

*Overtured Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan Boi Chau.* Translated by Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.

Phan Boi Chau is a name that is very familiar to most Vietnamese, but rarely recognized beyond Vietnam. Born in 1867, Phan was arguably the most prominent leader of Vietnam's independence movement during the first few decades of the twentieth century, until the mantle was passed to Ho Chi Minh. In some ways perhaps, Phan was Vietnam's closest equivalent to China's Sun Yat-Sen. This book is an English translation of Phan's autobiography, penned between 1928 and 1929. It was written covertly at night, on scrap paper taken from used notebooks, in literary Chinese characters, just in case his house was raided by the French *sûreté*.

Phan was born in Nam Dan district, in Nghe An province, which was also Ho Chi Minh's birthplace. (It is remarkable how many of Vietnam's nationalists and revolutionaries have hailed from Nghe An.) While undoubtedly a very gifted student, Phan took six years to pass his provincial examinations, in 1900, when he came top. After having spent five years journeying around Vietnam, Phan travelled to Japan in 1905, in a bid to seek Japanese assistance for an independence struggle against French colonial rule, under the auspices of the Dong Du (Go East) movement. But an agreement between Paris and Tokyo, signed in 1907, to mutually respect the other's sphere of influence led to Phan being expelled from Japan, and his relocation to southern China, where he was to remain based until 1925 (punctuated by sporadic visits to Thailand, Japan, and Korea). While in China, Phan sought to elicit China's assistance in his struggle, but his various efforts met with little success.

This was to be the full extent of Phan's foreign journeying. In contrast to Ho Chi Minh, Phan did not travel widely, and had what the translators of this autobiography regard as a "superficial" knowledge of Japan — on which he initially aspired to model Vietnam — and particularly the West. Phan never learnt to speak French, the language of his colonial oppressors, nor did he have much understanding of the workings of their regime. This can be explained in part by his appar-

ent belief that some form of pan-Asian force would ultimately rid Vietnam of the French.

It was in December 1924 that Ho Chi Minh met Phan in Canton. Ho seemed not to have been very impressed with Phan, noting that “he does not understand how to organize the masses. In our communications I have explained to him the necessity for organization and the futility of ill prepared actions”. Ho’s criticism of Phan seems valid, and helps shed light on why Ho Chi Minh would ultimately lead the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam, given the lack of organizational competence and coherent policies shown by Phan and other nationalists at this time.

In 1925, Phan was captured in Shanghai and transported back to Hanoi and the infamous Hoa Lo prison (later to be known as the “Hanoi Hilton” by captured U.S. airmen). A subsequent trial resulted in Phan being sentenced to a life of penal servitude, but an amnesty was given shortly after, following vigorous lobbying from various groups. The fact that French authorities gave Phan an amnesty suggests perhaps that he was not perceived to be a major threat by the colonialists. However, the translators of this book are probably right to suggest that the widespread lobbying for Phan’s release from prison — along with the scenes that accompanied the funeral of Phan Chau Trinh, one year later — “may be regarded as the first widespread, public, and powerful expressions of nationalism that modern Vietnam had ever witnessed”.

Phan was to spend the remaining fifteen years of his life in the city of Hue, in central Vietnam, leading a relatively quiet life. Although the French kept a close watch on Phan, his movements were not greatly constrained, and he became a well-known “man of letters”. Phan occasionally contributed articles to a newspaper called *Tieng Dan* (The people’s voice), wrote poetry, and penned two books on Confucian and cultural themes. An offer by Phan, extended in both 1929 and 1931, to act as mediator between the French rulers and the communists, was not taken up by Vietnam’s colonial rulers.

Phan himself declared “my history is entirely a history of failure”. This self-deprecatory remark is perhaps overstating the limited tangible impact Phan had on ejecting the French from his homeland, although

it is hard not to come away from this autobiography without wondering whether he could have achieved much more. Phan was at times naïve (particularly with regard to China's intentions in Vietnam), and clearly lacked the intellectual rigour, organizational discipline, and coherent world-view of Ho Chi Minh. And this is something he himself appears to have acknowledged. Phan is quoted as saying:

That my revolutionary career finally ended in failure is because I have passion but no ability. But there is no doubt that our nation will achieve independence eventually. Now there are people more able than our generation to see to the completion of the work left unfinished by us. Have you heard of Nguyen Ai Quoc?

Nguyen Ai Quoc later became known as Ho Chi Minh.

Phan died in 1940, shortly before French colonial rule was irreparably undermined by Japanese occupation during World War II. This English translation of his autobiography is both very welcome, and very well executed. For those seeking to understand the nationalist struggle in Vietnam prior to 1925 and the rise of Ho Chi Minh, this book is an important addition to the existing literature.

Nick FREEMAN

---

Nick Freeman is Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Singapore.