

**ARGUMENT**

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# Vietnam Wants Western Politicians, Not Western Politics

As Hanoi welcomes Trump, it shuts down a key reformist think tank.

By Bill Hayton

FEBRUARY 27, 2019, 7:07 AM

As the orange man meets the rocket man this week, the venue is also drawing attention. Vietnam, the host for U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's second meeting, is being held out as a model for North Korea to follow. The message will be: Embrace the free market, make friends with the United States, and investment and economic growth will flow in your direction. But Vietnam is currently giving the world a reminder that, fundamentally, it remains a communist state.

In what appears to be another backward step for intellectual freedom in the country, a leading academic foundation has been obliged to close down. It's the latest episode in a dispute that began with a campaign against the translation of books by Western political theorists. The ruling Vietnam Communist Party seems to have doubled down in its campaign against ideas "contrary to the views and policies of the Party and State."

On Feb. 20, the president of the country's leading independent-minded organization, the Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation issued a public letter saying the association was closing "due to objective circumstances." The nature of those circumstances has not yet been made clear, but the trail of evidence points toward pressure from the top. Several key figures linked to the foundation have recently been embroiled in a public dispute with the Communist Party leadership.

The closure appears to be the latest stage in a campaign by the Communist Party general secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, to reimpose political orthodoxy after a decade of loosening control. In October 2018, Trong also became the country's president, a dual role that has not been seen in Vietnam for half a

century. In a parallel initiative to that seen in China, Trong and his supporters have been using a so-called anti-corruption campaign to eliminate their political opponents and reassert the power of the party bureaucracy.

The Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation was established in 2007 to encourage the exchange of ideas between Vietnam and the rest of the world. It is named after an early 20th century nationalist intellectual who established a free school to bring new ideas into the country and shake off French colonialism. The foundation's president is Phan Chau Trinh's granddaughter, Nguyen Thi Binh, a war hero and former vice president of Vietnam. She is now in her early 90s and looking to step down.

According to Tran Vi, the editor in chief of the dissident online magazine the *Vietnamese*, the foundation was unable to agree on a replacement with the Communist authorities. By law, all Vietnamese organizations—from local sports clubs to national churches—have to be registered with either a government or Communist Party supervisory organization. The Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation was under the supervision of the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations which is, in turn, supervised by the Ministry of Science and Technology. The science union has a record of allowing more outspoken organizations to shelter under its umbrella. However, in this case its umbrella does not seem to have been strong enough to resist the storm from above.

The energy behind the Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation comes from a well-known writer, Nguyen Ngoc. In October 2018, in a rare and surprising move, Ngoc announced that he had resigned from the Communist Party because of its treatment of another leading intellectual, Chu Hao. Chu Hao had also resigned from the party after being disciplined for allowing his Knowledge Publishing House to issue books the party said were “politically and ideologically wrong.” Among the titles the Central Inspection Commission objected to were several standard European works of political philosophy including books by John Stuart Mill, John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Hayek.

According to the *Vietnamese's* Tran Vi, Nguyen Ngoc and Chu Hao were the two leading candidates to replace Binh as the Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation's president. However, “given what happened last year, regarding them leaving the party, it is almost impossible for the government to approve

either one to be the new leader, leading to the closure.” Although Ngoc and Hao were members of the Communist Party, they were also critics of many of its policies. In December 2012 they, along with hundreds of others, signed “A Call for Human Rights,” asking the National Assembly to abolish Article 88 of the Penal Code that punishes “crimes of propaganda against the State” and strike down a government decree invoked to prevent demonstrations. The two men have been prominent critics of China’s behavior toward Vietnam, particularly in the South China Sea.

In 2008, the foundation established annual prizes to honor academics who had made outstanding contributions to Vietnamese education. It is possible that the foundation’s choices of whom to honor contributed to its closure. Among them was one of the leading figures in Vietnamese studies in the United States, Cornell University’s Keith Taylor, whose 2013 book *A History of the Vietnamese* radically revised many of the more nationalist accounts of the country’s history.

Most critically, Taylor has also organized events examining the history of the Vietnam War from the perspective of South Vietnam. According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, a professor emerita of Vietnamese studies at Harvard University, that “bothered a lot of leaders in Hanoi.” The foundation tried to give the award to Taylor in 2014 but was blocked from doing so by the party. They tried again in 2015 and overcame the objections. However, the Communist Party’s daily newspaper *Nhan Dan* (“The People”) carried denunciations of Taylor’s work for four straight days afterward.

There has been no comment from Vietnam’s government or the Communist Party about why the foundation has closed. Democracy campaigners will say that the party has deliberately silenced an influential advocate of political reform. Some will suspect that the closure was directly requested by Beijing in order to silence the domestic anti-China constituency.

All this may offer Kim Jong Un some reassurance. As Vietnam demonstrates, it is entirely possible to have 6 percent economic growth, booming foreign investment, one-party rule, and a silenced opposition. Perhaps Hanoi does have something to teach Pyongyang after all.

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**Bill Hayton** was formerly a BBC reporter in Hanoi. His first book, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon?*, addresses a broad variety of issues in today’s Vietnam.

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