Phan Chu Trinh's Democratic Confucianism

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Abstract: A consensus on three claims has emerged in literature that explores the relationship between Confucianism and democracy: 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. Why, then, does Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926), Vietnam's celebrated nationalist of the French colonial period, argue 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? The answer is that Trinh 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.

Introduction

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."[1] 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

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[1]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.

Vietnam to gain the necessary strength for independence. The proper "med-icine" that could accomplish this, thought Trinh, was the adoption of European liberalism and the form of government that comes from liberalism: democracy.

This 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.[2] Although some scholars have tried to counter this negative stereotype by showing that Confucianism and liberalism can at least learn from each other,[3] they would still agree with Eske Møllgaard's statement that any "attempt to con-strue Confucianism as a liberal philosophy is an illusion."[4] 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 gov-ernment 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."[5] Liberal-democratic insti-tutions, Sungmoon Kim argues, "are not socially relevant in East Asian soci-eties."[6] 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 Asians are still deeply saturated, some-times without their awareness—in other words, if democracy were a Confucian democracy."[7]

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[2]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.

[3]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.

[4]Eske J. Møllgaard, "Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies," *Dao* 14, no. 3 (2015): 394.

[5]Daniel Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya, and David Martin Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 17.

[6]Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 10.

[7]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

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 article 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,"[8] 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 Western things, I am highly ignorant."[9] 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 essay 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

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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.

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

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

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 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 essay 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."[10] Confucianism, which downplays individualism and instead can emphasize healthy "nonexploitative hierarchy," also has democratic

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

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."[11] 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 route to democracy."[12] 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."[13] 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."[14] 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 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

[11]Ibid.
[12]Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy,* 15.
[13]Ibid., 201.
[14]Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia,* 10.

contemporary Confucianism."[15] 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."[16] 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."[17] 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 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."[18] 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.[19] 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

[15]Shaun O'Dwyer, "Democracy and Confucian Values," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 1 (2003): 51.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Hall and Ames, "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," 132.

[18]Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 166.

[19]Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Confucians have valued since ancient times."[20] 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.

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 under-represented 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

[20]Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 18.

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 (1858–1945) 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.[21] 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 Bội Châu (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 able to speak at length about the American Revolution.[22] Inspired by Japan's Meiji restoration and military defeat of the Russians in 1905, Trinh went to Japan to learn about their modernization

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[21]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).

[22]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.

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.[23] 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 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.[24] 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

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[23]For more about Trinh's time in France, see Sinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, 27–36.

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

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 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."[25] 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).

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

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[25]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.

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.[26] 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.[27]

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 theory and his prescription for the Vietnamese (ME, 113). Morality (humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness,

[26]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).

[27]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.

diligence, and frugality) is a set of goals that make up the self-cultivation com-
ponent 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*]."[28] 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 mis-
interpreted Confucianism to justify their despotism.[29] Trinh provides a
lengthy critique of Vietnam's monarchical tradition. He has five main criti-
cisms: kings tricked the people into blind obedience, violated their rights, pre-
vented 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 them-
selves '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

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[28]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.

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

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).[30] 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 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,

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[30]Phan Châu Trinh, *Toàn Tập*, 245.

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."[31]

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

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

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 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.[32]

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"

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[32]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.

(*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.[33]

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 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

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

"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*)."[34] 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 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

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

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."[35]

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."[36] 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 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

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[35]Vinh Sinh, *Phan Châu Trinh*, 21.

[36]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."

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."[37]

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 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

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[37]Trinh, *Toàn Tập*, 247.

the monarch."[38] 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 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

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[38]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.

knowledge, particularly of scientific and technological methods but also of "parliamentary political systems," actually had Chinese origins.[39] 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 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."[40]

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."[41] A "China-origins" claim may have been appropriate in China whose "Qing empire matched the British one in its 'universalistic pretensions.'"[42] 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 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.

[39]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.

[40]Ibid., 659.

[41]Ibid., 662.

[42]Leigh Jenco, *Changing Referents: Learning across Space and Time in China and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

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."[43] 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 essay, in which 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.[44] 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.[45] 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.

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

[44]Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 273.

[45]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.