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Revolutionary Aesthetics and Local Vernacular: Phan Boi Chau, Asaba Sakitarō, and Trans-Imperial Vietnamese Commemoration

In 1973, Vietnamese sculptor Lê Thành Nhơn's completed a monument to the nationalist scholar and anti-colonial revolutionary Phan Bội Châu (Figure 1). Erected in Huế—the ancient capital located in central Việt Nam—the artwork represents a profound negotiation between public memory, patriotic histories, and revolutionary aesthetics in a then-divided Vietnam. Created in the South before reunification, it makes sense that it was not until 2012—some forty years after completion—that Lê's work was finally installed in public space along the Hương River. Why the belatedness the delayed installation of the deferential bronze bust? How did the early 20th century history of Phan Bội Châu and his transpacific solidarity inform the postponement? What can exile and Châu's modernist sentiments reveal about internationalism and Pan Asian alliance during the French colonial period?

Our story in bronze, however, does not begin with Lê's solemn sculpture of Châu, his furrowed brow and downward gaze. Nor does my historical retelling commence with the narrative myth of nation and ethnicity carved in relief below his countenance. Although the material process, lost-wax casting technique, and fable of homogenous homeland undoubtedly add texture to Châu's pathos, this transnational origin story, in fact, starts in Japan at the turn of the 20th century. How is this the case?

In 1905, Châu traveled to Japan. His initial covert political plans had been thwarted when he was denied entry and assistance from China on his journey north from Vietnam. In response, and after a short stay in Hong Kong, the erudite scholar and Confucian intellectual arrived in Japan. He was seeking political advice, financial aid and international support in hopes of building an inter-racial and transnational Asian coalition with hopes of defeating French Colonialism. Soon his arrival, Châu was greeted by Asaba Sakitarō, a local Japanese physician. Sakitarō's friendship—his guidance and kindness—was a beacon of hope. Their relations and Sakitarō's shared lessons transformed Châu's internal political compass. However, in 1908, and at the behest of

international pressures, Châu was again displaced: Japan could no longer provide safe haven for his political exile.

It was more than ten-years hence that Châu would return to Japan. And only upon his return, would he learn of Sakitarō's death. In response, Châu began formulating an idea to construct a memorial dedicated to his friend, Asaba Sakitarō, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan (Figure 2). My study investigates this critical early 20th-century artifact as a Trans-Pacific public artwork. Moving beyond Western-centric models of colonial monumentality and singular authorship, it positions the site within a zeitgeist of contested aesthetic and political flows—an object shifting valences between the French, Japanese, Vietnamese, and declining Qing empires.

The sculptural genesis was first orchestrated by Châu from his ensuing exile in China; it was in turn then funded by contributions from Vietnamese monarchs, intellectuals, and peasants; and finally, materially erected by a Chinese stonemason. This communal form of material enactment and memory-making embodies a uniquely trans-imperial form of production and formation. I analyze Châu's gestures and the subsequent built memorial as a strategic trans-imperial site of commemoration, wherein the aesthetic language of East Asian stone monumentality is appropriated in order to perform multiple political acts: honoring a transnational ally, materially anchoring the Vietnamese independence movement within a Pan-Asianist geography, and finally posing a challenge to both French colonial rule and Japanese imperial authority through the stoic nature of stone—its silence and quasi-permanent form.

To conclude this proposal, let us return to Lê's 1972 sculpture of Phan Bội Châu. There is a kind of faux-utopian resonance in suturing these two works together; nevertheless, something akin to ascetic ambiguity and repose imbue these two works of art with kindred ritual pathos—we may perhaps think of Walter Benjamin's notion of historical indexicality; discreet moments that constellate to eventually burst forward into time. Read together then, the two monuments function as sites of resistance: artworks not merely staking claims against a single state or acting as utilitarian ideological props, but rather sculptural objects operating in a vitalist mode of artistic address. Lê's choosing to avoid heroic socialist statuary common (standard; even often institutionalized) across

contemporary Việt Nam—and instead present Châu with a contemplative countenance is, undoubtedly, a political statement (albeit from his singular artistic vantage). Regardless, the work espouses the gravitas of intellectual labor and individual resolve; some uncanny presence of Châu necromantically conducting the carver, Lê. Artist and poet-philosopher dancing in tandem. In this way, the pith of the work aestheticizes revolution as internal struggle, production as creativity: singular determination and local vernacular outlive the platitudes of triumphalist collective action and bad-faith fantasies. Alas, maybe this kernel of unknowable alliance and friendship is the final story: a place where unfashionable paths stake tenuous claims that finally result in two completely forgotten artworks. Friends in stone salute.

Figure 1. Lê Thành Nhơn's sculpture of Phan Bội Châu, 1972.

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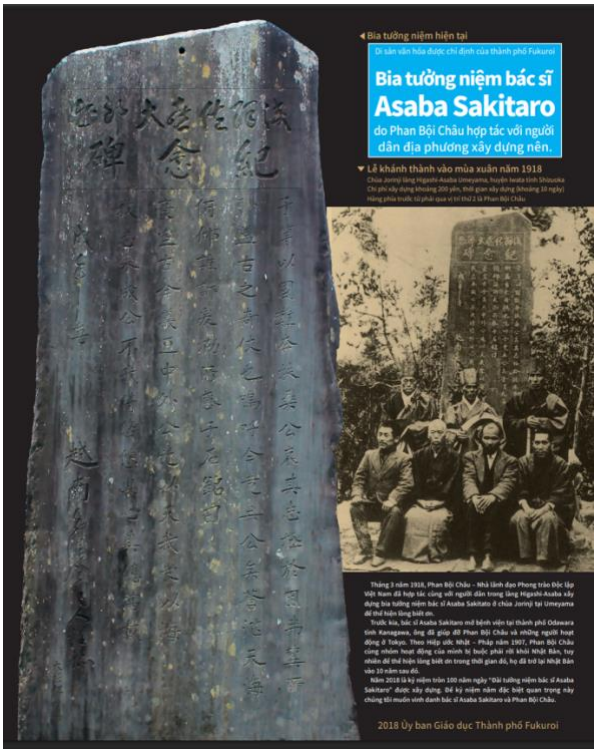

Figure 2. Asaba Sakitaro Memorial

Possible Key Words:

Phan Bội Châu, Đông Du Movement, Trans-Imperial Commemoration, Anticolonial Aesthetics, Asaba Sakitarō, Public Art, Monuments, Memorials

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