

Remarks by

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On the Occasion of his Acceptance of the 2014 Phan Chau Trinh Award

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It is a great privilege to receive the 2014 Phan Chau Trinh Award. I thank the leadership of the Phan Chau Trinh Cultural Foundation, including Madam Nguyen Thi Binh, Mr. Nguyen Ngoc, and Prof. Chu Hao, for selecting me for this wonderful, and humbling, honor. Looking out over the audience I see many friends I have known for decades. It is a great pleasure to see all of you here today. It is also a great pleasure to be back in Ho Chi Minh City. I arrived this morning, by way of Yangon. After two weeks in Myanmar, a country which faces enormous barriers to development, I am afraid I have lost the ability to be critical of Vietnam's development.

I understand that one of the objectives of the Phan Chau Trinh Cultural Foundation is to promote the intellectual, cultural, and political legacy of Phan Chau Trinh, one of the great figures in modern Vietnamese history. I would like to take just a few minutes to offer my thoughts on why Phan Chau Trinh's ideas remain so salient today.

Although nearly a century has passed since Phan Chau Trinh's death in 1926, his legacy remains very relevant to the current challenges facing Vietnam. Nowhere is this more true than with respect to the importance of education. During Phan Chau Trinh's lifetime, a large swath of the globe, including Vietnam, fell under the control of a handful of western powers. The rapid disintegration of political systems that had remained stable for centuries caused intellectuals in Vietnam and around Asia to search for explanations for the rise of the west. Many fixated on what might be called the west's hard power, its technological, military, and industrial prowess. Phan Chau Trinh delved deeper. He concluded that other factors, including education, were essential to understanding the sources of the west's rise.

The central role of education and innovation in determining the trajectories of nation states remains just as important today as it was in Phan's time. It is certainly no accident that the countries in Asia that have enjoyed the longest periods of rapid economic and social transformation— Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, Singapore—are also the countries that have succeeded in building educational systems capable of equipping their people with the skills and knowledge needed to compete and innovate. Education is a critical driver of value added economic growth and helps explain why these economies sustained high rates of growth when most developing countries slow down. Of course, education is important for other reasons as well. An educated citizenry is a source of positive social change and stability. Surely it is no

accident that South Korea and Taiwan were also among the very few countries in Asia to transition successfully from authoritarianism to democracy.

I doubt anyone in this room would disagree with the assertion that there is no bigger challenge facing Vietnam today than that posed by education reform. Nor, I suspect, would any of you disagree with my belief that without rapid and fundamental reform of the education system, especially of the higher education system, Vietnam risks failing to achieve its great potential as a nation. I will not take any of the short time that has been allotted to me to review why the Vietnamese education system is so deeply troubled. The problems that beset the education sector have been convincingly analyzed by Professor Hoang Tuy, Professor Pham Duy Hien, and many others, including the Harvard Vietnam Program.

Vietnam's economic transformation since I first returned to the country in 1985 has been nothing short of breathtaking. I certainly do not wish to diminish those achievements. However, as Vietnamese policymakers now regularly acknowledge, the economic activities that lifted Vietnam out of the ranks of the world's poorest countries—including agriculture and labor-intensive light manufacturing—cannot continue to be counted upon to deliver rising income levels to the Vietnamese people. Education, at all levels but especially in higher education, holds the key to unlocking new sources of growth and prosperity. In sum, education is an economic imperative for Vietnam.

Educational reform is also a political imperative, in at least two important respects.

First, education is what the Vietnamese people want. I have had many teachers about Vietnam over the years. Some of them are in this room. When it comes to the importance that Vietnamese attach to education, I learned a valuable lesson from an old friend who has devoted his career not to education but to agriculture. I remember meeting this individual about ten years ago. He was returning from the Mekong Delta, where he had worked as a young man when the *Doi moi* reforms were just beginning. When I asked him for his impressions of the Delta he gave what was to me at the time an unanticipated response. "Tommy," he said, "I assumed that our farmers wanted what they have always wanted: more farming land, improved inputs, more credit, and better extension. I was wrong. What they really want is better education, so that their children don't have to be rice farmers." Educational reform must remain a paramount priority not because it is what foreign investors want but because it is what the Vietnamese people want. I think it is clear that the government's ability to improve educational opportunities for the people will significantly influence how the Vietnamese public feels about its government.

Education is a political imperative in another respect too. As I observed a moment ago, Phan Chau Trinh was a sophisticated analyst of the geopolitical realities of his day. He appreciated that education was a source of the west's strength and that Vietnam's outmoded educational practices were a source of national weakness. While today's international order is of course very different from that of the early 20th century, I would argue that for Vietnam today, the link between education and national sovereignty is as real and vital as it was a century ago. If Vietnam is going to maintain its hard-won independence, it must build an education system that can contribute to economic and social progress. Without a dynamic, value added economy—which can only be achieved with educational reform—Vietnam risks falling into an increasingly

unequal set of economic and political relationships, with China and with other large countries. To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that Vietnam risks returning to the status of a conquered colonial possession as it was in Phan Chau Trinh's day. However, at a time when there is increasingly anxiety about Vietnam's relations with the great powers, including China, education should be understood as a bulwark of a vigorous and innovative socioeconomic system.

In my brief remarks I have tried to explain why I believe educational reform is such a critically important enterprise for Vietnam today and why Phan Chau Trinh's thinking remains so relevant to this undertaking. I have chosen not to address the content of the educational reform agenda. A great deal has been written about this question, including important statements authored by people gathered here today. Madam Nguyen Thi Binh, Professor Chu Hao, and Mr. Nguyen Ngoc have all been influential commentators on educational reform. I have learned from all of them. My own views and those of my colleagues at the Harvard Vietnam Program on this question have been stated elsewhere.

Before closing, however, I would like to suggest one additional area where I think that Phan Chau Trinh's philosophy remains relevant to educational reform. Although he was a great patriot, Phan could be sharply critical of aspects of Vietnamese society and culture that he believed were impediments to progress. (This characteristic may be because, like Mdm. Nguyen Thi Binh, Professor Hoang Tuy, and Mr. Nguyen Ngoc, Phan Chau Trinh was from Quang Nam. As everyone knows, people from Quang Nam relish a good argument!) Phan Chau Trinh made no secret of his belief that Vietnam could and should learn from other countries, including France, its colonial master at the time. Phan Chau Trinh's capacity for unflinching self-criticism should be applauded.

It is always a danger to believe that one's own country or culture is exempt from the same principles that apply elsewhere. Regrettably, this tendency is widespread in my country, to the extent that there is a term for it: "American exceptionalism." I have spent enough time here to know that there is a Vietnamese variety of this mental trap. Call it, if you will, Vietnamese exceptionalism. Having followed debates about educational reform in Vietnam for many years, this exceptionalism manifests itself in at least two areas. The first concerns how to measure and assess progress. It is not enough to say that Vietnam is better than it was twenty years ago, when it remains woefully far behind the countries Vietnamese should benchmarking itself against. No one has been a more powerful voice against the dangers of complacency than the great Professor Hoang Tuy.

A second area where we must be vigilant against exceptionalism is university governance. There are certain aspects of higher education that have a universal quality which transcends local context. The finest universities in the world all share certain basic features, including academic freedom, meritocracy, and transparency. Attempts to improve higher education while neglecting these intangibles of excellence are unlikely to produce the desired results. Universities should put down deep roots in the cultural "soil" in which they are planted, but it would be a grave mistake to invoke culture as an excuse to limit core principles such as freedom of enquiry.

In 1994, together with the support of a large number of Vietnamese colleagues and friends, I helped establish the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program. Our goal was to create a school

that could support Vietnam's development while also serving as an example of new forms of academic governance. Today I am proud to be part of a joint Vietnamese and American effort to build a new university in this city, Fulbright University Vietnam. Fulbright University Vietnam represents a continuation and expansion of the work that we began when the Fulbright School first opened its doors twenty years ago. As we move forward with this exciting project we can draw inspiration from Phan Chau Trinh's thinking. If he were alive today, I like to think that he would support our vision Fulbright University Vietnam as an institution that blends Vietnam's unique and precious heritage with the finest traditions of academic governance and excellence.

Once again, I would like to thank the Phan Chau Trinh Cultural Foundation for giving me this award.