

CHÂU TRẦN

*Trần Văn Thạch (1905–1945): Une plume contre l’oppression.*

Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2020. 360 pages.

At the end of a dreary 2020, I was pleasantly surprised to discover, in the aisles of one of Paris’s Latin Quarter’s famous bookstores, a work devoted to Trần Văn Thạch, one of modern Vietnamese history’s unjustly forgotten figures. To explain the historical forgetting of this man, robbed of life in his prime, many have turned to the rivalries between factions of the Vietnamese Left that culminated in the 1945 August Revolution and its aftermath. Although there is no doubt as to Trần Văn Thạch’s political commitment and radicalism, they are ultimately less important than the originality of his thought, which reveals him to be less a doctrinaire strategist of revolutionary independence than an incredible observer of his time, a conduit for new ideas, and, in some ways, a visionary of a world to come.

We owe this admirable volume to his daughter, Châu Trần, who set out to collect all available elements of her father’s living memory, as one does when tracing the course of a life. In Vietnam, the tradition of family registries [*gia phả*] remains the foundation of lineage cults, and it offers a way for overseas communities to retain ties to their homeland and ancestors. Biography has always played an important role in official Vietnamese historiography, whether in ancient dynastic annals [*liệt truyện*] or to incarnate the modern nation [*tiểu sử*]. Outside of such official histories and their pantheon of patriotic heroes, we now have excellent studies that tie smaller histories to larger ones and reveal national history through family sagas and other works that explore individual and collective destinies in less linear, less moralizing, and more complex ways (for instance, by

Duong Van Mai Elliott, David Lan Pham, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Nguyễn Ngọc Châu, and others).

Readers of this book might well expect an introspective and intimate approach to Trần Văn Thạch illuminated through private archives exhumed from an attic or dusty drawers. Or, alternatively, one might expect the fulfillment of the posthumous wishes of a man driven by a historical conscience, who had left behind hidden writings or documents. But that is sadly not the case. The war destroyed much: objects, bodies, hopes, and memories. As Châu Trần acknowledges, researching a father that she rarely saw and barely knew—she was just seven when he was assassinated in the greater Sài Gòn area in October 1945 during a political settling of scores—did not allow her to lift the veil that still covers most of his life. Trần Văn Thạch was a man in a hurry, a workhorse seeking to juggle his professional and family lives in addition to action and reflection. It is not without paradox that his daughter's research allowed her to “rediscover” her own mother later in life: a mother whose longstanding silence she began to better understand, who had never fully recovered from the tragedies she experienced in the 1940s, who could not face this past, and who, as a result, could not summon it with enough distance and clarity. It is not unusual for oral history to run up against such psychosocial realities.

As a result, this inquiry rested on fragile foundations: a paucity of primary sources, save a smattering of photos, some letters, and a small notebook. There were even fewer direct testimonies from family and relatives or from others. At any rate, it would have hardly been possible to carry out interviews with his remaining fellow travelers, who would have been nearly one hundred years old, nor to uncover more substantial biographical elements than the limited scraps taken from autobiographical texts [*hồi ký*] published in Vietnam or overseas. Instead, resolute and unflinching, Châu Trần began this project by gathering family memories and resituating Trần Văn Thạch's life in the colonial and revolutionary context.

This book was written based on fragments of private conversations, a synthesis of writings devoted to Vietnamese Trotskyism (by Daniel Hémerly, Ngô Văn, Hồ Hữu Tường, and Trần Ngươn Phiêu), French colonial archival documents, and especially articles culled from nine

Indochinese newspapers from the colonial era written in French (four) and Vietnamese (five). Trần Văn Thạch was a scholarship student in France, a political militant in Sài Gòn (where he defended the cause of native electoral representation in front of the colonial council before being jailed and then joining the resistance), a secondary teacher, and especially a journalist (he was elected general secretary of the journalists' association in June 1936). It is ultimately through his publications that his thought can be approached and analyzed.

Châu Trần's research, purely personal at the outset, resulted in an initial publication in Vietnamese in 2014. The historical importance of the subject and the richness of his writings in French lie behind this translated and expanded version published by *Les Indes Savantes*, which contains a collection of articles, often hard to find, that makes up nearly two-thirds of the book. These articles are preceded by two introductory chapters: a short personal history and an annotated chronology. Precious annexes (biographical notices and five short texts) supplement the work, offering external views of his life. This book is unusual in that it does not seek to conform to typical scholarly expectations. The second section (43–99) is an essay placing Trần Văn Thạch in the context of his time. Scholars of Vietnam will not learn much from either its facts or its argument, which is occasionally naive. These fifty-odd pages nevertheless remain useful as a chronological frame for Trần Văn Thạch's life and for our still-fragmentary knowledge of the “tragic destiny of the Trotskyists” (11) and southern Vietnamese revolutionaries more broadly.

More interesting is the first part of the book, which explains the purpose and motivations of the study. Marked by humility, sensibility, and neutrality in the face of events, Châu Trần's “quest for her father” (13–41) is touching. On a less personal level, it raises questions about the conflicts and controversies surrounding memory, and the role of absence and forgetting in history. It is especially useful in beginning to give back to Trần Văn Thạch his rightful place in the political and intellectual history of Vietnam. Châu Trần clearly states the purpose and objective of the book: “the best way to do justice to my father, to make known his ideals and his efforts for equality and social justice is to publish his writings” (33). Though this collection does not claim to be exhaustive, it comes close. It offers an

overview and allows readers to form an opinion. Trần Văn Thạch wrote in many journals (*Le Midi socialiste*, *L'avenir de l'Annam*, the *Bulletin de la ligue contre l'oppression coloniale et l'impérialisme*, and *Trung Lập*), but the ninety-six articles compiled here, published between 1927 and 1939, all come from two publications: seven articles from the *Journal des étudiants annamites*, in which Trần Văn Thạch published his early writings when he was a student in Toulouse, and the rest from *La Lutte*, a combative anti-colonial publication and the main forum for his political and literary expression, in a column titled “Small Nails” [*Petits clous*]. The book also includes some correspondence, references to the Hà Nội newspaper *Le Travail*, and an extract from a pamphlet on the colonial press that he wrote in 1937.

The articles are collected and organized under the classic thematic categories of anticolonialism, capitalist exploitation, and the denunciation of the daily abuses of political and social bureaucracy. This reflects the direct influence of socialist thought, which he studied in depth in France by reading the founding fathers of scientific socialism. It also reflects the friendships he forged in Occitanie, a region of France where radical-socialist milieus were dominant, as opposed to other more conservative university towns (such as Aix-en-Provence, Bordeaux, or Paris). He was not the only Vietnamese to discover political debate, syndicalist action, and social critique in Toulouse. We should remember that Trần Văn Giàu was also a student there before his expulsion from France in 1930, after which he traveled to the Comintern in Moscow; so too was Mai Văn Dậu, later a Hòa Hảo Buddhist who played an active role in the creation and development of a splinter Vietnamese social-democratic party [*Việt Nam dân chủ xã hội đảng*].

Vietnamese youths in France, whose anticolonialism was nourished by Gandhism or Sun Yat-Sen's Three Principles of the People, became increasingly fascinated by Marxism-Leninism's ideological and practical clarity. Internationalist revolutionary thought was naturally disassociated from nationalism, and its philosophy of action distanced it from the tepidity of constitutionalism or the compromises of reformist socialism. More than anyone, it was “Varenne and his prudent Auvergnat accounting” (130) during the socialist's governor generalship (1925–1928) that dashed the

hopes of many Leftist militants in Indochina. For them, communism became the only doctrine capable of overthrowing the colonial regime and its oppressive system (i.e., unfair taxation, corruption, legal injustice, and police surveillance and repression). They hoped communism would help establish a new public sphere or *res publica* [*choses publiques*] (119) and conclusively overthrow the traditional caste of mandarins and notables, thus liberating the Vietnamese people from their apathy and lack of critical spirit so they could determine their own destiny. But this conviction did not resolve differences among Leftist forces about which strategic alliances to pursue and which forms of governance to follow. The debates during the Popular Front era, and later within the ranks of the Việt Minh, bear witness to this.

Trần Văn Thạch offered virulent, vibrant interventions on all the political questions of his time. Like others, he denounced injustice and called on people to fight against it. He saw the dilemma of his generation as the choice between Confucius and Aristotle (123), between respect for Asian traditions or appropriation of some contemporary currents of Western philosophy, as means to mold new educated elites and new forms of popular instruction. But he did not limit himself to mechanistic production of pamphlets or political programs. His revolutionary writings are precise rhetorically and in their argumentative logic. They reflect a solid general culture, as evidenced by his interest in the nascent social sciences (he mentions Renan and Lévy-Bruhl) and in classical humanities, and are shaped by a deeply personal style. His exceptional mastery of the French language and his creativity allowed him to sharpen his attacks in both form and substance. One of his many neologisms illustrates his spiritual vivacity and sarcastic humor: he cast the civilizational and militaristic arrogance that led to fascist Italy's 1938 conquest of Ethiopia as a pitiful "syphilizing mission" [*mission des syphilisateurs*] (168). With this expression, he denounced both the sophism of all civilizing missions and the decadence into which imperialism and racism inevitably decay. He trained this kind of erudition and barbed wit on the petty abuses of the French police state, the depravity of high colonial society, the hidebound tendencies of organized religion (particularly Christianity), and a myriad of other political and social questions of his day.

We should not mistake Trần Văn Thạch's writing style and approach for the posture of a high-culture aesthete. His work on language is never gratuitous. He harnesses it for a collective struggle. Trần Văn Thạch proves here that he knew his classics, both Chinese texts and those from ancient Greece and Rome. For instance, he does not simply mention the Roman rulers' trick for keeping the plebe quiet, known as "bread and circuses" [*panis et circenses*]. He adapts the saying, as "jails and festivals" (226), in order to openly denounce the daily experience of physical and mental submission under the colonial regime. He delights in French slang and colloquial popular expressions: the phrase "voyou-flic" (i.e., gangster-as-cop, as in police informants or corrupt police) symbolizes, for instance, the abuses of the French colonial police state (153). He explains mischievously how a Buddhist monk "cut off his demon" [*se coupa le démon*, castrated himself] to get rid of his repressed desires (168). He evokes how depraved high colonial society and its Vietnamese "poules de luxe" [high class hens, i.e., prostitutes] really are (178). His combative stance enables him to denounce colonial hypocrisy, racial prejudice, and social taboos by weaponizing French cultural and moral references against the colonial enemy. Sexuality, the mediocrity of low-level colonial civil servants—described as "the pathetic elite of the pig sty" [*la triste élite de la porcherie*] (176)—the rush to nowhere of European imperialism, and the futility of newly imported social conventions help him denounce stereotypes of Western, masculine domination and its bestial impulses, its jingoism, and its petty bourgeois, colonial conformism. Trần Văn Thạch describes organized religions alternatively as superstitions all too ready to compromise themselves politically (especially Christianity, in his view) or as archaic and modern forms of collective idol worship. He mocks Caodaism as the religion of the one-eyed God [*du dieu borgne*] (183), and dismisses Buddhism as gazing at the "navel of a laughing genie" [*nombril d'un génie hilare*] (184), in other words, waiting for Maitreya to bring about his hoped-for world of blissful happiness.

The literary dimension of his social critique, though still rarely emphasized in scholarship, is the key to understanding Trần Văn Thạch. A revolutionary satirist and pedagogue who forged new forms of political speech, he was also a writer in revolt, who, because of his life circumstances, chose

the popular press as his medium of creative expression. Was he in contact with groups of writers (such as Tự lực văn đoàn) or journalists (as in the publication *Phong hóa*)? He was certainly aware of these groups, and we should remember that during the 1930s the anticolonial struggle and new forms of literary expression briefly found common ground.

If we connect his political ideas and his social critique, we realize that ultimately Trần Văn Thạch analyzes the modern world. He understood that the modernity he had experienced in interwar France was in fact ambivalent—with faith in progress newly counterbalanced by the possibility of Western decline—and that the modernity he saw in Vietnam was constrained by the yoke of colonialism. If Vietnamese modernity's emancipation depended on political liberation, it also needed to be invented, which some of his more prophetic writings (“A Singular Dream,” 135–140) also express.

Trần Văn Thạch died too soon, before he was able to contribute to his country's independence and before he could fully reveal the richness of his creativity, which drew equally from French and Vietnamese cultures. As early as 1927, he was convinced of one thing: “Slavery comes to us from France, but so too does liberty, someone said. And it will come to pass [*ce sera vrai*]” (133). If he had survived the events of 1945, would he have continued his political combat? Would he have focused instead on teaching, or on writing social novels or philosophical essays? Would he have been drawn to new libertarian trends in socialism, such as by proponents of free education [*éducation populaire*], or to the situationist and existentialist movements of the 1950s? It is impossible to know, but we get an inkling from his writings. He picked up his pen to fight oppression, but he also wrote to resist all forms of modern individual alienation. In bringing justice to her father's memory, Châu Trân allows us to rediscover the values and ideals of a person whose life's work was tragically interrupted and yet remains powerfully uncompromising.

*Pascal Bourdeaux, École Pratique des Hautes Études,  
Translated by Charles Keith and Christophe Robert*