with his own direction of national salvation, both with certain limitations, were two salient figures in Vietnam's history of the first two decades of the twentieth century.