PETRUS TRƯƠNG VĨNH-KÝ (1837-1898)
A GREAT CULTURAL NAME,
THE FIRST ERUDITE PHILOLOGIST
OF THE VIETNAMESE LITERATURE OF "QUỐC-NGỮ"

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Abstract

“Quốc-ngữ” (national language, the language of Vietnamese), the current Vietnamese writing was established by some European missionaries who entered Vietnam at the end of the 16th century. Until the time of Petrus Trương Vĩnh-Ký (usually called Petrus Ký), this writing had not been used extensively in Vietnam. It was protested stormily by every side including even French colonialists. However, the pioneers lead by Petrus Ký, the first linguist of Vietnam, strived to their end to remove all the obstructions in order to push Vietnamese literature in “quốc-ngữ” to take-off.

In this paper, the writer would like to introduce to the world and to the multicultural Canada a first savant, a great cultural name of Vietnam by revealing Ký’s predominant features: Petrus Ký, a honest intellectual, an erudite
philologist and a most valuable pioneer devoting all his life to the establishment of modern Vietnamese literature in its infancy.

INTRODUCTION.

1- Current Vietnamese writing was established by some European missionaries who entered Vietnam at the end of 16th century. They applied Latin alphabet and its pronunciation as a phonetic transcription for Vietnamese. At first, this policy was used as a vehicle to preach Catholicism; it was gradually reformed afterwards. When the French forces invaded Vietnam in the first half of nineteenth century, the use of Latin alphabet on the Vietnamese writing to parallel the French language was made compulsory. It became the official writing of Vietnam and thus was called "quốc-ngữ" which means "national language, the language of Vietnamese". More precisely, the term "quốc-ngữ" is translated as "the latinphono-vietnamese writing".

2- Until the time of Petrus Ký, this writing had not been used extensively in Vietnam. Therefore, regardless of the small number of Catholics who were already familiar to this writing, the Cochinchinese (the southern Vietnamese) were the first group in the country to use it. In 1942, Vũ Ngọc Phan, a well-known and recognized Vietnamese writer commented on the shaping of the Vietnamese literature in this writing, as follows:

"Quốc-ngữ” was reformed into its present day and expanded all over Cochinchna before it extended to other parts of the country. The shaping of present day Vietnamese can be traced to a few Vietnamese scholars who had benefited from exposure to French education and culture. Among them, Petrus Ký and Paulus Cúa were certainly the most prominent. They used the “quốc-ngữ” as a vehicle to diffuse the Western culture and ideology, and compiled a Vietnamese-French dictionary so that the Vietnamese people might use it to learn French. The volumes of the Vietnamese-French dictionary which were compiled by Paulus Cúa have been up to now used by both the northern and southern Vietnamese people.
As for Petrus Trương-Vịnh-Ký, he was really a savant. He was not only a writer, a historian, a translator, but also a prominent linguist. He was the prime example of those who were devoted to the Vietnamese literature of quốc-ngữ in its infancy." (1)

3- Before 1975, any traveller entering Saigon, had certainly the opportunity to contemplate Petrus Trương-vinh-Ký's two commemorative monuments, one on the public park located in front of the Independence Presidential Palace, another within the government secondary school, which had been named after him as the Trương-Vịnh-Ký Secondary School. Regretfully, as soon as the Communists entered Saigon in 1975, they destroyed any vestige of this merited intellectual. We are very pleased to introduce the life of this outstanding man and to further explore his achievements and appreciate his memorable contribution to Vietnamese culture.

**PART ONE.- BIOGRAPHY (2)**

**I- EDUCATION:**

1- Trương-Vịnh-Ký, usually called Petrus Ký, was born on Dec.6, 1837, at Cái-mơn village, Tân Minh district, Vĩnh-Long province in the West of the southern Vietnam.

2- Loosing his father at the age of 8, Petrus Ký lived with his mother and was taught Chinese characters. His father - Trương-chánh-Thi - commanding officer of the royal army, died in his frontier post at Pnompenh, Cambodia.

3- When he was 9 years old, Ký was brought up and educated by an European priest known by his Vietnamese name as Father Tám. Ký studied “quốc-ngữ” and Latin with foreign priests who were called with Vietnamese names such as Father Họà and Father Long.

4- When he was 11 years old, he attended Pinhalu, a Catholic school in Cambodia.

5- At the age of 15, he was sent to Pinang Seminary, located on Pinang Island of the coast of Malaysia. In the 6 years there, he demonstrated his natural academic of prominent abilities. He received an award for a Latin essay given by
the British authorities. He also had a command of several other languages, such as: Greek, French, English, Japanese, Spanish, Hindi, etc....

6- In 1858, at the age of 21, he came back to Vietnam while the French began their conquest of Vietnam starting with Đà-nẵng (formerly Tourane) and then Gia-định followed by the three eastern provinces of the South.

II- EMPLOYMENT.

1- In 1860, at the age of 23, the French authorities needed a Vietnamese interpreter for their negotiations between the two governments. Lefèbvre, bishop of Saigon Archdiocese proposed Petrus Ký for this position.

2- In 1863, he was designated interpreter for the Vietnamese delegation lead by Phan Thanh-Giàn to meet with France for peace. Petrus Ký had the opportunity to travel all over France and some European countries, such as Spain, Italy... and to make acquaintance with the great intellectuals of France, such as: Victor Hugo, Paul Bert, Renan,...

3- Returning to Saigon from this journey, he was appointed professor and afterwards principal of the School for Interpreters during the years 1866-1868.

4- In 1869, he was appointed director of the official gazette "GIA-DỊNH BÁO", the first newspaper to be written in “quốc-ngữ”, of which he had been director's assistant since 1865.

5- In 1873, at the age of 36, he was the professor at the Training School For Administrators.

6- In 1876, he was sent by the Governor of the South (formerly Cochin-China) on a special mission to study the political situation in the North. The travelling notes that he wrote during this 3 months' journey would be collected afterwards in a book published in 1881.

7- In 1883 at the age of 46, he got a medal from the French Academy, was appointed “officier d’Académie”. This award made him the equal of any European scholar of the time.

8- Returning from the North, he was deputed member of the Council of Saigon City, of the Colonial Educational Council, and got back his writing activities.

9- In April of 1886, the General Governor of Vietnam, Paul Bert, a French naturalist, also member of the French Academy, proposed him to the Imperial
Court of Vietnam for member of the Special Cabinet to facilitate the relations between France and Vietnam.

10- After his resignation on June 1886, Petrus Ký left Huế - the capital city - for Saigon, and devoted the remainder of his life to writing and compilation. He died on September 1st, 1898.

**PART TWO : WHY WE HONOUR PETRUS KÝ?**

Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký made an outstanding contribution to his country's literature and culture.

**I- PETRUS KÝ, A HONEST INTELLECTUAL**

Petrus Ký was actually treated kindly for a time by the French authorities, but he was not frivolous and extremist like other servile Vietnamese who disparaged and threatened anyone protesting French colonialism. Petrus Ký, however, considered himself a patriotic collaborator with the French, not merely a blind servant.

1- **First,** he co-operated with the French with knowledge and an understanding of his nation's circumstances, with the attitude of a savant who, during his travels in Europe, had recognized positive and great differences between Vietnamese and Western civilizations.

Before 1975, two parallel sentences were carved on the gates of Petrus Trương Vĩnh-Ký’s government school in Saigon. It was a reminder to future generations of the essential harmony between East and West:

"The heritage moral values must be engraved on our memory,

"The Western cultural and scientific advancement should be sounded in our mind"

2- **Second,** he co-operated with the French with the attitude of an affable and honest intellectual who liked to bridge cultural and political differences between two nations, to get reconcilable relations, to reestablish the national security, and to search for peace and prosperity for his country.
During his journey in the North in 1876, he discovered that this region had been suffering seriously from a social illness: bribery and oppression had struck roots deeply within the officialdom and village authorities, tensions grew between Catholics and non-Catholics; and Petrus Ký demanded thorough and urgent reforms which he believed that, in these conditions, "the Imperial court of Huế is unable to change, and only the French government can help to remedy such a weak society". (3)

In some regions of Vietnam, the Catholics relying on their privileges offered by the colonialists, considered themselves as a preferred class, sometimes exploited their power, and Petrus Ký condemned even them. In a letter to Paul Bert, the General Governor of Vietnam, he wrote as follows:

"The religions exist only on some moral principles that they have in common. While examining the facts, the State must recognize its duty and its role which results in a neutral attitude so long as the people do not disturb public order".

Though Petrus Ký persuaded the mandarins to co-operate advantageously with the French colonial government, he also set up a claim to vindicate against any policy of the French which would hinder the Vietnam's honour and interests. When the French required more power in the North, he proposed in his letter to Paul Bert that the French would have to share tax-revenues with the Vietnamese.

3- Third, he collaborated with the French authorities but he definitively refused to denaturalize himself to get French citizenship like others. He explained this decision in his letter dated 15th of September, 1888 to his friend Pêne Siefert (3).

That's why he liked to keep his Christian name in Latin accompanying his given name as Petrus Ký and not in French as Pierre Ký. This was simply to reflect the unyielding attitude of an intellectual proclaiming his religious faith while discriminative movements against Catholicism still continuously spread over the North.
Since February 1886, he was collaborator with Paul Bert, the Governor, because Bert had admired his dignity and his innately prominent talents. As a result, of his collaboration with the French, he was even maltreated unconcealably by French subordinates and successors of Paul Bert due to jealousy or suspicion of Ký regarding his negative and unfaithful cooperation. (4)

After two months of staying at the Special Cabinet as an intermediary between the Royal Court and the French government, Ký resigned on August 1886. Paul Bert urged him to return, but he did not. (5)

Ký did not feel happy so much about this collaboration. He believed it had been a moral punishment as he wrote in his complaining letter to the Director of the Department of the Interior of Cochinchina when they cut his salaries as Professor of Oriental Languages. He said:

"As a former government employee, I have the right to expect a salary raise not a diminution. I might add that before my compatriots. I have been already morally punished."

He stated his views towards the French that he had been with them not for them as he wrote in Latin to his friend Doctor Chavane:

“sic vos non vobis, hoc est mea sors et consolatio” (4).

Jean Bouchot while writing his biography, called Ký ‘a savant and a patriot’.

II- PETRUS KÝ, AN ERUDITE PHILOLOGIST

Indeed, Petrus Ký is deserving of our recognition because he was an erudite philologist, a great cultural name, a most valuable pioneer in the spread and the popularization of the literature of "quốc-ngữ", the latinphono-vietnamese writing.

1- First, Petrus Ký was the first Vietnamese to benefit from Western cultural knowledge. J.Bouchot related that Ký was able to read and speak fifteen languages including both modern and classic ones of the West and the East, and able to write in eleven languages.
This outstanding ability resulted from his gifted intelligence. The following story told how he knew some modern languages by self-learning during his studies at Pinang seminary: One day, while going for a walk on the school-yard, he had found a paper written in an unknown language that he identified later to be French. After translating the words from French to Latin, he recognized this was the letter to a professor, and then he brought the letter and the version to him. With great surprise of his gift, the professor provided him a dictionary and a grammar book to teach him this language of French. He also started to study Japanese and Hindi by cutting used newspapers, and using comparative and deductive methods to learn its grammatical rules. (6)

2- **Second**, J. Thompson, an English traveler visited Saigon and had the opportunity to contact Petrus Ký, talked about his linguistic skills as follows:

"Petrus Ký was an extraordinary case among the Vietnamese. I never forgot my great surprise when I was introduced to him. He talked to me in very good English with a slight French accent. He spoke also French in a style no less pure and elegant. He had a good command of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian as he had of Oriental Languages. One day, when visiting him, I recognized that he was writing ‘A Comparative Analysis About International Languages’, the book to which he had devoted ten years of his life. He had besides him a collection of rare and precious books from Europe and Asia. One night, a missionary of the Roman Catholic church came to participate in our conversation; and when going home, I left them debating together in Latin on a theological subject." (6)

3- **Third**, in addition to linguistics, Petrus Ký extended also his studies to other cultural domains. After his travels in Europe, he became a member of several research associations in the West. He wrote of History and Geography of Vietnam as well as biology, botany and agriculture. J. Bouchot judged him as follows:

"If the traditional methods of learning Chinese characters enhanced the extreme development of his memory, he also took
advantage of these procedures to enlarge his reasoning ability...Certainly, the results that he obtained were not only due to the education in the seminaries, but were undeniably formed from his innate gift of linguistics."

(A savant and a patriot of the Cochinchina: Petrus T.V.Ký, - un savant et un patriote Cochinchinois. - J. Bouchot.) (6)

III- PETRUS KÝ, A GREAT CULTURAL MAN, A PIONEER IN THE SPREAD AND THE POPULARIZATION OF MODERN VIETNAMESE LITERATURE OF "QUỌC-NGŨ"

1- First, he devoted most of his life to his literary career.

To write, to compile and to publish books were his main activities. In this sense, he was actually a writer, a cultural man rather than a politician. Indeed, he published his books since from the age of 26 and embraced his literary profession until his death. Many years ago, a Vietnamese author made a list of Truang Vînh Ký's books, and counted 118 altogether, including some written in French which may be classified into the following categories:

* Linguistic books:
- Summary of Vietnamese Grammar (1867).
- The practice of Vietnamese Language (1868)
- Lessons of Mandarin Language or Chinese Characters (1875).
- Lessons of Vietnamese for European Students (1886).
- Vietnamese-French vocabulary (1887)
- French-Vietnamese Dictionary (1888)
- Lessons of Siamese (1889), of Khmer (1890), of Malaysian (1893), of Burmese (1894), of Siamese (language of old Champak) (1894), of Laotian, of Tamil (1894), of Hindustani (1895).

* text books for Franco-Vietnamese schools:
 - Manual for Primary Schools composes "the Quoc-ngu syllabary", "History of Vietnam", "History of China".

  *general studies:
  - A Brief Introduction to the Kingdom of Khmer (1863).
  - Historic Souvenirs of Saigon & Its Vicinity (1883).
  - The Flora of Vietnam (1884).
  - The Products of Vietnam (1894).
  - A Comparative Study about the Languages and of the three linguistic branches (1894).

However, the fact that Petrus Ký has been so honored is mainly due to his magnificent work devoted to modern Vietnamese literature in its infancy. His books in this field may be classified into the following categories:

  *translation of Confucian ideology books from Chinese characters into "quốc-ngữ". Afterwards, according to Nguyễn Văn Tổ, a recognized Vietnamese scholar, these versions were well done and greatly appreciated.

  *translation of ancestors' various books from "chữ nôm" into "quốc-ngữ". ("chữ nôm" was the own writing of the former Vietnamese, a kind of pictography imitated from Chinese characters). These were novels in verse extending to various domains: social, moral and historical, etc...

  *his creative works in "quốc-ngữ" describe every aspect of life and every domain of the society. (7)

b) Second, Petrus Ký was the first significant Vietnamese writer in prose.

  * Up to his time, intellectuals were trained to write only in verse with a complicated style, full of Chinese characters, Chinese historical references, plenty of clichés or hackneyed sentences. With his two works "Chuyên Đời Xưa" (old stories), and "Chuyên Đi Bắc-kỳ Năm Ât-Hợi" (The Travel through the North in the year of the Pig, 1876), for the first time in the history of modern Vietnamese literature, writing appeared in a prose style, a style uniquely Vietnamese, and which became very popular.
Regarding the "Gia Định Báo", the first newspaper in "Quốc-ngữ" whose first Vietnamese director was also Petrus Ký, the Governor of Cochinchina, G. Roze, in his report dated 5th September, 1865, to the Minister of the French Colonies, stated as follows:

"This periodical aims to diffuse among the native people every important news and to give them knowledge of new issues relevant to their culture and to the progress in agriculture. The inspectors in charge of indigenous people's affairs reported to me that the "Gia Định Báo" has been warmly supported by the public, and in some regions, children who know "Quốc-ngữ" are able to read the newspaper to their parents. So, this monthly periodical will be undeniably useful and will contribute to the substitution for our language and Chinese characters which have been understood only by a minority of mandarins."

Therefore, according to Dr. Huyhn Văn Tông, "at first, this periodical had been simply an official gazette circulating in the villages. However, since Petrus Ký as director, it assumed other duties:

- to launch a campaign for a new learning approach.
- to develop the latinphono-vietnamese writing.
- to encourage the public to learn this new writing". (8)

So, even though this was clearly the colonists' purpose, Petrus Ký's efforts contributed so much to the popularization of "quốc-ngữ" and, thus, to new literature in this writing.

3- Third, The most remarkable aspect of this history is that 'quốc-ngữ" was scorned, and protested by every side: Vietnamese conservative intellectuals and patriots, and even French colonialists.

* The conservative intellectuals objected to "quốc-ngữ" because they were concerned that “quốc-ngữ” was simply a means for daily communications, for earning one's living, for being promoted, and moreover, was a political instrument for the colonialists: a means of moral invasion (to proselytize Catholicism and the
French influences) (9). They believed traditional moral values would be corrupted once the French abolished Chinese character and “chữ nôm”, a kind of former Sino-Vietnamese pictography. (9).

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, author of "Lục-văn-Tiền" - an well-known poetic novel of the South written in "chữ nôm" -, was furious when his village authorities asked him to allow his seventh son, Nguyễn Đình Chiêm, to learn "quốc-ngữ" (10).

The Vietnamese notables had also an open letter on the French newspaper, "Le Saigonnais", dated 10th December, 1885 to ask for the French government to abolish "quốc-ngữ" and maintain the French language as well as "chữ nôm", (10bis).

* The objection became also stormy among many colonialists. They argued:

- "quốc-ngữ" is helpful only for the masses and students of primary schools so that they may read public notices, government decrees, some books and newspapers which are common and necessary in daily life. French and Chinese characters, however, are the languages of the culture, of the literature used in high schools and in the universities. Therefore, on the one hand, the colonialists urged the French government in Vietnam to use “chữ nôm” in literature and in academic circles, and in the other hand, they insisted "quốc-ngữ" to be used in daily relations such as newspapers relations. (11)

- Up to 1913, after the death of Petrus Ký, this objection still existed. Similarly, Colonel Diguet asked to maintain Chinese characters because he was concerned that the “quốc-ngữ” is not the language of the Vietnamese literature. (12)

However, being sensible of Japan's win against Russia in 1905, the Vietnamese conservative intellectuals began to recognize the importance of "quốc-ngữ" and to transform it into useful means for provoking and growing the Vietnamese patriotism. This inaugurated a new era for modern Vietnamese literature as well as for the revolutionary movements that followed.
So, the pioneers lead by Petrus Ký strove to their end to remove all the obstructions from any side in order to push Vietnamese literature of "quốc-ngữ" to take-off in 1945. (See the enclose graph illustrating the Petrus Ký's devotion to the shaping of modern Vietnamese literature).

Petrus Truong Vînh-Ký & the Shaping of the Vietnamese Literature of “Quốc-Ngữ”

(D) illustrates the normal evolution.
(L) illustrates the specific evolution of Quốc-Ngữ’s literature with OM as a big-push from Petrus Ký’s efforts for enhancing its take-off.
* PK & GDB = Petrus Ký & his “Gia-Dính Gazette”
* TLVD = “The Literary Association Of Self-Doers”

* RI= Revolution for Independence
Along the positive Oy, “quốc-ngữ” became more and more popularized, Ký’s efforts had created a big-push for Vietnamese Literature taking-off.

Along the negative y’O, the “quốc-ngữ” has been not used extensively all over VN & was protested by every side.

NOTES:
* RN: “quốc-ngữ” was established since the end of the 16th century, has been not extensively used over Vietnam, it was simply a vehicle to preach Catholicism and then an access to the colonization.
* NO: With “Gia-Dính Báo / GDB” (1865) and his numerous works, Petrus Ký became a prominent cultural name among the pioneers who devoted to the shaping of Vietnamese literature of “quốc-ngữ”, while “quốc-ngữ” has been protested by every side: patriotic intellectuals, scholars accepting the French government, and even colonists too.
* OP: From 1905, patriotic opponents recognized the quốc-ngữ’s advantages and retook this effective instrument to promote revolutionary movements. “Quốc-ngữ” became popularized.
* PQ: From 1932, a group of intellectuals graduated from modern educational establishments, created a renovation in Vietnamese literature, issued to the public various works of their literary association named “Tự-LựcVăn-Doàn (TLVD)”, The Literary Association Of Self-Doers, thus, encouraged and accelerated Vietnamese literature of “quốc-ngữ” to take-off in 1945.
CONCLUSION

1- Anyone of ancient times as well as of today has not denied Kỳ's personality and his abilities.

*This erudite philologist was actually a savant, a great cultural name among his contemporaries of Vietnam and Europe and also a most valuable pioneer devoting all his life to the establishment of modern Vietnamese literature and culture.*

The reminiscence of his merits is to respond to those who, just following the 1975’s event, because of their politically partial ideas, were the first Vietnamese to diminish his prestige.

2- Therefore, to reestablish a memorial for remembering him is to restore his honor, to introduce to the world a first savant and great scholar of Vietnam.

*By honoring him, we contribute to the growth of multiculturalism in Canada which has been famous for its democracy, its liberty, its construction for peace and mostly for its protection of any heritage value.*

3- It is also to remind the young generations speaking generally to follow his example of fond of study, and Vietnamese-Canadians particularly to recognize their heritage in order to positively and actively enrich Canadian culture through their full participation.

**End notes:** (See the following references)

(1) Ref.#1, p. 37.
(2) Ref.#5, p. 67,-69. & Ref.#2, p. 53.
(3) Ref.#5, p. 72-73.
(4) Ref.#3, p. 115 & 116
(5) Ref.#5, p.70.
(6) Ref.#5, p. 69
(7) Ref.#5, p.74-76.
REFERENCES

#1- Vũ-ngọc-Phan, Nhà văn hiện-dại, Đại-Nam publish. 1334 N. Pacific Ave. CA.91202. USA
#3- Nguyễn-văn-Trung, Chữ và văn Quốc-ngữ, Nam-sơn xuất-bàn, reprinted by Xuân-Thu P.O. Box 97 Los Alamitos CA 90720 December 1989.
#4- Nguyễn Văn Trung, Chủ-dịch Nam-Phong, id.

(The above references in Vietnamese relative to Petrus Truong Vinh Ký were quoted from earlier authorities, among these the following well-known French book had been mainly used:” Un Savant et Un Patriote Cochinchois: Petrus T. V. Ký” by J. Bouchot, 3ème édition, Nguyễn Văn Cúa, 1927.
Instead of translating from the original which has been not found in Metro Toronto libraries, the writer was obliged to translate from the Vietnamese version mentioned through these references.)

Source: Vietnamologica, (Revue D’Études Vietnamologiques) #2, Centre de Vietnamologie, Montréal, Canada, 1996