

A LOOK BACK ON THE VERSE OF PHAN VĂN TRỊ AFTER 130 YEARS

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Abstract

Phan Văn Trị (潘文值 1830–?) was a prominent writer in Cochinchina in the late nineteenth century. He achieved the rank of senior bachelor (舉人 cử nhân) in the Confucian court examination at a young age but never joined the imperial bureaucracy. Despite living an agrarian life as a layman, he was popular all over Cochinchina for his talent in poetry creation. When the three provinces of Eastern Cochinchina were taken by the French, Phan Văn Trị led a patriotic writing movement against Tôn Thọ Tường (尊壽祥) and his idea of surrendering to the colonizers. Phan Văn Trị was famous for his polemical poems, object poems, and pastoral poems. This article provides a brief literature review of Phan Văn Trị's writings, describes the condition of his texts, and evaluates his poetry.

Keywords: Cochinchinese literature; Object poetry; Pen war between Phan Văn Trị and Tôn Thọ Tường; Phan Văn Trị.

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1. THE ISSUES OF PHAN VĂN TRỊ'S LIFE AND LITERARY TEXTS

Not counting *Gia Định thất thủ phú*, the *fu* written after the defeat of Gia Định was first collected and translated into Quốc ngữ by Trương Vĩnh Ký and noted as anonymous in *Saigon d'autrefois* in 1882. The Quốc ngữ translation and introduction by Phan Văn Trị began in 1889 with *Con rận thơ* [The Poetic Lice], which was collected and introduced in *Miscellanées*, Number 2 (June 1889), also by Trương Vĩnh Ký. This 130-year journey of studying the writings of Phan Văn Trị has received contributions from many generations of scholars and researchers. These contributions familiarize readers with his heritage and help to glorify his name in the realm of Vietnamese literature and culture.

A few researchers should be remembered for their great contributions to the study of Phan Văn Trị. Trương Vĩnh Ký started the journey (as stated before), followed by Lê Quang Chiêu, a family member on the side of Phan Văn Trị's wife. He was the first to introduce a series of Phan Văn Trị's poems in the collection, *Quốc âm thi hiệp tuyển* [Anthology of Poems Written in Vietnamese Script] (Lê, 1903), which consists of 28 poems with or without the author's name. Following him were many studies and collections, such as *Quốc âm thi tập* [Collection of Poems Written in Vietnamese Script] in 1979 by Huỳnh Tịnh Của, *Thi phú văn từ* [Works of Poetry, Fu, Prose, and Ci] in 1912 by Võ Sâm, a series of research articles in *Nam Phong Magazine* from 1919 to 1926 by Chương Dân and Lâm Tấn Phác, *Nam âm* [Vietnamese Sound] in 1925 by Nguyễn Văn Kinh, *Văn đàn bảo giám* [Primer Literary Collection] in 1926 by Trần Trung Viên, *Thi sĩ Trung Nam* [Poets of Central and Southern Vietnam] in 1943 by Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Phan Văn Trị (1830–1910)* by Nhất Tâm, *Cuộc bút chiến giữa Phan Văn Trị - Tôn Thọ Tường* [The Pen War between Phan Văn Trị and Tôn Thọ Tường] in 1957 by Thái Bạch, and *Thơ văn yêu nước Nam Bộ nửa sau thế kỷ XIX* [Patriotic Literary Works by Southern Vietnamese Authors in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century] in 1976 by Ca Văn Thỉnh and Bảo Định Giang. The conference, *The Patriotic Poet Phan Văn Trị (1830–1910)*, commemorating his 155th birthday and 75th anniversary of his death, held from 31 October to 2 November 1985 in Cần Thơ, was an important landmark in the study of Phan Văn Trị. The post-conference publication led to many books by researchers, such as *Nghĩ về Phan Văn Trị* [On Phan Văn Trị] by Nguyễn Khắc Thuần and Nguyễn Quảng Tuân published by Văn nghệ Cần Thơ in 1985, *Phan Văn Trị cuộc đời và tác phẩm* [Phan Văn Trị – Life and Works] in 2001 and *Tác phẩm Phan Văn Trị* [Works by Phan Văn Trị] in 1987 by the organizers of the conference on Phan Văn Trị (Ban chủ nhiệm hội thảo Phan Văn Trị, 1987).

These researchers have proposed and solved several issues concerning Phan Văn Trị: his life, his homeland, and his relations in Hanh Thông village (Gia Định Province) and Bình Thủy village (Cần Thơ Province).

However, a few issues remain unresolved or controversial. Did he really die in 1910 as claimed in most publications? When did he come to live in Phong Điền, Cần Thơ? Did he marry Đinh Thị Thanh during the 1870s in his 40s or during the 1880s in his 50s? Was his wife, Đinh Thị Thanh, born in 1840, 1850, or 1860? She remarried after his death. If he really died in 1910, she would be somewhere in her 50s to 70s. Was it possible

for a woman of that age to remarry, considering the historical context? In his *Nam Kỳ phong tục nhơn vật điển ca* [Verse on Cochinchinese Customs and Historical Figures], Nguyễn Liên Phong writes about Phan Văn Trị: “Cử Trị ăn ở lạ lùng/ Áo quần xịt xạt điên khùng quá tay/ Gặp Tường thời Trị mắng ngay/ Bởi vì tả tũu ít hay kiêng dè (...) Đều là tương trợ thành danh/ Đã lâu về cõi âm minh xa miên” [Bachelor Trị lived an unusual life/ In messy, crazy outfits/ He cursed Tường every time they met/ Never felt restrained in his drunken state (...) They helped to popularize each other’s name/ They left to the other world quite long ago] (Nguyễn, 2014, p. 172). From this, Nguyễn Liêng Phong claimed that Bachelor Trị (Phan Văn Trị) and Tôn Thọ Tường died before 1909, countering the widespread belief that Phan Văn Trị’s death was in 1910. So, when did he die? Nguyễn Khuê and Cao Tự Thanh analyzed *Khóc đầu Hạng Võ* [Eulogy for Xiang Yu], believed to be the eulogy of Tôn Thọ Tường for Bachelor Trị, and claimed that Bachelor Trị died before 1875 (the year of Tôn Thọ Tường’s death), so it could be 1874 (Nguyễn & Cao, 2011, p. 300).

It is also unclear why Phan Văn Trị did not join the imperial bureaucracy. He attained the rank of senior bachelor (*cử nhân*) in 1849, the same year as Nguyễn Thông (1827–1884). At the time, when Nguyễn Thông was 22, Phan Văn Trị was only 19. Nguyễn Thông then became a government bureaucrat and his highest rank was *Bổ chánh* [provincial treasurer] of Quảng Ngãi Province. So why did Bachelor Trị not join the imperial bureaucracy? It is not plausible that he grew bored of the bureaucracy, since he did take the court examination instead of choosing to be a recluse like Võ Trường Toản, or, in other words, he intended to become a bureaucrat. Was the “problematic” family background the cause, as obscurely mentioned in a verse from an anonymous eulogy on the death of Phan Văn Trị: “Một đời oan chịu đã mòn hơi/ Hà huống oan oan đến chín đời” [It is horrifying that a generation must suffer from injustice/ Let alone nine generations] (Nhất, 1956, p. 45), and as what Phan Văn Trị, himself, spoke of his family background in his poem *Hột lúa* [Grains of Rice]: “Ông cha giúp nước ðà ghe thuở/ Dòng giống nuôi dân biết mấy đời” [My ancestors have helped save the country for ages/ My family has raised the people for generations]? What is the problem with that problematic family background? How were his ancestors? We have not had a clear idea of it.

Regarding textual issues, if Phan Văn Trị did not die in 1910 but prior to that year, then it is not known whether he had already read *Quốc âm thi hiệp tuyển* [Anthology of Poems Written in Vietnamese Script] by Lê Quang Chiêu, which was published in 1903. It is thus not really persuasive to base our identification of Phan Văn Trị’s literary works only on Lê Quang Chiêu’s anthology. Therefore, to establish a relatively reliable bibliography of Phan Văn Trị’s works, it is necessary to examine different literary anthologies prior to 1945 and omit pieces by authors other than Phan Văn Trị. We have carried out this task and find that our bibliography of Phan Văn Trị’s literary works is rather similar to the ones published in *Nam Phong Magazine* by Chương Dân (in 1919) and Lâm Tấn Phác (from 1923 to 1926), and to those by Nhất Tâm (published in 1956) and Ca Văn Thỉnh, Bảo Định Giang (published in 1962). The corpus of Phan Văn Trị’s works accordingly consists of 45 poems classified into three different types: object poetry [thơ vịnh vật], polemical poetry [thơ bút chiến (xướng họa)], and pastoral poetry.

- Object poetry (18 poems): *Hột lúa* [Grains of rice], *Con mèo* [The cat], *Cá thia thia* [The betta fish] (2 poems), *Cối xay* [The rice mill], *Con cóc* [The toad], *Thú đi câu* [The hobby of fishing], *Câu cá* [Fishing], *Thợ may* [The tailor], *Quán nước* [The teahouse], *Chùa hư* [The damaged pagoda], *Cào cào* [The locust], *Con rận* [The lice], *Kiến hôi cắn kiến vàng* [A stink ant bites a green ant], *Con muỗi* [The mosquito], *Con cua* [The crab], *Ông táo* [The kitchen god], and *Cục cứt* [The turd].
- Polemical poetry (13 poems): Responses to *Tự thuật* [Confessions] (10 poems), *Tôn Phu nhân quy Thục* [Lady Sun submitted to Shu Han], *Từ Thúc quy Tào* [Xu Shu surrendered to Cao Cao], and *Hát bội* [Classic Opera].
- Scenery-inspired and nostalgic poetry (13 poems): *Mất Vĩnh Long* [Losing Vĩnh Long], *Cảm cảnh An Giang* [Compassion for An Giang], *Cảm hoài* [Nostalgia] (10 poems), and *Câu đối điệu Cai tổng Vĩnh* [Eulogistic antithetical couplet for Canton Chief Vĩnh].
- Poems attributed to Phan Văn Trị: *Làm khi đỗ cử nhân* [Writing after achieving the rank of senior bachelor], *Cảm thuật* [Conveyance of feelings], *Đồn lính trong làng* [The garrison in the village], *Than thời sự* [Lamenting over reality] (2 poems), *Vịnh Kiều* [On Kiều], and *Gia Định thất thủ phú* [The *fu* written after the defeat of Gia Định].

2. OBJECT POEMS BY PHAN VĂN TRỊ

Object poetry, with 18 poems, is an important part in Phan Văn Trị's literary oeuvre. These poems can be divided into three categories based on their themes:

- (1) Object poems demonstrating the mettle of a Confucian *junzi*;
- (2) Poems describing objects to express the author's aspirations;
- (3) Sarcastic poems satirizing and criticizing corrupt bureaucrats and those who persecute ordinary people.

Several poems are understood differently, sometimes contradictorily, because of their ambiguity and the presence of polysemantic images. However, if these poems are carefully read, there may be an accurate way of understanding them.

The poem, *The betta fish*, exemplifies this point.

- The betta fish no. 1

*Đồng loại sao người chẳng ngõ ngành,
Hay là một lúa phải nung gan?*

*Trương vì so độ vài gang nước,
Đâu miệng hơn thua nửa tác nhang.
Rán sức giãy lâu đà tróc vảy,
Nín hơi trót buổi lại phùng mang.
Ra tài cửa Võ¹ chưa nên mặt,
Cấc có khen cho khéo nhôn nhàng.*

Translation:

Of the same species, why still relentless,
Or do peers need to irritate one another?
Spreading fins, competing for some space
Opposing each other just to get a little win.
Straining for a while then having some scales peeled off,
Holding breath then flaring gills.
Trying to leap the Dragon Gate but in vain,
Giving some ironic compliments as a joke.

- The betta fish no. 2

*Đầm thắm mưa xuân trở mấy màu,
Vì tài vì sắc mới kình nhau.
Đua chen hai nước toan giành trước,
Lòng lầy đua hơi chẳng chịu sau.
Mường tượng rồng đua nơi biển thẳm,
Mía mai cù dẫy dưới sông sâu.
Thở hơi sóng dợn nhãn lòng nước,
Mắt thấy ai ai cũng cúi đầu.*

Translation:

Bursting with various colors in gentle spring rain
Fighting each other for talent and beauty.
Competitively jostling to win,

¹ Cửa Võ (or Vũ môn): A stone cliff which is located on the upstream of the Yangtze River (Sichuan, China). It is said that a fish leaping over that cliff can become a dragon.

Ardently breathing not to fail.
 It looks like dragons competing down the vast oceans,
 Or unicorns arising from the deep rivers.
 When they breathe, the waves whisper as the patriotism seethes,
 Everyone who sees that bows their head.

(Nhất, 1956, p. 16)

The meaning of the first poem is in conflict with that of the second one. In the first poem, the betta fish's image is described in a negative way: (Of the same species, why still relentless/ Opposing each other just to get a little win/ Giving some ironic compliments ...), and it is rather plausible to claim that through this piece, Phan Văn Trị wanted to criticize those who often argue and battle with their peers. The line, "Trying to leap the Dragon Gate but in vain," is derived from an ancient story of the carp that could not leap the Dragon Gate. In other words, the line refers to someone who failed in the imperial examination. Is it Tôn Thọ Tường? And are the betta fish battles mentioned in the poem allusions to the fact that Tường started acrimonious polemical debates with other intellectuals in Cochinchina to defend his decision to surrender and thus betray his country?

In contrast, the betta fish's image in the second poem is very graceful. It is also a battling fish, yet it is portrayed differently: "Bursting with various colors in gentle spring rain," "dragons competing," "unicorn arising," etc. The last two lines of the piece: "When they breathe, the waves whisper as the patriotism seethes/ Everyone who sees bows their heads" can only be used to allude to patriots. In a nutshell, the poem *The betta fish no. 2* mentions those who battle and dispute with Tôn Thọ Tường, including Phan Văn Trị and his allies. *The betta fish* should not be understood as a single poem, and thus consistency should not be required from the first poem to the second. Instead, *The betta fish* should be understood to consist of two independent poems: the former alludes to the country's traitor, Tôn Thọ Tường, while the latter alludes to patriots like Phan Văn Trị. The two sides battled with each other as do two betta fish.

The cat is also a notable poem that is particularly interesting and beautifully written, but one that also provokes controversy. It is sometimes interpreted as a satire on bureaucrats and officials (Phan Thanh Giản, specifically), while it is also construed as praising those people. We should reread the poem very closely:

*Mấy tầng đài các sải chơn leo,
 Nhảy lẹ chi cho bẫng² giống mèo.
 Chợt ngoảnh mặt hùm nhìn trực thị,
 Chi cho lũ chuột dám vang reo.*

² *Bẫng*: a variant of "bằng" (similar to) used in accordance with the meter of the poem.

*Vuốt nhanh sẵn có vàng khoe sắc,
Vằn vện đành không bụi đóng meo.
Trăm tuổi hồn dầu về chín tuổi,
Nhúm lông để lại giúp trò nghèo.*

Translation:

Spreading its legs to climb into noble places
Animal can hop as fast as cats
When turning back, the mice are so terrified
Of the tiger-like eyes, which are directly gazing at them.
Its claws are sparkling like gold
They are all striped without any dirt or mold
When it may die in the future
Its hair can be used to help poor students.

(Nhất, 1956, p. 11)

The poem is said to have been written after the meeting between Phan Văn Trị and Phan Thanh Giản in the early 1850s. At the time, Phan Văn Trị was a young and talented senior bachelor about 20 years old, while Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1867) was of his father’s generation, about 60 years old, and had held important positions in the imperial bureaucracy, such as Government Minister of the Ministry of Personnel [Thượng thư bộ Lại], member of the Privy Council [Cơ mật viện đại thần], and Viceroy of Cochinchina [Kinh lược sứ Nam Kỳ]. The cat’s image is obviously used to allude to the viceroy. He did “hop” really fast, from an ordinary person in Ba Tri – a remote town by the sea – to ultimately a powerful position in the bureaucratic system under the Nguyễn dynasty. However, Phan Thanh Giản was famous for his uprightness and integrity. He remonstrated with the king and reprimanded greedy officials. The third and fourth lines of the poem mention this reality: “When turning back, the mice are so terrified/ Of the tiger-like eyes, which are directly gazing at them.” At the time, when the French had not yet invaded Cochinchina, Phan Thanh Giản’s reputation was still brilliant, and his “claws” were thus still sharp, and untarnished (Their claws are sparkling like gold/ They are all striped, without any dirt or mold). Moreover, in Phan Văn Trị’s view, even when Phan Thanh Giản dies, his grandeur and kindness can also assist young Confucian students, as a pinch of cat hair can be used to make brush pens. This is an elegant poem since it indicates precisely Phan Thanh Giản’s character. In general, Phan Văn Trị expresses his admiration for Phan Thanh Giản through this poem. Yet, it is evident in this poem that he also teases with power rather than being terrified of it or attempting to adulate, which reflects Phan Văn Trị’s personality realistically.

Object poems written in Nôm script emerged in the time of Nguyễn Trãi, with verses about pine trees, chrysanthemums, bamboo, apricot blossoms, cycads, lotuses, and

sweet osmanthus. They were mostly written to discuss *junzi*'s aspirations. There are also some moralizing poems, such as the one about jasmine. King Lê Thánh Tông tended to compose poems about trivial objects, such as toads, straw scarecrows, brooms, etc., which, however, also present his majestic spirit. Nguyễn Công Trứ's object poems were composed both to present his aspirations and to satirize inept and adulatory bureaucrats. Object poems written by Hồ Xuân Hương are exceptionally unique: they present a play of obscenity and purity, in which dirty riddles with clean answers [đố tục giảng thanh] and clean riddles with dirty answers [đố thanh giảng tục] continuously appear. Phan Văn Trĩ's object poems are diverse in terms of themes and tones: some demonstrate *junzi*-like mettle but are in fact the mettle of patriots (*Grains of rice*, *The betta fish no. 2*, *The rice mill*, *The toad*); some express the writer's feelings and describe the scenery in order to convey his aspiration to save the country, such as *The hobby of fishing*, *Fishing*, *The tailor*, and *The teahouse*; there are also poems satirizing and criticizing corrupt bureaucrats and those who persecute ordinary people, such as *The locust*, *The lice*, *A stink ant bites a green ant*, *The betta fish no.1*, *The mosquito*, *The crab*, *The kitchen god*, and *The turd*.

Among those who wrote object poems in Cochinchina in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Phan Văn Trĩ can thus be considered a first-rate one.

3. POLEMICAL POEMS BY PHAN VĂN TRĨ

Phan Văn Trĩ is mostly famous for his polemical poems, namely *Confessions* (10 poems), *Lady Sun belonged to Shu Han*, *Xu Shu surrendered to Cao Cao*, and *Classic Opera*. The progress of the polemical conversations between Phan Văn Trĩ and Tôn Thọ Tường can be summarized as follows:

- (1) At first, Tôn Thọ Tường composed 10 poems entitled *Confessions* to prove that his submission to the French was justified. Phan Văn Trĩ wrote 10 poems to respond polemically to Tường. Bùi Hữu Nghĩa and Lê Quang Chiêu were Trĩ's allies, and they also wrote poems to debate with Tường.
- (2) Wavering, Tôn Thọ Tường degraded himself by writing *Lady Sun submitted to Shu Han*, comparing himself to a girl following her husband to his home after getting married. Phan Văn Trĩ then responded to that also by a polemical poem, unveiling Tường's hypocrisy.
- (3) Tôn Thọ Tường continued prostituting himself by writing *Xu Shu surrendered to Cao Cao*, implying that he was like Xu Shu, who surrendered to Cao Cao during the period of the Three Kingdoms only to save his mother's life, and that there were other talented people who could contribute to the resistance against the colonizers. He also promised in the poem that after surrendering to Cao Cao (or the French), Xu Shu (or Tường himself) did not assist Cao Cao at all. When Phan Văn Trĩ replied to this poem, he reminded Tôn Thọ Tường of that promise.

- (4) Tôn Thọ Tường once more degraded himself by assuming that he was only a disreputable old monk in *Lão kỹ quy y* [Disreputable old man taking refuge with the Buddha]. Phan Văn Trị and the other patriots won the polemical battle against Tôn Thọ Tường. However, Trị did not continue the debate, but instead composed the poem, *Classic Opera*, using the challenging Xu Shu rhyme scheme [*vân Tì Thù*] to satirize Tôn Thọ Tường and his followers.

First, it is necessary to examine the first pen war between Tôn Thọ Tường and Phan Văn Trị through the collection of polemical poems entitled *Confessions*.

Tôn Thọ Tường began the battle with his opponents by composing 10 Nôm poems written according to the *thủ vĩ ngâm* structure (the first and last line of each poem are alike). Tôn Thọ Tường was among the most well-known Nôm poets in the Bạch Mai poetic society [Bạch Mai thi xã], and he was really famous for his high-class writing talent. Tường's arguments can be outlined briefly as follows:

Confessions No. 1: Evaluation of the power of the French colonizers. According to Tường, the French possessed modern weapons and thus could not be defeated. Moreover, he expressed his love for his country and the people and his worries about the country's fate as well. He therefore advocated that the resistance should surrender.

Confessions No. 2: Tường's current situation. He was rumored to be a bad person, but he was in fact behaving with merit. He assumed that there was not much time left, so his work for the French colonial government was to save the country. He thus ignored the imprecations of others who resisted the French invaders.

Confessions No. 3: The country's current situation was devastating, with the corruption of morality and ethics. He believed that he, himself, still followed moral principles, so he did not pay attention to how others might think of him – “Thân còn chẳng kể kể chi danh” [I do not draw attention to myself, let alone my honor].

Confessions No. 4: In such turmoil, honor and social position did not exist anymore for Tường. He claimed that he was planning to “catch tigers” and “catch big fish”; whereas the resistance movements were suppressed already, which made the Vietnamese “miserable young chicks without their mother.”

Confessions Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8: Tường expressed his compassion for those who vainly attempted to resist the French, then claimed that he did not want to follow the path of the resistance. He conveyed that he should take care of himself first. He did not need others to understand his innocence.

Confessions No. 9: The social situation changed already. The country had been invaded, and a new government was established. It was hence useless to resist against the French colonizers. That very situation led Tường to work for the French government, and he could only accept to “transgress permanent moral principles.”

Confessions No. 10: Tường explained that he could still maintain his allegiance to the country. However, the social situation was irredeemable, and the future was so uncertain. Tường only wished that in the time ahead, “the three provinces of Cochinchina would still be here.”

Phan Văn Trĩ responded to these poems with incisive arguments. His words sprang from his long-lasting resentment of Tường.

In terms of evaluating the current situation, the French cannot be defeated, and the resistance to French colonizers could only lead to failure. There is little difference between Tôn Thọ Tường and Phan Văn Trĩ’s arguments. Nonetheless, Phan Văn Trĩ’s choice was more accurate compared with that of Tường. Phan Văn Trĩ based his arguments on firm and permanent moral and ethical principles in criticizing and reprimanding Tường:

- He claimed that Tường was “filthy” and just “prattling.” He also considered Tường “a stupid guy”: “*Người trí mắng lo danh chẳng chối/ Đứa ngu luống sợ tuổi không chờ*” [An intelligent man ponders how to brighten his reputation/ While a stupid guy may be afraid of getting old] (*Confessions No. 2*).

- He described Tường as “Đứa dại trót đời già cũng dại” [A foolish guy who cannot be more intelligent despite getting old] (*Confessions No. 8*).

- He called Tường “a wild guy” and “a mercantile merchant” who demolished his ancestor’s honor: “*Thân danh chẳng kể thiệt thặng hoang*” [Not count his honor and position, how wild he is], “*Hai cửa trâm anh xô sập ngửa/ Một nhà danh giá xáo tan hoang*” [He pushes his noble doors to collapse/ He demolishes his honorable family], “*Con buôn khắp khởi chưa từng ngọc*” [A mercantile merchant is excited about his first time seeing a gemstone], etc. (*Confessions No. 4*).

(Nhất, 1956, pp. 24-31)

Tường was eventually defeated. This was because his choice was incorrect; he was greedy and a coward, and he always used crooked and deceitful arguments.

After the first polemical battle, realizing that he was overwhelmed, Tôn Thọ Tường compared himself to Lady Sun in *Three Kingdoms*. It is said that Sun Quan, emperor of Eastern Wu, followed Zhou Yu’s plan, pretentiously allowing Lady Sun to become Liu Bei’s wife in order to invite Liu to Eastern Wu and kill him. Zhuge Liang anticipated that intention. Hence, he told Liu Bei to travel to Eastern Wu to marry Lady Sun, yet reminded Liu that on the way to Eastern Wu, he should announce to everyone that he was about to marry Lady Sun according to Sun Quan’s promise. When nearly everyone in Eastern Wu knew about it, Sun Quan’s mother did not allow her son to kill Liu Bei, since she was afraid of being criticized as an unrighteous person. Lady Sun thus became Liu Bei’s wife.

Tôn Thọ Tường borrowed this ancient story to claim that his situation and that of Lady Sun were alike. In other words, he would like to prove that his surrender to the colonial government was plausible and understandable:

*Cật ngựa thanh gươm vện chữ tông,
Ngàn thu rạng tiết gái Giang Đông.
Lìa Ngô bịn rịn chòm mây bạc,
Về Hán trau tria mảnh má hồng.
Son phấn thà cam dày gió bụi,
Đá vàng chi để thẹn non sông?
Ai về nhắn với Châu Công Cảnh,
Thà mất lòng anh đừng bụng chồng.*

Translation:

Riding horse, hand with sword to follow the principle of obedience
To shed luster on the thousand-year virtues of women in Eastern Wu
Leaving Wu, (I was) reluctant to leave (my) hometown's silver cloud
In Shu Han, (I would try to) take care of myself
(I) sacrifice myself to suffer from great misery
Rather than letting (my) country be ashamed
Who can help send Zhou Yu a message,
That (I) should satisfy my husband instead of obeying my brother.

(Ca & Bảo, 1976, p. 153)

Tường's arguments are really hard to criticize, since most Confucian scholars admit that the choice of Lady Sun was morally based. So, was Tường's choice also plausible? Phan Văn Trị responded that:

*Cài trâm sửa tráp³ vện câu tông,
Mặt già trời chiều biệt cỡi đông.
Ngút toả vàng Ngô in sắc trắng,
Duyên về đất Thục đượm màu hồng.*

³ *Tráp*: “tráp” in some texts. Generally speaking, this word has not been thoroughly explained before. In some books, the word is omitted and replaced by the phrase “cài trâm sửa áo” (wearing a brooch, readjusting clothes). However, it is not really persuasive to explain it in this way because clothes should be accompanied with a dress, skirt, scarf, etc., rather than a brooch. In my opinion, based on the exchange principle between the two sounds -p and -t, “tráp” is a variant of “trát” (櫛), which means comb. Hence, the phrase should be “wearing a brooch and readjusting the comb,” which is more acceptable.

*Hai vai tơ tóc bên trời đất,
Một gánh cang thường nặng núi sông.
Anh hỏi Tôn Quyền, anh có biết,
Trai ngay thờ chúa gái thờ chồng!*

Translation:

Wearing a brooch, readjusting the comb to follow the principle
of obedience

The sun has said good-bye to the East.

Eastern Wu fully dyed in white

Being destined to come to Shu Han is rosily happy.

On (my) weak shoulders lies my responsibility to the country

(I) have to carry (my) heavy duties to our fatherland

My brother Sun Quan, do you know?

While a righteous man shows his loyalty to the king, a righteous
woman expresses loyalty to her husband.

(Ca & Bảo, 1976, p. 153)

At first glance, it is evident that Phan Văn Trị did not argue with Tường, appearing to accept all of his arguments. Nevertheless, when reading closely, we may discover that the images of Lady Sun in the two poems differ. Tường's Lady Sun is brave and talented, and she is on her way to Shu Han to shed luster on the virtues of Eastern Wu's women. On the other hand, Trị's Lady Sun is much weaker, more feminine. Moreover, in Trị's poem, the scenario is gloomier. In the poem written by Tường, Lady Sun is reluctant to say farewell to her fatherland and seems unwilling to come to Shu Han, while Trị's Lady Sun is more definite with her decision, viewing her old country "fully dyed in white" and considering her marriage a rosy happiness. Trị's Lady Sun is thus more ordinary. Tường's Lady Sun sacrifices herself to fulfill her duties. In Trị's response, he did not only discuss Lady Sun, but argued from common ethics that everyone has to carry heavy responsibilities and keep following moral and ethical principles, including the most important rule: "While a righteous man shows his loyalty to the king, a righteous woman expresses loyalty to her husband." Tường is thus disclosed to be an unrighteous man. He cannot compare himself to Lady Sun in order to avoid his responsibilities. Trị's response is so convincing. The profundity of Trị's arguments is demonstrated in the fourth line of the poem "be destined to come to Shu Han," which alludes to the fact that Tường surrendered to Western colonizers, since the land of Shu Han was also located in the West. The phrase "wearing a brooch, readjusting the comb" also alludes to the story of Zhuge Liang sending women's ornaments to Sima Yi.

Phan Văn Trĩ's *Lady Sun submitted to Shu Han* is an outstanding polemical poem, which fully shows his intelligence, righteousness, and morality, and thus exemplifies how a polemical poem should be composed.

4. SCENERY-INSPIRED POEMS BY PHAN VĂN TRĨ

Scenery-inspired and nostalgic poems were perhaps written in the sunset of Phan Văn Trĩ's life. The poem *Losing Vĩnh Long* was composed after Vĩnh Long Province was first defeated in March 1862. *Compassion for An Giang* was written after three provinces of Western Cochinchina were invaded by the French, and at the same time as Phan Văn Trĩ wandered around many provinces, such as An Giang, Kiên Giang, and Hà Tiên. Ten pieces entitled *Nostalgia* could also have been written during this time, or later. These are not poems written to express his aspirations, but to describe the scenery and convey his feelings. *Losing Vĩnh Long* was written with great anguish. The poem starts with the sound of the French war trumpet. That sound was not really terrifying, only an "intermittent sound." However, it reminded him of traumatic memories of the battles in Mỹ Tho (April 1861) and Gia Định (February 1859), where Vietnamese troops were easily defeated by the French. It was the war trumpet sound that was heard as the country came to be invaded and war-torn, and led the Vietnamese government to exchange land for peace:

*Tò le kèn thổi tiếng năm ba,
Nghe lọt vào tai, dạ xót xa.
Uốn khúc sông Rồng mù mịt khói⁴,
Vắng hoe thành Phụng ủ sầu hoa⁵.
Tan nhà cảm nỗi câu li hận,
Cắt đất thương thay cuộc giảng hoà.
Gió bụi đời⁶ con xiêu ngã cỏ,
Ngậm cười hết nói nỗi quan ta.*

Translation:

The war trumpet resounds intermittently,
Listening to that, (I) feel great anguish.
On the meandering Dragon River the smoke engulfs
In the deserted Phoenix Citadel the flowers wilt

⁴ *Sông Rồng*: Alluding to the Tiền River when it flows past the river island named Dragon (or Tân Long River island, Mỹ Tho, Tiền Giang Province).

⁵ *Thành Phụng*: Also called "Phụng thành" (Phoenix Citadel), namely, Gia Định Citadel, which was built by King Minh Mạng in 1836 after the Lê Văn Khôi revolt.

⁶ *Đời*: many (ancient Vietnamese).

(I) understand how painful losing the country is
(I) feel compassionate for the exchange of land for peace
The grass is blown by strong winds
Cannot cease to laugh at our bureaucrats and officials.

(Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2001, p. 112)

In his last days, Phan Văn Trị pretended to be insane because his country had fallen into the hands of invaders. That was the failure of his country, his people, and his generation. When could he and his compatriots reclaim and liberate the country from French colonialists? Only his great allegiance to the nation never fades:

*Trung trinh dốc trọn đạo tôi dân,
Nạn khổ xưa nay biết mấy lần.
Ở Hán đành lòng phò lợn Hán⁷,
Oán Tần ra sức đuổi hươu Tần⁸.
Nhìn Nam chạnh tủi nhìn hoa ử,
Ngó Bắc ngùi thương đám bạch vân.
Cái nợ tang bồng than thở phận,
Đành đem dập dĩa giữa phong trần.*

Translation:

(I) am devotedly faithful to the country
From past to present, how many ups and downs there have been
Living under the Han dynasty, (we) must pay tribute to the Han pig
Resenting the Qin dynasty, (we) attempt to catch the Qin deer
When looking to the South, feeling shame for the dying flowers
When looking to the North, feeling compassion for the white clouds
(We) have to miserably pay our dues,
So, try to take it easy in the dust of life.

(*Nostalgia N. 2*) (Nhất, 1956, pp. 38-39)

⁷ *Lợn Hán* (Han pig): Perhaps alluding to Liu Shan, the deficient son of Liu Bei, who is usually called “pig king.” Before passing away, Liu Bei entrusted his son to Zhuge Liang. Liang was righteous and faithful, thus devoted to support Shu Han, despite the deficiency of the king.

⁸ *Hươu Tần* (Qin deer): It is said in Han history that the Qin dynasty lost a deer. Luminaries and talented men all over the country attempted to catch that deer. Anyone who was fortunate and talented could catch it.

5. CONCLUSION

Phan Văn Trị was a prominent Vietnamese intellectual during the first French colonization of Vietnam. His poetic legacy is not particularly diverse, consisting of up to 50 eight-line poems [thơ bát cú] and possibly one *fu* (poetic exposition). It is, however, notable that all of his works were written in Nôm script. Despite being an outstanding student who attained the rank of senior bachelor at a young age, he did not compose any poems using Chinese script. Perhaps his choice was similar to that of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who chose to write for the public in general. He thus chose to write poems in the Vietnamese script, which was more familiar to ordinary people at the time. Phan Văn Trị died over a century ago, but he left valuable lessons for his descendants: his boundless patriotism and his deep attachment to the fate of the nation. That is his unwavering attitude: despite the country's failure, he will not surrender. It is his choice not to submit to harsh powers. He also reminds us of the importance of writing for the sake of the people and the country and to criticize traitors. Though Phan Văn Trị and his generation failed to save the country, the lessons he left to us have always been precious and valuable, encouraging us to live more responsibly and attempt to construct and prosper our homeland.

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