

Anti-Colonial Visions of Dignity and Shame

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Pham, Kevin, *Architects of Dignity: Vietnamese Visions of Decolonization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, ISBN: 9780197770276, 232 pages, 29€.

This review provides an overview and assessment of Kevin Pham's book Architects of Dignity, the first book-length treatment of Vietnamese political thought during the French colonial period. At the core of Pham's book are novel claims about the nature of dignity and shame as explored by prominent Vietnamese political intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Pham, these thinkers took dignity to be collective and to be asserted instead of being recognized by some dominant power. Moreover, Pham contends that they viewed shame as a productive tool for motivating political action. Overall, this book is an important and necessary contribution that introduces readers to some of the central themes animating modern Vietnamese political thought. At the same time, this review highlights some philosophical and political concerns regarding the main ideas and claims of the book.

Key words: dignity; shame; political emotions; postcolonial theory; decolonization; comparative political theory; Vietnamese philosophy

This book provides a rich and sustained analysis of six of the most influential thinkers in Vietnamese political thought during the French colonial period: Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926), Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943), Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945), Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969), and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (1909–1997). At the heart of this book is a historically-informed reconstruction of what these Vietnamese thinkers thought were proper ways to respond to colonial rule and effective ways of generating productive forms of political resistance.

Part of what makes this text distinctive is that it is the first book of its kind. It is the first book-length treatment of modern Vietnamese political thought in which each of the above thinkers' views are both rigorously assessed on their own terms and contextualized as products of a dynamic conversation with western and non-western (e.g., Confucian) ideas. Many of the thinkers discussed in this text are relatively unknown to the English-speaking academic world, and many of the sources

this book draws upon are not readily available or at least available in English. While the book is framed as a work of comparative political theory, I believe that this book would be useful for any academic (philosophers included) interested in the basic philosophical themes animating Vietnamese political thought during French colonialism as well as the historical contexts which gave rise to such themes.

But more important than filling a gap in the literature, this book is significant because of the conceptual work it does *with* these Vietnamese thinkers. Of particular interest to philosophers is Pham's central claim that emerging from their writings are different attempts to theorize about the role and nature of dignity in light of colonial subjugation. In fact, one of the central goals of the book is to argue that these thinkers were united in regarding dignity "(1) as a property of nations instead of individuals, (2) as rooted in the duties that a nation's people embrace instead of in the qualities of persons, and (3) as something to be asserted by the nation instead of being dependent on recognition by colonizer (4)".

Such a "nationalistic" conception of dignity challenges prevailing western views, which tend to, though not always, center the rights and intrinsic value of individuals (independent of their nationality). But once dignity is recast in the above way, we can appreciate how resistance against colonial powers can take on a different shape. In particular, resistance is not primarily aimed toward (though it may involve) achieving the recognition of political and moral rights by the colonizer or some dominant political entity (such as the United Nations). Rather, according to these thinkers, resistance, as founded upon dignity, requires a collective assertion of self-worth, where such an assertion consists in the production of intellectual and cultural achievements, as well as the formation of new habits, linguistic practice, values, and social relations which could provide a sustainable foundation for a new Vietnamese national identity following French colonialism.

Given this notion of dignity, one might wonder what could constitute an effective method for inspiring anti-colonial resistance among colonized peoples. Another central goal of Pham's book is to argue that this tradition of Vietnamese political intellectuals used shame as a productive tool for provoking political action. According to Pham, these thinkers "sought to instill in their countrymen a sense of national shame toward their own people's perceived moral, intellectual, cultural, and political failures" (5). Here, Pham adopts a broadly Sartrean conception of shame on which shame is the painful feeling that arises from negatively judging oneself from the perspective of the Other. By exploring how shame functions to motivate individuals to engage in anti-colonial resistance and reclaim their dignity, Pham complicates post-colonial discussions of shame that take the shame of a colonized person to be a feeling of inferiority that results from internalizing the ideology of the colonial power. Shame, Pham contends, is not always destructive, but can have a productive role in the emancipation of colonized peoples.

The first chapter of the book is introductory, and it sets the stage for these central claims regarding dignity and shame. In particular, Pham puts pressure on the view that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is one in which the indigenous traditions of the latter give way to those of the former. As Pham notes, these Vietnamese thinkers were skeptical about whether there was such a thing as “Vietnamese culture” in the first place. What mattered most for them was the creation of a Vietnamese identity which could freely borrow elements from other cultures including those from its colonizers. If dignity is primarily a property of nations and not individuals, and if the identity of Vietnamese nation was not fixed (let alone well-defined), then a recognition model of dignity simply won’t work since there is no national identity to be recognized as such. As a result, the thought goes, these thinkers reasoned that dignity is better understood as something to be asserted, rather than recognized.

The second chapter concerns Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), a Confucian, anti-colonialist, and monarchist whom Pham takes as laying down the political and intellectual foundation for the rest of the thinkers featured in the book. According to Châu, the Vietnamese people are primarily to blame for their colonized state by virtue of their lack of self-reliance. In order to achieve dignity in the above sense, the Vietnamese people, Châu argued, would need to construct a genealogy of a dignified past, the core of which he thought was constituted by a history of successful resistance against Chinese colonization.

While Châu advocates for a return to a monarchy following independence from French colonialism, his contemporary Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), who is the focus of Chapter 3, is widely recognized as Vietnam’s first proponent of democracy. According to Pham, Trinh is notable in how he seeks to synthesize Confucianism with democratic ideals. For Trinh, national identity (and thus, dignity) should be built on Confucianism. Shame, then, was used by Trinh to motivate the Vietnamese to commit more deeply to Confucian values.

I will note that comparative philosophers might find Trinh as an illuminating example of how one might attempt to bridge Confucianism and democratic ideals. Confucianism has tended to favor strict social hierarchies and social roles, and typically, a Confucian society is conceived as a kind of family in which the leader treats their subjects like a parent does their children (54). As Pham notes, Confucianism, thus, *prima facie* seems to be in tension with democratic ideals. How can the two be compatible in the way that Trinh envisions?

According to Pham, Trinh responds to this issue by taking democracy to be a means to realizing Confucianism in its ideal form. In this context, Trinh construes democracy in a more limited manner as encompassing what could be translated as “popular rights” (*dân quyền*) which is distinct from what one would normally call individual rights. For Trinh, popular rights are, roughly, rights that would protect or promote the interests of the general public, such as the right of freedom of

expression. Such rights, Trinh thought, would lead to the right kind of moral cultivation required by the ideal Confucian state. While this is an interesting proposal, one wonders how exactly all of this is supposed to work in practice. After all, it is not clear how democracy construed in this way would lead to the fulfillment of Confucian values or ideals. In many circumstances, the right of freedom of expression, for example, might reasonably be said to undermine the kind of authority that a leader should have in an ideal Confucian society.

Chapter 4 focuses on Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943) who was part of the generation following that of Chau and Trinh. However, Ninh rejected both Chau and Trinh’s visions for Vietnamese national identity since they relied too much on Confucianism. Instead, Ninh, using shame as a rhetorical and political tool, sought to encourage his fellow Vietnamese to create their own original intellectual, aesthetic, and political culture. On Ninh’s view, national dignity was to be founded on the original and indigenous contributions of Vietnamese individuals. To break away from tradition, Ninh vocally advocated for the use of quốc ngữ (the modern Latinized Vietnamese alphabet) instead of the Chinese-influenced chữ nôm (which was the then-standard alphabet).

On the other hand, Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945), the subject of Chapter 5, thought that national dignity had its strongest foundation in tradition, and in particular, Confucian ideals. What separates Quỳnh from the other thinkers featured in the book is that, while critical of the French, Quỳnh was a collaborator with the French colonial regime. In particular, Quỳnh was the lead editor of a *Nam Phong*, a journal established by the French government as a mouthpiece for colonial propaganda. In a similar spirit to Trinh, Quỳnh advocated for a nationalistic dignity grounded on a harmonious and gradual synthesis of Confucian values with western (including French and democratic) ideas. Quỳnh argued we ought to separate the liberal and democratic philosophy of the French from the dehumanizing treatment of the Vietnamese by the French, which he took to betray the former.

Chapter 6 provides an extended study on the political ideas of Hồ Chí Minh (1890-1969), and in particular, Hồ’s critique of capitalism, which he takes to be racially exploitative. Pham interprets Hồ as a fundamentally Confucian thinker who advocated for what Pham calls “paternalistic democracy” according to which the members of the Vietnamese Communist Party would rule over the people as a parent would their children by providing moral and political guidance. On the face of it, paternalistic democracy sounds like a contradiction in terms. However, according to Pham, such a political vision was “democratic” insofar as the well-being of “the people” was of principal concern. At this point, I must admit that I have qualms about calling such a vision “democratic,” and that calling it such seems to me to be strained if not misleading. I do not think the issue is simply terminological. To construe democracy as a concern for the well-being of the people seems to be compatible with highly unequal (and thus, undemocratic) forms of governance or political decision making. Putting this issue aside, Pham takes Hồ’s paternalistic democratic vision as a way of

recovering a kind of humanity that had been lost as a result of capitalism and French colonial rule. Pham calls this recovery of humanity a process of “rehumanization” (145).

Lastly, in Chapter 7, Pham discusses Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (1909–1997), a critic of the Vietnamese Communist Party and Hồ’s paternalistic democratic vision. In this chapter, Pham argues that Tường offers a Montaignean account of the obstacles to national dignity and of solutions of how to overcome such obstacles. One such obstacle, according to Tường, is the anti-intellectualism and more specifically, the dogmatic commitment to a particular set of beliefs, which constrained the leaders of the Vietnamese Communist party. Employing Montaigne’s essay “Of the Education of Children,” Tường argues that one should instead practice a kind of open-mindedness and engage with diverse sources. Another obstacle comes in the form of paranoia and hostility toward anyone perceived to be a threat to the party. To overcome this obstacle, Tường advocates for a genuine commitment to democracy, understood as not just government for the people but also by the people (170). In particular, Tường argued that the party should respect *individual rights*, such as the right to free speech. By respecting such rights and by developing a more robust intellectual culture, Tường thought the Vietnamese people could reclaim their national dignity.

To conclude this review, I would like to make some critical remarks concerning the main philosophical claims and ideas of the book. First, while I do think that Pham convincingly illustrates how Vietnamese intellectuals sought to develop a distinctively nationalistic form of dignity, it is not entirely clear what we should ultimately make of this notion. Is national dignity something we should accept into our philosophical toolbox? What role should it play in our own emancipatory projects? Or is it simply a lens that helps us make sense of the history of political struggle? How might we distinguish between “productive” and “destructive” forms of collective dignity? As Pham’s analysis illustrates, national dignity can come at the cost of individual dignity (or the dignity that an individual has simply by virtue of being human). Moreover, national dignity seems to commit us to a form of nationalism, which we might have independent reason to be suspicious of.

One might raise similar questions with regard to shame. As Pham notes, shame as expressed by colonized people has typically been connected to a kind of internalized inferiority. It seems to me that when the Vietnamese thinkers featured in this book engage in shaming the Vietnamese for lacking in cultural, political, or intellectual achievements, they must be invoking some kind of standard. Where do these standards come from? Pham contends that this valuation of Vietnamese culture as a “wasteland of non-achievement” (21) originated in these thinkers independent of what colonial powers might have thought. But it is difficult to see what evidence there is for this claim. Further, a more general worry is that even if these thinkers came to conclude on their own that Vietnamese culture was inadequate, the invoked standard against which such a valuation is made might reinforce problematic attitudes about what makes a nation valuable, and moreover, what makes certain aesthetic, intellectual, or cultural practices valuable.

Overall, these criticisms should not detract from the fact that this book is a scholarly accomplishment. If anything, these criticisms illustrate ways we might benefit from further philosophical engagement with the ideas of this book. In sum, *Architects of Dignity* presents us with a compelling story of the dialectic between different perspectives on the nature of Vietnamese identity and how that identity is to be constructed. More generally, this book provides an invaluable resource on modern Vietnamese political thought and the ways in which prominent Vietnamese intellectuals struggled through questions concerning the nature of national dignity in light of colonial oppression. Thus, this book will be useful for philosophers interested in the nature of dignity and for scholars of shame, indignation, and political emotions more generally.

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