3 Speaking for Oneself: Language Reform and the Confucian Legacy in Late Colonial Vietnam

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Introduction

In the winter of 1906, Phan Châu Trinh, a former mandarin who had resigned his post in the colonial bureaucracy the year before to pursue reformist politics, arrived at the home of nineteen-year-old Phan Khôi, accompanied by a mutual friend, Nguyễn Bá Trác, and sporting a new haircut: "shaggy short hair, wrapped in a headscarf."[1] Recently returned from a trip to Japan, Phan Châu Trinh stayed with Phan Khôi for several days before inviting him and Nguyễn Bá Trác to accompany him first to the village of Diên Phong, where they collected another young man named Mai Dị, and eventually to the village of An Chánh where they stayed with a friend of Phan Châu Trinh who was a farmer of tea and cinnamon. Phan Khôi reports that when he entered the farmer's house, he noticed the "most amazing thing": everyone there, from worker to owner, had the same short haircut. Phan Khôi and his two friends, with their long hair tied in a bun on the top of the head in the usual Confucianist style, seemed markedly out of place.

When the group sat down for their first breakfast together, Phan Châu Trinh, renowned for his persuasive speeches, remarked:

> People everywhere, but especially we Confucians, are timid and are often afraid to act. Whenever there is something to be done, they find an excuse, saying: "Small things, are not worth doing." In their minds, they think, I'll wait for the big one. But if they already have the intention of not wanting to do something, everything will be small to them, so they will do nothing for the rest of their lives! (quoted in Phan Khôi 1939)

1 The most detailed account of these events is in Phan Khôi (1939). I also draw here on discussions in Sinh Vinh (2009), Marr (1971), and Jamieson (1993).

This, according to Phan Khôi, was a typical beginning for Phan Châu Trinh, who revelled in telling moral anecdotes, but then he continued: "If we judge by appearances as to whether a person is old-fashioned, only three of us sitting here … are out of date, because these three brothers still have a bun on top of the head" (quoted in Phan Khôi 1939).

Everyone smiled while the three young men sat in bashful silence. Phan Châu Trinh continued using the French rather than the Vietnamese verb to convey his exhortation, "Will any of you *cúp*? Don't say it's a small thing. If you can't do this, I wonder what you can do!" After the meal was over, the group went to the threshing house and, there, the host's younger brother cut the top knots off the heads of the three young Confucians: "the hair from the three heads filled a basket." Although the cut was clumsy, Phan Châu Trinh, sitting in a chair like a monk, complimented each one of the young men, saying: "Good cut! It's beautiful!"

On their way home, the group stopped off at the village of Diên Phong again and there encouraged others to cut their long hair as well. About sixty men did so. Soon, others, having heard of the hair cutting trend, came to visit and were persuaded to join in. This included eminent, reformist former mandarins such as Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and even Phan Khôi's old teacher Trần Quý Cáp. By 1907, many more had joined the hair-cutting movement. Wherever there was a school, someone set up a shop to offer haircuts (this having become a lucrative business). The superintendent of the school at Diên Phong started barbering in his spare time and Phan Khôi composed a little folk song (*ca dao*) for him to sing as he worked:

Tay trái cầm lược,	The left hand holds the comb,
Tay mặt cầm kéo,	The right, the scissors,
Cúp hè! Cúp hè!	Clip! Clip!
Thẳng thẳng cho khéo!	Straight, straight, be careful!
Bỏ cái hèn mầy,	No more with cowardliness,
Bỏ cái dại mầy,	No more with cowardliness,
Cho khôn, cho mạnh,	Get wise, get strong,
Ở với ông Tây!"	You are living with the French![2]

The chant served to contextualize the haircut, specifying the meaning of an otherwise indeterminate symbol by associating it with courage, wisdom, strength, and a new modern, Western outlook (all central principles of Phan Châu Trinh's

2 The translation is from Vinh Sinh's edition, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings* (2009, 21–2). Sinh, somewhat surprisingly given the issues I point to below, complains that this song has often been mistranslated by previous scholars. A more literal translation reveals some details that are relevant to the present discussion. First, the expressions *Bỏ cái hèn* and

political stance). The movement gathered momentum and during the uprisings of 1908, demonstrations included the cutting of hair. Gradually, the short haircut came to be seen as a sign of defiance – not only a rejection of Confucian tradition but of the status quo more generally, including the French colonial government. The French began to refer to these activities as the "Révolte des cheveux tondus." Meanwhile, Phan Khôi's "haircutting chant" spread throughout the country, spawning more elaborate versions, with additional verses. The song had been composed of four syllable lines, a common metre of folk poetry and also of proverbs. As such, it could easily accommodate additions of this sort. One of the added lines was a proverb *ăn ngay, nói thẳng*, which translates as "eat immediately, speak straight" and, used in context, means "speak freely" or "speak without fear." This addition further specified, or, better, metasemiotically elaborated, the symbol of the short haircut by linking it to a new interactional freedom and a self-consciously modern approach to communication in which relatively autonomous individuals, "abstracted from the constraints of former social entanglements" (Keane 2002, 67), might debate matters of common interest and concern.

Freedom and Unfreedom

In "A Plea for Excuses," J.L. Austin (1957) advocates an approach to the study of action, and philosophy, that focuses on occasions of failure and misfire and more specifically on the particular ways we talk about such occasions, that is, the way such failures are defended, justified, excused, explained away, and so on. Such a method, he suggests, would allow us to describe a "model of the machinery of acting" (6). In the course of his discussion, almost as an aside, Austin makes the remarkable assertion that, "in this sort of way … a number of traditional cruces or mistakes in this field can be resolved or removed. First among these comes the problem of Freedom" (6). He goes on:

> While it has been the tradition to present this as the "positive" term requiring elucidation, there is little doubt that to say we acted "freely" … is to say only that

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Bỏ cái dại are more precisely rendered as "Let go of cowardice" and "Let go of foolishness," and thus clearly suggest a reluctance to change. Second, both of these exhortations end with a dialect variant of the non-honorific second person, singular pronoun *mày*. Given that the song is addressed to Confucianists being encouraged to cut their hair (learned men in other words), the use of this pronoun embodies a rejection of traditional practices of address that force speakers to position themselves and their interlocutors within social space. Finally, although often taken to mean "the French" or "France," *tây* actually means "West," and this is surely closer to what is intended here – that is, not the French colonial administration but the "the West" conceived of as all that is new and modern.

> we acted not un-freely, in one or another of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting (under duress, or what not). Like "real," "free" is only used to rule out the suggestion of some or all of its recognised antitheses. As "truth" is not a name for a characteristic of assertions, so "freedom" is not a name for a characteristic of actions, but the name of a dimension in which actions are assessed. In examining all the ways in which each action may not be "free", i.e., the cases in which it will not do to say simply "X did A," we may hope to dispose of the problem of Freedom. (6)

For Austin, then, the philosophical attempt to identify "freedom" as a universal value or a decontextualized quality rests upon certain underlying and wrong-headed assumptions about the relation of language to reality; it is yet another manifestation of a widespread "'descriptive' fallacy" (Austin 1962, 3).

As anthropologists and ethnographers we, like Austin, are committed to the study of "freedom" and other such notions not as metaphysical qualities or ontic bedrock but as historically situated concepts that people use to think and talk about the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. Words such as "freedom" demand an analysis as much in terms of their performative effects as their purported referential extension. At the same time, even if we enrich the analysis with ethnography, an anthropological account demands more. After all, the people we study are not limited to the kind of unselfconscious usage that Austin's (1957) analysis seems often to presuppose (though note that excuses are inherently reflective acts). Indeed, it's doubtful that such a thing could exist (see Lempert 2013). Like the philosophers Austin (1957, 9) criticizes, the people we write about are concerned as much with "the beautiful" as with "the dainty and the dumpy," and, in some contexts at least, as much with freedom as with what is permitted and what is prohibited. If it is true that ordinary speech contains the "wisdom of the ages" – "a battery of distinctions that men have found useful through the centuries, and which have stood the test of time" (Williams 2014, 43) – it is also true that such usage, and the ways of thinking which it provides for, are subject to more or less continuous reflective consideration, critique, and reanalysis. What Peirce (1998, 270) called "hypostatic abstraction" plays an essential role here. This is the process by which "goodness" is derived from "good," which converts the proposition "Opium puts people to sleep" into "Opium has a dormitive virtue" (Peirce 1976, 49), which, in other words, "furnishes us with the means of turning predicates from being signs that we think or think *through,* into being subjects thought of" (Peirce [1906] 1933, 549).

Thus, while it may be true that saying one acted freely is to say only that one "acted not unfreely," it also seems to be the case that people often talk and think about these matters through the lens of quite abstract concepts such as, for instance, "freedom" and "liberty" and so on and that this allows them to

consider the problem in other than purely negative terms (i.e., "not unfreely"). In this way, freedom can indeed come, contra Austin, to serve as the "name for a characteristic of action." Specifically, through these processes of reflexive reanalysis, particular ways of speaking (along with other aspects of conduct) may combine to form a cultural model of positively free action. In the case I discuss here, hairstyles, dress codes, and other aspects of embodied conduct, social life, and artistic production were linked to a wide range of lexical and grammatical alternates so as to constitute a recognizable way of speaking and acting "freely" (see Agha 2004).[3]

My remarks in what follows focus, then, on the way questions of freedom and free speech, or at least their nearest analogues (*sự tự do,* "freedom"; *tự do ngôn luận*, "free speech"), were posed in the writings of some Vietnamese intellectuals in the 1930s, and in the work of the journalist, essayist, and poet Phan Khôi in particular. Phan Khôi and his contemporaries identified two obvious yet very different obstacles to be overcome in their struggle for freedom. On the one hand, there was the often brutally repressive French colonial state and the persistent threat of censorship by the government and, more immediately, the "Sûreté Générale Indochinoise" established by Governor Albert Sarraut in 1917 with the expressed aim of preventing the development of Vietnamese nationalism. On the other hand, there were the lingering effects of a Confucian past, imagined as an enduring legacy of stultifying, esoteric, and rigid moral behavioural codes reaching back well into the precolonial period.

My focus is on this second obstacle and my main contention is that we cannot hope to understand how freedom was conceptualized in this (or any other) context without first attempting to understand the forms of unfreedom from which people sought to liberate themselves. To this end, I consider a number of arguments put forth by Phan Khôi, beginning with those in which he described Confucian tradition as a sickness that limits and constrains thinking, prevents self-realization and inhibits the cultivation of moral integrity, before then turning to those in which he suggested that the widespread practice of referring to the participants in a communicative encounter using kin terms forces the speaker to make explicit his or her relation to those being addressed and so anchors all communication to its context of occurrence. Comparing Vietnamese with French and Chinese, Phan Khôi suggested that this requirement emerges as particularly inconvenient and troublesome with the rise of text-mediated public discourse in the twentieth century precisely because it frustrates any

3 An added complication for the Austinian account is to be found in the fact that such reflective activities not uncommonly involve the conjunction, if not confrontation, of two or more languages (e.g., in this case, French and Vietnamese), each embodying a quite distinct point of view.

attempt to transcend local particularities so as achieve the "utopian universality" (Warner 2005) of a truly modern, public sphere.[4]

Within a few months of publishing his essays on language reform, Phan Khôi (1932b) introduced what he described as a new approach to poetry, one that abandoned the strict conventions of the Tang-style "regulated poem," as well as the looser requirements of Vietnamese *lục bát* (six-eight) metre which, by general agreement, had achieved its most refined expression in Nguyễn Du's epic *Tale of Kiều* composed in the second decade of the nineteenth century. In the short essay, which accompanied his poem "Old Love" (*Tình Già*), Phan Khôi proposed that the old forms had been exhausted and that a new style of verse was required to express adequately the intentions of the modern poet. In this way, he advanced an argument for the reform of poetry that paralleled almost exactly his arguments for language reform in general – here too he found old Confucian traditions to be an impedement to the exercise of a universal human freedom.

The Vietnamese case suggests two conclusions of broad significance for an anthropological approach to the problem of free speech – both quite obvious but important nonetheless. First, the modernist, liberal conception of free speech is intimately tied to the imagining of, and the infrastructural conditions for, a particular kind of public discourse in which persons are able to participate as self-abstracted individuals. As Nancy Fraser (1990, 59) puts it, in this context, "discussion was to be open and accessible to all, merely private interests were to be inadmissible, inequalities of status were to be bracketed, and discussants were to deliberate as peers." Because, in reality, what someone says and how they say it is always shaped to a large extent by the context in which it is produced (e.g., by whom it is said, to whom it is addressed, to what it responds), the very notion of "free speech" presupposes just the kind of disembedding and decontextualization that the liberal public sphere promises to provide. Second, and relatedly, the notion of free speech, or at least some familiar rendering thereof, assumes a near total and radical disassociation of language and "communication" from all other aspects of social conduct and social life more generally. That is, language and communication have to be conceptualized in a particular way for the idea of free speech – as a *specific kind* of freedom – to gain traction. In the period of Vietnamese history I am concerned with here, we can see one way these interdependencies – between language, speech, and social life – can manifest. In relation to his contemporaries, it was

4 Phan Khôi also wrote several essays addressing questions of free speech explicitly (see, for example, Phan Khôi 1936). In this he argued that (1) the freedom to speak is not something one can "ask for," and (2) even if the Vietnamese people had the right to free speech, many at least would not be able to exercise such rights.

Phan Khôi who most clearly articulated a vision of public life within which a person might freely express their views as a self-abstracted individual, and it was he who suggested that in order for this to be realized some degree of language reform would be required. Not surprisingly, about twenty years after he made these arguments, he was arrested for his participation in what was perhaps the first "free speech" movement in Vietnam.

Colonial Censorship: Confucian Invisible Strings

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of quickened change and profound social transformation in Vietnam, especially within intellectual circles. Before the 1900s, both education and advanced literacy were elite pursuits available only to a small number of Vietnamese people. Mandarins, trained in the classics of Chinese civilization, monopolized intellectual life and wielded considerable influence as high-ranking civil servants in the colonial administration. Then, in an effort to undermine the power and prestige of the mandarins along with the practices of literacy upon which it was largely predicated, the French colonial government introduced local schools and actively promoted the romanized orthography that came to be known as *quốc ngữ*, the "national script." Within twenty years, *quốc ngữ* had all but completely replaced Chinese as the language of higher learning as well as the old system for writing Vietnamese, which involved the use of Chinese characters in somewhat idiosyncratic and often cryptic ways to represent Vietnamese words. The emergence of *quốc ngữ* (which had been invented some 250 years earlier by Jesuit missionaries Alexandre de Rhodes and Francisco de Pina) coincided with the availability of modern printing technology and the result was an explosion of literacy. In 1918, Emperor Khải Định issued a declaration abolishing the traditional writing system based on Chinese characters. And, in 1919, the colonial government suppressed the Confucian examination system, thereby forcing Vietnamese elites to educate their children either in French, Vietnamese, or some combination of the two (see DeFrancis 1977; Zinoman 2002).

As Shawn McHale (2004, 5) puts it, these changes, resulted in a "dramatic expansion in the use of the printed word." McHale surmises that "by the mid-1930s, 10 to 20 percent of the population was literate and that this figure was increasing" (27). A lively public discourse emerged in the pages of *quốc ngữ* periodicals ranging from the generally conservative *Southern Wind* (*Nam Phong*), the more progressive *Women's News* (*Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*), to the self-consciously modernist *Mores* (*Phong Hóa*) and *These Days* (*Ngày Nay*). Although committed in principle to a relatively free press, the French were nevertheless concerned that this would provide a forum for nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment and perhaps an instrument of revolution. Not surprisingly, colonial authorities in Indochina attempted to tamp down protest and unrest

through censorship of radical political views in periodicals. Newspapers and weeklies were, intermittently at least, subject to pre-publication review and censorship. Books were less controlled and, by all accounts, the more radical and politically volatile volumes tended to sell out before the authorities were able to ban them. Despite such limits of effective enforcement in practice and the ambivalent stance on press freedom in principle, the sense that speech was constrained and, in many ways, unfree was widespread. However, many journalists and writers of the day saw another threat to their freedom as a far greater concern: like Marx, they imagined the traditions of "dead generations" weighing "like a nightmare on the brains of the living." More specifically, they characterized the Vietnamese people as trapped within a Confucian social order, which, through its capacity to ritualize and thus regulate the most mundane aspects of everyday life, had produced persons incapable of self-realization and autonomous action (see Marr 1981).

This view was articulated most clearly and explicitly in the writings of members of the avant-garde "Self-Reliant Literary Group" (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*, sometimes translated as "Self-Strengthening Literary Group") formed in 1932 by Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng. For instance, in his *Đoạn tuyệt* (Severance of ties, or Breaking away) published in 1935, Nhất Linh used the image of invisible strings to describe the way in which women were tied to the oppressive gender roles and normative expectations of the traditional Vietnamese family. The novel tells the story of Nguyễn Thị Loan, a modern-oriented woman who is forced to marry a man in exchange for money that her parents need to pay off a debt. Loan moves into her new husband Thân's home but finds that his primary loyalty remains focused on her mother-in-law. Loan eventually becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, thereby fulfilling a key duty as a wife and daughter-in-law. However, the child becomes sick and dies after the mother-in-law insists on treating him only with traditional medicine. Thân marries a second wife and when tensions arise due to this polygamous arrangement, Loan accidently kills Thân with a letter opener. She is tried and exonerated in the colonial court but, as Tran (2017, 76) writes, she "is only truly free after her father, husband, and son die, enabling her break with the social bonds of Confucianism. This trinity represented a woman's 'three obediences' throughout her life: obedience to her father as daughter, to her husband as wife, and to her son as widow."[5]

5 In Vietnamese, *tam tòng, tứ đức*, "three obediences, four virtues." As Tran notes, the three obediences demanded that a woman recognize the authority of the father, the husband, and the son. The virtues specified appropriate modes of feminine comportment in the domains of *công*, "work" (skillful in women's work), *dung*, "appearance" (neat and attentive to one's own appearance), *ngôn*, "speech" (graceful and compliant), and *hạnh*, "behaviour" (well-mannered and respectful).

The group shared this understanding of Confucian tradition as an oppressive, totalitarian regime of largely unconscious custom and habit reinforced through the ritualization of everyday behaviour with many other intellectuals of the day, including Phan Khôi whose writings on language extended these ideas in important ways.[6] For, if these conceptions so permeated everyday life, making it nearly impossible to escape from them, what was the mechanism by which that hegemony was achieved?

Phan Khôi's Critique of Confucianism and His Proposals for Modernizing Language Reform

Compared to the authors of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Phan Khôi was older and had received a much more traditional education. Born in 1887 to a family of Confucian scholars, he earned a *tú tài* degree in the regional examinations of 1905. This was, however, insufficient to secure a position in the colonial bureaucracy, and Phan Khôi began to explore other options. He first worked as a teacher of Vietnamese *quốc ngữ* and of Chinese characters at a school associated with the Duy Tân movement (a campaign for reform led by Phan Châu Trinh). Sometime in early 1908, he travelled to Nam Định to study French with the writer Nguyễn Bá Học but after only a month was arrested for his participation in nationalist activities and was imprisoned at Hội An until 1911 (Jamieson 1993, 109–10, offers a slightly different chronology). After writing for many different newspapers in the 1920s, in 1929 Phan Khôi settled in as the star editorialist for the weekly periodical *Women's News*. This was an innovative publication explicitly addressed to women but not to them exclusively – it featured articles on a broad range of topics. Moreover, it responded to the widely held contention that women would figure centrally in the process of modernization.

Like members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Phan Khôi identified the legacy of Confucianism as a particularly significant obstacle to modernization in the Vietnamese context. In part, this was a result of the way in which

6 "For the Self-Strengthening Literary Group, Confucianism permeated all aspects of social life, from ritualized events to personal habits and behavior. Self-Strengthening authors viewed it as an institution of doctrines and principles enforced by the familial collective: Confucian beliefs condition, saturate, and organize social life, in particular, through the reinforcement of gender differences. From their perspective, Confucianism is limited neither to the erudite traditions of the civil service examination and its mandarin candidates nor to the realm of religious doctrines to which followers adhere for moral or spiritual guidance. They did not understand Confucianism as a repertoire of ideas and principles that individuals referred to for specific situations but instead as a ubiquitous and accepted social force that compelled individuals to act and behave accordingly, unaware of the imposed rules, roles, and norms" (Tran 2017, 72).

Confucianism had penetrated the consciousness of everyday life and so exerted lingering effects even when it was explicitly rejected. Thus, in an essay titled "Confucianism and Democracy," he wrote: "Up until now we have never had a bold and powerful program of reform to overturn the corrupt thinking of Confucianian scholars. This kind of thinking takes root and grows in the minds of people and so runs very deep and is naturally very stable even though Confucianism is falling into decay" (Phan Khôi 1937).

Along similar lines, Phan Khôi (1930a) described Confucianism as a sickness that manifests as a willingness to discuss matters without first researching them, and as a refusal to base one's arguments on historical fact. Confucianism, rather, encourages the summary of all things in a single sentence, or even a single word.[7]

Like the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Phan Khôi located the source of the sickness in the traditional family. As he bluntly put it in another essay also published in 1931, "I write this article, intending only to report … that Vietnamese society is sick, the family system is no longer suitable for it; … the family in this country has become a problem." Phan Khôi was quite explicit about the connection between family organization and politics, suggesting later in the same essay that, in reviewing human history, one finds that, "never has a people suffered oppression in the family and yet managed to achieve freedom within society" (Phan Khôi 1931a).

And again, with his contemporaries in the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Phan Khôi focused much of his attention on women and particularly on the dire consequences of the traditional family system for in-marrying wives. He suggested, for instance, that laws surrounding marriage treat women as "things" that are owned by their husbands. Moreover, even if the husband dies, the widow is not permitted to remarry – thus the relationship of bondage is maintained in perpetuity. According to Phan Khôi (1932a) these laws treat women as things not as persons, though, "in reality, a person has freewill (*ý chí tự do*) and is therefore different from a thing!" Elsewhere, perhaps meaning to invoke Rousseau, Phan Khôi (1929a) writes, "A person born into this world is a free person … Woman and girls are also people (so why say) one is inferior to another?"

7 Some aspects of Confucian language ideology in Vietnam are discussed by Luong (1990). In a book that argued for the continuing relevance of Confucianism in the twentieth century, Trần Trọng Kim ([1930–2] 2012) wrote of differences between Eastern and Western practices of reading and the use of language more generally, suggesting, for instance, that "the Chinese usually think intuitively and sum up their ideas in a few short sentences," whereas Western learning "uses reason and makes deductions and inferences, proceeding continuously from one point to another." Phan Khôi reviewed the book in *Women's News*, and this led to an extended exchange with Trần Trọng Kim over several subsequent issues.

It is clear, however, that Phan Khôi sees the traditional family as just one element in a larger totalitarian social order. In the traditional Confucian system, a person is caught in a series of nested social relations, and within each of these the person is conceptualized as belonging to others, as a possession, or as an instrument – in this way, there's no room for freedom or autonomy.

> One is not only subordinate to the king alone. Anyone who has parents, must say that the body belongs to the parents as long as they live. And not the body only, if one has property, has a wife and children, one must say that all this also belongs to the parents. According to the *Book of Rites*: if a son loves his wife but the parents hate her, then he must leave his wife. And if a son hates his wife but his parents love her, then he must get along with her … This is much too strict. Most important is the king and the parents. Then comes the mandarin, the village, the extended family, all of whom also have rights over a person … [A person like this] cannot be his own master; he is always subordinate to king, parents, mandarin, village, clan, and, if it is a woman, then she is also subordinate to her husband as well. Because of that, our society is like a ladder with many steps. (Phan Khôi 1928)

Against this conception of dependence on hierarchically arranged others, Phan Khôi insists on the fundamental autonomy of the individual, which he glosses as "belonging to oneself" (the word is *tự chủ*). This, he says, is the root of individualism (*cá nhân chủ nghĩa*).[8] And while Phan Khôi (1928) emphasizes the oppressive effects of institutional structures, he nevertheless maintains that, because a person is innately endowed with a capacity for critical judgment, freedom is within reach of everyone. He concludes: "And so, whomsoever takes ownership of himself (*tự chủ lấy người ấy*) is subordinate to no one. That's why there is freedom."

In conjunction with this critique of the Confucian social order, Phan Khôi develops a parallel psychological argument that opposes the blind adherence

8 Although Phan Khôi (1928) indicates that this idea of individual autonomy has been most fully realized in the West, he also suggests some Eastern precedents. For instance, he cites a line from the *Tale of Kiều*: "Between heaven and earth he lived free" (*Đội trời đạp đất ở đời*, line 2171).

Đội	*trời*	*đạp*	*đất*	*ở*	*đời*
Carry on one's head	heaven	kick	earth	LOC	life

Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1987, 199) writes: "Carrying heaven on [his] head and trampling the earth, [he] lived in the world.' To 'carry heaven overhead and trample the earth underfoot' (*đội trời đạp đất*) is to lead a proudly independent life, acknowledging nobody's authority."

to tradition with, on the one hand, the exercise of critical judgment, and, on the other, the universal standard of truth. Truth is a universal measure that can be applied to any religion, any way of thought.

> In my opinion, those people who are considered educated in this life, really should not close their eyes like in the old days, but must have their own critical judgment. This critical judgment is independent and free, it does not depend upon anyone, it does not owe allegiance to anyone. The only master of such a mind is universal truth. It takes truth as a ruler to measure all saints and sages, from ancient times until now, Eastern or Western, any person, anywhere. It also uses the ruler of truth to measure religious doctrines, then it criticizes all and decides what to reject and what to keep. (Phan Khôi 1929b)

Phan Khôi concludes this passage on a biographical note saying that he has been reading the books of Confucianism from the time that he was six years old, and then shifting footing to address the imagined Confucian master using the respectful term *ngài*, he asserts that "I was born into your house, and so today I have the right to criticize you and to judge everything about your religion." He ends on a defiant note with "in the past I was your subordinate; but now I, in relation to you, am an independent and free person."

In these respects, Phan Khôi agreed with his contemporaries in the Self-Reliant Literary Group that Confucianism had penetrated the everyday, habitual ways of thinking both of ordinary people and of the highly educated. But Phan Khôi went beyond Nhất Linh and others in his attempt to identify more precisely the semiotic mechanism by which the pernicious unfreedom of Confucian ideology had become ingrained in the Vietnamese mentality. Yes, ritual and custom were important but more fundamental was language – language, operating below the level of conscious awareness, was capable of reproducing the traditional, Confucian order and ideology even when this was explicitly rejected. Indeed, Phan Khôi often seems on the verge of articulating a fundamental insight: conventionalized ways of speaking carry with them a picture of the world that people repeat to themselves (and others) every time they speak.

Consider, for instance, the collection of practices Phan Khôi refers to as the custom of name taboo (*tục kiêng tên*), one of his favourite examples of the communicative problems wrought by Confucian ideas (see Phan Khôi 1930b, 1931b). These practices embodied much of what Phan Khôi objected to in "traditional" ways of speaking: they were irrational in prohibiting not just the saying of a name but also the saying of words homophonous with that name; they involved the performance of elaborate and unwarranted deference; they caused speakers to talk in a manner that was confusing and often inaccurate. In sum, the name taboo impeded the rational and effective use of language as an instrument of reference and predication, and, as Phan Khôi pointed out on

several occasions, it actually provided much fodder, or at least occasion, for mockery.

But it was in the practices of interlocutor reference that Phan Khôi identified the most serious obstacle both to modernizing public discourse and individual autonomy. For instance, in an essay on the topic of *khí tiết* (moral integrity), Phan Khôi (1933) casts a series of arguments for individual autonomy and freedom in a linguistic idiom as, specifically, a matter of claiming the right to say *ta*, a markedly informal and non-deferential first person pronoun.[9] Here, Phan Khôi suggests that in former times, *khí tiết* was cultivated through Confucian ritual and was an exclusive preserve of the mandarins along with other members of the educated elite. But, Phan Khôi suggests, *khí tiết* is a good thing for everyone, not just a particular type of person. After all, although everyone lives in the world and thus their actions depend upon their social position – some are high (*sang trọng*, "opulent") while others are low (*hèn*, "base, vile") – everyone is, at the same time, human, "and everyone has a way of being human, no one is inferior to anyone else."[10] It is at this point that Phan Khôi introduces the linguistic argument to illustrate, writing, "The word 'ta' can be used by anyone to refer to him or herself, everyone has the right to proudly proclaim that 'ta.' But they also have the obligation to protect that voice of 'ta,' from dishonor."

Phan Khôi continues by introducing the figure of the humble beggar and proposing that possession of *khí tiết*, and the associated right to refer to oneself as *ta*, is not distributed according to social class: "Even the beggar can assert his own autonomy (i.e., what is conveyed by "ta", J.S.). And so that group is divided between those who have *khí tiết* and those that do not."[11] He develops the argument with the example of a particular person in Hanoi:

> Here in Hanoi, in the botanical garden, there is often a person sitting on the grassy bank: shabbily dressed, sometimes playing a flute, sometimes plucking away, with an upturned hat placed in front (of him) to ask for money from visitors. To

9 The form *ta* takes its significance in large part as an alternative to other possibilities, most prominently, within the set of pronouns, *tôi*. Thus, as a pragmatic alternative to *tôi*, which is derived from a word meaning "subject of the king" and was thought until recently to have a self-humbling connotation, *ta* is vulnerable to being heard as arrogant or, as Thompson (1987, 248) puts it, "superior." Indeed, elsewhere, Phan Khôi characterized the proposal to use *ta* as a universal pronoun as "bold" and suggested that most people would not accept this.

10 The expression used here is *làm người,* literally, "make a person," but widely used to mean the cultivation of virtue or the teaching of virtue by parents to their children.

11 Phan Khôi's point is, of course, that moral integrity does not depend on social position. His focus on the figure of the beggar, however, is suggestive of an unarticulated sense that the cultivation of virtue, in this case at least, may involve some degree of alienation from kith and kin, and separation from the ordinary pulls of domestic life. This would certainly align with his arguments about the oppressive character of traditional Vietnamese family.

> whomever gives, he nods his head in thanks, but to those who don't give he does not bow: That is to say, the beggar has *khí tiết*. (Phan Khôi 2018, 38)

Phan Khôi goes on to explain that such moral integrity cannot be equated with simple pride or vanity. Thus, even though the beggar asks for money (in his way) he does not feel the need to commit suicide, that is, he does not feel ashamed by this. Rather, he comports himself in a noble way (*cách cao thượng*). No one can deny the beggar his own moral integrity – this is an inalienable, constitutive aspect of the person. Voicing the beggar, Phan Khôi writes:

> I (*ta*) ask for money, I (*ta*) have self-respect, and yet cannot commit suicide. I (*ta*) respect the honor of I (*ta*), I cannot beg and beseech, rather I (*ta*) must ask in a noble way: who can forbid me? Who can deprive me of my character? … putting it this way is meant to show that all classes of people can have self-respect, can preserve their position. (2018, 38–9)

Phan Khôi's discussion here must be understood against the normative background of everyday linguistic usage. In Vietnamese, in almost all situations, speakers avoid using pronouns altogether, preferring instead various common nouns, most prominently kin terms. So, rather than, "*I* see *you* are already quite old," a Vietnamese speaker might say, "Younger sibling (*em*) sees elder brother (*anh*) is already quite old." Kinterms such as *em*, "younger sibling," and *anh*, "elder brother" (along with those which denote "elder sister," "mother's brother," "father's sister," and so on), are used across a wide range of contexts and with persons who are not genealogically related to the speaker (see Luong 1990 for the definitive account). Against this, Phan Khôi suggests that everyone has the right to proclaim their own individuality and autonomy which is grounded in a potential for moral integrity. Everyone, he suggests, even the beggar, can cultivate this moral integrity and so proudly proclaim their status as an "I."

Phan Khôi's argument here resonates with that made by the linguist Emile Benveniste in his famous essay on subjectivity in language. There, Benveniste ([1956] 1966, 224) proposes that "it is in and through language that man [*sic*] constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality … 'Ego' is he who says 'ego.' That is where we see the foundation of 'subjectivity,' which is determined by the linguistic status of 'person.'" Soon after introducing the idea that the universal source of subjectivity is pure deictic self-reference, Benveniste adds the following caveat:

> A language without the expression of person cannot be imagined. It can only happen that in certain languages, under certain circumstances, these "pronouns" are deliberately omitted; this is the case in most of the Far Eastern societies, in which

> a convention of politeness imposes the use of periphrases or of special forms between certain groups of individuals in order to replace the direct personal references. But these usages only serve to underline the value of the avoided forms; it is the implicit existence of these pronouns that gives social and cultural value to the substitutes imposed by class relationships. (225–6)

Like Phan Khôi, then, Benveniste identifies the use of lexical nouns ("periphrases or … special forms") such as kin terms or titles to refer to the speaker and addressee as involving a *substitution* of the *original* (or, underlying) pronominal forms. Both writers seem to agree that pronominal forms that do no more than point to the speaker constitute an authentic subjectivity, one that is obscured by the use of substitutes. In other words, an orientation to the social as conveyed by a "polite" formula threatens to overwhelm, or undermine, the expression of a more authentic subjectivity and individual autonomy.[12]

Elsewhere, Phan Khôi (1930c) adopted a more technical approach, comparing Vietnamese with Chinese and with French and suggesting that the latter languages included neutral pronouns, that is, pronouns that conveyed neither respect nor disdain. The Vietnamese language on the other hand was "troublesome" and "inconvenient," obliging speakers to constantly signal their relative social position in ways that were not only cumbersome and confusing but also opened up the possibility of error and of giving offence. He proposed that reform of the practices of referring to speaker and addressee would be necessary for the establishment of a public discourse, one in which distinctions of status and social position were bracketed so that persons might speak as self-abstracted individuals (see Sidnell 2023).

The specific solution for which Phan Khôi consistently advocated involved the promotion of the first-person singular pronoun *tôi*. While acknowledging that this form is etymologically derived from a word meaning "servant" or "subject of the king," Phan Khôi suggests that it could be readily adapted to a new function as a simple, neutral form that conveys neither deference to the addressee not derogation of the speaker. Again, there is a parallel to the work of Emile Benveniste ([1956] 1966, 218) who, in his essay "The Nature

12 Costas Nakassis (2013) suggests "zero-degree individual" – a phrase from Sudipta Kaviraj (1997, 90) that means "zero-degree individuals, reduced to the hypothetical points of their being, stripped of the attributes they carry in actual life" – would better capture what Benveniste and Phan Khôi are describing here. My sense is that while such a notion fits the technical facts at issue, the larger question being raised is fundamentally about "authentic" and individual subjectivity (ego) as opposed to something like the mere performance of an institutionalized social role.

of Pronouns," argued that whereas each use of a "noun" refers to a "a fixed and 'objective' notion, … always identical with the mental image it awakens," each use of the word "I" has its "own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such." Or, as he goes on to put it, the reality to which "I" refers is a "reality of discourse."

While Benveniste's analysis of pronouns in terms of token-reflexivity is more sophisticated than that of Phan Khôi in terms of neutrality, they point in the same general direction. Both notice an important characteristic of such deictic forms, one often obscured by the emphasis, within linguistic anthropology, on what is somewhat unfortunately described as "social indexicality." Namely, deictic forms offer a minimal characterization of their referents. The English "I" and the Vietnamese *tôi* come close to merely pointing to their referents, that is, the speaker of the utterance that contains the token (or the writer of the written passage). In contrast, when used to refer to the participants in a communicative event, terms meaning the equivalent of "elder brother," "younger sibling," "father's elder brother," and so on, invoke the literal or metaphorical relevance of such institutionalized social relationships (Fleming and Sidnell 2020). These social relations, in Vietnamese at least, are inherently asymmetrical, and so the use of kin terms points also to the hierarchical character of those relations. This, however, was not what Phan Khôi found objectionable. Rather, his concern was with the way such practices of reference tethered the universal roles of speaker and addressee (sender and receiver) to the particular social and institutional context within which an exchange takes place. His proposed reforms can be seen, then, as an attempt to lift the communicative encounter out of its social context, and so elevate it to a higher level of rationality. Phan Khôi imagined a radical disarticulation of discourse from its contexts of occurrence made possible by linguistic reform.

"Old Love": The New Poetry and Freedom from Form

The only son of Phan Trân (1826–1935), a minor mandarin and the prefect (*tri phủ*) of a rural district in Khánh Hòa province, Phan Khôi began studying Chinese characters at the age of five. By his early twenties, he was steeped in the Confucian classics and so expert in brushwork that he was recruited by the warden of the prison where he was held from 1908 to 1911 to paint decorative banners for the warden's home. He also composed his own poetry in the tradition of the "regulated poem" in which each line consists of exactly five or seven syllables, and specifically in the genre of *trúc chi từ*, a pastoral style that draws on imagery of mountains, rivers, willow trees, and such to convey the emotions of the poet. However, in the early 1920s Phan Khôi stopped writing poetry. He became a social critic and a prolific essayist. It was not until 1932

that he returned to poetry with a short essay titled "A Style of 'New Poetry' Presented to the Poetic Community," accompanied by the original composition, "Old Love" (*Tình Già*).[13]

The essay begins with Phan Khôi recounting a conversation with Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945) in which the latter encouraged him to return to the pastoral poems of his youth, several of which Phạm Quỳnh had translated into French. Phan Khôi writes that, though Phạm Quỳnh may have been teasing him, this nevertheless prompted him to make another try at composing his own poetry. But, then, when he sat down to write, he found he could not. He was confused. Should he write in Chinese? In Nôm?[14] He felt as though the great poets of the past – Nguyễn Du (1765–1820), Bà Huyện Thanh Quan (1805–48) – were pressing down against his chest, making it impossible to breathe. Whatever he wrote appeared merely to repeat what they had already said. And those things that he wanted to say, that the great poets of the past had not said, were impossible to articulate within the constraints established by the rules of *luật* (governing the distribution of even and uneven tones within each line), *niêm* (specifying certain lines that must have the same distribution of tones and are thus "sealed" to one another), *vần* (specifying the possible patterns of rhyme), and *bố cục* (governing the arrangement or structure of the poem as a whole).

So, Phan Khôi writes, the old poetic style, with all its rules and regulations, seemed to him too restrictive, but, more than that, he found something repugnant in it and every poem seemed to him the same. He decided to write in a "new poetic style," the aim of which would be to "reveal the true meaning in the soul with verse not bound by poetic rules." Phan Khôi then presents the

13 Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân ([1942] 1999, 24) describe the appearance of Phan Khoi's essay and poem as a "fire-starting revolution" (*cuộc cách mệnh về thi ca đã nhóm dậy*) that "breached the stronghold of old poetry" (*trong thành trì thơ cũ hiện ra một lỗ thủng*). And while they go on to suggest that it served as an inspiration to "a large number of young people" (*một số đông thanh niên*), they also contemptuously suggest that "it is not clear if anyone liked it" (*không rõ có được ai thích không*). Phan Thị Mỹ Khanh (2017, 90) reports on a conversation between Phan Khôi, Lưu Trọng Lư, and Nguyễn Vỹ in which Phan Khôi denied that he had played this role, saying that he wrote poetry for fun (i.e., did not consider himself a poet) and then in the tradition of the Song Dynasty (i.e., was not doing anything "new"). Both the essay and poem in question were actually first published in a special issue of *Đông Tây* (East–West) magazine (see Lại Nguyên Ân 2013a, 2013b).

14 *Chữ nôm* (literally, "southern script") is a writing system invented in the thirteenth century. It uses Chinese characters to represent Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary and some non-Sinitic Vietnamese words represented by characters created through phono-semantic compounding (i.e., one character to represent the sound, one to represent the meaning).

poem titled *Tình Già*, which was widely seen as having initiated the new poetry movement by later commentators.[15]

One of the first people to respond to the essay and poem was a young poet and journalist named Lưu Trọng Lư. He wrote a letter to Phan Khôi "commending his effort but complaining that since its publication neither Phan Khoi nor anyone else had written any additional works in the new style." Later, in 1934, he gave a speech in which he attempted to convey the significance of the new poetry when it was first presented:

> As external conditions are altered, the human soul changes as well. Our pain and sadness, happiness and pleasure, love and hatred are no longer the same as the pain and sadness, happiness and pleasure, love and hatred of our forefathers. Our ancestors led lives that were simple and tranquil: life was easy, there was little contact with the outside, so their souls were simple, impoverished, torpid, atrophied, just like their lives. And in addition to that, Chinese culture engulfed them, bringing to them the stern and narrow discipline of Confucianism. The totalitarian political rule also had a great impact on poetry and writing, because our ancient poets were all devoted Confucians who had buried their noses in books for ten years only out of eagerness to embark upon a public career at some future date. Their poetry was an aristocratic, majestic, public type of poetry, with well-established forms, used to make toasts to each other or to sing the praises of contemporary power figures, the honors and exploits of both others and themselves. And if these Confucians were so unfortunate as to lose out on their opportunities … they were capable of no more than chanting a cliche: "The flowers wilt, the clouds pass, life is a sea of misery." In fact, their disillusionment was as commonplace and as meager as their love of life. With such common place and paltry sentiments, what need did they have for a broader, more flexible framework? (quoted in Jamieson 1993, 110–11)

Like Phan Khôi, then, Lưu Trọng Lư suggested that the traditional styles were no longer capable of conveying "the actual thoughts that are in the bottom of our hearts."

15 It is often suggested that the poem is meant as a critique of the custom of arranged marriage (see Jamieson 1993, 109). However, in a later autobiographical essay, Phan Khôi seems to imply that the poem is actually about a romantic encounter with the wife of the warden of the prison where he was held from 1908 to 1911 (see Phan Thị Mỹ Khanh 2017). Somewhat later, Phan Khôi became involved in some exchanges about the new poetry and the ways in which this had been taken up by a new younger generation. He recoiled from what he saw as poetry that didn't make sense and that lacked rhyme.

Conclusion

With his emphasis on the conditions of possibility of public discourse and by distinguishing technical linguistic problems of communication from the context of social relations, Phan Khôi laid the foundations of an argument for free speech – an argument which, in other words, presupposes both the existence of some public forum within which such a freedom might be exercised and a rigid demarcation of communication as distinct from all other forms of human conduct. In the period I have considered here, Phan Khôi was primarily concerned with what he saw as the fundamental autonomy of the individual evidenced in the capacity for critical judgment and what he referred to as *khí tiết*, "moral integrity." I have suggested that these arguments were consistent with his more technical elaboration of specifically linguistic issues and the kinds of reform for which he advocated. Specifically, Phan Khôi insisted that a modern public discourse could only be realized if certain technical, infrastructual, linguistic, *and* cultural or psychological conditions were met.

Phan Khôi's arguments of the 1930s focused then on the freedom to speak rather than the freedom to say something (in particular). That is to say, he was concerned primarily with the right of each individual to speak *as an individual*, and to speak without being required to position himself or herself in relation to others. This was a vision of freedom that grew directly out of the perceived unfreedom wrought by the Confucian social order – a social order which was imagined, in the 1930s, to rigidly assign to each person a place and a set of rights and duties associated with that place. Phan Khôi's vision for the future involved transcending this social order by tapping into a universal truth and an inalienable "moral integrity," expressed most unequivocally in self-reference with the plain, neutral pronoun *ta*. In sum, Phan Khôi's arguments of the 1930s are about the freedom to speak, and to speak as oneself, as an individual abstracted from social relational ties. He arrives at this view through a consideration of the kinds of unfreedom experienced while living under a Confucian regime in which each action and each utterance most reflect, and do no more than reflect, the pre-established relations which link participants in a social encounter.

In later life, Phan Khôi along with a number of high-profile contemporaries, established the journals *Nhân Văn* (Humanity) and *Giai Phẩm* (Works of art), both of which routinely featured articles criticizing the party-state for imposing limits on what could be said. Contributors called for free discussion, "greater respect for views "from below," and an end to highhandedness on the part of party officials" (Zinoman 2011, 93). These journals included essays with titles such as "An Honest Struggle for Democratic Freedoms," "Interview on the Problem of Expanding Freedom and Democracy," and "Efforts to Develop Democracy and Freedom." Along with other reformers in Eastern Bloc countries,

and like them emboldened by Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" delivered at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, members of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm group criticized the cult of personality that had developed around Stalin and pressed for a more open debate within the party. Trần Đức Thảo, for instance, wrote that the Twentieth Congress had "sternly denounced the cult of personality, proposed guidelines for ideological liberalization, shored up the enforcement of socialist legality and initiated reforms designed to democratize all organizations." And, he went on to say, these "historic resolutions of the congress have deeply marked fraternal people's democracies and working class movements, the world over. Our country cannot remain alone on the sidelines" (quoted in Zinoman 2011, 86).

In this context, Phan Khôi's anti-Confucianism was reignited, and he likened the party's cultural commissars to authoritarian mandarins under a feudal regime:

> They make me recall the old dynastic Vietnam of the Emperors Thiệu Trị and Tự Đức[16] when the source of all authority lay in the Chinese classics. Vietnam today is still a dynasty with the main difference being that the source of authority is Marxism. But the fidelity to authority is unchanged. (Phan Khôi 1956)

In this period, then, the issue became one of freedom to express opinion, freedom to criticize authorities (including the state), and freedom not just to speak but to say certain things in speaking. In the face of an increasingly authoritarian political context, Phan Khôi's focus shifted from an emphasis on the cultivation of positive freedom through the use of a neutral pronoun expressing universal speakership, self-abstraction, and social autonomy to more familiar concerns about censorship and constraint and the right to criticize those who occupy positions of power. And note that, in comparing the party-state to the imperial dynasties of the past, Phan Khôi was both exercising free speech and thematizing it, indeed he was exercising free speech *in* thematizing it. With this, the kind of heightened self-awareness and reflexivity that characterizes discussions of free speech in contemporary discourse had emerged in Vietnam.[17]

16 Thiệu Trị (1807–47) was the third emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty. He was the eldest son of Emperor Minh Mạng and reigned from 14 February 1841 until his death on 4 November 1847. Tự Đức (1829–83) was the fourth emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty of Vietnam; he ruled from 1847 to 1883.

17 This presented the party-state with a conundrum, for to censor such speech is, necessarily, to validate the claims it makes. Perhaps for this reason the party-state attempted to silence members of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm group not by directly controlling what they could say in print but through a campaign of character assassination.

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