

**A LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY DEBATE: FAMILY VS. NATION
WITH SELECTIONS FROM THE LETTERS OF HOÀNG CAO KHẢI AND PHAN ĐÌNH PHÙNG**

Introduction

Despite its strong start in the first decades of the nineteenth century, by its middle the Nguyễn regime began to weaken just as the European powers were beginning to show their strength and colonial ambitions. Led by the British who attacked Burma and China, other Western powers worked to take other parts of Asia, particularly as these areas related to China. The French first took the far south of Vietnam in the 1860s, then the north and the center two decades later. The weakened Nguyễn regime, unable to control Chinese bandit gangs in the north, was even less able to do much against the French forces.

A resistance did spring up in different parts of the country. In the north and the center it was led by scholar-officials, though most of them continued to serve the government, even under the French. A famed poetic debate arose between two of the literati — Hoàng Cao Khải (1850-1933) and Phan Đình Phùng (1847-1896) — should they serve the government (and thus the French) or should they reject it and go into the resistance and the mountains?

Document Selections with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention, 1858-1900*, by Truong Buu Lam (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1967), 122-127.

**A Late Nineteenth Century Debate: Family vs. Nation
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Letter from Hoàng Cao Khải to Phan Đình Phùng

Until now, your actions have undoubtedly accorded with your loyalty. May I ask however what sin our people have committed to deserve so much hardship? I would understand your resistance did you involve but your family for the benefit of a large number! As of now, hundreds of families are subject to grief; how do you have the heart to fight on? I venture to predict that, should you pursue your struggle, not only will the population of our village be destroyed but our entire country will be transformed into a sea of blood and a mountain of bones. It is my hope that men of your superior morality and honesty will pause a while to appraise the situation.

I have meditated time and again upon my arguments and am sincerely inclined to hope that you might willingly accept them. But in your present situation, will you perhaps find it difficult to bring your struggle to an end?

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Questions:

1. Loyalty to the country, the suffering of the people — how did one balance these two aims?
2. Which should come first, the welfare of one's own family? Or that of all families?
3. What was the struggle worth?

Longer Selection with Questions

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Letter from Hoàng Cao Khải to Phan Đình Phùng

Soon it will be seventeen years since we ventured upon different paths of life. Although matters have changed, the road from north to south remains long and arduous.¹ Nevertheless, in neither my dreams nor my thoughts do I ever feel that you are far. How sweet was our friendship when we both lived in our village.

From the day on which you decided to take up arms against the invasion your courage and loyalty have grown so renowned that I have often heard the French administrators speak of you with high regard. It is therefore clear that loyal men command respect not only from their compatriots but also from persons of foreign countries.

At the time when the capital was lost and after the royal carriage had departed, you courageously answered the appeals of the King by raising the banner of righteousness. It was certainly the only thing to do in those circumstances. No one will question that.

But now the situation has changed and even those without intelligence or education have concluded that nothing remains to be saved. How is it that you, a man of vast understanding, do not realize this? But I seem to perceive your reasoning. You are determined to do whatever you deem righteous. You give all your efforts and talents to the cause you consider just. And yet, although it is in a man's power to undertake any enterprise, its outcome depends upon the will of Heaven. All that matters indeed is the giving of one's life to one's country. No one therefore can deter you from your goal.

The subject I should now like to introduce is the suffering imposed upon our country. It distresses me and has prompted me, on several occasions, to write to you so as to discuss with

¹ *The road from north to south*: The road separating Hoàng Cao Khải, the viceroy in Hanoi, from Phan Đình Phùng, whose headquarters were in the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, south of Hanoi.

you or at least impart to you some of my superficial ideas. Each time, however, I lacked the courage to complete my letter. Why? Because I knew your determination too well and knew that my words would certainly not induce you to change your mind. Moreover, the circumstances in which we now live are so unlike that I doubted you would want to understand my language.

But recently, in an interview with the French governor-general, we happened to discuss the situation in our province. Here are his views. He knows quite well that you are committed to your righteous cause and that you are also utterly selfless. But though you have no thoughts for your own person nor for your own family, you should at least attend to the sufferings of the population of a whole region. The governor mentioned this to me because he knew that I was from the same province as you and that we might together devise a plan to save it. His words are not worthless, and this is precisely the reason why I can no longer remain silent.

Are you not ashamed to see that the governor-general, who comes from a foreign country several thousand miles away, knows how to care for our people while we, who were born and raised in this country, remain blind to the sufferings of its people? How will they judge us, the generations a hundred years hence? I have always been taught that superior men should consider the care of the people as fundamental; who has ever heard of men who were loyal to their king but forgot the people's aspirations?

Until now, your actions have undoubtedly accorded with your loyalty. May I ask however what sin our people have committed to deserve so much hardship? I would understand your resistance did you involve but your family for the benefit of a large number! As of now, hundreds of families are subject to grief; how do you have the heart to fight on? I venture to predict that, should you pursue your struggle, not only will the population of our village be destroyed but our entire country will be transformed into a sea of blood and a mountain of bones. It is my hope that men of your superior morality and honesty will pause a while to appraise the situation.

I have meditated time and again upon my arguments and am sincerely inclined to hope that you might willingly accept them. But in your present situation, will you perhaps find it difficult to bring your struggle to an end?

Had I not been quite sure of being able to offer you security, I should never have dared suggest a solution to you. But it happens that the governor-general and I are good old friends. Furthermore, the *résident supérieur* in Huế and the chiefs of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces also concur with my views. In addition to all this, I can tell you that there have been cases in which I have been able to save people in even dire circumstances. Recently, Mr. Pham Tron Mu'u came to offer his surrender, and I personally presented him to various French officials who treated him like a precious guest. They immediately cabled the provincial authorities requesting them to free his three sons and to permit him to attend to his ancestors' tombs. This alone will prove to you the tolerance and generosity of the government of the Protectorate. It will also prove to you that, though they come from a foreign country several thousand miles away, the French have the same heart and the same logic we have.

If you do not think my proposition completely senseless, please, do not be concerned with anything else. I would never dare commit you to anything which would belittle you.

Phan Đình Phùng's Reply to Hoàng Cao Khải

In the last years, ever since the moment I gave my life to military affairs and went to live in the heart of the jungle, I have continually experienced a heavy sorrow indeed, aggravated these days by the cold of the winter season. Then all of a sudden, I was informed that a letter had come from you. Upon hearing the news, my sorrow and the cold weather marvelously dissipated as if into thin air. I read your missive at once.

In your letter, you revealed to me the causes of calamities and of happiness. You showed me clearly where advantages and disadvantages lie. All of which sufficed to indicate that your anxious concern was not only for my own security but also for the peace and order of our entire region. I understood plainly your sincere arguments.

Although removed from each other by thousands of miles, I feel as if we were sitting in the same house conversing calmly with each other. The words which spring from the depths of your heart receive my full consideration. But the nature of my situation and my present feelings are difficult to express. When I pit the affairs of the world against my own talent, the match reminds me of the old saying, "Take the arm of the locust to halt the carriage" — and my situation is even worse.

Now, upon reflection; I have concluded that if our country has survived these past thousand years when its territory was not large, its army not strong, its wealth not great, it was because the relationships between king and subjects, fathers and children, have always been regulated by the five moral obligations. In the past, the Han, the Sung, the Yuan, the Ming time and again dreamt of annexing our country and of dividing it up into prefectures and districts within the Chinese administrative system. But never were they able to realize their dream. Ah! If even China, which shares a common border with our territory, and is a thousand times more powerful than Vietnam, could not rely upon her strength to swallow us, it was surely because the destiny of our country had been willed by Heaven itself. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Classics and of the Rites upon which we base our behavior was thereby demonstrated.

The French, separated from our country until the present day by I do not know how many thousand miles, have crossed the oceans to come to our country. Wherever they came, they acted like a storm, so much so that the Emperor had to flee. The whole country was cast into disorder. Our rivers and our mountains have been annexed by them at a stroke and turned into a foreign territory. These events affected the whole country, the entire population. It is not any particular region or any particular family alone that has suffered this trial.

In the year I Yu [1885] the Imperial carriage arrived at Son Phong, in the province of Hà Tĩnh. At that time I was mourning the death of my mother. I remained secluded in my house in order to fulfill my filial duties. It did not occur to me to envisage anything else. However, since I

belonged to a prominent family, the Emperor, two or three times, issued edicts summoning me. I could do nothing then but obey the Imperial orders. In addition, the Emperor has recently granted me the great honor in investing me with a major mission and in conferring upon me liberal powers. Were you in my place, could you refuse or escape these responsibilities?

Ten years have elapsed since the birth of our movement. Among those who gave themselves to the cause of righteousness, many have been imprisoned and many have been killed, but the determination of those who are left has never diminished. On the contrary, they continue to sustain me with all their efforts and the number of these courageous persons increases daily. They did not abandon their families to tread my path because they found pleasure in adventure and danger. They simply trusted me, they had confidence in me; because of my determination, they could endure all these hardships without a murmur. Such is the people's disposition. Were you in my place, could you abandon all these men without a pain in your heart?

Dear old friend, it was because these people regarded me so highly that I was willing to leave my ancestors' altars without incense and to see my relatives scattered in every direction around the country. If this is my attitude toward those who are my relatives, what then is my feeling toward those with whom I have no ties? If I am not even able to protect those who are close to me, what then am I for those who are far from me?

Moreover, if our region has suffered to such an extent, it was not only from the misfortunes of war. You must realize that wherever the French go, there flock around them groups of petty men who offer plans and tricks to gain the enemy's confidence. These persons create every kind of enmity; they incriminate innocent persons, blaming one one day, punishing another the next. They use every expedient to squeeze the people out of their possessions. That is how hundreds of misdeeds, thousands of offenses have been perpetrated. How can the French not be aware of all the suffering that the rural population has had to endure? Under these circumstances, is it surprising that families should be disrupted and the people scattered?

You and I are from the same province of Hoan,² but we are now removed from each other by several thousand miles. In spite of this distance, you still care for the place of your birth. How much then do I, who suffer this situation with my own body and witness it with my own eyes? The difficulty is that I am bound by circumstances. I must accept my destiny. I am only sad that I have not the power to effect that which I will. What else can I do?

My friend, if you are troubled about our people, then I advise you to place yourself in my position and to think about the circumstances in which I live. You will understand naturally and see clearly that I do not need to add anything else.

Questions:

1. Why did each man choose the side he took?

² *Province of Hoan*: The ancient name of the province of Hà Tĩnh.

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2. Which side was best for Vietnam?
3. What role did friendship play in this discussion?