Proceedings of ICLLCD 2026 Symposium: Using Visual Arts to Enrich History Understanding
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT30558

A Vietnamese Missionary in the West: The Foreign Experience and Observations of Philliphê Bỉnh in the Pre-Modern Era

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Abstract. This paper centers on the travel manuscript of Philliphê Bỉnh, a Vietnamese Catholic missionary active from 1759 to 1833, who sought support from the Portuguese court in 1796 for the Tonkin diocese in Vietnam. Stranded in Portugal for over three decades, Bỉnh documented his experiences in the Latinized Vietnamese script (Quốc ngữ) in his work Sách sổ sang chép các việc (Notebook That Transmits and Records All Matters). Through literature review and comparative analysis, this study examines this rare early-19th-century travelogue in Vietnamese vernacular script. It focuses on Bỉnh's observations and reflections on the European world as one of the first Vietnamese missionaries to reside long-term in Europe, and contrasts his narrative perspective with writings by 19th-century Vietnamese Confucian scholar-officials. The paper argues that Bỉnh's writings are not only a record of a long-distance ecclesiastical mission but also an important historical source for understanding bidirectional cultural encounters between East and West in the pre-modern era, offering a key case study for examining the early modernity of Vietnam from a global historical perspective.

Keywords: Philliphê Bỉnh, Sách sổ sang chép các việc, Pre-modern era, Cultural encounters, Travelogue

1. Introduction

After the Age of Discovery began, Catholic religious orders expanded their missions to the Far East, establishing a diocese in Macau in 1576. The Tokugawa shogunate's anti-Christian laws and Ming dynasty maritime controls led to the expulsion of Jesuit missionaries to Macau, who then focused on Indochina, particularly Vietnam [1]. Despite its steady growth in Vietnam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Catholicism consistently clashed with the Confucian values upheld by the royal court. Philippê Bỉnh (1759–1833) emerged as a prominent Annamese missionary during this period. After the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, Bỉnh and other priests traveled to Europe to seek a new bishop for the Diocese of Tonkin, but their efforts were thwarted by unfavorable political conditions, leaving Bỉnh in Lisbon until his death. Scholar C. R. Boxer have referred to him as to him as "the last defender of the Padroado in Indochina" [2]. He left behind over

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twenty manuscripts in Vietnamese, Portuguese, and Latin, contributing significantly to the fields of papal history, hagiography, and missionary narratives. According to scholar Thanh Lãng, Bỉnh was a cultural scholar, linguist, and historian, with the scope of his writings standing out among his contemporaries [3]. His notable work Sách sổ sang chép các việc (Notebook That Transmits and Records All Matters), which captures his journey to Europe with other Annamese priests, detailing in it maritime travel, social observations, and interactions with the Portuguese royal family and church officials, serves multiple scholarly purposes.

Through a literature review and comparative analysis, this study explores Bỉnh's portrayal of Europe and juxtaposes his insights with contemporary Sino-Vietnamese writings from the Annamese court's envoys, thus offering a nuanced understanding of Vietnam's early modernity and the cultural exchanges between East and West in the premodern era.

2. Sách sổ sang chép các việc: the westward notes of Philippê Bỉnh

Philippê Bỉnh's challenging journey to Europe began in September 1794, leading to Lisbon in July 1796 after two years of travel with three fellow Annamese priests [4]. His work, the Notebook That Transmits and Records All Matters, completed in 1822, details his voyage and offers insights into Lisbon's society, particularly its religious practices and secular life—information previously unavailable to Vietnamese scholars influenced by Confucianism. This study emphasizes key examples from both domains.

2.1. Religious practice

In the late eighteenth century, the Catholic Church in Europe held a central and orthodox role, unlike its marginalized status in East Asia. When Bỉnh arrived in Lisbon from Annam, he documented the church's structured religious life in his Notebook. He noted that Mass was celebrated hourly from 9 AM to noon and highlighted the unique practice where certain churches began Mass after 1 PM to accommodate those who missed the morning services. The contrast with Annam, where priests adhered strictly to regulations and refrained from elevating the Host after noon, illustrates the limitations faced by Vietnamese Jesuits compared to the more institutionalized practices in Lisbon.

When discussing differences between European and Annamese religious customs, Bỉnh devoted special attention to the system of Mass "offerings." He explained that European believers regarded the Mass as an invaluable sacrament that could not be bought or sold, and therefore expressed their support through voluntary offerings, the amount of which typically fluctuated with market prices. As a devout Catholic, he borrowed the Vietnamese Buddhist term "tiền làm phúc" (merit-making money) to explain offerings, making the concept relatable to his audience. Similarly, he frequently incorporated Buddhist and Daoist terminology to express Catholic ideas, using terms like "ăn chay" to denote "fasting" and "biết Đạo" for "embracing the faith."

Bỉnh's account of Lisbon's church practices also reveals the strictness of the rites and the grandeur of ceremonies. Lay faithful, including children as young as five or six, served as acolytes, demonstrating intergenerational continuity in European religious practice. With regard to the arrangement of the sanctuary, the normative and intricate nature of the liturgical order was reflected in its material furnishings. Each altar was equipped with five foot hangings and five standard chasubles, each set corresponding to one of the five liturgical colors used exclusively during designated seasons of the Church calendar. In addition, churches were required to maintain more elaborate foot hangings and vestments for major solemnities. On such occasions, laborers were hired to adorn the draperies and were compensated for their work.

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Discussing discrepancies in the observance of the Church's "five precepts," Bỉnh noted that European believers were required to contribute a tithe—one-tenth of agricultural and livestock produce—for the maintenance of the Church. In Annam and in Ming China, where the sovereigns did not profess the Catholic faith, believers were not subject to this regulation. Regarding fasting rules, Western Christians were required to fast for roughly seventy days each year, whereas Christians in East Asia observed only nine fasting days. Bỉnh was particularly struck by the profound integration of religion and public life in Europe: on feast days, shops closed, government offices suspended their work, courts ceased trials, schools halted classes, markets did not open, and craftsmen laid aside their tools. Such practices revealed the thorough interpenetration of Catholicism with secular life.

Bỉnh came from Annam, experienced a secular society where politics and religion were separate, with Confucianism acting as the ideological foundation since the Trần dynasty, mainly serving governance purposes rather than as a religion. This contrasted with the seamless fusion of Catholicism with public life in the West stood in stark contrast to the sociopolitical order of East Asia and became a central focus of Bỉnh's comparative observations.

2.2. Secular life

2.2.1. Court and nobility

In the East Asian tributary system, states like Annam, Joseon, and Japan acknowledged the Chinese emperor's authority by sending envoys. In contrast, Bỉnh, as a religious envoy to the Portuguese king, occupied a different role, challenging traditional East Asian concepts of ruler-subject hierarchy.

When describing his first audience with the King of Portugal and the presentation of gifts, Bỉnh stressed that the king did not delegate the reception of gifts to officials but accepted them in person—a gesture he considered an extraordinary honor. After the audience, the king even allowed them to tour the palace garden and paused again to converse with them. Bỉnh added that the queen later walked in the garden holding the fan he had offered, accompanied by noblewomen, one of whom inquired about another Annamese priest who had previously traveled to Rome. This indicates that prior Vietnamese missionaries had cultivated relationships with European elites, highlighting a bidirectional exchange of Catholicism rather than a one-sided spread from Europe.

During their stay in Lisbon, the Annamese missionaries received careful royal arrangements for food, lodging, and transport, and were invited to court ceremonies and banquets that allowed them to observe Western court protocol firsthand. Describing the hand-kissing ritual, Bỉnh noted that participants lined up along the king's right side strictly in order of arrival—regardless of rank—and then kissed the hands of the king and the princes. This emphasis on bodily contact and procedural equality diverged sharply from the rigidly hierarchical court etiquette of Annam, yet Bỉnh recorded the contrast without explicit judgment.

He also described noblewomen's banquet attire, characterized by long skirts and puffed sleeves, as well as men's accessories, including tricorne hats, ceremonial caps, staffs, silver buckles, and silk sashes. He noted the market prices of these items and is surprised by the high cost of canes. A priest explained that the canes were made from materials obtained in the East Indies and transported by Danish merchants. Although such canes were ordinary objects in the East and worth less than five đồng (a copper-coin unit), they were treated as valuable items in Europe and served as signs of social status [5]. This contrast highlights the global trade networks of the early modern period and the significant price differences created by long-distance maritime exchange.

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Bỉnh also recorded how the missionaries made use of European "Oriental imagination." They prepared traditional Annamese clothing during the voyage to draw royal interest through their foreign appearance. Because they lacked hats, they wrapped their heads with turbans in the manner of Southern Annamese people. This approach matched the king's preferences, as he permitted Western clothing for daily life but mandated Annamese dress at court to showcase Lisbon's cosmopolitan character.

Compared with contemporary East Asian literature, Bỉnh's Notebook demonstrates a significant cross-cultural awareness and proto-modern economic sensibility. It avoids "self-Orientalization," depicting Annamese missionaries as active negotiators rather than passive subjects of European perception, providing early insights for revising Eurocentric global historiography.

2.2.2. Ordinary citizens

In his Notebook, Bỉnh provides an insightful depiction of Portuguese commoners, emphasizing aspects of their everyday life such as food, education, customs, and rituals.

He notably observes that tea, introduced to Europe via the East India Company, has evolved into a common beverage with specific social practices. Ordinary Portuguese households typically drink tea twice daily, sweetened with sugar, and often combine it with milk and coffee, along with pastries. Furthermore, Bỉnh describes the etiquette of serving tea, where placing a silver spoon on the saucer indicates a request for more tea, while leaving it in the cup denotes refusal [5]. Bỉnh, however, insisted on drinking tea without sugar, explaining that tea in Annam and China was always consumed plain. His account clearly illustrates how global commodities were reshaped through local tastes. He systematically recorded Vietnamese transcriptions of European foods, such as xốp pa (sopa, soup), mỡ sữa bò (butter), rượu nho (wine), dầu Oliva (olive oil), making his Notebook an early source for Western food concepts in Vietnam. Additionally, he noted European cooking methods and compared local prices with his economic understanding, expressing surprise at the high cost of beef .

Family life was another key theme. Bỉnh observed that European mothers did not feed infants by mouth but trained them to eat with small spoons, fostering orderly and autonomous habits. In childrearing, he noted a spirit of equality: children did not fight over food or outings and quietly accepted parental arrangements. This emphasis on independence and order contrasts with Confucian patriarchal households structured around gender and age hierarchy.

Bỉnh also commented on Portuguese institutions and customs. Marriage required only the presence and registration of a parish priest, with no village marriage tax. Funerals were simple, held at night, involving processions with crosses and candles, but did not include a feast or male relatives following the coffin. Besides, he wrote that under Western inheritance law, property without children or an appointed heir goes to the crown, sharply different from East Asian clan-based succession practices and revealing a state-centered mechanism for reclaiming ownerless wealth.

Beyond daily customs, Bỉnh focused on European scientific knowledge regarding childbirth, noting that European women walked with support until strong contractions, and then sat to deliver. He reported that if a mother died before delivery, a cesarean section was performed to baptize the infant. He also recorded gestation periods for humans and animals and used European obstetric knowledge to refute the legendary claim that Laozi's mother carried him for eighty years and delivered through her left armpit, dismissing it as fiction.

Bỉnh's religious background did not limit his engagement with secular subjects [6]. His descriptions consistently measure foreign customs against Annamese experience. Through this comparative lens, the Notebook becomes not only an ethnography of Europe from an Eastern

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viewpoint but also a rare document showing how premodern Vietnamese intellectuals used local knowledge to interpret and understand an unfamiliar world.

3. A comparison between Annamese Confucian envoys and Philippe Bỉnh's writings on the west

In pre-modern Annam, classical Chinese served as the official written language, with a civil service examination system based on Confucian teachings and a literary culture focused on the Confucian classics. From the sixteenth century, increased contact with Western missionaries and merchants disrupted this cultural foundation, leading to an interaction network spanning religion, commerce, and politics by the late eighteenth century. Following the Nguyễn dynasty's establishment in 1802, Annamese scholar-officials undertook missions to Western-influenced regions [7]. Notable figures like Lý Văn Phức and Phan Huy Chú documented their travels in works that reflect these interactions, with travel diaries proliferating during French colonial incursions beginning in 1858. Philippe Bỉnh and the Confucian envoys of the Nguyễn period had significantly different cultural backgrounds. Bỉnh, influenced by Western missionaries and Catholic theology, contrasted with the envoys, who adhered to Confucian orthodoxy and wrote from a Sinocentric perspective. These differences notably influenced their representations and evaluations of foreign encounters.

To begin with, missionaries like Bỉnh and Annamese envoys adopted entirely different languages and literary forms. While classical Chinese was the traditional authoritative written form for centuries, the seventeenth century saw Western missionaries developing a Romanized system, known as Quốc ngữ, aimed at facilitating proselytization. In its early stage, however, quốc ngữ circulated mainly within Catholic communities, while Confucian scholars continued to adhere strictly to classical Chinese composition. Thus, the envoys' travel accounts were written in elegant classical prose, marked by refined rhetoric and strict prosodic structure, whereas Bỉnh wrote entirely in Romanized Vietnamese. His language was clear and colloquial, and he arranged his topics alphabetically with an index—an organizational structure remarkably systematic and modern. This method of composition was unprecedented in the history of Vietnamese literature and can be regarded as a precursor to the country's modern literary transformation.

Their observational emphases also diverged dramatically. Pre-modern Annamese society was agrarian and lacked the technical basis for industrial development or scientific inquiry. Accordingly, in the envoys' writings, the "strangeness" of the West manifested above all in their astonishment at advanced industrial technologies and mechanical devices. Lý Văn Phức marveled at Western shipbuilding ingenuity but struggled to understand their methods [8]. In Hai Cheng Zhi Lue, Phan Huy Chú described the ship's furnace, the rotation of its paddle wheels, and its rapid speed, but confessed that the mechanical principles behind it were "impossible to observe or comprehend" [9]. In Phạm Phú Thứ's Record of the Journey on the Fulangsha Railway, images such as "rivers bridged and mountains tunneled in swift succession" and "streets lined with telegraph wires" captured the modern "spectacles" of Paris, including trains, telegraph cables, and glass windows [10]. These accounts are valuable for their observations but generally remain on the level of surface description, without probing the scientific logic underlying the technologies.

By contrast, Philippe Bỉnh, who lived in Lisbon from 1796 to 1833, did not experience the industrial revolution in Portugal, which reflects in his work, Notebook, devoid of modern industrial descriptions. Despite this absence, Bỉnh did not overlook technological advancements. He presented Enlightenment scientific knowledge with practical applications. For instance, the final chapter of his book features "Instructions for Constructing a Printing Press," detailing the materials, mechanical structure, and production procedures of the device, supplemented by precise hand-drawn diagrams,

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showcasing a pronounced utilitarian orientation. Although religious concerns pervade his writings, Bỉnh also devoted considerable space to explaining Western scientific and rational understandings of the world. His earlier correction of “absurd” Eastern beliefs regarding pregnancy, based on physiological knowledge, is a case in point.

Differences between the two groups were also evident at the ideological and evaluative levels, with Vietnamese dynasties viewing their realm as "Lesser China" and espousing a Sinocentric worldview. Confucian scholars deemed non-adherents to their teachings as "barbarians." In writings by Lý Văn Phức, Europeans were depicted as cunning and profit-driven, characterized by a "barbarian nature" [8]. Phạm Phú Thứ similarly framed Catholicism in comparison to Confucianism, deeming it "crude" from an Eastern philosophical perspective, reflecting a strong cultural confidence [10].

In contrast to the envoys’ prejudicial depictions, Bỉnh’s writings on the “Other” seldom relied on moralistic stereotypes. Notebook both praises God, the Church, and the martyrs, and simultaneously steps beyond doctrinal boundaries to critique European maritime conduct from the standpoint of humaneness and fairness. He commended the peaceful trading relations and courteous diplomacy between Ming China and Russia, while condemning the unjust practice of European nations seizing ships in times of war. Bỉnh did not favor Catholic countries merely on the basis of shared faith; rather, he evaluated them through a universalistic humanistic ethic that reflected an early form of global consciousness. In doing so, he transcended parochialism and negotiated a subtle balance between reason and faith.

4. Conclusion

The Notebook That Transmits and Records All Matters, compiled by Annamese missionary Philippê Bỉnh during his three decades in Lisbon, captures a broad spectrum of observations about life abroad. Originally motivated by religious concerns, Bỉnh's writing explores both secular social groups and the role of Catholic practices in daily life. His detailed descriptions span food, education, customs, technology, and local institutions. Before the Nguyễn dynasty reached its zenith, even as Annam adhered to the traditional East Asian tributary system, Bỉnh had sailed overseas. There, employing romanized Vietnamese, he captured a vivid portrait of an unfamiliar society. Bỉnh draws from Annamese experiences while interpreting foreign cultures without value judgments, fostering a non-binary understanding of East-West dynamics.

Philippê Bỉnh held a dual identity as both an infidel in his homeland and a foreigner in Europe, allowing him to develop a balanced narrative that transcended narrow religious and national perspectives, reflecting an attachment to his homeland and loyalty to his faith, while integrating theological reflection with empirical observation. This article offers only an initial reading of his travel writing. Future research may examine his work through religious history, intellectual history, consumption history, and studies of global and local interactions. Such approaches can deepen our understanding of early global encounters as seen from an indigenous East Asian perspective.

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