

5 The Vision of Modernisation

French colonialism was resisted at many levels and in various forms. But all nationalists had to grapple with one set of questions: What was it to be Modern? What was it to be Nationalist? In order to be modern, was it necessary to regard tradition as backward and reject all earlier ideas and social practices? Was it necessary to consider the 'West' as the symbol of development and civilisation, and try and copy the West?

Different answers were offered to such questions. Some intellectuals felt that Vietnamese traditions had to be strengthened to resist the domination of the West, while others felt that Vietnam had to learn from the West even while opposing foreign domination. These differing visions led to complex debates, which could not be easily resolved.

In the late nineteenth century, resistance to French domination was very often led by Confucian scholar-activists, who saw their world crumbling. Educated in the Confucian tradition, Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) was one such nationalist. He became a major figure in the anti-colonial resistance from the time he formed the Revolutionary Society (Duy Tan Hoi) in 1903, with Prince Cuong De as the head.

Phan Boi Chau met the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) in Yokohama in 1905. Phan's most influential book, *The History of the Loss of Vietnam* was written under the strong influence and advice of Qichao. It became a widely read bestseller in Vietnam and China and was even made into a play. The book focuses on two connected themes: the loss of sovereignty and the severing of ties with China – ties that bound the elites of the two countries within a shared culture. It is this double loss that Phan laments, a lament that was typical of reformers from within the traditional elite.

Other nationalists strongly differed with Phan Boi Chau. One such was Phan Chu Trinh (1871-1926). He was intensely hostile to the monarchy and opposed to the idea of resisting the French with the help of the court. His desire was to establish a democratic republic. Profoundly influenced by the democratic ideals of the West, he did not want a wholesale rejection of Western civilisation. He accepted the French revolutionary ideal of liberty but charged the French for not abiding by the ideal. He demanded that the French set up legal and educational institutions, and develop agriculture and industries.

Source A

In Japan, Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh spent time together, discussing their visions of Vietnamese independence, and debating their differences. This is what Phan Boi Chau later wrote about their discussions:

'Thereafter over more than ten days, he and I debated time and again, and our opinions were diametrically opposed. That is to say, he wished to overthrow the monarchy in order to create a basis for the promotion of popular rights; I, on the contrary, maintained that first the foreign enemy should be driven out, and after our nation's independence was restored we could talk about other things. My plan was to make use of the monarchy, which he opposed absolutely. His plan was to raise up the people to abolish the monarchy, with which I absolutely disagreed. In other words, he and I were pursuing one and the same goal, but our means were considerably different.'

Source

Discuss

What ideas did Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh share in common? What did they differ on?

New words

Republic – A form of government based on popular consent and popular representation. It is based on the power of the people as opposed to monarchy

5.1 Other Ways of Becoming Modern: Japan and China

Early Vietnamese nationalists had a close relationship with Japan and China. They provided models for those looking to change, a refuge for those who were escaping French police, and a location where a wider Asian network of revolutionaries could be established.

In the first decade of the twentieth century a 'go east movement' became popular. In 1907-08 some 300 Vietnamese students went to Japan to acquire modern education. For many of them the primary objective was to drive out the French from Vietnam, overthrow the puppet emperor and re-establish the Nguyen dynasty that had been deposed by the French. These nationalists looked for foreign arms and help. They appealed to the Japanese as fellow Asians. Japan had modernised itself and had resisted colonisation by the West. Besides, its victory over Russia in 1907 proved its military capabilities. Vietnamese students established a branch of the Restoration Society in Tokyo but after 1908, the Japanese Ministry of Interior clamped down on them. Many, including Phan Boi Chau, were deported and forced to seek exile in China and Thailand.

Developments in China also inspired Vietnamese nationalists. In 1911, the long established monarchy in China was overthrown by a popular movement under Sun Yat-sen, and a Republic was set up. Inspired by these developments, Vietnamese students organised the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam (Viet-Nam Quan Phuc Hoi). Now the nature of the anti-French independence movement changed. The objective was no longer to set up a constitutional monarchy but a democratic republic.

Soon, however, the anti-imperialist movement in Vietnam came under a new type of leadership.



Fig. 9 – Cartoon of Vietnamese nationalists chasing away imperialists.
In all such nationalist representations of struggle the nationalists appear heroic, marching ahead, while the imperial forces flee.