

Phạm Quỳnh, borrowed language, and the ambivalences of colonial discourse

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Phạm Quỳnh (1893–1945), twentieth century Vietnamese intellectual and politician, is a contentious figure in Vietnamese colonial history in terms of his collaboration with the French administration. Much of the mixed opinions on his role, though gleaned from his essays and political positions, have not yet been connected to the ambiguities of the colonial reforms concurrent with his budding career. Informed by Homi Bhabha's framework of 'mimicry', this study offers a reading of Phạm Quỳnh's attachment to language, both tongue and discourse, to nuance his character and reveal the ambiguous articulations of French colonial policy in Vietnam.

The story of Phạm Quỳnh's death is a tragic one. It was a hot August afternoon in 1945 when he was taken away from his Hoa Đường residence in Huế by the Việt Minh.¹ Neither Phạm Quỳnh nor his family members knew where he was going; they also did not know that he would never return. Just earlier that year in March, upon Japanese intervention, emperor Bảo Đại had declared the 'Empire of Vietnam' independent from French rule. Phạm Quỳnh took the occasion to resign from his post as Minister of the Interior, and planned to spend his retirement returning to a life of literature and writing.

In a local newspaper many months after his arrest, in early 1946, the Vietnamese scholar's family found out that he had been 'tried and executed' (*xử tử hình*) along with father and son Ngô Đình Khôi and Ngô Đình Huân. Eleven years later, in 1956, South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm sought to find the whereabouts of the death of his brother Khôi and his nephew Huân. He learned that their remains, along with Phạm Quỳnh's, lay somewhere in the forest of Hắc Thủy in Quảng Trị province, about 20 kilometres north of Huế. The men were finally given proper

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1 See Thụy Khuê's broadcast on Phạm Quỳnh, featuring his daughter Phạm Thị Ngoạn. *Radio France Internationale*, 4 Oct. 1992, <http://thuykhue.free.fr/rfi/1992-10-04-PhQuynh.mp3>; 'Phụ bản: Phạm Quỳnh và vụ án Nam Phong', *Vietnam Radio France Internationale*, 31 May 2011; as well as Phạm Thị Ngoạn's 'Introduction au Nam Phong', *Bulletin de la Société des études indochinoises*, nouvelle série, 48, 2–3 (1973): 209.

burials. Although there is much speculation that the execution occurred on 6 September 1945, the details of these deaths remain unclear.

Vietnamese newspapers and political figures in the last two decades have turned this event over and over again in their heads: How did Vietnam lose such an important cultural figure? Had it been a mistake?² Throughout his career and even in historical scholarship, Phạm Quỳnh was never able to escape the criticism of collaborating with the French, to the extent that this may have been the very reason for his execution. But did collaboration mean that Phạm Quỳnh was truly an enemy of the nascent Democratic Republic, or might we venture to ask, was he just too skilled a mimic?

This essay will re-examine Phạm Quỳnh's purported role as colonial collaborator alongside Homi Bhabha's layered theory of mimicry,³ in which the colonial language and culture that is taken up by the colonised is not just a sign of assimilation, but a juxtaposition of one's culture next to another in a way that renders this mimicry incomplete, insecure, ambivalent. Bhabha traces this mimicry back even further, in which colonial discourse and its civilising mission is itself the aberrant derivative of post-Enlightenment civility. Mimicry and its partial representation repeats not only when the colonial elites speak like the French, it also operates whenever the French try to reiterate their colonial authority. It is therefore not merely a tool or technique that Phạm Quỳnh used, nor were his essays in French only ironic or sarcastic, even though in addressing the same topics in the same language as French administrators, his mimicry can be seen as inextricable to the mockery of colonial discourse. But the nuance to be made is that the appropriation of this language — both French and colonial discourse — allows Phạm Quỳnh to repeat and remind the French of what they had previously promised in their policies. The way that mimicry has been developed by Bhabha, as a 'split' or 'forked' discourse, illustrates the possibility for competing agendas to co-exist in the era of colonial reform, so that Phạm Quỳnh's ideas were similar but not quite identical to those of the colonial administrators.

It is this idea of 'similar but not quite' that I argue to reveal an unexplored subtlety and unsoundness to Phạm Quỳnh's character and career, which extends beyond an evaluation of a single individual to that of a larger colonial context filled with paradoxes. Reading his writings and actions through this lens, we are able to account for him being implicated as a member of the colonial elite within the rhetoric of reform, and be more critical regarding any normative judgements on his character.

Contentions around a character

In addition to being known as editor of *Nam Phong*, one of the most influential reviews in 1920s Vietnam, the perception of Phạm Quỳnh's role as a collaborator has been perpetuated by a number of English language scholars. Only recently have

2 Many articles have periodically appeared on Phạm Quỳnh's death in Vietnamese online, some even outlining his final moments, e.g., *Xưa Và Nay* (i.e. Nhật Hoa Khanh, Oct. 2006), *Hồn Việt* (i.e. Thái Vũ 27 Apr. 2011), and *Báo Mới* (Anonymous, 17 Nov. 2009). See also blogs, e.g., Phạm Tôn, 'Ai đã giết Phạm Quỳnh, Người nặng lòng với nước' [Who killed Phạm Quỳnh, the Vietnamese patriot?], 18 Sept. 2009, <http://sachhiem.net/LICHSU/P/PhamTon04.php> (accessed Aug. 2017).

3 Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', *The location of culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 121–31.

scholars tried to re-examine earlier critical perspectives on his role in cultural politics to redress the use of ‘collaboration’ and its role within Vietnamese colonial history.⁴ Sarah Womack has dedicated an entire dissertation to defining Phạm Quỳnh’s agenda as a collaborator. While she defines collaboration as ‘the conditional mutual accommodation of state and individual towards the service of separate goals, and the limited assistance of each party, whether wittingly or not, towards the ends of the other’, she remains very critical of Phạm Quỳnh’s character, reading his ‘self-serving agenda’ along the same lines as David Marr.⁵ She nevertheless gestures toward a particular ‘carved out space’ that Phạm Quỳnh occupied where he was able to exercise a certain influence on colonial policy. *Nam Phong* was a platform for this space, because, despite its subheading ‘*Văn Học Khoa Học*’ (Culture and Science), it was ‘often the site of lively political discussions, some in support of and some critical of French policy’, a site that the Vietnamese could occupy outside of narrow colonial discourse.⁶ Yet, despite the attempt to separate her usage of ‘collaborator’ from its Second World War connotations of betrayal, the numerous examples of ambivalence that Womack cites in both French colonial policy and Phạm Quỳnh’s agenda are never considered as such. Any credit that he is granted is inseparable from her early announcement of distrust for his character.⁷

Gerard Sasges goes further in taking to task labels such as ‘sycophant’, ‘toady’, ‘arch-collaborator’ by looking at Phạm Quỳnh’s influence within colonial economic policy, especially in relation to the oppressive alcohol monopoly system.⁸ It may be easy to categorise Phạm Quỳnh as an arch-collaborator, Sasges claims, if we read his essays praising the philosophy of a French protectorate without examining the nature of his engagement with the colonial regime. Acknowledging the paradox between these two ‘loyalties’ runs the risk of crystallising a colonial narrative of superior and inferior positionalities, but Sasges instead uses such paradoxes as a point of departure to fathom how commitments to French modernisation and the preservation of Vietnamese culture could simultaneously and mutually exist.⁹ Such loyalty is translated into how Phạm Quỳnh imagined collaboration with the French to be carried out. Standing up to the Grand Council of Economic and Financial Interests, an advisory forum of Indochinese and French representatives to the governor-general in 1931, Phạm Quỳnh argued against the renewal of the alcohol monopoly as a concrete exercise in negotiation. If ever accused of resistance, he could have easily defended his actions, for such representation of Vietnamese public opinion was appropriate and

4 Among historians, he has been pigeonholed as a collaborator who even ‘prostituted’ himself for these leveraging relationships with the colonial administration. See David Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 153–61, and Trương Hữu Lâm’s *Colonialism experienced: Vietnamese writings on colonialism, 1900–1931* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 292.

5 Sarah Womack, ‘Colonialism and the collaborationist agenda: Phạm Quỳnh, print culture, and the politics of persuasion in colonial Vietnam’ (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2003), p. 183.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

8 Gerard Sasges, ‘Indigenous representation is hostile to all monopolies: Phạm Quỳnh and the end of the alcohol monopoly in colonial Vietnam’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, 1 (2010): 1–36.

9 See also Gerard Sasges, ‘Drunken poets and new women: Consuming tradition and modernity in colonial Vietnam’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48, 1 (2017): 6–30.

necessary in a legitimate collaboration. This was a way of stretching the boundaries of his administrative role to push back against colonial oppression where he saw it to be both necessary and appropriate.

Complementary to the way that Sasges has re-evaluated Phạm Quỳnh through his administrative contributions, this study examines in particular Phạm Quỳnh's language and writing so that the cumulative effect is to reconsider his legacy and situate him in the field of colonial reformism. Moving away from the concrete political engagement of collaboration elaborated by these scholars, I use the framework of mimicry to broaden our understanding of the ambivalent roles of Vietnamese elites in parallel with the ambivalence of colonial discourse more generally. In other words, collaboration is but one iteration of mimicry at work, and the paradox of loyalties that we detect in the Vietnamese elite mirror the paradoxes inherent in the proposed French reforms of the interwar period. Moreover, this allows us to take the debate back to a discussion initiated by David Marr and Hue-Tam Ho Tai regarding a 'code for politics', in which participation in politics can exist outside of physical action and revolutionary form.¹⁰ In expanding what constitutes 'politics' and 'political discourse', for example, Martina Nguyen has been able to show ways in which the Self-Reliant Literary Group used their journals as vehicles of political empowerment.¹¹ In a similar vein, this essay challenges the long-standing dichotomy between reform and revolution, to think about political activity more broadly, from participation to subversion. Beyond this idea of collaboration, beyond the expectation of revolution and violence, political activism might be thus found in language and discourse in ways that are as subtle as a twist of a sentence.

Colonial elite in a time of colonial reform

Phạm Quỳnh's role as a part of the colonial elite was as important, if not more so, for the French administration than it was for the Vietnamese people. His career thrived during a period of colonial reform, not only because he benefited from civil participation in politics and the freedom of the press during the rise of print culture, but because he played a key role in the shift of French policy toward a *politique indigène* that included native voices in the administration. And as we will see, while many scholars have examined this interwar era through different lenses and terminologies, their perspectives nevertheless underline the ultimate tension of this era of reforms, that is, to extend republican values to colonial possessions while still maintaining the status quo and hierarchy of relations. As an elite Vietnamese recruited into that system, Phạm Quỳnh was therefore deeply implicated within the paradoxes of that thinking.

Born in 1893 in Hanoi (the seventeenth day of the twelfth month in the lunar calendar), his career as an intellectual began at the age of 16, working as an interpreter at the École Française d'Extrême Orient and writing articles for *Đông Dương Tạp Chí* (Indochina Review). It was through his work with this journal that Director of the Surêté Louis Marty saw Phạm Quỳnh's potential for collaboration. In July 1917,

10 See Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial*, pp. 136–61; and Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 51.

11 Martina Nguyen, 'The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn): Colonial modernism in Vietnam, 1932–1941' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), p. 144.

the two men along with a fellow journalist, Nguyễn Bá Trác, launched the French-sanctioned *Nam Phong*. Meanwhile, its rival *Le Tribune Indigène* was launched a month later by journalist Bùi Quang Chiêu and François Henri Schneider in Cochinchina. Then in 1919, Phạm Quỳnh helped to found the Association for the Intellectual and Moral Formation of Annamites (AFIMA), with Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh as its vice president. Ten years Phạm Quỳnh's senior, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh had already established his journalism career and was especially known for his translations, making key works of French literature accessible in Vietnam to help foster French–Vietnamese cultural relations. Both Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh were the main decision-makers within the association, advocating for a slow and steady progress of the Vietnamese people in the face of Westernisation. Also sanctioned by the French, AFIMA was indeed another important vehicle to cultivate the indigenous elite in the name of social progress, particularly through the discussion of social and cultural issues, language and literature.

The idea behind the reworked *politique indigène* and the recruitment of Vietnamese intellectuals was to facilitate the dissemination of French views on domestic and international politics, relieve the burdens of French administration, and theoretically move toward a more associative — that is, indirect — form of colonial governance. This initiative, particularly enforced during Albert Sarraut's terms as governor-general in 1911–13 and 1917–19, needs to be briefly contextualised within the larger framework of colonial reform during this time.

A major reason leading the French administration in Vietnam to move toward alternative policies other than repression and force was the rising fear of Vietnamese nationalism. Introducing necessary changes presented an opportunity to revisit and extend the French republican tradition of social and political reform. For Vietnam, these changes included educational policies, civil representation, and the extension of social welfare. While Sarraut was not the first administrator to commit to bringing more republican values to Vietnam, so as to allegedly prepare it for eventual independence, the implementation of his reforms over his two terms would prove to have long-standing effects on print culture, education, and civil institutions.¹² During his first term, he reorganised the Indochinese Consultative Chamber and provincial councils to include more seats for indigenous elites. Upon his return as governor-general and in the wake of the First World War, he worked with Louis Marty to cultivate print culture as a way to capture and control public opinion.¹³ Sarraut also pushed for the elimination of mandarin examinations (and thus the elimination of education in Chinese) and in 1918, officially passed the Code of Education which centralised primary schools to be Franco-Indigenous schools, so that French and *quốc ngữ* (romanised Vietnamese) would be taught to Vietnamese youth at an early age. These policies would change the cultural landscape of

12 The idea of an alliance with local elites to implement French policy more effectively can be traced back to J.L. de Lanessan and his term as governor-general (1891–94) shortly after the Patenôtre Treaty of 1884. Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémeury trace the period of colonial reformism and official policies of 'association' to 1905, under the government of Emile Combes in France and Minister of Colonies Etienne Clémentel. See *Indochina: An ambiguous colonization, 1854–1954*, trans. Ly Lan Dill Klein et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 300–301.

13 Womack, 'Colonialism and the collaborationist agenda', p. 123.

Vietnam, part of what Sarraut called *la mise en valeur*, in which France was only helping the native elite realise and put into effect their resources and qualities for the betterment of a ‘human collective’.¹⁴

The efficacy of Sarraut’s administration, however, does not occlude the fact that the governor-general was still very much concerned with maintaining French colonial power, ‘the collaboration with duly qualified native elements’ being a way for the ‘French Protectorate’ to remain faithful to itself, and its *mission civilisatrice*.¹⁵ Indeed, the split of this colonial agenda — to valorise but also control native resources and qualities — pronounced a greater paradox in colonial discourse in which the extension of certain liberties only translated to variations on France’s firm grasp on its colonial possession. Gary Wilder has called this a shift toward ‘colonial humanism’, in which *outré-mer* territories would be considered as actual societies that possessed their own diverse peoples and cultures that should not be assimilated to become ‘French’, and yet, understanding the customs and habits of local populations only provided more precise ways to control them.¹⁶ Similarly, Peter Zinoman and Martina Nguyen have examined specifically how North Vietnamese writers in the 1920s and 1930s detected this paradox themselves, continually expressing their dissatisfaction with colonial institutions in their work. The ‘colonial’ quality of republicanism in French Indochina referred necessarily to the limited ways in which the freedom of association, expression, and political participation was put into practice, and yet, it was through these republican practices that they were able to voice their opinions.¹⁷ In highlighting these paradoxes, these Vietnamese writers attest to the first instance of mimicry that Bhabha delineates regarding post-Enlightenment civility and its colonial version, the *mission civilisatrice*. The emergence of colonial reform is thus ‘the sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power’.¹⁸ The ideal of post-Enlightenment republican values and their actual application in the colony produce a split identity of those ideals, a duplicity that is both ‘double’ and ‘deceitful’, which in turn ‘alienates [that first] language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms’, one fit for the colonial setting.¹⁹

The paradox we understand here then is a reflection of the inherent split in the civilising mission and its post-Enlightenment origin, and it percolates into the

14 Sarraut writes: ‘*La France qui colonise va organiser l’exploitation pour son avantage sans doute, mais aussi pour l’avantage générale du monde, de territoires et de ressources que les races autochtones de ces pays arriérés ne pouvaient à elles seules ou ne savaient mettre en valeur et dont le profit était ainsi perdu pour elles, comme pour la collectivité universelle.*’ [French colonisation will no doubt consolidate exploitation for its own benefit, but also for the general benefit of the world, valorising territories and resources that the indigenous people of these backward countries cannot or do not know how to do on their own, risking the loss of such value not only for them but for the universal collective.] Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies* (Paris: Payot, 1923), p. 88.

15 Albert Sarraut, *Projet de loi de mise en valeur des colonies françaises, présenté par M. Albert Sarraut, Ministre de Colonies* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Revue indigène, 1921), p. 26; cited in Tai, *Radicalism*, p. 38.

16 Wilder, *The French imperial nation-state*, pp. 61–5.

17 See Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese colonial republican: The political vision of Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 19–22; Nguyen, ‘The Self-Reliant Literary Group’, pp. 142–93.

18 Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man’, p. 122.

19 Ibid.

inclusion of colonial elites who use French tools to make claims and advance positions. Christopher Goscha's study on Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and colonial modernity focuses on the Vietnamese intellectual's ability to use translations to navigate his relationship with France as well as his position on the modernisation of Vietnam. Colonial modernity, to Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, meant an alliance with France was necessary in order to be on 'civilisational par' with the rest of the world.²⁰ This position is not unlike that of Phạm Quỳnh, and while the two men disagreed on how they thought France's administration in Vietnam should be put into practice, they shared the belief that in working with the French, the Vietnamese had a better chance of establishing their cultural legitimacy. While this was not their main agenda, which was still to work toward a political system that would grant them more autonomy and agency, it was a fundamental rationale as to why Vietnam should benefit from different policies and reforms than other French colonies.

Where the goals of these members of the Vietnamese elite aligned with those of the French was in the preservation of the social and cultural edifices of Vietnamese culture, confirming Sasges' argument that colonial modernity was mutually constituted along with colonial tradition, and that local culture was crucial to shaping colonialism.²¹ For Phạm Quỳnh, the celebration of Vietnamese language and culture overlapped with the French desire to better understand native culture, and while this was a means for the French to better control the Vietnamese, it was also an opportunity for the Vietnamese to strengthen their cultural vitality. In other words, this only begins to reveal the second instance of mimicry regarding colonial subjects, in which participation and practice may overlap, their intentions similar, but not quite the same.

Self-strengthening through language and culture

Against the backdrop of interwar initiatives for colonial reform, Phạm Quỳnh travelled to France in 1922 as an AFIMA delegate to the Marseille Colonial Exhibition. During this trip, recorded extensively in his serialised *Pháp Du Hành Trình Nhật Ký* (Journal of a voyage to France),²² he was also commissioned to give a series of lectures in Paris, at the École Coloniale de Paris and the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences.²³ As a training centre for aspiring administrators of West Africa, Madagascar, and Indochina, the École Coloniale was an important institution in which reforms in colonial policies were first relayed. Bringing in Phạm Quỳnh to speak about Vietnamese culture reflected the reorganisation of curriculum and signalled a shift in the French colonial agenda — providing practical and scientific training to produce social intervention rather than political or violent oppression,

20 Christopher Goscha, 'The modern barbarian: Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and the complexity of colonial modernity in Vietnam', *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, 1 (2004): 139–66.

21 Sasges, 'Drunken poets and new women', p. 7.

22 The trip was first recorded in *Nam Phong* (58 Apr. 1922–95 May 1925), and published as a volume: *Pháp Du Hành Trình Nhật Ký* [Journal of a voyage to France] (Yerres: Ý Việt, 1997).

23 The speeches at the different institutions in Paris were published in *Nam Phong* beginning in issue 66. In 1923, these were collected into a single volume, where the French original is accompanied with page-by-page translations, in *Quelques Conférences à Paris, Mai-Juillet 1922* (Hanoi: Imprimerie Tonkinoise, 1923).

as well as extending republican welfarism to improve social rights, conditions, and relations.

Standing in front of his *École Coloniale* audience on 31 May 1922, Phạm Quỳnh, dressed in the Vietnamese *áo dài* for added effect, began his lecture on the ‘Evolution morale et intellectuelle des Annamites’ by referencing a classic Vietnamese proverb: ‘One should not beat a drum outside the house of Thunder’.²⁴ He immediately identified himself as the disobedient, ‘presumptuous youth’ who dares beat his drum before the French ‘*génies du tonnerre*’, by taking on the task of speaking before a French public in a language that is not his own. After taking the liberty to situate his position, neither as French nor as a historian, he goes on nevertheless to speak about Vietnamese history in French, setting the stage for a talk on the intellectual and moral evolution of the Vietnamese, and embodying that very idea of evolution.

This 1922 speech, though lengthy and with copious examples of this theme, epitomised two major tenets still attributed to Phạm Quỳnh’s career and writings today. First was the importance of cultivating a national culture through teaching, using and developing *quốc ngữ*, and the second was the need for a reciprocal understanding between the French and the Vietnamese, based concretely on the Patenôtre Treaty of 1884.

By the time of this lecture, Phạm Quỳnh’s advocacy for the first objective regarding *quốc ngữ* was well under way. In the first issues of *Nam Phong*, Phạm Quỳnh made a point of including glossaries at the end of each issue as a way to expand the *quốc ngữ* vocabulary. The glossaries listed *quốc ngữ* terms alongside their imported meanings from both Han Chinese and French. In 1918, the journal featured a letter to the editor that challenged the frequent usage and incorporation of Han Chinese characters to broaden *quốc ngữ* vocabulary, claiming this exacerbated the problem of proper instruction of the national language.²⁵ Taking the opportunity to shed more light on this topic, *Nam Phong* subsequently published other writers’ responses to this letter before finally putting an end to the debate in February the following year with a response from Phạm Quỳnh himself. While he did not disagree with the lack of *quốc ngữ* teaching, he affirmed the opinions of the writers before him, insisting that existing Vietnamese literature in *quốc ngữ* emerged from Han literature and it was impossible to neglect that history or leave that framework in regards to the language. It was instead necessary to ground the language and culture in its existing territory, to clear pathways for new Western influences (*mưa Tây gió Mĩ*, literally, ‘French rain and American wind’) so that ‘this ancient thousand-year-old country could be glorified along with the rest of the world’.²⁶

Phạm Quỳnh also began *Nam Phong* with strong neo-Confucian views regarding the function of literature in society. Directing his criticism toward his contemporary Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, better known by his pen name Tản Đà, in an essay in 1918, Phạm Quỳnh wrote that those who take their own life and experiences to be inspiration for

24 Phạm Quỳnh, *Quelques Conférences*, p. 17.

25 The letter was written by Nguyễn Háo Vinh, from Cochinchina, ‘Thư ngõ chủ-bút Nam Phong’ [Letter to the editor], *Nam Phong*, 16 Oct. 1918, pp. 198–209. More on this editorial debate can be found in Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial*, pp. 158–61.

26 Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial*, pp. 158–61. See also Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Bàn về sự dùng chữ nho trong văn quốc ngữ’, *Nam Phong*, 20, 20 Feb. 1919, pp. 83–97.

literature are no different from ‘crazy fools who walk the streets naked’. According to Phạm Quỳnh, Tản Đà had misused his literary talents in *Giấc mộng con* (A little dream), because literature was first and foremost a mode of instruction, not a place to indulge the imagination.²⁷ Moreover, he did not believe the Vietnamese language to be in a state where it could express the complexities of certain thoughts and feelings; only once the Vietnamese had cultivated and worked on the language could it develop that quality and capacity.²⁸

Both the journal and its *redacteur en chef* would evolve over the next decade, however, adapting to the rise of and changes in print culture in quốc ngữ. Despite his earlier position regarding Tản Đà’s *Giấc mộng con*, a later essay in 1932 reflects a change in perspective regarding the emergence of a new Vietnamese prose that was ‘less synthetical ... and more analytical with minute descriptions of places and of men, of external aspects and psychological states’.²⁹ The limitations of change can be summarised in what Phạm Quỳnh calls ‘Les trois plans’, detailing where he saw appropriate convergences between Western influence and Eastern tradition:

*En résumé, plan intellectuel largement ouvert à tous les apports de l’Occident; plan esthétique où ces apports gagneraient à être accueillis avec modération; plan moral où serait sage de ne rien accepter qu’avec une extrême prudence et pour ainsi dire après un long stage dans les autres domaines.*³⁰

In summary, intellectually we can be open to all Western contributions, aesthetically, it is best we welcome these contributions in moderation; and morally, it would be wise to accept anything with extreme caution, after a long trial phase in the other areas.

Capitalising on the long existence of Confucian tradition and the right fusion of ‘*l’esprit français et de l’esprit annamite*’, was a way for Phạm Quỳnh to argue for a special position for Vietnam in the colonial spectrum of culture.

It is therefore within these terms that we can understand Phạm Quỳnh’s early position in the national language and literature as well as his gradual change in perspective. It was very important to Phạm Quỳnh to emphasise just how much Vietnamese culture was not a tabula rasa. Like Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, he was concerned with ways to valorise Vietnamese culture in relation to others. In one direction, he constantly referred to Japan and its ability to stem from the same Sinic linguistic foundation to establish its own independent and strong culture, and in the other direction,

27 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Mộng hay mị?’ [Dream or hallucination?], *Nam Phong*, 7, Jan. 1918, pp. 23–5. In another review of a different work from Tản Đà called ‘Đài Guơng’, Phạm Quỳnh instead praised the writer’s ability to address the moral education of young girls, to have written ‘such a useful book’. ‘Giới thiệu sách mới’ [Introducing new works], *Nam Phong*, 23, May 1919, p. 423.

28 In a *compte rendu* for Paul Bourget’s novel *Le sens de la mort*, Phạm Quỳnh writes, ‘Có lắm cái tư-tưởng cảm-giác không tài nào diễn ra tiếng ta cho minh-liệu được. Cho hay cái quốc văn ta mới nở còn non-nớt chưa đủ sức mà ra vẫy-vùng trong bể ngôn-luận. Bởi vậy mà ta phải luyện cho nó có cái tư cách ấy. [There are a lot of thoughts and feelings that cannot be expressed clearly in our language. How can our still-burgeoning national language be flaunted in discussions? This is why we must develop it to reach that capacity.]’ See ‘Một bộ tiểu thuyết mới: Nghĩa cái chết’ [A new set of novels: The meaning of death], *Nam Phong* 1, 18 July 1917, pp. 20–27.

29 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘La nouvelle langue annamite’, *Nam Phong*, 171, Apr. 1932, p. 44.

30 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Les trois plans’, *Essais Franco-Annamites 1929–1932* (Huế: Éditions Bùi-Huy-Tin, 1937), pp. 234–44; henceforth *Essais*.

he saw other countries as lagging further behind in civilisation than Vietnam.³¹ This is clear in the record of his trip to France, passing through other British and French colonial possessions like Singapore, Colombo, and Djibouti. Certain places were more ‘civilised’ (*văn minh*) than others, he observed, thanks to the helping European hand, noting that British colonies like Singapore and Colombo seemed to have better infrastructure than the French ones, only because they had been colonised longer.³² On a more local level, Phạm Quỳnh supported Vietnamese expansion into Laos, and felt it natural for the Vietnamese to play the leading role in building the Indochinese federation with the French.³³

The colonial yardstick by which Phạm Quỳnh measured culture is problematic in its own right, but also reveals the extent to which he subscribed to the same rhetoric that fuelled colonial reform. That is, it was not only that the Vietnamese were well aware of the race for cultural superiority and the importance of making one’s culture more robust and durable in the face of other cultures; interwar colonial reform necessarily relied on gradual evolution and progress toward independence, and therefore recruited Vietnamese intellectuals into this way of thinking about themselves and also of others. For those who were co-opted into the colonial elite, to prove that they were worthy of French intervention, by making a case for their centuries-old culture, was also to place themselves in a favourable position on that directional spectrum vis-à-vis other colonial subjects.

A question of semantics: Meaning, accountability and application

In terms of the second important issue that concerned Phạm Quỳnh, comprehension between the French and Vietnamese was symbolically reduced to a missing ‘*politique d’égards*’, or a policy of respect. In a 1932 essay of the same title,³⁴ Phạm Quỳnh used a seemingly minor detail such as the *tutoiement* and *vouvoiement*³⁵ of colonial subjects to project a broader critique of contemptible French behaviour. Beyond government structures and native roles, this policy of respect addressed a more delicate problem among French *colons* and Vietnamese people, in which fixed ideas about Vietnamese inferiority affected the way the French treated them. If the French were successful in their conquest more than half a century ago, he argued, it was because their organised violence was met with a more sporadic response, and the only way to maintain a successful cohabitation and collaboration was for the French to adjust toward a ‘true reciprocal policy of respect’. Surely the French with their ‘reputation of being one of the politest people in the world,’ would understand this principle, for ‘everything here is an affair of nuance, of tact.’³⁶

Behind the question of behaviour and a politics of respect, the growing malaise within the Franco–Vietnamese relationship was at its core due to the failure of

31 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘L’exemple du Japon’, *Essais*, pp. 158–65 (also in *Nam Phong*, 146, Jan. 1930).

32 Phạm Quỳnh, *Pháp Du Hành Trình Nhật Ký*, pp. 237–40.

33 Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting concepts of space and place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2012), pp. 62–3.

34 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Politique d’égards’, *Essais*, pp. 350–58.

35 The use of the familiar ‘*tu*’ and the formal ‘*vous*’ forms of address in familial or informal and formal discourse and settings, respectively, indicating also sociological distinctions such as hierarchy and kinship.

36 Phạm Quỳnh, *Essais*, p. 351.

creating a policy, that again, was ‘*conforme à la lettre et à l’esprit*’ of the 1884 Patenôtre Treaty (also known as the Treaty of Hue). For Phạm Quỳnh, the most important qualities of the Protectorate administration were detailed in Articles 7 and 16 of the treaty, which stated that ‘native officials at all levels will continue to govern and administer the provinces’, and ‘as in the past, His Majesty the King of Annam will continue to direct the internal administration of his realms’.³⁷ Without the strict application of these two articles, the protectorate regime was indistinguishable from direct administration.

In Phạm Quỳnh’s mind, the ideal specific form of the protectorate should include a bicameral government, in which both the emperor and a Chamber of Representatives would be given authority. This idea of the protectorate, in which the elite class of mandarinate would be restored to its legitimacy and the king would actually be allowed to rule over his people, was something expressed much earlier during J.L. de Lanessan’s term as governor-general (1891–94) shortly after the treaty was signed. De Lanessan saw the protectorate regime as a lasting compromise between French imperialism, a conservative Vietnamese national elite, and the monarchy, though he believed that the latter institution had largely a symbolic role.³⁸ It would also enable the mobilisation of Confucian values, including the loyalty of civil servants to the king and the maintenance of certain hierarchies for peace in society. This was exactly how Phạm Quỳnh imagined leveraging existing Vietnamese culture for a policy of association. But de Lanessan’s hopes of gaining mandarin trust in order to create an alliance was perhaps far-sighted at the time, as it would carry out the kind of indirect administration that could possibly lead to eventual decolonisation. When de Lanessan was dismissed in 1894, these visions had dissipated along with him.

In 1930, in the wake of the violent revolts at Yên Bái, Phạm Quỳnh published a handful of essays that resurfaced this issue of direct and indirect administration. Through *Nam Phong*’s statement on these events, it was clear where Phạm Quỳnh stood in terms of revolutionary activity and violence, especially in their disruption of social order and any progress in improving Franco–Vietnamese rapprochement.³⁹ But these essays also demonstrate how he took the opportunity to make sure the Vietnamese were not entirely to blame for the rising nationalism and its revolts. In fact, in grounding his position in the existing political document of 1884, which he reprinted in the July 1930 issue of *Nam Phong*, Phạm Quỳnh was able to concretely point out the responsibility of the French in this turn of events. Citing the Resident Supérieur of Tonkin, René Robin, and his address to the largely rubber-stamp *Chambre des Représentants du Peuple* in one essay, ‘A propos de réformes’, it is clear that if the French could be lauded for their aid, they were also accountable when things went awry. Robin had made the following observation:

37 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Điều ước bảo-hộ năm 1884’ [The Protectorate Treaty of 1884], *Nam Phong*, 152, July 1930, pp. 5–9.

38 J.L. de Lanessan, ‘Pacification du delta et des pays annamites’, *La colonisation française en Indochine* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1895), pp. 6–55.

39 See for example, Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Việc khởi loạn ở Yên Bái’ [On the Yên Bái Uprising], *Nam Phong*, 146, Jan. 1930, p. 98.

*Et cependant, avant de frapper les coupables, il est plus d'une fois où je me demande si vraiment en toute sincérité, nous n'encourons pas, nous qui les avons instruits, qui les avons pour ainsi dire découverts, qui les avons désignés pour devenir les soutiens du peuple, une certaine part de responsabilité dans les fautes qu'ils commettent? ... Nous sommes-nous toujours adressés à des gens qui, par leur passé, par l'étendue et la qualité de leurs connaissances, par leur valeur morale, étaient les mieux préparés au rôle que nous attendions d'eux?*⁴⁰

And yet, before striking the guilty [referring to the mandarins charged with corruption and other abuses], there have been multiple occasions where I asked myself in all sincerity, if we do not incur some of the responsibility for the mistakes they commit, we who have educated them, who have discovered them so to speak, who have designated them to become the support of the people ... Have we always turned to those who, by their past, the extent and quality of their knowledge, their moral value, were best prepared for the role we expected of them?

While the main idea here is to address the reforms initiated by the Résident Supérieur toward the mandarinat, the essay highlights first and foremost a French admission of responsibility for often having chosen officials who were not up to the task. Only after repeating this important claim does Phạm Quỳnh characterise his defence of the mandarinat not as a step backwards, but as ultimately the long-awaited fulfilment of the criteria promised in the 1884 Treaty.

Over the course of his famous debate with Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh in 1931, Phạm Quỳnh's attachment to this treaty proved to be more focused on restoring indigenous authority over Vietnam than its efficacy or fairness. In addition to the symbolic monarchy, he argued that if mandarins were given more respect and genuine authority, they could be effective officials. But, even if colonial elites shared the conviction that the French had good intentions for the political future of Vietnam, their vision for what that future looked like varied greatly. Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, who was less keen on the mandarinat system and who saw very little use for the monarchy, pointed out the corruption, bribery, and general façade of those institutions.⁴¹ He proposed instead that Vietnamese officials be viewed as '*fonctionnaires*' or civil servants who reported to French superiors only. Rather than rectify deteriorating institutions, as Phạm Quỳnh proposed, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh saw it necessary to do away with them altogether in a more direct system of administration — not only of Vietnam, but for Indochina as a whole. This was the breaking point for Phạm Quỳnh, however, whose trust in the protectorate was grounded in its cultivation of an eventually independent 'Annam', not a federal Indochina.⁴² What appears to be a dispute over semantics — over a direct or indirect administration in a protectorate — was for Phạm Quỳnh a violation of political principle.

Such attention to language — particularly those of the French administrators — was facilitated by Phạm Quỳnh's privileged role within the colonial administration.

40 Phạm Quỳnh, *Essais*, p. 409.

41 For two different analyses of these debates, see Bruce Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy* (New Haven, NY: Council on Southeast Asian Studies, Yale University, 1993), pp. 51–7, and Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, pp. 62–8.

42 Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, pp. 64–6.

His access to this language allowed him to use it often and freely. It was a tactic to not only support his arguments with the legitimacy of an administrator's discourse, but also to strategically and safely question the colonial regime and its promised reforms. In 'Une opinion du Colonel Diguët', an essay on the same topic, it is through the military official Edouard Diguët's words that Phạm Quỳnh is able to harness his own position in terms of a politics of association. Diguët, who spent over a decade in Vietnam, also wrote a number of ethnographic texts on the Vietnamese people. Phạm Quỳnh cites him as someone who truly tried to understand Vietnam:

Dans l'ordre administrative, revenons à l'observation des traités; laissons les Annamites s'administrer et se juger librement eux-mêmes et n'exerçons notre souveraineté qu'à l'aide d'un haut contrôle. Le véritable chef de province doit être le tống-đốc ou le tuàn phủ auquel nous donnerons une solde lui permettant de tenir une situation honorable avec tous les égards dus à son rang. [italicised in the original]⁴³

In terms of administration, let us return to the adherence to treaties; let us leave the Vietnamese to govern and judge themselves freely, and let us only exercise our sovereignty with the help of a high degree of control. The true head of the province [instead of being the French Résident, as was effectively the case under the protectorate] must be the Tống-đốc [a joint governor of two provinces] or tuàn phủ [a governor of a single province] to whom we will give a salary allowing him to hold an honourable position with all the respect due to his rank.

Phạm Quỳnh was not merely hiding behind these French words, he was tracing their origin, connecting them to the document that started it all, and to the importance of a strict application of the protectorate as he believed it was originally intended and articulated in the 1884 treaty.

This loyalty to words and the principle of their application culminates in the essay, 'Une apologie du régime du protectorat'.⁴⁴ Similar to the essays previously mentioned, it takes the official language of a colonial administrator as a mouthpiece for Phạm Quỳnh's own position. It incorporates news of the sixth Congrès de la Fédération Française des Anciens Coloniaux held in Lorient, France, and addresses in particular the concluding speech given by François Piétri, Minister of Colonies, on the pursuit of a protectorate regime.⁴⁵ When reading Phạm Quỳnh's essay and Piétri's discourse independently, it is clear they do not share the same message. The first half of Piétri's discourse is greatly sympathetic to the noble task that these former colonial administrators had to endure, sacrificing their 'prime years for a voluntary exile in the colonies', only to be reciprocated with rising nationalism, rebellion, and ungratefulness.⁴⁶ Citing in particular the recent Vietnamese demonstrations in Paris in 1930, he affirms the magnanimity and responsibility of an imperial power like France, whose racial and cultural superiority should not be threatened by such

43 Phạm Quỳnh, *Essais*, p. 403; Phạm Quỳnh's emphasis. This is taken from Edouard Diguët, *Annam et Indo-Chine Française: I. Esquisse de l'histoire annamite. II. Rôle de la France en Indo-Chine* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1908), p. 176.

44 This essay is originally published in both Vietnamese and French in *Nam Phong*, 152, July 1930.

45 The national congress of the federation took place on 7–9 June 1930. For a full text of Piétri's discourse, see *Bulletin officiel de la Fédération Française des Anciens Coloniaux* 52, June 1930.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

outbursts or by the gradual changes introduced by reforms. It is only toward the end that Piétri mentions the shift toward what he calls ‘this new method that has emerged in the last thirty years, one that requires certain skill and finesse’. Focusing instead on this latter half of Piétri’s talk on reform and relating it to the protectorate regime, Phạm Quỳnh omits the entire reproach of the ungrateful Vietnamese and the justification for French colonial power. He praises the speaker for having so well defined the protectorate regime right from the very beginning of his essay, yet this is immediately ironic: not only has Phạm Quỳnh expressed multiple times that Tonkin seems more like a ‘colonie-protectorat’ even though by right there should have been no middle ground between a protectorate and a direct administration, the definition that Phạm Quỳnh cites from Piétri is anything but precise. Piétri himself calls the protectorate a ‘judicious’ or appropriate middle term between direct administration and consultative administration, but it is

*ni l’un ni l’autre, et il est les deux tout ensemble. La politique qu’il requiert est faite de nuances subtiles et de limites mouvantes.*⁴⁷

Neither one nor the other and it is both of them together. The policy that a protectorate requires is made of subtle nuances and shifting boundaries.

Because the nature of this policy is so ‘fluid’, the application, whether faithful or not, of a protectorate regime would be difficult, potentially unlikely, and at one point in the essay, even fictitious:

*Mais si on sait l’appliquer (le Protectorat) avec loyauté et avec conviction, si l’on veut en faire une réalité de travail et non un décor de théâtre, il est de nature non seulement à légitimer notre action, mais encore à lui servir de soutien et de guide, dans les circonstances difficiles.*⁴⁸

If we are able apply it (the Protectorate) faithfully and sincerely, if we want to make it a *working reality and not a stage piece*, it will be able to not only legitimise our action, but also to be their support and guide in difficult circumstances.

By citing Piétri, Phạm Quỳnh actually underlines the ambiguity of the French colonial administrator’s definition. Thus, while both Piétri and Phạm Quỳnh make an ‘apology’ or defence of a colonial policy, the fact that the policy is actually absent, incomplete, or even ambiguous lends it an alternative meaning, a regretful acknowledgement of failure or, more appropriately, of offence.

With the only visible trace of Phạm Quỳnh’s voice in his italicisation of the original text, we can find in the French administrator’s words what Phạm Quỳnh thinks is the true lesson to be learned:

L’esprit de blague, le sarcasme, la bourrade inconsidéré ne sont point des articles d’exportation colonial. Nous avons affaire à des sensibilités silencieuses, au tréfond desquelles, vous le savez, un mot déplacé, une attitude maladroite, peuvent déposer des ferments mortels. [italicised in the original]⁴⁹

47 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Une apologie du régime du protectorat’, *Essais*, p. 427.

48 Ibid., p. 429; Phạm Quỳnh’s emphasis.

49 Ibid., p. 431; Phạm Quỳnh’s emphasis.

The spirit of joking, sarcasm, the inconsiderate shove should not be exported to the colonies. We are dealing with silent sensibilities [on the part of our colonial subjects], of such profoundness that, as you know, one misplaced word, one clumsy act, can leave fatal ferments.

In the same way that '*la bourrade inconsideré*' can be read alongside Phạm Quỳnh's critique of French behaviour, not everything is suitable for colonial exportation, especially these elements that make matters out to be unserious and dishonest. This warning that Piétri pronounces to the *anciens coloniaux* brings the practice and politics of colonial reform to a fundamental level of language, one that cannot risk 'joking around' or 'sarcasm', or even 'one misplaced word'. While Piétri openly warns against dishonest language, he simultaneously implies that much of colonial policy and practice must go unspoken. On the one hand, then, Piétri's words borrowed here legitimise Phạm Quỳnh's position on the *politique d'égards*, yet on the other they also reveal the ambiguity of colonial policy and the application of the Protectorate system.

For Phạm Quỳnh, the colonial administrator never has to elucidate what must go unsaid, because his use of italics in the passages quoted above also signify without 'speaking'. These stylistics draw attention to a peculiar section in the administrator's speech that lend many uncertainties about the colonial discourse that the speech tries to affirm. Unfit for the colonial context not only because it is dishonest or misleading, such language — both the concrete discourse of Piétri's speech and the elusive discourse of a protectorate policy — can also have uncontrollable, unforeseeable ramifications, 'fatal ferments'. What are these fatal ferments, and why are they dangerous? They could, for example, result in outbreaks of violence that the administration then has to suppress — which was precisely what was happening in Indochina at this point. Or, less obvious but threatening nevertheless, is the answer embedded in Phạm Quỳnh's essay, where the ruse of using another's language is a way of manoeuvring the political space condoned and created by the colonial state.⁵⁰ In this sense, the borrowing of language, both in words and the way it is used, of accidentally imported slippage and dishonesty, gives Phạm Quỳnh an opportunity to make his critique, often where it is easiest to read and trace, in the written word.

Mimicry and the careful undoing of authority

When Sarraut wrote in his 1923 *La mise en valeur des colonies* that it was necessary to cultivate the indigenous elite, he was already acknowledging his anxiety about threats and distractions from without:

*Beaucoup plus grave est le danger de laisser se former en dehors de nous, dans d'autres pays, sous d'autres influences et d'autres disciplines scolaires ou politiques, des élites qui revenant ensuite sur le territoire natal, peuvent tourner les talents de propagande et d'action acquis à l'extérieur contre le protecteur local qui leur refusa la faculté de s'instruire.*⁵¹

Even more serious is the danger of allowing the training without our [control], in other countries, under other influences and other academic or political disciplines, of elites who then return to the native territory, can turn the talents of propaganda and

50 Sasges, 'Indigenous representation', p. 16.

51 Sarraut, *La mise en valeur*, p. 99.

action acquired outside against the local protector who refused them the faculty to educate themselves.

Fearing that the Vietnamese could pick up the wrong ideas elsewhere, Sarraut argues that it is better for the French to educate the Vietnamese themselves, which would in turn benefit the French. To include the Vietnamese elite in their policy, ‘to educate and form them and to multiply them in number’, creates further replicas of that mimicry of a discourse. The Vietnamese elite, targeted for their Western affinity, are *francisé* but not French, and therefore considered partial — both incomplete and virtual — representations of that discourse. But what makes that partiality a form of mimicry is that they are also affirmations of the irony in that partial representation, reminding the French administration just how much their authority may be jeopardised.

If the basis of colonial reform is to reiterate the civilising mission, in which France would equip its colonial possessions with the tools for self-government, this would in principle imply the eventuality of independence. To this end, the French administration greatly depended on the Vietnamese elite for local legitimisation of that project. The more the Vietnamese elite propagated the strength and vitality of its culture, the more they proved the relationship with the French necessary and productive, which only testified to the French regime’s commitment to its civilising mission.⁵² Elite Vietnamese like Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh were therefore indispensable. In theory, the eventuality of this later independence was also meant to function as the temporal caveat that separated colonial elite from coloniser, to fossilise that partial representation so that while looming, decolonisation would never actually be something the French had to immediately address. But granting the Vietnamese elite the limited tools of language, print culture, and local civil representation made the Vietnamese critical and eager to keep the French accountable — precisely through those tools and within those spaces. The repeated instances of mimicry, of continual anxiety regarding colonial authority and the effort to appease that anxiety, undoes colonial authority from the inside.

What is therefore important to retain in the visible ‘mimicry’ of Phạm Quỳnh’s use of the colonial administrator’s discourse is that it does not merely crystallise the image of a colonial subject speaking the language of the coloniser. These essays also point to ‘signs of the inappropriate, [of] difference or recalcitrance’ within mimicry. These signs, which always necessarily return to reiterate the partial presence and partial assimilation of the colonial subject, make him difficult to completely categorise as a colonial elite within the project of colonial reform, and by extension, colonial discourse. This is because his mimicry exceeds the fundamental, underlying limitation required for a colonial authority to fully exert his power and affirm his position. In other words, in his capacity to import the very aspects of language that the colonial administrator warns against, Phạm Quỳnh manifests the menace to authority that stirs such anxiety in the first place. Phạm Quỳnh’s strategy within his language succeeds as ‘colonial appropriation’ because it ‘depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once *resemblance and*

52 Womack, ‘Colonialism and the collaborationist agenda’, pp. 196–8.

menace.⁵³ As a byproduct, his successful ‘resemblance’ lends itself to misunderstandings for his contemporary readers who cast him into the negative light of ‘collaboration’.

Conclusion

Since the centennial of his birth in 1992, Phạm Quỳnh’s earlier works have been reprinted in Vietnam and more and more Vietnamese scholars have opened up the debate on his character in newspapers and online journals. Among many revised editions, his travel journal was republished in 2004, his French essays were translated into Vietnamese in 2007, and a number of other studies focusing on Phạm Quỳnh’s cultural contributions have also been released.⁵⁴ Most recently, Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học in Hanoi republished *Thượng Chi Văn Tập* (Collected works of Thượng Chi) in April 2018 (it previously appeared in 2006, employing Phạm Quỳnh’s early pen name). This collection of five volumes, which first appeared in 1943, contains some of Phạm Quỳnh’s most important essays on Vietnamese language, literature and culture gathered and assembled by the author himself. The 2018 edition was published on the occasion of the recent hundredth anniversary of *Nam Phong*, and the editorial remarks reiterate the fact that the collection was initiated in 1943 as a way to grant easier access to Phạm Quỳnh’s essays in *Nam Phong*, essays that have nevertheless become testament to his contribution to Vietnamese culture. These republished editions in Vietnamese therefore make a point of restoring a major cultural figure to whom Vietnamese culture is greatly indebted, but what remains undiscussed is his participation in the colonial administration.

I maintain that this participation was indeed an ambivalent one, and that his cultural contribution was not independent of his political role. In fact, where culture and politics overlap for Phạm Quỳnh is precisely in the importance of language, down to the minute details of words and their meanings. Phạm Quỳnh’s belief in language as the fundamental building block of both Vietnamese culture and Franco-Vietnamese relations is demonstrated in his emphasis on the development of quốc ngữ as well as his loyalty to the treaty of 1884. More than just an official agreement, the latter was a promise that secured its honour through its word. And in the same way that a culture could attain legitimacy and strength through the cultivation of its language, a similar robustness could be attained with strict abidance to the language offered in a treaty.

To return, then, to the earlier discussion of a participation in politics, could Phạm Quỳnh’s replication of the French language — both tongue and discourse — signal a form of resistance? Arguably, Phạm Quỳnh’s role did not so much resist the French colonial presence or its subsequent reforms as it did the undesirable effects of that presence. My reading of Phạm Quỳnh’s writings within the context of ambivalent colonial reforms could be considered as another contribution to these revisions in

53 Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man’, p. 86, my emphasis.

54 *Phạm Quỳnh tiểu luận-viết bằng tiếng Pháp trong thời gian 1922–1932* [Phạm Quỳnh’s essays: Writing in French in the era of 1922–1932] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Trí Thức, 2007); *Pháp Du Hành Trình Nhật Ký* [Journal of a voyage to France] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Hội nhà văn, 2004); and *Phạm Quỳnh trong dòng chảy văn hóa dân tộc* [Phạm Quỳnh in the currents of Vietnamese culture] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Thanh Niên, 2012).

history. I have shown, however, that his speaking French and borrowing of colonial discourse — this mimicry — unravels the rhetoric upon which the French colonial empire gathered its strength. In other words, the measure of cultural distance, meant to be reduced through the civilising mission and colonial reforms, is instead mocked and challenged as it is refracted back to its source. This study has therefore been less invested in rescuing the tragedy of Phạm Quỳnh's death or the accusations about his character than it is in addressing the way that the ambiguous nature of this Vietnamese intellectual's role can be explored through language, one embedded with clues to understanding a historical context as ambivalent as French colonialism.