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# The Cosmopolitan Nation:
# Vietnamese Comparative Political Theory

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**Acknowledgments**

After living in Vietnam for eight months, right out of college, I was asked by my father to write an essay about it so that my parents and his five siblings, all of them Vietnamese refugees, can read it. Without telling me, he had it translated, and submitted it to an essay contest about being Vietnamese-American. I was notified when my essay won an award and was published in a Vietnamese newspaper, *Viet Bao.* Shortly after, at a family wedding, an elderly Vietnamese man whom I did not know approached me and said he had read my essay. He told me that it made him happy and hopeful to discover that young Vietnamese born and raised in America were interested in their Vietnamese roots. Thanks to him, I undertook this project as an excuse to become more curious about my roots.

The first chapter, "Phan Chu Trinh's Democratic Confucianism," was published in *The Review of Politics* in 2019. The second chapter, with the title, "Nguyen An Ninh's Anti-Colonial Thought: a New Account of National Shame," was accepted for publication in *Polity.* A generous fellowship provided by UC Riverside's Graduate Research Mentorship Program allowed me to conduct archival research for this dissertation in Paris. The UC Berkeley-UCLA Graduate Student Workshop in Southeast Asian Studies gave me the opportunity to test my political theory ideas with historians and anthropologists working on Southeast Asia. Drafts of chapters were presented and helpfully engaged by participants at conferences hosted by Leiden University, the French Colonial Historical Society, Midwestern Political Science Association, Engaging with Vietnam, American University of Paris, Northwestern University, University of Copenhagen, Sciences Po, Ghent University, UC Irvine, and UC Riverside.

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For *bố, mẹ.*

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Cosmopolitan Nation:
Vietnamese Comparative Political Theory

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The emerging field of "comparative political theory" has examined political thought from China, India, and the Islamic world, but has hitherto overlooked Vietnam. It turns out that thinkers in marginal civilizations like Vietnam were actually doing the kinds of creative and hybridizing theoretical moves we would today characterize as comparative political theory. This dissertation is the first book-length scholarly work to introduce Vietnamese political thought to the academic field of political theory. I examine the political thought of five Vietnamese thinkers: Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943), Pham Quynh (1892-1945), Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), and Nguyen Manh Tuong (1909-1997). Responding to French colonialism in Vietnam, they each proposed a different way of diagnosing problems facing the Vietnamese, a solution to those problems, and how Western ideas might play a role in the solution. Each chapter is devoted to one thinker and shows how his ideas intervene in, challenge, or enhance a debate in political theory. The dissertation covers a broad range of political

theory debates (liberalism, democracy, national identity, civic and cosmopolitanism virtue, postcolonialism, revolution, and skepticism). However, a theme that cuts across all chapters is that they all conducted engaged comparative political theory, namely, they compare between Eastern and Western moral traditions to find the best ideas for the Vietnamese. This dissertation ultimately argues that their writings should be understood as a debate over how to construct a cosmopolitan national identity. From them, we gain five lessons that have the potential to be universalizable: (1) Misinterpretations of and overidealizing Others can actually be invigorating or instructive. (2) National shame over the inadequacies of your own people can actually be productive. (3) Assertive agreeability is a cosmopolitan virtue. (4) One understanding of revolution is the humanization of all who have been dehumanized. And lastly, (5) skepticism and love for diversity (by way of Montaigne) can be used to combat dogmatism and authoritarianism.

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## Introduction

The emerging field of "comparative political theory" has begun introducing political thought from outside the West to debates in contemporary political theory. These are welcome achievements (and long overdue) for human beings who live in an interconnected world with diverse cultures, and especially for those living in multicultural societies. However, comparative political theory has primarily given attention to political thought from China, India, and the Islamic world—perceived "civilizational centers," while overlooking perceived "margins" like Vietnam.

It is imagined that "centers" have distinct moral traditions, "original" indigenous thought, and are cleanly self-contained, while "margins" are unoriginal and merely get their ideas by borrowing them from "centers." This can be a problematic assumption because no system of thought is actually cleanly self-contained, and hybridity and cross-cultural borrowing actually characterize most if not all intellectual traditions.

Yet, it is more common to hear, for example, about "Chinese cultural influence on Vietnam" and more uncommon to hear about "Vietnamese cultural influence on China." We can think of other ways "centers" have influenced "marginal" nations and have more trouble finding examples of it being the other way around. This is because "centers" are often more powerful than "margins," and so exert their influence on them. Thus, there is some truth to the claim that thinkers from "margins" are more preoccupied with borrowing ideas from "centers," while thinkers from "centers" generally are preoccupied with discussing their own traditions of which they are proud to call their own.

But thinkers in marginal nations do not "borrow" passively. They have agency. They actively and creatively theorize the ideas that have percolated to them across time and space, sometimes from "centers" and sometimes from elsewhere, ideas that are then applied to demands of the moment, demands that arise, for example, from the desire to break free from colonial domination. Thus, if a scholar of comparative political theory were to study political thought of thinkers from "marginal" nations, he or she may end up studying individuals who were, themselves, conducting comparative political theory. If so, we might say the scholar conducts "meta-comparative political theory." This dissertation does just that.

This dissertation is the first book-length scholarly work to introduce Vietnamese political thought to the academic field of political theory. While historians have documented political and cultural trends of the French colonial period in Vietnam,[1] there has been less interpretation of the writings of Vietnamese thinkers of that period and no demonstration of how their writings intervene in political theory. This dissertation explores the writings of five influential Vietnamese thinkers: four who were theorizing in response to French colonialism in Vietnam and one who was responding to the

[1] See Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925*, (London: University of California Press, 1971), and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945,* (London: University of California Press, 1981); Pierre Brocheux, "Une histoire croisée: l'immigration politique indochinoise en France (1911-1945)," *Hommes et Migrations* 1253, no. 1 (2005): 26-3; Ngo Van, *Viet-nam, 1920-1945: Révolution et Contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* (Paris: Nautilus, 2000).

Vietnamese Communist Party that ruled after French colonialism. The dissertation ultimately argues that the writings of these five Vietnamese thinkers should be understood as a debate over how to construct a cosmopolitan national identity and how to conduct the right kind of engaged comparative political theory.

Andrew March argues that political theory is "engaged" if we are theorizing to find the best ideas for us, and "comparative" if we are moving between distinct moral traditions.[2] March's formulation may be untenable, he himself admits, since, as we mentioned, no system of thought is cleanly self-contained and virtually all intellectual traditions are hybrid in some way. If so, March argues, then "comparative political theory" as a subfield may actually not be itself tenable. However, if we can speak of more or less distinct moral doctrines from perceived civilizational "centers," then March's advocacy of "engaged comparative political theory" is, I believe, legitimate. All five of the Vietnamese thinkers in this dissertation conduct "engaged comparative political theory" because they compare Western and Asian ethical and political systems (specifically ideas from foreign powerful "civilizational centers" of China and Europe) to find the right ideas for the Vietnamese.

By presenting the engaged comparative political theory of these Vietnamese thinkers, I show how *we* might conduct our own engaged comparative political theory. These thinkers can be models for us.

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[2] Andrew March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009): 531– 65.

All five of these thinkers were bicultural, by compulsion and choice. Biculturalism was forced upon them in the sense that French colonialism imposed the French language, French education, ideas, and values onto the Vietnamese soon after conquering the country in stages starting in the late 1860s. Yet, in another sense, each of these thinkers at some time in their life decided to travel to and live in France for significant amounts of time. Upon their return to Vietnam, they shared their insights with fellow compatriots. They are *theorists* in the original sense of the term. Many of the ancient Greek city-states, Susan McWilliams reminds us, commissioned a *theoros*—a theorist—whose job it was to travel to visit foreign city-states or religious oracles. "The *theoros* was expected to return to his home city and report on what he had seen…"[3] Crossing political borders, the theorist thought seriously about the differences among political entities, had to think about how to translate what he had seen to his own people upon his return, occupied the intellectual position of being close to centers of power *and* at the margins of society, and collected information and developed insight that would be of practical use.[4] To use Farah Godrej's description of the activities of a cosmopolitan political theorist, these Vietnamese thinkers engage in "self-dislocation," leaving their home to immerse themselves in an alien world, followed by "self-relocation" in which they return home and call into question presumptions learned from that home.[5]

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3 Susan McWilliams, *Traveling back: Toward a Global Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.
4 Ibid., 12-13.
5 Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17-18.

When a Western comparative political theorist studies, say, Chinese philosophy, he or she typically does so to learn something useful. This dissertation indeed studies non-Western thinkers to learn something useful, but it also reverses the gaze, showing how non-Western thinkers interpreted and theorized Western ideas for *their* practical political purposes, particularly for constructing a national identity.

The idea of a Vietnamese nation was only incipient in the first few decades of the twentieth century, and constructing a national identity was a task for all five of these thinkers took on. They intuitively understood that Vietnam's national identity *had* to be a cosmopolitan or bicultural one, one that fused values from East and West. To them, whether there was an "original" or "pure" indigenous identity to return to was too vexed a question. Instead, a national identity had to be created from scratch.

Considered a cross-roads of empires, Vietnam was known as "Indochina" for its influence by Indian and Chinese cultural spheres. It was a colony of China for a millennium (111 B.C. to 938 A.D.), colonized by France for nearly a century (1868-1954), and at war with the U.S. for twenty years (1955-1975). It was also, itself, a proud colonizer, conquering the Cham and Khmer peoples as it expanded southward in the fifteenth century to give shape to the country's "S" shape that we know today. Yet, this dynamic history is not just about conquest, colonialism, and war. It is just as much about cross-cultural learning and struggle over political ideas. Vietnam was colonized, was a colonizer, was colonized again, then revolutionized and communized, following and amid attempts to Confucianize, democratize, and liberalize.

In the first half of the twentieth century during French colonialism, Vietnam was full of passionate debates over what their national identity should be and what foreign ideas should go into the construction of that identity. How did Vietnamese thinkers answer questions like, "What is the biggest problem facing the Vietnamese and what should be done about it? What ideas from the West can be part of that solution?" The five thinkers here are united in wanting to construct a national identity for Vietnam, and they each find something useful from the West that can help them in doing so.

From their engaged comparative political theorizing, we gain five different lessons, each explored in a chapter. These lessons have the potential to be generalizable and universal: (1) It's okay to misinterpret and overidealize Others. Doing so can actually be invigorating or instructive. (2) It's okay to be ashamed over the inadequacies of your own people. Such shame can actually be productive. (3) Assertive agreeability is a cosmopolitan virtue. (4) One understanding of revolution is the humanization of all who have been dehumanized. And lastly, (5) skepticism and love for diversity (by way of Montaigne) can be used to combat dogmatism and authoritarianism. These lessons or theories are implicit rather than explicit in the writings of these thinkers. Other readers of their texts may come up with alternative interpretations or lessons.

If read in order, the chapters in this dissertation can be viewed as one continuous intergenerational conversation, beginning with Phan Chu Trinh who died in 1926 and ending with Nguyen Manh Tuong who died in 1997. It is coincidental that the order in which the thinkers appear are the order in which they died. Perhaps death can be a

metaphor: each voice represents an entire generation of Vietnamese; when that voice ceases speaking, a new voice fills the void.

While each chapter presents how one Vietnamese thinker conducts engaged comparative political theory, it also shows how, in doing so, the thinker challenges or enhances a particular debate in contemporary political theory. After all, the aim of this dissertation is to show to contemporary political theorists what they can learn from Vietnamese thinkers. Thus, the chapters are structured in a way that first discusses the state of a contemporary debate in political theory, a debate that would be enhanced or challenged by the ideas of the Vietnamese thinker later explored in that chapter. The topics in political theory in which these Vietnamese thinkers intervene will range broadly.

*Outline of the dissertation:*

Chapter one explores the ideas of Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), Vietnam's celebrated nationalist of the French colonial period. He is the first Vietnamese thinker to engage seriously with political ideas from the West and is also Vietnam's first democrat. Trinh challenges a consensus on three claims that has emerged in literature that explores the relationship between Confucianism and democracy. The consensus is that democracy is not the exclusive property of Western liberalism, Confucianism and liberalism are opposed, and democracy in East Asia would be best buttressed by Confucianism, not liberalism. Against these claims, Trinh argues that liberalism and democracy *are* Western creations that cannot be decoupled, and, if adopted by the Vietnamese, will allow

Confucianism to find its fullest expression. He is able to make this peculiar argument because he ignores liberalism's individualism while celebrating other aspects of liberalism and Western civilization. Trinh's interpretation of Western ideas, although naive, is a creative one that offers political theorists a lesson: it may be useful to view foreign ideas as foreign, to interpret them generously, and to import the creative distortion to revive our own cherished, yet faltering, traditions.

Chapter two explores the ideas of Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943), an influential Vietnamese anti-colonial intellectual in French colonial Vietnam. In contrast to Phan Chu Trinh who thinks Confucianism should be revived in Vietnam, Ninh argues the Vietnamese should be ashamed of its passive reliance on received Chinese tradition, which he thinks made them weak in the first place. His solution, inspired by Nietzsche, is to redeem this shame through anti-colonial struggle by means of individual emancipation and self-recreation. Thus, Ninh shows that a source of national shame can be the perception that one's nation is intellectually inferior compared to other nations. This kind of national shame can lead not to despair but to a sense of national responsibility to engage in creative self-renewal and create national identity from scratch. Ninh's account of national shame challenges existing assumptions in political theory, namely that national identity requires national pride, that national shame comes from bad actions towards outside groups, and that national responsibility means responsibility for those bad actions. Moreover, postcolonial and decolonial literature has also overlooked the national shame of which Ninh is exemplary, tending to attribute any perception of inferiority on the part of the colonized to "internalized inferiority," and to assume the

existence of an indigenous "original" culture that colonizers destroy, overlooking the fact that natives themselves sometimes questioned the existence of "original" culture. Ninh shows that colonized people can be ashamed of lacking intellectual culture on their own terms, and be anti-colonial at the same time.

Chapter three explores the ideas of Pham Quynh (1892-1945), who explicitly rejects Ninh's bold proposals to overthrow Confucian tradition. For Quynh, Confucianism embodies precious "Eastern wisdom." The Vietnamese people's problem, he thinks, is neglect of their own Eastern wisdom while kowtowing before the Western ideal of power and science. His solution is to balance and harmonize Eastern and Western ideals. This requires the Vietnamese to strengthen their understanding of Eastern wisdom, not rejecting it, while also appreciating Western ideals. I call Quynh's approach "assertive agreeability" because he is agreeable to the West while also asserting his own Eastern tradition. We can view this approach, in general, as a cosmopolitan virtue. So far, theorists have proffered "civility" as a civic virtue for members *within* a society, but I argue that "civility" is an incoherent concept for members of different *civitates* and societies; for an *inter*national cosmopolitan virtue, Quynh's "assertive agreeability" is more appropriate. Quynh's agreeability towards the French and the West sometimes slipped into support of the French colonial regime, earning him the reputation of a traitorous collaborator. My sympathetic reading of Quynh, showing other ways he resists the West, challenges this notion, as well as the collaborator-resistor binary often relied upon in postcolonial literature.

Chapter four explores the ideas of Vietnam's most famous figure, Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969). In contrast to Quynh, Ho Chi Minh sees nothing good in French colonialism. For Ho, colonialism is fundamentally dehumanizing. His solution is to reclaim Vietnamese people's humanity through revolution on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and Confucian self-cultivation which he believed would humanize the dehumanized. Fusing theory together with practice, Ho challenges existing understandings of revolution which rarely cite dehumanization as a justification of revolutionaries, and which rarely cite humanization as a goal of revolution. Scholars typically argue that Ho's primary concern was freedom and independence, but a closer reading shows that the underlying motivation of Ho Chi Minh's entire moral and political program is outrage at the dehumanizing effects of colonialism in Vietnam and around the world. Ho is the only Vietnamese, to my knowledge, to have been engaged by political theorists. While they are correct to understand Ho's view of revolution as the cultivation of citizens so that citizens align their private interests with collective interests, these scholars overlook Ho's primary assumption that this would have a humanizing effect.

Lastly, chapter five explores the ideas of Nguyen Manh Tuong (1909-1997). Tuong saw the main problem facing Vietnam as the dogmatism and authoritarianism of the Communist Party. For Tuong, the Party's prioritization of the collectivity over the individual and its zealous devotion to Marxism-Leninism went too far, blinding it from constructive criticism. A former supporter of the Party, Tuong was excommunicated by the Party because he criticized it for lacking democratic accountability and law, which he thinks led to its self-sabotaging mistakes during land reforms in the 1950s. What is most

interesting about Tuong is that his primary source of inspiration are the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), whose skepticism and love for diversity provides Tuong many conceptual tools to criticize the Party's dogmatism. Both Ho and Tuong want to help form the "new Vietnamese man," but they have different views of what this would mean. Whereas Ho wishes to tighten social bonds, Tuong wishes to relax them.

In summary, each of these thinkers compares ideas from the East and West, choosing some and rejecting others in order to articulate what they think are the best ideas for the Vietnamese. For them, their engaged comparative political theory is not an academic exercise but rather a political and practical activity undertaken to address real problems facing the Vietnamese.

Although this dissertation aims to be an important contribution, I should probably mention some of its limitations. One shortcoming is that all five of the thinkers that I engage are men. The dissertation does not engage Vietnamese women thinkers, such as Dam Phuong (1881-1947) who was known as 'the learnt woman,' or revolutionaries like Nguyen Thi Minh Khai (1910-1941). It also does not engage the important issue of gender in debates about modernity in French colonial Vietnam, a topic discussed in important journals in Vietnam like *Phu nu Tân van* ( The Women's Gazette) and *Phu nu thoi dam* (Chronicles of Women).[6] A dissertation that uses the term "Vietnamese political

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[6] Bui Tran Phuong has explored Vietnamese women intellectuals in her dissertation "Viet Nam 1918-1945, Genre et Modernité: Émergence de nouvelles perceptions et experimentations," Ph.D. thesis, Université Lumière—Lyon 2, Lyon, 2008 and "Femmes vietnamiennes pendant et après la colonization française et la guerre américaine: réflexions sur les orientations bibliograpiques," in Hugon, ed., *Histoire des femmes en situation coloniale,* 71-94; For an overview of "the question of women" in French

thought" without including women political thinkers is problematic. Yet, it should be clear from reading this dissertation that there is never, in the first place, a unified or coherent "Vietnamese political thought."

Government officials in contemporary Vietnam would likely say that Vietnam's official political thought is "Ho Chi Minh Thought." Although I engage Ho Chi Minh, I also engage three Vietnamese political thinkers writing before Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam in 1941 and one thinker who criticized Ho's zealous followers. All of them are elite intellectuals (with the exception of Ho Chi Minh who was not quite elite and had very little formal education), but they have diverse and sometimes conflicting, even antagonistic, perspectives on politics, morality, and ethics. I chose them for this diversity, and also for how influential they were within their respective generations. Even today, street signs of major streets in every major city in Vietnam are named after Phan Chu Trinh and Nguyen An Ninh. And, of course, one can see images and sculptures of Ho Chi Minh everywhere in Vietnam. Pham Quynh and Nguyen Manh Tuong were also very influential in their time, but because their political views conflict with the official Communist Party line, their names are not, to my knowledge, on street signs. There are other important and perhaps equally interesting Vietnamese political thinkers that this dissertation does not engage such as Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940),[7] Tran Trong Kim

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colonial Vietnam, see David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (London: University of California Press, 1981), 190-251.

[7] Phan Boi Chau, *Overturned Chariot: the Autobiography of Phan Bội Châu*, trans.Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

(1882-1953),[8] Vu Trong Phung (1912-1939),[9] and Tran Duc Thao (1917-1993), to name a few.

Another limitation of this dissertation is its lack of extensive engagement with Vietnamese language sources. However, three of these Vietnamese thinkers wrote most of their political thoughts in French, the official language of Vietnam from the beginning of French colonization until independence, and I make extensive use of French-language sources. Raised in French language schools in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese thinkers writing in the 1920s such as Nguyen An Ninh openly admitted that they were more adept at French than Vietnamese. The two thinkers who did not write most of their political thoughts in French (Phan Chu Trinh and Ho Chi Minh) are well-known enough to have reputable English translations of nearly all of their important work. Sometimes, however, I will provide my own translation from the original Vietnamese if I take issue with the English translation. Furthermore, another deficiency of this dissertation is that it fails to engage Vietnamese scholars who also wrote about these thinkers. I have instead engaged scholars of Anglo-American political theory through my own interpretations of these Vietnamese. That is both a weakness and strength of this dissertation.

Despite these limitations, my hope is that the field of political theory and comparative political theory will find value in this dissertation. Given our interconnected

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[8] See Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the making of modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004): 77-83.
[9] See Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: the Political Vision of Vu Trong Phung* (London: University of California Press, 2014).

world in which diverse cultures and ideas are coming into more contact, we need to figure out how to pick out the most useful from each, create something new, and use it to improve ourselves, our country, and our world. These Vietnamese thinkers show us how it might be done.

## Chapter 1:

Phan Chu Trinh's Democratic Confucianism

On a November evening in 1925, the Vietnamese nationalist Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926) delivered a speech to his compatriots in Saigon. He exhorted them to "break the tyrannical chain and bring in liberal ideas from Europe as a medicine for our people."[10] The Vietnamese were sick, Trinh believed, owing to a lack of Confucianism caused by tyrannical monarchs. This explained Vietnam's vulnerability to French conquest and colonization (1858–1945). For Trinh, Confucianism needed to be revived in order for Vietnam to gain the necessary strength for independence. The proper "medicine" that could accomplish this, thought Trinh, was the adoption of European liberalism and the form of government that comes from liberalism: democracy. Thus, Trinh conducts engaged comparative political theory to construct a cosmopolitan national identity, one that uses liberal democracy to enhance Confucianism.

Trinh's claim is puzzling, considering that contemporary political theorists typically agree that liberalism and Confucianism are opposed. Liberals often associate "Confucianism" with rigid social hierarchy, strict gender roles, and a conservative emphasis on correct behavior.[11] Although some scholars have tried to counter this negative stereotype by showing that Confucianism and liberalism can at least learn from

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10 Phan Chu Trinh, "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident," in *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Vinh Sinh (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009), 116. Hereafter ME.

11 Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us about the Good Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 21.

each other,[12] they would still agree with Eske Møllgaard's statement that any "attempt to construe Confucianism as a liberal philosophy is an illusion."[13] How, then, is Trinh able to argue that not only are the two not opposed, but liberalism will allow Confucianism its fullest expression?

Perhaps less puzzling is Trinh's assumption that democracy is derived from liberalism. Indeed, for those in the liberal West, "democracy" typically means "liberal democracy." However, political theorists have argued that illiberal ideas such as Confucianism are also compatible with democracy, and that if East Asians are to democratize, Confucianism rather than liberalism will best buttress their democracy. Daniel Bell argues that the usual justifications for democracy in the West, such as that "democracy is the best form of government for autonomous individuals," will "not capture the hearts and minds of East Asians still impregnated with Confucian values and habits." For them, a more effective argument for democracy is that democratic governments "protect and facilitate communitarian ways of life."[14] Liberal-democratic institutions, Sungmoon Kim argues, "are not socially relevant in East Asian societies."[15] Democracy in such societies would be most politically effective and culturally relevant "if it were rooted in and operates on the 'Confucian habits and mores' with which East

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12 Seung-hwan Lee, "Liberal Rights or/and Confucian Virtues?," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no.3 (1996): 367–79; Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism and Liberalism," *Dao* 2, no.1 (2002): 1–20.
13 Eske J. Møllgaard, "Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies," *Dao* 14, no. 3 (2015): 391-402, 394.
14 Daniel Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya, and David Martin Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 17.
15 Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 10.

Asians are still deeply saturated, sometimes without their awareness—in other words, if democracy were a Confucian democracy."[16]

Indeed, we see virtually unanimous agreement that Confucianism and liberalism are opposed, that democracy does not belong exclusively to Western liberalism, and that Confucianism buttresses democracy for East Asians better than liberalism.

Little to no attention has been given to Vietnam in discussions about Confucianism and democracy, which have hitherto focused on contexts in China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. This chapter introduces Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926), one of the most important Vietnamese nationalists of the early twentieth century. He argues that democracy *is* a part of liberalism, both are properly Western, and, if adopted by the Vietnamese, democracy and liberalism will not only revive long-lost Confucianism in Vietnam but also allow Confucianism to find its fullest expression. Unlike the scholars mentioned above, Trinh is unaware, or intentionally downplays, that a widely held interpretation of liberalism "takes the individual as the ultimate and irreducible unit of society and explains the latter in terms of it,"[17] while lauding other aspects of liberalism and Western civilization. This (mis)reading may come as no surprise, as he was among the first Vietnamese to engage Western ideas. At the end of his life, he said, "about

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[16] Ibid., 4. For arguments in the same vein, see Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 2; David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127

[17] Bikhu Parekh, "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy," *Political Studies* 40, no. 1 (1992): 161.

Western things, I am highly ignorant."[18] Yet his perceptions of the West and his reworking of its ideas for his own ends make for fruitful terrain for political theorists. Political theorists have ignored the fact that, as early as the 1920s, thinkers in marginal civilizations like Vietnam were actually doing the kinds of creative and hybridizing theoretical moves we would today characterize as comparative political theory. Ultimately, Phan Chu Trinh shows political theorists that they should not always fear cultural appropriation or creative misunderstandings of other traditions of political thought. Misunderstandings themselves may be invigorating or instructive.

This chapter is structured as follows. I begin by constructing a typology of three ways in which scholars have theorized the potential relationship between Confucianism and democracy. The first is what I call "Confucian democracy": the proposal that Confucian ideas be used in order to achieve the goal of democracy (which is viewed as more important than Confucianism). The second is "mutual enhancement": the proposal that democracy can improve Confucianism and vice versa. Third, and lastly, "democratic Confucianism" is the proposal that democratic ideas and institutions be used to achieve the goal of Confucianism (which is viewed as more important than democracy). I create this typology to help us identify primary and secondary commitments in existing scholarly work, and to situate Phan Chu Trinh into the existing literature. Then I introduce Phan Chu Trinh as an early comparative political theorist. Trinh's political theory is a strong example of "democratic Confucianism." He sees Confucianism as the

[18] Phan Chu Trinh, "Monarchy and Democracy," in *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, 126. Hereafter MD.

goal because he thinks a lack of genuine Confucianism created Vietnam's vulnerability to foreign domination. He argues that to strengthen Vietnam, Confucian morality—which had been eroded by a history of monarchic and autocratic rule in Vietnam—must be restored. The "medicine" that would revive Confucianism, he thinks, is European ethics and liberal democracy. I show how Trinh misinterprets liberalism, centering it on popular rights rather than individual rights, and argues that the importation of Western-style liberalism and democracy would improve familial, social, and national ethics in Vietnam, thus remedying the "autocratic disease of Vietnam." He detests monarchy not in principle, but only because there are bad monarchs. Unfortunately, he thinks, Confucius was silent on what form of government the people should adopt when the monarch is oppressive. Trinh views democracy as picking up where Confucianism leaves off.

This chapter ultimately suggests that political theorists can learn from Trinh's method of learning from foreigners. It is sometimes permissible and desirable to view foreign ideas as foreign, to be charitable to them even to the point of romanticizing them, and to import the creative distortion as "medicine" to revive our own faltering traditions. In the conclusion, I show that this method is different from the one Leigh Jenco derives from her study of Chinese reformers in the late twentieth century who had their own methods of learning from the West.

## Confucian Democracy

Some scholars appear to be primarily committed to democracy and want to see if a foreign idea can help reinvigorate democracy. Exemplary of Confucian democracy is

Brooke Ackerly's article "Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy." Ackerly answers the question that appears in the title in the negative. For her, liberalism—specifically, its core value of respect for the "autonomous rights-bearing individual"—is often presumed to be *the* ideology that supports democracy. She shows that this need not be the case and aims to rectify the fact that so far, the "unexamined characterization of Confucianism as hierarchical and static prematurely closes off its consideration as a source of insight for theories about democracy."[19] Confucianism, which downplays individualism and instead can emphasize healthy "nonexploitative hierarchy," also has democratic potential. A Confucian democracy, according to Ackerly, would be a democratic form of government guided by three democratic-friendly ideas that she finds in Confucian texts or within debates internal to the Confucian tradition: (1) the expectation that all people are capable of *ren*—"the overarching virtue of being a perfected human being"—and are therefore potentially virtuous contributors to political life, (2) an expectation that institutions function to develop virtue, and (3) "a practice of social and political criticism that, when guided by *ren* and the cultivation of human nature, is democratic."[20] Ackerly's main goal is to examine ways towards the destination and goal of democracy that do not rely on the liberal way.

Many other scholars appropriately use the term "Confucian democracy." Sor-hoon Tan declares in her book *Confucian Democracy* that "We shall look for a Confucian

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19 Brooke A. Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (2005): 552.
20 Ibid.

route to democracy."[21] However, a closer reading shows that Tan wants to realize a society that is equally Confucian and democratic, "a harmonious community in which every member contributes, participates, and benefits according to his or her abilities and needs."[22] To bring this into reality, she suggests a gradual, democratic bottom-up approach that encourages democratic practices at various levels of society. If both democracy and Confucianism are viewed as means and goals, it may be more appropriate to consider scholars like Tan as advocates of a middle ground.

## Mutual Enhancement

Some scholars appear to promote "mutual enhancement" where Confucianism improves democracy and vice versa. For these scholars, there is a dialectical interaction between Confucianism and democracy in which they enhance each other. This makes it difficult to tell if the scholar privileges one over the other. Sungmoon Kim is motivated by the conviction that democracy is needed in East Asia and that East Asians should not try to surpass liberal democracy but should "attempt to Confucianize partially liberal and democratic regimes that currently exist."[23] On this view, Confucianism is supplemental rather than instrumental to democracy. The best example of the dialectical relation between Confucianism and democracy is found in the work of scholars, such as Sor-hoon Tan, who pose Deweyan pragmatism as a promising way of making democracy more Confucian and Confucianism more democratic. "Pragmatists, with their relational

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[21] Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy*, 15.
[22] Ibid., 201.
[23] Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia*, 10.

conception of selfhood, and their desire to augment liberal talk of individual liberty with the acknowledgment of the community grounds for articulate expression of such liberty, would have many sympathies with the political and philosophical orientation of contemporary Confucianism."[24] Here, Deweyan pragmatism is a practice that is at once both Confucian and democratic. O'Dwyer argues that, in contemporary East Asia, democratic reform of community life, such as the enhancement of participation and deliberation within associations, coupled with instituting civil freedoms, will "help preserve the continuity of Confucian moral traditions cherished in a number of East Asian societies."[25] Similarly, Hall and Ames argue that a promising task at hand for political theorists and Confucians "is to try to demonstrate to the more traditional of the Confucians that Dewey's philosophy holds the greatest promise for achieving a Confucian democracy in which central Confucian values are retained still largely intact."[26] The goal for these scholars is democratic practice that embodies Confucian values.

## Democratic Confucianism

At the other end of the spectrum are those who appear to promote "democratic Confucianism" in which they view democracy as a means to the goal of Confucianism. Daniel Bell, in his later work, argues that the political ideal in China is a system that

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[24] Shaun O'Dwyer, "Democracy and Confucian Values," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 1 (2003): 51.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Hall and Ames, "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," 132.

upholds Confucian ideals. He proposes a political meritocracy with democratic lower levels of government and meritocratic upper levels where members are selected by competitive examination. The proposal of a meritocratic upper house is reasonable because "the cultural terrain is relatively favorable in Confucian-influenced East Asia" where "the idea of respect for rule by an educated elite is a dominant strand of Confucian political culture."[27] Bell calls this the "China model" or a "vertical democratic meritocracy," in which the Confucian ideal of "meritocracy" is the noun and "democracy" the adjective. Another proponent of "democratic Confucianism" is Joseph Chan, for whom the main problem facing contemporary Confucian societies is the gap between the Confucian ideal and political reality.[28] There is nothing wrong with the ideal, he argues; the puzzle is how to achieve it. Chan shows that democratic institutions, based on Confucian conceptions of the good rather than liberal conceptions of the right, can be used to achieve Confucian ideals. Stephen Angle's "Progressive Confucianism" also promotes a kind of democratic Confucianism, as it is based in part on the aim of realizing "fundamental human virtues that Confucians have valued since ancient times."[29] To realize these virtues, Angle argues for a separation of morality and politics that also emphasizes the ability of democratic institutions to help people to achieve such moral virtues.

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[27] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 166.
[28] Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
[29] Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 18.

In short, “Confucian democracy” puts democracy first and Confucianism second. “Mutual enhancement” views each as enhancing the other. And “democratic Confucianism” puts Confucianism first and democracy second. The point of drawing these (often fuzzy) distinctions between ways of relating Confucianism to democracy is not only to position Phan Chu Trinh in the field but to remind us that scholars’ personal commitments matter, which is especially apparent in the case of Trinh. Those who have been more immersed in the democratic tradition of the West may be more inclined to promote Confucian democracy in which democracy is the goal. Conversely, Asians and scholars immersed in Confucianism may want to introduce democracy to their Confucian societies in order to enhance their goal of Confucianism. It seems natural to privilege elements of one’s native identity and to use foreign ideas as instruments to preserve or enhance those elements. This task may seem especially pressing when one feels that their native identity (which is unstable to begin with) is losing stability. Of course, with rapid globalization in the last half of the twentieth century, many, if not most, of the scholars hitherto mentioned have been well immersed in both Western and Chinese philosophical traditions. Yet underrepresented in these discussions are views of individuals further back in history when the encounter between East and West was fresher to them and their respective civilizations, such as when Vietnamese Confucian society was only beginning to learn about what the West called “democracy.”

## Phan Chu Trinh

Phan Chu Trinh identified as a Confucian scholar, spent most of his life studying Confucian classics, and eventually received the highest mandarin degree. At age thirty-nine he went to France, where he stayed for fourteen years. Upon his return to Vietnam in 1925, he attempted to introduce and advocate to his fellow Vietnamese the "democracy" that he had learned while abroad, arguing that liberalism and democracy would bring back long-forgotten (or perhaps never understood) Confucianism. Trinh's political theory is a strong example of democratic Confucianism. It contends that Western liberal democracy is the best vehicle for taking the Vietnamese back to a genuine Confucianism.

Phan Chu Trinh's political theory opposes recent scholarship which assumes three things: (1) liberalism and democracy can be decoupled, (2) liberalism and Confucianism oppose each other, and (3) if East Asians adopt democracy, Confucian democracy is best. In contrast, Trinh argues that (1) liberalism and democracy are part of a package of properly Western ethics, (2) liberalism and democracy are compatible with Confucianism, and (3) the Vietnamese need liberal democracy to fulfill Confucian ideals. I side with recent scholarship and do not endorse Trinh's arguments as more sound. Trinh's conclusion is based on his limited understanding and idealization of liberalism that downplays individualism. However, his (mis)reading of the West is a creative and productive one from which we can gain valuable lessons.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese elite of which Trinh was part was trying to hold on to Confucianism while younger Vietnamese thinkers were increasingly dissatisfied with traditional Confucianism as a social philosophy. A sense of

inferiority under French colonialism (1859–1945) led some Vietnamese to believe that the only way Asians could equal the West was to master Western ideas. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, social Darwinism, as interpreted by Chinese thinkers, reigned as the most plausible theory, convincing Vietnamese elites that Vietnam fell to French rule because Vietnam was intellectually and culturally (and thus politically and materially) weak. Thus, before communism became an attractive ideology, Vietnamese intellectuals debated the merits of an eclectic range of political philosophies in order to find the ones most suitable for their goal of self-determination.[30] In 1907, a group of Vietnamese intellectuals created the Tonkin Free School where they read and debated Chinese translations of Rousseau, Montesquieu, and other Western political philosophers. The school promoted discussion of diverse opinions, evidenced by its two ideologically opposed founders: Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940), who advocated revolutionary violence to oust the French from Vietnam, and his friend Phan Chu Trinh, who rejected the use of violence and instead advocated reform through education in French enlightenment and democratic values.

Unlike his predecessors, who had spent time studying Confucian thought exclusively, Trinh had the advantage of being well trained in Confucianism and well aware of the modernizing world outside of Vietnam. Unlike other Vietnamese, he was

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[30] For the best treatment of this period in English, see David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (London: University of California Press, 1971), and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (London: University of California Press, 1981); William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

able to speak at length about the American Revolution.[31] Inspired by Japan's Meiji restoration and military defeat of the Russians in 1904, Trinh went to Japan to learn about their modernization process and was exposed to Liang Qichao's reformist writings. He returned to Vietnam, advocating that it modernize along similar lines.

Trinh's political thought was a response to both the brutality of French colonialism and to the corruption of Vietnamese rulers. In 1907, he wrote to the French colonial governor general Paul Beau to denounce the social evils in Indochina and demanded improvements in colonial policy. From 1911 to 1925 Trinh spent fourteen years in France, retouching photographs for a living while attempting to urge the French government to liberalize its colonial policy in Indochina.[32] In 1922, Trinh accused the Vietnamese emperor Khải Định of seven offenses, including recklessly promoting autocratic monarchy, doling out unfair rewards and punishments, and reckless extravagance. Both letters described a "long train of abuses" by both the French colonial regime and the emperor of Vietnam, justifying, for Trinh, a revolution. Yet revolution meant more than merely replacing one leadership with another. For Trinh, fundamental changes had to be made in the minds and habits of the Vietnamese people.

I pay special attention to two essays that Trinh wrote upon his return from France and shortly before his death. "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident" and "Monarchy and Democracy" were delivered as speeches in the same week in November

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[31] George Dutton, "革命, Cách Mạng, Révolution: The Early History of 'Revolution' in Việt Nam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 18.
[32] For more about Trinh's time in France, see Sinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, 27–36.

1925 to a Vietnamese audience at the Vietnam Society House in Saigon, and contain arguments that overlap and are consistent with each other. They are also an example of what we would today consider to be comparative political theory.

### *An Early Comparative Political Theorist*

Phan Chu Trinh conducts "engaged comparative political theory" of a kind similar to what Andrew March advocates. March argues that political theory is "engaged" if we are theorizing to find the best ideas for us, and "comparative" if we are moving between distinct moral traditions.[33] March's formulation may be untenable, he himself admits, since no system of thought is cleanly self-contained, and hybridity and cross-cultural borrowing actually characterize most if not all intellectual traditions. If so, March argues, then "comparative political theory" as a subfield may actually not be itself tenable. However, if we can speak of more or less distinct moral doctrines from perceived civilizational "centers," then March's advocacy of "engaged comparative political theory" is, I believe, legitimate. Trinh's work is exemplary of this "engaged comparative political theory" because he compares Western and Asian ethical and political systems (specifically ideas from foreign powerful "civilizational centers" of China and Europe) to find the right ideas for the Vietnamese.

For Trinh, Japan serves as a model of how to fuse Western and Asian ideas. His visit to Japan in 1906, where he and Phan Bội Châu visited schools and met with

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[33] Andrew March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009): 531– 65.

prominent persons, confirmed his conviction that before the Vietnamese could even contemplate independence, they had to modernize. Writing to Phan Bội Châu, Trinh says, "Please stay on in Tokyo to take a quiet rest and devote yourself to writing, not to making appeals for combat against the French. You should only call for 'popular rights and popular enlightenment.' Once popular rights have been achieved, then we can think of other things."[34] As we will see, Trinh views "popular rights and popular enlightenment" as Western ideas that can revive a moribund Confucian tradition in Vietnam.

### *The Goal: Confucianism*

Why is Confucianism the goal for Trinh? We must begin with why he thinks Vietnam was conquered by the French: "our country was weak; therefore, it fell into the hands of the French" (ME, 112). Such weakness, he argues, is a result of a lack of a solid moral foundation upon which everything else depends. From time immemorial, "regardless of the country, regardless of the race," a nation "must rely on morality as its foundation. For a nation that has fallen down, in order to rise up and avoid being trampled over by others, it is all the more necessary to have a moral foundation even firmer than that of wealthier and stronger nations." Where does this morality come from? Morality is "the fine values and superior qualities that [a nation's] ancestors, over thousands of years, have left, so that they will earn respect from other nations" (ME, 103).

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[34] Phan Boi Chau, *Overturned Chariot: the Autobiography of Phan Bội Châu*, trans.Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 108.

A moral foundation has two components: morality and ethics. For Trinh, morality never changes. Ethics can and does. Morality, and, above all, Confucian morality, is universally applicable. In contrast, ethics, which are the expression in lived practice of this true morality, do vary from place to place.

*Morality*

Morality, Trinh argues, is simply a list of qualities or virtues for any human being anywhere and at any time to have in order to be good. "To be a human being, one is expected to have *nhân* (humaneness), *nghĩa* (righteousness), *lễ* (propriety), *trí* (wisdom), *tín* (trustworthiness), *cần* (diligence), and *kiệm* (frugality)." A person with these qualities "behaves according to the way of human beings" (*đạo làm người*). These ideals never change, and apply everywhere and always, regardless of culture. Morality "remains the same, old or new, Oriental or Occidental" and everyone "must preserve it in order to be a complete person." Even though "political systems might be different—be it democratic, monarchic, or communist—the truth of morality cannot be ignored" and morality can never be changed (ME, 105). Trinh views Confucius and his students such as Mencius as Vietnam's ancestors and the providers of Vietnam's morality. For Trinh, the morality that Confucius taught is true, eternal, and universal not because Confucius taught it but because it is true, eternal, and universal. Confucius just so happened to recognize and teach them, just as any other nation's truly wise ancestors can. Thus, when Trinh refers to Confucian morality, he also means true, universal morality. "These characteristics have

been crystallized over an extended period of time; like jade, they will not wear off when polished, and like tempered iron, they will not break into pieces when struck" (ME, 104).

*Ethics*

Ethics is how an individual ought to behave towards others. Unlike morality, ethics (*luân lý*) is variable and could, "depending on the time and the place," change (ME, 105). Ethics is like "a robe that can be changed according to the size of the person, but morality is like rice, water, and nutrition—all are needed for everyone, one cannot change one's morality even if one wishes to, and if it is changeable, it is false morality." Ethics exercises one's morality and one's morality is cultivated through ethics. Referring to the famous "Five Relationships" of Confucianism, Trinh says that Asians have five spheres of ethics. Relations are between (1) ruler and subject, (2) father and son, (3) husband and wife, (4) older brother and younger brother, and (5) friend and friend.[35] The reason why Vietnam is weak, Trinh believes, is that it lacks the proper Confucian moral foundation and so Vietnamese people were unable to fulfill their proper ethical duties in the five spheres.[36]

Morality (of the individual) and ethics (between individuals) are inextricably linked as seen in the "Confucian formula" which Trinh cites as crucial to his political

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[35] Feminist scholars have criticized these and other aspects of Confucianism as promoting the idea of men's superiority to women. See Chenyang Li, ed., *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2000).
[36] Phan Châu Trinh, *Phan Châu Trinh Toàn Tập* [The complete works of Phan Châu Trinh], ed. Chương Thâu, Dương Trung Quốc, and Lê Thị Kinh (Đà Nẵng : Nxb Đà Nẵng, 2005), 245, my translation. Oddly, Vinh Sinh's translation excludes this passage in the original.

theory and his prescription for the Vietnamese (ME, 113). Morality (humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness, diligence, and frugality) is a set of goals that make up the self-cultivation component of the famous Confucian formula found in the book of Great Learning. This formula positions eight verb-noun compounds in cause-and-effect sequence: (1) investigate things, (2) deepen knowledge, (3) make thoughts sincere, (4) rectify the heart-mind, (5) cultivate the self, (6) regulate the family, (7) govern the state, (8) pacify the world. The first four take place within the individual self, and can be simply restated as "cultivate the self, regulate one's family, govern one's country, and pacify the world [*thiên hà*]."[37] While morality takes place within the self, three of the five Asian ethics (father-son, husband-wife, brothers) take place within the family. The "govern the state" component would be satisfied by proper ethics between ruler and subject. Ethics between friends refers to the "pacify the world" component.

*A Lack of Confucianism Attributable to Autocracy*

For Trinh, Vietnamese ignorance of authentic Confucianism was attributable to centuries of despotic rulers and corrupt mandarins who deliberately misinterpreted Confucianism to justify their despotism.[38] Trinh provides a lengthy critique of Vietnam's monarchical tradition. He has five main criticisms: kings tricked the people into blind obedience,

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[37] Sinh translates *thiên hà* as "empire," though the term means "all under heaven" or "world," probably because for the Chinese at the time, the knowable world *was* their empire.

[38] Trinh is speaking of Chinese and Vietnamese rulers, the latter being influenced by China's rule over Vietnam (111 BC to AD 938).

violated their rights, prevented knowledge of genuine Confucianism, prevented patriotic consciousness, and prevented the Vietnamese from learning from foreigners.

First, Vietnamese kings tricked their subjects into thinking that it was Confucian to submissively and blindly obey the ruler. To restrict and control the people, the kings "selected from among the sayings of Confucius and Mencius . . . passages that would carry ambiguous meanings that they could take advantage of in making laws." The kings "called themselves 'Son of Heaven,' but at the same time regarded themselves as human beings" and in an intimate relationship with the people "as sovereign, father, husband." Thus, "when the ignorant people in the villages hear that the king is related to them, they respect him without realizing that if he is infuriated he might have their three families/generations murdered. Father, teacher, and husband, in contrast, do benefit us and would not do such evil things" (MD, 131). Absolute monarchy in East Asia and Vietnam has been maintained by teaching that "from the moment one comes into the world, one must perform one's duty as a subject toward the king." Unfortunately, many are unaware that "the relationship between the king and his subjects should be a mutual one." The kings thought only of how to suppress the people's intellect in order to keep the throne exclusively for their descendants and did not know that "if the people were ignorant, the country remained weak." Given that "the people were so ignorant and weak that they could not rise in rebellion, it is understandable that foreigners would encroach upon their countries" (MD, 132).

Second, autocrats used corrupt interpretations of Confucianism to violate people's rights. The court made laws against "having talents but not allowing the king to use

them" (MD, 132). Political speech was prohibited because kings feared people would stage a revolution if they were well versed in politics. Swords were confiscated, melted, and recast into monuments to prevent the people from using them to rise up against the king. Fearing that scholars would challenge them, kings had them buried alive (MD, 129). Trinh laments, "the people's life and death are decided unilaterally by the king, and we have no rights to defend ourselves. We should ask ourselves why this is so!" (MD, 131).

Third, the autocrats prevented the people from learning the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, whom Trinh considered to be Vietnam's ancient ancestors. In China and Vietnam, during the previous two thousand years of dynasties, "there has been a decline in the practice of Confucianism," each ruler being less Confucian than the ruler before him. Trinh writes, "When one looks into the history of monarchy in East Asia, one finds that . . . since the Qin dynasty [221–206 BC], though the East Asian countries would consider they were practicing Confucianism, in actuality there was nothing Confucian in the policy practiced. Only one or two things remained in the family traditions, and, apart from that, the absolute monarchs relied on Confucianism only to exert pressure upon their peoples" (MD, 130). Even scholars "have allowed the morality that had been left by our ancient ancestors to drain away downstream" (MD, 104).

Fourth, habituation to autocracy prevented the Vietnamese from understanding nationalism or patriotism. "The people understand if someone tells them, 'You must be loyal to this person, or respect that person,' but if anyone mentions the name of Vietnam and tells them, 'That is your motherland, you must love it,' they do not understand

because they cannot touch it with their hands or see it with their eyes" (MD, 137). The Vietnamese will gossip if a family has children who are addicted to gambling, "but if one talks about the 'loss of national independence,' not a single soul cares." Trinh declares, the "poison of autocracy has fatally injured the patriotism of our people" (MD, 136).

Fifth, and lastly, Vietnamese kings were to blame for Vietnamese ignorance of world trends. Trinh remarks that Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan belonged to the same culture, all had monarchies, all venerated Confucius, and all faced Europeans, and wonders how only Japan "was able to abandon the Old Learning and adopt the New Learning, and within a mere forty years it was able to join the ranks of the world powers?" The answer, he thinks, is that unlike Vietnam, Japan did not "close their eyes to condemn the new civilization (the European one) as barbaric" but rather learned from the West during the Meiji period. "The world trends are unrelenting. Those who go with them are sailing with the wind, and those who go against them are pushed away and trampled on like grass" (MD, 124). Unlike Japanese rulers, Vietnamese rulers, such as King Tự Đức who reigned from 1848 to 1883, refused to learn from the West (MD, 134).

In short, autocrats cherry-picked parts of Confucianism to justify their despotic rule, preventing the people from learning Confucianism's genuine teachings. As a result, the Vietnamese had a poor conception of the proper ethics between ruler and subject, of rights, of patriotism, and of the outside, modernizing world. It was no surprise, then, that Vietnam fell to French rule. In order to regain strength for self-determination, Vietnam had to restore its proper Confucian moral foundation. But how was this to be done?

*Western Ethics*

Trinh turns to Europe for solutions. It would be instructive, he says, to "compare our ethics to European ethics." He observes that in contrast to Asians who have five ethical spheres, Europeans have three: familial (proper behavior towards one's family members), national (proper attitude or love towards the idea of one's nation, i.e., patriotism), and social (proper behavior towards all human beings, first inside one's nation and, eventually, towards all outside one's nation).[39] Trinh views these ethics as stages of development, beginning with the familial and advancing towards the goal of cosmopolitan social ethics. He thinks that ethics in Vietnam— "the Five Relationships"—"have disintegrated so badly only because the autocratic monarchs have practiced incorrectly the teachings of Confucius and Mencius" (ME, 107). Since the Vietnamese performed poorly in their five ethical spheres, they should switch to Europe's tripartite model. Doing so would not be difficult because three of the five Asian ethics already take place within the family.

Regarding familial ethics, Trinh explains that Europe and Vietnam have historically started with similar family ethics with the exception that in Europe, "according to the law, at age twenty-one, when boys and girls become adults, they can leave their parents and live on their own, assuming duties and responsibilities according to national ethics, and the burden for the family thus becomes lighter." Thus, Trinh sees Europe as having advanced beyond familial ethics. Europe's "social movements" and "numerous thinkers" have "begun contemplating means to break the stuffy family

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[39] Phan Châu Trinh, *Toàn Tập*, 245.

bondage so that everyone in the same country would be equal, i.e., both the rich and the poor are to be educated and to live in the same way, putting an end to the enormous gap that exists between them today" (ME, 105). In contrast, as Europe began moving beyond familial ethics to think about the nation, Vietnam remained struggling to advance even in family ethics. Vietnamese children in wealthy and poor families "have to breathe the authoritative atmosphere in their family." When these children grow up and enter society, "how can they possibly escape that submissive and servile mentality?" (ME, 109). Simultaneously, Trinh laments the fact that children do not fulfill their duties of filial piety. He also argues against a hierarchical relationship between husband and wife if both do not respectively exercise proper conduct, arguing instead that it should be that in "cases where the wife is wiser than her husband, she will be in charge of that family" (ME, 110).

Regarding national ethics (by which Trinh means patriotic feelings towards the idea of one's country), Europeans had developed patriotic consciousness while the Vietnamese did not. He writes that in Europe, "national ethics have been developing since the sixteenth century, when monarchism was still in vogue. Europe's monarchs at the time were like ours, that is, recklessly autocratic." European kings suppressed their people "by colluding with the church, saying that the king was God, acting on behalf of God . . . that the king was not the same human race as the people, and therefore the people must respect him" (MD, 131). Yet "numerous philosophers clarified the distinction between the nature of a monarch and a nation." As a result, people in Europe came "to understand the importance of a nation and to place less emphasis on the family"

(ME, 106). In contrast, Vietnamese "national ethics from the ancient times to the present day have been confined, parochially, to the two words 'king' and 'subjects.' There has been nothing about 'people' and 'country,' because the people have not been allowed to discuss national affairs." Contemporary Vietnamese "do not realize what popular rights [*dân quyền*] are, what love for their country is, and what their duties are."[40]

Lastly, with regard to the social sphere, Trinh argues that in Europe, the age of nationalism began to give way to social ethics after international wars, particularly World War I, when the "great politicians, great philosophers, and great educators all came to realize that the age of nationalism has passed and cannot be maintained, giving way to the age of social ethics" (ME, 106). Trinh views Europeans as more developed in their social ethics—if not yet towards all human beings, then at least in the way they treat their fellow nationals—because "they compete only within the law. They help one another with respect to public justice and maintain a sense of respect for each other's interest." In contrast, in Vietnam, "it is a shame that our people, though having to work throughout their lives, cannot look after their basic personal needs and prepare for their old age, let alone think of society or humanity. How could we not respect the Europeans if they are so superior to us?" (ME, 107). Contemporary Vietnamese "are much more ignorant about social ethics than about national ethics" while the ancestors of the Vietnamese "understood that we have to help one another. For this reason, there are sayings, such as 'It is impossible to break chopsticks when they are in a bunch.' . . . Our people lost their sense of solidarity and public interest because, in the past three or four hundred years, the

[40] Trinh, *Toàn Tập*, 250, my translation.

students in our country craved power and official position" (ME, 113–14). In short, Europe, Trinh thinks, is further along in the evolutionary stages of ethical development, and closer to the goal of cosmopolitan social ethics, than the Vietnamese.

Trinh assures the Vietnamese that adopting European ethics would in no way contradict or impinge on Confucian morality but rather would preserve and revive it. After all, while morality stays the same, ethics can and should change to preserve morality. Trinh says it is a shame that "so-called Confucian scholars" in Vietnam have refused to learn from Western ethics. They "do not know anything about Confucianism. Yet every time they open their mouths they use Confucianism to attack modern civilization—a civilization that they do not comprehend even a tiny bit." With the exception of a few youth, there "is no one who cares to compare the Western learning with our 'Old Learning' and to single out what is good and what is bad so that our people may judge and select the path for their future" (MD, 126). The proper task for the Vietnamese, then, is to learn from the West in order to develop and strengthen their ethics in these three spheres in order to restore (or bring in) proper Confucian morality.[41]

[41] Phan Bội Châu had similar ideas, arguing that the preexisting bond between emperor and subject ought to be replaced by a national bond associating the people with the nation. However, whereas Châu advocated revolutionary violence as the means to liberation, Trinh advocated adopting Western liberalism and democracy in order to advance national and social ethics.

## *Liberalism and Democracy as Means to Confucianism*

Trinh views Western civilization as, for all intents and purposes, monolithic, unified by the predominant ideology of liberalism, a word he translates to Vietnamese as *tư tưởng tự do*—literally, "ideology of freedom" or "the thought of freedom." For Trinh, liberalism is the mental attitude and ideology that buttresses democracy, a form of government and political institutions, which, in turn, institutionalizes and maintains the spirit of liberalism. Trinh does not decouple the two. Together, they constitute a sort of "Western ethics package." Let us start with how he understands liberalism and how it would improve national and social ethics.

### *Liberalism*

Trinh misinterprets or has a naive interpretation of liberalism because he ignores individual rights. Trinh's liberalism is centered on "popular rights" (*dân quyền*), a term that he invokes often and in opposition to the autocratic rule to which Vietnam had been historically subject. Popular rights include the right of freedom of expression, particularly the freedom to publicly criticize anything without being punished. Trinh is convinced that Europeans value popular rights because while in France he saw numerous public statues of philosophers who have argued in favor of popular rights and against tyranny. Writing to the emperor of Vietnam, Trinh says of Paris,

> "along its long boulevards and in the large public squares, you must have seen the bronze statues commemorating the philosophers and the heroes who risked their lives in defense of freedom. You must have seen the pillar that reaches up into the clouds; atop it stands a Goddess who holds in her hand the flame of Liberty

> radiating in four directions. That is the Goddess of Liberty, who illuminates the whole world and has no mercy for any tyrant monarch on earth."[42]

Trinh understands liberalism as a product of European history, particularly of rebellions against tyrannical monarchies led by philosophers who argued for popular rights. By respecting popular rights, the Vietnamese could have a better sense of "the people" and the fact that their country belongs to them. Naturally, this would improve their patriotism, or national ethics.

Trinh draws attention to the public far more than to the individual. Terms such as "public rights," "public interests," and "public expression" appear often, in contrast to terms like "individual rights," "individual interests," and individual expression." Trinh's liberalism is a mix of what we might think of as classical liberal concern for rights without the emphasis on individualism, and classical republican concern for civic duties. Yet, while downplaying individual rights, he does not totally dismiss them. "In France, if a person of power or the government uses authority to repress an individual or an association, people make an appeal, resist, or stage a demonstration until a fair solution is reached. Why are people in France able to do so? It is because they have associations and a public awareness that promote their common interest" (ME, 114). Even here, the collective is held up as more important than the individual. Even the defense of individual rights, he argues, requires collective action and "associations," which are permissible and promoted in a liberal society. By collectively defending individual rights

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[42] Phan Chu Trinh, "Letter to Emperor Khải Định," in *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, 99.

and promoting the common good, the Vietnamese, Trinh believed, would improve their social ethics.

It should come as no surprise that Trinh downplays individualism. Political theorists today may view sovereignty of the autonomous rights-bearing individual as the core tenet of liberalism, but such an idea would have probably seemed to Trinh outlandish and out of character for Europeans and their "superior" morals and ethics. David Marr shows that the term for "individual" (*cá nhân*) did not enter the Vietnamese vocabulary until the first decades of the twentieth century. Initially, "Individuals were often compared with cells in the body, each one having a legitimate role in sustaining and enhancing the vitality of the organism, but meaningless and incapable of surviving on their own." The introduction of the term "individualism" brought awareness of the danger of "individuals acting in a selfish, short-sighted manner, which could jeopardize the larger order of things. Such persons were said to be witting or unwitting perpetrators of 'individualism' (*cá nhân chủ nghĩa*)."[43] Trinh may have been unable to conceive of an ideology that would uphold the individual as sovereign. He would have viewed "individualism" as a defect of liberalism, rather than constitutive of the logic of liberalism. Trinh describes aspects of Western ideas that he does not like as mere defects and deviations that can be remedied by "true" principles of Western ideas. "In European society there are drawbacks, such as excessive freedom between men and women, high rates of divorce, enormous gaps between the rich and poor, and people who are

[43] David G. Marr, "Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (2000): 769.

unemployed or overworked," and "fanatical nationalism" has made wars "incessant." However, "the Europeans have remedies to deal with them." That is to say, "there are philosophers and educators who devote themselves to remedying the evil effects, so that their morality and ethics will be uplifted day by day. In contrast, in our country only the good is shown and the bad is hidden, and thus the situation increasingly grows worse" (ME, 122). Liberalism is ultimately better even if it includes individualism because it respects open discussion of the "good and bad" which can then remedy the bad of liberalism and restore communal values. In a society where critique is permitted, "there are those in the upper and middle classes who have social concerns, and great politicians, philosophers, writers, and educators make appeals, write books and plays, publish newspapers, and deliver speeches to denounce social evils" (ME, 107). Only this kind of society, not a society that hides "the bad," such as Vietnam, could foster proper morality. In borrowing from the West, the Vietnamese ought to be "purposeful and selective, only adopting that which is worthy of adoption" (ME, 122).

Trinh seems to think that respect for popular rights in Europe had the effect of fostering admirable behaviors with respect to the common good. The morality and ethics of Europeans "are high because they have been influenced by liberal ideas ever since the Greco-Roman age." The European "public sentiment is very enthusiastic, and their character is highly dignified" (ME, 115). They "help one another with respect to public justice and maintain a sense of respect for each other's interest" (ME, 107). Trinh thinks that these behaviors are a direct result of liberalism in which the people are valued and

exercise their rights. If the Vietnamese were to also respect popular rights, they, too, could improve in familial, national, and social ethics.

Trinh made several moves to implement liberalism in Vietnam. Recognizing the importance of free-market competition, he advocated the creation of "commercial societies" and stressed the importance of competition within constraints of the law. Recognizing the importance of discussion and deliberation as part of a proper liberal democratic society, he advocated for the creation of a Public Speech Society and a New Learning Society. Moreover, he even wanted the Vietnamese to adopt European fashion, so he advocated Short-Hair and Short-Clothes Societies. As early as 1906, Vinh Sinh writes, "Phan Chu Trinh began to promote short haircuts; for a man to have his hair cut short became a powerful symbolic act that represented courage, modernization, and eventually even rebellion."[44]

*Democracy*

Trinh observes that when it was no longer possible for European kings to mislead their people with the deception that they had a divine right to rule, "popular rights [*dân quyền*] became stronger in Europe and the monarch's power was diminished."[45] Thus, Trinh writes, all nations in Europe except those "whose people are still ignorant" now practice democracy. To them, "there is no need to explain 'why it is called democracy'; but in our

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[44] Vinh Sinh, *Phan Châu Trinh*, 21.
[45] Ibid. The Vietnamese term for "rights" (*quyền*) may also mean "power," "authority," "privilege," or "claim." It is debatable if *dân quyền* is best translated as "popular rights" or "people power."

country, this is not so." Not only do the Vietnamese "dare not think about the question of 'whether or not we should have a king,' but they act as if a person raising this question would be struck by a thunderbolt, buried under rocks." When the Vietnamese can understand democracy, they will "realize that those who have been called kings and officials since the olden days are, after all, just their representatives acting on their behalf, and if they cannot do a good job, there is nothing wrong with chasing them away" (MD, 137–38).

Trinh advocates democracy as a form of government necessary to institutionalize liberalism. To his fellow Vietnamese, Trinh provides a brief historical overview of democracy in ancient Greece, Roman law, and the British system. He goes on to describe the political structure of France, explaining that the lower house National Assembly is the most important and has legislative power, that the senate is elected by an electoral college, and that the president is elected by the two houses. He mentions that the president takes an oath in front of the two houses promising not to betray the people and not to be partisan, and that if he is, he is subject to impeachment. Trinh explains France's system of checks and balances, and indicates that there are two political parties in the national assembly, and "if the leftwing party holds the majority of the seats, the rightwing party will be the watchdog and be ready to level criticism; therefore, it is difficult to do anything outrageous." Moreover, government officers "possess only administrative power," while "judicial power is entrusted to judges who have the required training and qualifications," and these powers "are separate, not controlled by a single person" (MD, 138–39).

In contrast to a monarchy which he defines as "government by men," a democracy is "government by laws," and the laws are created by representatives of the people. The "rights and duties of everyone in the country are well described by the laws—like a road on which lines have been drawn clearly, so that you can walk freely, there is nothing to stop you, and you may go on as far as you like, as long as you do not violate the rights of others. This is because before the laws, everyone is equal, regardless of whether they are officials or common people." Trinh writes,

> "we see that democracy is far better than monarchy. To govern a country solely on the basis of the personal opinions of one individual or of an imperial court is to treat the people of that country as if they were a herd of goats—their prosperity and joy, or their poverty and misery, are entirely in the hands of the herder. In contrast, in a democracy the people create their own constitution and select officials, who will act according to the will of the people to look after their nation's business. (MD, 139)

Adopting the rule of law and a constitution would improve social ethics by improving a sense of "public justice."

*The Way to Confucianism*

If implemented in Vietnam, liberalism and democracy will allow Confucianism to find its fullest expression. This is possible for Trinh because he thinks ideal morality—the unchanging qualities of a good human being—does not only shape the ethical spheres in the Confucian formula (self, family, nation, world) in a strictly forward motion. It is not that good family ethics only depends on a fully cultivated self, or that proper national ethics are possible only after proper family ethics are achieved. Trinh assumes that while morality shapes the ethical spheres, the ethical spheres can also cultivate morality. The

individual relates to the family, nation, and world at any moment, and is in turn affected by them just as he or she can affect them. Thus, a change in ethics will produce a change in morality. By adopting liberalism and democracy, social and national ethics will improve, thus improving Confucian—or true—morality. An improvement in social ethics (proper behavior towards those inside and outside the nation) while national ethics (patriotic feelings towards one's country) are still weak would also improve national ethics because half of social ethics is about improving relations with fellow nationals which would improve patriotism. Therefore, if the Vietnamese learned to love and respect fellow Vietnamese (half of social ethics), they would simultaneously improve their patriotism (national ethics) and family ethics. Trinh hopes that eventually, once they are equal in power with other nations, the Vietnamese can move beyond nationalism and practice social ethics that is inclusive of all individuals, inside and outside the nation, emulating Europeans who "not only worry about those in their own country, but also about all others in the world as well."[46]

Democracy is guaranteed to exercise the people's moral self-cultivation, Trinh thinks, in contrast to the gamble one takes with monarchs who may or may not promote self-cultivation. "Self-cultivation is such a crucial aspect, one which Confucius insisted the people and the monarch must practice." If a country "were fortunate enough to have a wise and heroic king . . . that country would enjoy prosperity and peace as long as that king was on the throne." However, if the king were a despot, the country would collapse (MD, 134). Monarchy is a form of government that "may be liberal or harsh, depending

[46] Trinh, *Toàn Tập*, 247.

entirely on the joyful or sorrowful, loving or unloving, mood of the king, and it is a form of government in which the laws exist for nothing" (MD, 135). Evidently, Trinh does not detest monarchy in principle, but only in cases of bad monarchs. Unfortunately, Trinh thinks, Confucius was silent on what the people should do if the monarch was uncultivated, corrupt, and oppressive. Thus, Trinh views democracy as picking up where Confucianism leaves off in order to perform the work of aiding self-cultivation. This is apparent when he attempts to reconcile what may initially appear to be conflicting claims about equality made by Confucius and Mencius. Trinh writes that Confucius "is very fair [*bình đẳng*], teaching that the monarch and the people are both equally important [*quân dân tịnh trọng*]." In contrast, Mencius famously writes that "the people are the most important element; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the ruler is insignificant." Trinh argues that Mencius makes this prodemocratic claim only in response to the rampant authoritarianism of rulers during Mencius's time. "Because the kings of the vassal states had become so autocratic, [Mencius] advocated democracy." Therefore, for both Mencius and Trinh, it was out of situational necessity and in the context of autocracy that they offer democracy as a solution. For them, democracy is not inherently desirable or good, but rather an appropriate response that would counter autocracy and alleviate the spiritual malaise of a people who have lived under an autocracy. Trinh writes, "It is regrettable that [Confucius] did not say what the people should do if the monarch does not love the people." Mencius also "does not mention what the people

should do if they question the monarch."[47] It is in this uncomfortable silence from Confucius and Mencius, in which they have no advice to give, that Trinh picks up where they left off, reasoning that democracy is the way to bring back (or to bring in) long lost (or never understood) Confucian values.

Given that ethics (which include forms of governance) can change, "at present, in order to meet the trends of the time, we should replace autocratic monarchism with democracy" (ME, 105). Trinh's "engaged comparative political theorizing" is most apparent here:

> Montesquieu said, "The people who live under an autocratic monarch have no ideas about morality and see their social status as their chief source of pride. It is only under democracy that there is genuine morality." For this reason, in order to have a genuine democracy in our country, we should take this opportunity to break the tyrannical chain and bring in liberal ideas [*tư tưởng tự do*] from Europe as a medicine for our people. (ME, 116)

Addressing potential concerns that adopting European values would displace traditional Confucian ones, Trinh argues that European democracy would enhance, not contradict, the teachings of Confucius. "If your Majesty opened the Five Classics and the Four Books, could you find an indication that autocracy should be promoted? If your position is above everyone, you should place your heart below everyone—that is the essence of Confucianism." For Trinh, democracy is "a wonderfully efficacious remedy against the autocratic disease" of Vietnam. "To bring in European civilization is to bring back the

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[47] ME, 117–18. Mencius did in fact say that cruel rulers should be removed. See Justin Tiwald, "A Right of Rebellion in the Mengzi?," *Dao* 7, no. 3 (2008): 269–82. At the same time, Yuri Pines's claim that Mencius "did not present any alternative to the hereditary principle of rule" supports Trinh's. See Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Period* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 76.

teachings of Confucius and Mencius. . . . The introduction of European civilization would not cause any harm, but it will help to enhance the teachings of Confucius and Mencius" (ME, 116). Therefore, learning about democracy was actually a way of resurrecting the long forgotten (or perhaps never understood) ideals of Confucius and Mencius. For Trinh, liberalism and democracy are the means to the goal of Confucianism.

## Conclusion: How to Learn from Others

Trinh offers a method of learning from foreign "others." This method is different from the one that, according to Leigh Jenco, was used by Chinese reformers grappling with how to learn from the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Soon after Protestant missionaries introduced Western knowledge into China, Chinese reformers argued that all Western knowledge, particularly of scientific and technological methods but also of "parliamentary political systems," actually had Chinese origins.[48] The "China-origins" thesis may sound outlandish, and much of it did turn out to be false. However, Jenco argues that the thesis was more than just rhetoric or cultural chauvinism. It performed the political work of authorizing the use of Western knowledge in a way that made the use of Western methods an innovation of, rather than a departure from, traditional Chinese learning. By characterizing Western knowledge as actually having Chinese origins, the Chinese Yangwu reformers were able to be truly disciplined by Western knowledge rather than merely incorporate if as a variant of what they were

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[48] Leigh Jenco, "Histories of Thought and Comparative Political Theory: The Curious Thesis of 'Chinese Origins of Western Knowledge,' 1860–1895," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 661.

already doing. Jenco takes from this the lesson that political theorists in the West ought to do something like a China-origins thesis if we are to see foreign, particularly marginalized non-Western, thinkers and knowledge as "think partners who help us to develop a practice we see ourselves as sharing with them," that is, to be truly disciplined by them, rather than viewing them simply as "targets of representative inclusion." The ironic outcome, Jenco says, is that by "integrating Western science into an existing frame of discourse, these reformers end up displacing the repositories of (largely Confucian) past thought that once lent definition to *ru* [scholarly] learning, and contribute instead to the evolving criteria of a very different kind of knowledge."[49]

Instructive comparisons may be made with Phan Chu Trinh's "Western learning." Unlike the Chinese reformers, Trinh never claims that Western liberal democracy actually has "Vietnamese origins." He is explicit that those ideas come from the West and adopts them in a way that still disciplines his learning. Trinh's glowing admiration for the West is in contrast to Chinese reformers such as Feng Guifen who viewed the West as "barbarian."[50] A "China-origins" claim may have been appropriate in China whose "Qing empire matched the British one in its 'universalistic pretensions.'"[51] However, Trinh never makes any kind of "Vietnam-origins" claim. Such would be inappropriate for Vietnam, and this may have to do with Vietnam's relative lack of pride and power as compared to China. Trinh and many other Vietnamese intellectuals at the time lamented

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[49] Ibid., 659.
[50] Ibid., 662.
[51] Leigh Jenco, *Changing Referents: Learning across Space and Time in China and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

Vietnam's shameful lack of great thinkers as compared to China and Europe. They were well aware of Vietnam's long history of borrowing from Chinese culture and of the difficulty of locating anything "originally" Vietnamese.

The approach Jenco advocates "may not involve manufacturing 'Western' origins for that disciplinary continuity," but "it would require us to act as if such knowledge is part of our own heritage."[52] However, we may act like Trinh and other Vietnamese who had few qualms about viewing foreign ideas as foreign, and therefore do not need to act as if such knowledge is part of our own heritage in order for it to truly discipline us. If we are not so prideful, we may just as easily act as if such knowledge comes from the outside and still be disciplined by it.

Moreover, it may be useful to idealize and romanticize foreign knowledge, explaining its perceived drawbacks as defects rather than an inherent part of the logic of the foreign knowledge. This does not require "orientalist fetishization" but simply a disposition that assumes the Other might be doing some things better than we are. By doing this, we may be able to import the creative distortion to our own context in order to revive our own faltering tradition. This kind of cultural appropriation need not harm anyone, even when done by the more powerful who perceive their own traditional ideas to be inadequate.

My claim is modest. Just as Trinh explores how liberalism and democracy might improve his cherished Confucian tradition, we should conduct more scholarship of the "Confucian democracy" kind mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in which

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[52] Jenco, "Histories of Thought," 660.

Confucianism is examined for ideas that might improve our cherished liberal and democratic traditions. This does not require attempts to make Confucianism (or any other "foreign" idea) compatible with liberalism (or any other of "our" ideas). It would just require that we assume that foreign ideas can be valuable to us and that they may educate, inform, and perhaps even fix what needs fixing in our own traditions.

Phan Chu Trinh's funeral in 1926 saw an unprecedented surge of people into Saigon. It was, for the Vietnamese, the closest they ever had to a truly national funeral.[53] He never saw his project of reviving Confucianism through liberalism and democracy realized, a project that was, by the 1930s, displaced by Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, he had introduced a powerful new set of political vocabularies—democracy, liberalism, constitution, separation of powers—to the mental universe of the Vietnamese. Bui Ngoc Son has argued that "the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 and the subsequent enactment of the first written constitution in 1946 are the denouement" of movements led by Trinh.[54] Today, Phan Chu Trinh's name adorns street signs of major streets in every major city in Vietnam. Whether such signs evoke his memory, or his exhortation to import liberalism and democracy, remains an open question.

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53 Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 273.
54 Bui Ngoc Son, "The Introduction of Modern Constitutionalism in East Asian Confucian Context: The Case of Vietnam in the Early Twentieth Century," *National Taiwan University Law Review* 7 (2012): 456.

## Chapter 2:

Nguyen An Ninh's Anti-Colonial National Shame

On an October day in Saigon in 1923, twenty-three year old Nguyễn An Ninh (1900-1943) stood before a large crowd of fellow young Vietnamese and gave a fiery speech, delivered in French. He shamed his own country for its poor intellectual output compared to other nations: "At present, as India and Japan provide thinkers and artists whose talent or genius radiates alongside the talents and geniuses of Europe, Annam is still only a child who does not even have the idea or the strength to strive towards a better destiny, towards true deliverance."[55] Nguyễn An Ninh wanted his countrymen to feel ashamed about Vietnam's past and present intellectual weakness, but this was supposed to motivate them to become "great men" rather than drive them to despair. Their task, he exhorted, was to muster a creative spirit to "guide the footsteps of the people and enlighten their path. We need artists, poets, painters, musicians, scientists to enrich our intellectual heritage."[56] This speech became one of the most influential speeches in Vietnam at the time, and Ninh would soon become one of the most influential Vietnamese anti-colonial intellectuals of French colonial Vietnam (1858-1945).

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[55] Nguyen An Ninh, "Idéal de la jeunesse Annamite" (Ideals of Annamite Youth) reprinted in the newspaper *La Cloche Fêlée* (hereafter CF) (Saigon), 7 Jan. 1924. Unless noted otherwise, translations are mine. Annam is the name used for Vietnam prior to 1945.

[56] Ibid.

Ninh conducts engaged comparative political theory, praising other nations' intellectual traditions while shaming Vietnam for lacking its own. Yet, he uses national shame to exhort the Vietnamese to construct their own cosmopolitan national identity, one not stuck in tradition but one that encourages individuals to open themselves to new experiences and influences from the world. Ninh's account and use of national shame is illuminating for political theorists, shedding light on an aspect of national identity that has been given little attention.

This chapter shows that one's national identity can be based on a feeling of shame (a painful feeling of humiliation, loss of respect, or dishonor) that one's nation is intellectually inadequate compared to other nations. It also shows that such shame—rather than leading to self-hatred or despair—can inspire a redemptive project of national responsibility centered on creative remaking of the self and construction of national identity from scratch. To illustrate this, I present the case of Nguyễn An Ninh, someone who could be said to have embodied the attitudes and aspirations of an entire generation of Vietnamese youth coming of age during the height of French colonialism in Vietnam.[57]

National shame from a sense of intellectual inadequacy was significant in Vietnam, at least for many Vietnamese who followed Nguyễn An Ninh. Such national shame may also exist in other so-called "periphery" or "marginal" nations that have had greater trouble than perceived civilizational "centers" in identifying an indigenous

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[57] Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Roots of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 5.

intellectual tradition to be proud of. Yet, this way of conceptualizing and relating national shame and responsibility has been overlooked in existing political theory, which has hitherto viewed these concepts from the perspective of more powerful/dominating nations.[58] By taking the perspective of a thinker from a dominated/colonized nation, I offer a different, though not necessarily normatively superior, way in which national identity can be grounded.

The first section of this chapter exposes the assumed referents and contexts of political theories of national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility through a brief and broad review of scholarship on the topics. Although I address a wide range of debates, it is in service of a simple observation: there has been a prevailing "typical" way of conceiving and linking together national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility. Namely, scholars have so far assumed that national identity comes from pride,[59] that national shame comes from bad actions towards others,[60] and that national responsibility

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[58] Scholarship on national shame focuses primarily on countries such as Germany, the US, Japan, and Israel. See Emma Dresler-Hawke and James H. Liu, "Collective shame and the positioning of German national identity," *Psicología Política* 32 (2006): 131-153; Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds. *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992).

[59] See Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 7.

[60] See Emma Dresler-Hawke and James H. Liu, "Collective shame and the positioning of German national identity," *Psicología Política* 32 (2006): 131-153; James Goodman, "Refugee Solidarity: Between National Shame and Global Outrage," in D. Hopkins et al. (eds.) *Theorizing Emotions: Sociological Explorations and Applications* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009): 269-290; Emile Therein,
"The National Shame of Aboriginal Incarceration," *The Globe and Mail,* 20, July (2011). http://www.theglobeandmail.com.

is the righting of the wrongs of those bad actions.[61] This is because these scholars typically have powerful dominating/colonizing nations in mind when they talk about national identity. I pay special attention to Farid Abdel-Nour's account, which appears to embody most of these trends.[62] His account holds that national pride is the source of national identity, prompting a kind of national responsibility and shame centered on redressing the bad actions of one's nation towards others.

In the second section, I show how these traditional understandings of national identity are challenged by the case of Nguyễn An Ninh who, from the perspective of a weaker dominated/colonized nation, presents a different way in which national identity can be grounded. I briefly discuss his historical context, his diagnosis of Vietnam's problems, and his exhortations to the Vietnamese. In doing so, I show how he challenges the prevailing assumptions of national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility. In contrast to Abdel-Nour, Ninh shows that national shame (rather than pride) can be a source of national identity, and that this shame can come from a sense of intellectual inferiority (rather than from harming others). This prompts a kind of national responsibility centered on creatively remaking the self and nation-building. While traditional understandings of national identity make more sense to explain how national identity can be sustained over time (through pride of a nation's achievements), Ninh's

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[61] See David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds. *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992).
[62] Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 693-719.

account is significant because it can better explain how national identity is created from scratch.

In the final section, I discuss how postcolonial and decolonial theorists have also overlooked the account of national shame of which Ninh is exemplary. Despite these literatures' purported intention to pay attention to the subjectivities of colonized people,[63] there are at least three blind spots in these discourses: (1) there is a paucity of explorations of how colonized peoples have expressed a sense of their own cultural inferiority, (2) of the little discussion of such expressions that exist, they are interpreted in a dismissive way, categorized as "internalized inferiority" or "false consciousness" caused by colonialism,[64] thus overlooking how colonized people can be ashamed and critical of themselves on their own terms and anti-colonial at the same time, and (3) it is assumed that colonialism destroys an "original" indigenous culture, overlooking the fact that natives themselves have questioned the existence of any "original" indigenous culture of their own.

The case of Vietnam challenges these problematic tendencies and open new paths for scholarly exploration. Vietnam was ruled by China for more than a thousand years (111BC to 938AD), and remained influenced by China's cultural, philosophical and political models. Thus, Vietnamese intellectuals of the French colonial period struggled

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[63] Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2001), 64.
[64] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), 3; E.J.R. David and Sumie Okazaki, "Colonial Mentality: A Review and Recommendation for Filipino American Psychology," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2006): 1-16, 2.

to identify a unique Vietnamese intellectual culture. This did not lead to self-alienation, nor was it a justification for the imposition of French culture. Rather, the shame of cultural shortcomings provoked a desire to recreate their selves. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists, in arguing that colonialism *causes* colonized people to "see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement,"[65] tend to dismiss the agency of colonized people to conclude this for themselves and miss the fact that such "nonachievement" can motivate self-renewal, rather than self-hatred.

## Existing assumptions about national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility

### *National Identity and National Pride*

Consider this cartoon that is popular on the Internet.[66]

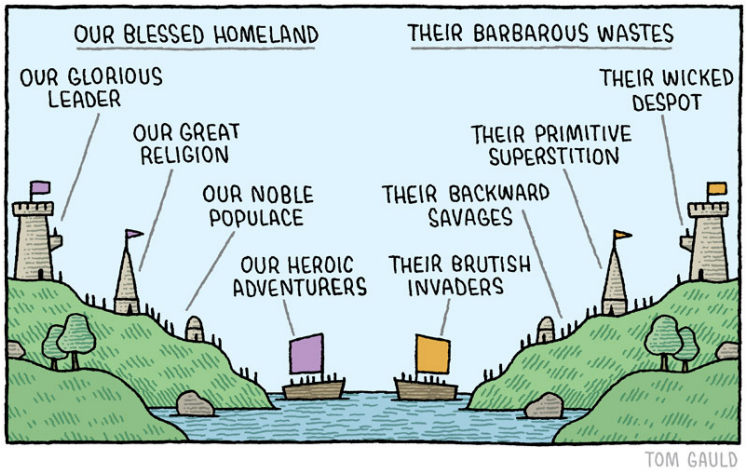


Figure 1. Cartoon by Tom Gauld, "Our Blessed Homeland"

[65] Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 3.
[66] The cartoon is by Tom Gauld: https://twitter.com/tomgauld/status/571994690289061888.

Its message points to a widely accepted assumption: whenever there is a sense of national identity, or of an "us" and "them," the "us" is always perceived as superior or normal and the "them" is always perceived as inferior or bizarre. The cartoon is critical of this way of seeing things, but also assumes this is how we typically see it. It echoes a similar point made by Montaigne in the sixteenth century: "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice."[67] However, some groups may view themselves as inferior to others in some domain. Political theorists have not paid enough attention to this because they more often have powerful nations in mind when thinking about national identity.

Nationalism is synonymous with national pride, but even if we distinguish national identity from nationalism, much of the literature still assumes that national identity requires national pride. National pride is viewed as *the* cohesive force for national identity. Farid Abdel-Nour argues that the "national bond is a bond of pride that allows modern individuals to be something in the world, to have a certain standing in it."[68] Our modern understanding of the nation, Liah Greenfield points out, can be traced to early 16th century England when being a member of a nation started to mean that one "partake[s] in its superior, elite quality... [that renders all other]... lines of status and class... superficial."[69] She writes: "Nationality makes people feel good... National identity is fundamentally a matter of dignity. It gives people reasons to be proud."[70] Anthony Smith notes that although national identity poses the danger of exacerbating conflicts by

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67 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays,* trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 152.
68 Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 700.
69 Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 7.
70 Ibid., 490, 487

dividing humanity into nations, there can also be hope since national identity is "a source of pride for downtrodden peoples."[71] Abdel-Nour goes so far as to suggest that if we do not feel a sense of national pride when we view the achievements of our compatriots, then we might not have national identity.[72]

Richard Rorty writes, "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary precondition for improvement."[73] A lack of national pride, Rorty says, can "make energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely."[74] Whether or not he has empirical evidence for this is besides the point. Like Rorty, many other discourses assume that pride is the cohesive force that bonds national identity and is the requisite emotion for improving one's country. To the contrary, this chapter will show that *shame*, not just pride, can be the cohesive force for national identity, and individuals may be motivated to move their country in a desirable direction when national shame outweighs pride. However, the kind of shame that I have in mind is different from the kind of shame that is typically talked about.

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[71] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1993), 176.
[72] Abdel-Nour asks us to imagine a person who views the achievements of her compatriot not with pride but with mere approval and admiration, "without gaining for herself from them a sense of added authority, or added standing in the world," analogous to how a Chinese or Indian individual might admire a work by Shakespeare or Leonardo Da Vinci. "But about such a person we must ask whether she still has a national identity." "National Responsibility," 713.
[73] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.
[74] Ibid.

*National Shame*

National shame has usually referred to the shame a nation feels from its shameful actions towards outside (weaker) groups, and emotion that threatens to unravel national identity. For Rorty, the new cultural left in the United States has been unfortunately mired in this kind of shame. They find pride in American citizenship to be an "endorsement of atrocities: the importation of African slaves, the slaughter of Native Americans, the rape of ancient forests, and the Vietnam War."[75] Scholars discuss how Germany might deal with its shameful actions towards Jews.[76] In Israel, the "New Historians" have challenged traditional versions of Israeli history to bring attention to the harm Israel has inflicted on Palestinians.[77] Others write about the national shame of detaining refugees[78] or incarcerating aboriginals.[79] To be sure, it is equally intuitive that national shame could be based on something that was done *to* the nation, rather than *by* it. Korean "comfort women," the inhabitants of occupied Palestine, and many others have experienced a sense of dishonor or humiliation around being occupied by another power and subsequent atrocities. This kind of shame has been less explored in political theory.[80]

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[75] Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 7.
[76] Dresler-Hawke and Liu, "Collective shame," 131-153
[77] Benny Morris, "The New Historiography: Israel and Its Past," in his *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
[78] James Goodman, "Refugee Solidarity: Between National Shame and Global Outrage," in D. Hopkins et al. (eds.) *Theorizing Emotions: Sociological Explorations and Applications* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009): 269-290.
[79] Therein, "The National Shame of Aboriginal Incarceration."
[80] An exception, Howard Wiarda suggests that national inferiority complexes help explain why some 'peripheral' countries, through a desire to "wreak revenge on those 'superior' nations that earlier treated other countries with considerable disdain," have adopted Marxism-Leninism. Howard Wiarda, "Political culture and the attraction of

This chapter will explore a kind of national shame different from these, one arising not from bad acts towards others or from being humiliated by others, but from a sense of intellectual inadequacy.

*National Responsibility*

Under the heading of "collective responsibility," a vast literature addresses the question of whether groups or nations of people are collectively responsible for the harms that their groups perpetrate to others.[81] Domestically, there are debates about what kind of national responsibility nations have for past injustices, such as concerning reparations for the enslavement of blacks in the United States.[82] Internationally, national responsibility is evoked in discussions of global justice. On the one hand is the intuition that inequality between nations is unjust. Thus, some, like Thomas Pogge, insist that wealthy nations have a national responsibility to share their wealth with those of the global south.[83] On the other hand is the intuition that each nation has a right to devote its "national responsibility" to its own members first and foremost. David Miller, an eminent proponent of "national responsibility," attempts to solve the conflict between these opposing intuitions by preserving respect for national self-determination and constructing minimal principles for global justice. For him, national responsibility should be thought

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Marxism-Leninism: national inferiority complexes as an explanatory factor," *World Affairs* 151, no. 3 (1988): 143-149, 148.

[81] May and Hoffman, *Collective Responsibility*, 1-8.

[82] Lawrie Balfour, "Reparations after Identity Politics," *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 786-811.

[83] Thomas Pogge, "Cosmopolitanism and sovereignty," *Ethics* 103, no. 1 (1992): 48-75.

of as not a demand for the uniform treatment of individuals across national boundaries, but rather as upholding universal protection of human rights.[84] In all these cases, the responsible nation is assumed to be a powerful one that has either harmed a weaker group or has power to help weaker others.

These discussions of collective responsibility are essentially debates over whether groups can have beliefs and intentions, and whether they can act. This irresoluble dilemma has led at least one political theorist, Farid Abdel-Nour, to skip the idea of *collective* national responsibility and hone in on *individual* national responsibility. It is worth paying special attention to his argument not only because he shares the prevailing assumptions about national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility discussed above, but also because my argument will parallel, yet invert, his.

Farid Abdel-Nour's central argument is that, on the individual level, wherever there is national pride, there is national responsibility and this responsibility is best taken up in the form of national shame.[85] What he means is that if a person feels proud of something her national ancestors did (e.g. founding the country), and if that action produced a bad situation (e.g. extermination of the natives), then, to the extent she is proud, she is also responsible. She is responsible because she imaginatively identifies with her national ancestors (evidenced by her saying things like, "*We* won the war," or "*We* made the desert bloom") who were the cause of the bad situation. She should not be punished because you cannot punish someone for feeling proud of their country. Rather,

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[84] Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, 164.
[85] Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 713.

her responsibility should be to feel shame. By feeling national shame, she would become self-reflective and perhaps take it upon herself to transform the myths of her country or to change how she relates to her country.

Abdel-Nour's argument evokes an interesting question that he does not attempt to answer: how do people with national pride—and no national shame—come to accept the idea that their ancestor's actions caused the bad situation, and therefore recognize on their own their responsibility to feel shame? His central argument might be restated more clearly as this: If someone has national pride, they have national responsibility whether they agree or not, and *should* accept responsibility and feel shame. However, this is tantamount to declaring, "you should feel ashamed!" to which one can simply respond, "No."

For the special individuals who are able to admit that their ancestor's actions caused a bad situation, Abdel-Nour offers them the title of "mature agents." But what makes an immature agent become mature?[86] A more useful research question would be: In cases where people with national pride—and no national shame—were able to come to recognize their national responsibility and feel shame, how did they do so? What do their narratives look like?

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[86] Ibid. Abdel-Nour acknowledges in a footnote, "One is entitled to ask, what is to be done when the member of the nation is not a mature agent?" (718, note 74). He rules out that others can actively shame the immature agent, since shaming is a form of punishment, and suggests others can "exhort" her to be more self-critical. Indeed, his argument is more clearly rephrased as an exhortation.

The point of all these criticisms is not to undermine Abdel-Nour's argument, but to focus on a question that his argument inspires: How do individuals with national identity come to accept and conceptualize their national responsibility?

This chapter attempts to answer such a question, but with a twist. I present a case where a colonized person's national identity is rooted in shame, not pride.

Nguyễn An Ninh offers an account that runs along parallel lines as Abdel-Nour's. A person may feel *shame* because he acknowledges that his national ancestors failed to create a robust cultural stock for his nation. This shortcoming in cultural stock of the nation created a bad situation (e.g. it weakened the country, making it vulnerable to foreign conquest). Given that he has a sense of national identity (evidenced by his use of "we" to refer to himself and fellow nationals), he has national responsibility to redeem national shame by engaging in creative self-remaking and constructing a new "culture" for the purpose of nation-building so that his national identity can become pride-worthy.

Pride connects individuals to the achievements of others, some of whom might be dead. Thus, pride can sustain national identity over time. Similarly, shame can connect the individual to the *shortcomings* of others, some of whom might be dead. The difference is that while pride can help sustain national identity over time, national shame can help motivate the creation of national identity from scratch. Thus, for Ninh, shame engenders a different mode of responsibility for a different purpose from the kind that Abdel-Nour's notion of pride would.

In short, the lessons we will take from Nguyễn An Ninh are (1) national identity can be based on national shame, not just pride, (2) national shame can refer to feelings of

inadequacy as compared to others, not only to the shame from harming outsiders, and (3) national responsibility can refer to the duty to creatively self-remake the individual for the sake of nation-building and national self-determination, not only for redressing harms done to others.

## Nguyễn An Ninh

By the time Nguyễn An Ninh was born in 1900, France had been extending its control over Vietnam for four decades. In its first three decades of the 20th century, Vietnamese intellectuals saw their task as twofold: providing their countrymen a diagnosis of how Vietnam had fallen to French rule, and prescribing how the Vietnamese might strengthen their country to stand up to French rule.

Up until Ninh's birth year, Vietnamese intellectuals were primarily mandarins who had studied classic Confucian texts for civil service exams. However, entering the 20th century, many elites began doubting Confucianism as it had been practiced as an adequate social philosophy for Vietnam. A new idea, Social Darwinism, took hold from the end of the 19th century to the 1920s in Vietnam as the prevailing explanation for the country's fall to French rule.[87] Its emphasis on struggle and competition went against ideals of equilibrium and harmony long-held by Confucian elites. According to Hue Tam Ho Tai, Social Darwinism was a revelation to the Vietnamese, providing "an explanation of their country's downfall... Vietnam had indeed fallen prey to a mightier country, but its

[87] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 297.

conqueror's might lay in its cultural superiority."[88] Elites who were accustomed to gauging the health of a country using cultural criteria were easily seduced by this argument.

It seemed that the fate of the country depended on what culture, ideas, and values it would take on as its own. Vietnamese intellectuals at this time would not have been fully convinced by Samuel Huntington's claim that "the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence."[89] Many Vietnamese indeed assumed that Western material superiority must have had something to do with their supposedly superior culture, ideas, and values. Thus, Vietnamese thinkers believed that the only way Asians could equal the West was to master Western ideas. In the decades before communism became an attractive ideology, young Vietnamese intellectuals debated the merits of an eclectic range of political philosophies in order to find the ones most suitable for their goal of self-determination. Students were encouraged to travel to and learn from Japan where modernization was taking place. Hue Tam Ho Tai writes, "equating independence with survival, patriotic literati believed that they were engaged in a desperate race against annihilation as a people and a culture."[90] Schools were created in order to promote debates about what and how to learn from the west, and what should be done to strengthen the Vietnamese people

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[88] Tai, *Radicalism*, 20.
[89] Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 51.
[90] Tai, *Radicalism,* 2.

spiritually, intellectually and culturally, with the assumption that doing so would bring greater material and political power.[91]

Part and parcel of this new educational movement was the imperative to construct a sense of national identity which was only incipient and would remain so until at least the late 1920s.[92] At the Tonkin Free School, "a functionary in the local bureau of cartography made a big map of Vietnam of white cloth, which he used at the school to describe the S shape of the country… People are said to have come from other neighborhoods just to view that map—probably the first time that they had seen their country rendered schematically."[93]

The question of how to construct national identity where there was none was deeply related to the question of where the Vietnamese should get their moral guidance. There were two ostensible choices: the old Chinese Confucianism or the new Western liberalism. By the 1920s, these two options increasingly came to appear unsatisfactory for a new young generation. By then, Social Darwinism's influence was diminishing and being supplanted by the rising influence of "radicalism," a term used by Hue Tam Ho Tai to describe a nonideological reaction to colonialism, characterized by iconoclasm, and the marriage of the personal and political.[94] Unlike Social Darwinism, radicalism was

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[91] Ibid., 276.
[92] In 1925, Phan Châu Trinh, Vietnam's most famous early 20th century nationalist, was criticizing the Vietnamese for having little sense of national identity. See Phan Châu Trinh, "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident", in *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, edited and translated by Vinh Sinh (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009): 103-23.
[93] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 166.
[94] Tai, *Radicalism*, 1.

influenced by anarchism and was preoccupied "not with survival and competition but with freedom and the relationship between the individual and society."[95] At this time, many young Vietnamese saw "symmetry between the national struggle for independence from colonial rule and their own efforts to emancipate themselves from the oppressiveness of native social institutions and the deadweight of tradition."[96] The most influential figure of this period and the one who best embodies its "radicalism" is Nguyễn An Ninh. Vietnam's period of "radicalism" was flowering with liberal ideas, philosophical experimentation, and new political vocabularies. Although it was eventually replaced by Marxism-Leninism (another radical tradition), it remains rich political-theoretical terrain overlooked by political theorists.

The rise of "radicalism" could perhaps be explained by this young generation's deep immersion in European philosophy and further distancing from traditional Confucianism. They "no longer possessed a sense of rootedness and had fallen prey to a deep spiritual malaise."[97] In the previous generation, two renowned Vietnamese nationalists of the early twentieth century, Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) and Phan Châu Trinh, were among the first Vietnamese to learn about Western ideas after having been immersed in Chinese philosophy, although the western texts they read were Chinese translations of Japanese translations. Before Trinh and Châu, scholars studied Chinese philosophy exclusively. Now, in the 1920s, Nguyễn An Ninh was fluent in French and educated in the best French schools. He lived in France from 1920 to 1923 and received a

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[95] Ibid., 4.
[96] Ibid., 3.
[97] Ibid.

law degree from the Sorbonne. On his bookshelf could be found works by Nietzsche, Rousseau, Plato, Kant, Tolstoy as well as a photograph of Rabindranath Tagore.[98] Ninh returned to Vietnam and created, edited, and wrote for the *newspaper La Cloche Fêlée*, which made its debut on December 10, 1923.[99] This newspaper is where we find most of Ninh's writings and speeches. For many, Ninh was the archetypal patriot intellectual. However, his patriotism, as I will show, stems not from national "pride" generally understood, but rather from a passionate sense of responsibility rooted in national shame. The few historians who have written about Nguyễn An Ninh have not framed him as being primarily motivated by national shame.[100] Therefore this chapter offers a new interpretation of Ninh. In what follows, I show that (1) Ninh's national shame arises from his feeling that his nation is intellectually inadequate compared to other nations and that this shame can be a cohesive force for Vietnamese national identity, (2) that this kind of shame can motivate the Vietnamese to recreate their selves anew, and (3) that Ninh's critiques of the Vietnamese are compatible with and part of his anti-colonialism.

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98 Léon Werth, *Cochinchine* (Paris: Rieder, 1926), 35.
99 For a history of *la Cloche Fêlée*, see Tai, *Radicalism*, 125-131.
100 For works on Nguyễn An Ninh, see Tai, *Radicalism*; Judith Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Van Hum," PhD Dissertation (Seattle: University of Washington, 2003); Pierre Brocheux, "Une histoire croisée: l'immigration politique indochinoise en France (1911-1945)," *Hommes et Migrations* 1253, no. 1 (2005): 26-3; Ngo Van, *Viet-nam, 1920-1945: Révolution et Contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* (Paris: Nautilus, 2000) 28-45; Phuong Lan Bui The My, *Than the va su nhiep nha cach mang Nguyễn An Ninh* (Saigon, 1970).

*National shame from a sense of intellectual inadequacy*

In 1923, Ninh diagnoses the central problem for Vietnamese youth as a crisis of moral knowledge. "Vietnamese youth is caught as if in whirling waters, not knowing where to swim for. Faced with a moral choice, it does not know on which morality to base its actions and its judgments."[101] Turning to Chinese ideas or Western ideas for prepackaged moral guidance would not work, he thinks. Although he says that it is possible for Confucianism to "elevate men,"[102] he argues that Vietnamese reliance on Chinese ideas is inadequate in the face of new problems facing Vietnamese society: "Haven't the so-called elite fashioned by Chinese books been forced to cling to Confucian ideas like shipwrecked people to a raft?"[103] Similarly, the Vietnamese should not simply adopt French or European values without struggling on their own to make such ideas meaningful to themselves:

> "The future that we desire will not come to us in a dream. It is not enough to mark in gold letters on the front of public buildings: liberty, equality, fraternity, in order for liberty, equality, and fraternity to reign among us... You claim from others things that they cannot give you... things that you must acquire by yourselves."[104]

If Chinese or European moralities are not solutions, then it would be natural to turn to Vietnam's indigenous culture for moral guidance. For Ninh, culture is the primary source of moral knowledge for all nations. For any nation, its culture is its "soul," guiding

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101 CF, 10 Dec. 1923; translation in Tai, *Radicalism*, 72.
102 CF, "Ideals of Annamite Youth," 7 Jan. 1924.
103 Ibid.
104 CF, 24 Dec. 1924.

not only its citizens' moral behavior but also allowing nations to survive in the face of foreign attacks.

> "Any people dominated by a foreign culture cannot know true independence if they do not posses an independent culture... Take, for example, a culture that we are still influenced by: the Chinese culture. Vanquished constantly by brutal force, conquered by barbarian neighbors, China owes its existence to its culture."[105]

Correspondingly, a nation with a weak culture has a weak "soul" and is vulnerable to foreign domination.

Ninh thinks Vietnam shamefully does not possess its own robust intellectual culture, and this is the cause of its weakness.

> "If we pile up all that we have produced in our country in terms of purely literary and artistic achievements, the intellectual lot that was left to us by our ancestors would certainly be weak compared to the heritages of other peoples... The literary lot that was transmitted to us is thin and, what's more, exhales a strong breath of decadence, of sickness, lassitude, the taste of an impending agony. This is not the kind of heritage that will help give us more vigor and life to our race in the fight for a place in the world."[106]

The standards that Ninh endorses to assess the value of a nation are not necessarily "European" (e.g. rationality and autonomy), but rather whether a nation has a heritage of intellectual culture, specifically literary and artistic works, and whether these have endured to guide and invigorate future generations and inspire the world at large.[107] He writes, "Many people owe to their culture the duration of their name, their influence

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105 CF, 7 Jan. 1924
106 Ibid.
107Ninh's emphasis on written texts as "culture" bears resemblance to the Chinese literati view of culture. In Chinese, the first character in the word "culture" (文化) literally means "literature or writing."

in the world, and the messianic role that they play in the world."[108] Unfortunately, he thinks, Vietnam, unlike some other nations, lacks a pantheon of "great men" and the little culture that the youth have inherited is more harmful than good. Vietnam's standing in the world is low, even compared to other nations colonized by the West. "India, despite its oppression by the English, has its philosophers, its poets, its intellectuals, its leaders who lead actions of the masses."[109] In comparison with India, "Annam figures like a pygmy next to a giant, because India has a most glorious past."[110] Compared to nations like India and Japan whose thinkers "radiate alongside the talents and geniuses of Europe, Annam is but an infant."[111] More than mere "envy," "shame" best captures Ninh's feeling of Vietnam's dishonor and humiliation.

It is interesting that Ninh is citing India as an inspiration. For Gandhi, the problem for Indians was not their lack of an intellectual culture (of this they knew they had a rich heritage) but rather a contemporary moral failing in falling prey to the desire for luxury, ease, and material gain.[112] In contrast, the problem for Vietnam, in Ninh's view, is that it lacked even the requisite foundation of an intellectual culture. Whereas "self-criticism" may describe Gandhi's approach, a deeper sense of "shame" best describes Ninh's.

Ninh's remarks on the lack of indigenous Vietnamese intellectual culture were not unique in Vietnam. A generation before him, the Vietnamese nationalist Phan Châu Trinh

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[108] CF, 7 Jan. 1924.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Farah Godrej, "Gandhi, Foucault, and the Politics of Self-Care," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 4 (2017): 894-922.

said that a number of European thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu had "contributed to unshackling their compatriots from autocratic rule" and that only "Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Laozi, or Zhuangzi... in ancient China might be compared" to those European men. From the Qin dynasty [221-206 BCE] on, "there has been no person of such caliber" in Vietnam.[113] In a public speech in 1925, Phan Châu Trinh asks, "In our country at present, is there a person who may be called moral philosopher? Even since the time of the Lê dynasty, is there anyone who may be called a moral philosopher like those I mentioned?"[114]

Ninh goes further than Trinh, attacking Vietnamese literati for not only failing to be moral philosophers, but for achieving nothing more than badly copying Chinese Confucian ideas.[115] Yet, for Ninh, Vietnamese cultural and intellectual inadequacy is not an inherent condition, nor are they condemned to be forever inferior. The problem is not *metaphysical*, but deeply related to the historical processes that constitute Vietnam's situation (e.g. lingering Chinese cultural dependency and material hardship under French colonialism).[116]

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[113] Phan Châu Trinh, "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident," 115.
[114] Ibid.
[115] CF, 7 Jan. 1924
[116] Roberto Schwarz, writing in the context of Brazil, argues that the occasional superiority of a Latin American artist over his or her European model does not indicate cultural parity of their respective spheres, though it might relativize the idea of "originality." Even so, while the idea of relativism might make Latin Americans feel better when it lets them know they "are not metaphysically predestined to suffer the inferiority of imitation, since in fact the Europeans imitate as well (hence the relativization of originality)," the fact remains that "innovation is not distributed equally over the planet, and that if the causes of that inequality are not metaphysical, they are perhaps something else." The "something else" that Schwarz has in mind is found in an "international space that is polarized by hegemony, inequality, and alienation—a space

*National shame as motivation*

What task, then, is incumbent upon the Vietnamese given their shameful limited cultural stock? Ninh's solution is for the Vietnamese to aim for a kind of originality generated through intense, energetic, personal, spiritual struggle. Their should aim to become "great men." Quoting the Indian thinker Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ninh writes, "the only and real importance of India for the world will be revealed in the great men India will provide to humanity."[117] Ninh wants Vietnam to offer its own "great men,"—by which he means philosophers, artists, and poets—to the world. Unfortunately, Ninh thinks, the Vietnamese may not be receptive to this idea because they are "without energy, without will, discouraged by the slightest effort," which are consequences of a lack of intellectual culture rather than natural, essential qualities. "Even if favored by heredity and by circumstance, very few of us are capable of efforts that can bring us up to the level of spirit cultivated in Europe."[118] Yet, even so, "why shouldn't we speak of great men, since we need great men, a flowering of great men, personalities that can give status to their own people?"[119]

For Ninh, his generation's task is to creatively "finding a solid intellectual heritage that can serve as the first stone on which to build our dreams."[120] This heritage

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where we find the historical and collective hardships of underdevelopment." Roberto Schwarz, trans. Washbourne, R. Kelly, Neil Larsen, "National Adequation and Critical Originality," *Cultural Critique* 49, no.1 (2001): 18-42, 20.

[117] CF, 7 Jan. 1924.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

would be 'solid' only if it was a result of their efforts, not others. "The current generation needs new ideals, *their ideals*; a new activity, *their activity*; new passions, *their passions*."[121]

For ideas, Vietnam should not depend solely on China or Europe but should learn from diverse sources. He writes, "in these times, all Asian minds must be nourished by two cultures, one occidental and one oriental."[122] Vietnam should be like a vampire, sucking up wisdom and knowledge wherever wisdom and knowledge can be found in order to reinvigorate the nation. "What we need is curiosity under all its forms, a curiosity that is the last hope and last sign of life, that is capable of every audacity in order to quench its thirst, a curiosity that burrows, seeks, searches, and dissects everything that is life in others so as to find the remedy which will give new vigor to a weakened blood."[123] This reinvigorated 'blood' will be hybrid. Importantly, although other sources should be studied for inspiration, what the Vietnamese need "is not servile imitations that far from liberating us attach us to what we imitate. We need personal creations that come from our own blood or works that come from an actual change within ourselves."[124] He says this to "prove to today's youth that in all things they can count on no one but themselves to rise to the level where man, aware of his own strength, also begins to be aware of his dignity."[125]

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Quoted in Tai, *Radicalism*, 79.
124 CF, 14 Jan. 1924.
125 Ibid.

One precondition to attaining a genuine "change within themselves" was the necessity of breaking away from convention, tradition, and even their families. "It is against your milieu that you must struggle, against your family that paralyzes your efforts, against the vulgar society that weighs on you, against the narrow prejudices and hindrances that lurk around your actions, against ideals that lack vigor and nobility, that are humiliatingly base and reduce, day by day, the status of our race."[126] The greatest idealists, he writes,

> "have always hitherto advised those who wanted to be their disciples to flee 'their father's house.' We, too, must flee the 'house of our father.' We must escape our family, escape our society, distance ourselves from our country. We must have a life of struggle that awakens the little vigor we have; we must a society that reveals our true worth."[127]

Here, Ninh's exhortations echo Nietzsche's Superman.[128] At a time when even the most progressively minded Vietnamese felt that at least some traditional family values ought to be respected, Ninh's call to struggle against the family were radically iconoclastic. Hue Tam Ho Tai has remarked that a familiar theme of the period was that young Vietnamese should seek their destinies outside their families, but "that they should reject the values of their fathers was little short of revolutionary."[129] Only by breaking free from old and stale cultural constraints could the new generation perform their duty of rectifying the failure of their ancestors and becoming great thinkers, themselves. "And more than India, we

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126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ninh was attracted to an "anarchism heavily tinged with Nietzschean individualism" (Tai, *Radicalism*, 73). David Marr shows that Ninh's La Cloche Fêlée devotes considerable attention to Nietzsche's writings (Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 161-62).
129 Tai, *Radicalism*, 80.

need men who know the soul of our race, its needs, and what is best suited to it. We need men who guide the steps of the people and illuminate their path. We need artists, poets, painters, musicians, and intellectuals to enrich our intellectual heritage."[130]

Ninh's exhortations to break from tradition, learn from diverse sources, and become "great men" can be read as the "national responsibility" he prescribes for Vietnamese youth. My account of national responsibility, paralleling Abdel-Nour's, draws on Bernard William's model of responsibility. On William's view, any notion of responsibility requires that a link be made between someone who (whether they intend to or not) causes a bad state of affairs, and the later self that knows the meaning and consequences of the act. Yet, raising the question of *national* responsibility, how is it possible for someone who merely identifies himself imaginatively with the members of his nation be responsible for what those members do, or, in Ninh's case, did not do? The answer lies in the use of "we" statements. An individual's ability to say "we have been conquered," and mean it, is, in Abdel-Nour's words, "evidence of their success (by whatever mechanisms) in extending their sense of communal belonging to persons they have neither met nor are likely to meet or hear about."[131] Ninh makes a link between Vietnam's ancestors (whose act of omission—i.e. not creating great intellectual works—caused a bad state of affairs) and the present generation of Vietnamese who know the meaning and consequences of the act of omission. Thus, the "task that is incumbent on the present generation is heavy."[132] This generation has a "mission. And who better than

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130 CF, 7 Jan. 1924.
131 Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 699.
132 CF, 24 Dec. 1923.

us to take on this mission?"[133] His generation is a "sacrificed generation" that should "think of our task and not our happiness, that we should contribute all our efforts to a better future."[134] Only by fulfilling these responsibilities could the Vietnamese eventually conceive their national identity in terms of pride: "Today's youth must avoid above all talk of the fatherland and of patriotism. They must concentrate all their strength on seeking themselves. The day they find themselves, the words fatherland and patriotism will have become greater words, more elevated, more noble."[135] Here, Ninh shows that Vietnamese national identity can be worthy of pride so long as Vietnamese youth fulfill their responsibility to creatively remake their selves. Yet, taking on such responsibility is only possible after correctly diagnosing Vietnam's primary problem as a shameful lack of intellectual culture.

One might criticize Ninh's "national responsibility" as undue emphasis on individual answerability which overlooks the realities of capitalist expansion and imperialism on the part of the French.[136] However, we now turn to how Ninh calls for Vietnamese answerability *while also* being fundamentally anti-colonial and well aware of the historical realities of French imperialism and the brutality of French colonial power. Far from being an apologist for French colonialism or a victim of false consciousness, his call for national responsibility is part of his anti-colonialism.

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133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 CF, 14 Jan. 1924.
136 For a critique of Bernard William's emphasis on causality and individual answerability for being only "vaguely concerned with sociological realities and contexts," see Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): 134.

*Ninh is anti-colonial at the same time*

While we have so far seen Ninh's exhortations addressed to Vietnamese youth, his critiques of colonialism are found in his writings addressed to French citizens in the metropole, informing them about their government's unjust actions in Indochina. Ninh rejects colonialism on the basis of equality and self-determination. Ninh's anti-colonial commitment is expressed in three ways.

First, Ninh thinks colonialism as a civilizing mission is unjust because no people is inherently inferior. Even if the colonizing nation hypothetically really was superior, he still would not have actually supported colonialism because, as seen earlier, Ninh deplored mimicry and imitation and instead believed that internal, personal struggle gave meaning to anything. Yet, Ninh thinks the French are not actually superior. He writes, "The European prestige is based neither on the moral nor the intellectual superiority of the Europeans over the Asians. It is based on the color of skin alone."[137] Moreover, this "European prestige" holds that "a European, as idiotic as he can be, could be a boss over a Vietnamese, and the inverse is inadmissible."[138] He writes, "It is the European prestige that kills justice in the courtrooms; that prevents the judges from giving the same sentence to a Frenchman and a Vietnamese indicted with the same offense."[139]

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137 CF, "France in Indochina" 26, 30 Nov., 3 Dec. 1925. Translation in Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*, (University of Michigan Press, 2000): 190-207, 196.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.

Second, Ninh believed the French civilizing mission was a fraudulent sham from the beginning, providing mere justification for exploitation: "it was not to carry out a sentimental deed that France came to Indochina", and that those Vietnamese who "have talked about France's humanitarian ideas, in order to humor the colonialists, are as naive as those Europeans who believe in the civilizing mission of Europe."[140] Referring to a recently published work titled "the French Miracle in Asia" he asks, "What is this miracle? It is a miracle indeed to be able in a short time to bring a people with a low intellectual level down to deeper ignorance, and to bring a people with democratic ideas into complete servitude."[141] Moreover, those who officially represent France in Indochina, he writes, "can only speak of the construction of costly railroads, ruinous underwater cables... in short, of the excessive exploitation of Indochina in both senses of the word."[142] Ninh is also aware of the harm French colonialism is inflicting on the French themselves, quoting Rabindranath Tagore: "Those who take pleasure in dominating foreign races abdicate little by little their own liberty and their own humanity in favor of the mechanisms that are necessary to keep other peoples in servitude."[143]

Third, and lastly, Ninh is well aware of and expresses outrage at a wide range of human rights abuses by the French. Such violations justify violent rebellion as a last resort: "there are cases when violence must be accepted for it represents the only recourse."[144] Death is preferable to slavery, he says. However, before combatting

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140 CF; Translation in Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced*, 191.
141 CF, 7 Jan. 1924.
142 Ibid.
143 Quoted in Tai, *Radicalism*, 82.
144 CF; Translation in Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced*, 191.

"violence with violence as in a bulls' fight, the Vietnamese youth of today, fully conscious of its responsibilities towards its own society, tries first to reconcile French interest with Vietnamese wishes. It tells the mother country—which is too far away from Indochina—the truth about what happens in this colony."[145] Thus, he first appeals to France's purported sense of rights. He argues that when individual freedoms "are denied to the people, only silence and revolt remain. I know, however, that in 1789 the Rights of Man were proclaimed in France, and that's why I hope to be able to move the French people in the Metropole by showing clearly to them the absence in Indochina of these basic rights that protect the dignity of mankind."[146] For Ninh, "not only does France not apply to Indochina the noble principles she has herself proclaimed; she also destroys the democratic tradition of Vietnamese society."[147] The French regime, he notes, violates several rights, such as the right of Vietnamese to travel freely in their own country and the right to freedom of thought by censoring Vietnamese newspapers.[148] For several consecutive issues of *La Cloche Fêlée*, each issue displays on one of its pages in large text two or three articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, until all seventeen articles are presented. In one place, he writes that he has heard of some Vietnamese who have been afraid to subscribe to *La Cloche Fêlée* given its anti-French tone, and says, "but too bad for those who do not have the power to revolt against despotism... Compatriots, at least defend the rights you have obtained. Rebel against

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145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., 203.
147 Ibid., 195.
148 Ibid.

tyranny and despotism. Any concession you make today is binding on your heirs. Live in servitude and serfdom if you like, but you have no right to mortgage the liberty of your children."[149] However, implicit in Ninh's appeal to the French metropole's sense of human rights is also an admiration for France's noble ideals of rights. For Ninh, it just so happened that their colonizers and colonialism in general was hypocritical. Ninh detests one kind of France (a colonial France) and admires another France (a rights-loving France).

## Postcolonial and decolonial dismissals

So far, we have seen how contemporary political theorists typically conceptualize national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility and that this is usually from the perspective of dominant nations. In contrast, Ninh offers an alternative account of these concepts from the perspective of a dominated nation.

We may naturally turn to the field of postcolonial and decolonial thought for insight into expressions of shame arising from a sense of intellectual and cultural inferiority on the part of the colonized. After all, postcolonial and decolonial theory, though not a single, homogenous ideology, has the purported aim of giving attention to the ideas and subjectivities of colonized peoples. Yet, these discourses are inadequate to explain the case of Nguyễn An Ninh. Such discourses spend more time denouncing the evils of colonialism than examining how colonized natives are agents of their own internal conversations about national self-strengthening and nation-building. As Antonio

[149] CF, 28 Jan. 1924.

Vázquez-Arroyo has aptly put it, "violent conquests constitutive of colonial situations inaugurate predicaments of power beset with forms of historical and political agency that complicate the dyad colonizer/colonized and call for political explanation as opposed to moralization."[150] Taking the perspective of the colonial situation, and, I would add, specifically of the colonized, thus "enables a historically accurate understanding of colonialism and the different—because asymmetrical—but real modalities of political agency constituting rulers and ruled."[151] Attention to Ninh's agency to use shame to spur a new national identity is illuminating because it challenges and enhances postcolonial and decolonial thought. Specifically, there are three blind spots in these literatures that preclude explorations of the kind of agency and national shame that Ninh expresses. Taking Ninh's account into consideration provides a more wholistic understanding of colonial situations.

First, there is simply a paucity of explorations of how colonized peoples have expressed a sense of their own cultural inferiority. In contrast, there is a great amount of literature about how colonizers viewed the colonized as inferior. In widely cited introductory texts to postcolonialism in which the field of postcolonial literature is surveyed, one finds a great amount of evidence for a tradition of how Europeans viewed non-European peoples as intellectually, culturally, and biologically inferior, thus justifying the latter's conquest and colonialism.[152] Yet, we rarely see how colonized

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150 Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Critical theory, colonialism, and the historicity of thought," *Constellations* 25 no. 1 (2018): 54-70, 60.
151 Ibid.
152 See the two most widely cited introductory texts on postcolonialism:
Young, *Postcolonialism,* and Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York:

people expressed their own sense of inferiority or shortcomings. To be sure, there are some discussions of how colonized people were self-critical, particularly of Gandhi's remark that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them,"[153] and his criticisms of Indians for becoming dependent on Western goods. Scholars have interpreted this as an instance of self-criticism in which Gandhi holds Indians responsible for their weakness and vulnerability to colonial rule.[154] However, Gandhi is criticizing Indians for their moral failure, not for India's lack of indigenous intellectual traditions, of which, he and other Indians clearly recognized, there was no lack. As we saw, Ninh's shame is rooted not only in Vietnamese moral failure but also in his belief that Vietnam shamefully lacked indigenous intellectual culture, upon which moral guidance depends. Whereas for Gandhi the solution for Indians was to turn to indigenous ideas for self-strengthening and moral guidance, for Ninh the Vietnamese had no such solution because they did not have a foundation of indigenous ideas to begin with.

Second, if any attention is given to colonized peoples' expressions of shame arising from a sense of cultural inferiority, such expressions are usually interpreted in a dismissive way. They are viewed primarily as psychological consequences of colonialism rather than taken seriously on colonized peoples' own terms. Colonized peoples' self-proclaimed inferiority are diagnosed as *internalized inferiority* and *colonial mentality*. It is *false consciousness* in which they have internalized their colonial masters' beliefs in

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Routledge, 2005); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

153 Anthony Parel (ed.), *M. K. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

154 Godrej, "Gandhi, Foucault, and the Politics of Self-Care," 904.

their own inferiority. *Internalized oppression* is used to describe "a condition in which the oppressed individuals and groups come to believe that they are inferior to those in power," and view it as a "salient consequence of systematic and sustained oppression."[155] Implicit in claims like these is that groups cannot really come to believe that they are inferior on their own or for their own purposes. Rather, it is implied, feelings of inferiority are always solely the product of sustained oppression. Though foreign conquest may indeed evoke shame among the conquered, subsequent attempts on the part of the conquered to explain how they got conquered may center on what exactly they should feel ashamed about. One should take these claims seriously and resist the tendency to attribute them to "false consciousness," despite what one might think the real reasons are for their being conquered. Such a tendency is not surprising, considering that, according to Robert Young, Marxism (the chief promulgator of the term *false consciousness*), "remains paramount as the fundamental framework of postcolonial thinking."[156]

I do not deny the existence of at least some variants of internalized oppression and false consciousness, for scholars have done important work exploring the impact of colonialism on beauty standards and on the sense of self-worth of colonized peoples.[157] I am also not suggesting that reigning postcolonial and decolonial wisdom holds that the

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155 David and Okazaki, "Colonial Mentality," 2.
156 Young, *Postcolonialism,* 6.
157 Cynthia Robinson-Moore, "Beauty Standards Reflect Eurocentric Paradigms--So What? Skin Color, Identity, and Black Female Beauty," *Journal of Race & Policy* 4, no. 1 (2008): 66-85; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon, 1965); Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970); David and Okazaki, "Colonial Mentality," 1-16.

critique of or shame in one's own culture on the part of the colonized can *only* be a sign of internalized inferiority and false consciousness. I am merely suggesting that the use of terms such as "internalized inferiority" to describe most cases of self-proclaimed inferiority discourages us from exploring and taking seriously other instances of self-critiques, such as the claim that one's own intellectual culture is inferior. Moreover, I am not saying that a field as diverse and complex as postcolonialism and decolonialism gives us only two options for the colonized person: false consciousness (apology for colonialism) versus agency (rejection of colonial values). There is a complex recognition in this literature of how agency and oppressed consciousness work together. However, my point is that most postcolonial and decolonial discourses—following Marx, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Jean Paul Sartre—deter us from taking seriously self-professions of cultural inferiority on the part of the colonized.

Furthermore, understanding Ninh's national shame as something "on his own terms" does not mean that shame has nothing to do with colonization or empire. Any response on the part of the colonized to the colonial situation is mutually constituted by colonizer and colonized, and this interdependence should not be ignored. In this vein, Edward Said's exhortation to read texts "contrapuntally" is correct. However, read through the lens of Nguyễn An Ninh, Said is not contrapuntal enough. For Said, a "contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded."[158] We should appreciate the fact that the Bertram family in

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158 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993): 66-7.

Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (1814) was so wealthy because of the British colony of Antigua, although Antigua is "referred to only in passing."[159] For Said, a contrapuntal reading brings Antigua to the fore and allows us to see the bigger picture, to read the novel not as something ahistorical or only concerned with private, domestic issues, and instead to read the forgotten Other back into the text. This is admirable. However, if we want to take a more deeply contrapuntal approach to history, it is not enough to reveal the interdependence of colonizer and colonized within the texts of European writers only. Contrary to what Said has seemed to imply in his famous book *Orientialism*, there *is* a way to engage the texts of non-Europeans without being "orientalist."[160] Whereas Said privileges texts of those from powerful/colonizing nations, I privilege the perspective of the colonized. For Said, culture is a crucial factor in the desire to found and maintain imperial regimes, and this is what makes his contrapuntal readings of European texts useful: they challenge these cultures. Yet, Ninh shows a different use of culture: a lack of culture can cause national vulnerability to foreign conquest, and a robust culture can be a crucial factor in enabling a nation to stand up to and resist imperial regimes. This is why, for Ninh, the Vietnamese must construct their culture, and thus their national identity, anew.

Lastly, in quickly assuming that colonialism destroys an "original" indigenous culture, postcolonial theorists overlook the fact that some colonized people themselves were unsure about the existence of such. For most postcolonial theorists, it goes without

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159 Ibid. 89
160 Edward W. Said, *Orientialism* New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

saying that colonized, non-Western people have indigenous intellectual traditions. This is the premise underlying what Robert Young describes as the main assumption that postcolonial theory operates on: "that the intellectual and cultural traditions developed outside the west constitute a body of knowledge that can be deployed to great effect against the political and cultural hegemony of the west."[161] While indigenous intellectual traditions have certainly developed outside the west, little attention has been given to how some non-Western thinkers, at least in "peripheral" nations such as Vietnam, may have debated and questioned the existence of the development of their own indigenous intellectual traditions.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon famously defines all colonized people as those "in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave."[162] However, as I have shown, Ninh and some Vietnamese intellectuals living under French colonialism were suggesting that the Vietnamese, having been ruled by China for about a thousand years (111 BC to 939AD), had little "local cultural originality" to begin with. Theorists who follow Fanon may dismiss such a claim as internalized inferiority. Yet, Ninh's national shame leads not to depressing self-hatred but to self-renewal. Similar to Fanon's claim, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o asserts that colonialism destroys indigenous cultural achievements through a "cultural bomb":

> "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement and it makes them want to distance themselves

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[161] Ibid., 65.
[162] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008): 2.

> from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own."[163]

This may have been true for some colonized peoples. Ninh indeed saw his country's past as somewhat of a wasteland of nonachievement, but this was not the "effect of a cultural bomb" from French colonialists. Rather, it was Ninh's own conclusion, independent of what colonialists may have said about the Vietnamese. Moreover, Vietnamese nonachievement does not make him want to distance himself from his "Vietnamese-ness" but rather to *recreate* the Vietnamese self through engagement with a variety of traditions, non-Western and Western.

Jean Paul Sartre argues that if colonized blacks consume the French culture and education imposed upon them, they would be alienated from their authentic roots. The solution to alienation, Sartre argues, is to "breach the walls of the culture prison"[164] of the whites and to "return to Africa."[165] This would allow them to "die to the white world in order to be reborn to the black soul."[166] Sartre assumes that there is an "authenticity" and indigenous "soul" that blacks can recover or return to. These well-intended assertions are problematic, Marie Paule Ha rightly argues, because they share the same assumption with racialist arguments that essentialize groups.[167] The reality is that there may be no

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163 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 3.
164 Jean Paule Sartre, trans. S.W. Allen, *Black Orpheus* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976): 20.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid. 31
167 Marie-Paule Ha, "On Sartre's critique of assimilation," *Journal of Romance Studies* 6, no. 1-2 (2006): 49-60, 53.

"authentic soul" to begin with, and that if a colonized person acknowledges this, they are not necessarily apologetic for colonialism or expressing a "false consciousness."

Often, postcolonial theorists interpret colonized peoples' expressions of their cultural inferiority as mere parroting of their colonial masters, dismissing the fact that such conclusions can be attributable to the agency of the colonized. Ania Loomba remarks that countless colonial intellectuals "certainly parroted the lines of their masters," and that at least some Indian students willingly adopted "the role of Macaulay's English-educated Indian who acts as a surrogate Englishman and awakens the native masses."[168] Thomas Babington Macaulay, the architect of English education in India, infamously said, "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England."[169] Leela Gandhi argues that what Macaulay is doing here is "canon formation" in which English literature is established as "the normative embodiment of beauty, truth, and morality" and that it "enforces the marginality and inferiority of colonized cultures and their books."[170] Yet, we have seen that Nguyễn An Ninh essentially says the same thing as Macaulay, that European literature *is* worth more than Vietnamese literature, but Ninh does not say this to uphold other nations' works as "normative embodiments of beauty and truth." Rather,

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168 Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 78.
169 Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 12.
170 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: a Critical Introduction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 144.

he views the great works of other cultures as things to admire and learn from, and that, if the Vietnamese fulfilled their national responsibility, they too can create equally great works. Rather than internalizing what colonizers wanted him to believe, Ninh is an example of being self-critical while also rejecting colonial attempts to establish normative "truths."

A dismissal of Ninh's judgment of his own culture risks being a dismissal of his agency to judge. Some scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak, have been wary of too easy a recovery of the "agency" of colonized peoples.[171] Others have simply overlooked the agency of colonized peoples. Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been criticized by Megan Vaughan as implying that "the historical experiences of colonial peoples themselves have no independent existence outside the texts of Orientalism."[172] Said "appears to have placed himself in the position of denying the possibility of any alternative description of 'the Orient', any alternative forms of knowledge and by extension, any agency on the part of the colonized."[173]

Of course, not all postcolonial theorists deny or overlook the agency of colonized peoples. The study of colonialism has focused on the agency of colonized peoples' to violently resist colonialism. Yet, some postcolonial theorists are giving more attention not to violent revolutionary agency but to the agency of colonized peoples to resist

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171 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" reprinted in *Marxist Interpretations of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988 [1985]), 271–313.
172 Megan Vaughan, "Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or Has Postmodernism Passed Us By?", *Social Dynamics* 20 (2) (1994): 1–23, 3.
173 Ibid.

*colonial discourse*.[174] The most influential example of this is Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," which refers to a kind of exaggerated copying on the part of the colonized of the language, culture, manner, and ideas of their colonizers.[175] This often occurs after colonizers attempt to create a loyal indigenous class that speaks and thinks in the colonizers' language. If the colonizer feels that the English or French-speaking indigenous class begins to resemble the colonizer too much, the colonizer may experience an unsettling anxiety. This anxiety, Bhabha thinks, opens a space for the colonized to resist colonial discourse. Mimicry threatens to undermine the colonizers' apparently stable, original identity: "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."[176] Closely related to "mimicry" is Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" which also challenges colonial discourse. Although, for Bhabha, "hybridity" shows how postcolonial identity is a mix and new creation, hybridity refers to the impurity of cultures in the first place, as there is never pure or "authentic" cultural identity, despite familiar forms of "official" culture. "Hybridity" is significant because it challenges the tendency of colonizers to set up distinctions between pure cultures.[177]

Half a century before Bhabha introduced the concept of "hybridity," Ninh told his fellow Vietnamese, "all Asian minds must be nourished by two cultures, one occidental

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174 See Ashis Nandy, *Intimate enemy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xii.
175 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *October* 28, (1984): 125–133.
176 Ibid., 129.
177 Homi Bhabha, "Signs taken for wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 144-165.

and one oriental."[178] Ninh is aware that cultures are always already mixed and impure, so "originality" or "purity" are never his goals. Rather, he thinks the Vietnamese should aim to be *sincere* and *genuine* in their creative efforts to construct a new culture after learning from other cultures. They should produce personal creations "that spring from our own blood or works that derive from an actual change within ourselves."[179] He warns the Vietnamese against "servile imitation," and to avoid mimicking the colonizers, as mimicry weakens Vietnamese intellectual culture. To Bhabha's point, Ninh's eloquent use of the French language to subvert the French colonial project certainly provoked anxiety within French colonizers to where they imprisoned him several times for his writings.[180] However, while Bhabha's "mimicry" and "hybridity" might be useful concepts to understand how Ninh disrupts colonizers' self-perceptions, these concepts take on different purposes once we take Ninh's perspective. Whereas Bhabha is ultimately concerned with how mimicry and hybridity challenge colonizers and colonial discourse, Ninh thinks colonized Vietnamese should avoid mimicking colonizers, and instead work on sincere creations that generate hybridity in order to redeem their shame and create a national identity from scratch. At stake for Bhabha is challenging colonial discourse. At stake for Ninh is Vietnamese national identity.

In existing discussions of the agency of the colonized to resist colonial discourse, the colonized's self-professed inferiority is hardly mentioned as part of the colonized person's anti-colonial strategy. Loomba argues, as many scholars do, that colonialist

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178 CF, 7 Jan. 1924.
179 Ibid.
180 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 307.

production of knowledge included a "clash with and a marginalization of the knowledge and belief systems of those who were conquered."[181] Yet, it is rarely considered that colonized peoples have their own desire to marginalize and recreate their own native knowledge. Due to the common tendency to dismiss colonized people's self-professed inferiority as merely internalized colonial mentality, we are discouraged from exploring how these feelings of inferiority might have led not to assimilation to colonial values but to creative, hybrid ways of national self-remaking. Such feelings may form the basis of strategies of resisting dominant power structures emanating from both the metropole and from cultural conventions and institutions at home. I have shown a case in which an intellectual living under colonialism can be very anti-colonial and at the same time very critical of his own nation in order to construct a national identity.

## Conclusion

To be sure, there are possible problematic consequences for grounding national identity on shame of one's own cultural achievements. It is possible this might stir a sense of competitiveness towards other nations, that is, a race to prove the superiority of one's nations over all others, such as in the Cold War where the antagonism between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. could be read as a race to prove not to be inferior to the other nation. However, in the context of a dominated Vietnam, this form of national shame and responsibility entails creative and hybrid self-remaking, a quest for dignity, national identity, and ultimately, self-determination. Political theorists should pay more attention

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[181] Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 60.

to the idea of national shame as arising from national inferiority. Perhaps the larger weight of this attention should go to non-Western nations that may have felt this way during and after Western domination.

From 1926 to his death, Ninh is arrested and jailed by French authorities five times for promoting riots and revolts. On his last arrest, he is sent to Côn Đảo prison where he died on April 14, 1943. Nearly four decades later, in 1980, the Vietnamese state conferred upon Nguyễn An Ninh the title of "Revolutionary Martyr." Today, in Vietnam, many major streets in many cities are named after him.[182] Today's Vietnam, having militarily vanquished two powerful nations, the French and the Americans in the first (1945-1954) and second (1955-1975) Indochina Wars, might be said to be full of pride, rather than shame. Yet, whether there is any shame or pride towards a Vietnamese intellectual tradition, and whether Ninh's street signs evoke his exhortation that the "current generation needs new ideals, *their ideals*; a new activity, *their activity*; new passions, *their passions*"[183] remains an open question.

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[182] Da Anh, "Nguyễn An Ninh- A Patriotic Lawyer," *Vietnam Law & Legal Forum*, October 29, 2012. http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/Nguyễn-an-ninh-a-patriotic-lawyer-4662.html

[183] CF, 7 Jan. 1924.

## Chapter 3.

Pham Quynh's Assertive Agreeability

For Pham Quynh (1892-1945), "every step taken in the acquisition of modern Western science marks for man a setback in the field of moral and spiritual values."[184] One unfortunate consequence of French conquest of Vietnam, he thinks, was that the Vietnamese were easily seduced by their conquerors' ideals of power and science, causing them to forget their own precious Eastern ideal of wisdom: Thus, "obliged to bow down to Western power, Eastern wisdom has at first fallen back on itself. She wondered anxiously which way to turn." The solution to the problem of the East and West, he believed, was for "the opposition of two principles, both equally necessary," to "meet, merge into a vast unity." Their meeting, if conducted properly, he believed, "may one day produce a more beautiful form of civilization for humanity. Harmonious, more humane, and more perfect."

Quynh is pointing to a common problem that confronts human beings whenever two different people or societies undergo a sustained encounter: the overbearing dominance of one party over another and lack of harmonious balance between the two. The solution is harmony of these differences, Quynh thinks.

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[184] Translations are mine unless noted otherwise. For now, many of Quynh's quotations are missing citations in this chapter draft. It was my plan, after completing a draft of this dissertation, to go back to this chapter to provide page citations for Quynh's quotes, however, I had to prematurely return my rented copy of Pham Quynh, *Essais franco-annamites (1929-1932)* (Hue Bui Huy Tin, 1937) which provides the majority of quotations from Quynh in this chapter, due to covid-19 forcing the campus library to be closed from March 16 to April 3. Once I get a hold of that book, again, I will provide all the citations.

Quynh conducts engaged comparative political theory in the sense that he picks out what he thinks are the best elements of East and West and harmonizes them to construct a cosmopolitan national identity, one that asserts itself and at the same time remains agreeable to foreign ideas. He offers us a method to confront and relate to different Others so that there is more harmony.

Consider the following passages, one from Ryszard Kapuściński, a Polish journalist, and one from Fred Rogers, an American television personality:

> "…Malinowski claimed after arriving at the site of his research—the Trobriand Islands—that the whites who had been living there for years not only knew nothing about the local population and its culture, but had completely false images of them, typified by contempt and arrogance. And in defiance of all sorts of colonial habits, he pitched his tent in the middle of one of the local villages and settled in with the local population. What he experienced was not easy to endure. In his account, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, he made more and more comments about his troubles, bad moods, moments of despair and even depression. He paid a high price for breaking away from his own culture. That is why it is so important to have one's own, distinct identity, a sense of its strength, value and maturity. Only then can a man boldly confront another culture. Otherwise he will lurk in his hiding place, fearfully isolating himself from others."[185]

> "It's the people who feel strong and good about themselves inside who are best able to accept outside differences—their own or others."[186]

The passages above suggest that if we are to deal with those who are different from us in a mutually beneficial way, we ought to first develop a strong sense of who we are. On the one hand, "boldly confronting another culture" and "accepting outside differences" are moves that risk eclipsing one's sense of self: in an act of self-abandonment, one might totally assimilate to the Other. On the other hand, confronting

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185 Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Other* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018): 87.
186 Fred Rogers, *You Are Special* (Penguin Books, 1995): 10.

other cultures and rejecting their differences risks conflict, domination, or simply missing out on potential new benefits that one might learn from the Other. A good middle-path is to encounter and accept outside differences while also affirming a sense of one's own identity. Not only would this retain diversity between self and Other but it also would allow for the possibility of diversity's harmonization instead of diversity's conflict or erasure. To harmonize differences is to make them mutually empowering and beneficial, like a tasty soup made of different ingredients which, despite having even opposed flavors, enhance one another.

What disposition or virtue should one have in order to harmonize with others? A personality trait that promotes harmony with others is *agreeableness*. Yet, agreeability, conceptually speaking, is laden with selflessness and perhaps even self-abandonment. One risks losing a sense of self when one is *too* agreeable. Agreeable people are considered to be "push-overs." Is it possible to be agreeable and self-assertive at the same time? If so, what role would such a virtue have in a globalized world? This chapter develops a normative theory of self-assertive agreeability, a cosmopolitan virtue that can enable the harmonization of global intellectual and cultural diversity. Resources for this theory is found in the writings of Pham Quynh, a Vietnamese intellectual of the French colonial period.

Infamously known to Vietnamese nationalists and historians as a sycophantic 'arch-collaborator' for the French, Pham Quynh was among the first to be executed when Viet Minh revolutionaries took power in 1945. This chapter offers an alternative, sympathetic reading of Quynh, showing how he promotes a vision of Vietnamese identity

in order to resist the West while also being agreeable in order to harmonize European and Asian ideas. The case of Quynh challenges binaries of resistance/collaboration which are assumptions pervading much of postcolonial scholarship. The upshot for comparative political theorists is a method for productive cross-cultural relationship-building that simultaneously strengthens the identity of one's own community.

The empowerment of the self and simultaneous mutually beneficial engagement with others is a pertinent virtue for the emerging field of "comparative political theory." In recent years, political theorists have begun exploring traditions outside the West to answer and pose questions concerning political life, not merely to be inclusive but also to see if they can gain valuable, useful insight which they may have missed as a result of their Westcentrism. To the question of how we ought to engage foreign cultural and intellectual traditions, political theorists have offered methods of doing so.[187] This chapter offers another (though not necessarily superior) method.

One place to start figuring out the appropriate virtue needed for engaging intellectual diversity *between* societies around the globe is to first examine what thinkers have proferred as the most appropriate virtue for engaging difference *within* societies, particularly societies that aim at pluralism and toleration.

This chapter is structured as follows. I begin by critically engaging Teresa Bejan's arguments concerning civility as a virtue for dealing with differences and disagreement

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[187] See Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Leigh Jenco, "'What does heaven ever say?'" A methods-centered approach to cross-cultural engagement," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 741-755.

within a society. Mere civility is a conversational virtue that addresses the problem of *how* we talk to each other. Yet, I argue that a more common and fundamental problem is *that* we talk to each other, both within and across societies. Civility requires shared social convention in a *civitas*. While civility may be an appropriate civic virtue, it cannot be a cosmopolitan virtue. For individuals dealing with difference across societies, we need another concept.

In the second section, I develop the concept of agreeability as a cosmopolitan virtue. I do so by working backwards from the goal. The goal ought to be harmony of global intellectual differences. The appropriate means to attain such a goal is agreeability. Yet, agreeability needs to be updated to include more of the self. Thus, I develop the notion of *assertive agreeability*: a tendency to seek in the Other points of admiration and agreement, assuming such points can benefit one's own self, while also asserting the value of one's own differences. This virtue serves the goal of harmonization (mutual empowerment) of global intellectual and cultural diversity.

Third, and lastly, I show that resources for a theory of assertive agreeability are found in the writings of Pham Quynh.

## Civility

What is the best virtue for dealing with difference within a society? Teresa Bejan thinks it is civility.[188] Bejan begins as a skeptic. She is aware that exhortations to be more

[188] Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017).

civil can end up as justifications for excluding others or suppressing anything perceived as dissent. Accusations of incivility can justify persecution. Also problematic, she thinks, is the naïve tendency for some theorists such as John Rawls, Jeremy Waldron, and Martha Nussbaum to view civility as the key to social harmony. "In *equating* civility with mutual respect, theorists necessarily move the discussion to an aspirational realm of ideal theory in which the kinds of problems civility is needed to address *do not even arise."* Bejan is a realist, however, and sees the problem as a practical one. The real world is messy and we inevitably must deal with unpleasant and unavoidable individuals. Her solution is to set a much lower bar—what she calls *mere civility.*

Mere civility is "a minimal conformity to norms of respectful behavior and decorum expected of all members of a tolerant society as such. Others' incivility *feels* so egregious for this reason—it places them potentially beyond the pale of social life."[189] Mere civility is not politeness because one can be merely civil while having contempt for the other. One can even use offensive language so long as one says it to the others' faces and not behind their backs. Key to mere civility is having courage or mental toughness to show the bare minimum of what is socially necessary to continue conversations in a productive way despite disagreement.

For Bejan, [mere] civility is a "conversational virtue," primarily concerned with *how* we talk to each other—the tone and volume of one's voice, the frequency of interrupting the other, etc.—given the fact that we disagree with each other. It is about *how we disagree,* and how we can continue conversations in productive ways rather than

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189 Bejan, *Mere Civility,* 9.

ending them. Differences create disagreements and a society that aims for tolerance of differences requires the virtue of civility

Bejan makes a convincing case for how we ought to behave *during* conversations with those we disagree with. Yet, the problem she tackles is not as common of a problem as she suggests. She takes for granted a series of hard-earned accomplishments that must occur before the problem that mere civility resolves even arises. It is actually rare, I think, that we ever engage people with whom we differ about in important matters in a way where we would express our frustrations about them *to them*. In our daily lives and most of the time, we do a good job avoiding people we disagree with [after they have been identified] and a remarkably good job spending most of our time with those who are like us and would agree with us. It is true that civility allows for the smooth function of daily life given we will bump into unavoidable people whom we do not like. However the kind of civility Bejan thinks is necessary for conversational disagreements is rarely needed because such conversations are rare to begin with.

It is actually a remarkable achievement to get two people with opposing views face-to-face. To get them to have actually have a conversation is a second remarkable achievement. I suspect this rarely happens outside of family Thanksgiving dinners (an example Bejan uses). More common are shouting matches across dividing lines at protests and counter protests, and hostility on the Internet and social media; these are not conversations. In promoting mere civility, Bejan is not calling for us to have more face to face conversations where mere civility would be needed. She is prescribing mere civility for the face to face conversations we already (rarely) have. But since this is rare, it is not

the most pressing problem. The more common and fundamental problem is one that civility or mere civility cannot address. The problem is not *how* we talk to each other, but *that* we talk to each other.[190]

This suggests that the nature of the more pressing problem coheres around the notion of *otherness* or difference rather than disagreement. Important for us, here, is that Bejan's notion of civility is that it is a virtue to be used during conversations with others *within our own community or society*. Civility is from the Latin *civilis,* 'relating to citizens,' and pertains to how citizens of the same country or state ought to behave towards each other. One's notions of civility depends on the social conventions of one's own *civitas*, a term she uses. She distinguishes between "*decorum*, which describes a standard of propriety specific to a conversational context, and *civility proper*, which applies to one context in particular: the *civitas*." One must exercise "decorum" in a faculty meeting but "civility proper" within one's own country or 'civilization.' While a *civitas* is traditionally a country, she avoids the terms "country" or "state," probably because a number of countries can share a more or less commonly understood notion of propriety or belong to one perceived civilization.

Thus it is appropriate that Bejan's key example of someone who was a proponent of mere civility is Roger Williams (1603-1683), a Christian Puritan minister in the early

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190 I share a similar concern as Montaigne. Douglas Thompson rightly points out that, today, political theorists often "argue that a properly moral conception of tolerance entails a duty of reasonableness and civility towards others in public dialogue. What it means to be a tolerant person, in this view, is largely a question of *how* we talk to our political opponents. Montaigne is much more interested in the prior imperative *that* we talk to our political opponents." Douglas Thompson, *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

United States. Bejan does not make much of the fact that the reason why Williams believes in mere civility is because "a Jew, a Turk, a pagan, an anti-Christian, today, may be (when the word of the Lord runs freely) a member of Jesus Christ tomorrow."[191] Williams's conditional tolerance reminds one of Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), the famed Spanish "Protector of the Indians" who defended the Indians of the New World against Spanish cruelty but ultimately on the grounds that they might eventually give up their barbarism and see the light of Christianity. The difference is whereas Williams shared the same country as his 'Others,' Las Casas was confronted with more radical Otherness in which there was no shared social convention. Rather than speak of the need for civility or mere civility with the Indians, Las Casas wanted a *civilizing mission*, bringing the Indians into his civilization through the destruction of their culture, what Daniel Brunstetter calls "cultural othercide."[192]

Although the concept of civility is only coherent to the extent there is a shared social convention within a civitas, even within a *civitas,* Bejan writes, "there may be differential expectations of members of the *civitas* depending on their degree of

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191 Quoted in Bejan, *Mere Civility,* 50.

192 Cultural Othercide is a term coined by Daniel Brunstetter. See Daniel R. Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and his Legacy in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Michele de Montaigne (1533-1592) had the same facts as Las Casas about the New World but a different interpretation. Montaigne argues that the natives understood that they had the option to assimilate to Spanish ways, but they preferred to keep their own traditions. Montaigne affirms my point that civility is an incoherent concept in contexts of radical Otherness, writing that the Spanish should "promptly hurry up and vacate [the Indians'] land, for [the Indians] were not accustomed to take in good part the *civilities* and declarations of armed strangers"(Montaigne 1958: 695).

enfranchisement or alienation."[193] Moreover, Bejan recognizes that civility cannot work for individuals across societies. The idea of civility presuming a *civitas* "also raises the vexed question of civility beyond national boundaries in an increasingly wired world. While mere civility would be a universal virtue in a universe of tolerant societies, it cannot be a cosmopolitan one."[194] This last point is an important one which this chapter addresses. If mere civility cannot be a cosmopolitan virtue, what would a cosmopolitan virtue look like?

The problem that civility addresses—heated disagreement during conversations—is even less apparent and pressing for individuals from different civilizations due to the simple fact of language barriers, lack of opportunities to meet, etc. The political activist who angrily screams at his fellow countryman for having opposing political views cannot do the same to a foreigner who does not speak his national language. Depending on what he has been told about his Other, he is more likely to be silently puzzled or silently judge.

The problem that this chapter addresses is not conversational disagreement but the question of how to intellectually engage the ideas, traditions, and values of different cultures and nations.[195] We are brought back to Roger Williams and Las Casas. Do we

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[193] Teresa Bejan, "A Reply to My Readers-Teresa M. Bejan: Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration.(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 272.)." *The Review of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 528-532, 531

[194] Ibid.

[195] Before there can even be genuine disagreement towards foreign ideas, a certain level of intellectual engagement must first be achieved: one must learn the foreigner's ideas. This requires learning foreign languages or reading translations of foreign texts. This is no simple matter, exemplified by rancorous and uncivil debates in recent times in North America over academic philosophy's Westcentrism and whether and how to diversify it. See Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

tolerate different cultures because they can someday abandon their ways to adopt ours?[196] This need not be the case. It is possible to tolerate the other without such an expectation. It is also possible to find an aspect of the foreign other superior to us in some way, in order to improve our own community.

## Assertive Agreeability

*Goal: Harmony*

If civility is an inappropriate cosmopolitan virtue, as Bejan and I agree, what would the appropriate one look like? To answer this question, it helps to first clarify a goal. I offer the goal of productive intellectual cross-cultural engagement. The term that best captures a vision of 'productive cross-cultural engagement' is harmony. Many political philosophers since Plato have proffered harmony as a goal. It is well known that Plato promoted harmony among disparate parts of the soul and, by extension, classes within the city. John Rawls aims for a society of "harmony and concord." Jeremy Waldron's vision of a tolerant society is one of "affirmative harmony" in diversity, similar to Pierre Bayle's vision of "a harmonious Consort of different Voices, and Instruments of different Tones, as agreeable at least as that of a single Voice."[197]

Bejan dismisses aspirations to harmony as naïve and ignorant of the real world. But as I have argued, even her solution of mere civility is not very realistic considering the actual paucity of face-to-face conversations that are a prerequisite for her solution.

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196 For a critique of Las Casas and cultural "Othercide," see Daniel Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity.*
197 Quoted in Bejan, *Mere Civility,* 20.

Her goal is to prevent conversational disagreement from bursting into violence. While this is certainly a worthy goal, I do not think observations of human shortcomings can be used to refute more aspirational goals. This chapter is concerned with a different problem: how to mentally approach and think about difference for the goal of harmonizing such differences.

Harmony is a key concept in Confucian philosophy[198] and harmony as understood in Confucian traditions is only beginning to be engaged in contemporary political theory. Chenyang Li notes that scholars in the Confucian tradition endorse Michael Sandel's criticism of liberalism. They agree with Sandel that a community-based framework rather than an individualistic one helps us better understand the concept of the individual and justice. However, from a Confucian perspective, Sandel's version of communitarianism is still "too thin for a robust communitarian society."[199] Li argues that missing from Sandel's account of community is the concept of harmony which is at the heart of the Confucian notion of community. Li and Sandel agree that, contrary to Rawls, it is wrong to see justice as the primary virtue for any society. Justice is a *conditionally* good thing. For example, Sandel and Confucians generally think that justice "does not play a central role in the more or less ideal family, not because injustice prevails but because family members interact with sufficient mutual affection and care. In such a situation, it would

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198 Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
199 Chenyang Li, "Community without Harmony?: a Confucian Critique of Michael Sandel," in ed. Michael Sandel and Paul D'Ambrosio, *Encountering China: Michael Sandel and Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018): 3.

not be appropriate to see justice as a primary virtue."[200] Confucians strive for a society where justice does not have to be the primary virtue. The highest virtue for them is harmonious relationships. For Li, harmony requires diversity, much like a soup that integrates various ingredients or an orchestra that involves diverse instruments. Harmony is distinct from domination, though the one might sometimes be confused for the other. In contrast to domination, harmony is "mutual engagement that is constructive to all parties." Harmony is best conceived of as an ongoing process of harmonization rather than a static state of affairs, where diverse parties support each other in fulfilling each others' potential. It is dynamic, developmental and generative, balancing and reconciling differences.[201] In harmonious communities, "each individual not only forms and discovers his or her identity, but also contributes to the identity and the good of other members; in harmonizing with others, each person benefits from the contributions of fellow community members."[202] Li shows that "without a concept of harmony… Sandel is unable to make a strong case in support of affirmative action."[203] A person who appreciates the goal of harmony in his community would be more inclined to support affirmative action and be willing to make sacrifices for it, Li argues, since such a policy would increase diversity and harmony.

A global conception of harmony would not only promote the formation and discovery of each nation's or culture's own identity, but also contribute to the identity

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200 Ibid., 5.
201 Ibid., 8.
202 Ibid., 14.
203 Ibid., 12.

and good of other cultures. In harmonizing with others, each nation or tradition benefits from contributions of other traditions around the globe.

Some may be skeptical. Such a notion of harmony assumes diversity and diversity assumes separate cultures. This assumption conflicts with the wide acceptance that there is never a 'pure' culture and that all cultures are, in some way, hybrid. Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, some national pride is necessary for maintaining national identity, and such pride is rooted in a *perception* of having a unique national culture. National pride is synonymous with nationalism and can of course become problematic if taken too far, particularly if a nation asserts itself as superior to others and dominates them. However, harmony, distinct from domination, is the goal. If harmony is a state of affairs or a dynamic process. What virtue is necessary actualize harmony?

*Virtue: Agreeableness*

In contemporary personality psychology, the personality trait known as agreeableness promotes social harmony. Agreeableness has two aspects: politeness (the tendency to conform to social norms and to refrain from belligerence and exploitation of others) and compassion (reflecting empathy and sympathy, and the tendency to care about others emotionally).[204] "Individuals scoring high on Agreeableness are typically cooperative, sympathetic, altruistic, modest and generally pro-social and communal in

[204] Allen, Timothy A., and Colin G. DeYoung. "Personality neuroscience and the five factor model." *Oxford handbook of the five factor model* (2017): 319-352.

their orientations toward other people."[205] Agreeableness is very strongly positively related to the norm of trying to understand how other people think,[206] and has been shown to contribute to pro-social behaviour more generally.[207]

However, agreeableness is sometimes described as including selflessness or conforming to others' wishes,[208] in the sense of what I have called self-abandonment. This is why agreeable people are sometimes seen as pushovers or 'spineless.' It seems that one who is agreeable cannot at the same time assert a will or desire that opposes the other person. Asserting an opposing view is disagreement and, as Thomas Hobbes has said, "the mere act of disagreement is offensive."[209] There is a reason why agreeable is a synonym for pleasant, and disagreeable is a synonym for unpleasant. But must agreeability and self assertiveness be necessarily opposed? Must the assertion of a contrary view be offensive or unpleasant? Many people know how to disagree in pleasant ways. Consider the 'compliment sandwich,' a method of disagreeing by placing the disagreement in between two agreements or compliments. Oftentimes such a tactic is merely to lessen the harshness of disagreement, and sometimes the compliments are not very sincere.

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205 Dinesen et al. Dinesen, Peter Thisted, Asbjørn Sonne Nørgaard, and Robert Klemmensen. "The civic personality: Personality and democratic citizenship." *Political Studies* 62 (2014): 134-152, 136.
206 Ibid. 143
207 Graziano, W. G. and Eisenberg, N. H. (1997) 'Agreeableness: A Dimension of Personality', in R. Hogan, J. Johnston and S. Briggs (eds), Handbook of Personality Psychology. San Diego CA: Academic Press, pp. 795–825
208 Ibid. 795-6
209 Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive* [On the Citizen] (1642/1647), ed. Richard Tuck, trans. Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

One who is agreeable and at the same time self-assertive is one who affirms some positive thing of the other and at the same time some positive thing from one's self. One who is exercises this *assertive agreeableness* seeks points of agreement with the other. She identifies a difference in the Other, something the Other has that she does not have and praises it as valuable while admiting its regretful lack in her own self. At the same time, she also asserts the value of something that she has but the other does not have, in a way that does not concede any one person's thing as superior over the other. Assertive agreeableness best describes this disposition or guiding attitude for engagement with Others. Harmony is achieved through mutual empowerment of different strengths of each party. It is not diplomacy or negotion; such terms place greater emphasis on securing one's interests. Assertive agreeableness actively seeks to learn useful new things from the other that one does not already have. What might assertive agreeability—as a method of engaging intellectual foreign otherness—look like in practice in political life?

**A case of assertive agreeability: Pham Quynh (1892-1945)**

Leaving aside the 'assertive' aspect for a moment, agreeable individuals who have been politically relevant can be found in historical cases of collaborators during colonialism or foreign military occupation. Agreeableness manifests as kindness, sympathy, and cooperativeness.[210] While not all collaborators show kindness and sympathy to their occupier, all show some level of cooperativeness. Collaborators are

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[210] Haas, Brian W., Alexandra Ishak, Lydia Denison, Ian Anderson, and Megan M. Filkowski. "Agreeableness and brain activity during emotion attribution decisions." *Journal of Research in Personality* 57 (2015): 26-31, 26.

typically objects of shame because they are perceived as traitors. Especially shame-worthy are those who are kind and sympathetic in addition to cooperative to the foreign occupier. The perceived opposite of collaboration is resistance, which is typically pride-worthy.

At work in discourses about collaboration and resistance are a set of conceptual binaries that, while useful, can be problematic. On one side there is loyalty to one's nation, expressed as resistance and antagonism against the enemy, all of which are typically viewed as good and noble. On the other side is betrayal to one's nation, expressed as collaboration and agreeableness towards the enemy, all of which are typically viewed as bad and dishonorable. These binaries help us judge and interpret individuals' actions, but they can also be misleading and fail to capture complexity or other significant phenomena. It is not always easy to categorize an action or person as exemplary of either loyalty or betrayal. Conscientious objectors may be labeled traitors but see themselves as the truly loyal ones defending their nation's principles. Moreover, an individual who was viewed as traitorous can turn out to be, in retrospect, a loyal patriot, and vice versa.[211] Thinking in such binary terms can also distract. Behavior that first appears as an obvious case of resistance or collaboration may actually be, upon closer inspection, performing some other productive work, best understood neither as resistance nor collaboration but as something else.

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[211]There are cases of Germans who resisted Nazism but were later awarded medals for patriotism to Germany. Consider the case of Hermann Axenn who was awarded the Patriotic Order of Merit and Anton Ackermann who was awarded the Patriotic Service Medal.

The case of Pham Quynh shows that upon closer inspection, Quynh is not so much a standard 'collaborator' as he has been labeled. He actually resists the West in other ways. Yet, more than a collaborator or resistor, he is best described as what I call an "architect." He created a blueprint for a modern Vietnamese consciousness. Implicit in his 'architectural' work, as we shall see, was a normative political theory of assertive agreeability for the goal of harmonizing the East and West. Before turning to Quynh and his work, we should briefly situate him within the literature on political collaboration and postcolonialism.

*Collaboration*

There has been little exploration of the phenonemon of collaboration in political theory. The scholar who has done the most to theorize about collaboration has been Stanley Hoffman. Hoffman's work, like most of the sparse scholarship on collaboration, draws on the case of Vichy France's collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War.[212] Hoffman constructs a useful typology of collaboration. Yet, Pham Quynh does not comfortably fit into it.

Hoffman first makes a distinction between "collaboration" and "collaborationism." From the perspective of the occupied, "collaboration" is less egregious than "collaborationism." Each of these is then further divided into two subtypes. Thus, for Hoffman, we have four types, the first being the 'least bad' and the fourth being the 'most bad.'

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[212] Stanley Hoffmann, "Collaborationism in France during World War II." *The Journal of Modern History* 40, no. 3 (1968): 375-395.

The first type is (1) *involuntary collaboration*: this is the reluctant recognition of necessity. One collaborates with the enemy simply because one must. There is no other choice (other than death). This can easily slide into (2) *voluntary collaboration*: one collaborates more enthusiastically with the enemy because of a feeling that the enemy might win the war, so one anticipates the enemy's demands and adopts an 'understanding' attitude towards the enemy, collaborating in order to improve one's nation's lot. From voluntary collaboration, one can step to (3) *servile collaborationism*: this is deliberate service of the enemy. It is usually rationalized in terms of national interest, but ultimately it is based on calculations of personal advantage. Lastly, there is (4) *ideological collaborationism*: this is "deliberate advocacy of cooperation with a force which, even though it was foreign, was deemed to be the champion, guarantor, or model of the kind of domestic transformation" that the collaborationist wants to impose on his own country. These four types of collaboration are best understood as a linear spectrum in which one can easily slide from bad to worse.

We will see that Pham Quynh is not (1), an involuntary collaborator; he indeed enthusiastically volunteered to cooperate with the French when they asked him to be editor of the journal that was to be their propaganda machine. Quynh is not (3), a servile collaborationist; he did not do it ultimately for personal advantage. Quynh is not (4), an ideological collaborationist but the opposite; he exhorts the Vietnamese to resist French culture and values. This leaves us with (2), voluntary collaboration. Quynh is closest to this because he collaborates enthusiastically with the French and does so in order to improve his nation's lot.

However, there are shortcomings with Hoffman's description. Colonial Vietnam is different from occupied France in WW2. Whereas the French had to look after their country's interests, especially in the case that the Germans might win the war, the Vietnamese did not have a nation-state with its own "interests" to begin with. The concept of a Vietnamese nation was incipient in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the more pressing problem was how its national identity ought to be constructed from scratch. Quynh collaborated with the French in order to *use* the French to push for indigenous cultural change. While Hoffman's typology takes into account a collaborator who is concerned about his or her nation's interests, the typology overlooks the collaborator with an agenda of developing the indigenous culture and value-system of his or her country. With that said, Hoffman's typology is an improvement over postcolonial theory on the issue of collaboration and resistance because it is more sophisticated.

*Postcolonialism*

Postcolonial scholarship largely relies on the conceptual binary of resistance and collaboration in order to understand indigenous responses to colonialism. These tendencies result in overlooking 'architectural' work of which Quynh is exemplary. We would expect postcolonial literature, which purportedly seeks to explore how colonized people understand their experiences of colonialism, to attend to a diverse range of colonized peoples' responses to their colonial situation. However, as vast and varied as postcolonial literature is, most postcolonial theorists have tended to speak of responses on

the part of the colonized strictly in terms of "resistance"—either violent or discursive—against colonialism, or the false consciousness of "collaborationism" with the colonizer.

We get the impression from postcolonial literature that all the actions of colonized people fall into the category of either resisting colonialism or perpetuating it. There appears to be little room for actions outside of resistance and collaboration. Take, for example, what leading scholars of postcolonialism have emphasized. Ashis Nandy tells us that it is crucial that postcolonial theory take seriously the idea of a psychological resistance to colonialism's civilizing mission.[213] Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon are studied as figures "united in their proposal of a radical style of total resistance to the totalising political and cultural offensive of the colonial civilising mission."[214] Edward Said tells us how it was never the case that imperialism "pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was *always* some form of active resistance and, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out."[215] Ania Loomba writes, "Historically speaking, anti-colonial resistances have taken many forms, and they have drawn upon a wide variety of resources. They have inspired one another, but also quarreled with each other about the nature of colonial authority and how best it should be challenged."[216] Resistances indeed take many forms, but if this is so, it becomes too easy to categorize everything that colonized people do, short of explicit collaboration with the colonizer, as resistance. In these literatures, those who do not resist

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213 Ashis Nandy, *Intimate enemy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xii.
214 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 19.
215 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), xii.
216 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2007), 155.

in some way are either inert victims or colonial intellectuals who "parrot" the lines of their colonial masters.[217] The tendency to view all active responses to colonialism as either resistance or collaboration risks overlooking other productive activity.

Perhaps this tendency can be attributed to greater attention to the case of Indian responses to British colonialism than Vietnamese responses to French colonialism. The issue of constructing a national identity in Vietnam was more urgent in a different way than the case of India. In short, the Vietnamese were more confused than the Indians. Indians were more confident that they had a rich indigenous tradition to call their own, one that stretched back far in time (Hinduism is often referred to the oldest religion in the world). This was not the case for the Vietnamese who, before the French came, had been ruled by China for over a thousand years (111BC to 938AD) and needed to create a national identity from scratch. Indians did not have to grapple with the question of whether there was an indigenous intellectual tradition in the same way the Vietnamese did. Mahatma Gandhi turned to traditional Indian philosophy, such as Kautilya's *Arthasastra* from the fourth century BC and a Hindu vision of 'Ram Rajya,' and blends it with ideas from the West to construct a new Indian philosophy, all in order to resist Western (British) colonialism.[218] To be sure, Gandhi did not go unchallenged in the particular vision of national consciousness he was trying to build, as there were others with different visions, some of whom have arguably been more successful. Yet the point

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[217] Ibid. 77

[218] See Anthony J. Parel, "Gandhi and the emergence of the modern Indian political canon." *The Review of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 40-63.

remains that contrary to India, constructing a national identity *from scratch* was the most pressing task for many Vietnamese intellectuals, a task that required architectural and construction work. There was no Vietnamese "Kautilya" but rather a Chinese Confucius that the Vietnamese came to see (some more reluctantly than others) as their wise ancestor. Without a perception of having a philosophical and ethical tradition of their own, some Vietnamese thought that they could use the French (and its printing press) to help them construct one.

*Vietnam and the case of Pham Quynh*

In the first two decades of the 20th century, the most popular explanation for why Vietnam fell to French rule was Social Darwinism: Vietnam was conquered because it was weak; it was weak because its ideas (i.e. culture, ways of thinking, and values) were weak; France and Europe were strong because their ideas were strong.

Thus, the logic went, the task for Vietnamese intellectuals was to figure out which ideas the Vietnamese should keep, get rid of, or adopt in order to strengthen Vietnam. There were generally four types of responses, each spearheaded by a public intellectual. [1] Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943), the editor of *La Cloche fêlée*, and other iconoclastic youth argued that they should get rid of their traditional Confucian ideas and explore Western and Indian ideas. [2] Others, such as the influential nationalist Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926) said the Vietnamese were weak because they misunderstood Confucian ideas and should use Western democratic ideas to revive Confucianism. [3] Others, such as Tran Trong Kim (1883-1953), said that Chinese Confucianism was Vietnam's true

essence and they had been living a bad version of it; the task was to return to it, and avoid Western ideas which conflicted with Asian ones. And [4] some others, such as Phan Van Truong (1876-1933), said the first task should be to develop the romanized Vietnamese language script so that people can become literate and learn as much as they can and then choose their favorite ideas.

Pham Quynh, as I will show, is a mix of the last three: he thinks the heart of Vietnam's problem is the decay of its traditional Confucian morality caused by French colonialism and overbearing Western ideas. His solution is to reconstruct a Vietnamese intellectual and moral foundation by reviving Vietnam's Confucian core, developing the indigenous language, and cautiously importing compatible Western ideas for the goal of harmonizing East and West.

Vietnamese revolutionaries, Vietnamese nationalist historians, and Western historians have frequently referred to Pham Quynh as a traitorous collaborator. This charge was due to a combination of Quynh's philosophical conservatism, his enthusiastic cooperation with the French colonial government, and his frequent praise of France as a "noble, great Mother country." He has been described as an "obsequious," "servile" "French lackey."[219] The Historian David Marr argues that Quynh's collaboration with the French was a kind of "prostitution" that mirrored Quynh's defense of the prostituted heroine in the famous Vietnamese poem "Kim Van Kieu."[220] Quynh was among the first

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219 Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism experienced: Vietnamese writings on colonialism, 1900-1931* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 292.
220 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), 155.

to be executed by the Viet Minh Revolutionary army when they took power in 1945. While many have branded him as a traitor, others have simply decided to ignore him altogether. Anthologies of literature in Ha Noi following the August Revolution of 1945 fail to even mention him, which is notable given the fact that Pham Quynh was editor of Vietnam's most important and widely read intellectual and literary journal, *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind) from its inception in 1917 to 1934.

*Nam Phong,* whose audience would be primarily Vietnamese, was intended by the French colonial regime, specifically the Governor General Albert Sarraut, to be a tool of French propaganda to create an elite class of indigenous Vietnamese loyal to the French. Typical of colonial practice, the French needed help, justification, and support from indigenous elites in running the affairs of their colonies. Sarraut's aim was to promote "East West reconciliation and Indochinese solutions to problems" and "Franco Vietnamese collaboration and harmony" in contrast to early calls for Westernization and attacks on Confucianism. The French chose Pham Quynh to be the editor of this journal not only because Quynh was fluent in French and praised the French, but also because he was a philosophical conservative who wanted order and stability at all costs. Most important of all, he shared the same goals as Sarraut. It is not difficult to see why a Vietnamese revolutionary or resistor would despise Pham Quynh, who appears toady and subservient.

However, a closer examination of his writings show a more independent character. Quynh actually resists the West in many ways while also constructing a theory for cosmopolitan harmony. Because the French trusted him, *Nam Phong* escaped a level

of censorship that other journals of the time faced. This provided Quynh an opportunity to advance his own agenda, one that was independent from the intentions of the French. It turns out that Quynh's effusive praises of the French were, at least partially, actually strategic, rhetorical devices meant to cover for a project designed to ultimately subvert France's colonial "civilizing mission." Some will find this to be too strong of a claim, but it is actually not.

In what follows, I show how Quynh exhorts the Vietnamese to resist French and Western civilization while empowering their own East Asian Confucian values. His aim is not to replace Western values with East Asian ones, but only to balance out the current overbearingness of the West and retreat of East Asian values. The end goal is to establish balance and harmony between East and West. By asserting Vietnamese and East Asian values in a way that aims for harmony with the Western Other, Quynh has an implicit theory of assertive agreeability.

I reconstruct his implicit theory in three steps. First, I show how he conceptualizes the goal and the means. Inspired by Confucian ethics, his goal is harmony between all humans, particularly between the people of Vietnam and France, and between East Asian and Western values. The means to the goal are self-cultivation and education along Confucian ethics. Second, I show how he interprets the problem. He interprets the current state of affairs in Vietnam and in French-Vietnamese relations as falling short of the goal of harmony. Third, and lastly, I discuss his solution. Quynh has practical prescriptions for what the Vietnamese ought to do to achieve the goal, namely what kind of self-cultivation and education will be required of them.

*Goal and means*

Pham Quynh begins with principles [ideal goals and means] and applies them to reality, so does not have a 'materialist' understanding of history. His political goal is informed by his interpretation of Confucianism and his desire to inspire interest in Confucianism in Vietnam. He acknowledges that a new tendency in East Asia is that the "'old man' [Confucius] is ridiculed by a raging youth. He is accused of being the prince of pedants, the king of retrograde conservatives, the patron saint of reactionaries of all stripes…"[221] Yet, in Vietnam, "the wave of disfavor is rather a wave of indifference." In Vietnam, Confucius "does not seem to have interested his readers; no one has approved or contradicted him; and I doubt very much that his articles, written with a high concern for style and documentation, have had as many readers as the small bit of recent news about the two tennis champions who have been promoted to the rank of national heroes." Vietnamese indifference towards Confucianism, Quynh thinks, can be attributed to stereotypes of Confucianism shrouded in highfalutin scholarly talk. Quynh is concerned with "freeing it from all the scholastic apparatus which surrounds it." Moreover, Quynh wants to update Confucianism by ridding it of what he sees as inessential, particularly its emphasis on patriarchy. Confucius's "patriarchal organization of society and state, modeled on the family monad… has certainly aged and no longer responds to the current state of modern societies, even those which have just left the patriarchal stage as

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Annamese society… This conception no longer accords with the current evolution of societies."

For Quynh, updating Confucianism for modern times means getting rid of the excesses and directing the youth towards the simple, core essentials of Confucianism: "to preserve social order and to make peace reign among men." Order and peace can be summed up in the word 'harmony.' Quynh is consistent with other Confucians in promoting social harmony. Where Quynh is innovative, as we shall see, is his application of harmony for a cosmopolitan aim. In order to accomplish the goal of harmony, manifested as order and peace, Quynh says individuals should develop their "social or sociable tendencies," what we can call "agreeableness." In doing so, one's "nature is thereby improved and in whatever society in which he is called to live, he will be able to behave as he should, avoiding unnecessary conflicts with other men and above all seeking peace and harmony."

In order to develop these sociable tendencies, one must refrain from egoistic instincts and practice four virtues: respect, propriety, benevolence, and equity. The latter two, Quynh writes, are the "fundamental virtues of Confucian ethics." These qualities and virtues "are within the reach of all men; they require no superhuman effort, no extraordinary courage." While some will be able to better achieve these qualities than others, all should try to practice them.

Writing in French, Quynh asserts that benevolence means humanity, and "humanity… can be summed up in one word: love." Equity means justice, and justice can be summed up in one word: "*convenance." Convenance* in this case can mean a number

of things: suitability, agreement, conformity, conventional propriety, to be fitting to one's liking, appropriateness, and so on. In latin, the verb *convenir* means 'coming together' [*con* meaning with or together, and *venir* meaning to come]. In the context of Quynh's aim for harmony along Confucian lines, he means *convenance* as something like harmonious agreement. It is only harmonious agreement—mutually beneficial and positive agreement—between two parties that determines whether something is suitable for both. Thus, justice, for Quynh, is synonymous with harmonious agreement. Where there is no harmonious agreement, there is no justice. This is the idea behind the fourth virtue of 'equity.' Furthermore, equity [justice understood as *convenance*] and benevolence [humanity understood as love] go together and mutually aid each other. "To love other men as oneself and to act towards them *comme il convient*, which is to say as one would like them to act towards you, isn't this all of morality?"

What are the means to achieve the goals of harmony and the exercise of respect, propriety, benevolence, and equity? The answer for Quynh is self-cultivation through elite-led education. He assumes, along with Mencius, that humans are naturally good and altruistic. It is simply a matter of developing that inherent goodness. Mencius is a "Chinese Rousseau" who thinks "man is naturally good and that society perverts him."

Quynh positively invokes Mencius's famous example of how anyone who sees a drowning child would naturally rush to help the child, which is evidence of the natural goodness of humans. Delighting in Mencius's debate with Cao Tu on whether man is naturally good, Quynh recounts Mencius's response to Cao Tu who argues that man is neither good or bad, just like how water naturally flows neither east nor west. Mencius

counters by saying that water sinks naturally, though by striking water, you can make it splash up and divert the course of water, which upsets the nature of water to flow down. Thus, "when man does evil, he is like water rising upward." Referring to Mencius's view of good tendencies as "sprouts," Quynh remarks that all people have "germs of virtues" which constitute "a kind of moral instinct."

Good instincts dominate for all average natures unless there is irretrievable decay. "It's about discovering them and promoting them through appropriate education. This education, everyone can undertake it himself." While anyone can undertake their own education, an elite led education is preferable. To Quynh, Japan is proof of what proper education can do, particularly if led by the correct kind of elite. Japan attained a "harmonious synthesis of the ideals of the Occident and the Orient and of the ancient moral tradition and the modern scientific culture."[222] Key to Japan's success, Quynh thinks, was Japan's "far-sighted elite" that "took up with ardor the task of educating the people." As we shall see, Quynh wanted Vietnam's "far-sighted elite" to be cosmopolitan and bi-cultural (well-steeped in Vietnamese and European, specifically French) intellectual culture, cautiously selecting the best Eastern and Western ideas to be adopted by the Vietnamese, preventing the masses from any dangerous shock that would occur through direct exposure to Western ideas. Now that the goal and means have been outlined, we turn to how Quynh inteprets the current state of affairs between Vietnam and the West and how it falls short of the goal of harmony.

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[222] Pham Quynh, "Intellectual and Moral Reform," in George Dutton, Jayne Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds. *Sources of Vietnamese tradition* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 391.

*Problem: the current state of affairs and its distance from the goal.*

For Quynh, the current state of affairs facing both the Vietnamese and the French is primarily characterized by disharmony of what he sees as the 'Western ideal' and the 'Eastern ideal,' with the former currently in excess and the latter in lack. Speaking of Europe and East Asia, Quynh writes, "these two portions of humanity had long lived apart from each other; they had completely ignored each other, each cultivating its own ideal. That of the East is an ideal of wisdom, conducive to a happy quietude." The Eastern ideal consists of what we previously discussed: harmony, as expressed in peace and order, and its requisite virtues as expressed in Confucian tradition. It is the "need for stability that keeps Eastern people within the standard of principles that have proven themselves over the centuries, digging deeper and deeper every day until they consider such standards as infallible and immutable."

In contrast to the Eastern ideal, "That of the West has always been an ideal of power." In order to "tame the forces of nature to put them at the service of man, [the westerner] invented science." The Western ideal "multiplies the means, creates the needs, excites the appetites, and carrying the will of power to its highest degree, makes the Western man overflow from his natural environment and throws him to the conquest of the world… This thirst for knowledge always pushes the Western peoples forward and makes them walk from discovery to discovery, from novelty to novelty, constantly renewing ways of human life and the notions on which it rests."

It should be noted that Quynh is not alone in conceiving of the 'East' and 'West' as the expression of opposite ideals. As J.J. Clarke puts it, the essentialising of East and

West into two simple and contrastive categories "has a long history and can be traced back to the time of Herodotus and to the epic conflict between Hellenes and Persians, giving rise to the mythical contrast between the heroic, liberty-loving and dynamic West and the despotic, stagnant and passive East."[223]4. For some, like Samuel Huntington, this contrast has taken the form of an eternal East-West conflict. For others, "this duality carries the Romantic message of the 'marriage of East and West' and the pursuit of the ultimate unity of the human spirit which has had the misfortune to become bifurcated in the modern age, the West's 'rationalistic and ethical, positivistic and practical' mind needing to be supplemented by 'the Eastern mind [which] is more inclined to inward life and intuitive thinking."[224] It is in this latter camp that we can place Quynh. Quynh is like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan [1888-1975), India's famous comparative philosopher and 'bridge-builder' between India and the West and a contemporary of Pham Quynh. Whereas Radhakrishnan draws on Hinduism in order to bridge Eastern and Western thought, Quynh's contribution is to draw on Confucianism to harmonize the East and West.

For Quynh, the Western ideal and the Eastern ideal are opposed but complementary. It would be dangerous to ignore the Other's ideal which can balance and temper the potential excesses of one's own ideal. The West with all its mechanization would have done well to learn from Eastern wisdom, Quynh thinks. "This incompatibility between the ideal of power and the ideal of wisdom, as well as the misdeeds of 'science

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[223] J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1997)
[224] Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment,* 5.

without conscience,' has never appeared so clearly to Orientals as during the immense massacre of which the whole of the West has just been theater. If all Western power with its murderous science only ends in this vast collective madness, how can Orientals avoid regretting their ancient wisdom?"

Quynh is troubled by Easteners' self-doubt and capitulation to the lures of the 'Western ideal.' It is disturbing how the East is "rushing at an increasingly rapid rate" towards the Western sciences, "towards this mechanical civilization." Unfortunately, "the ideas of the West have invaded all the East. This conquest of the intelligence by European civilization is perhaps deeper, more definitive than conquest by European nations of territories and men. Before the intellectual power of Europe, the whole of Asia bowed as it did before its material power."[225]

The invasion of Western ideas into the East was to be lamented, Quynh thought, because "every step taken in the acquisition of modern Western science marks for man a setback in the field of moral and spiritual values." Because of Western cultural imperialism, the Vietnamese were losing a sense of their identity, causing a malaise among Vietnamese youth, compounded further by their cultural uprootedness. Vietnamese youth "exclusively formed in the French schools and completely detached from the old ancestral disciplines" were lost and confused.[226] The youth were despondent and melancholic. Melancholy is justified when great enterprises that are undertaken remain unfinished. But what has today's youth done to justify its sadness?"[227] He thought

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225 Quynh, *Essais,* 248.
226 NP, "Malaise Moral," (July 1926), 53.
227 NP, 68 (Feb. 1923).

of many reasons: unfulfilled, unattainable ideals; a dull daily life; unhealthy bodies. The cause behind these, however, was a lack of Eastern confidence and Western overbearingness.

The initial cause of this disharmony occurred at the initial encounter between East and West. “The West rushed towards the East with all the ardor of its imperialism and all the force of its technique. The contact was so great that the Eastern nations did not recover from this surprise and stupor for a long time.” Lamenting over a lost opportunity for a mutually fruitful encounter, Quynh says the encounter “could have been fertile for humanity if it had taken place under less brutal conditions, by means of the elites and on the plane of a communion of ideals and doctrines.” Unfortunately, Quynh thinks, the initial encounter between France and Vietnam was between the “least accomplished individuals.” Quoting Paul Valery, the West sent its “hardest, most avid men who were most determined to impose their doctrines and to give without receiving.” In other words, those who were very assertive and not at all agreeable. Instead of a bi-directional harmony of differences, Europeans imposed their beliefs without being curious of the Vietnamese. Thus, “obliged to bow down to Western power, Eastern wisdom has at first fallen back on itself. She wondered anxiously which way to turn. Sometimes suspicious of herself, she was hesitant and puzzled.”

*Solution to the problem*

The solution to the problem of disharmony between East and West is simply to harmonize them. This means balancing them out by toning down Western excessiveness

while also empowering and renewing the Eastern ideal. Specifically it means using aspects of the other's ideal to temper potential extremes of one's own ideal and, in doing so, ensuring the optimal conditions for each others' own flourishing.

Quynh notes that some Western thinkers are already doing their part and "criticizing Western 'mechanical civilization' and showing that 'a purely quantitative conception of life and progress… have been insufficient." Some Westerners have "even turned to the East, whose old philosophies they scrutinized to seek lessons of wisdom." If such a trend continues, Quynh thinks, it will bring the West "back to a more just appreciation of the spiritual elements of civilization and give it all its human value, which resides in a harmonious synthesis of matter and spirit."

A few decades later in other countries responding to Western domination, like Iran, thinkers like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad will similarly decry the influence of Western "mechanical civilization" as "westoxification." Unlike Jalal Al-e-Ahmad who rejects the West, however, Quynh aims for a "great synthesis" of the so-called Eastern and Western ideals. He only denounces the Western ideal when it becomes excessive, such as in the decades before and after the first world war when the West went through a series of "political, economic, social, and international crises that come precisely from the excesses of this quantitative or mechanical civilization." However, he also praises the West's "creative dynamism," which could some day temper the Eastern ideal should it ever become too extreme. He wants a "spiritual alliance" that will "unite together European science and Asian wisdom."

He identifies "the famous problem of the East and the West: the opposition of two principles, both equally necessary and which must meet, merge into a vast unity." Quynh evokes the ancient Chinese dualistic concept of yin and yang to represent East and West. "If I reasoned like a Chinese philosopher, I would say that the east is the principle yin [in Annamite *am*] and the west the principle yang [*duong*]. One represents perenniality and stability, the other strength and activity. So far they have not met each other, having developed each in their own pole. However, their meeting may one day produce a more beautiful form of civilization for humanity. Harmonious, more humane, and more perfect."[228]

Without first having a strong sense of Vietnamese identity, the youth were ill equiped to make sense of or adapt Western ideas in beneficial ways. Attention to the core ideas of Confucianism, Quynh thinks, could "bring a salutary counter-weight to this disorderly agitation, to that feverish haste which impels the younger generations to make a clean sweep of the past…" Yet, the quest to develop a Vietnamese identity imbued with 'Eastern wisdom' should not mean uncritically recovering old, stale Confucian ideas. The

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228 Again, Quynh was not alone in this vision of Eastern and Western unity. Niels Bohr, the leading physicist developing quantom theory, visited China in 1937, and "was one of the first to see the close similarities between the revolutionary new model of nature that was being forged and the ancient philosophies of the East, and his interpretation of quantum theory had the consequence of allowing the re-introduction of consciousness into the scientific understanding of nature. Following a visit to China he became especially interested in Taoist philosophy, and it is interesting to note that on being knighted by the Danish government he chose for his coat of arms the Chinese Taoist yin/yang figure of interlocking circles which he felt symbolised his most important idea, namely the principle of complementarity." Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment,* 167-168.

youth should reclaim Confucian ideals in a way that adapts its essentials to the modern context. Not only can Western dynamism use some stabilizing wisdom, but Eastern stability can use some dynamism. In a passage worth quoting at length, Quynh writes,

> "Eastern wisdom, that which has allowed vast human multitudes through the centuries to maintain their cohesion and unity, has been confined to the ivory tower of its old immutable principles far from the reality of things. It no longer evolves, becoming a 'fossil' in a way and a principle of stagnation which condemns the societies it dictates to no longer renew theirselves and live in perpetual mediocrity. The stability it gives them often resembles sleep or death. Thus, neither pure dynamics nor absolute statics are conducive to the blossoming of a truly human and complete civilization. It is from the harmonious union of European science and Asian wisdom that a new culture will be born which will be the true universal culture. This union is far from being realized, and for the moment the East-West question is essentially the struggle between these two principles, following the violent introduction of Western science into societies governed by old Asian wisdom."

The "ideal would be to be able to achieve the harmonious harmony of the West and the East, European science and Asian wisdom." A balance must be implemented: the Vietnamese should pursue the Western ideal less and instead empower and renew their Eastern ideal.

For Quynh, what this meant was promoting Vietnamese cultural nationalism, particularly Vietnamese literature and their national language. While some Vietnamese nationalists felt Quynh was distracting Vietnamese youth from political struggle by telling them to focus on seemingly harmless literary issues, Quynh felt he was the true nationalist. Reviving Vietnamese literature and language would also revive the Eastern ideal latent within Vietnamese culture.

He exhorts the Vietnamese to study their own past. Why? As Isaiah Berlin eloquently puts it, men learn their own history for reasons of

> "pride, the desire to glorify the achievements of tribe, nation, church, race, class, party; the wish to promote the bonds of solidarity in a given society; faith in the sacred traditions of the tribe—to our ancestors alone has been vouchsafed the revelation of the true ends of life, of good and evil, right and wrong, how one should live, what to live by; and, associated with this, a sense of collective worth, the need to know and teach others to understand the kind of society that we are and have been, the texture of relationships through which our collective genius has expressed itself, and by which alone it can function."

Missing from Berlin's list of reasons for studying own's own past is the desire to resist foreign attempts at cultural othercide.

Quynh exhorts his fellow Vietnamese to study and appreciate the Vietnamese classic epic poem, "The Tale of Kieu" by Nguyen Du, published in 1820. For Quynh, the poem is evidence of the greatness of Vietnamese literature: "As long as the Tale of Kieu endures, so does our language; as long as our language endures, so does our country."[229] He frequently alludes to how it embodies the order and harmony of "Eastern wisdom." The poem is "the most beautiful jewel of our language, a language that some consider poor and imperfect but that could not have more richness, suppleness, charm, harmony, and subtlety for painting the most delicate feelings of the human soul."[230]

> "…Kieu was conceived and composed according to a general plan whose every part, down to the smallest detail, accords with the whole. It is an orderly ensemble that is as faultless in its lines and proportions as a beautiful antique censer…The degree of simplicity and harmony covering the whole and the amount of art and perfection in each detail are amazing… The more one studies Kieu, the more one feels its perfection, the full and harmonious perfection of a work of art that completely achieves an ideal of beauty that corresponds not to a particular aesthetic but to the very pattern and rhythm of universal art."[231]

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229 NP, 86 (August 1924).
230 Pham Quynh, "Kim Van Kieu and the National Language" 1924, in *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 403.
231 Ibid., 405.

Moreover, for Quynh, the poem's protagonist is a role model of self-sacrifice for the sake of social harmony and filial piety. The protagonist is a woman "who, in an agonizing choice between love and filial piety, deliberately chooses the more difficult path. She sells herself to save her father, and from that day onward, goes from misery to misery, eventually sinking to the most abject depths, but like the lotus in the song, she conserves within that abject state the pure scent of her original nobility." 404 Here, self-sacrifice should be interpreted as self-assertion rather than selflessness in the sense of self-abandonment. By choosing the more difficult path, Kieu does not neglect her own desires or values. She does the opposite. Kieu is a role model, Quynh thinks, because she asserts her highest desires which so happen to accord with the group's [filial piety], even if it comes at a great cost for her [selling herself into prostitution]. Quynh was criticized by many other nationalists who saw Quynh as using the Tale of Kieu to justify his collaboration with the colonial regime. Yet, a sympathetic reading of Quynh would maintain that it is noble to think of one's self not in individualistic terms but as part of a greater group, and that self-sacrifice in this instance is self-assertion, not self-abandonment, in order to preserve an ideal of harmony and filial piety.[232] The small sacrifice of collaborating with France allows Vietnam, through the use of their printing press, to develop a more robust national culture.

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[232] An example of 'self-abandonment' would be if someone approached you and started preaching their values to you and you completely assume they have it all right and you have had it all wrong, so you adopt their beliefs and abandon your own. Quynh does the opposite.

By promoting the Tale of Kieu, Quynh is at once 'self-assertive' of Vietnamese cultural nationalism and also uses the opportunity to build harmonious relations with the French. For Quynh, *The Tale of Kieu* is on par with the best of French literature. Both countries, he argues, have similar tastes for great literature and such is the basis for friendship and mutual cultivation.

> "What can one say except that two peoples separated by the entire expanse of Europe and Asia share a certain conception of literature and art or, rather, that between the spirit of the French and the Annamese are certain natural affinities that would be interesting and even desirable to cultivate, given the rapprochement that is eagerly desired on both sides and that must be achieved by the elite of these two peoples through the intimate communication of art and poetry?"[233]

Notable is Quynh's emphasis on the intellectual elite whose job it is to lead the revival of cultural nationalism and harmonization with France.

Quynh was also at the forefront of promoting *quoc ngu*, romanized Vietnamese, as Vietnam's national language. In his journal, he translated many Vietnamese poems from Chinese and nom [Vietnamese with Chinese characters) into *quoc ngu*.

> "I have devoted all my fervor and love to my mother tongue. I swore a long time ago to sacrifice my whole life to this task: to build a literature with our language so as to give to our country an independent national literature (...) and to see to it that our people would no longer have to suffer the pain of learning and imitating everything from foreigners."[234]

Part of building the Vietnamese language meant making it more robust by importing foreign concepts that could lend more richness and nuance to the Vietnamese language. In *Nam Phong*, Quynh presents his vocabulary-building project in which he constructs new Vietnamese words drawing on Chinese and French. Because he believed that

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[233] Ibid. 406. At the time, the Vietnamese were referred to as "Annamese."
[234] Quoted in Thi Ngoan Pham, *Introduction au Nam Phong 1917-1934* (1973), 252.

Confucianism was the basis for Vietnamese culture and sustained the social order, he argued that Chinese rather than *nom* should be the source of all *quoc ngu* vocabulary relating to important topics such as politics, law, philosophy, and religion.[235] In the introduction to his vocabulary development project in the first issue of *Nam Phong*, he writes, "Our national language at present is poor. We do not have enough words to express important ideas," and goes on to present new Vietnamese words based on Chinese and French: "despotism," "skepticism," "epic," and so on.

Thus, Pham Quynh resists the imposition of the French language onto Vietnam as well as the idea that French literature is superior to Vietnamese literature. At the same time, he seeks harmony with the French, finding commonality with the French and also using French vocabulary to strengthen Vietnamese vocabulary.

Another way that Quynh empowers the eastern, Vietnamese ideal is to reject Western individualism in favor of an East Asian communitarian Confucian concept of the self. He argues that

> "the massive introduction of ideas and conceptions of the west, and the subsequent destruction of the ancient moral framework of the east, resulted in a general imbalance of minds. Thanks to this worsening imbalance, our minds are stuffed with words and formulas, stuffed with foreign theories and doctrines poorly assimilated or even unassimilable, indulging in a veritable saturnalia of intelligence, to which is added, in a certain youth, a saturnalia of sensibility, provoked by the most intemperate individualism or the most disheveled romanticism."[236]

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[235] Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 157.
[236] Quynh, *Essais,* 249.

Western notions of individualism, Quynh thought, threatened the structure of society and its social values because it threatened the core of Vietnamese society: the family. Quynh writes,

> "The smallest, strongest, and most enduring of all such groups is the family... In all societies of Europe the family is passing through a crisis. It is being forced to resist the movement for freedom, for liberty. This movement seeks only advantages, prosperity, and happiness for each person, making each and every discrete human being the center of the universe. It is called, in a word, 'individualism.'... But apart from those people who lead such precariously attuned lives, everyone concerned with a proper way of living knows that the family is a secluded harbor in which we may be saved from the turbulent seas of this period."[237]

The Vietnamese, Quynh argues, should be wary of the ideas they import from France for such ideas can either harm or help, depending on how appropriately they are understood within the context of their own traditions.

> "The libertarian and individualistic theories that come from the West are certainly not without attractions, and these attractions are often irresistible to the minds of those who have barely escaped the rigors of a patriarchal organization over which absolutism reigns triumphant. [These theories] are not, however, without dangers, and therefore, it is best to incorporate them cautiously. They can give a positive character to old traditional ideas that tend to discount individuals a bit too much by inscribing them completely within the family unit or the community and in this way often hinder the full development of the personality. But if they act alone without the solid base of good traditional training, these theories may cause dissolution and destruction. The delicate matter of the dosage must be respected, as it requires much foresight and tact and can be the work only of an elite truly conscious of its role as initatior and guide."[238]

Another way of empowering the Eastern ideal is to engage in politics. Quynh distinguishes two kinds of politics. In one sense, it is "all that relates to the government of the state, to the good management of public affairs, to the safeguarding of the higher

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[237] Nghia gia toc (the meaning of family) Nam Phong 1 (2) August 1917: 89-92.
[238] Quynh, *Essais,* 390.

interests of the nation." In another sense, there is a kind of politics that comes from "the demagogic societies of the West… which consists in exciting popular passions and exploiting them, in dividing the nation into opposing cliques, in training them against each other, in making appeal to the lowest instincts of the masses to satisfy the ambitions of an unscrupulous minority." Quynh prefers the former, arguing that it is a duty of citizens to engage in improving national welfare, and warns the Vietnamese against the latter. In the politics Quynh sees in Western 'demagogic societies,' "it is the mediocre who triumph at the expense of the best, it is the most impassioned who are agitated and it is the cleverest or the least scrupulous who profit."[239]

Yet, while the West, "in their old practice of liberty" has "antidotes powerful enough to neutralize… the harmful effects" of such populism, Quynh thinks, Vietnam is not ready for it. "What would happen to this country if, overnight, young men just left school and decided to go into politics on the basis of foggy ideologies imported from foreign lands, and undertook to upset everything to rebuild the state and society on a new basis?" Engaging in such politics without a proper moral foundation would end up producing a politics "as an exploitation of the popular passions." It would "never cease to become an industry in the hands of people who live on it, who we call politicians. They maintain in society a state of continual excitement favorable to the hatching of all hatreds, all resentments, all bad feelings that sleep in the heart of the masses."

Here, we have Quynh decrying populism, whether from the left or the right. His implicit theory of assertive agreeability is visible here. It is remarkable that recent

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[239] Quynh, *Essais,* 346.

empirical political science research argues that "the relationship between low Agreeableness and voting for populist parties is robust, controlling for other personality traits, authoritarianism, sociodemographic characteristics and ideology." Bakker and his colleagues found strong support for the notion that the anti-establishment message of populists resonates the most with highly antagonistic people. Antagonism—the opposite of agreeableness—predicted support for populists for both right wing and left wing populists. Those who see populism as something bad should be interested in promoting agreeableness. It is not surprising that Quynh is anti-populist. Populism, as defined in these empirical studies, is an ideology that is anti-establishment and anti-elite, viewing elites as corrupt in contrast to a 'pure' people who are of central importance. Yet, Quynh is an elite and his goal is for elites and commonors to work together harmoniously.

So far, we have discussed how Quynh wants to empower Vietnamese cultural nationalism in order to strengthen the 'Eastern ideal' and push back against the 'Western ideal.' This is where we see much of Quynh's assertiveness in his 'assertive agreeability.' Now, we shall turn to Quynh's agreeability, particularly in his calls for reconciliation with France through what he calls a 'policy of respect.'

Quynh acknowledges the violent and oppressive nature of colonialism. "When a people settles with another people as ruler and master, it is at bottom a policy of force that they apply. Having conquered the country by force, it is maintained only by force. The iron hand may be more or less a velvet glove. It remains ultimately an iron fist." Yet, Quynh thinks that the French/Vietnamese relationship has become less oppressive over time. "There may have been at the beginning victors and the vanquished, some bruised by

their defeat, the others all proud of their victory. But a half-century of common life, equally profitable for both as is the case between the French and the Annamese, has also been able to gradually erase the memory of this bad dream. Today, they both recognize among themselves rights and duties other than those acquired or imposed by force."

How to explain the apparent reliance on the use of force? Quynh thinks that "time is a big factor; it reconciles, it soothes, it creates between men only interests, duties. Common burdens bring closer ties every day and that can become indissoluble. Time blunts roughness; it rounds the angles; it transforms rough stones into polished pebbles which polish more by rubbing each day." To use the language of game theory, Quynh is describing how cooperation between two actors tends to emerge over iterations of interactions. After half a century of interaction, he thinks that a "policy of force" has become "less and less necessary" and substituting it "must be a policy of respect."

Quynh wants the French and Vietnamese to respect each other. An obstacle to mutual respect is a false sense of prestige that some French have from "only the humiliation of others. It is thus something unhealthy, I will even say inhuman, that poisons and spoils everything." In contrast, "real prestige emanates from personality itself, from all its qualities and moral value; it can not be the effect of some sort of racial pride which makes it so that when one belongs to a so-called superior race, one believes one has the right to manifest it in every respect towards men of another so-called inferior race."

Quynh is speaking directly to the French and telling them that they are capable of having true prestige and respecting the Vietnamese. It is unclear if Quynh is using

insincere flattery to coax the French into what he wants them to be, or if he actually means it. His strategy is not unlike a parent who lavishes praise [i.e. "you are so kind!") upon a not-so-kind child to encourage the child to be more kind. The French man "will find in his good natural grace,…in that kind of bonhomie and sometimes even good-boyishness which distinguishes him, what is needed to round off all the angles. It is enough for him to be himself, and not to be compelled by an exaggerated preoccupation with prestige, to be constantly a representative [of the colonial regime] before the native." Quynh writes that the French man "is capable of sympathizing with men of other countries and other races. He readily recognizes any superiority wherever it comes from. All of his classical culture gives more importance to the universal than to the particular, all his revolutionary ideology—the French Revolution proclaimed human rights and worked for the emancipation of the human race—prepared him for a long time for this universal sympathy which, through individuals of different races and colors, is addressed to the same man, to men alike everywhere, in all latitudes, since he is made of the same greatness and misery characteristic of all humanity."

Anticipating criticism of this policy of respect, Quynh notes that some Vietnamese doubt the French would ever be sincere in giving respect and would prefer the French to not respect them, establishing "a demarcation between the races and an attitude of pure humiliating condescension" which would be more honest, "frank and clear," and would "not produce confusion and equivocation." However, Quynh thinks these Vietnamese "do not believe in time and its accommodating power. Fortunately they

are only a minority. The majority of the annamites desires, that this policy of respect be sincerely applied."

Continuing his appeals to the best of the French, Quynh writes, "So here is this humane and lovable people who are self-sufficient and do not need others, struggling with another people whom they have conquered, not to satisfy imaginary needs for expansion, but only for the sake of glory, for he loves glory, and that is his only weakness. What will he do with these conquered people? Will he be content to dominate and exploit them as a vulgar colonizer does? No, because that is not its strength… it would be infinitely better for him to follow his natural inclination and let this broad humanism within him, eager to spread for the greater good of all humanity, act freely.

In conclusion, Pham Quynh has an implicit theory of assertive agreeableness, from which we might find useful. He is agreeable towards the French [i.e. is kind, sympathetic, and cooperative with them], and seeks harmony for the French and the Vietnamese and the West and the East. Yet, he does not abandon his own self nor does he adopt the will of the French. He strongly asserts the Vietnamese national, cultural 'self.' He is an example of someone who is agreeable yet also assertive at the same time. In pursuing harmony between East and West as the ultimate goal, Quynh still used his own Eastern ideal standard as a global standard. He could not go beyond it. Yet, indeed, what could be a better ideal than harmony of global differences? One answer may be the eradication of some differences and domination of others. The debate between whether the former or latter is preferable continues. We may bypass this question by assuming a kind of overlapping consensus between different traditions. Yet, rather than seeking

overlapping similarities, perhaps it is some times better to celebrate and harmonize differences. The virtue of assertive agreeability enables this. Whereas mere civility is a civic virtue that helps with the problem of disagreements during conversations with one's own compatriots, assertive agreeability is a cosmopolitan virtue that addresses the problem of how to make use of diversity for mutual benefit.

## Chapter 4:

Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Humanization

Of the five Vietnamese thinkers that this book engages, Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) is certainly the most well-known and probably the most controversial.[240] To Americans, he is infamous as the United States' enemy during the Vietnam War. To Vietnamese who fled Vietnam after Communist victory in Vietnam, he is an evil tyrant. However, to Vietnamese in Vietnam, he is a great leader. To anti-colonial movements around the world, he was an inspiration. The name "Ho Chi Minh" evokes a range of emotions, memories, and opinions. How ought political theorists engage and understand him? This chapter argues that Ho offers political theorists a conception of revolution fundamentally concerned with resisting dehumanization.

Less of an "intellectual" in the typical sense of the term, Ho conducts engaged comparative political theory in the sense of our ancient Greek *theoros.* Outraged at the dehumanization of the Vietnamese under French colonialism, he travels the globe, sees the dehumanization of other colonized peoples, and seeks any ideas in any traditions that would help him rehumanize the dehumanized. In the end, his solution is to promote a new cosmopolitan national identity, one based on Marxism-Leninism, Confucian self-cultivation, and Christian love.

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[240] Born Nguyễn Sinh Cung, and later known as Nguyễn Tất Thành, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Bác Hồ or simply Bác, Hồ Chí Minh went on to assume many, perhaps even hundreds, of pseudonyms. I will refer to him in this chapter simply as Ho Chi Minh or Ho.

Ho Chi Minh is, to my knowledge, the only Vietnamese thinker to have received attention from political theorists. In a chapter of their book *Political Theories of Decolonization,* Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride engage Ho as a theorist of revolution. They present him as challenging the "conventional wisdom that revolutionaries are primarily, even myopically, concerned with disrupting power."[241] For them, Ho offers a novel understanding of revolution as a perpetual project of self-cultivation, as a "total psychological shift of the governed," and "a process of self-cultivation and transformation for both leaders and citizens."[242] What he is really concerned with, they argue, is "creating long-lasting political freedom."[243] Rather than emphasizing the structure of institutions like political theorists are wont to do, Ho is concerned with the capacities and dispositions of citizens.

Kohn and McBride are virtually the only political theorists so far to my knowledge to have engaged Ho Chi Minh, so it is worth quoting at length their summary of Ho's political project:

> "Ho's paradigm of self-determination is then a fascinating blend of the Maoist impulse to total revolution and the process of self-criticism and the ideals of Mencius. In order to maintain a truly revolutionary morality, it must be aimed toward making sure that the government serves the people and provides a space for them to become virtuous themselves. His answer to the question of what comes after the revolution was to assert that the revolution will never end. Only by having permanent revolution could Ho claim that his nationalism was democratic. The content of this revolutionary morality incorporates elements of Confucian philosophy, whereby the morality of the leader determines whether or not the people should be devoted to him. Yet it also displays elements of

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241 Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, *Political theories of decolonization: Postcolonialism and the problem of foundations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56.
242 Ibid., 57.
243 Ibid., 56.

> Rousseau's vision of rule by the general will: when all of us are equally driven to live by and refine revolutionary morality, there will be no discord; everyone will have perfect harmony between their internal beliefs and impulses and the regime at large."[244]

I agree with all these claims. Kohn and McBride are particularly right to demonstrate Ho's aptitude for borrowing ideas from diverse thinkers and traditions for his own purposes. They are also correct to highlight Ho's ideal of perpetual revolution in which individuals cultivate themselves in order to harmonize with the collectivity.

However, Kohn and McBride surprisingly miss something important. They and most scholars who write about Ho Chi Minh overlook a fundamental, core concern and motivation at the heart of Ho's entire political and moral project: rejection of dehumanization and desire for (re)humanization. Ho is best understood as someone who was outraged at colonial dehumanization of the Vietnamese and whose ultimate goal is to (re)humanize the Vietnamese.

Typically, scholars who write about Ho Chi Minh understand his ultimate aim as revolution, communism, independence, or freedom. This is understandable. Consider Ho Chi Minh's most-often quoted assertion: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." Yet, a more judicious reading of his writings reveals that revolution, communism, independence, and freedom are for Ho actually means to a vision of personhood and humanity for the Vietnamese. Those commonly understood aims are actually logical conclusions to Ho's reaction to and resistance against the dehumanization of the Vietnamese under French colonialism.

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[244] Ibid., 67

Thus, Tuong Vu may be correct in advancing the thesis that the most influential factor in the history of Vietnamese communism has been its leaders' unwavering devotion to communist ideals,[245] but we should examine the grievances that drove leaders like Ho Chi Minh to those ideals in the first place. We would find that the main grievance is dehumanization. Exploring this grievance helps us get at the underlying, fundamental needs that motivate appeals to communist ideals.

It is actually not much of a surprise that Kohn and McBride overlook dehumanization in discussing Ho's view of revolution. The topic of dehumanization is typically underdiscussed in discussions about revolution. In surveys of possible meanings of revolution, humanizing the dehumanized never figures as the definition or purpose of revolution.[246] Dehumanization is not often cited as the core complaint of revolutionaries. Americans who revolted against the British in the American Revolution complained of "taxation without representation," not dehumanization. Revolutionaries in the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions did not complain about dehumanization. They complained about social, political, and economic inequality. They may have even complained about moral inequality—the violation of the idea that all humans are deserving of the same dignity and respect. But they did not complain about moral

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[245] Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: the Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[246] See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963); Reinhart Koselleck, "Historical criteria of the modern concept of revolution." *R. Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press 2004 (1969)): 43-71.

*exclusion*—"when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply."[247]

Why does dehumanization not figure as a complaint, particularly in the American and French revolutions? One answer is that the perception of racial difference did not figure in these revolutions. The outrage justifying the American and French revolutions could be read as outrage towards the violation of an assumption of equality on the various dimensions mentioned, particularly between those who ultimately still saw each other as "white" and as superior to nonwhites.

Despite competition and conflict between whites, through European expansionism and colonialism, argues Charles Mills, whites "contract to regard one another as moral equals who are superior to nonwhites and who create, accordingly, governments, legal systems, and economic structures that privilege them at the expense of people of color."[248] For Mills, the so-called "social contract," a thought experiment commonly assumed to apply to all human beings, has in reality and history actually been a contract (sometimes literally) between whites.

On this view, the American and French revolution were instances of whites being outraged at the violation of the "racial contract" and expectation of moral equality. In contrast, as we will see, Ho Chi Minh was outraged at the *existence* of the racial contract and moral exclusion of the Vietnamese from humanity.

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[247] Susan Opotow, "Moral exclusion and injustice: An introduction." *Journal of social issues* 46, no. 1 (1990): 1-20, 1.
[248] Charles W. Mills, "Racial liberalism." *Pmla* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1380-1397, 1386.

Underdiscussed in debates in political theory is the fact that some revolutions have been motivated by the rejection of dehumanization. This should be further explored, especially since Ho Chi Minh is not the only example of a revolutionary that cites dehumanization as a reason for revolution.

Many revolutions have occurred throughout history and it is well known that Hegel said that the whole historical process is a struggle for dignity. For some, part of struggling for dignity means struggling for recognition as being fully and equally human. Ho echoes Aimé Cesaire's remark that colonialism turns "the indigenous man into an instrument of production… colonialism = 'thingification'."[249]

Frantz Fanon famously writes about the dehumanization of Algerians by French settlers who constructed a Manichean world of good settlers and evil natives:

> "At times this Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations."[250]

Scholars have theorized with Fanon on the topic of dehumanization in the context of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and revolution.[251] For example, Christopher Lee argues that the *Wretched of the Earth* should be understood as providing solutions to the

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[249] Aimé Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.
[250] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 41.
[251] See Anna M. Agathangelou, "Fanon on decolonization and revolution: Bodies and dialectics." *Globalizations* 13, no. 1 (2016): 110-128.

problem of dehumanization.[252] In a similar vein, this chapter argues that Ho Chi Minh's writings should be understood as a diagnosis and solution to the problem of dehumanization. Ho offers us a new way of understanding the role of dehumanization and humanization in theories of revolution. Ho's political and moral program for revolution can be understood as both resistance against dehumanization and at the same time a project of humanizing the Vietnamese.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. First, I argue that while it is true that Ho showed little interest in theorizing in the traditional sense, we should read him as someone who saw theory and practice as necessarily unified. Since his fundamental aim is to reject dehumanization, all ideas and theories he engages are tailored to that purpose. Second, I provide examples of Ho's outrage at the dehumanization that occurs under French colonialism. In colonial relations, both colonized and colonizer are dehumanized. Third, I turn to Ho's solutions to the problem of dehumanization: a loving gaze, demand for liberal rights, the communist movement's solidarity with the dehumanized, and Confucian self-cultivation. Throughout, I will sometimes provide quotes at length that I think are particularly illuminating and so that the reader can get a sense of his writing style

## Ho Chi Minh: theory and practice

Most scholars and biographers of Ho Chi Minh do not consider him to be a creative thinker, theorist or philosopher. William Duiker asserts that Ho did not write

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[252] Christopher Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015), 151.

frequently about his ideas or inner motivations. "In contrast to other prominent revolutionary figures, Ho Chi Minh expressed little interest in ideology or intellectual debate and focused his thoughts and activities on the practical issue of freeing his country and other colonial societies from Western imperialism."[253] When asked whether Ho was a creative thinker, another biographer, Pierre Brocheux, laughed, replying, "*Pas du tout!*"[254] Bernard Fall wrote that Ho "has been too much the doer, the organizer, the conspirator, and, finally, the father of his own country to engage in the contemplation that serious writing generally requires." While Lenin had years of comfortable and safe exile in Switzerland to do his writing and Mao had long periods of time in his Yenan redoubt to produce his philosophy, Ho Chi Minh seldom had any such leisure.[255] At the age of twenty-one in 1911 Ho Chi Minh went to sea as a mess boy on a French liner. Fall remarks that Ho's "association with equally destitute French sailors must have been an eye-opener to him, as were his travels throughout the world… The life of a mess boy aboard a ship is not one that permits much time for philosophizing, but it left some indelible impressions on Ho Chi Minh, which are clearly reflected in his early writings."[256]

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253 William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 5.
254 Personal conversation, Paris, November 2017. Pierre Brocheux is the author of *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
255 Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings,* ed. Bernard Fall (New York: Signet, 1967), v.
256 Ibid., vi.

The ancient Greeks believe that leisure is required for philosophical thinking.[257] Raymond Geuss argues that the appropriate conditions for philosophical reflection "include being to some extent insulated from the demands of immediate action."[258] Ho, who seldom had any leisure, may not have philosophized in the traditional sense. However, he certainly engaged seriously in the activity of "thinking." For Ho, contrary to Geuss, philosophical reflection is meaningful *only* when one acutely feels the demands of immediate action.

Ho certainly felt such demands. He believed the only way to help the Vietnamese out of their colonial oppression was to first learn about the world. Before leaving Vietnam in 1911, Ho said to a friend, "I want to go abroad, to visit France and other countries. When I have seen what they have done, I will return to help my compatriots." Ho asked the friend to join him. When the friend asked where they would find money for the voyage, Ho showed his two hands: "Here's our money… We will work. We'll do whatever is necessary to live and travel."[259]

Throughout Ho's travels, he learned several foreign languages. His voluminous writings were written in English, French, Chinese, and Russian, as well as in his native Vietnamese. Ho's curiosity to learn about the diversity of the world emerges, one might say, from his feeling of powerlessness in the face of colonial oppression and sense of moral and political exigencies. As Kwame Anthony Appiah put it, "Thoroughgoing

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[257] The word *school* derives from Greek σχολή *(scholē)*, originally meaning "leisure."
[258] Raymond Geuss, *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 26.
[259] Ho's friend ultimately did not join him. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 44.

ignorance about the ways of others is largely a privilege of the powerful. The well-traveled polyglot is as likely to be among the worst off as among the best off—as is likely to be found in a shantytown as at the Sorbonne."[260]

For Ho, without the demands of immediate action which theory can serve, theory is a waste of time: "Practice without the guidance of theory is blind practice. Theory without integration with practice is mere theory."[261] Ho understands theory as "the summing up of the experiences of mankind, the synthesis of knowledge of nature and society in the course of history." He adopted Marxist-Leninist theory, understanding it as "the summing up of experiences of workers' movements of all countries down to the present time."[262] For Ho, since theory must serve a purpose, it must change and adapt to the situation: "While applying theory, we must improve and enrich it with new conclusions drawn from our revolutionary practice."[263] We shall see how Ho adapts his understanding of Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam's Confucian context.

Asking, "why do we have to study theory?" Ho answers that it is so the Party's cadres "raise the level of their understanding in order to meet the requirements of its revolutionary tasks and the practical situation so that [the Party] can better carry out its work and fulfill its great revolutionary tasks."[264] These tasks are in short to alleviate Vietnamese suffering, destitution, and brutal oppression, which, Ho thinks, are what

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260 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), xviii.
261 Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution,* 288.
262 Ibid., 288.
263 Ibid.
264 Ibid., 284.

Vietnamese know best. The Vietnamese "don't get educated by books or speeches, but in another fashion. Suffering, destitution and brutal oppression are their only educators."[265] Because Ho's focus is on helping the masses, he is dismissive of high-style theory: "What's the use of writing such lengthy and hollow sentences? There is only one way of answering: such writings are surely not meant for the masses."[266] His writings—short essays, letters, newspaper articles, reports, and speeches—are written in simple, direct language. They are exposés of the evils of colonialism and instructions of what the Vietnamese ought to practically do in order to unify and defeat Western colonialism and imperialism.

Ho did not write philosophical tracts and treatises, and this can pose a problem for political theorists accustomed to interpreting tracts and treatises for the theories in them. The Greek word for "theory" originally meant something like "passionate sympathetic contemplation," referring to the experience of spectators at a classic tragedy, which would leave them heightened in awareness and shaken and purified in their emotions.[267] It was Pythagoras who took the term "theory" in an intellectual direction, giving us its intellectual rather than experiential connotation today. For Pythagoras, mathematics gave him that ecstatic revelation.[268] Yet, we should reclaim an experiential understanding of

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[265] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* ed. Walden Bello (London: Verso Books, 2007), 3.
[266] Ho Chi Minh: Toan tap *Ho Chi Minh's Collected Works*, Chinh tri quoc gia *National Political Publishing House*, Han Noi, 1995, vol. 5, p. 299.
[267] Karl W. Deutsch, "On political theory and political action," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (1971): 11-27, 11.
[268] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 33.

theory. Karl Deustch holds that the concept of "theory" has an objective and subjective meaning. Objectively, it implies perception—to see or perceive something. Subjectively, it means to perceive something *as relevant* to one's own emotions, needs or desires. Ho's writings certainly reveal a "passionate sympathetic contemplation" of the dehumanization of the Vietnamese and other colonized peoples. He frequently engaged in such contemplation, whether seeing dehumanization with his own eyes or reading accounts of it, in Vietnam and outside of Vietnam during the thirty years he spent travelling the world from 1911 to 1941.

**Dehumanization**

Treating someone as an inferior is not always wrong. All hierarchies contain superior and inferior positions within them. Hierarchies pervade social life, many of which, if they are based on competence rather than domination or exploitation, can be beneficial and useful. Andrea Sangiovanni addresses the question of *when* treating someone as inferior is wrong. He argues that doing so is wrong when it enables, expresses, or instantiates "one or more of the following modes of treatment: stigmatization, dehumanization, infantilization, instrumentalization, or objectification."[269] For Sangiovanni, common in these modes of treatment is *cruelty*. He makes a similar argument to Judith Shklar who once proposed that liberalism is ultimately grounded in a

[269] Andrea Sangiovanni, *Humanity without dignity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 4.

rejection of cruelty.[270] Citing Montaigne, she argued that cruelty "is the worst of all vices."[271] It disfigures and destroys the human character of both the perpetrator and the victim. Borrowing this insight from Shklar and Sangiovanni, I use "dehumanization" to mean treating others as inferior in a cruel way, particularly as non-human, less than human, as a class of inferior humans, or as objects or instruments.

Ho's primary grievance was that the Vietnamese and other colonized peoples were being dehumanized by colonizers. The theme of dehumanization is a common, yet overlooked, thread that runs through Ho's writings. Bernard Fall recognizes this though he does not elaborate, saying that Ho's writings "clearly reflect the personal humiliations he must have suffered at the hands of the colonial masters—not because they hated him as a person, but simply because, as a 'colored' colonial, he did not count as a human being. This intense personalization of the whole anticolonial struggle shines clearly throughout Ho's writings."[272]

Ho is anti-colonialist but the substance of his anti-colonialism, the way his anti-colonialism is expressed, is almost always in terms of anti-dehumanization. Ho would have enthusiastically supported Christian evangelization in Vietnam if it was done humanely and uplifted the Vietnamese materially. Writing to a French priest, Ho says that the French Christian mission of evangelizing to the Vietnamese is "the most

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[270] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[271] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 313. "Of Cruelty": "Of all vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and by judgment, as the extreme of all vices."

[272] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, vi.

beautiful and the most noble" mission because "like all things ideal, religion does not and should not have any borders." However, exploiting and oppressing the Vietnamese contradicts the aim of making them good Christians. Ho asks, "Isn't the free man the only man recognized by God?"[273]

*Animal language*

Ho frequently expresses outrage over instances of dehumanization of the Vietnamese by French colonialists in Vietnam, describing the Vietnamese as being treated as animals. He explains to the Vietnamese that "exploiting capitalism is… decimating your race by the use of spirits and opium... is depriving you of all individual liberty, and all political and social rights, thus placing you on the lower level of *beasts of burden*."[274] Writing about the plight of the Vietnamese when France yielded to Japanese powers in Vietnam, Ho writes that "our people suffer under a double yoke: they serve not only as *buffaloes* and *horses* to the French invaders but also as slaves to the Japanese plunderers. Alas! What sin have our people committed to be doomed to such a wretched plight!"[275]

Ho is also surprised that animals get better treatment than colonized and oppressed peoples: "We have racked our yellow brains in vain, yet we cannot succeed in discovering the reason which led the men and women of France to found the remarkable

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[273] Ho Chi Minh, "Unpublished Letter by Hồ Chí Minh to a French Pastor." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (2012): 1-7, 3.
[274] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, 122. Italics mine.
[275] Ibid., 133. Italics mine

institution called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. First, the reason escapes us because we see that there are still so many unfortunate human beings who appeal without result for a little care."[276]

*Sadism*

Ho frequently describes how dehumanization took the form not only of turning the Vietnamese into slaves and instruments of production, but also as objects of the French's disdain.

> "All the Frenchmen… arrive here with the idea that the Annamese are their inferiors and must serve them as slaves. They treat them like brutes good only for leading with a stick. All of them have got into the habit of considering themselves as members of a new and privileged aristocracy. Whether they are military men or colonial settlers, they normally visualize no other kind of relations with the natives than those they have with their servants. It seems that their "boy" is for them the representative of the entire yellow race. You should hear with what idiotic disdain a Frenchman of Indochina speaks of the 'yellow-skinned man.' You should see how boorishly a European treats a native. The conqueror attaches a great price to signs of submission or respect on the part of the conquered. The Annamese in the towns, like those in the countryside, are obliged to take off their hats before a European. An agent of the security service brutally struck any Annamese who forgot to call him 'Great Mandarin.' A customs clerk obliged natives passing by his house to doff their hats or get off their mounts. One day, this civilizer brutalized an Annamese woman who, though she had greeted him, had forgotten to call him Great Mandarin. This woman was pregnant. A violent kick right in the stomach aimed by the agent caused a miscarriage; the unfortunate woman died shortly after."[277]

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[276] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 20.

[277] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, 91.

Similar to Aimé Cesaire's observation that "wherever there are colonizers and colonized face to face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism…,"[278] Ho writes, "colonial sadism is unbelievably widespread and cruel."[279] Ho recounts the testimony of a colonial soldier who describes a time he was on a boat with other Frenchmen. Vietnamese vendors in smaller boats approached them to sell fruit and shellfish. Instead of giving them money, the soldiers threw cigarette butts into their baskets. However, "sometimes, just for a laugh, a stoker throws a bucket of boiling water onto the unfortunates' backs. Then there are cries of pain and a frantic flight of oars which bumps the canoes together." A father tries to help the burned son but Frenchmen throw boiling water on the father as well. The French soldier writes, "From these spectacles, I have noted but one thing, it is that we are crueler and more barbarous than the pirates themselves."[280]

Reproducing eye-witness accounts of colonial violence in gruesome detail, Ho describes an instance when French soldiers came upon three Vietnamese, asked for money, alcohol and opium. When the Vietnamese could not make themselves understood, the Frenchmen raped, killed, and dismembered them.

> "The three corpses lay on the flat ground of a former salt marsh: the eight-year old girl naked, the young woman disemboweled, her stiffened left forearm raising a clenched fist to the indifferent sky, and the old man, horrible, naked like the others, disfigured by the roasting with his fat which had run, melted and congealed with the skin of his belly, which was bloated, grilled and golden, like the skin of a roast pig."[281]

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278 Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism,* 42
279 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 10.
280 Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution,* 92.
281 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 11.

Ho writes that this "gloomy black list" of stories of dehumanizing treatment by the French "lengthens every day."[282] A Vietnamese named Tai

> "came out to meet the representative of civilization who addressed him thus, 'You stupid brute, why don't you raise the bridge?' In reply, Tai, who could not speak French, pointed to the red signal. This simple gesture exasperated M. Long's collaborator who, without more ado, fell upon Tai and, after giving him a thorough drubbing, pushed him into a brazier nearby. Horribly burnt, the Annamese crossing-keeper was carried to the hospital where he died after six days of atrocious suffering. The French official was not charged… While the life of an Annamese is not worth a cent, for a scratch on the arm M. Inspector General Reinhardt receives 120,000 francs compensation. Equality! Beloved equality!"[283]

*Dehumanization of other colonized peoples*

Ho sees dehumanization happening in other colonies outside of Vietnam as well, writing about their plight and displaying sympathy and empathy with the victims. As two scholars have put it recently, Ho's writings "evidenced an extensive range of alliance making with the colonized around the globe." [284] He describes French settlers in Tunisia killing three natives just for grazing their sheep in their olive grove.[285] In Morocco," the civilizing of the Moroccans by gunshots is continuing. A Zouave major garrisoned at Settat, speaking to his men, told them: 'We must put an end to these savages. Morocco is rich in agricultural and mineral products. We civilized Frenchmen are here with two aims: to civilize it and enrich ourselves.'"[286] Ho documents colonial oppression in Martinique, Morocco, French Polynesian islands, British control in China, India, and

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[282] Ibid., 14.
[283] Ibid., 15.
[284] Quỳnh N. Phạm and María José Méndez. "Decolonial Designs: José Martí, Hồ Chí Minh, and Global Entanglements." *Alternatives* 40, no. 2 (2015): 156-173, 161.
[285] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 16.
[286] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, 94.

Sudan, the Belgian Congo, German extermination of the Herero and Nama peoples, Algeria, India, Native Americans in reservations in the United States, and more.[287]

> "In Dahomey, the already crushing native taxes are being increased. Young men are dragged from their homes and their lands to be turned into 'defenders of civilization.' The natives are forbidden to possess arms to defend themselves against wild animals which devastate whole communes. Education and hygiene are lacking. On the other hand, no means are neglected to submit the "protected" of Dahomey to the abominable native status, an institution which places men on a level with animals and which dishonors the so-called civilized world. The natives, their patience at an end, revolt Then comes bloody repression. Energetic measures are taken. Troops, machine guns, mortars, and warships are sent; a state of siege is proclaimed. Mass arrests and imprisonments are carried out That is the gentleness of civilization!"[288]

Travelling in the United States in 1912, Ho observes the dehumanizing treatment of blacks. He writes that

> "after sixty-five years of so-called emancipation, American Negroes still endure atrocious moral and material sufferings, of which the most cruel and horrible is the custom of lynching…The horde are the lynchers. The human rag is the Black, the victim. In a wave of hatred and bestiality, the lynchers drag the Black to a wood or a public place. They tie him to a tree, pour kerosene over him, cover him with inflammable material. While waiting for the fire to be kindled, they smash his teeth, one by one. Then they gouge out his eyes. Little tufts of crinkly hair are torn from his head, carrying away with them bits of skin, baring a bloody skull. Little pieces of flesh come off his body, already contused from the blows. The Black can no longer shout: his tongue has been swollen by a red hot iron. His whole body ripples, trembling, like a half-crushed snake. A slash with a knife: one of his ears falls to the ground. . . . Oh! How black he is! How awful! And the ladies tear at his face. . . . 'Light up,' shouts someone. 'Just enough to cook him slowly,' adds another. The Black is roasted, browned, burned. But he deserves to die twice instead of once. He is therefore hanged, or more exactly, what is left of his corpse is hanged. And all those who were not able to help with the cooking applaud now… While on the ground, stinking of fat and smoke, a black head, mutilated, roasted, deformed, grins horribly and seems to ask the setting sun, 'Is this civilization?'"[289]

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[287] Phạm and Méndez, "Decolonial Designs," 161-162.
[288] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, 116.
[289] Ibid., 51-52.

Ho recognizes that dehumanization is enabled by notions of racial superiority and inferiority: “In the colonies, if one has a white skin, one belongs to the aristocracy: one is of a superior race. In order to maintain his social status, the least of European customs officers has at least one servant, a ‘boy’ who, quite often, is a maid of all work.”[290]

*Dehumanization dehumanizes both*

He sees dehumanization as degrading those who dehumanize as well. Echoing Montaigne and Shklar, Ho sees cruelty as degrading both the humanity of the one who inflicts it as well as the one who is a victim of it. He thinks colonizers, with their feelings of superiority over the Vietnamese causes them to commit “savage” acts towards others: “If one has a white skin, one is automatically a civilizer. And when one is a civilizer, one can commit the acts of a savage while remaining the most civilized.”[291] “The French imperialists savagely repressed and terrorized the Vietnamese people.”[292] Ho writes,

> “everybody knows the deeds of derring-do of the assassin-administrator Darles. However, he is far from having the monopoly of savagery against the natives. A certain Pourcignon furiously rushed upon an Annamese who was so curious and bold as to look at this European's house for a few seconds. He beat him and finally shot him down with a bullet in the head. A railway official beat a Tonkinese village mayor with a cane. M. Beck broke his car driver's skull with a blow from his fist. M. Bres, building contractor, kicked an Annamese to death after binding his arms and letting him be bitten by his dog. M. Denis, receiver, killed his Annamese servant with a powerful kick in the kidneys.”[293]

Ho calls colonialism an animal.

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[290] Ibid., 85.
[291] Ibid., 87.
[292] Ibid., 301.
[293] Ibid., 27.

> "Colonialism is a leech with two suckers, one of which sucks the metropolitan proletariat and the other that of the colonies. If we want to kill this monster, we must cut off both suckers at the same time. If only one is cut off, the other will continue to suck the blood of the proletariat, the animal will continue to live, and the cut-off sucker will grow again."[294]

Vietnamese collaborators and other native collaborators in colonial regimes around the world, too, become animals by participating in colonial rule. In a mocking tone, Ho describes how different "animals" are trained to administer European laws around the world. "If you take the largest and strongest member of the herd and fasten a bright substance to its neck, a gold coin or a cross, it becomes completely docile . . . This weird and wonderful animal goes by the name of *colonis indigeniae*, but is referred to according to region as Annamae, Madagascan, Algerian, Indian . . ." [295]

*Dehumanization is avoidable*

Ho does not see the French as naturally evil or as inherent dehumanizers. He thinks the French in France are good. But the French who see themselves in a colonial relationship with the Vietnamese are dehumanizers. Ho gained this insight from his travels to France and Europe. When Ho first arrived in Marseille, France in 1911, he was surprised when he was addressed as "*monsieur*" for the first time by a Frenchman when he stopped at a café on the city's Rue Cannebière for a cup of coffee. The experience inspired him to remark to his friend: "The French in France are better and more polite

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[294] Ibid., 119.
[295] "Zoology," *Le Paria*, vol. 2. Quoted in Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, trans. Peter Wiles (London: Allen Lane Press, 1968), 28.

than those in Indochina."[296] For Ho, this surprising experience demonstrated to him that it was possible for the French to treat the Vietnamese with equal human dignity. Ho believed that human nature was neither naturally good nor evil. Cruel dehumanization of others was not intrinsic to any race but was rather a product of colonial relations.

## Humanization

*A loving gaze*

The incident at the café reveals to Ho a solution to the problem of dehumanization, one that is implicit in his thinking. A solution is to *view* the Other as human. This is as simple as addressing the Other with respect. Here, George Kateb's notion of a loving gaze is useful.

Kateb, drawing on Walt Whitman, writes that the best way of honoring human dignity is to "see all persons as beautiful" and "to see all persons as human."[297] Being addressed as an equal is no big deal if one is accustomed to it or takes it for granted. But Ho's experience of being recognized as equally human for the first time by a Frenchman is profound. For Kateb, Ho's experiencing of *noticing* the Frenchman's use of "*monsieur*" is significant, to the point where it was something Ho found worth writing about to a friend. This is an instance in which the ideal of what Kateb calls "democratic individuality" is achieved. This ideal is a kind of loving respect for individuals and

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[296] Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh,* page number currently unavailable. [Used Kindle version]
[297] George *Kateb, The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992): 93.

individuality.[298] Kateb, as well as Ho, envision an ideal of political life where "everyone and everything deserves patient attention, a look, a gaze, but not to be followed by an attempt to remedy or control or to make over."[299] Elaborating Kateb's insight on the indispensability of a loving gaze, Jack Turner sees this gaze as enabling individuals to "contemplate those whom they usually ignore, scorn, or hate so as to emancipate their own perception from preconceived notions of the other and thereby allow the other's humanity to disclose itself. A loving gaze delivers the other person's humanity from one's prior dehumanization of her or him."[300] It is probably unlikely that the French waiter who addressed Ho as "*monsieur"* initially saw Ho as subhuman *and then* emancipated himself from this perception by address a Vietnamese man as "*monsieur."* However, we have an idea of the effect on Ho of the French waiter's use of "*monsieur."* By saying the French in France are better than the French in Indochina, Ho begins diversifying a group that otherwise could have been seen as monolithic. "*Monsieur"* enables Ho to begin humanizing the French just as "*monsieur"* enables Ho to feel humanized.

A humanizing gaze thus frees both the one who gazes and the person being gazed at. Writing years after this incident, Ho laments over the prejudices of Vietnamese natives who "regard all the French as wicked exploiters," as well as the prejudices of the

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[298] This kind of individuality, writes Kateb, escapes certain frequent criticisms of "individualism," a kind of individualism that stands in opposition to "individualism" aimed at a life of economic pursuits.
[299] George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 145.
[300] Jack Turner, "Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality," *Political Theory* 36 (5): 655-682, 647.

French workers who "look upon the native as an inferior and negligible human being."[301] He wishes these prejudices to disappear because, as he wrote to a friend during a brief trip to Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, "all are human beings. Everywhere we meet good and bad people, honest and crooked people. *If we are good people, we will meet good people everywhere.*"[302] For Ho, if one is "good," i.e. if one's emotions, needs or desires are oriented towards seeing others as humans worthy of dignity, one is probably more likely to *perceive* others as also good. In short, what we desire and anticipate, we see. Ho is theorizing in the objective and subjective meanings of "theory" outlined by Karl Deustch mentioned earlier: Ho sees Europeans in Europe (an objective experience) as relevant to his desire to see all humans as equally human and worthy of dignity (a subjective experience).

*Rights*

However, Ho is aware that the French will not on their own begin viewing the Vietnamese as human beings worthy of respect. Humanization of the Vietnamese must first be demanded from the French. The form in which respect should be demanded, thought Ho and other Vietnamese nationalist, should be a petition demanding basic rights. Thus, Ho's first significant political act in response to the dehumanization of the Vietnamese was in 1919. This act would launch him onto the world stage and international politics. He had arrived in war torn France two years earlier and was

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301 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 9
302 Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh,* page number currently unavailable.

working as a photo retoucher in a shop managed by Phan Chu Trinh who was also living in France.

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference following the first world war, Woodrow Wilson, spoke of self-determination for colonized peoples. Inspired by this, Ho Chi Minh, Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Van Truong wrote in French a list of demands of the Vietnamese people, the famous *Revendications du Peuple Annamite,* and submitted them to the delegates of the Conference on June 18. The eight demands were modest liberal rights: amnesty for political prisoners; equality under the law; freedom of speech; freedom of association; freedom of travel; freedom of education; rule of law; and representation. The petition did not ask for independence from French colonial rule. Delegates acknowledged receipt of the petition, but Ho did not receive a response to the claims. He did, however, manage to secure a meeting with Albert Sarraut, the Governor General of Indochina. At their meeting, Sarraut gave what Ho saw as the same tired lines of gradual reform. Unsatisfied, Ho wrote to Sarraut,

> "As a follow-up to our talk yesterday, I send you herewith a copy of the Demands. Since you were kind enough to tell me that you were disposed to talk frankly, I am taking the liberty to ask you to indicate to us what has already been accomplished regarding our eight demands.… Because I maintain that the eight questions continue to be unresolved, none of them having yet received a satisfactory solution."[303]

Shortly after, Ho Chi Minh moved in with Phan Chu Trinh, and Phan Van Truong into 6 Villa des Gobelins in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. Now suspicious of Ho,

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[303] Nguyen Ai Quoc to Albert Sarraut, governor general of Indochina, September 7, 1919, in SPCE, Carton 364, CAOM.

French authorities hired a Vietnamese informer and police agents to stake out Ho's residence and to follow Ho around Paris for the rest of 1919 and on and off until 1923.

One police agent reported that one night, there was an angry debate in 6 Villa des Gobelins between Ho Chi Minh and Phan Chu Trinh. Trinh pleads to Ho,

> "Brother Quoc [Ho Chi Minh], allow me to observe you are still very young, and all can see that you are too headstrong. You want twenty million of our compatriots to do something when they have no weapons in their hands to oppose the fearsome weapons of the Europeans. Why should we commit suicide for no purpose?"[304]

Ho responded:

> "Why don't our twenty million compatriots do anything to force the government to treat us as *human beings*? We are *humans*, and we must live as *humans*. Anyone who does not want to treat us as his *fellow man* is our enemy. We don't want to live together with them on this earth. If others don't want to live with us as fellow *humans*, then it is really useless to live humiliating lives and be insulted on this earth... You are older and more experienced than I, but our compatriots have been demanding [reforms] for sixty years and have received what? Very little!"[305]

We clearly see here Ho's primary frustration: dehumanization and humiliation and insult from it.

*Power*

To reiterate, the petition that Ho delivered to the delegates are demands for *rights*. The petition was written in French. Yet, in Vietnamese, the term for 'rights' is the same term for 'power' (*quyền*). This point is theoretically interesting and rich. Spinoza had the

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[304] Cited in Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh,* page number currently unavailable. Report of Edouard, December 20, 1919, in F7-13405, SPCE Carton 364, CAOM, cited in Nguyen Phan Quang, "Nguyen Ai Quoc va Phan Chau Trinh o Phap (1917-1923)."
[305] Ibid., Italics are mine.

same idea, saying that one has exactly as much right as one has power. For Ho, by not having rights which human beings are supposed to have by virtue of being human, the Vietnamese do not have any power.

Thus, after failing to gain rights (which humanizes), Ho thinks the Vietnamese should strive to gain power (which also humanizes because it is the same thing as rights). Part of gaining power meant gaining international support. After the argument with Phan Chu Trinh, Ho walks around Paris approaching various newspaper publishing houses to publish the Demands. All reject him, except for the French Socialists, particularly Jean Longuet—Karl Marx's grandson, who begins inviting Ho to their meetings.[306]

The support and sympathy of the French Socialists had a profound impact on Ho. Ho finally finds a group that humanizes him and the Vietnamese. The French Socialists were paying attention to Russia at the time, seeing communism go from theory to practice, debating if they should join the Russians, and whether to have an evolution or a revolution towards socialism. However, what matters most to Ho Chi Minh was the oppression of colonized peoples. At these meetings, particularly in his speech at the Tours congress in 1920,[307] he urges them to give as much attention to the suffering of the colonized as they do to the working class.

In response to Ho's plea, someone gives him a copy of Lenin's *Theses on the National and Colonial questions*. Later reflecting on the impact of reading Lenin, Ho writes,

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306 Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism,* 69.
307 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 1-2.

> "In those theses, there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again finally I was able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment and confidence they communicated to me! I wept for joy. Sitting by myself in my room, I would shout as if I were addressing large crowds: 'Dear martyr compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to liberation!' Since then, I had entire confidence in Lenin, in the Third International."[308]

Essentially, Lenin's theses argued that the Communist International should try to unite peasants and workers in all countries in all lands, colonized or not. Ho writes, "After a time of waiting and study, we realized that the 'Wilson doctrine' was but a big fraud. The liberation of the proletariat is the necessary condition for national liberation. Both these liberations can only come from communism and world revolution."[309]

*Marx and Lenin as humanizers*

For Ho, Marxism-Leninism was appealing precisely because he understood these ideologies as fundamentally concerned with humanizing the dehumanized. For Ho, a Marxist-Leninist revolution meant a permanent struggle to humanize all who have been dehumanized and to create a new world on that basis. With sarcasm, Ho writes, "The fact that the Communists not only treat the "inferior natives of the colonies" like brothers, but that they get them to participate in the political life of the country, is highly characteristic of the "barbarity" of the Bolsheviks."[310]

Ho had developed class consciousness when he worked menial jobs to avoid going hungry, and this left him amenable to the Marxist view of class struggle. In his first

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[308] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 190.
[309] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 6.
[310] Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, 45

letter to Phan Chu Trinh as Ho was living abroad in London, Ho wrote about his first job as a snow sweeper at a school: "What a hard job... I sweated all over and yet my hands and my feet were freezing. And it was not easy to break up the icy snow, for it was slippery. After eight hours' work I was completely exhausted and hungry." Ho left that job for another as a boiler operator, which was even worse:

> "From five o'clock, another friend and myself had to go to the basement to light the fire. All day long we had to feed coal into the boiler. It was terrifying. I never knew what the people were doing upstairs because I'd never been up there. My workmate was a quiet man, probably he was dumb [mute]. Throughout the working day he never spoke. He smoked while working. When he needed me he made a sign but never said a word. It was terribly hot in the basement and terribly cold outside. I did not have enough warm clothes and therefore caught cold."[311]

Here, Ho develops class consciousness through experience. He labored with other workers *below* and never saw those he labored for *above.* For Ho, an ideology that claimed to liberate workers appealed to him because it was fundamentally about giving workers dignity and humanity.

To gain power for the Vietnamese, Ho believed unity was necessary, and this required the suppression of individual interests that run contrary to the collective. However, Ho believes a Marxist-Leninist revolution will actually promote individual human flourishing in the long run, while capitalist and colonial exploitation only humanizes a few and dehumanizes the masses. Part of being human, Ho believed, was being free and making use of one's own individual unique potential, but true individual freedom for many was not possible under capitalism and could only be realized in socialism and communism. Ho argues that

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[311] Quoted in Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh,* page number currently unavailable.

> "one must realize that only under the socialist regime can each person improve his private life and develop his personality and his strong points. No system equals socialism and communism in showing respect for man, paying due attention to his legitimate individual interests and ensuring that they be satisfied. In a society ruled by the exploiting class only the individual interests of a few people belonging to this class are met, whereas those of the toiling masses are trampled underfoot. But in the socialist and communist systems, of which the laboring people are the masters, each man is a part of the collective, plays a definite role in it and contributes his part to society. That is why the interests of the individual lie within those of the collective and are part of them. Only when the latter are secured can the former be satisfied."[312]

In a paradoxical move, Ho argues that the only way to promote individual freedom and flourishing is to get rid of "individualism." Ho uses "individualism" to describe those who

> "become arrogant and conceited and keep flaunting their merits. While criticizing others, they do not like being criticized; they avoid self-criticism or practice it without sincerity and seriousness. They are afraid they might lose face and prestige. They pay no attention to the opinion of the masses, and make light of non-Party cadres. They do not realize that it is difficult not to commit any errors in one's work."[313]

Ho also defines "individualism" as arrogance that leads one to be unable to merge theory with practice:

> "Theory must go hand in hand with practice. But some comrades only learn by heart a few books on Marxism-Leninism. They think they understand Marxism-Leninism better than anyone else. Yet, when faced with practical problems, they either act in a mechanical way or are thrown into confusion. Their deeds do not match their words. They study books on Marxism-Leninism but do not seek to acquire the Marxist-Leninist spirit. They only want to show off their knowledge, not to apply it to revolutionary action. This is also individualism… It ties up and blindfolds its victims whose every action is guided by their desire for honour and position, not by concern for the interests of the class and the people. Individualism is a cruel enemy of socialism. The revolutionary must do away with it."[314]

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312 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 159-60.
313 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 158.
314 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 160.

Some are

> "burdened with individualism and always think of their own interests first. Their motto is not 'each for all' but 'all for me'. Because of their individualism, they flinch from hardships and difficulties and sink into corruption, depravation, waste and luxury. They crave for fame and profits, position and power. They are proud and conceited, look down on the collective, hold the masses in contempt, act arbitrarily and tyrannically… They make no efforts to improve themselves and don't seek to improve their ability through study. Because of their individualism, too, they provoke disunity, and lack a sense of organization, discipline and responsibility. They do not carry out correctly the line and policies of the Party and the state, and harm the interests of the revolution and the people. In short, individualism is the source of many wrongdoings."[315]

To combat "individualism," Ho thinks, the Vietnamese should "fear neither difficulties, hardships, nor failures" and "never hesitate to sacrifice their own interests…This is a very clear and lofty expression of revolutionary morality."[316] Doing so would lend the Vietnamese unity and strength to defeat the forces that dehumanize. Doing so would allow for genuine individual freedom in the long run, so long as, echoing Rousseau's General Will, private interests align with collective interests. "To struggle against individualism is not 'to trample on individual interests'. Each person has his own character, his fortes, his private life and that of his family. There is no harm when the interests of the individual do not go counter to those of the collective."[317]

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[315] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 209-10.
[316] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!,* 154.
[317] Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* 158. Kohn and McBride develop the point that Ho was inspired by Rousseau's notion of the General Will. 62-67

*Confucius as a humanizer*

For Ho, Marxism-Leninism is compatible with and enhanced by another humanizing tradition: Confucian self-cultivation. Ho writes, "Marx developed his doctrine on the ground of a certain philosophy of history, but which history? That is the history of Europe. What is Europe? It is not the entire humankind."[318] Ho argued that Vietnam's Confucian influence and its collectivist nature would make it easier to achieve communism in Asia than in Europe.[319]

John Le Van Hoa writes that Ho's *Prison Diary*,

> "interestingly, was written in Chinese the language of Confucian scholars which has, through centuries of literacy, been used by famous learned men to describe the highest, the purest in human spirit; the kind of spirit that often separates a man's psyche from his surrounding reality in order to fulfil a dream , to satisfy his own inner expectations. Here Ho was no different from other age-old Chinese and Vietnamese *quan tu* [gentleman] who recognized their own intrinsic value , regardless of physical constraint."[320]

Ho believed that the goal of Marxism-Leninism could be achieved through the means of Confucian self-cultivation. The bad things about "individualism" outlined above could be ameliorated by practicing Confucian virtue: "To our Annam people, we should self-

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318 Ho Chi Minh, Toàn tạp, Tạp I, p. 465.
319 Nguyen Ai Quoc, "Phong trao Cong san quoc t" [The international Communist movement], published in *La Revue Communiste* no. 15 (May 1921) and reprinted in Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap* [Collected works by Ho Chi Minh], 2nd ed., v.i (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 1995), 33-36.
320 Hóa John LêVán, "Cultural foundations of Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary ideology," ideology" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University), p. 280.

rectify our mind by reading Confucius' works, and with respect to revolution, read Lenin's works."[321] Ho argues that it

> "is not difficult for a cadre to become a real revolutionary if he wants to. Everything depends on him. If his sole interest is the Party; the country and his compatriots he will become totally selfless, dedicated to serving the public good. In doing so, his personal faults will decrease and his virtues will become increasingly apparent each day. The revolutionary virtues are five in all : humaneness [*nhan*], righteousness [*nghia*], knowledge [*tri*], courageousness [*dung*], and integrity [*liem*]." Bui Ngoc Son recognizes that these "five components of revolutionary virtue were fundamentally derived from the familiar cardinal moral values of classical Confucianism."[322]

For Ho, these virtues were fundamentally about making a person into a proper human concerned with upholding the humanity of others. "Humaneness consists of loving deeply and wholeheartedly assisting ones comrades and compatriots...That is why he will not hesitate to be the first to endure hardship and the last to enjoy happiness. That is why he will not covet wealth and honor; nor fear hardship and suffering, nor be afraid to fight those in power."[323] Concerning the virtue of *liem* [integrity], Ho cites Confucius: "A person who has no *liem* is less than an animal."[324]

Understanding that harmony, love, and duty are key concepts in Confucian tradition, Ho writes, "Understanding Marxism-Leninism means that we must live in harmony with one another, in love, and with a sense of responsibility. If we know by heart many books about this doctrine and live without love and responsibility, then we

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321 Quoted in Son Ngoc Bui, "The Confucian Foundations of Ho Chi Minh's Vision of Government," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 46 (1) 2013: 35-59, 42.
322 Ibid., 51.
323 Ibid., 52.
324 Ibid., 50.

don't understand Marxism-Leninism."[325] Thus, Ho saw perfect harmony and mutual enhancement between the ideals of Marxism-Leninism and Confucius.

> "The advantage of Confucius's doctrine is the moral cultivation of individuals. The advantage of Jesus's religion is the great altruism. The advantage of Marxism is the dialectic method of work. The advantage of Sun Yat Sen's doctrine is that its principles were appropriate to our condition [...] Confucius, Jesus, Marx, and Sun Yat Sen share commonalities. They all pursue the happiness of humankind and the welfare of society. If they were alive and gathered in one place, I believe that they would coexist perfectly like amicable friends. I try to be their tiny student."[326]

## Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh's first political attempt to gain the Vietnamese human status was his hand-delivery of a list of demands for basic human rights to the delegates at the Paris Conference of 1919. The snubbing of this petition led Ho to find sympathy from socialists and Marxists who he felt humanized him and the Vietnamese. This sowed the seeds for the 1945 revolution in Vietnam, the first Indochina war with France, and the Vietnam War with Americans, resulting in the deaths of millions of human beings.

A simple lesson we gain from this story is that if we wish to avoid, war, death, and destruction, we should reject the dehumanization of others and humanize those who ask for it. However, there is in reality a distinction between *cruel* dehumanization (i.e. taking pleasure in causing suffering to others) and *mere* dehumanization (i.e. simply seeing someone as an instrument but not necessarily showing cruelty). In modern capitalist societies, the latter is ubiquitous in daily life, such as when we see individuals

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[325] HCM collected works op. ci. Vol 12, p554.
[326] Cited in Bui, "The Confucian Foundations," 56.

as workers before seeing them as individuals, or when we fail to offer Kateb's "loving gaze" to a stranger. To the modern liberal, it is obvious that cruel dehumanization should be abolished; denouncing it and doing away with it is much easier than doing away with *mere* dehumanization. However, for Ho Chi Minh, cruel dehumanization and mere dehumanization blended together to become the same thing in the context of colonialism in Indochina. Ho saw capitalist and colonial exploitation, instrumentalization, and objectification of humans as all inherently cruel. The simple lesson of rejecting dehumanization need not be *simplistic* if our attention is brought to the various ways we take part in both cruel and mere dehumanization. Ho encourages us also to think about how we might engage in humanizing others, even if we do it merely so, such as offering a loving gaze or addressing someone with respect.

Dehumanization and resistance to it has been widely discussed in contexts of slavery, genocide, and war, but from Ho Chi Minh, we gain a new understanding of how resisting dehumanization can be understood as an ongoing revolutionary process. Kohn and McBride are right to say that revolution for Ho is "a process of self-cultivation and transformation for both leaders and citizens,"[327] but the substance and marrow of such self-cultivation and transformation is the rejection of dehumanization and activity of humanization.

Beverly Mitchell, writing of dehumanization in slave ships, plantations and death camps, argues that the "telling of the story, the bearing witness of a crime against

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[327] Ibid. 57

humanity, is a sure sign of the strength of human dignity."[328] Indeed. However, in the context of Vietnamese resistance against colonialism and revolution, Ho resisted dehumanization not only by writing extensively about it, but also developing a program for humanizing the Vietnamese, colonized peoples, and colonizers. For Ho, the aim was not just about retaining a sense of one's own humanity, but about implementing a 'worldmaking'[329] project, changing self, society, and world to decrease dehumanizing and increase humanizing. Thus, revolution entails demanding basic rights, adopting ideologies that humanize, and working on cultivating virtues that make the self and others more human.

There is general scholarly consensus that Ho was quite the moderate, known for being flexible and rejecting dogmatism. However, his vision inspired zealous dogmatism in many who, in turn, dehumanized their perceived enemies, such as the many Vietnamese landlords and 'rich peasants' who were humiliated and executed during the Land Reforms of the 1950s. Today, the Vietnamese government is calling for a return to "Ho Chi Minh Thought." Whether Ho's project of creating a more humane world is undertaken, and what that will mean, remains to be seen.

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[328]Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009): 33.

[329] With this term, I nod to Adom Getachew who presents African, African American, and Caribbean anticolonial nationalists as not solely nation-builders, but concerned with challenging international racial hierarchy and articulating alternative visions of worldmaking. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

## Chapter 5:

Nguyen Manh Tuong's Montaignean Anti-Dogmatism

One morning in Hanoi in 1957, Nguyen Manh Tuong (1909-1997) heard a knock on his door. A friend of ministerial rank had come to inform him that authorities in the Communist Party had decided for Tuong's incarceration. Nguyen Manh Tuong was a well-respected member of the Party for many years, but his recent criticisms of the Party had apparently crossed the line. The thought of prison made him consider going into hiding, but he quickly decided against it: "The police have put its agents, spies and informers everywhere. Besides, such an attitude seems degrading to me: I would feel as if I am renouncing my convictions and ideas."[330] Convinced he would spend the rest of his life behind bars, Tuong began gathering his essential belongings:

> "I am resigning myself to my fate and, in anticipation of a journey without return, I fill my suitcase with underwear and woolen clothes. I also put in a copy of Montaigne's *Essais* from the Pléiade collection, together with paper, pens, ink and pencils! I want to occupy my forced and endless spare time with some kind of intellectual work, to save myself from the insanity of imprisonment. Perhaps my jailers will have the humanity of not taking away this viaticum of which I greatly need."[331]

Tuong had a large collection of literature to choose from. Why did he choose Montaigne's *Essais* as the only book to accompany him to (what he believed) could be a lifetime in prison? A clue is in the way Tuong refers to the *Essais:* a viaticum—the last

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330 Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, *Un Excommunié: Hanoi 1954-1991: Procès d'un Intellectuelle* (Paris : Quê Mẹ, 1992), 235. All translations of Nguyễn Mạnh Tường are mine. Hereafter, I will spell "Nguyễn Mạnh Tường" without diacritics, and will often refer to him as "Tuong."

331 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 235

Eucharist for a dying man. For Tuong, Montaigne is a kindred spirit. Tuong's near-religious admiration for Montaigne is grounded in a love for skepticism and individual free thought, and hatred for dogmatism and conformity.

Tuong's engaged comparative political theorizing leads him to find in Montaigne the best ideas for the Vietnamese. The kind of cosmopolitan national identity he wants to create is one that uses Montaignean skepticism and love for diversity to resist the dogmatism of the Communist Party which he thinks is hurting the Vietnamese.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), the famed "inventor of the essay," has enjoyed a recent surge of popular and scholarly interest in the West. For example, Sarah Bakewell's popular biography shows that Montaigne can teach us how to live well.[332] Political theorists like Douglas Thompson show that Montaigne can teach us how to resolve conflicts.[333] Other recent scholarship shows Montaigne's influence on American culture and political thought.[334] Montaigne's influence on political liberalism and his impact in the West has been studied at length.[335] Much less studied, however, is

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332 Sarah Bakewell, *How to live: or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (New York: Other Press, 2010).
333 Douglas I. Thompson, *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
334 See articles in the special issue, "Montaigne in America" in the journal *Montaigne Studies,* edited by Emiliano Ferrari, University of Chicago, XXXI (1-2), 2019. In particular, see in this issue John Christian Laursen and Kevin Pham, "Montaigne in American Political Theory: Two Generations," and Daniel R. Brunstetter, "Benjamin Franklin's Three Montaignes: The *Essays*, the *Éloges*, the Man."
335 David Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Alan Levine, *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001).

Montaigne's impact in Asia and on Asian political thought. This chapter helps fill this gap by introducing the political thought of Nguyen Manh Tuong, a Vietnamese intellectual who *thinks with* Montaigne in order to resist dogmatism and authoritarianism in Vietnam while envisioning an alternative political mindset for the Vietnamese.

Typically, when a government is too authoritarian for the people to bear, revolution—understood as a disruption of power—is one way for the people to change the state of affairs. However, just having had a revolution to oust French colonialism, instigating a new revolution so soon after seems rather inappropriate. How are Vietnamese who are sympathetic or supportive of the Vietnamese Communist Party supposed to rectify its mistakes stemming from its dogmatism? We shall see how Tuong creatively responds to this puzzle.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I provide some context for Nguyen Manh Tuong's criticisms of the Vietnamese Communist Party and his excommunication. Second, I show how Tuong uses skepticism by way of Montaigne to attack the Party's dogmatism. Tuong thinks dogmatism spawns a number of evils, for which he proffers remedies: dogmatism creates weak minds, for which the remedy is exposure to diversity; dogmatism leads to paranoid purges of perceived enemies, for which the remedy is democracy and law; dogmatism's logomachy distracts from what matters, for which the remedy is attention to the people's needs; and dogmatism dehumanizes by generating mindless conformity, for which the remedy is freedom of thought. Lastly, in the conclusion, I discuss the tension between Tuong's conception of the 'new Vietnamese

man' and Ho Chi Minh's. I argue that while Ho's approach is more appropriate during anti-colonial struggle, Tuong's approach is more appropriate after independence.

## Nguyen Manh Tuong

Tuong is notable as the first Vietnamese to receive two doctoral degrees, unheard of at the time, at the age of 22, one in literature and the other in law from the University of Montpellier in France. Returning to Vietnam in 1936, Tuong taught French literature in Hanoi. From 1945 to 1956, he received praise from the Communist Party for his devotion to the anti-colonial and revolutionary cause, such as for when he donated to the Party three buildings that were his family's heritage.[336] His prestige with Communist authorities rose even higher when he gave a speech in Vienna in 1953, radioed to the world, urging intellectuals all over the globe to support the resistance in Vietnam.[337] For this, Communist authorities appointed him professor at the Pre-University School in Thanh Hoa and later professor at the pedagogic school in Hanoi. The Party also seated him on ten executive committees.[338] However, Tuong's life and his standing with the Party took a sharp turn when the Communist Party put him through a series of trials in 1957.

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336 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 216.
337 Hoang Van Chi's preface to Nguyen Manh Tuong's October 30, 1956 speech, "Concerning Mistakes Committed in Land Reform," reprinted in *The Human Cost of Vietnam: a compendium prepared for the subcommittee to investigate the administration of the internal security act and other internal security laws of the committee on the judiciary United States Senate* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 26.
338 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 328.

Four years earlier, in 1953, the Party implemented land reforms in which land was taken from landlords and redistributed to poorer peasants. Yet, in this process, innocents and 'landlords' who turned out to be as poor as anyone else were humiliated and executed. The Party recognized these mistakes and undertook a program to "rectify errors." Implementing Ho Chi Minh's ethos of "criticism and self-criticism" and following China's "Hundred Flowers" movement, the Party encouraged criticism from intellectuals. Known as the *Nhan Van—Giai Pham* [Humanities—Masterpieces] affair, the campaign's purported aim was to learn from mistakes so the Party could properly move forward. Nguyen Manh Tuong took up this invitation and gave a speech on October 30, 1956 in Hanoi.[339] In it, he criticized the Party for its lack of democracy and lack of the rule of law to protect individual rights.

The Party leaders claimed to have no problem with his criticism. They were upset, they claimed, because Tuong's speech was leaked to the rest of the world and into the hands of the enemy. His speech was exploited by capitalists to further attack communists and communism. According to the Party, criticism was supposed to be done in private. They scolded Tuong: "You are surely aware of the damage you are doing to our cause, that of our communist State. You will tell me that dirty laundry must be washed. Yes, it must be, but within the family! But you are putting it in display, in broad daylight!"[340]

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[339] Nguyen Manh Tuong's "Concerning Mistakes Committed in Land Reform," speech reprinted in *The Human Cost of Vietnam: a compendium prepared for the subcommittee to investigate the administration of the internal security act and other internal security laws of the committee on the judiciary United States Senate* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 26.
[340] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 220.

But Tuong argued that the leak was not his fault: "Regarding the fact that a copy of my text was taken and sent abroad during these times of the Cold War when the slightest faults and errors of communism are shamelessly exploited, I cannot be made to bear responsibility."[341] His speech had fallen into the hands of Vietnamese correspondents in Rangoon who sent it to Saigon where it was published in full in many papers.[342]

Tuong never ended up going to prison. In the end, some of the higher-ups in the Party decided against incarcerating him, opting instead to permanently excommunicate him from the Party. Referring to the Party as religious zealots, Tuong suggests that excommunication is not all that much better:

> "In my personal case, no sentence was imposed on me, neither prison nor a cell. But in the communist city there are unnamed, informal punishments that amount to a long-term death sentence. Such is the case of excommunication that political fanaticism has taken from the arsenal of medieval criminology; excommunication is the most decisive weapon of religious fanaticism. No believer is allowed to house, feed, or clothe an excommunicated who has been deprived of shelter, sustenance, clothing, and who cannot lead his life normally."[343]

He describes the years of his excommunication, from 1955 to 1991 in Hanoi, in his memoir, *Un Excommunié* [The Excommunicated], which he wrote in French. In it, he describes how, despite living with his wife and daughter, they all have difficulty finding work because of his excommunication. They are no longer granted rationing vouchers for food, so they are always hungry, trying to sell what they can to buy food.[344] His friends

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341 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 154.
342 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 26.
343 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 317.
344 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 251-260.

avoid him, so he is always painfully lonely. Happiness is rare, but occurs one day when he befriends a cat on the street, and it becomes his pet:

> "I took the animal in my hand, caressed it and felt compassion and tenderness for it. He and I are two wrecks in life, both suffering from the same hunger, victims of the same isolation, afflicted with the same fate. After going around the neighboring houses to ask if the cat belongs to them and getting negative responses, I started to thank chance, or Providence?, for granting me a companion in misfortune and misery."[345]

Writing about a physical and mental condition that he shares with his cat, we see Tuong's implicit knowledge that man is ultimately no better than animals, which challenges common presumption that humans are superior to animals. Montaigne is famous for precisely this argument, particularly in his essay, "The Apology of Raymond Sebond." Moreover, reading about Tuong's affection for his cat, one wonders if he was thinking of Montaigne's musing: "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?"[346]

Yet, Tuong's memoir is more than autobiography. Written "clandestinely and in isolation"[347] it contains his most frank thoughts on the Communist Party and his political philosophy. Although Tuong authored other numerous texts, this chapter primarily engages *Un Excommunié.* The manuscript reached Paris in 1991 when he was eighty-two years old. Initially reluctant due to fear of further punishment, he finally agreed to have it

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345 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 325-326.
346 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* trans. D. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 331. All quotations of Montaigne will be from this English translation of the *Essais.*
347 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 5.

published: “you have made me cross the Rubicon and I think you are right: the risk is great, but it must be taken.”[348]

His memoir could be read as the lamentations of a Vietnamese Socrates. Tuong tries to encourage the youth to think critically but is ultimately condemned for “corrupting the youth.” He writes:

> “Since Socrates, we know that when the City wants to condemn an intellectual to drink hemlock, it accuses him of corrupting the youth! Communism has therefore revived a practice that dates back more than two millennia. Historically, the autocracy has dreamed of molding the people, especially the youth who bear the future, in its image. As a result, they are educated with every political line. The School is charged with the mission of training those who, tomorrow, will assume their responsibilities in the City. It is therefore important that the teacher trains his students to become executors of government policy. Any deviation committed in education has the same gravity as a deviation from the political line proclaimed by the leaders.”[349]

Needless to say, Tuong was not convinced that the Party’s only complaint against him was the leak of his speech. At the core of Tuong’s moral and political project is a rejection of dogmatism, which he saw pervading the mentality and actions of the Vietnamese Communist Party. To be clear, Tuong criticized the *communists*, not *communism.* He believed he was trying to improve the Party, not destroy it, starting with the criticism that they lack intellectual seriousness:

> “Those who quote Marx have not read him, and if by chance they happen to take a peek at a page in Capital, they don’t understand anything! The best proof of this is that the enthroned Marxists commit tremendous errors from which the people suffer, which raises doubts about their knowledge of the doctrine on which they rely!”[350]

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348 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 350.
349 Tuong, *Excommunié, 96-97.*
350 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 27.

For Tuong, the Party's anti-intellectualism contributed to its dogmatism. And its dogmatism produced a number of errors and evils. The remedies he proffers are all motivated in some way by skepticism, which he sees as the best response to dogmatism.

**Nguyen Manh Tuong's skepticism as a response to dogmatism**

Writing in the third century A.D., Sextus Empiricus (c. 160-c. 210 A.D.) drew on Pyrrho's (c. 360-c. 270 B.C.) philosophy of suspending judgment, arguing that skepticism (doubt of the possibility of knowledge) was the best response to the dogmatism (the insistence on something's incontrovertible truth). For Sextus, examples of dogmatism were Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Aristotelianism. Writing in the sixteenth century, Montaigne (1533-1529) drew on Sextus's skepticism, reviving it partly as a response to Catholics and Protestants killing each other over their "certainties." Writing in the twentieth century, Tuong drew on Montaigne's skepticism to respond to the Vietnamese Communist Party's dogmatic devotion to Marxism-Leninism. We can read Tuong as belonging to a tradition of using skepticism to respond to dogmatists. Identifying himself as an intellectual and speaking for intellectuals, Tuong writes, "We defend ourselves with our skepticism, we attack with our irony. Our critical mind saves us from errors."[351] Yet, when intellectuals 'attack' communists, it is only out of love, not hatred. Tuong envisions mutual empowerment between the two groups:

> "Communist culture forms man for the revolutionary struggle. Intellectual culture forms man for thinking and research. But the communist culture must not annihilate intellectual culture. Between these two cultures can be peaceful

[351] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 188.

> coexistence and, better yet, a beneficial collaboration for the respective interests of the two groups and for the entire people."[352]

Now, we shall turn to a few ways Tuong believed dogmatism was hurting the Vietnamese and what he thought the solution should be. Dogmatism, argues Tuong, weakens and dulls the mind, generates paranoia, promotes excessive concern for words, and encourages mindless conformity. Tuong draws on Montaigne to argue that the remedies to these problems are, respectively, diverse perspectives, democracy and law, paying attention to people's needs, and freedom of thought.

First, dogmatism weakens and dulls the mind. It does so by making the mind subservient to those who demand obedience to dogma. Tuong finds support for this in Montaigne. Refering to the *Essais* as a liturgical book. Tuong writes:

> "I open Montaigne. It is my breviary, my viaticum. There are so many good lessons that the communists can learn, if only they were cultivated. Through the 'healthy example of the Ancients' and of Montaigne, they could have learned that one should not lodge anything in one's head 'by mere authority and trust,' that anyone 'following another follows nothing.' Translated clearly, this means that one should not kneel before anybody, neither Marx nor Lenin, neither Stalin nor Mao."[353]

This is a radical challenge to the Communist Party which demands loyalty to Marxism-Leninism. In this passage, Tuong quotes lines from Montaigne's essay "Of the Education of Children."[354] In it, Montaigne describes how a tutor might properly educate his charge to become a strong thinker:

> "Let the tutor make his charge pass everything through a sieve and lodge nothing in his head *on mere authority and trust*: let not Aristotle's principles be principles to him any more than those of the Stoics or Epicureans. Let this variety of ideas

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352 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 197.
353 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 311.
354 Montaigne, *Essays,* 792.

> be set before him; he will choose if he can; if not, he will remain in doubt. Only the fools are certain and assured."[355]

Indeed, Tuong believes the Communist Party's certainty and assuredness that Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao held monopoly on the 'truth' was foolish. It is foolish because it creates narrow-minded, fake personalities. Those who profess Marxism-Leninism in Vietnam, he writes, are "lacking in personality and individuality. He is a fake and can easily be replaced by a tape recorder."[356] The "communist mind," he argues, is narrow and happily ignorant of others it can otherwise learn from. It "carries out an operation which is completely its own: it marks out a small area of land and digs deep, without worrying at all about what the neighbors are doing!"[357] Thus, the dogmatic mind is closed off to different perspectives which otherwise would, when rubbed together, "polish" and strengthen the mind. The Vietnamese, Tuong exhorts,

> "must neither shut themselves up nor lock themselves in a closed world, but open themselves to the 'commerce of men,' 'rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others,' enter into this vast world, 'scrutinize where we should look for to find out the good angle,' and 'thus, with the pieces borrowed from others,' one must transform them and mix them up in order to 'turn them into one's own work, namely, one's judgment.' 'The gain of our study is to become better and wiser.' This, in brief, is what the communists should have learned in order to form themselves before governing others!"[358]

The quotations in this passage are lifted from the same essay by Montaigne in which Montaigne argues that students should learn from diverse Others through discussion,

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[355] Montaigne, *Essays,* 111. Montaigne continues: "For if [the student] embraces Xenophon's and Plato's opinions by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs, they will be his. He who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing; indeed he seeks nothing. 'We are not under a king; let each one claim his own freedom.' [Seneca]."
[356] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 44.
[357] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 80.
[358] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 311.

travel, and learning foreign languages.[359] Tuong believes that through exposure to diversity and the truth of other ideas, one gains skepticism that any one doctrine holds a monopoly on truth. By borrowing good ‘’pieces” from diverse others and “transforming and mixing” them into one’s own judgment, one becomes better and wiser.

Second, dogmatism produces paranoia, which causes the party to perversely see those it is supposed to represent as enemies. The Party’s commitment to their ‘Truth’ leads them to think that anyone who questions the Party’s ‘Truth’ is not only wrong, but hostile, even after the Party allowed criticism. Paranoia sets in and the Party sees enemies where there actually are none:

> “The ongoing slogan reminds us that the ‘enemy is everywhere and hangs up his creatures anywhere.’ Maintaining general security requires vigilance in a state of alertness, the sending of professional spies to all meetings, the mobilization of amateur or volunteer spies to wander around continuously in the streets.”[360]

The paranoid Party squanders manpower through the use of spies. Moreover, because all criticism is dismissed as enemy infiltration, the Party prevents itself from constructive criticism from the masses. During the land reform, “the worst thing was that when someone amongst the masses said that we were wrong, that we had better do something in this way or that way, we immediately shouted that this voice came from the enemy.”[361] Dogmatism produces paranoia because of pride: “We still had this vague conception of

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[359] Montaigne, *Essays,* 112. Montaigne writes, “The gain from our study is to become better and wiser by it.” And that “…mixing with men is wonderfully useful, and visiting foreign countries… to bring back knowledge of the characters and ways of those nations, and to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others.”
[360] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 99.
[361] Tuong, “Concerning Mistakes,” 30.

friends and enemies: we saw enemies everywhere because we were too proud of ourselves; practiced self-adulation excessively."[362] This echoes Montaigne's assertion that for the human race "pride is his ruin and his corruption."[363] Because the Party dismisses critics as enemies, the Party ends up neglecting the masses for whom they are supposed to represent: "we were proud of ourselves, we believed we had a monopoly of Truth… we did not despise the masses in theory but we did so in fact."[364]

One solution to the problem of paranoia and pride, Tuong thinks, is democracy. Tuong is aware that Ho Chi Minh and the Party exalt the word "democracy." However, he notes that the Communist Party understands democracy narrowly, as government *for* the people, failing to appreciate that democracy should also be government *by* the people. Tuong's accuser from the Party admits that "the communists understand democracy in the sense of action FOR the people and strive to do everything to serve the interests of the people."[365]

However, Tuong argues,

> "In its full meaning and effect, democracy has two functions that are inextricably linked: that of government **by** the people and that of government **for** the people. It would be shameful to play with words and pretend that government **for** the people is enough. It's a sham. If it is not the people who act and control, no one can do it for them. Under the pretext that we act **for** the people, we can commit all kinds of infamies and take measures which more or less seriously harm the interests of the people."[366]

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362 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 30.
363 Montaigne, *Essays,* 368
364 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 30.
365 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 186.
366 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 343-44. Emphasis in the original

Tuong evokes the fact that the Party is now aware of Stalin's crimes. Stalin also viewed any criticisms as coming from an enemy. He thus saw enemies everywhere, and sought to exterminate them. Because of Stalin's "pride, his self-adulation, Stalin did not allow anybody to behave democratically towards himself, and everywhere he saw enemies… We have paid a high price, but we know now the cause of the evil which has made us suffer: *We lack democracy."*[367]

In order to have an actual democracy in which there is government *by* the people, the Vietnamese need a "regime of true legality."[368] What this means is that the right to free speech must be enshrined in law. Freedom of expression is a human right, Tuong argues, and can be learned from the West: "the West has offered the East a technique and conception of human rights, concerning the moderation and diversity of peoples ways of thinking and living." [369] This would provide the people a means to make their desires known to the government. However, the unfortunate problem is that the communists despise law. This is because during French colonialism and "the time of their clandestine agitation, the revolutionaries had a hard time with colonial legislation and magistrates. They therefore connected the memory of their sufferings and their sacrifices to the Judiciary and the Law which they considered to be instruments of oppression in the hands of the capitalists." However, Tuong argues, had the revolutionaries been curious about

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[367] Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 30.
[368] Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 31.
[369] "Tây cho Đông kỹ thuật, quan niệm về nhân quyền, về cái chừng mực và đa dạng của con người, về phương pháp suy tư và về một quan điểm đời sống." Translation mine. Quoted in Thuỵ Khuê. "Phần XVII: Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (1909-1997) - Bài 1: Giai đoạn trước 1954." Radio France Internationale. July 15, 2011. Accessed January 8, 2020. http://vi.rfi.fr/viet-nam/20110715-phan-xvii-nguyen-manh-tuong-1909-1997.

how law actually works, **"**They would have noticed that the instruments of oppression against the working masses can perfectly be turned into means of defense and protection of the State and Revolution..."[370] This is one explanation Tuong comes up with to explain why the communists hate the law. However, Tuong thinks that there is a more profound reason: they are politicians and there is "a divergence of viewpoints between the politician and the jurist, in mental habits and intellectual practice."[371] The communist is a politician who works in *politics*, an unstable world with "fuzzy borders" that one can cross without even noticing. In contrast, the jurist works in the realm of "geometric rigor, rational logic, Cartesian precision and clarity. Between legality and illegality, the dividing line is clear as between white and black."[372] These two worlds are opposed and the politician's "opportunity comes up against the judiciary and the rule of law: therefore, he decides to sweep away legislation and trample on the law."[373] Yet, this is a mistake because the absencee of law led the Party into its current mess. The absence of law led to innocents being punished and executed.

The problem, Tuong writes, is that "the rights and duties of the citizen were not clearly defined. Practically no one had a right to express his opinion; there were no means to present it to the authorities. He was not allowed to participate in the elaboration of the Government program. In such a situation, the leaders were permitted to commit serious mistakes, to effect a great loss of people's lives and energy, and to damage the prestige of

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370 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 28.
371 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 29.
372 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 29.
373 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 30.

the party and the government. Therefore, if we want now to correct our past mistakes we must establish a regime of true legality and true democracy."[374]

Clearer legal definitions, Tuong thinks, would also decrease persecutions of innocent people as 'enemies': "derived from our *political* conception of the *enemy.* That conception was too shifting, too dialectical and therefore, with that conception in mind we could not make any distinction between friends and enemies and we merely struck at ourselves."[375] The remedy is to "have a clear definition of the enemy and that definition must be in accordance with the penal code. And then we will be able to strike rightly at our enemies, to consolidate our revolutionary regime."[376]

Yet, while clearer definitions can guide the Vietnamese away from meting arbitrary punishment and towards democratic deliberation and judgment of who real enemies are, even definitions of "enemy" are ultimately inadequate. This is because, ultimately, the real enemy of the Party is the "dogma of its infallibility"[377] Tuong writes,

> "the communists should know that they have no enemies but themselves. Their enemy: it is their inordinate subjectivism which makes them believe that they are gods endowed with superhuman infallibility, installed in heaven, above the world of reality, legality, the rule of law, justice and equity. Their folly is to believe that they are always right. Even and especially when they are wrong! This disease requires hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic!"[378]

Tuong is clearly drawing on Montaigne's frequent reminder that humans are fallible: "All things produced by our own reason and ability, the true as well as the false, are subject to

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374 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 31.
375 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 32.
376 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 32.
377 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 83.
378 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 142.

uncertainty and debate."[379] Unfortunately, Tuong thinks, the Party is insistent on its infallibility:

> "The fundamental, inviolable, immutable dogma, with which everyone must fill their minds is that the Party is the unique holder of Truth, that it is always right against everybody else, that the duty and obligation of each "subject" is to fight for the triumph of the Party in what it thinks and does, to accept all suffering, all sacrifice, - even that of one's life, if necessary– in the name of the Party, for the Party!"[380]

The Party leaders see themselves as the unique holders of Truth, so they "do not tolerate any discussion, any criticism of the dogmas which proclaim their permanence, their invincibility, and burn to the stake of heresy bourgeois notions of rights, justice, and innocence."[381] Furthermore, the Party leaders' belief in their infallibility opens "the door to all kinds of fantasies, insanities, freedoms, and therefore to crimes by the cadres at all levels, all the members or creatures of the Party."[382]

In response to Tuong's indictment of the Party's dogmatic belief in its infallibility, his communist accusers respond:

> "It is clear that you have been deformed by the western culture you have received. You fall into skepticism, you doubt everything, you no longer perceive the grandeur of beings and things, you are losing yourself in the details, and no longer see the whole picture and, above all, you criticize everything."[383]

Tuong replies:

> "French and western culture has made me the man that I have become. I have acquired the qualities and faults of the French spirit: the love for clarity, precision, and logic, but also a critical approach to men and problems. I don't get carried

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379 Montaigne, *Essays,* 414.
380 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 119.
381 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 120.
382 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 85.
383 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 224.

> away easily and only give my approval wisely. I bow to the real, the true, the just, but I hate hypocrisy and am filled with horror by fanaticism."[384]

While Tuong is "fully aware of the crimes of the capitalist leaders" he, echoing Montaigne who hates cruelty above all vices,[385] is "also able to see the cruelties of the communist leaders."[386]

Third, dogmatism promotes excessive commitment to mere words, causing the Party to forget what is truly at stake. Tuong argues that the Communist Party's dogmatism is based on logomachy—argument about words. He writes,

> "let us not kill ourselves over words, going to the extreme of a ridiculous logomachy. The terms capitalism and socialism have no meaning by themselves but depend on the tastes and preferences of those who use them. In the mouth of a "socialist," according to a habit which is not only inveterate but no less ridiculous and childish, one qualifies as "capitalist" all that one hates and, whoever has been given such a certification of infamy, his fate is done. When a politics of cannibals is involved, the quarrels no longer limit themselves to only matters of grammar, as Montaigne thinks, they lead to bloodshed and death!"[387]

For Tuong, the way people feel about terms depends on their preferences and habits, not on any objective understanding of them. Thus, a quarrel between proponents of "capitalism" and "socialism" are a quarrel over words and thus really a quarrel over preferences and habits. In the last sentence of the above passage, Tuong refers to when Montaigne points out that many of our conflicts are actually over diverse interpretations of words. Montaigne writes,

> "Our speech has its weaknesses and its defects, like all the rest. Most of the occasions for the troubles of the world are grammatical. Our lawsuits spring only from debate over the interpretation of the laws, and most of our wars from the

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384 Tuong, *Excommunié, 224-25.*
385 Montaigne, *Essays,* 313.
386 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 225.
387 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 162.

> inability to express clearly the conventions and treaties of agreement of princes."[388]

However, while most quarrels are over words, Tuong says that quarrels become bloody when 'cannibals' are involved. What Tuong means by 'cannibals'—in his point about quarrels in a 'politics of cannibals' leading to bloodshed—appears to be a reference to when Montaigne describes a tribe of cannibals in the New World who do not have quarrels over words but have wars with "nations beyond the mountains" and show such firmness in their combats "which never end but in slaughter and bloodshed" for they know nothing of fear.[389] Tuong appears to be calling the communists 'cannibals' because they do not limit their fights (over words) to words. They will unfortunately fight to the death over such words.

One other frustrating aspect of an overreliance on labels such as "socialism" or "capitalism," Tuong argues, is that universal things like "natural rights" come to be associated with "capitalism," creating the erroneous view that if "capitalism" is the enemy, then "natural rights" must be an enemy as well: "Capitalism must not be given the monopoly for the application of the natural rights of man in the City."[390] Similarly, freedom of opinion is universally good, Tuong thinks. He wants to make the case that freedom of opinion should not be seen as the exclusive property of capitalism but can actually "strengthen ties between the Party and the people through a two-way dialogue."[391]

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388 Montaigne, *Essays,* 392.
389 Montaigne, *Essays,* 155.
390 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 162.
391 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 185.

Freedom of opinion will not only

> "permit the interlocutors to understand one another but also to avoid mistakes that the Party would have committed if the voice of the people had not reached it in time. Freedom of opinion, by its nature, has no democratic or socialist meaning, but any government that cares to act FOR the people must promulgate it. If all these quarrels are about grammar, why fight over words? Is there a need for happiness to wear a socialist or capitalist label?"[392]

The solution to logomachy is for all who engage in politics to be skeptical of the purported objectivity of terms such as "socialism" and "capitalism," to abandon their devotion to such terms, and to instead focus on fulfilling needs of the people:

> "If man is the starting and end point of all education and culture, the people must be the starting and end point of all politics. Let's be realistic! Let's mock any ideology that only provides logomachy as a pretext. What are the people asking for? Not much and yet a lot. Not much because they wish for a reasonable material life: a decent housing, decent food, clean clothes. In intellectual and artistic life, they only ask for the possibility to acquire instruction and culture, they want to be entertained in a healthy manner. In political life, they dream of being consulted on major issues concerning their present and future interests and of being able to sincerely express their thoughts and reflections. In social life, they demand education and the practice of morality, the purity and cleanliness of customs and mores among individuals and, even more, of those who govern. They consider that all the doctrinal quarrels and the like are purely grammatical ones, as Montaigne says. They are not concerned with whether a measure taken is capitalist or socialist. The essential thing is that it contributes to the welfare of the population: the rest is silly nonsense!"[393]

Political labels distract from what matters. Tuong recounts stories of how ridiculous it is that taxi drivers are asked what their political ideas are before being asked about their driving skills. Another unfortunate example of politics getting in the way of what matters

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392 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 185-86.
393 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 312-13.

is when doctors first ask what class the patient is, allowing landowners to die because treating the landowner would cause the doctor to lose his platform.[394]

Fourth, dogmatism dehumanizes people by generating mindless conformity. The Party's dogmatic devotion to Marxist-Leninist ideology demands that citizens not question the official ideology or think for themselves. Freedom of thought is discouraged, and freedom of expression is restricted. Since freedom of expression makes one human, Tuong argues, "by depriving men of their use of reason and speech, the Party reduces them to the ranks of beasts, infuses in them conditioned reflexes which turn them into robots."[395] Yet, the Party appears to want a docile and easily controlled population. Describing Party leaders, Tuong references Circé, the goddess of magic in Greek mythology who would transform those who offended her into animals: "It is not without reason that Circé transforms her prisoners into pigs whose only behavior is to jump on their trough at a given signal. All those with power dream of possessing the wand of the magician."[396]

Yet, Tuong recognizes that while the Party officially denies freedom of expression (and some will become "robotic" by sincerely believing the Party's dogma), there will always be others who think freely in private. This creates a situation in which public and private life are bifurcated. People behave like lifeless robots in public because the Party's spies are everywhere. But in private and in the company of trusted friends, people become free and alive again:

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394 Tuong, "Concerning Mistakes," 29.
395 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 44.
396 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 44.

> "All of Hanoi offers a spectacle of a puppet show or of mimes where people gesticulate, have fixed looks, play deaf and dumb, and act like robots driven by springs hidden inside the body. But, behind the scenes, in the back-shops, on the sidewalks, in conversations between two people, the ironical pretenses come back to life, the face regains its expressive mobility, smiles are lit up in the eyes and bloom on the lips, and, to take its revenge on prolonged silence and deliberate inertia, people thrash about like the devils, burst out laughing by mimicking the tone or mania of a leader."[397]

Tuong uses the term "*arriere boutiques*" [back-shops] referring to Montaigne's well-known use of the term to describe a space of privacy necessary for one to freely be one's self. Montaigne writes, "We must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude. Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves, and so private that no outside association or communication can find a place."[398]

One way the Party promotes conformity is through cultural production. Articles, books, plays, theaters, films, and pretty much all other cultural production "must be in line with unconditional, absolute and tyrannical devotion to the Party. The party is not a party like any other, it is THE Party and must always be spelled with a capital P."[399] Because culture shape one's values and habits, each person "undergoes a molding or remolding process, during which he is initiated, in defiance of all traditional human values, in the worship of a single god, in whose name permits the most monstrous ideas and most abominable actions! Man is deformed, transformed into a living robot in which

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397 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 100.
398 Montaigne, *Essays,* 177.
399 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 102.

all the energy of his soul and heart work for the triumph of instinct and bestiality, that is to say, that of abjection and horror."[400]

There is irony in the Party's dogmatism deforming man into a "live robot." Marxism-Leninism was initially intended to emancipate the oppressed from being tools and machines for capitalists, but through dogmatism and forced conformity, the Party creates different kinds of robots. The fanaticism of those who preach the Marxist-Leninist Gospel, writes Tuong, "turns the multitude into robots acting on outside command, upsetting minds that think!"[401] The Party leaders, "baked in the communist oven, has alienated his individuality and even his personality, replacing it with a double of himself whose reactions are remote controlled from the outside."[402]

The Party conforms to the Soviet Union and the Chinese, both in ideology and in how they dress, forcing its citizens to do so as well. Tuong sees this as an erasure of Vietnam's personality:

> "what strikes even unsuspecting people is the total, servile submission to Soviet and Chinese big brothers! This complete abdication concerns not only the ideology, of which the Vietnamese communists advocate Soviet and Chinese orthodoxy which they defend with intransigence and harshness against the slightest expression of disrespect or discord, but it is expressed even in clothing, public or private meetings, forms of courtesy and good manners etc... Viet Nam is losing its personality to become a reflection, a copy of the Soviet Union and China."[403]

For Tuong, clothing is expressive of individual personality, so he especially condemns conformity of clothing:

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400 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 103.
401 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 298.
402 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 202.
403 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 84.

> "All the women parade in the uniform imposed by female Party cadres: white shirt and black pants. All the men disguise themselves in the outfit launched Stalin and Mao and then by Vietnamese communist leaders and cadres: jacket with an upright collar, wide pants. The women's tunic and white trousers and the men's collar and tie are condemned by communist rigor as bearing the mark of the capitalist bourgeoisie. One can cry and laugh. One laughs at seeing the whole population display the obviously simple and inexpensive uniform, which kills the individuality of the human being, their personality, the distinctive characters that allow them to be understood, sympathized with, or even communicated with."[404]

Tuong had worn custom-made suits that he brought back from Peking, Vienna, Brussels.[405] However, unable to find work or borrow money from friends during his excommunication, he attempts to sell his suits for money. But no one is willing to buy. He goes to a tailors' cooperative but they decline his offer, saying to him, "We know that your clothes are of great value. But to whom can we resell these kinds of outfits that nobody wears anymore? All we can do with them is cut them up and turn them into children's clothes. But that would be a shame! Even if we made children's clothes, which parents would buy them from us/ The ordinary cadres do not have money and, even if they do, they would not give their children such clothes for fear of being criticized by their colleagues who would detect in them germs of capitalist infection!"[406]

For Tuong, the leaders are faced with a choice. On the one hand, they can allow the continuance of "formalism" in which they are content with citizens behaving robotically, flattering the leaders and bowing their heads towards them. On the other hand, the leaders can find out what the people are really feeling and thinking by giving

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404 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 261.
405 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 261.
406 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 263.

them free speech. The latter is the only sane choice, he argues. Free speech "allows them to reveal what they have hitherto been hiding in their inner selves. Once diverse opinions are expressed, leaders have the opportunity to rectify their erroneous or incomplete views, to refine their decisions to make them adequate, timely and beneficial."[407]

In addition to free speech, another remedy for the dehumanizing effects of conformity, he thinks, is:

> "intellectual culture, which develops reason, maintains critical thinking, forms judgment, preaches realism and objectivity, advocates clarity and precision in the perception and understanding of phenomena, logic in reasoning and greater skepticism towards the Don Quixote who ride their high horses and brag, who have no conviction, and only manifest naivety, ignorance and imbecility! It is the French culture whose benefits I recognize every day which helps me preserve, maintain, develop what is human in me, in the midst of a world undermined by conformism and servility."[408]

In short, skepticism can be used to remedy conformity, servility, and robotic behavior.

Montaigne's idea of a private *arriere-boutique* [back-shop] to enable true freedom of thought is a recurring theme for Tuong and key to his solution to the problem of conformity. Tuong wants one to preserve the authenticity of one's self. In the following passage which I have quoted at length, Tuong provides numerous quotations from throughout Montaigne's *Essais,* referring to Montaigne as 'our master' and 'our author':

> "And now, when faced with the communists, what attitude should one adopt to preserve the integrity and authenticity of one's own being? Let's listen to our master: 'As for me, I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy.'[409] The watchword 'belong to yourself' can only be carried out at the 'back-shop.' 'I try to make my authority over it absolute, and to withdraw this one corner from all

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[407] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 161.
[408] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 298.
[409] Montaigne, *Essays,* 499. For all of Tuong's quotations of Montaigne in this passage, I use Donald Frame's translation.

society, conjugal, filial, and civil.'[410] From this observatory where we observe ourselves, we can 'be spectators of the life of other men in order to judge and regulate'[411] our own lives... 'In the end I recognized that the surest thing was to entrust myself and my need to myself.'[412] Since we are living through difficult times, and witnessing 'this notable spectacle of our public death,'[413] let us be aware that 'in this confusion that we have been in for thirty years every man… sees himself at every moment on the verge of the total overthrow of his fortune.'[414] Therefore, the only dignified attitude, even if we were compelled to take a public position, must be the one of not being 'blind to either the laudable qualities in our adversaries or those that are reproachable in the men I have followed.'[415] In short, let us keep our vigilance and clear perception, avoid partisanship and prejudices which affect the position we hold in a social and particularly political community. The utmost wisdom is to follow our author: 'I do not know how to involve myself so deeply and so entirely. When my will gives me over to one party, it is not with so violent an obligation that my understanding is infected by it.'[416] It is to avoid infecting their understanding that a lot of intellectuals decline the offer to be admitted into the Party."[417]

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410 Montaigne, *Essays,* 629.
411 Montaigne, *Essays,* 117.
412 Montaigne, *Essays,* 799.
413 Montaigne, *Essays,* 800.
414 Montaigne, *Essays,* 800.
415 Montaigne, *Essays,* 774.
416 Montaigne, *Essays,* 774.
417 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 312-13. Tuong's quotation in full : Et maintenant, face aux communists, quelle attitude adopter pour se conserver dans l'intégrité et l'authenticité de son être ? Ecoutons notre maître : « moy, je replie ma veue au dedans, je la plante, je l'amuse ». Le mot d'ordre « estre à soy » ne peut être exécuté que dans « l'arrière boutique ». « Il faut soustraire ce seul coing à la communauté et conjugale et filiale et civile ». De cet observatoire où nous nous observons nous-mêmes, nous pouvons « estre spectateurs de la vie des autres hommes », « pour en juger et régler » la nôtre… « Le plus seur estoit de me fier à moy mesme de moy et de ma nécessité ». Comme nous vivons des temps difficiles, et assistons « à ce notable spectacle de notre mort publique », sachons que « dans cette confusion où nous sommes depuis trente ans, tout homme… se veoid à chaque heure sur le poinct de l'entier renversement de sa fortune ». Dès lors, la seule attitude digne,-même si nous sommes obligés de prendre une position publique, doit être de ne pas « mes-congoistre ny les qualités louables en nos adversaires, ni celles qui sont reprochables en ceulx que nous avons suivis ». En un mot garder sa vigilance et sa clairvoyance, éviter les partis-pris et les préjugés auxquels incline la place qu'on tient dans une communauté sociale et surtout politique. La suprême sagesse est de suivre notre auteur : « Je ne sais pas m'engager si profondément et si entier : quand ma volonté me donne à un party ce n'est pas d'une si violente obligation que mon entendement s'en

The key message here that Tuong takes from Montaigne is one of intellectual humility and honesty, to focus one's mind on what is true rather than be easily swayed away from everything our enemies say and towards everything our friends say, to not ignore the laudable qualities in our adversaries nor what is reproachable in those we follow. For Tuong, the kind of Vietnamese person that should be formed is one who thinks for his or her self.

infect ». C'est pour ne pas infecter leur entendement que pas mal d'intellectuels déclinent l'offre de se faire admettre dans le Parti.

## Conclusion

Nguyen Manh Tuong is an ideal capstone to this book. In a sense, he wants the same "solutions" proffered by the other four thinkers to strengthen Vietnam and provide it with a new cosmopolitan national identity.

Similar to Phan Chu Trinh, Tuong wants the Vietnamese to adopt liberal democracy. Yet, whereas Trinh saw liberal democracy as reviving Confucianism in Vietnam, Tuong saw liberal democracy as protecting the Vietnamese from communist dogmatism.

Similar to Nguyen An Ninh, Tuong wants to construct a new Vietnamese culture through freedom of thought. Yet, while Ninh did not have in mind a particular role-model for the Vietnamese, Tuong saw Montaigne as their ideal role-model.

Similar to Pham Quynh, Tuong wants to bridge and harmonize West and East. Tuong writes,

> "The essential problem to which I have focused my entire intellectual life is that of the meeting between West and East, in opposition to the thesis of Rudyard Kipling who denies such possibility. I assign myself the task of aiding the mutual comprehension of these two worlds, on the basis of which their meeting can take place. Each world has its own scale of values which sometimes clash with one another. The meeting, on the basis of comprehension, is accompanied by reciprocal aid between the two worlds in order to complement and shape each other for the greater good of humanity. It is in this direction that I will engage my reflections to complete the work of my life."[418]

[418] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 329. Kipling famously wrote, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," in his poem "The Ballade of East and West"

Yet, while Quynh was far more rooted in Eastern tradition, Tuong had less commitment to Eastern ideas while wanting teach the Vietnamese about Western skepticism, democratic accountability, and law.

Out of the other four thinkers, though, Nguyen Manh Tuong shares a special tension with Ho Chi Minh. They both are concerned with creating the "new Vietnamese man." Tuong writes, "the East, and particularly Viet Nam, faces a number of difficulties in the search for solutions to problems that are both important and urgent. For example, there is the problem of forming the new man."[419] However, they each have different interpretations of what that means. Whose vision of a "new man" was more appropriate for Vietnam in 1956 at the time that Tuong was giving his criticisms?

We might go about answering this by first thinking about who is most appropriate for *us* who live in modern Western liberal democracies today. It is probably Nguyen Manh Tuong. Tuong's arguments do not come across as surprising or novel because we are accustomed to thinking that dogmatism is bad and skeptical criticism is good. However, Tuong's arguments were radical and innovative for the Vietnamese at the time. Before Tuong's criticisms, and during the Vietnamese struggle to expel French colonizers (from the time of Ho Chi Minh's return to Vietnam in 1941 to French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954), Tuong's skepticism would surely have been inappropriate. If the aim is to defeat colonizers, unity is needed. Skepticism and free speech are not tools for unification, and unified devotion to dogma is more useful for generating the power

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[419] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 329.

needed to defeat an enemy. For this purpose, Ho Chi Minh's emphasis on unity, as we saw in the previous chapter, is more appropriate.

In order to resist foreign dehumanization, Ho correctly prioritized the collective interest over individual interests. Ho attacked "individualism" and promoted selfless sacrifice for the cause. The difference between Ho and Tuong can be seen in how they each start a particular piece of writing of theirs. Ho begins one article by stressing the importance of the collective. "Ever since the beginning of its existence mankind has had to struggle against nature… Alone, he cannot get the better of nature and subsist."[420] He goes on to argue that this means the collectivity is more necessary than ever if the Vietnamese are to defeat the French: "Our era being a civilized, revolutionary era, one must rely all the more on the force of the collective, of society, in all undertakings. More than ever the individual cannot stand apart but must join the collective, join society."[421]

Now compare this to Nguyen Manh Tuong. Tuong begins a chapter in his memoir in a nearly identical way as Ho Chi Minh did above. Tuong starts by drawing our attention to how humans are born into the world and need their community, without which they would be helpless. "Since the earliest times, humans have been used to living in a community."[422] However, Tuong takes the logic in a different direction than Ho, invoking, once again, Montaigne's *back-shop*:

> "But, beyond the limits of physical and material existence extends the boundless and infinite world of feelings and of the heart. The community neither wants to nor can interfere in this. This back-shop constitutes a laboratory where internal

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420 Ho Chi Minh, *Down with Colonialism!* ed. Walden Bello (London: Verso Books, 2007), 152.
421 Ibid.
422 Tuong, *Excommunié,* 316.

> decisions are made, which dictate to the individual the actions that carry his personality and express his or her will."[423]

The answer to the question of who has the better vision of the 'new Vietnamese man' depends. While dogmatism and conformity are more appropriate for producing unity and power to defeat a foreign oppressor, skepticism and freedom of thought is more appropriate once the society is no longer oppressed by an outside.

Thus, the ideological struggle between Ho and Tuong represents a classic tension in politics. From 600 B.C. to the present day, writes Bertrand Russell, "philosophers have been divided into those who wished to tighten social bonds and those who wished to relax them." Yet, in the case of Vietnam, this tension is resolved once we take into consideration whether the society is free from foreign domination or not. When dominated by outsiders, tightening social bonds is more appropriate, but when free from outside domination, relaxing social bonds is more appropriate. Of course, as is well known, it is also the case that rulers sometimes exaggerate or even fabricate foreign enemies, using them as a pretext to restrict domestic civil liberties. Yet, in the case of Vietnam during French colonialism, those who followed Ho Chi Minh saw clearly that French colonialism oppressed Vietnam. There was little question, then, that unity was needed. Yet, even after independence, should not social bonds be relaxed? Perhaps. However, some continue to see enemies and threats. Indeed, only a few months after defeating the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Ho Chi Minh had a new foreign enemy in Vietnam: American military presence.

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[423] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 316.

Yet, even if there were no other enemies, Ho Chi Minh never envisioned a post-victory 'unclenching of fists and relaxing of fingers.' Even if the day came that the Vietnamese banished away colonizers and imperialists once and for all, Ho never quite wanted to encourage individual freedom of expression, or laws that would protect individual rights. Ho's dream was a world with few laws but a lot of virtue. He wanted everyone to always be working on themselves to align their private desires with the group's. For Ho, with or without enemies, the 'fingers' must never come apart too much.

Despite all this, we know that (literally) maintaining clenched fists for too long is not good or healthy. It can lead to arthritis, pain, and swelling, not to mention be indicative of anxiety and stress that cause harm to the body in the long run. Thus, Nguyen Manh Tuong appears to be more appropriate, at least as a goal, so long as there are no threats to society. To continue the metaphor, Tuong believed 'fingers' must always be kept as relaxed as much as possible. While clenched fists may sometimes be necessary to fight off a bully, only relaxed fingers can allow one to play the piano or write poetry on a typewriter.

Yet, it would probably be more accurate to promote a happy medium. Fingers never get much done if they are totally clenched or totally relaxed. Tightening *and* loosening are required for dexterity and coordination, such as when one paints or knits beautiful scarves.

At the end of Tuong's life, he could forgive the communists for condemning him to "endure the throes of hunger by depriving me of my means of livelihood in teaching

and law practice,... for they know not what they do."[424] However, he would not forgive the communists for one thing: preventing him from helping to form the Vietnamese 'new man.' They prevented him from teaching a generation of Vietnamese the ideas of French thinkers, whom he saw as critical, free thinkers, specifically citing Montaigne when his interlocutor asks for examples:

> "But what I cannot forgive them for is depriving me of decades of happiness from training generations of intellectuals, as I did prior to their conquest of power, that is to say, a whole youth endowed with a high level of knowledge in the French language and literature, men equipped with French wisdom and a culture of quality which would have enabled them to govern their vessel through the pitfalls of existence. I have been unable to pass onto them the torch that has illuminated my mind and lit my steps in the human community."[425]

Tuong sees in French culture valuable resources for coping with human existence. It did not matter to him that these resources happened to come from thinkers who were part of the same nation that oppressed Vietnam.

Similarly, Ho Chi Minh began his speech on September 2, 1945 that declared independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with words familiar to all Americans: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."[426] A moment later, he cited the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Ho believed in these words even though he referred to the French and, later, Americans as enemy imperialists.

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[424] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 311.
[425] Tuong, *Excommunié,* 311.
[426] Ho Chi Minh, *Down With Colonialism!,* 51.

All of the thinkers we have explored in this dissertation conducted this kind of engaged comparative political theory. They left their home (literally, figuratively, culturally, and disciplinarily) to seek in other cultures and traditions the best ideas for them.

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