Research into Asian cultural relations is today a pressing problem for us all. Especially is it so for the intelligentsia, who -- whether they like it or not -- must be counted on to provide the necessary initiative and leadership. If they are to lead properly, our intellectuals must thoroughly understand the historic mission of their societies and their links with the rest of Asia. We of Vietnam, for example, must be always conscious that we are very much a part of the Asian community, having been intimately linked with the cultural heritage of this part of the world for many centuries. From generation to generation we have acquired many habits, ways of living, and a particular traditional spirit as a result of our special geographic situation.

In its narrower sense, Culture limits itself to Art, Literature, and the similar activities of a minority in any society. But in its broader sense, Culture encompasses the activities of all mankind in so far as they live collectively and cooperate to survive, evolve and deal with the world outside. Furthermore, Culture implies the transformation of nature -- internally and externally -- in accordance with man's best intentions. This dynamic meaning, which has been ascribed to Culture by thinkers from Hsun-Tzu (Third Century B.C.) to modern Western sociologists, clearly distinguishes human from animal society. Only man can adjust to his environment and evolve in interaction with it, while the animals submit passively to their environment with mere survival as the end.

Thus, Culture may be said to cover all efforts made by man in his social groups for the sake of mastering the natural environment as well as pursuing his individual and collective life.
Despite varied intellectual starting points, scholar would appear to agree on the dominance of two major patterns of culture: namely, the Eastern (or Asian) and the Western (or European). Historically speaking, the former embraces those cultures which took root in China, India, Iran and Israel; the latter refers to the cultures sired by Greek and Rome. Taking geographical factors as the determinant in human life, one might similarly identify the two major patterns as the continental (Asia's culture) and the insular (the Graeco-Roman culture). Again, from the standpoint of psychological and spiritual attitudes, one might distinguish the traditional culture of the East and the non-traditional of the West.

Using geographic factors as a basis for his analysis, Rabindranath Tagore discerned the following distinction between East and West:

"Thus in India it was in the forest that our civilization had its birth, and it took a distinct character from this origin and environment. It was surrounded by the fast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her and that the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects.

"...The West seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things. This sentiment is the product of the city-wall habit and training of mind. For in the city like man naturally directs the concentrated light of his mental vision upon his own life and works, and this creates on artificial dissociation between himself and the universal nature within whose bosom he lies.

"But in India the point of view was different; it included the world with the man as one great truth. India put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal. She felt we could have no communication whatever with our surrounding if it was absolutely foreign to us. Man's complaint against nature is that he has to acquire most of his necessary by his own efforts. Yes, but his efforts are not in vain; he is reaping success every day, and that shows there is a rational connection between him and nature for we can never make anything our own except that which is truly related to us". (1)

(1) Rabindranath Tagore, Sadhana - The Realization of Life, Mac Milan, and Co., 1947, pp. 4 - 5
In the above passage, Tagore distinguished the wholly different temperaments engendered in peoples living respectively in rural and urban surroundings, either close to or far from Nature. The city has typified the Western mode of living, especially since the outset of the contemporary era. The East still clings too much of its traditional rural way of life. Hence, the characteristics of the forest culture that Tagore spoke about in relation to India may be considered as common characteristics of the continental culture of Asia.

Contrasting Eastern and Western cultures from the spiritual point of view, René Guénon made the following assertion:

"One characteristic of the modern world is the scission between East and West . . . It is true that there are diverse and multiple civilizations of which each develop in a way of its own conforming to the abilities of its people and race. Distinction, however, does not necessarily mean opposition, and there can be an equivalence between civilizations of every different forms when all are founded on the same fundamental principles and only differ as the application has been conditioned by varying circumstances. This is the case for all civilizations that we refer to as normal or traditional. Between them there is no essential opposition and the divergences if they exist at all are no more than outward and superficial. On the other hand, a civilization that does not admit any supreme principles will consequently lack any means of mutual understanding with others. In order to be profound and efficacious, such understanding must exist at the top that which is entirely lacking in an abnormal and deviated civilization.

"In the present world situation, we have on the one hand all the civilizations which abide by the traditional spirit, namely the oriental civilizations, and, on the other a truly anti-traditional civilizations, which is that of the modern West". (1)

In point of fact, the West also had its traditional culture in the Medieval period. Three centuries ago, the Western spirit was essentially similar to that of the present East. When speaking of East-West conferences in

cultural outlook, we refer only to the contrast of Eastern traditionalism with Western anti-traditional tendencies in our modern times.

Cultural groups do not, of course, live always isolated from one another. History has witnessed synthesis, such as the marriage between Indian and Chinese cultures as a result of the Eastward expansion of Buddhism two centuries before Christ, and the blending of East and West in the wake of Alexander's victorious armies, giving birth to a synthesis of Christianity and the Greek culture.

For Vietnam and other Asian countries as well, the most consequential East-West contacts have occurred but recently, primarily in the last two centuries.

With the 18th Century Industrial Revolution, Europe soon transformed herself into a huge factory producing a tremendous amount of goods and consuming immense quantities of raw materials. She became in effect a fantastic colossus symbolizing man's competition with Nature. There issued a feverish scramble for colonies to serve as markets for manufactured goods and as sources of raw materials. This undertaking had as its primary targets the old continent of Asia and the new Americas and was rationalized as the "white man's burden". The history of a new era in Asian-European diplomatic relations opened with the Opium War and continued through other colonial conquests.

"Swarming in the river, iron-clad ships thundered out a persistent shellfire.

"Mustering on shore, foreign troops showered around a fierce rain of bullets". (1)

Toward the end of the 19th Century, the whole of Asia except for the Japanese Islands fell under direct or indirect control of the European powers. At the same time, however, Asia was awakening from her long slumber.

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(1) Nguyên-Dinh-Chiều, 19th Century Vietnamese Poet.
Talking of the awakening of Asia, we should not overlook one fact of great significance. Prior to the East-West contacts ushered in by "iron-clad ships", there had been a genuine cultural relationship starting in the early 17th Century. Among other such contacts, Father Ricci had set up an astronomical observatory for the Society of Jesuits in China in 1607 and Father Alexandre de Rhodes had published the first dictionary in Vietnamese, the latter providing this country it's unified and convenient Romanized writing system of today.

Had the East-West relations proceeded only in such peaceful cultural field instead of being stained with violence and colonialism, many a live would have been spared during the awakening of Asia. Without colonialism, indeed, where would communism have found such fertile ground in Asia to sow its seeds of hatred and class struggle? Here is one of the reasons which compel us to search out the keys to Asian cultural relation.

The awakening of the East is often associated with Japan, the only Asian country which, until the end of World War II, had succeeded in preserving her sovereignty and keeping Western armies from trampling her soil. An outstanding aspect of Emperor Meji's thirty-year period of reforms was Japan's loyalty to the traditional while borrowing from Western technology and economic institutions. It is true that history has proved the fragility of such a superficial East-West blending as was accomplished in Japan.

Nevertheless, the history of the Japanese renovation contains many valuable lessons not only for Asians, but for the whole world as well bearing on the search for an East-West cultural harmony. Here is a second motive for our conducting further studies on Asian relations.

This is indeed the core of the problem with which Vietnam must be concerned for the sake of her own destiny. We and the Chinese people alike are in search of a universal concept which can satisfactorily solve the modernization problem of our nations and people while keeping a balance between the individual and the collective, the material and the spiritual.

Turning our eyes to India where the liberation of 400 million people after two centuries of colonial domination was peacefully achieved under Gandhi's leadership, we find an East-West cultural harmonization of a
deeper and broader sort. Whereas the reconciliation of Eastern and Western cultural values brought Japan international power in economics, politics, and the military field, a similar harmonization has been effected without violence in India and has endowed with a creative spirit that commands world influence. Her great intellectuals have included: Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), the first thinker who synthesized Christianity with Upanishad philosophy, Debondranath Tagore (1817-1905), Kechoub Tchanderson (1830-1884), Ramakrishna (1831-1886) and Vivekananda (1862-1902), the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1864-1941), Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), Gandhi, the political sage and, today, Radhakrishnan, the philosopher-statesman.

Gandhi set down the ideal concept for an East-West harmonization at the Gujerat National University in these words:

"The National University will consider the systematic study of Asian cultures as indispensable for a well-rounded education as the study of Western science".

And his disciple Nehru wrote in Ahmadnagar prison in 1944:

"India must break with much of her past and not allow it to dominate the present. Our lives are encumbered with the dead wood of the past; all that is dead and has served its purpose has to go. But that does not mean a break with, or a forgetting of, the vital and life giving in that past. We can never forget the ideals that have moved our race; the dreams of the Indian people through the ages, wisdom of the ancients, the buoyant energy and love of life and nature of our forefathers, their spirit of curiosity and mental adventure, the daring of their thought, their splendid achievements in literature, art and culture, their love of truth and beauty and freedom, the basic values that they set up, their understanding of life's mysterious ways, their toleration of other ways than theirs, their capacity to absorb other peoples and their cultural accomplishments, synthesize them, and develop a varied and mixed culture; or can we forget the myriad experiences which have built up our ancient race and lie embedded in our subconscious mind. We will never forget them or cease to take pride in that noble heritage of
ours. If India forgets them she will no longer remain India and much that has made her our joy and pride will cease to be". (1)

According to Nehru. We must revive and preserve those vital forces of the traditional past but let go all that is sterile and dead. In the same vein, Phan-Chu-Trinh, once reproached the Vietnamese intellectuals of his day:

"While thousands of people are being trampled by oppression scholars take delight in outward triviality".

India is the land of faith, the land of the most dynamic traditionalism in Asia. The contemporary West is the land of discerning reason, of experimental sciences. Western tradition and the Western contemporary mind are in bitter conflict since Reason and Faith, Science and Religion have become in the West basically conflicting forces. If India succeeds in resolving its own similar conflict, without destruction and with creative vitality, her experience will offer valuable lessons bearing on the problem of achieving East-West harmony in the world of tomorrow, the most critical problem of contemporary Man. To learn how India reconciles reason with sentiment to achieve cultural harmony is the fourth motive that leads us to study Asia's culture relations.

Let us now turn to the awakening of the Vietnamese people since the beginning of this century. It was heralded by the Độc-Kinh Nghiê-Thuộc reform movement. The two outstanding leaders of the movement were Phan-Bội-Châu and Phan-Chu-Trinh, great revolutionary who will live forever in our hearts and minds. In their search for solutions, Phan-Bội-Châu looked to the East while Phan-Chu-Trinh looked Westward.

"Relying on Western education, we hope to find a solution in the philosophy of Rousseau and Montesquieu; looking to the East, we expect to enlist sympathetic support from Hong-Kong and Nagasaki".

Phan-Bội-Châm defended the monarchy whereas Phan-Chu-Trinh advocated a democratic regime. But, whether looking to East or West, to

(1) J. Nehru, " The Discovery of India ", Signet Press, pp. 430-431
monarchy or to democracy, they were united by the same noble objective: liberation of their fatherland and happiness for their people.

After many stormy years abroad, they both returned to their home-land firmly convinced that Vietnam's reformation must begin there. Phan-Bội-Châu, upon leaving the Hà-Nội jail in 1926, declared to his people:

"If we wish to be successful in our endeavours, we have to get to the root of the problem".

When Phan-Chu-Trinh came home from France, he talked with the people of Saigon about "The Fundamental Ethics of the East and the West". Despite their differing approaches, both men believed that the problem of reform or modernisation of Viet-Nam most be solved in a profound rather than a superficial way. If the Problem of an East-West harmonization was to be solved, its very roots had to be exposed, leading to the discovery of Man's fundamental motivations and the core of his dynamic concept of the Universe. This essence, after all, had always been the common source of creativeness in East as well as West, even before it took its different local forms according to varying historic and geographic circumstances. Today the problem remains the same. In a word, we must aspire to the ultimate Truth, to the real and enduring Truth of humanity:

"Truth as ultimate reality, if such there is, must be eternal, imperishable, unchanging. But that infinite, eternal and unchanging truth cannot be apprehended in its fullness by the finite mind of man which can only grasp, at most, some small aspect of it limited by time and space, and by the state of development of that mind and the prevailing ideology of the period. As the mind develops and enlarges its scope, as ideologies change and new symbols are used to express that truth, new aspect of it come to light though the core of it may yet be the same. And so truth has ever to be sought and renewed, reshaped and developed, so that as understood by man, it might keep in line with the growth of his thought and the development of human life. Only then does it become a living truth for humanity, supplying the essential need for which it craves, and offering guidance in the present and for the future". (1)

(1) J. Nehru, "The Discovery of India", p. 431
It was in search of this Truth, this ultimate reality, that Phan-Bội-Châu and Phan-Chu-Trinh spent their whole lives hoping to renovate a country that had lost its independence because it could not modernize itself in time.

If we believe that this ultimate truth can be a dynamic force in the process of modernizing our present thoughts and actions, where can we find it if not in the restoration of our traditional spirit? Ours is the spirit of a people full of life, who love freedom and peace, who are deeply devoted to the humanities, and who know how to harmonize different school of thoughts into a dynamic force for the preservation of their culture. Standing between two opposing cultural tendencies, practical Confucianism and the more imaginative Brahmanism, our ancestors chose the concept of universal humanism as the means to self-realization. Emperor Trần-Thái-Tông once declared:

"Buddha's truth surpasses the limitation of space and equally accessible to all who strive for it; the human mind may be bright or dull but the road to illumination indiscriminately opens to all".

At the time when Vietnam's intellectuals had either lost themselves in bigotry or were vacillating between the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties, between affirmation and negation of the world, Nguyễn-Công-Trú advocated the concept of abnegation to show his broad-mindedness:

"Action and seclusion are not essentially different".

Our traditional culture does not therefore lack either that flexibility of that depth enabling it to penetrate to the very nucleus of permanent Truth and yet adjust to changing circumstances. We take justifiable pride in our people's glorious history, which abounds with example of courage and love. Recently, after eighty years of foreign domination, that traditional spirit seemed to have died out somewhat, choked by a more powerful Western civilization. But deep down in our heart and entrenched in our subconscious the memories of our ancestors still live vividly, exerting powerful influence over our daily life. To do research on Asian culture is to review the traditional culture of Asia on which we have been nurtured for generations and from which we derive our strength; this review aims at illuminating our traditional values, and reviving our own traditional spirit,
which throughout history has proved suitable for our subjective conditions. That spirit can never die.

"In the universe the spirit forever endures;
Though one dies, he is not lost".
_(Phan-Bôi-Châu)_

This is the source of our spiritual life, the immutable reality which inspires our people and has manifested itself in various aspect of life throughout our history. This spiritual essence is in fact the common denominator which has pervaded all traditional cultures from time immemorial, and which creates itself indefinitely onward. This concept, commonly known to all Asians, is referred to in Confucius' saying of 2000 years ago: "To search in the old for the understanding of the new". It can be seen in the works of every Asian philosophers for whom the history of mankind is but the varied expressions of an immutable principle according to different conditions of time and space.

"Human nature is originally alike,
Divergence is only the result of environment".

The history of mankind is therefore not one of evolution but rather of transformation; only the forms change while the essence remains the same. The way to understanding the new accordingly lies in studying the old. This transform conception entirely contradicts the contemporary concept of the history of mankind which based itself on the theory of evolution, since evolution implies a determinist progress by successive breaks with the past and by the denial of what is old. Without lengthy arguments we may acknowledge that humanity has progressed, but this progress must have proceeded from something and not from a void: History has witnessed striking resemblances between civilizations completely isolated from each other and having no mutual influence whatever. Such is the case of Roman and Greek civilizations; Socrates is the counterpart of Confucius, Heraclites of Y-King, and the sophists are to be found on both sides. This phenomenon proves that all humanity shares the same spirit which different environments and areas cannot alter.
Man has culture and culture implies progress. Man's primal nature contains something radically different from that of the animal, something which promotes progress and motivates creation at all levels of civilization. That motivation is the spiritual vitality, unchangeable through time and space, which lies in the essence of the human being. It may at different times, be illuminated or veiled, strong or weak, but it is never extinct. When it is strong, humanity strides forward in giant steps; when it is shaded, humanity declines.

This has been the traditional conception of all philosophical systems in Asia. This unanimity was reaffirmed by a Chinese scholar at the 1947 Asian Cultural Relations Conference in New Delhi:

"Asia is the birthplace of the principal civilizations and religions. In the course of the past five thousand years, great saints have been born in Asia. Whatever the country of their birth and their languages, their aim has been the same. Their tenets from any faint of national and racial discrimination, taught men to love, respect, and help each other; these lofty tenets have come down to us and are upheld by the whole world".

Above is the scope of our present search for Asian cultural relations, which has as its two main objectives, the following:

First, to get to know ourselves;

Second, to contribute our share to the design of a proper universal culture for the world.

As regards the first objective, the Vietnamese people as well as other Asians will strive for self-consciousness and for a full appreciation of their reciprocal cultural relationships.

We cannot forget that we are nations with thousand years of history, ancient civilization possessing creative and synthesizing forces that have more than once brought us prosperity and equilibrium. When Europe was only desolate swamps and impenetrable forests, the teaching of Veda and Y-King already had overflowed Asia. These teachings have forged models of great men of thought and action throughout the course of history. We
Asian peoples were faithful to that tradition until the 17th and 18th centuries, when an interruption was caused by the overwhelming assault of Western industrial civilization. With the expulsion of anti-traditional colonialism and the recuperation of our political sovereignty we are but halfway back on our road to recovery. To achieve full recovery, the Asian peoples have to re-establish the equilibrium of their thought and action in a modern world. The modernization of their individual and collective lives needs to be thoroughly understood and mastered.

This modernization requires the re-evaluation of cultural, spiritual, and moral values of both East and West as begun by Phan-Chu-Trinh, so as to save what is good and do away with what is bad on both sides. But in this re-evaluation we should have a set of basic criteria. Where can they be found if not in our own cultural heritage which manifests itself in the great religions and traditional philosophies which have always prescribed thought and action for our millions of people and have deeply influenced our social structure?

We can only judge the values of other people through our own "spectacles", through our subjective feelings and the collective soul of our people. This soul is not a blank page. Already it is heavily engraved with the imprints of a culture forged for so many centuries already by the traditional spirit of Asia. It is because they are not aware of the heavy shadow of the dead over the living that the communists have denied tradition and attempted to break with the past by sheer violence. They harbour delusion of using mechanical processes to manufacture men of different nature, one hundred per cent new in their conduct and thought.

We fight communism, as we fought colonialism because the latter has begin birth to the former and both are anti-traditional. But while colonialism limited itself to several areas, communism is infiltrating the world over. Because communism is a whole conception of life and of the world, we cannot expect to offset communism by vociferous insults. Instead, we must have a balanced and philosophical conception of life, a theory better grounded than communism, a theory that will better meet basic human needs and aspirations, before we can defeat communism and eradicate its influence in our midst.
To build such a stable and effective ideology, we have no other way than to look into our traditional past and re-study its rich values. Since communism is expanding throughout the whole world the problem of fighting it has become one that concerns the whole world. No single nation or locality can deter communism through its own effort. As far as the Vietnamese people are concerned, there are two imperative reasons for fighting communism and both recommend our re-examination of the Asian culture which is our tradition.

First, communism is a foreign doctrine, the product of contemporary Western capitalism, developed in an environment basically different from our agrarian social structure. Ninety per cent of our population are farmers with a mode of living and a temperament sharply in contrast with those of industrial city dwellers.

Second, our nation is not yet totally independent and unified. The Northern half of the country remains under the domination of communist China. This is a dishonour to our national tradition and betrays our ancestors, who in all stages of history have given their lives to defend our fatherland against Chinese invaders. We must fight communism until the unification of our country is achieved. Studying the national culture will give new vigour to the examples of our ancestors, whose thoughts and needs have been a source of inspiration and a stimulus to all of us from North to South.

To be effective and convincing, an anti-communist theory must move our innermost being and from there influence our actions. Such a theory cannot be a mere product of reasoning and imitation. On the contrary it should be founded on the long experience of our people, of our race, and of humanity, so as to meet the deepest aspiration of man and to set the inspirational fibber of the masses in sympathetic vibration. As a first step we must recapitulate the dynamic achievement of our ancestors, as raw materials for the later constructive work.

To our theory must be joined ingredients other than those furnished through our ancestral heritage. The past will undoubtedly clarify our mind as to the conscience of our people and the true objectives of the struggle to which they have dedicated themselves. At the same time, the glorious
accomplishments of our ancestors will instil in us confidence and faith in our actions. But for all that, we should not forget that the present world is dominated by the scientific civilization of the modern West. Nowadays, science and technology have unified the world in practical fields and given man new powers over nature. However, science does not preach any end, it aspires instead to be absolutely objective. Therefore, if science can promote happiness for humanity, it can also bring about its extermination.

Man cannot be objective in his actions. Life wants a meaning. Where does our action lead? What aims do we have? Where is true happiness? These are the questions that humanity always must ask itself and try to answer. The actions of man must aim at certain ends; to live be to strive for an ideal. The Asian ideal was prescribed two thousand years ago by its traditional philosophers as being the ultimate reality and in fact the prime mover common to science and morality, to reason and love.

"To strive for the realization of the cosmic spirit is to approach the threshold of Truth and Morality".

Whether the ideals are "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality", as those the French revolution, or the Asian concept of "Tu, Tề, Trị, Bình" (to perfect oneself, to organize one's family, to administer the state, to pacify the world), humanity in its dealings with life must still take a universal and eternal objective as its ultimate end.

Research on Asian cultural relations cannot be restricted to the search for the basic spiritual tradition common to the Asians, designed to promote mutual understanding under among ourselves, but should also embrace the search for a universal humanism, so as to promote understanding among peoples everywhere. An ancient Chinese philosopher had said:

"There is a saint in the West,
There is a saint in the East,
There is only one heart and one reason".

There is only one universal heart and one eternal reason. These qualities manifest themselves in various colourful forms, depending on time and space, and if their origin is to be highly valued. It follows that Asia has her
own precious message, and Europe and America have theirs. If Asia's awakening is to be complete she should thoroughly explore her own cultural particularities and prepare to meld her millenary message with that of the West in building up a true world culture. This universal culture must pay due to truth and love. Only that can protect humanity from the threat of extermination by atomic wars.

A Thai princess recently declared that a new starting point should be found for East-West relations. We, too, believe this starting point should be the object of tireless search by newly-liberated Asia and should be introduced to the world by the Asian peoples themselves. The urgency of research on Asian cultural relation is apparent and undoubtedly all thinking Vietnamese who treasure the destiny of their nation and of humanity will want to play their proper role.