

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tu Luc Van Doan): Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/25s5x7xm>

### Author

Nguyen, Martina Thuchhi

### Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn):  
Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941

by

Martina T. Nguyen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair  
Professor Tyler Stovall,  
Professor Jeffrey Hadler

Fall 2012

The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn):  
Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941

© 2012

by Martina T. Nguyen

## Abstract

The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn):  
Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941

by

Martina T. Nguyen

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

This dissertation provides the most thorough history currently available of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. It sheds light on the cultural and political history of the 1930s, arguably the country's most dynamic intellectual and literary period. I examine the nature of colonial intellectual life by addressing the following questions: how did Vietnamese intellectuals make sense of the sweeping forces of modern life brought by French colonialism? How did they understand, internalize, and appropriate the foreign ideas and worldviews transmitted by their colonizers? And ultimately, how did they use this imported knowledge to help themselves and their compatriots? I argue that the cultural, social and political program of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was less concerned with the immediate seizure of political power than the progress towards a just, civil and modern Vietnamese society. Its reforms were wide in scope, concerned with cosmopolitan questions of fairness, freedom and social justice. The Group preferred the unknown and unpredictable future brought by modern life to the known stagnation of tradition. The Group believed that the past and its paradigms held back Vietnamese progress and iconoclastically broke away from their strictures. It looked to westernized societies for models to emulate, borrowing selectively and deliberately from western culture to envision a Vietnamese society that would someday be seen by other modern civilizations as an equal.

As arguably the most important group of intellectuals in 1930s Tonkin, the Self-Reliant Literary Group is an ideal lens through which to view this complex landscape. The publishers of the first satirical newspaper in Vietnam, the Group served as the vanguard of a new, youthful generation of Vietnamese intellectuals—educated only in modern French and vernacular Vietnamese, unfamiliar with the classical Chinese worldview of their Confucian literati predecessors. Deeply committed to the ideals of human progress, the Group reexamined every aspect of Vietnamese society, and sought to replace outdated traditions with new ways to build a civil society. I maintain that the Self-Reliant Literary Group constituted the first Vietnamese modernists—never before had intellectuals advocated such boldly iconoclastic, sweeping changes across the whole of Vietnamese society. Their reform program covered disparate issues such as rural/urban relations, national costume, domestic and international politics, women's issues, publishing, fashion and architecture. I examine their writings and social/political project to describe how these intellectuals constructed their own vision of a modern, civil Vietnamese society in a colonial context.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<i>Introduction</i>	ii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxix
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>1</b>
The <i>Đời Nay</i> Publishing House: The Economics, Politics and Culture of the Book and Newspaper Trade	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>52</b>
Wearing Modernity: <i>Phong Hóa</i> , Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, and Fashion	
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>91</b>
Humor as Modern Sensibility: Lý Toét, Jokes, and Irony in <i>Phong Hóa</i>	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>142</b>
Reform vs. Revolution: The Self-Reliant Literary Group, Colonial Republicanism, and the Politics of the Center Left	
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>195</b>
The Politics of the Self-Reliant Literary Group in Local and International Context, 1936-1941	
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>243</b>
The Politics of Everyday Life: The League of Light [Đoàn Ánh Sáng] and Housing Reform in Hanoi, 1937-1941.	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>307</b>
Dramatis Personae: Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group	
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>310</b>
Publications by SADEP and the <i>Đời Nay</i> Publishing House, 1933-1945	

## INTRODUCTION

---

On the gray and cloudy Saturday morning of July 13, 1963, thousands of people flooded the streets of Saigon to pay their last respects to the writer and journalist Nguyễn Tường Tam. Best known by his nom de plume Nhất Linh, Tam had played a leading role in Vietnamese intellectual life in the late colonial decade of the 1930s. He founded two of the highest-circulating and most influential journals in all of Indochina—*Phong Hóa* [Mores], Vietnam’s first satirical newspaper, and its successor publication *Ngày Nay* [These Days]. His 1935 novel *Đoạn Tuyệt* [A Severance of Ties] was widely considered “the most celebrated novel of the decade” and cemented his lofty position in interwar literature. Along with these individual achievements, Tam had also founded the *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* [Self-Reliant Literary Group], the most important intellectual collective in 1930s Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> As a whole, the Group profoundly influenced the development of modern Vietnamese literature, journalism, publishing and art for decades to come. Urbane and western-educated, members of the Group pioneered artistic fields such as poetry, theatre, architecture, literary criticism, fashion, and design. Their ambition and iconoclasm also extended to social and political issues. As the leader of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Nhất Linh used *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* to launch a far-reaching program of social reform. Deeply committed to the modern ideals of human progress and individual freedom, the Group reexamined every aspect of Vietnamese society, and sought to replace outdated traditions and repressive colonial structures with a modern civil society. With such an impressive career, Nguyễn Tường Tam’s funeral should have been a celebration of his life and work.

But the atmosphere at the funeral was tense. The southern Vietnamese government led by Ngô Đình Diệm had been wary of Tam’s presence in Saigon since 1956. Even after his death, it had sought to limit his influence. Before the funeral, the government had tried its best to control the public spectacle of the event. It refused the family’s request to hold the funeral on a Sunday, a non-work day that increased the risk of a large turnout. Ngô Đình Nhu, brother and counselor of President Diệm and the head of secret police, had approached Tam’s literary colleagues with an offer: the government would pay for the entire funeral in exchange for it to be attended only by preapproved invitees. But Tam’s colleagues declined out of respect for the family. In the days leading up to the funeral, Tam’s body remained guarded under lock and key at the hospital morgue. A coterie of police vetted all visitors, paying particular attention to young intellectuals and students. On the day of the funeral, plainclothes secret police infiltrated the crowds and armed guards lined the route taken by the funeral cortege. Vietnamese press and media were

---

<sup>1</sup> Other scholars often refer to the Nhất Linh’s collective as “the Self-Strength,” “Self-Strengthening,” or “Autonomous” Literary Group. In this dissertation, I have translated “Tự Lực” as “Self-Reliant,” which I believe is closest in meaning to the Group’s intention and reform project.

strictly forbidden, but this did not stop foreign journalists from jotting notes or snapping pictures.<sup>2</sup>

Why would the South Vietnamese government go to such lengths for a writer whose influence had peaked thirty years earlier? Why did the government feel threatened by his public funeral? As it happened, Nguyễn Tường Tam was not just a writer and journalist, but also a politician and revolutionary. After an illustrious career in literature and journalism, Tam entered politics around the beginning of the Second World War, a tumultuous period in Vietnamese history. He helped revive the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, or VnQDD), leading it to become the country's largest noncommunist nationalist political party and perhaps the only viable alternative to Ho Chi Minh. An ardent anticolonialist, Tam and his party joined Ho in the Viet Minh coalition. He served in Ho's revolutionary government as the first Minister of Foreign Affairs and represented the country at negotiations with the French. Fissures in the coalition soon developed and Tam and his party were eventually outmaneuvered by Ho Chi Minh in the power struggles of the mid-1940s. Defeated and vilified as a traitor by the Communist establishment in the North, he retired from politics and spent a few years in self-imposed exile. In 1956, Tam relocated to Saigon and tried to revive his literary career. But because of his temporary collaboration with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, the RVN leadership never really welcomed Tam either. In 1960, Tam was accused of taking part in a failed 1960 coup against President Ngô Đình Diệm, charges which he fully denied and believed were trumped up. The government summoned Tam to appear in court on the morning of Monday, July 8, 1963. The afternoon before his court date, Tam killed himself by drinking a bottle of scotch laced with veronal in an act of political protest. He left a suicide note denouncing the government which was secretly reproduced and circulated among the public.<sup>3</sup> Already besieged and in a precarious political state, the Diệm government sought to control the fallout caused by Tam's dramatic death.

The funeral procession began at the Grall hospital where the body had lain. It halted at the Xa Loi Pagoda for a brief memorial service before heading down Bà Huyện Thanh Quan street towards the Go Vap cemetery for burial. The stop at the Buddhist pagoda was largely symbolic—Nguyễn Tường Tam was not religious and did not attend temple with any regularity. In fact, he and his Self-Reliant Literary Group championed science and denounced the impact of religious superstitions over the peasantry. Ngô Đình Nhu noted that in life Nguyễn Tường Tam had hardly attended temple—why would he want a Buddhist service in death? Nhu was aware that the Xá Lợi temple was a hotbed of Buddhist protest against his brother's government. It was from there that the monk Thích Quảng Đức had departed for his famous self-immolation a few months earlier.<sup>4</sup> Eternalized on film by photojournalist Malcolm Browne, the iconic image of the burning bonze had helped to turn the tide of public opinion against the American-backed South Vietnamese regime. By holding his funeral service at the Xá Lợi pagoda, Tam's family linked the two acts of protest, one religious and the other secular. If Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation was a denunciation of the regime's religious persecution, Nguyễn Tường Tam's suicide implied that the government was guilty of suppressing intellectuals.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanh Lăng, "Tường nhớ văn hữu Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam" *Tin Sách*, 7 July 1964, p. 9-10. Nguyễn Duy Diễm, "Chân dung của Nhất Linh giữa cuộc đời và vai trò của Nhất Linh trước văn học sử" *Tin Sách*, 7 July 1964, p. 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 241-242.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Phiêm, "Nhớ Về Nhất Linh" *Sách Hiem*, <http://sachhiem.net/VANHOC/NguyenHuuPhiem.php> (accessed July 12, 2012).

At the cemetery, thousands of people gathered. Members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party came to pay their respects to their former Party leader, Nguyễn Tường Tam the politician. The Vietnam PEN Club mourned the loss of their comrade, Nhất Linh the novelist and journalist. The most surprising was the number of students who came to the funeral. They carried banners identifying their schools, some of them the most illustrious in Saigon, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Chu Văn An. The female students from the exclusive all-girls schools Couvent des Oiseaux-Regina Mundi, Gia Long, Trung Vương and Marie Curie stood with their classmates; all wore white, flowing ao dai, the Vietnamese national costume. As the works of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were a mandatory part of literary curriculum in the South, these young girls had read Nhất Linh's novels in school. Many of them held signs proclaiming their support for the deceased writer and politician: "Nguyễn Tường Tam Forever" [Nguyễn Tường Tam Bất Diệt], "We Mourn Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam" [Thương Nhớ Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam] and "Nguyễn Tường Tam's Death has awakened a generation of youth" [Một Nguyễn Tường Tam chết đi, Cả thế hệ thanh niên sống dậy].<sup>5</sup> At the gravesite, politicians, writers and intellectuals gave eulogies, but some significant figures were missing—none of the other members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were present. His two brothers who were active in the Group, Nguyễn Tường Lân (Thạch Lam) and Nguyễn Tường Long (Hoàng Đạo), had been dead for almost twenty years. His close friend Trần Khánh Giu (Khái Hưng) had gone missing and was presumed killed by Viet Minh operatives in the Viet Bac forced labor camps in 1947. The rest of the Group—the poets Nguyễn Thứ Lễ (Thế Lữ), Ngô Xuân Diệu (Xuân Diệu), and Hồ Trọng Hiếu (Tú Mỡ)—had remained in the North and joined the Communist Party. All three had disavowed their activities in the Self-Reliant Literary Group and denounced their former friend and colleague as a traitor.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the earliest and most influential period of Tam's career remained unrepresented.

The following morning, the English-language pro-Diệm newspaper the Times of Vietnam downplayed the event. Its headline announced, "Nguyễn Tường Tam's funeral passes quietly." It underestimated the crowd at "about 2000" persons, although other accounts and photographs of the funeral suggested a significantly larger number of attendees. In an attempt to deflate the drama of Tam's death as an act of political protest, the paper casually mentioned that had he been alive to attend his court date, the magistrate would have found that "Tam was not guilty."<sup>7</sup> But the Times did not report that a number of funeral-goers were arrested, including young female students in white ao dai.<sup>8</sup> This was perhaps the most important testament to Tam's life work. Having read the Group's works in school, they would have certainly been exposed to the individualism and personal freedom exemplified by their strong female characters. Even their clothing bore the Group's influence. During the 1930s, *Phong Hóa* spearheaded the reform of women's clothing and introduced a predecessor to the *áo dài*. Clad in both the material reforms and modern ideals of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the female students of Regina Mundi, Trung Vương, Gia Long and Marie Curie were boldly out in society, enthusiastically engaging in their world with action and vigor just as the Group had advocated decades earlier. The public

---

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Tường Tâm, "Tưởng niệm Nhất Linh 7.7.1963-7.7.2008," Talawas, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=13623&rb=0302> (accessed July 12, 2012); Nguyễn. "Nhớ Về Nhất Linh."

<sup>6</sup> Biographies of the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>7</sup> "Nguyễn Tường Tam's Funeral Passes Quietly," *The Times of Vietnam*, 14 Jul 1963, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 243.

funeral also marked the beginning of the end for the Diệm regime. Less than four months after Tam's death, Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Nhu were assassinated in a coup.

It is easy to separate Nguyễn Tường Tam's writing career from his politics, to describe him as "a politician," "a journalist," "a social reformer," "an author" or even "a revolutionary." In fact, he played all these roles in varying degrees all his life. But what was clear from his funeral was that his life displayed a kind of unity—that his writing was political and his politics had its roots in his writing. To try to separate Nguyễn Tường Tam's artistic and journalistic accomplishments from his politics is to impose artificial and contrived boundaries. Though many could not—or would not—see it, Nguyễn Tường Tam's political life was a natural and logical outgrowth of his journalistic and literary career. In the same vein, the tumultuous political history of Vietnam in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be understood without first examining the vibrant colonial period that preceded it. During this period, a modern vision of the Vietnamese nation was forged in the public forum by intellectuals such as Nhất Linh.

This dissertation provides the most thorough history currently available of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. As some of the best-selling authors of the decade, the Group served as the vanguard of a new generation of Vietnamese intellectuals. I suggest that the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group—educated only in modern French and vernacular Vietnamese and removed from the classical Chinese worldview of their Confucian literati predecessors—constituted the first Vietnamese modernist movement. The Group reexamined every aspect of everyday social, political, and cultural life in Vietnam, addressing such disparate issues as literature, architecture, fashion, domestic and international politics, women's issues, and the family. They sought to replace what they saw as an outdated intellectual and political culture with a modern civil society, rooted in an understanding of Western ideals of human progress. I explore the cultural, social and political reforms of the Self-Reliant Literary Group to illuminate how these intellectuals constructed their own vision of a modern Vietnam in a colonial context.

By looking at the Self-Reliant Literary Group, this dissertation sheds light on the cultural and political history of the 1930s, arguably the country's most dynamic intellectual and literary period. I examine the nature of colonial intellectual life by addressing the following questions: how did Vietnamese intellectuals make sense of the sweeping forces of modern life brought by French colonialism? How did they understand, internalize, and appropriate the foreign ideas and worldviews transmitted by their colonizers? And ultimately, how did they use this imported knowledge to help themselves and their compatriots? I argue that the cultural, social and political program of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was less concerned with the immediate seizure of political power than the progress towards a just, civil and modern Vietnamese society. Its reforms were wide in scope, concerned with cosmopolitan questions of fairness, freedom and social justice. The Group preferred the unknown and unpredictable future brought by modern life to the known stagnation of tradition. The Group believed that the past and its paradigms held back Vietnamese progress and iconoclastically broke away from their strictures. It looked to westernized societies for models to emulate, borrowing selectively and deliberately from western culture to envision a Vietnamese society that would someday be seen by other modern civilizations as an equal.

## Historical Background

When *Phong Hóa* made its debut under Nhất Linh's editorship in September 1932, it reflected and was made possible by the vast social and economic changes sweeping across Vietnam under Western influence. France's pacification of Indochina and its five component regions (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia and Laos) had been completed at the turn of the century. In the ensuing decades, Vietnam underwent a period of rapid modernization that disrupted and transformed the country's economy, politics and society. As part of its plan to develop a modern export sector, the French colonial government restructured the Vietnamese economy to facilitate efficient resource extraction. The introduction of a market economy based on wage labor, the rule of law and impersonal commercial exchange eroded the primacy of the village and traditional social networks. Newly established transportation and communication infrastructures facilitated the movement of people, goods, and information throughout Indochina. Modern technology such as electric lights, sewage systems, automobiles, trams and cinemas permanently transformed the Vietnamese landscape.

This transformation was most visible in the urban areas which experienced rapid growth in the decades leading up to the 1930s. Hanoi in particular was transformed from a small ancient city to the glittering capital of a unified French Indochina. Within a few decades, the colonial government demolished the ancient citadel, built government and civic complexes, overhauled the city's sanitation and public works infrastructure, and laid thousands of kilometers of railroads and telegraph lines converging on Hanoi. Urban cities and slums swelled as a result of industrial development and the rise of a service economy. Hanoi experienced dramatic growth, its population nearly doubling between 1921 and 1931.<sup>9</sup> The growth of cities meant that there were more potential consumers of newspapers, magazines and journals than ever before. Furthermore, the densely populated urban areas made large-scale distribution of periodicals much easier than in previous years.

Perhaps most importantly, the colonial government instituted a new Franco-Vietnamese education system, which laid the foundation for future social change through its curriculum of French language, *quốc ngữ* [romanized Vietnamese script], general science, hygiene, geography, and French history. This educational transformation led to widespread literacy, with the proliferation of *quốc ngữ* creating a market for journals in vernacular Vietnamese. Furthermore, this "new education" [tân học] resulted in what Peter Zinoman described as a "rapid influx of unfamiliar discourses" into the Vietnamese intellectual lexicon, such as science, rationality, mass politics, romantic love and market economics.<sup>10</sup> These dizzying, new ideas forced Vietnamese to call into question existing social and cultural institutions and norms. Intellectuals increasingly saw the newspaper as a medium in which to discuss these large social and cultural transformations.

Economic development also transformed the Vietnamese social landscape. By the 1930s, Indochina saw the emergence of what can be described as a "working class" and an "urban middle class." Although small in number, both groups would have a significant influence in transforming Vietnamese culture, society and history. While this dissertation will touch upon the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ng Shui Meng, *The Population of Indochina: Some Preliminary Observations* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974), 41. Peter Zinoman, "Introduction: Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism" in Vũ Trọng Phụng, trans. Nguyệt Cẩm Nguyễn, and Peter Zinoman. *Dumb Luck: A Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Zinoman, "Introduction," *Dumb Luck*, 13.

former group, it is mostly preoccupied with the latter. Educated in the Franco-Vietnamese school system, these young urbanites looked for employment as journalists, teachers, interpreters, or clerks in the colonial bureaucracy. Well-learned and ambitious, these Vietnamese faced a colonial “glass ceiling” that stunted their social ascent, and were often passed over in favor of less-qualified white Frenchmen.<sup>11</sup> The global depression of 1929 dealt a further blow to Indochina, resulting in high rates of unemployment, bankruptcies, plummeting exports and widespread immiseration. With such economic and social upheavals, Indochina was the site of numerous anticolonial uprisings. In 1930-31, the colonial government brutally stamped out the Yên Bái Mutiny and Nghệ-Tĩnh Soviet movement, devastating the anticolonial movement and sending it underground for the decade to come. It was against this backdrop that the Self-Reliant Literary Group made its entrance into the Vietnamese intellectual scene in 1932.

### General Timeline of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s Activities

While teaching science at the École Thăng Long, Nguyễn Tường Tam had unsuccessfully petitioned the colonial government to start a *quốc ngữ* publication, which he had intended to call *Tiếng Cười* [Le Rire, or Laughter]. The school’s principal, Phạm Hữu Ninh, had started a newspaper called *Phong Hóa* which was on the verge of collapse after only 13 issues. Tam arranged to take over the paper from Ninh, who remained its *gérant* [manager] in name only. To produce copy for his new publication, Nguyễn Tường Tam recruited a team of writers and encouraged them to specialize. Fellow teacher Trần Khánh Giur (Khái Hưng) later became the Group’s most prolific and best-selling writer of novels and short stories. Recognizing talent in Hồ Trọng Hiếu (Tú Mỡ), a former colleague at the colonial Office of Finance, Tam suggested that he write satirical and humorous poetry. His brother Nguyễn Tường Long (Hoàng Đạo) became the Group’s chief theoretician and social commentator. His other brother Nguyễn Tường Lân (Thạch Lam) wrote novels, reportage, and essays on the peasantry. Nguyễn Thứ Lễ (Thế Lữ) established *Phong Hóa* as the epicenter of the New Poetry movement and pioneered literary criticism and spoken theater. New Poet extraordinaire Ngô Xuân Diệu (Xuân Diệu) joined the Group later in 1937.<sup>12</sup>

Nguyễn Tường Tam took the pseudonym Nhất Linh and made his debut as editor of the new *Phong Hóa* in the paper’s 14<sup>th</sup> issue, dated September 22, 1932.<sup>13</sup> In a short time, he transformed *Phong Hóa* from a struggling newspaper into the country’s first journal dedicated to

---

<sup>11</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Trong Bếp Núc của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Văn Học Tạp Chí*, no. 233-234 (Sep-Dec 1988), 102-106.

<sup>13</sup> Before the arrival of *Phong Hóa*, *quốc ngữ* periodicals of the late colonial period only loosely resembled today’s publications. Often unstructured operations started by wealthy individuals without journalistic training, such newspapers reflected the political and social agendas of their founders and editors. Founders would take the title of newspaper owner [giám đốc], and hire an editor [chủ bút] and a number of assistant editors [trợ bút]. Such a setup often bred conflict over the direction of the paper between the intellectuals working at the newspaper and the financial investor holding the purse strings. No attempt was made to separate commentary and factual reporting of news. The literary forms that today are viewed as distinct and separate—such as the novel, reportage, short story, investigative writing, literary criticism, travel writing—had less-defined boundaries during the 1930s. It was only during the Group’s active years that such genres and categories became increasingly differentiated, specialized, and professionalized. , and “Kỷ Niệm Ngày Báo Ra” *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 2

humor. *Phong Hóa* rejected the journalistic style of its predecessors, and wasted no time in differentiating itself in form, tone, ideology and content. First, *Phong Hóa* looked different from past newspapers: the layout included illustrated title banners, cartoons, crossword puzzles, advertisements, illustrations embedded in text, and unique fonts. A keen observer of the journalistic and the literary publishing world of the metropole, Nhất Linh modeled *Phong Hóa* on cosmopolitan journals such as *Le Canard Enchaîné* and *Le Rire*.

Second, *Phong Hóa* sounded different than its predecessors. In the North, the journal that had defined the generation before the Self-Reliant Literary Group was undoubtedly *Nam Phong Tạp Chí* [Southern Wind]. Started in 1917 through a collaboration between the French government and prominent northern intellectual Phạm Quỳnh, the paper focused on academic and theoretical topics, writing in a formal and lofty prose that many readers (including the Self-Reliant Literary Group) found pretentious. The paper had almost no pictures and featured lengthy sections in French, Chinese and *quốc ngữ*. Subsidized by the French colonial government, *Nam Phong* thus disseminated a pro-French message.<sup>14</sup> *Phong Hóa* made the austere and erudite *Nam Phong* a regular butt of jokes, referring to it as “Old Lady Nam Phong” [Bà Lão Nam Phong].<sup>15</sup> In the eyes of this new generation, *Nam Phong* was out of touch with readers, and put people to sleep with its excessive moralizing and pedantic tone. Instead, *Phong Hóa* used only *quốc ngữ*, its writers preferring simple colloquial language, which helped create a light-hearted and playful tone.

Finally, *Phong Hóa* differed from its predecessors in that it was owned and administered by its own writers. The Group believed that with financial self-reliance also came ideological independence. As the paper proudly stated,

*Phong Hóa* is completely different—it doesn’t belong to any individual. *Phong Hóa* belongs to everyone who writes for *Phong Hóa*. There are no bosses, no hired writers, no conflict between writers and capitalists. Those that collaborate on *Phong Hóa* are all independent writers, and *Phong Hóa* for that reason is an independent newspaper, and does not follow the directives of any party or any capitalist.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of economic freedom meant that Nhất Linh and his associates could run *Phong Hóa* without outside interference, as well as publish any material or follow any agenda they wished. However, colonial censorship did provide some constraints to this freedom.

As a result, *Phong Hóa* “exploded like a bomb” in the Vietnamese journalistic and literary scene.<sup>17</sup> Within a few months of publication, its readership more than tripled; within a year, its circulation passed 8,500 copies per week.<sup>18</sup> The paper’s readership was spread out

<sup>14</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 153-161.

<sup>15</sup> Đông Sơn, Cartoon, *Phong Hóa* no. 110, 10 Aug 1934, p. 1. N.V.U, Cartoon, *Phong Hóa* no. 124, 16 Nov 1934, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> “Kỷ Niệm Ngày Báo Ra” *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 2. Also see Nhất Linh, “Viết Sách, Xuất Bản Sách” *Phong Hóa* no. 101, 8 Jun 1934, p. 1

<sup>17</sup> Lê Thị Đức Hạnh. *Mấy vấn đề trong văn học hiện đại Việt Nam*. (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 1999), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 250. The latter figure was gleaned from circulation information written on newspaper issues submitted to the French *Dépôt Legal*. This information has proved invaluable in tracking the circulation of the Group’s newspapers over the years. While this information does not reveal how many Vietnamese actually read these books, they nevertheless offer data on how many copies of a particular book was available for consumption.



throughout the colony and not just concentrated in Tonkin. According to Thạch Lam, *Phong Hóa*'s readership was strongest in Hanoi, where more than 25% lived. Surprisingly, 13% of the paper's readers lived in the southern city of Saigon, which outnumbered the 7% in Haiphong, Tonkin's second largest urban area.<sup>19</sup> The paper had the least influence in Hue, with only 5%. 30% of *Phong Hóa*'s readers lived in "all other areas," which perhaps included small provincial towns, rural areas and colonial outposts. On the rare occasions that *Phong Hóa* or *Ngày Nay* published lists of subscribers, some of their readers lived as far away as Vientiane, Fort Bayard, and Tay Ninh.<sup>20</sup>

Nhất Linh and his team of writers soon began setting guidelines for their literary and publishing activities. The fact that the Self-Reliant Literary Group formed a literary collective, a definite school, with shared principles and a fixed artistic manifesto, further set it apart from its predecessors and its contemporaries. The Group outlined its goals in its mission statement:

1. Use one's own ability to produce literary works of value, not just translate works from foreign countries just because they have literary worth. This is to enrich the literary corpus of the nation [văn sản trong nước].
2. Produce or translate only works that reflect on society, for the purpose of helping people and society improve by the day.
3. Follow populism [chủ nghĩa bình dân], produce only works about the common people, and encourage others to love populism.
4. Use a simple literary method—easy to understand, little Chinese characters—a literary method that truly embodies the Annamese character [tinh cách Annam].
5. See everything as new, young, life-affirming, with a fighting spirit [trí phấn đấu] and a belief in progress [tin ở sự tiến bộ].
6. Praise the beauty of our homeland as it reflects the common people, which in turn encourages others to love their country in a populist way. Do away with any sense of elitism and aristocracy [trường giả quý phái].
7. Place the utmost importance upon individual freedom [tự do cá nhân].
8. Persuade others that Confucianism [đạo khổng] is no longer with the times.
9. Bring the scientific methods of the West [phương pháp khoa học thái tây] into Annamese literature.
10. To follow one of the above nine things is acceptable, so long as one does not violate any of the others.<sup>21</sup>

The Group's manifesto highlights a number of its major concerns and preoccupations. The first striking aspect of this mission statement is its nationalism. In its first principle, the Group advocated the creation of a Vietnamese literary corpus written by Vietnamese authors, not borrowed from other civilizations. In its fourth principle, the Group encouraged its writers to find a literary voice that "embodied the Annamese character." In addition to nationalism, the Group

<sup>19</sup> Thạch Lam, "Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân," *Phong Hóa* no. 172, 31 Jan 1936, p. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> The relatively strong readership in the South (13%) prompted the Group to establish a headquarters for *Phong Hóa* in Saigon in January 1934. Located at 160 Rue Lagrandière, this branch served as the headquarters for *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* in Saigon. Evidence suggests that this arrangement was short-lived: after the first 13 issues of *Ngày Nay*, the Saigon office was never mentioned again. Announcement in *Phong Hóa* no. 131, 4 Jan 1934, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> "Tự Lực Văn Đoàn," *Phong Hóa* no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 2.

also displayed a strong sense of iconoclasm—it called for members to strip Chinese influences from their writing, reject Confucianism and do away with the old hierarchies of “elitism and aristocracy.” The Group also espoused populist sensibilities. As stated in principles #3 and #6, its writers must focus on the common people and encourage others to embrace populism. And finally, the Group’s manifesto reveals its belief in progressivism and rationality. Principles 2, 5, 7, and 9 affirmed the Group’s commitment to scientific thought, individualism and belief in progress.

On the basis of this manifesto, the Group soon began to launch a number of reform projects, using *Phong Hóa* to disseminate its message. Seeing the poor production quality of Vietnamese books and the exploitative relationship between publishers and writers, the Group started the Doi Nay publishing house in 1933-1934 (more about this in Chapter 1). The firm aimed to produce beautiful books and support its writers financially, which provides a basis for a national literature. In 1934, the Group helped launch designer Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tuồng’s campaign to reform women’s clothing on the pages of *Phong Hóa* (Chapter 2). These new fashions were designed to teach Vietnamese women modern habits and sensibilities. Observing the ennui among Vietnamese youth, the Group incorporated humor into their newspapers, especially through a cartoon character named Lý Toét (Chapter 3). Beloved by readers, the Lý Toét character became a forum through which they expressed their thoughts and feelings towards modern life.

After the success of *Phong Hóa*, the Group launched another newspaper venture in January 1935 called *Ngày Nay* (These Days). Its mission statement described *Ngày Nay* as: “a journal for our friends living in these days. The purpose of *Ngày Nay* is to inform you clearly about the activities of our people in these times, on all fronts ... to see all the current state of affairs [trạng thái] in our society ... and to recognize life with bright and clear eyes, then happily struggle and fight.”<sup>22</sup> *Ngày Nay* featured an abundance of photographs—indeed, it was one of the earliest forums for photojournalism in Vietnam. Unfortunately, *Ngày Nay* proved too expensive and taxing on the already overworked Group members. The paper went from being a weekly publication to a monthly before closing after only 13 issues.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the early failure of *Ngày Nay*, 1935 proved to be an unlucky year for the Group. On May 30, 1935, it suffered a debilitating setback when government censors closed *Phong Hóa* for three months. The authorities gave the paper no notice or justification for its closure, only an edict revoking the paper’s authorization.<sup>24</sup> Many speculated that *Phong Hóa* had gone too far in criticizing the mandarin, the enforcers of colonial power in the villages.<sup>25</sup> Evidence exists that support these rumors. Archival documents indicate that authorities had started monitoring *Phong Hóa*’s writings on the mandarin since December 1932. By March

---

<sup>22</sup>Announcement in *Ngày Nay* no. 1, 30 Jan 1935, p 2

<sup>23</sup> According to the Group, it lost a few hundred piastres with each issue because the cost of printing photographs was prohibitively high. The Group did not want raise the price, nor did they want to use a cheaper printing service. “Cùng các độc giả *Ngày Nay*” *Phong Hóa* no. 151, 31 Aug 1935, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Amicale des journalistes annamites de Cochinchine. *Le régime de la presse en Indochine*. (Saigon: L'Amicale, 1937), 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> In Cochinchina, the Association of Annamite Journalists noted that, “*Phong Hóa* is perhaps guilty of ridiculing the mores of mandarins, especially the practice of bribery. Unofficial knowledge suggests that the government accused the paper of undermining the prestige and authority of Annamite mandarins, the faithful servants of the French enterprise in Tonkin.” Ibid.

1935, secret bimonthly reports on the indigenous press reveal that *Phong Hóa* was under close surveillance by government censors.<sup>26</sup>

After the three-month closure, the Group tried to recuperate its financial losses and recapture reader enthusiasm. However, *Phong Hóa* seemed to lack the passion of its early years. Perhaps sensing the need for a change, the Group shut down *Phong Hóa* permanently and reinstated *Ngày Nay* less than a year later, on July 12, 1936. Rather than focusing on photojournalism, the new and improved *Ngày Nay* combined both the humor and literature from *Phong Hóa* with the social commentary of its previous incarnation. The paper was divided into two parts; the first focused on literature, and the second commented on social issues. Satire and humor were relegated to a column titled *Vui Cười* [Laughter]. This new format signaled a radical shift in content; the Group was making the logical progression from social commentary to political activism. It was no longer enough for the Group to make fun of Vietnamese society and politics, they now began to make impassioned calls for reform. The emboldened activism of *Ngày Nay* strongly mirrored the new political climate after the May 1936 victory of the French Popular Front. Leon Blum's leftist government created a more relaxed political atmosphere and generated optimism in the colonies. Many Vietnamese hoped that the Front would liberalize colonial policies and enact reforms.

*Ngày Nay* took the Self-Reliant Literary Group into a new era of political activism. The Group's discourse became increasingly political, especially during the French Popular Front period and the resultant Indochinese Congress and Indochinese Democratic Front movements (more about this in Chapter 4-5). During this period, the Group began interacting with outside political organizations, including the Indochinese Communist Party. *Ngày Nay* served as the main organ of information for the League of Light, the public housing philanthropic organization founded by Nhất Linh (Chapter 6). 1940 saw the beginning of the end for the Self-Reliant Literary Group. On September 7, the Petainist government of Admiral Jean Decoux shut down *Ngày Nay*.<sup>27</sup> This effectively ended the newspaper activities of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

Around this time, Nhất Linh left journalism to engage in clandestine anticolonial politics. He founded the Đại Việt Dân Chính Đảng [Greater Vietnamese Authentic People's Party], which was later incorporated into the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.<sup>28</sup> A month later after *Ngày Nay*'s closure, the remaining Group members started a new publication called Chủ Nhật Tuần Báo [Sunday Weekly Journal] that featured literature, an editorial column, and a jokes section. This paper closed down after only 5 issues. In 1945, Nguyễn Tường Bách and some of the younger

---

<sup>26</sup> It was not until 1937 that the French colonial government privately confirmed all the rumors. In a confidential report an unnamed government official wrote, "*Ngày Nay* is the successor of the weekly journal *Phong Hóa*, who had its authorization revoked following a violent campaign against the mandarin corps." "Note Confidentielle sur l'état de la presse au Tonkin," CAOM, Commission Guernut, Carton 33, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ngày Nay* was closed by a government edict, issued September 6, 1940. *Journal officiel de l'Indo-chine française*. (Hanoi: Impr. F.-H. Schneider, 1889), 2479.

<sup>28</sup> Dates differ as to when Nhất Linh left journalism for politics. Francois Guillemot writes that the Dai Viet party was formed in 1938, which implies that Nhất Linh left journalism before then; Hoang Van Dao's book cites 1940. Nhat Thinh gives an even more exact date for Nhất Linh's departure--March 25, 1939. However, this date cannot be independently confirmed. Francois Guillemot, "Vietnamese Nationalist Revolutionaries and the Japanese Occupation: the Case of the Dai Viet Parties (1936-1946)," in Li Narangoa and R. B. Cribb. *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895-1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), 223. Hoàng, Văn Đào, and Huynh Khue. *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang: A Contemporary History of a National Struggle: 1927-1954* (Pittsburgh, PA: Rose Dog Books, 2008), 219. Nhật Thịnh. *Chân dung Nhất-Linh, hay, Thân thế sự nghiệp Nguyễn-Tường-Tam*. ([Glendale, CA]: Đại Nam, 1980), 134.

generation of writers tried to revive *Ngày Nay*, but this venture petered out after 15 issues. Despite the lack of a journalistic organ, the remaining members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, such as Thạch Lam and Khái Hưng, continued to run the *Đời Nay* publishing house until the August Revolution. The revolution brought an end not just to the Group itself, but to the personal friendships between its members. Poets Xuân Diệu, Tú Mỡ, and Thế Lữ joined the Vietnam and ultimately the Communist Party, while Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, and Hoàng Đạo participated in non-Communist nationalist politics. Friends had now become rivals.

### Historiography of the Self-Reliant Literary Group

There is no shortage of secondary sources on the Self-Reliant Literary Group, but research has been dominated by literary criticism focusing on the Group's poetry, short stories, novels and novellas. In addition, the later political career of Nguyễn Tường Tam and his party's rivalry with the Communists has also negatively influenced the historiography of the Group, as Vietnamese communist scholars have neglected or misrepresented the overtly political aspects of its project. Furthermore, scholarship on the Group serves the political interests of the Communist Party, which has downplayed and distorted the Group's reform project to highlight its own. I divide this historiography into three main periods: the interwar years, the post 1945 period, and the post *Đổi Mới* era. I will first assess Vietnamese-language scholarship through these three eras. I will then present a discussion of western language scholarship and discuss how my dissertation contributes to the historiography of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

#### *Interwar Years (1932-1945)*

Initial writings about the Self-Reliant Literary Group coincide with the early development of modern Vietnamese literary criticism. This early scholarship focuses on individual members rather than on the Group as a whole. Most of this literature analyzes a single work or a number of works, then extrapolates generalizations or opinions about the author's literary merit. Three books best exemplify this early scholarship: Trương Chính's 1939 *Dưới Mắt Tôi* [As I See It], Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân's 1942 *Thi Nhân Việt Nam* [Poets of Vietnam], and Vũ Ngọc Phan's 1942-45 *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* [Modern Writers].<sup>29</sup> All three are collections of literary essays about exemplary figures in Vietnamese literature at the time, and all discuss multiple members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

This early scholarship was generally supportive of the Group's novels and poetry and sympathetic to the Group's reform program. Literary critic Trương Chính (not be confused with Trường Chinh, the Communist statesman and architect of DRV cultural policy, different diacritic marks) wrote that Nhất Linh's *Đoạn Tuyệt* hailed a new culture for youth, based on humanist ideologies and personal freedoms.<sup>30</sup> Vũ Ngọc Phan lauded Nhất Linh for

---

<sup>29</sup> Trương Chính. *Dưới mắt tôi: phê-bình văn học Việt-Nam hiện-đại* (Hanoi: [s.n.], 1939); Vũ, Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Hà-nội: Nhà xuất bản Tân dân, 1942); Hoài Thanh, and Hoài Chân *Thi nhân Việt Nam: 1932-1941*. (Hanoi: Nguyễn Đức Phiên, 1943).

<sup>30</sup> Trương Chính, "Dưới Mắt Tôi" abridged and reprinted in Hà Minh Đức. *Tự lực văn đoàn: trào lưu-tác giả : khảo luận và tuyển chọn bài viết về Tự lực văn đoàn* ([Hanoi?]: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2007), 298-299.

trailblazing a new genre, which Phan called the “didactic novel.”<sup>31</sup> This early scholarship is equally praising about the Group’s poetry. Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân described members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group as ushering in a new era of Vietnamese poetry: Thế Lữ in overturning the ages old rules and strict meter, and Xuân Diệu for his experimentation with language.<sup>32</sup> This was a far cry from later descriptions of the Group.

The interwar period also saw the beginnings of Vietnamese communist literary criticism, class-based and ideologically-driven analysis which would dominate scholarship on the Group until the present day.<sup>33</sup> In 1938, the budding Marxist literary critic Trương Tửu launched a critique of the Self-Reliant Literary Group based on a crude form of class analysis. He blasted the Group: “Using a literature full of dreams, fantasy, sentimentality, dissolution and doubt, Tự Lực Văn Đoàn enthusiastically praises base actions and cowardly attitudes of degenerate capitalist youths.”<sup>34</sup> He and his associates at *Ích Hữu* also launched their own manifesto to counteract the Group, calling their new literary philosophy “The Philosophy of Strength” [Triết Lý Sức Mạnh]. Trương Tửu spent the majority of the manifesto attacking the Group and less advancing his own social Darwinist views of the world. He wrote,

This type of sentimental and dissolute literature is the child of the class of wealthy men, born when our country was forced to Europeanize according to the machine of capitalism ... This type of literature praises debauchery, worships materialism, worships dreaminess. This type of literature has a worthy representative: the Self-Reliant literary Group ... For that reason, we denounce the Self-Reliant Literary Group. To denounce the Group is to denounce sentimental and debauched literature that enslaves people to the regression of this decayed class of wealthy men. Denounce this literature and pave the way for the literature of struggle.<sup>35</sup>

For Trương Tửu, the literature of the Self-Reliant Literary Group represented the attitudes and sensibilities of a wealthy capitalist class.

During the interwar period, literary critics had used the term “romantic” or “romanticism” [lãng mạn] to describe the depressing and somber literature of the previous decade.<sup>36</sup> The Self-Reliant Literary Group mercilessly attacked such literature in *Phong Hóa* and advanced its own modernizing novels, poetry and short stories. In particular, Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân used the term to refer to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French aesthetic movement and its

---

<sup>31</sup> Vũ Ngọc Phan, “Nhất Linh (Nguyễn Tường Tam)” reprinted in Hà Minh Đức, *Tự lực văn đoàn*, 274.

<sup>32</sup> Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn Học, 2005), 61, 116-117.

<sup>33</sup> Rather than focusing on the writing, this body of criticism saw literature as an extension of authorial intent, as evidenced by their consideration of an author’s biography and psychology as well as the written works. Such an approach, although seen today as antiquated in modern criticism, is still practiced in some variation in Vietnam.

<sup>34</sup> Trương Tửu, “Đả Đảo Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Ích Hữu* no. 101, 26 Jan 1938, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> “Chung quanh cuộc diễn thuyết ở Nam Định 14-12-1937: Triết Lý Sức Mạnh và Văn Học Đấu Tranh: sự phá hoǎng vô ý thức của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Ích Hữu* no. 96, 22 Dec 1937, p. 1, 3.

<sup>36</sup> The use of the Vietnamese word for “romanticism” or “romance” in this period differs greatly from its use in the post-1945 era. Literary scholars have never really defined the term; even present-day literary scholars continue to use these terms without self-consciousness. Nevertheless, its meaning and usage have changed over time.

influence on 1920s Vietnamese popular literature.<sup>37</sup> Works such as *Tuyết Hồng Lệ Sử*, *Tố Tâm* and *Giọt Lệ Thu* were notorious for their lamenting and dolorous tone. Likewise, Vũ Ngọc Phan thought that Thế Lữ's poetry was anything but romantic, calling the term "antiquated" and "ordinary," and that the poet had passionately captured the transformation in the lives and spirit of Vietnamese.<sup>38</sup> Trương Chính seemed to have agreed with both these descriptions of romanticism. He wrote that Khải Hưng's writing had dispelled a "low form of romanticism currently harming Vietnamese youth."<sup>39</sup> As seen above, interwar literary critics described the Group's writings as the very opposite of romanticism.

### *The First and Second Indochina Wars: Northern and Southern Scholarship*

In 1947, after the failure of his noncommunist nationalist National Union front, Nguyễn Tường Tam resigned his ministerial post in Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary government and fled to China. Soon thereafter, the Vietminh launched a vicious propaganda campaign against Tam, branding him a traitor to the nation. This treatment of Nguyễn Tường Tam inevitably prejudiced future scholarship on the Self-Reliant Literary Group. In his *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, the 1948 speech that will influence Communist party cultural policy for decades to come, Trường Chinh (the Communist statesman) linked the literature of the Group with degeneracy:

Sadness mixed with anger invaded the Vietnamese soul after the reign of terror in 1930-1931. The romantic literature of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn group appeared. The bourgeois class was afraid of political and military confrontation with the imperialists and switched to fighting the feudal mandarin state with cultural weapons, (through the columns of the magazines *Phong Hóa*, *Ngày Nay* and the publications of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn). Romanticism in literature and art complemented the "happiness and youth" movement which was sponsored by the young people, intellectuals and urban bourgeois and conducive to debauchery. In encouraging these tendencies, the French colonialists aimed at leading the masses, especially the young people, astray. They permitted the running of opium-dens and dance-halls in the cities; they promoted the publication of pornography, wild adventure, and mystical books; they revived Buddhism; they encouraged distribution of a great number of books about the catholic religion which specialized in heaping abuse on communism, and they promoted scouting to keep our youth under control.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Trường Chinh set the tone for all future scholarship of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. In the postrevolutionary era, the writings of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were no longer the antidote to romanticism, they were the embodiment of it. Interestingly, a number of non-communist pre-war writers escaped the "romantic" epithet, such as Nguyễn Công Hoan, Vũ Trọng Phụng, Ngô Tất Tố, and Nguyễn Hồng. Rather, they were called "critical realists" [hiện

<sup>37</sup> Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại: phê bình văn học* ([TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Khoa học xã hội, 1989), 695.

<sup>39</sup> Trương Chính, "Dưới Mắt Tôi," in Hà Minh Đức, *Tự lực văn đoàn*, 309.

<sup>40</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, in Trương Chinh. *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1977), 253.

thực phê phán] or “social realists” [hiện thực xã hội]. Thus, in post-1945 discourse, “romanticism” became a pejorative term for any writers who did not join the revolution.<sup>41</sup>

The victory of the Vietminh over the French in 1954 established a vulgar form of Marxism as the dominant paradigm in Vietnamese intellectual life. After the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into two countries, the Communist Party began the process of bureaucratizing its cultural policy through the establishment of state-run research institutes. The Institutes of Literature, History, and other sister organizations were designed to oversee cultural policy and disseminate the official communist party line on various aesthetic and scholarly issues. A number of these party cultural organs were run by none other than former members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group who joined the Viet Minh and later the Communist Party. Xuân Diệu served as editor of the influential party journal *Tạp Chí Văn Nghệ* [Journal of Arts and Letters]. In 1957, Tú Mỡ was elected vice-chairman of the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Arts [Hội Liên Hiệp Văn Học Nghệ Thuật Việt Nam], while Thế Lữ was elected the first chairman of the newly-established Vietnamese Association for Stage Actors [Hội Nghệ Sĩ Sân Khấu Việt Nam].

In the late 1940s to 1950s, these former members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group denounced their activities in the interwar years. Despite his reputation as the most individualistic and romantic poet of the interwar era, Xuân Diệu had transformed into a diehard communist in 1947. He used his talents to write poetry extolling the revolution and Ho Chi Minh: “Whenever the struggle grows fierce, Uncle Ho always comes to visit. As we children listen to his teachings, we want to travel in his path. We children swear a solemn oath: To be resolute in our devotion, to shed our skins from this day forth.”<sup>42</sup> After months of ideological indoctrination, Thế Lữ penned a self-criticism in the journal *Văn Nghệ* (edited by Xuân Diệu) called “The Ropes Binding Me on the Road to Serve the Revolution” [Những sợi dây trói buộc tôi trên bước tôi trên đường phục vụ cách mạng]. In it, he admitted his “wrongdoings” during the colonial era: “The project of the Self-Reliant Literary Group is not only not progressive, but regressive. It did not benefit the people, but sinned against them.”<sup>43</sup> Tú Mỡ, on the other hand, never really disavowed the Group, instead expressing sadness that Nhất Linh never “saw the light” and that any potential collaboration with the Communist party was ruined because of class issues.<sup>44</sup> The reputation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group suffered because its members who joined the Communist Party after 1945 had to prove their political bonafides by denouncing their previous activities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist Party set out to disseminate its own version of literary history. Multi-volume party-sponsored historiographies and anthologies devoted to

<sup>41</sup> In my examinations of the Group’s writings, the Group never used the slogan “Happiness and Youth” to describe themselves. The closest was in 1940, when the Group had used “Vui Ve Hoat Dong” [Happy and Active] to describe the new ethos of *Ngày Nay*. While the Group’s project certainly encouraged youth to cheer up, this new enthusiasm was meant to encourage youth to go out into society and rebuild it. In fact, the Group denounced the same fads and escapism that the Communists did. For example, the Group penned a humorous article on the yo-yo fad, calling it a complete waste of time. This suggests that the “happiness and youth” slogan was used later to mislabel the Group’s project. See “Yo...Yo!” *Phong Hóa* no. 24, 2 December 1932, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 208. The best research on how Xuân Diệu dealt with his interwar career in the post-revolutionary era can be found in Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe, “The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu, 1954-1958,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, no. 2, Summer 2010, p. 1-90.

<sup>43</sup> Thế Lữ, “Những sợi dây trói buộc tôi trên bước tôi trên đường phục vụ cách mạng” *Văn Nghệ* no. 41, July 1953, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Trong Bếp Núc của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Văn Học Tạp Chí*, no. 235, Jan-Feb 1989, p. 81-82.

modern literature began to appear, such as *Văn Học Việt Nam, 1930-1945* [Vietnamese Literature, 1930-1945] by Bạch Năng Thi and Phan Cự Đệ, and *Văn Học Việt Nam Hiện Đại* (1945-1960) [Modern Vietnamese Literature (1945-1960)] by Hoàng Như Mai, and *Tiểu Thuyết Việt Nam Hiện Đại* [Modern Vietnamese Novels] by Phan Cự Đệ. These anthologies advanced a formal periodization of literary history and identified a national literary canon according to party lines. These anthologies cemented the Self-Reliant Literary Group's place in communist historiography as "bourgeois romantics." According to communist scholars, the Group exemplified a depraved bourgeois class, representative of dissolute youth in selfish pursuit of individual happiness while ignoring the plight of the suffering masses. For example, in his critical history on interwar literature, Bạch Năng Thi wrote the following about Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng:

Like in the works of Khải Hưng, the main characters of Nhất Linh are all capitalist youths, or petit bourgeois, the children of mandarins, or landowners. Carousing, debauching, and confused, they spend all their lives searching for happiness and ideals only for themselves... In the end, because of the limitations of their class, the characters in the novels of Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng do not progress far... The substance of these characters is romantic, in the same way that the substance of the works is romantic.<sup>45</sup>

Focusing mostly on the Group's literature, these critics hardly looked at the Group's journalistic writings, thus ignoring the social and political implications of its reform project.

Although considered degenerate in the DRV, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was integrated into secondary and university curricula in the South.<sup>46</sup> In fact, writings of the self-Reliant Literary Group enjoyed a resurgence in the RVN in the 1960s, in part due to Nhất Linh's presence in Saigon. In the 1950s to early 60s, Nhất Linh spent the last years of his life living in Saigon, where he attempted to kickstart his long dormant literary career. In 1952, he founded the Phụng Giang (in keeping with the Group's theme of the phoenix) publishing house, to reissue books written by the Self-Reliant Literary Group and introduce new talent. Nhất Linh also founded the New Self-Reliant Literary Group [Tân Tự Lực Văn Đoàn], to encourage a new generation of writers and keep the Group's project alive. Going back to his journalistic roots, Nhất Linh founded *Văn Hoa Ngày Nay*, a literary magazine intended to showcase the work of both new and veteran writers. Unfortunately, Nhất Linh was no longer in the vanguard of a new youthful movement, but a veteran of the old establishment. The publication shut down after only 11 issues. As the literary journal *Sáng Tạo* boldly announced, the era of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was over. 1960s Saigon was a radically different time than 1930s Hanoi, with distinct preoccupations, all set against the backdrop of a protracted civil war.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Bạch Năng Thi, "Nhất Linh: Tác Gia Tiêu Biểu" in Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn trong tiến trình văn học dân tộc*. (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa - thông tin, 2000), 211-212.

<sup>46</sup> The writings of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were included in the literature exams of the high school level. Copies of luận đề or "topic" books written by literature professors, used by high school students to study for exams (similar to Cliff's notes or Sparknotes), still abound in Ho Chi Minh City used bookstores.

<sup>47</sup> The Group's popularity in the South could also be attributed to the fact that the South was undergoing a similar nation and state building process after 1954. In many ways, 1950's and 60s Saigon resembled 1930s Hanoi in that the same urgency to identify a national identity. For the South, it was vis-à-vis the communist party, and the Group's ideology and project provided a counterbalance to the northern collectivist rhetoric. But this is a whole other project in itself.



Literary historian, critic and university professor Thanh Lãng (pen name of Nguyễn Đình Xuân) perhaps has shaped the Southern historiography of the Self-Reliant Literary Group more than any scholar. A Roman Catholic priest and personal friend of Nhất Linh, Thanh Lãng penned a history of interwar literature that provides an interesting counternarrative to Northern Communist accounts. He also wrote extensively on the Group and its intellectual milieu as well as anthologized much of *Phong Hóa*'s content. His scholarship on the interwar years eschewed class analysis, choosing instead to provide richer contextualization of the literary works. With regards to the Group, Thanh Lãng identified the Group as the vanguard of a new generation, which he calls the "Generation of 1932." Rather than seeing the Group as degenerate, he described the Group's project as "progressive." A case in point: According to Northern scholars, the failed Yên Bái uprising and Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh movements and subsequent political crackdown by the colonial government had created a sense of ennui among Vietnamese youth. The Self-Reliant Literary Group, as the most representative intellectual group of the period, embodied the escapism of this period. Thanh Lãng, on the other hand, had a different interpretation: "Because they lacked the organization, these uprisings were brutally put down. Even so, they had created a strong emotional reaction amongst the people... All of these political events not only awoke a sense of nationalism, but also shaped the aspirations and actions of an entire generation: a new and young generation." For Thanh Lãng, the Group's progressive project was also the product of the failed uprisings, except that rather than suffer ennui and confusion, the Group's generation developed a nationalist consciousness.<sup>48</sup> However, Thanh Lãng only discussed the Group's nationalism in regards to their literature and still misses one large piece of the Group's project: its political program.

### *Post Đổi Mới to Present*

Officially recognizing the failures of collectivization, the Communist Party embraced economic liberalization in 1986. Resembling *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in the Soviet Union, Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] policies dismantled the command economy and replaced it with a market economy, as well as allowing foreign direct investment, international commerce and development aid. It also loosened some of its cultural policies, including allowing Vietnamese to worship more freely and increased freedom for intellectuals. In the relaxed and more open economic and political atmosphere, literary scholars began to reevaluate previously banned writings and shunned figures, including the Self-Reliant Literary Group. This new scholarship is characterized by three key features: greater praise of the Group's literary talent, acknowledgment (albeit brief) of its social project, and a reframing of "bourgeois romanticism" as a product of its time.

A conference held in Hanoi on May 27, 1989 signaled the official rehabilitation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Hosted by the University of Hanoi and the University Publishing House, two government organs, the conference convened Vietnam's literary critics and scholars to reevaluate and reinterpret the Group's writings. Scholars now felt emboldened to praise the Group's journalistic and literary talent, all while still disparaging the politics of some of its members. Surprisingly, some even described the Group as being

---

<sup>48</sup> Thanh Lãng, *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*. ([Saigon?]: Phong Trào Văn Hóa, 1972), 2.

patriotic. As Huy Cận, former collaborator with the Group and lifelong companion of Xuân Diệu, said in the conference's keynote speech:

Enough time has passed that we can now reassess the Self-Reliant Literary Group. One could say that the Group has made a large contribution to the literary history of Vietnam. They had ambitions towards a national culture. They had the means but did not like the road to prestige and wealth, and chose literature instead. What was worth criticizing about Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng is the latter period of their lives. But we should not let that affect our judgment. At first, they truly loved their country, but chose the wrong path and ultimately became counterrevolutionaries. The Self-Reliant Literary Group had made an enormous contribution to the art of the novel, to the modernity of the novel, and to the voice and language of the people through their use of clear language that embodied the Vietnamese...<sup>49</sup>

Scholars were now willing to separate the Group's writings from its later political activities, rather than considering its literature a reflection of its counterrevolutionary politics. Other literary critics seemed to have softened towards the Group. Rather than condemning the Group without question, they now excuse the Group's "bourgeois romanticism" as being a product of its time. As Trương Chính wrote:

One could say that in its eight years, from 1932 to 1940, the Self-Strength Literary Group have carved for themselves a high status; their publications are the most beautifully printed, sold out the fastest, and had the most influence among bourgeois and petit-bourgeois urban intellectuals. No one can deny that at the head was Nhất Linh, or Nguyễn Tường Tam, who was already a talented writer, but also had the organizational mind, with many ideas: all those who despised him had to respect him as well, wanting to imitate him but cannot. Say what you want, but his Self-Strength Literary Group played a large role in the development of our national literature in the 1930's.<sup>50</sup>

Now, communist literary historians have reinterpreted the Group's literature and reforms as a transitional stage in the historical teleology of Communism.

Once rehabilitated, the Group was incorporated into the Communist canon. Although they now offered new interpretations of the Group's work and project, scholars still could not look beyond the "bourgeois" or "romantic" labels that held sway for decades. For example, Phan Cự Đệ offered this new periodization of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's career:

- 1932-1934: Wrote romantic novels [*Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên*, *Gánh Hàng Hoa*] and progressive romantic works [tác phẩm lãng mạn tiên bộ] that fought for the right of the individual and were critical of the feudal family such as *Nửa Chừng Xuân*, *Đoạn Tuyệt*.

---

<sup>49</sup> Huy Cận was rumored to be Xuân Diệu's lover, their relationship often likened to that of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. "Hội thảo về văn chương Tự Lực Văn Đoàn" in Hà, Minh Đức. *Tự lực văn đoàn*, 208-209.

<sup>50</sup> Trương Chính, "Tự Lực Văn Đoàn." in Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn trong tiến trình văn học dân tộc* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa - thông tin, 2000), 30.

- 1935-1939: Continued its critique of traditions and the feudal family continued with *Lạnh Lùng*, *Thoát Ly*, *Thừa Tự*, but new trends also appeared. Developed a tendency towards populism with sympathy towards the peasantry as seen in such as *Gió Đầu Mùa* and *Con Trâu*. Campaigned to reform the peasantry with its League of Light and with such novels as *Những Ngày Vui*, *Gia Đình*, *Con Đường Sáng*. Wrote novels that idealized of the figure of the “wandering warrior,” a person compelled to leave his family and a home for an ideal, seen in novels such as in *Tiểu Sơn Tráng Sĩ*, *Thế Rồi Một Buổi Chiều*, *Đôi Bạn*.
- 1939-1945: the decline period of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Produced novels of Realism, such as *Bướm Trắng* and *Đẹp*.<sup>51</sup>

Phan Cự Đệ’s crude periodization suffers from two shortcomings. First, it focuses only on the literature produced by the Self-Reliant Literary Group and ignores their newspaper writings and publishing activities. Second, it only briefly touched on the reform activities of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. In the following chapters, I will posit my own periodization of the career of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, one that accounts for not only the ruptures in the Group’s project, but also the continuities. One of the arguments of this dissertation is that Communist mislabeling of the Group as “bourgeois romantic reformers” was in part an attempt to mask the Group’s overtly political elements and the similarities between their two social projects.

This newfound interest in the Self-Reliant Literary Group and their writings has generated a flurry of publications and new interpretations. In the 1990s, party-run publishing houses issued three different multi-volume anthologies of the Group’s literary works, not to mention numerous collections on individual members.<sup>52</sup> Around the same time, Vu Gia (real name of journalist Trần Phúc) wrote a series of scholarly works focusing on each of the Group members.<sup>53</sup> Vu Gia’s work acknowledges and attempts to look at the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s social and cultural reform projects, such as the Đồi Nây publishing house or the League of Light. He even takes on some of the old guard scholars of the Group, such as Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Minh Đức, and Bạch Năng Thi. Encyclopedic in some instances and too cursory in others, the series highlights the new directions taken by scholars. In the mid 2000s, the Arts and Letters Publishing House of Ho Chi Minh City [Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ TP Hồ Chí Minh] republished the Group’s novels as brightly colored, inexpensive pocket paperbacks. However, even this newfound interest and scholarship could not move past the entrenched stereotyped descriptions of the Group as “romantics” or “bourgeois,” nor can it move beyond the class and ideologically driven Marxist analysis.

---

<sup>51</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, “Tự Lực Văn Đoàn,” in *Tự lực văn đoàn: con người và văn chương* (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1990), 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> Phan Trọng Thương, and Cù Nguyễn. *Văn chương Tự lực văn đoàn*. ([Hà Nội]: Giáo dục, 1999), 3 vols; Nguyễn, Phan Hách, and Vu Phong. *Tuyển tập Tự lực văn đoàn*. (Hà Nội: Hội nhà văn, 1999), 3 vols; Nguyễn Hoành Khung. *Văn xuôi lãng mạn Việt Nam: 1930-1945* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 1989); Mai Hương. *Nhất Linh, cây bút trụ cột của Tự lực văn đoàn* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000); Phương Ngân. *Khái Hưng, nhà tiểu thuyết xuất sắc của Tự lực văn đoàn* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Vu Gia. *Khái Hưng, nhà tiểu thuyết* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1993); Thạch Lam, *thân thế và sự nghiệp* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1994); *Nhất Linh trong tiến trình hiện đại hóa văn học* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1995); *Hoàng-Đạo, nhà báo, nhà văn* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1997); *Trần Tiêu: nhà văn độc đáo của Tự lực văn đoàn* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2006); *Thế Lữ, một khách tình si* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2009).

*Western Language Scholarship on Self-Reliant Literary Group*

Western language scholarship on the Group remains small, and usually takes the form of shorter descriptions of its general project and/or literature. This historiography of the Group is characterized by three key features: it reflects the Communist scholarship by repeating entrenched stereotypes of the Group, ignores the political aspects of the Group's project, and does not adequately examine the period of 1930s in its own right.

First, western language historiography of the Group echo (in varying degrees) the same biases as the Communist secondary literature, especially the characterization of the Group as "bourgeois romantics." Some scholars accept Communist characterizations of the Group almost completely. For example, Huỳnh Kim Khánh, in his seminal book on Vietnamese Communism, might as well have repeated Trường Chinh verbatim when he wrote:

Meanwhile, the urban youth showed decreasing interest in politics of any kind. Disillusioned and directionless, they found their mental anesthetics in the romantic novels of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (Self-Initiative Literary Group) or in the "healthy entertainment" allowed by the government, available at the dancing halls and opium dens.<sup>54</sup>

Other western language scholars use the "bourgeois romantic" epithet to describe the Group without any attempt to define or analyze it. As Van Nguyen-Marshall wrote, the Group espoused a "romantic perception of rural poverty:"

Feelings of guilt pervade the Self-Reliance Group's stories on poverty, guilt felt by children of the rich when confronted with the miseries of their compatriots... Without a doubt, members of the Group were educated urbanites of the privileged class with the dominant members, such as Nhất Linh (and his brothers) and Khải Hưng, coming from families with mandarin roots.<sup>55</sup>

Such scholarship merely repeats longstanding communist stereotypes, thus illustrating the pervasiveness of these labels in the historiography.

Second, most western-language scholars neglect the political implications of the Group's literary and social project, as well as its overt nationalism. Although sympathetic to the Group, Neil Jamieson still portrayed its project as predominantly cultural and expressed in its literature. His *Understanding Vietnam* features long translated passages from some of the Group's most celebrated novels. But he downplays the journalism, thereby missing much of the Group's political writings. In fact, he dismisses *Ngày Nay* entirely, writing that "*This Day* reappeared. Over the next three years it published some fine essays, fiction, and poetry, but the elan of the early years of *Mores* was gone. Neither Tam nor his many competitors could recapture the enthusiasm of those days."<sup>56</sup> Despite being more favorable to the Group, Jamieson neglects the

---

<sup>54</sup> Huỳnh, Kim Khánh. *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, by Cornell University Press, 1982), 162.

<sup>55</sup> Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 101-102.

<sup>56</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 158.

a large and important part of the Group's history as conveyed in *Ngày Nay*, its main organ of political reform and activism.

In contrast, some western-language scholars acknowledge the political nature of the Group's reforms. Greg Lockhart gave the Group's cultural project a political spin, calling *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* instruments of a "cultural nationalism." He argued that the Group's attack on the institution of the mandarin was an "oblique attack on French colonialism."<sup>57</sup> James Banerian also recognized the nationalist focus of the Group's reforms in the introduction to his *Vietnamese Short Stories*. Banerian wrote:

In Vietnam, the TLVD promoted modernization and social reform to replace the customs and traditions of precolonial Vietnam which these writers felt were standing in the way of their country's development. At the same time, these modernists paid tribute to Vietnamese national and cultural identity through their descriptive writings... The early modernists were also ardent nationalists who sought to protect their country's integrity and assist in leading Vietnam to independence from colonial rule. Sometimes starkly realistic, other times vague and romantic, their stories and articles gave the readers a promise of a better future for all their people. Some of the writers were directly involved in revolutionary political activity and their works reflected nationalist goals.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, Banerian does not elaborate what these nationalist goals were. In addition, his use of the term "modernist" wrongly implies support for modernization. Likewise, Lockhart's brief description of the Group's "cultural nationalism" does not adequately capture the comprehensive and openly political nature of its reforms. As I will demonstrate, the Self-Reliant Literary Group's modernism and nationalism were much more nuanced and complex, representative of a particular climate of opinion and thought that defined its generation.

Finally, there is a tendency on the part of western-language historians to generalize the period of the 1930s in order to arrive at the August Revolution. David Marr, in his seminal *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, describes Vietnam has having three generations of intellectuals since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first generation is the literati scholar gentry [*sĩ phu*], whose influence lasted until the end of World War I. Members of this generation were educated in the Confucian classics, but realized their deficiency in the face of western power. The second generation, which he called the intelligentsia [*giới trí thức*] emerged during the 1920s. They faced the same problems as the scholar gentry, but were the product of the colonial system.<sup>59</sup> Educated in French and Vietnamese, this generation "understood the neo-confucian classics only vaguely but were impatient to digest two millennia of European learning in a matter of a few years." The third generation was that of the "educated cadre," that is, the Communist Party, made up of mass-oriented intellectuals.<sup>60</sup>

This dissertation complicates Marr's periodization of intellectual generations, which, while helpful, runs the real risk of oversimplification. For example, it is odd that Marr would lump such disparate intellectuals as Phạm Quỳnh and the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group within the same generation. I maintain that the various entities that make up this intelligentsia must be examined rigorously and systematically before drawing any

---

<sup>57</sup> Greg Lockhart, "Broken Journey: Nhật Linh's 'Going to France'" *East Asian History* 8, (1994), 76-77.

<sup>58</sup> James Banerian. *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction* (Phoenix: Sphinx, 1986), 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 8-9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

generalizations. The Self-Reliant Literary Group and its contemporaries certainly saw themselves as part of a new generation, and defined their respective projects in reaction to the intellectuals of the 1920s. I agree with Thanh Lăng, who called the generation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group “the Generation of 1932” [Thế Hệ 1932]. Other scholars, including Alexander Woodside and Neil Jamieson, also make a case for the importance of 1932 as a watershed year.<sup>61</sup> This dissertation aims to highlight the 1930s not as a transition before the revolution, but as complex and decisive period of Vietnamese history in its own right—one during which intellectuals made social, cultural and political decisions that helped forge national destinies.

## Sources

The most important primary sources for my dissertation are *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*, which spanned the years 1932-1940 and comprised 189 and 240 issues respectively. In addition to the Group’s journals, I examine other colonial newspapers of the era. I have consulted over 75 distinct titles currently held in the national libraries in Vietnam and France. Competing newspapers, such as Vu Dinh Long’s *Ích Hữu* and the Communist weekly *Tân Xã Hội*, often engaged in bitter debates with *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. Such exchanges enrich my analysis by illustrating not only how the Group’s reform ideas were received, but also rivalries and clashes of ego that shaped the intellectual community.

I have also collected the published literary works of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, consisting of novels, short stories, children’s books, plays, and poetry compilations. Comprising 91 titles in total, these books were mostly published by the Group’s *Đời Nay* publishing house. From these findings, I compiled a master list of all the Group’s publications (see Appendix B) which has provided valuable information on its publishing history. Using this data, I was able to chart the trajectory of the Group’s book output, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1.

In addition, memoirs of the period provide insight and context not available in the newspapers. Of the Self-Reliant Literary Group members, only Tú Mỡ, Nhật Linh, and Thế Lữ left memoirs, albeit very short ones. I also use memoirs written by their family members, collaborators, and other writers of the period. Nguyễn Thị Thế, the younger sister of Nhật Linh, Hoàng Đạo, and Thạch Lam, wrote a memoir chronicling the story of the Nguyễn Tường family. The youngest brother, Nguyễn Tường Bách, a physician who later collaborated on *Ngày Nay* and who was a political activist in his own right, wrote two memoirs about his career which recounted his activities with the Group, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua* [Vietnam in the Past Century], *Việt Nam Những Ngày Lịch Sử* [Vietnam’s Historical Days]. Song Kim, famed actress and second wife of Thế Lữ, wrote a memoir about their artistic life together titled *Cuộc Đời Sân Khấu của Chúng Tôi* [Our life on the Stage]. Descendants of Group members also wrote memoirs, including Trần Khánh Triệu (Nhật Linh’s son adopted by the childless Khái Hưng), Nguyễn Tường Thiết (Son of Nhật Linh), and Thế Uyên (Nguyễn Thị Thế’s son).<sup>62</sup> Memoirs written by other writers from the

---

<sup>61</sup> Although *Phong Hóa* was but one of 155 newspapers in Indochina in 1932, its debut marked the beginning of what Alexander Woodside calls “the true golden age of journalism” in Vietnam. Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 80. and Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 102-103.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyễn, Thị Thế. *Hồi ký về gia đình Nguyễn Tường: Nhật Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam* (Saigon: Sóng, 1974.); Song Kim. *Cuộc đời sân khấu của chúng tôi* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1983.); Nguyễn, Tường Bách. *Việt-Nam những ngày lịch sử* ([Montréal]: Nhóm nghiên-cứu sử-địa Việt-Nam, 1981.); Nguyễn, Tường Bách. *Việt-Nam một*

period have also proved useful in illuminating the rivalries, work environment and conditions of other intellectuals outside the Group. These included memoirs written by Nguyễn Công Hoan, Vũ Hoàng Chương, and Vũ Bằng.<sup>63</sup>

At the National Archives in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, I supplemented my research with police reports on individual Group members, censorship records, and other documents. At the Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer in Aix-en Provence, I found government reports, correspondence and pamphlets that would allow me to situate the intellectual milieu in a larger political and social context.

Along with primary materials, I have collected over 200 secondary sources related to my topic, consisting of dissertations, biographies, and literary criticism. These sources span the interwar years to the present, and cover all regions of Vietnam. I make particular use of post-1945 newspapers, as these provide important information on the historiography of the Group in the decades after 1945.

### Methodology and Theoretical considerations

My methods entail a close reading of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* to clearly define the nature of the Group's reform programs. I read both papers as a complete body of discourse, and look for patterns in the discourse—particular themes that arise, when they change, and when notable events occur in the history of the Group. I supplement my readings of the journals with outside sources when necessary, but the main goal is to outline the Group's social and economic project from the Group's own perspective.

I describe their project as “colonial modernism,” a term that must be defined and theorized. I use “modernity” to refer to the massive transformations in social life which emerged in post-feudal Europe by the advent of the capitalist industrial market, which became increasingly worldwide in its impact. This includes objective institutions and social forms such as the nation state to bureaucracies, to ideologies such as rationality and belief in progress. “Modernity” also encompasses subjective transformations in human experiences—for instance, ideas of individualism and concepts of the self—that emerged as a result of this new world order. “Modernization” refers to the process which a “traditional” agrarian society goes through industrialization, urbanization and other social, economic and cultural transformations that changed the lives of individuals. As described above, the forces of modernity were brought to Vietnam by French colonialism.

The term “modernism,” much less its colonial variant, is trickier to define. In his oft-cited review of Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Perry Anderson described one of the fundamental dilemmas in the study of modernism—the difficulty of defining it. Calling modernism “the emptiest of all cultural categories,” Anderson lamented that whatever was considered modern soon became obsolete. As a result, modernism lacked a sense of formal cohesion that rendered the term futile and vitiated.<sup>64</sup> If modernism as an aesthetic movement

---

*thế kỷ qua: hồi ký.* (California: Thạch Ngu, 1998.); Nguyễn, Tường Thiết. *Nhật Linh cha tôi: hồi ký* ([Gardena, CA]: Nhà xuất bản Văn Mới, 2006.)

<sup>63</sup> Vũ Hoàng Chương. *Ta đã làm chi đời ta: hồi ký.* ([Hà Nội?]: Hội nhà văn, 1993.); Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi: Hồi ký.* (Hà Nội: Nxb Hội nhà văn, 1994.); Vũ, Bằng. *Bốn mươi năm nói láo.* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993.)

<sup>64</sup> Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 144, March-April 1984, p. 112-113.

lacked formal or definitional cohesion, did its adherents have any essential characteristics that identify them as such? According to Peter Gay, modernists of all kinds espoused two defining attitudes: “first, the lure of heresy that impelled their actions as they confronted conventional sensibilities, and second, a commitment to a principled self-scrutiny.” For Gay, modernists were iconoclasts at their very core: “they and their allies drew satisfaction not only in having taken a new, an untried, a revolutionary path—their own—but also in the sheer act of successful insubordination against ruling authority.”<sup>65</sup>

The Self-Reliant Literary Group reveled in their rebellion against established conventions and traditions, and proudly proclaimed it in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. Aesthetically, the Self-Reliant Literary Group trailblazed new forms of literature. New poets such as Xuân Diệu and Thế Lữ departed from traditional verse forms and subject matter as they pushed the expressive boundaries of language. Secondly, both the Group’s projects are deeply reflective in nature. It is no coincidence, that with the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the Vietnamese novel found its most powerful expression. Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng, began to investigate the innermost thoughts and emotions of their characters as no other writers had done before. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group looked within themselves as individuals and as a society, identifying their own flaws and prescribing reforms to correct them. Scholars, even nationalist Marxists critical of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, would point to the Group’s goal of dismantling the vise of traditional institutions such as the family and Confucianism. What they refused to admit was the revolutionary or political nature of such iconoclasm. As Thanh Lăng described the intellectual climate: “The collective psychology of the interwar writers was a suspicion of all traditional values, all foundations of society, all regimes of politics: their tendency was to reestablish everything, to start with the premise that man was an animal.”<sup>66</sup>

In Peter Gay’s description of Europe, this sense of belonging to a new and distinct generation paved the way for the emergence of modernism, and Vietnam was no different. In Europe, an acute sense of generation gap was created by the First World War, in which an entire generation was perceived to have died in the trenches. In Vietnam, the Great War had a much different, albeit equally dramatic, effect. The end of the war gave rise to new colonial policies especially in the area of comprehensive education. In 1918, the last of Chinese-language mandarin examinations were held in Vietnam, and the French authorities established the University of Hanoi. At the secondary and primary levels, the colonial government instituted a new Code of Public Instruction that emphasized “Franco-Vietnamese education” and western curriculum.<sup>67</sup> Within a generation, Chinese ceased being the language of intellectual exchange, replaced by French and *quốc ngữ*. This linguistic disconnect created a complete shift in paradigm and worldview between the old generation of Confucian literati and the new urban intelligentsia. Born in the decade that straddled the turn of the century, the generation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was the first to be educated solely in this new system. These new urban intellectuals were more familiar with French poets like Baudelaire and Verlaine than they were with Tang 8-legged poetry. Thus, the perception of a generation gap in Vietnam, although different than in Europe, was no less palpable.

How did these modernist artists and intellectuals in Europe and Vietnam understand their own newness, and how did they construct their identity vis-à-vis their predecessors and

---

<sup>65</sup> Peter Gay. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy: from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 3- 4.

<sup>66</sup> Thanh Lăng. *Phê bình*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 149.



contemporaries? Some common methods included outlining a clear aesthetic agenda through reviews, essays, pen wars, but perhaps the most iconic was the issuing of artist manifestos. Associated with the most radical of avant-garde modernist movements in Europe such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, manifestos are, as Dadaist Tristan Tzara wrote, “a communication made to the whole world, whose only pretension is to the discovery of an instant cure for political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agronomical and literary syphilis. It may be pleasant, and good-natured, it's always right, it's strong, vigorous and logical.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, manifestos are deeply iconoclastic statements of the modernist agenda. The members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were conscious of their unique position as a new intellectual generation, and their boldly-worded manifesto in *Phong Hóa* (discussed above) can be seen as an attempt to establish itself as the vanguard of this new generation. The Group had a penchant for bold mission statements, and published them for all of their ventures, including their publishing business and the League of Light. In September 1936, Hoàng Đạo famously issued a manifesto titled *Ten Things to Internalize* [Mười Điều Tâm Niệm]. Intended to serve as guide for Vietnamese youth, the manifesto called for them to

1. Modernize completely, without any hesitation.
2. Believe in progress, that things can improve.
3. Live according to ideals
4. Work for the benefit of society
5. Train your character
6. Encourage women to go into the world
7. Acquire a scientific mind
8. Value real achievement, not recognition
9. Exercise and strengthen your body
10. Organize your work systematically<sup>69</sup>

The Group’s manifestos were a sign that it wanted to break with conventions and with the past; they were documents that established points-of-no-return and fashioned the future.

Along with the similarities, colonial modernism in Vietnam also diverged from its European counterparts in three significant ways. First was the scope of their reforms. The modernist movement in Europe was far-flung and fragmented; groups of artists and writers specialized in specific aesthetic forms or fields, such as prose, architecture, painting, or poetry. In contrast, one group alone attempted ambitious reforms in architecture, fashion, publishing, and literature in Vietnam. By comparison, the Self-Reliant Literary Group seemed less specialized, and some would argue, more amateurish.

A second difference lies in the views of modernism towards capitalism and bourgeois society. While their European counterparts scorned bourgeois society and criticized the impersonality of market economics, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was less ambivalent about

---

<sup>68</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Seven Dada Manifestoes,” in Robert Motherwell and Jean Arp. *Dada: The Dada Painters and Poets : an Anthology* (Boston, Mass: Hall, 1981), 86.

<sup>69</sup> The series began in *Ngày Nay* no. 25, 13 Sep 1936 and lasted until December. It is important to draw a distinction here between the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s mission statement and Hoàng Đạo’s later *Ten Things to Bear in Mind*. Several accounts of the Group have conflated the two and described Hoàng Đạo’s *Ten Things to Bear in Mind* as the Group’s mission statement, including Hue Tam Ho Tai’s *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* and Peter Zinoman’s introductory essay to *Dumb Luck*.

capitalism. Economic development had important implications for Vietnamese national autonomy and the ability to stand as equals to western countries. The Group believed that Vietnam had much to gain from capitalism. They were, however, also aware that capitalism also had its excesses, and sought to ameliorate them while reaping the benefits of a strong and innovative economy. As this dissertation will explore, the Group espoused the politics of the center left, which believed in taming the capitalist system and its inherent inequalities.

The third and perhaps most significant difference was movements' attitude towards the nation. For many European modernists, the nation and patriotism were linked to bourgeois sensibility. In comparison to its European counterpart, national identity and nationhood was a core concern of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The relationship between the emergence of the periodical press and the rise of the nation-state has been well-examined by scholars such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and especially Benedict Anderson. In his *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argued that the readers of newspaper form the same kind of community as citizens of a nation. The reading of newspapers constituted a daily ritual, and although each person reads his or her own copy of a periodical

in silent privacy... each communicant is aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.<sup>70</sup>

These individual readers come to think of themselves as part of a larger community that employs a conceptual grammar and espouses the same values expressed in their newspaper of choice. In other words, the newspaper allowed Hanoians and Saigonese living 700 miles apart to imagine one another buying, reading, and ultimately sharing the news of the day in vernacular Vietnamese. As a result, the periodical press both reflects and actively participates in the construction of a modern national identity. For this reason, *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* are particularly interesting case studies. The papers enthusiastically and intentionally promoted a sense of national community between intellectuals, writers, publishers, and readers to find a collective voice that was distinctively Vietnamese.

### **Contributions to Existing Scholarship**

The significance of this dissertation is twofold. First, it is the first accurate and exhaustively-sourced depiction of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's social and political project as expressed in their journalism. Despite the Group's influence on Vietnamese cultural and intellectual life, few scholars have directly engaged with its journalistic writings. Rather, these scholars choose to pay lip service to the Group's intellectual legacy without seriously considering its cultural and political context. I argue against the reigning historical stereotypes that cast the Group as "bourgeois romantics" who lacked a cultural and political vision for Vietnam. Second, my dissertation calls for a substantial revision of the teleological narrative of the Communist Party that still dominates scholarship on Vietnam. While both Vietnamese and western-language historiography depicts the ultimate victory of Marxism-Leninism implicitly as

---

<sup>70</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 2006), 35-36.

a foregone conclusion, reducing the importance of alternatives, I show how Communism was but one of many rival ideologies vying to define Vietnamese national identity. I show how the Group's vision for a modern Vietnam included not only political definitions of Vietnamese identity, but also far-reaching, long-term cultural and social plans. Although these concrete plans never materialized, the intellectual legacy of the Self-Reliant Literary Group has been profound.

This study will rely on much of the literary criticism and other publications produced during this period. In an effort to rehabilitate the voices of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, I place my project in contrast to those in English and French secondary sources, works pioneered by scholars such as David Marr, Hue Tam Ho-Tai, Peter Zinoman, Greg Lockhart and Neil Jamieson. In this historiography, treatment of the Group remains cursory and static; I intend to contribute to these important works by introducing a more nuanced analysis of the Group. I will expand the scope of inquiry from the Groups' literary works to encompass their larger body of journalistic writing, to redefine and more comprehensively describe their project and ideology. Despite the lip service paid to the Self-Reliant Literary Group for its modernization of Vietnamese literature and language, no scholar has ever attempted a comprehensive analysis of this contribution, much less their entire social project.

### **Dissertation Structure**

The dissertation is divided into two parts corresponding to two eras of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's activities, each comprising three roughly chronological thematic body chapters. Part I deals with the period of 1932-1936, during which the Group was mainly preoccupied with its satirical newspaper *Phong Hóa* and its literary, social, and cultural reforms. Chapter 1 examines the Group's literary activities and the history of its publishing organ, the *Đời Nay* Publishing House. It argues that the Group's commercial ventures had roots in its reform program. In its firm, the Group sought to reconcile the often opposed commercial and cultural aims of the publishing industry, combining both profitable and humane business practices without sacrificing literary quality. Chapter 2 describes the Group's reform of women's clothing and how subsequent debates in the press on fashion revealed Vietnamese anxieties on modernity. The Group believed that the dynamism inherent in capitalism, the hallmark of modern life, can help transform the lives of Vietnamese women for the better. Chapter 3 explores the nature of humor in the Group's journals and argues that this humor did not merely serve as an instrument toward social reform, but that it involved an entirely new way of being and seeing that was thoroughly modern.

Part II focuses on the period of 1936-1941, the Group's most politically active years. Chapter 4 lays out the Group's political leanings and argues that the Group's aims were to achieve republican ideals through the politics of the center left. The Group believed that the new modern Vietnam should be built on the foundation of the rule of law, democracy and personal freedoms, and campaigned for these reforms. Chapter 5 examines the Group's political activities from 1936-1940 and describes the politics of the period as being marked by ideological fluidity and lack of dogmatism. Chapter 6 looks at the history of the League of Light, an organization founded by the Group in collaboration with well-known Hanoi architects to combat unsanitary housing in urban and rural areas. The chapter shows how the League's founders aspired to shape a cohesive social moral order through the regulation of everyday life. By examining the diverse social, cultural and political project of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, a new narrative of

colonial Vietnam emerges, one that moves beyond dominant teleologies and highlights aspects that has been missing from accounts of the period—historical contingency and possibilities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

I have fantasized for a long time about writing my acknowledgments--sometimes I thought more about them than I did the dissertation! Now that the moment has come, however, I don't really know what to say that would adequately express my gratitude for all those who have supported me. This dissertation has been a long time coming and is the most difficult and rewarding academic challenges I have ever faced. It takes a village to raise a child, the saying goes, and a dissertation is no different. I simply could not have done this without the help, love and support of my own village—my professors, colleagues, friends and family.

I owe an incredible intellectual debt to my advisor Peter Zinoman, who took a chance on a clueless but curious undergrad with a mediocre GPA and an almost nonexistent academic resume. His grounded and empirical approach often brought me “back down to earth” when I was carried away by flights of linguistic or theoretical fancy. His patience, constructive (and often blunt) criticism and willingness to line-edit have helped me become a better writer, thinker and historian. I could not have made it without him.

Many, many thanks also go to my other committee members, Tyler Stovall and Jeffrey Hadler. In his 285 class, Tyler first encouraged me to explore cartoons featuring a country bumpkin named Lý Tóet, which later became a chapter of this dissertation. In his seminar on Southeast Asian history, Jeff introduced us to some of the best books in the field, as well as regaled us with juicy stories about their authors. I will always remember fondly the late professors Reggie Zelnik and Susanna Barrows, whose European history seminars got me thinking about larger intellectual connections between Vietnam, 19<sup>th</sup> century France, and Communist Russia. Professor Carla Hesse found funding somewhere in the History Department budget so that a first-year grad student can go to France for the summer. Without that trip, I would have never found my dissertation topic. Likewise, Cô Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm's class on modern Vietnamese literature introduced me to the writings of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and their aesthetic project. With such supportive and passionate faculty, Berkeley will always be my intellectual home.

My friends and cohort at UC Berkeley have been the best academic community I could have wished for. I will always cherish the sense of camaraderie and memories in the History Department. Shout outs go to Nicole Eaton, Amy Lippert, Jennifer Nam, Amanda Clark, Sabrina Rahman, Leslie Woodhouse, Teddy Varno, Dylan Esson, Candace Chen, Mark Sawchuk, Kevin “the General” Adams, Cheongsoon Gan, Matt and Amelia Sargent, Navin Moul, Sokhieng Au, Trang Cao, Mary Panelo, and Richard Tran. I also want to thank colleagues in Vietnam and Southeast Asian studies: Erich DeWald, Alex Cannon, Brad Davis, Charles Keith, Ivan Small, and Jolynna Sinanan. I would have been completely lost without

organizational mavens Mabel Lee and Barbara Hayashida, who helped me navigate the labyrinthine UC bureaucracy. Towards the end, Sabrina Rahman and Nicole Eaton gave me the encouragement and push I needed to finish.

In Vietnam, the staff in the Periodicals room at the Vietnam National Library (especially Chi Yên and Anh Dũng) was incredibly helpful and accommodating towards a Việt Kiều scholar who wanted to poke around their colonial collections. My thanks also go to my friends and family in Vietnam: my late aunt Nguyễn Thị Lan and family, my uncle Nguyễn Minh Thiện and family, and Anh Nguyễn Đức Tăng. I also thank the son of Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Bác Nguyễn Trọng Hiền and the daughter of Thế Lữ, Bác Phạm Thảo Nguyên, who befriended me and shared their private family archives.

In Europe, I cannot forget the help and friendship of Pascal Bourdeaux, Agathe Goscha, Mary and Keith Weller, Antonia Staats, Ann Pettifor and Jeremy Smith, Larissa Archer, the Worcester Gang (Geoff, Moira, Amy, and Gareth), Tom and Florence Terrett, and Kristi and Bob Novak (Kristi—I finally got my plumber’s license!).

My old friends were always there for me throughout the years: Nguyễn Hương Giang, Adam Straussner, Michael Kang, and Annie Chen.

My family has given me strength, especially when I was at my weakest. My husband Benjamin James Roberts believed in me when I lost my drive and passion to finish. His love, patience and support remind me every day that newspapers were not the only thing I found in Hanoi. My brilliant sister Katherina Nguyen and brother-in-law Javier Costa-Garcia were always there for emotional support and animated conversations about art and life. My in-laws, Colin Roberts and Linda Smith always gave me prudent advice and tireless friendship. I thank my late grandmothers, Nguyễn Thị Ruyên and Nguyễn Thị Phước, who experienced the tumultuous events of 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese history firsthand. Both raised their children as young widows, harbored anticolonial fighters in their homes, fled to the South in the mass exodus of 1954, and immigrated to the US after the war. It was their stories of strength and perseverance (as well as their cooking) that interested me in Vietnam in the first place.

Lastly, and most importantly, I thank my parents, Nguyễn Duy Từ and Nguyễn Phương Mai. They came to a strange foreign land with nothing, built a small business and raised a family. Despite the hardships of immigrant life, they still insisted on exploring the world with their two small children in tow. That sense of adventure and wonder was infectious; I owe all my intellectual curiosity to them. Their hard work, sacrifice, and perpetual optimism were the best legacy they could bestow on their children. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

Martina Thuchhi Nguyen  
London, July 2012

## CHAPTER 1

---

# The Đời Nay Publishing House: The Economics, Politics and Culture of the Book and Newspaper Trade

### Introduction

When Nhất Linh launched the new *Phong Hóa* in September 1932, it came in the midst of a larger publishing boom that reflected the modern social and economic transformations sweeping through Vietnam. About 428 *quốc ngữ* newspapers appeared in Vietnam between the years of 1932 and 1945, over four times the number founded during the entire period of 1865 to 1930.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of 1933 alone, the colonial government granted 27 permits for new journals.<sup>2</sup> In Tonkin, the growth was particularly impressive. In 1918, Tonkin had only four newspapers for the entire region; twenty years later, it boasted 94.<sup>3</sup> This upsurge in periodicals also coincided with the proliferation of *quốc ngữ* books and pamphlets. Between the years 1923-1942, about 9,050 items were published in Indochina: Modern fiction, which included novels and anthologies of short stories, comprised the largest category with about 2,172 titles (24%). Religious publications covering Catholicism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Caodaism numbered about 1,810 (20%). Traditional literature, poetry, and folktales totaled roughly 1,720 titles (19%), as did educational and other “functional” publications. Modernizing essays and translations encompassing topics such as law, linguistics, philosophy, and economics comprised 950 titles (10.5%). Theatrical publications, most notably in the new genre of renovated theatre (*cải lương*), totaled 543 (6%). Finally, government publications amounted to a mere 145 titles (1.6%).<sup>4</sup> Vietnamese readers had access to an unprecedented volume and range of reading material, and writers worked prodigiously to meet demand.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 80. Huỳnh Văn Tông, *Báo chí Việt Nam: từ khởi thủy đến 1945* ([TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2000), 275-280. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 138.

<sup>2</sup> Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 18. Liste des journaux et publications périodiques paraissant en Indochine, December 1938: CAOM, SLOTFOM, Serie 5, Carton 39.

<sup>4</sup> My own calculations based on David Marr’s statistics from *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p 49-51. The total of 9,050 publications and its breakdown was originally compiled by Mme. Christiane Rageau of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

This chapter examines this vernacular publishing boom through the business ventures of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. By focusing on the Group's *Đời Nay* publishing house and its newspapers, this chapter investigates the economics and logistics of cultural production in late colonial Vietnam. It considers how the financial and social conditions of writers affected their literary output, and contemplates how the business practices of the publishing industry influenced the printed material that reached the reading public. Lastly, it discusses how the intersection of economics and culture shaped Vietnamese intellectual life and "literary village" (*làng văn*).

I argue that the Self-Reliant Literary Group's commercial ventures were deeply rooted in its reform program, and that this difference set the Group apart from its predecessors and contemporaries. The *Đời Nay* publishing house aimed to reconcile the seemingly opposed commercial and cultural aims of the publishing industry, combining both profitable and humane business practices without sacrificing literary quality. On the commercial side, the *Đời Nay* publishing house marked an attempt by the Group to transform book publishing into a mass market business. This chapter will discuss a number of business practices that contributed to the work culture at the *Đời Nay* publishing house, such as marketing, internal governance and publisher-writer relations. It describes how the firm released variously priced editions to appeal to a range of incomes and tried to build new markets in areas such as genre fiction.

Although designed to maximize profits and satiate public demand for reading material, these commercial practices also carried a reformist bent—they sought to remedy the problems plaguing the literary publishing world. The Group focused on two problems in particular: the exploitation of writers and poor production quality. The *Đời Nay* publishing house was intended to serve as a model for change by paying writers a decent wage and by providing beautifully printed products. By changing the way Vietnamese readers consume books, the Group sought to transform attitudes towards the knowledge contained within.

### Historiography

Vietnamese language scholarship mentions the *Đời Nay* publishing house in passing, usually in more general descriptions of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. As the historiography mostly focuses on literary history and criticism, it has marginalized the *Đời Nay* publishing house along with other aspects of the Group's reform project. Most accounts treat the publishing house as a static entity, existing only to publish works previously serialized in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. Some accounts, such as those by Vu Gia, focus on one aspect of *Đời Nay*'s publishing activities such as its children's book series. The little scholarship that does exist on the subject, however, mostly comments on the firm's general reputation. For example, Phạm Thế Ngũ wrote, "It was the first time our country had a publishing house that pursued a literary purpose, and worked under a literary motto. Here we could say that the *Đời Nay* Publishing house has opened a new era of books in the literary history of Vietnam."<sup>5</sup> Trương Chính

---

<sup>5</sup> Phạm Thế Ngũ, "Tự Lực Văn Đoàn" in Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn trong tiến trình văn học dân tộc* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa - thông tin, 2000), 25.



commented on the printing quality:

Books by the Self-Reliant Literary Group were beautifully printed...the covers, illustrations were done by famous artists—Nguyễn Gia Trí, Tô Ngọc Vân, Trần Bình Lộc...one could say that among the publishing houses in that era, Nam Kỳ, Tân Dân, Mai Lĩnh, Công Lực, Minh Phương, Lê Cường, Tân Việt, ... none could compete with it.<sup>6</sup>

He went on to write that the proprietors of *Đời Nay*

knew how to do business, in part because of money, but also in part because of literary art. They did not bully writers, nor were they only worried about profit. Their books sold 4-5 thousand copies per title while other houses only released 1-2 thousand at most. Before the revolution, our book market flourished because of them.<sup>7</sup>

These descriptions acknowledge the esteem the *Đời Nay* Publishing house enjoyed among its peers and readers, but ultimately describe little else.

Although western language scholarship specifically on the *Đời Nay* Publishing House remains almost nonexistent, there is a large and important body of research on print culture in the late colonial period. This historiography focuses on the explosion of printed materials in the 1920s and 1930s and links it to an emerging modern Vietnamese identity, usually national or political. For example, David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* and Philippe Peycam's *Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* found evidence of a new political and social consciousness in the publications of the period. Hue Tam Ho Tai, in *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, described the proliferation of newspapers as illustrative of the role of radicalism in the earliest stages of the Vietnamese Revolution. In his *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, Shawn McHale analyzed this same publishing boom to marginalize that the role of Marxism-Leninism in favor of Buddhism and Confucianism.<sup>8</sup> These scholars privilege political or ideological analyses; the tendency to read grave and weighty topics into documents can often seem overly deterministic and neglects more immediate contexts that could prove illuminating. This chapter demonstrates that while the Self-Reliant Literary Group was indeed consumed by these larger intellectual questions, it was also equally motivated by the everyday realities of keeping a business afloat.

This chapter also draws on the extensive body of scholarship on the history of publishing, particularly rich in the United Kingdom. Rather than treating literature as a self-contained text that invites abstraction, this relatively new field of “literary sociology” or “history of the book” can be seen as a reaction to the dominant paradigms of 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism. It focuses

---

<sup>6</sup> Trương Chính, “Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” in Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*; Philippe M. F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

on the business and material aspects of the book trade—quantitative analysis of accounting ledgers, trends in pricing, production costs and techniques, and writers’ wages—to examine how texts were shaped by their immediate economic and historical contexts. As Roger Chartier argued, literary sociology reacts

against the abstraction of the text, it shows that the status and interpretation of a work depends on material considerations, against the “death of the author”, it stresses the author’s role, at the side of the bookseller-printer, in defining the form given to the work; against the absence of the reader, it recalls that the meaning of a text is always produced in a historical setting and depends on the differing and plural readings that assign meaning to it.<sup>9</sup>

The larger debates of modern literary criticism aside, I agree with literary sociology’s premise that the material conditions of book publishing can yield rich and interesting analyses, and believe that such an approach can highlight contexts often overlooked in ideologically or politically driven accounts of Vietnamese history.

In regards to the history of Vietnamese intellectual life, to describe the explosion of printed materials is not enough. It is easy to use terms like “production” to describe undefined processes in which printed works miraculously appear fully formed and ready for consumption. However, as Robert Darnton pointed out, books are the result of a collaborative process, a “communications circuit” that runs from author to publisher, down to the printer, bookseller, and finally, the reader/consumer.<sup>10</sup> Readers’ responses, in the form of reviews and sales, inform the author and his future writing, thus completing the loop and starting the cycle anew. According to Darnton, it is not enough to study only the contents of books. Because every agent along the communications circuit responds to social, economic, legal, demographic and intellectual conditions, the message contained within the book is transformed at each stage of production. Therefore, any scholar of print culture must consider the material object in its various contexts.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter is divided into three main parts further divided into subsections. Part I provides a timeline of the *Đời Nay*’s history, covering the years 1933-1946. The first subsection deals with the years 1933-1934, and describes the firm’s founding and first publishing projects, with its emphasis on beautiful collector’s editions of exemplary production quality. The second

---

<sup>9</sup> Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Darnton, “What is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, Summer 1982, p. 65-83.

<sup>11</sup>To put this information into context, it is important to draw a distinction between printing and publishing: the former refers to the mechanical act of producing a book, while the latter is the larger and more inclusive process of procuring, developing, marketing, and distributing printed material. Publishers do not necessarily print books themselves. In the early history of the book trade in Europe and America, artisans who owned printing presses also financed and sold the books they printed. Through internal changes within the trade as well as the Industrial Revolution, the functions of printer, publisher, and bookseller gradually became separated and more specialized over the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first modern publishing firms emerged, most notably Carey’s in Philadelphia (1785), W.H. Smith in London (1812), and Hachette in Paris (1826). In the case of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, *Đời Nay* began as a publishing house before becoming completely self-sufficient in 1940 with the purchase of its own in-house printing press.

subsection looks at the years 1935-1940, when *Đời Nay* shifted away from publishing books as exclusive collector's items and began to offer high-quality, low-price paperbacks. During this time, the firm launched a number of book series aimed at the mass market, as well as ventured into genre fiction and children's literature. The third subsection examines the history of the publishing house after the closure of *Ngày Nay*, from 1941 to 1946. It analyzes *Đời Nay*'s quantitative output and describes its demise in the wake of World War II.

Part II deals with the specificities of the firm's business practices and finances. The first subsection looks the organization and work culture at *Đời Nay*. It examines the spatial layout of the firm's headquarters, and describes the work dynamic and division of labor within the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The second subsection compares *Đời Nay*'s business practices with those of its main rival, the *Tân Dân* publishing house, as a means of bringing the Group's publishing reform program into clearer relief. The third subsection examines the wealth of individual group members and argues that the Group's financial circumstances were very different from depictions in the historiography. I demonstrate that the Self-Reliant Literary Group's unique work dynamic and practices were not the norm in late colonial Hanoi, and that its reform ideals influenced even their day-to-day business activities.

Part III describes the publishing process at *Đời Nay*, and follows the Self-Reliant Literary Group as it planned, compiled, printed, and distributed its annual special Tết issue. It looks at the large amounts of capital, extensive planning and intensive labor required to publish a single newspaper issue. It illustrates how the process of producing a newspaper—even one as successful as *Phong Hóa*—often resulted in very little financial return. Finally, it examines the 1936 Tết publication, and looks at how and why the practice of special issues became such a mainstay of the *Đời Nay* publishing house.

### **Part I: Timeline of the *Đời Nay* Publishing House**

In this part, I trace the history of the *Đời Nay* publishing house from its founding in 1933 to its demise sometime in 1946. The Self-Reliant Literary Group founded the firm to rectify the serious problems it perceived in the literary publishing world, in particular the poor production quality of books and the exploitation of writers by publishers. During the years of 1933-1934, the firm placed an emphasis on producing high-quality collector's editions with beautiful printing. The period of 1935-1940 marked a shift in *Đời Nay*'s business practices as it began to move towards offering high-quality, low-price paperbacks. After the closure of *Ngày Nay* in 1940, members of Self-Reliant Literary Group switched to publishing books full-time until the firm was finally closed in 1946.

#### *Emergence of the *Đời Nay* Publishing House, 1933-1934*

On April 15, 1933, *Phong Hóa* announced the founding of its own publishing house, *le Societe Annamite d'Édition et de Publicité* [*Annamite Company of Publishing and Publicity*],

also known by its French abbreviation SADEP.<sup>12</sup> The firm's headquarters were located at 1 Boulevard Carnot (now Phố Phan Đình Phùng), the same address as the paper. The precursor to the *Đời Nay* publishing house, SADEP served as the launching pad for *Phong Hóa*'s first publishing projects. Although it was formally a publishing house, the firm did not own an in-house press. The back pages of *Phong Hóa* issues reveal that SADEP had hired outside printers such as IDEO, Tân Dân, Thụy Kỳ, Trung Bắc, and Lê Văn Phúc to print their newspapers and books.<sup>13</sup> SADEP represented the first attempt by Nhất Linh and his associates to take control of the commercial aspects of their literary output—the first step towards becoming “Self-Reliant.”

SADEP oversaw all aspects of publishing for the fledgling Group, most importantly its finances. After *Phong Hóa*'s relaunch, Nhất Linh had a difficult time procuring enough funds to pay the printers each week, despite the paper's skyrocketing circulation numbers. The Group was responsible for purchasing its own paper as well as hiring an outside print service, who would not hand over the finished issues without payment in full. Lacking reserve funds, Nhất Linh and his associates were forced to buy paper in smaller quantities from expensive retailers. Consequently, the writers at Phong Hoa started SADEP with help from an outside investor. As Tú Mỡ recounted:

To help surmount these difficulties, Doctor Luyện, a capitalist sympathetic to *Phong Hóa*, was willing to front the money for Tam to start SADEP, and took responsibility for the material needs of the paper. That way, the journal had a supply of paper on hand, bought directly from the factory so as to reduce costs, and extra money to pay the printers so that Tam did not have to run around borrowing money.<sup>14</sup>

Tú Mỡ suggested that SADEP helped to organize and facilitate smoother production of the newspaper.<sup>15</sup>

SADEP not only published Phong Hoa, but also released its previously serialized novels. Less than three months after SADEP's launch, the newspaper announced the publication of Khái Hưng's *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* [A Butterfly's Soul that Dreams of Immortality], the first serialized novel by a Group member published in book form.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the publishers decided to print a very small run of 300 copies suggests that they had no idea how this first book would sell.<sup>17</sup> The advertisements for *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* emphasized the book's superior production quality: “Printed on thick paper of premium quality, with a multicolored cover, retouched illustrations

---

<sup>12</sup> Announcement for SADEP, *Phong Hóa* no. 45, 5 May 1933, p. 2. The firm was also known by its Vietnamese name, Annam Xuất Bản Cục.

<sup>13</sup> The name of the printing house used can be found at the bottom of the back page of all *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* issues.

<sup>14</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Trong bếp núc của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn,” in Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> During this time, advertisements for a Dr. Nguyễn Văn Luyện on 8 Duong Thanh began appearing in Phong Hoa. Dr. Luyện would later run his own newspaper, *Tin Mới*, from 1940-1943. Active in anticolonial politics in the 1940s, he was killed along with his son by French soldiers in December 1946 after resisting arrest. Trương Hữu Quýnh, *Từ điển nhân vật lịch sử Việt Nam*. ([Hanoi]: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2006), 1021-22.

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 53, 30 June 1933, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 55, 14 Jul 1933, p. 5.

and reedited content. Quality literature! Beautiful pictures! A valuable book!”<sup>18</sup> SADEP then published three more books in quick succession, two by Group members: Thế Lữ’s suspense novel *Vàng và Máu* [Gold and Blood], Khải Hưng and Nhất Linh’s collection of short stories *Anh Phải Sống* (You Must Live). The firm also published the first major work by the young up-and-comer Vũ Trọng Phụng titled *Cạm Bẫy Người* [the Human Trap]. This very short publishing record thus indicates a willingness on the part of SADEP to publish works by writers outside the Group.

It was soon after the founding of SADEP and the release of its first novel that the moniker “the Self-Reliant Literary Group” (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn), and its insignia began to appear in *Phong Hóa*. Both were first used on July 21, 1933 without fanfare or acknowledgement, inconspicuously tucked away in an advertisement for SADEP’s books.<sup>19</sup> The Group’s insignia featured a stylized phoenix emerging from the flames, the well-known metaphor for change and renewal (

Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Insignia of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, *Phong Hóa* no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 2**

For almost three months after this unassuming entrance, *Phong Hóa* continued to use the name and insignia in advertisements for books without any explanation of what they meant. Finally, an advertisement appearing in *Phong Hóa* on September 29, 1933 clarified the purpose of this new group:

[*Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên*] is the first book by the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Subsequently, we will publish more books, each carefully selected for publication. For this reason, books marked with the insignia of the Self-Reliant Literary Group are all readable books [*sách đọc được*]. Do not be afraid of making a mistake. Buy this book, then the next,

<sup>18</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 56, 21 Jul 1933, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Advertisement in *Ibid*, 2.

etc...so you own all the Self-Reliant Literary Group books.<sup>20</sup>

This early usage of the “Self-Reliant Literary Group” moniker suggests an attempt at literary branding. Readers could trust that anything bearing the Self-Reliant Literary Group “brand” would have been carefully chosen for quality and thus “readable.” As a result, it is likely that the reading public would have first associated the Self-Reliant Literary Group with the commercial sale of books, rather than the social reform or group cohesion for which they became famous. An anecdote from the memoirs of interwar writer Nguyễn Vỹ supports this observation. Reminiscing about his journalism years in 1960s Saigon, Nhật Linh said to Vỹ:

Almost all the other writers of the interwar years—Luu Trọng Lư, Lan Khái, Vũ Trọng Phụng—sold their copyrights to the publishing house. We spent our own money to print, self-publish and release our own works, so we called ourselves Self-Reliant, that’s all. There is no other meaning.<sup>21</sup>

The inception of the Self-Reliant Literary Group can thus be attributed almost exclusively to practical economic concerns—namely the sale of books and financial self-sufficiency.

Despite these origins, the name “Self-Reliant Literary Group” gradually began to evoke loftier, more idealistic meanings. For six months after its first use, the moniker continued to appear as a brand-name in book ads. It was not until March 2, 1934 that Nhật Linh and his associates repackaged the Self-Reliant Literary Group by printing its mission statement. The Group described itself as a

...gathering of like-minded comrades in the literary world. Members of the Group collectively follow a mission statement, wholeheartedly help each other to reach our common goals, and support one another in endeavors of a literary nature.<sup>22</sup>

With that, the Group fashioned an image for itself as iconoclastic reformers and cultural entrepreneurs. This description of the Group as a literary collective differed greatly from its original commercial concerns; in short, book branding gave way to a general sense of group solidarity. To redress their previous association with bookselling, the article clearly stated that “The Self-Reliant Literary Group is not a club that sells and publishes books.”<sup>23</sup> The Group’s strict rules of operation illustrate these new higher standards: Only official members had the right to use the Group’s name and insignia in conjunction with their writings. Works submitted by non-members were subjected to a rigorous vetting process in order to appear in the Group’s publications. To be branded with the Group’s insignia and given publication assistance, a manuscript had to be approved by two-thirds of Group members, judged on the basis of literary merit and compliance with the Group’s mission statement. At the heart of the Group activities,

---

<sup>20</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 66, 29 Sep 1933, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyễn Vỹ, *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến: hồi ký văn học* (Hà Nội: Hội nhà văn, 1994), 160.

<sup>22</sup> “Tu Luc Van Doan,” *Phong Hóa* no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Tú Mỡ wrote, was the

...principle of relying on our own strength, following the spirit of comrades under one roof...to take our trust in one another as our guide, to lay down some internal guidelines that each person follows of their own free will.<sup>24</sup>

Tú Mỡ described the sense of self reliance and camaraderie that first allowed the Group to take control of its most basic operations and finance, and how it soon encompassed larger, more socially-minded meanings. The idea of self-reliance was a guiding principle not only for the Group itself, but one that they actively prescribed in their reform projects from the League of Light to their politics.

This commitment to self-reliance was tested when the relationship between *Phong Hóa* and Dr. Luyện broke down, forcing the Group to manage their financial matters on their own. While it is unclear when this event actually occurred, Tú Mỡ's memoirs suggest that it happened around the time that *Phong Hóa* announced the founding of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. When they balanced the journal's ledgers at the end of the year, Nhật Linh and his associates had made a shocking discovery. Dividing the earnings proportionally according to investment, they found that most of the profits ended up in the doctor's pockets. Convening a meeting of the Group, Nhật Linh lamented the injustice of working hard to benefit the investor and immediately sought to end the partnership. The Group decided to strike out on their own--in other words, to become truly "self-reliant." Each member invested 500 piastres of his own money into the venture.<sup>25</sup> In later years, members of the Group would receive dividends off this initial investment, usually about 100 piastres a year. As a result, the Group became a literary cooperative—a voluntary, autonomous association collectively owned and governed by its members for their mutual financial, social, and cultural benefit. This arrangement most likely contributed to the Group's financial and literary success, and set it apart from other writers at the time.<sup>26</sup>

The *Đời Nay* publishing house was established to serve this new literary cooperative, and reflected this new stage of self-reliance. Soon after the Group's rebranding, it changed the name of its publishing house from the uninspiring Annamite Company of Publishing and Printing to the *Đời Nay* [This Life] publishing house. The new name appeared for the first time on the cover of *Phong Hóa* on June 22, 1934, replacing SADEP in an advertisement for books. Along with the name, the entire direction of the business changed. As the new name suggests, the Group intended the *Đời Nay* Publishing house to focus on contemporary society. The firm no longer merely facilitated the smooth running of *Phong Hóa*; it represented the mature articulation of the Group's reform program and its presentist worldview. Unlike SADEP, *Đời Nay* was intended to

---

<sup>24</sup> Tú Mỡ, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>26</sup> *Đời Nay*'s publishing history bolsters the description of the Group as a literary cooperative. In its first six years of existence, the *Đời Nay* publishing house rarely accepted submissions from outside writers, only publishing two titles out of 31. Only in 1940 did the firm begin to publish more of such works, perhaps for financial reasons or because Group members were not as prolific as in previous years. This suggests that the firm was established to primarily support its stakeholders.

be a publishing firm with established cultural objectives, systematic business operations and a clear vision of the publishing process from manuscript to book.

The founding of *Đời Nay* was motivated by the Group's desire to avoid and remedy the problems of literary publishing. Coinciding with the unveiling of *Đời Nay*, *Nhị Linh* (a pseudonym used by *Khái Hưng*) penned a number of articles commenting on the state of authors and publishing in Vietnam: "Writing books, publishing books" [*Viết sách, Xuất bản sách*], the two-part article *Tủ Sách Gia Đình* [*The Family Library*], and *Xuất Bản Sách* [*Publishing Books*].<sup>27</sup> These articles express the Group's grievances towards the publishing world and illuminate its vision for *Đời Nay*. *Nhị Linh* took issue with two shortcomings of the Vietnamese publishing industry: the unfair treatment of writers and the poor production quality of books.

The first grievance involved the exploitation of writers by publishers. *Nhị Linh* described how greedy publishers took advantage of writers by paying meager royalties ranging from 30-100 piastres per novel. He ranted:

To spend forty piastres to capture the ideas of others...! Because of the contract signed by both sides, these novels become the property of the publisher. They will forever belong to him, his children, his grandchildren—these works become part of their estate. Truly, there are no businessmen in the world as cruel as those who peddle words.<sup>28</sup>

Not only did these "peddler of words" pay pittance in royalties, but they also came to own the copyright of the work. For *Nhị Linh*, this was the real injustice of the publishing industry. Comparing the current state of publishing in Vietnam to other "civilized" countries, *Nhị Linh* wished that Vietnam would institute a system in which a writer receives a percentage of the profits and keeps the copyright of his book. Because the craft is laborious and time-consuming, a writer would only sell his work cheaply out of desperation and hunger. Such low rates force writers to turn out works quickly and sloppily. *Nhị Linh* concluded that in order for writers to produce works of literary value, royalties must be commensurate with their time and effort. He argued that the material welfare of intellectuals and writers carried larger consequences, especially because "it pertains to the quality of our national literature."<sup>29</sup> *Nhị Linh* believed that transforming the specific business practices such as salaries and royalties will improve the overall caliber of the literature available to the public.<sup>30</sup>

*Nhị Linh*'s second grievance pertained to the poor production quality of books. In another article, he criticized the literary publications on offer in Hanoi:

---

<sup>27</sup> *Nhị Linh*, "Viết Sách, Xuất Bản Sách" *Phong Hóa* no. 101, 8 Jun 1934, p. 1; "Xuất Bản Sách" *Phong Hóa* no. 103, 22 Jun 1934, p. 1-2; "Tủ sách gia đình" *Phong Hóa* no. 110, 11 Aug 1934, p. 1-2; and "Tủ sách gia đình," *Phong Hóa* no. 111, 18 Aug 1934, p. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> *Nhị Linh*, "Viết Sách, Xuất Bản Sách."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> That writers could make a living on literature at all was an improvement from previous decades. As David Marr wrote, "...for most creative writers of the 1920s, it was not the sale of poetry or short stories that kept them alive, but the numerous small fees for producing a steady flow of newspaper articles according to deadlines...Only in the 1930s were authors able to support themselves, at least in part, through sale of their fiction or poetry." Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 164.



Let me be honest. Just looking at the books for sale has made me lose my enthusiasm for reading. The books are thin, covered in dragons and phoenixes, with dirty printing on ugly paper—nothing about them could be called artistic. And we haven't even discussed the writing. Who has the courage to read those books, even only to see if the literature is good or bad? If you want people to read your book, then it must be clean to the eye. Publishers that sell shoddy and skimpy books are disrespecting their readers...<sup>31</sup>

For Nhị Linh, form and content were intricately linked: a book's outside appearance should never detract from the quality of the content inside, but should complement and reflect it. Other writers of the period shared the same frustrations. When Nguyễn Công Hoan submitted one of his first works to the Mai Lĩnh publishing house in Haiphong, which had a reputation for publishing “thin, slight volumes that sold for only three sous,” an irritated Tam Lang reminded him that he should “know the value of his own work.”<sup>32</sup> In the ensuing years, the *Đời Nay* publishing house took pride in its superior production quality: its advertisements would often emphasize its use of high-end paper and beautiful printing. Sometimes the publishing house would boast the services of a master printer, usually Đỗ Văn of the Trung Bắc Tân Văn printing house.<sup>33</sup>

According to Nhị Linh, the lamentable state of the publishing industry was indicative of a larger cultural flaw—the Vietnamese attitude that “everything is seen as ordinary, easily done, and that expertise is not necessary.” He described how “Lý Toét” publishers would quickly turn out slapdash publications based on short-term profit. Once a publisher has paid pittance for the copyright of a book, he

counts the pages, lines, and words. He then estimates the number of printed pages. He calculates the cost to print the book, the commission for booksellers, and the profit that he will collect.<sup>34</sup>

Nhị Linh suggested that while such publishers are perhaps shrewd businessmen, they fail to see the larger cultural goals of publishing. In the long run, he argued that such myopic calculations damage the development of a Vietnamese national literature. By merely pandering to reader demand for trashy reading, publishers have hampered the literary education of the Vietnamese reading public. Nhị Linh pointed out that “currently readers only like to read novels...and all

---

<sup>31</sup> Nhị Linh, “Tủ sách gia đình,” *Phong Hóa* no. 111.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Đời viết văn của tôi: Hồi ký* (Hà Nội: Nxb Hội nhà văn, 1994), 110.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to printmaking, Đỗ Văn also tried his hand at journalism, launching *Nhật Tân* in 1933. Đỗ Văn received a sizeable salary of 300 piastres working for Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's Trung Bắc print house, but the salary was gradually decreased as Vĩnh's newspaper ventures declined. At one point the French print house Taupin tried to lure him away from Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh by offering him 300 piastres plus 40 for housing, but he refused out of loyalty to his friend. Vĩnh's newspapers deteriorated so badly that at one point Đỗ Văn printed *Nhật Tân* for free at the Trung Bắc print house instead of taking a salary. However, loyalty to Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh did not seem to stop Đỗ Văn from freelancing for other newspapers like *Phong Hóa*. See Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Đời viết văn của tôi*, 170.

<sup>34</sup> Nhị Linh, “Xuất Bản Sách.”

those profit-seeking publishing houses print only novels. And no one bothers to print books about history, geography, science, philosophy, etc.”<sup>35</sup> For Nhị Linh, publishing a book is not merely the smearing of ink on paper, nor is it the tedious activities of counting words and pages; rather, it is fundamental to the growth and modernization of the Vietnamese collective intellect.

To remedy these problems, Nhị Linh advanced two solutions: 1) allow intellectuals to control the publishing industry, and 2) transform Vietnamese attitudes and reading habits.<sup>36</sup> Because writing books is an intellectual activity, the author believed that publishing them must be so as well. As with the great French publishing houses of Flammarion, Plon, and Grasset, so intellectuals should be in charge of publishing in Vietnam. Nhị Linh wrote,

...to publish a book is truly difficult. One must be educated to choose quality books. One must be aesthetically minded to know how to increase the literary value of the book through its appearance... Finally, one must be sincere, not only with the reader, but also with oneself. One must sincerely want to enrich the literary corpus of our country.<sup>37</sup>

Only intellectuals would have the aesthetic discernment to recognize a manuscript’s literary potential, as well as properly design a book’s cover. Most importantly, they would not lose sight of the main purpose of book publishing—to build a body of literature for a modern Vietnamese nation. Nhị Linh believed that only intellectuals could reconcile the gap between the commercial and cultural impulses of the publishing industry.

Secondly, Nhị Linh argued that by introducing books of cultural value to Vietnamese readers, intellectuals can begin to transform their reading habits and attitudes. He advocated Vietnamese taking up the European practice of book-collecting [chơi sách]. He explained that such a pursuit could never have flourished in the past, because the Confucian education system championed rote memorization of a limited number of classic texts. In contrast, westerners living in modern times require a breadth of knowledge and thus cannot rely on only a few books. For this reason, Nhị Linh wrote, they build libraries with hundreds, even thousands of books. Families would have home libraries, their size dependent on wealth. Nhị Linh lamented that although many young Vietnamese are starting to collect books, the ones available in *quốc ngữ* are too poorly made: “Should we display on our shelves thin little books of a few dozen pages, priced at around 3 sous to a hào?”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the way to entice Vietnamese readers to start collecting was through beautiful printmaking. When readers encounter an aesthetically printed book, Nhị Linh reasoned, they would buy it to display on their shelves regardless of the subject matter. The actual use of the book would come in due course, because “once displayed on their shelf, one day they will read it. When they need to research something in that book, they will look for it.”<sup>39</sup> Through the superficial appeal of fine printing, therefore, publishers could sell books that readers would not usually buy, thereby introducing the Vietnamese to new ideas and concepts. In time, this transformation in reader demand would force a change in supply:

---

<sup>35</sup> Nhị Linh, “Tủ sách gia đình” *Phong Hóa* no.111.

<sup>36</sup> Nhị Linh, “Xuất Bản Sách,” and “Tủ sách gia đình” *Phong Hóa* no. 111.

<sup>37</sup> Nhị Linh, “Xuất Bản Sách.”

<sup>38</sup> Nhị Linh, “Tủ sách gia đình” *Phong Hóa* no. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Nhị Linh, “Tủ sách gia đình” no. 111.

If we knew how to choose quality, beautiful books to buy and read, then the publishers wanting to make a profit must follow our wishes and publish only quality books printed artistically... So to encourage writers and publishers, we must begin collecting books. We must follow the Europeans and start a library that is beautiful and worthwhile for our families.<sup>40</sup>

When readers no longer demanded lowbrow books, profit-seeking publishers would be forced to offer reading material of literary value. This was the first instance of what will become a common theme in the Group's modernist reform projects: the idea that material changes will gradually enact changes in attitude and behavior.

In the above analysis, Nhị Linh outlined a comprehensive vision for the Vietnamese publishing industry from the submitted manuscript to the finished book. When the Group founded the *Đời Nay* publishing house, it incorporated this vision into the firm's guiding principles:

1. To find writers of worth and encourage them. To publicize these writers and their work.
2. Pay attention to methods of artistic printing and design, so that foreigners do not curl their lip in scorn when they hold an Annamese book. The printed book must be worthy of the literature in it.
3. To be an enlightened and trustworthy mediator between those who write books and those who read books. The reader spends his money to get his money's worth. The writer should be able to live properly from books, and view the job of writing books as a proper job, one that is necessary to the progress of our country's culture.
4. Publishing books must also have a motto to be followed carefully, like a newspaper.<sup>41</sup>

These principles not only reiterated *Đời Nay*'s commitment to fair treatment and quality publications, but also linked this to the Group's ardent sense of nationalism. Motivated by the dread that foreigners would scorn Vietnamese books and literature, *Đời Nay* wanted to prove that the Vietnamese were capable of producing books similar to those of the great publishing houses of Europe and America. This would become another underlying theme of the Group's reform projects—the desire for Vietnam to be taken seriously by western countries. Again evoking the idea that material changes can transform society and culture, the Group also established the link between the work conditions of intellectuals and the development of a modern national culture. Only when writers make a decent living can they focus on producing works that would benefit the nation. Thus, the Self-Reliant Literary Group had high aspirations for its publishing house; *Đời Nay* was intended not only to support a select group of talented writers, but also to help

---

<sup>40</sup> Nhị Linh, "Tủ sách gia đình" no. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Pamphlet titled, *Nhà Xuất Bản Đời Nay* (Hanoi: *Đời Nay*: [1941?]), 1.

develop the intellect of the Vietnamese nation through quality literature.

*Đời Nay's Book Series: From Collector's Items to Mass-market Paperbacks, 1935-1940*

True to its goals of reform, the Đời Nay publishing house quickly established its reputation for quality printing and use of high-end paper. Đời Nay's books looked different from those of other publishers; with their well-designed and often illustrated covers, the books looked contemporary and innovative. In fact, they were displayed at Hanoi's 1935 Salon, the yearly art exhibition held by the Indochinese Fine Arts University to showcase new talent.<sup>42</sup> The books' appearance at such an event suggests that the Group envisioned their products not only as a mere vessel for its contents, but also as an aesthetic object in their own right. This reputation for high production quality extended to the Group's newspapers as well. As part of its own advertisements, the Tân Dân print shop (to whom Đời Nay outsourced their print jobs for a time), boasted that because the Group had commissioned them to print *Phong Hóa*, "it is enough to see how beautiful Tân Dân printing can be."<sup>43</sup> Through the years, the Đời Nay publishing house would emphasize the quality of their books, printed on such exclusive papers such as *velin de rives* and *imperial a la cuve*. Poetry collections in particular received the most beautiful printing: advertisements for Xuân Diệu's *Thơ Thơ* [Innocent Poems] and Thế Lữ's *Mấy Vần Thơ* [Some Poetic Verses] boasted the books' expensive paper, high quality printing, and illustrations by some of Hanoi's most illustrious artists such as Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Gia Trí, and Trần Bình Lộc. Because of the expense, these books were not released for widespread sale, but printed specially for prepaying customers.<sup>44</sup>

The Đời Nay publishing house released no books in 1935 due to two major events that hindered its operations: the launching of *Ngày Nay* and the temporary closure of *Phong Hóa* by the censors. The publishing house began to release books again in 1936, but with a marked difference. The rise of the Popular Front government in France generated a widespread populist sensibility in Indochina, and the Đời Nay publishing house also reflected this shift. Although Đời Nay's initial priority had been to transform production quality through its beautifully printed collectors' editions, the publishing house soon shifted its focus to a more modern publishing practice—the paperback. As Claire Squires wrote about modern publishing in the west, "The paperback book is an intrinsically twentieth century literary and publishing phenomenon, and the story of its rise is central to the modern publishing industry."<sup>45</sup> Small in size and bound in less durable cardstock, paperbacks were designed to be portable, affordable, and disposable—the very definition of a mass-market commodity. Although its forerunners had existed in various forms beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mass market paperback was made iconic by the British firm Penguin, who launched in 1935 and sold more than three million books by the end of 1936. The

<sup>42</sup> Nhị Linh, "Phòng Triển Lãm 1935" *Phong Hóa* no. 136, 15 Feb 1935, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa*, no. 121, 26 Oct 1934, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 108, 1 May 1938, p. 11; *Phong Hóa*, no. 132, 11 Jan 1935, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Claire Squires, "The Publishing Industry: the Rise of the Paperback" in Brian W. Shaffer, Patrick O'Donnell, and John Clement Ball. *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* vol. 2 (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 316.

format was soon followed in the US by Robert de Graff's Pocket Books line in 1939.<sup>46</sup> Representing quality for value, paperbacks revolutionized modern publishing and democratized mass readership by making books widely available to readers of all incomes.

On January 10, 1936, the Group introduced the *Sách Lá Mạ* (*Green Book*) series, a new concept in book publishing. "Books of value at a low price," the advertisement read.<sup>47</sup> Unlike the cheap books of previous years printed on poor quality paper with generic graphics, the *Green Books* sported well-designed covers, beautifully printed text and cost just 25 sous apiece. A typical *Green Book* measured a rather large 17 x 25 cm, had its text divided into two columns per page and was clad in a characteristic green cover.<sup>48</sup> As high quality but reasonably priced books, the *Green Books* were situated somewhere between the luxury editions printed by Đồi Nay and the cheap 2-hào books that the Group despised so much. The Group intended the series to make quality reading material more readily available to a wider range of readers. The announcement stated:

So that books will become widespread and those with less money can build their own family library, we have decided to print a very inexpensive book. All are sold at the same price. These books are still artistically printed, but because the author does not take royalties, we can sell them cheaper than when first released.<sup>49</sup>

The *Green Books* can be seen as the Group's version of the paperbacks popular in Europe at the time, and signaled a shift from the book as a collectible *objet d'art* to a modern mass-produced commodity. The series aimed for the democratization of literature by allowing families of all incomes, not just the genteel classes, to build their own "family library." The Group chose to publish only works that would surely sell, or whose message it wanted widely disseminated. The first *Green Book* ever published was Nhất Linh's *Đoạn Tuyệt* [A Severance of Ties]; to my knowledge, this is the first edition ever printed of Nhất Linh's most well-known work. The fact that the Group chose to release this bestseller as a low price book also suggests that the Group believed the book's social message important enough to offer it at a price that many readers could afford. This first *Green Book* was a huge success--*Đoạn Tuyệt* sold over 1000 copies in three days.<sup>50</sup> By my own count, the Đồi Nay publishing house published 10 *Green Books* in total: Nhất Linh's *Đoạn Tuyệt* and *Tối Tăm* [Darkness]; Khải Hưng's *Nửa Chùng Xuân* [In the Midst of Spring], *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* [A Butterfly's Soul that Dreams of Immortality], *Giọc*

---

<sup>46</sup> Albert Greco, *The Book Publishing Industry* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), 75. Rob Banham, "The Industrialization of the Book, 1700-1970" in Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007), 289. The end of World War II saw paper supplies returning to normal, which facilitated the growth of the paperback industry in Belgium (Bibliothèque Marabout, 1949), Germany (Rowohlt 1950), the Netherlands (Prisma Pockets, 1951), and France (Livre de Poche, 1953). Adrian van der Weel, "Modernity and Print II: Europe" in Eliot and Rose, *Companion*, 363-364.

<sup>47</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 170, 10 Jan 1936, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> The size of the Green Books roughly corresponded to the ISO B5. It is unclear which system of paper standardization was used in French Indochina. The German DIN standard was published in 1922, and introduced the A and B series of paper sizes that was later adopted by the International Standards Organization in 1967.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 177, 6 Mar 1936, p. 3.

*Đường Gió Bụi* [Dust Storm on the Road], *Gánh Hàng Hoa* [the Flower Peddler], and *Trống Mái* [Rooster and Hen]; and Thế Lữ's *Mai Hương và Lê Phong* [Mai Hương and Lê Phong], *Bên Đường Thiên Lô* [On the Edge of the God of Thunder], and *Vàng và Máu* [Gold and Blood].<sup>51</sup> The *Green Books* provided readers with low cost reading material without sacrificing literary or production quality, an alternative to the cheap publications offered by other publishers.

Despite its initial success, the *Green Books* proved short lived. A year later on January 24, 1937, *Đời Nay* announced it would print *Khố Nhỏ* [Small Size] books measuring about 11 x 18 cm, because it “wants everyone to have a family library, to have beautifully printed books with thick spines.”<sup>52</sup> This announcement suggests that the larger size of the *Green Book* series made the books too thin to be properly displayed on a shelf. These smaller books would range in price from 20-30 sous, and promised quality printing at low prices like their *Green Book* predecessors. In May 1937, *Đời Nay* announced that in an attempt to standardize its books, it would publish books only in the smaller size.<sup>53</sup>

Also in 1937, *Đời Nay* announced yet another new book series. Calling the series “*Nắng Mới*” [New Sun], the Group intended it to serve a pedagogical purpose: “We want to print books about many subjects... written in a clear and simple style so that those who do not know French or with little schooling can absorb new ideas and culture.”<sup>54</sup> The Group envisioned the *New Sun* books to cover a wide range of topics, and serve as the means through which writers could communicate directly with readers about current social issues. *Đời Nay* aimed its marketing at women in particular:

Women find ideas in novels, but that is not enough. These *Nắng Mới* books will introduce you to new ideas, new ways of learning, books that discuss rights and duties of everyone. Those that do not have much schooling will have the means to save themselves, and move towards a secure foundation for learning.<sup>55</sup>

At a mere 15 sous each, the *Nắng Mới* books were the least expensive books published by the firm thus far. The pricing suggests that *Đời Nay* intended the *Nắng Mới* books to reach the most intellectually neglected and underprivileged groups, and to equip them with the means of “saving themselves” through self-education. Unfortunately, the series did not prove to be a priority for the firm. After over a year of advertising the series, *Đời Nay* finally published *Bùn Lầy Nước Đọng* [Swampy Mud and Stagnant Water], Hoang Dao's collection of articles on the legal system.<sup>56</sup> It took another year after that for the firm to announce two more *Nắng Mới* books: Thạch Lam's collection of literary essays titled *Theo Giòng* [With the Flow] and Hoang Nhu Tiep's *Tứ Quốc Chí* [Chronicle of Four Countries], his translation of Emile's Servan-Schreiber's account of conditions in socialist Scandinavia. Although the pedagogical slant of these

---

<sup>51</sup> Counting the Green books in my personal collection and matching them with advertisements in *Phong Hóa*.

<sup>52</sup> Advertisement for *Đời Nay* in *Ngày Nay* no. 44, 24 Jan 1937, p. 682.

<sup>53</sup> Advertisement for *Đời Nay* in *Ngày Nay* no. 60, 23 May 1937, p. 367.

<sup>54</sup> Advertisement for *Đời Nay* in *Ngày Nay* no. 34, 15 Nov 1936, p. 442

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Advertisement for *Đời Nay* in *Ngày Nay* no. 164, 7 Jun 1939, p. 5.

publications kept with the spirit of the *Nắng Mới* series, the pricing did not. The latter two books cost 40 and 30 sous respectively, double the original advertised price of 15 sous.<sup>57</sup> The Group also advertised Hoàng Đạo's *Mười Điều Tâm Niệm* [Ten Things to Internalize] as part of the series, but this publication never seemed to have materialized. Despite its spotty publishing record, the *Nắng Mới* books marked another attempt by the Đời Nay publishing house to fulfill its mission statement and reflected its reform program by providing Vietnamese with tools to work towards their own betterment.

In the late 1930s, Đời Nay began diversifying its literary publications by introducing new genre fiction and educational series. On February 4, 1939, the Group announced a new series of children's books. Emulating the French publisher Hachette and its famous *Bibliothèque Rose* (*Pink Library*), the Self-Reliant Literary Group announced a new series of books called *Sách Hồng* (*Pink Books*).<sup>58</sup> The Group described the new series as "prepared just for children, including stories of adventure, danger, legend, biographies of famous historical and literary figures, science, art, etc..."<sup>59</sup> For children with little pocket money or parents with many expenses, the books cost an affordable 10 sous apiece. Despite the low price, the books tried to maintain high-quality production standards: they sported a simple but well-designed pink plaid cover, and boasted clean and legible printing sprinkled with illustrations by some of the most well-known artists of the time, such as Tô Ngọc Vân and Nguyễn Gia Trí. Perhaps to keep costs down, the publisher opted for a small-sized book (the spine measured 19 cm) and shorter stories that fitted an average of 30-40 printed pages. The series encompassed various literary and artistic forms including prose, poetry, drama, and even music. The *Pink Books* included translations of well-known foreign children's literature such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Rudyard Kipling's *the Jungle Book*, and Hans Christian Andersen's *the Little Mermaid* and *the Nightingale*. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group wrote the majority of the series: Khái Hưng wrote the most *Pink Books* with 12, Hoàng Đạo contributed nine titles, Thế Lữ wrote six, while Thạch Lam contributed six and Tú Mỡ authored three.<sup>60</sup> Đời Nay published about 41 of these children's books from 1939 to 1945, with some titles receiving multiple printings. The first edition of every title ranged from 4000-8000 copies, with 5000 copies on average.<sup>61</sup> In total, Đời Nay published at least 164,000 *Pink Books* between 1939-1945.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> *Nha Xuat Ban Đời Nay*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Started by Louis Hachette during the Second Empire, the *Bibliothèque Rose* was a collection of books for little girls (hence the color pink), which sold in his numerous railroad bookstores. Intended to be morally educative, the books were written with a moderate Catholic bent, written by women such as Comtesse de Segur and Zenaïde Fleuriot. The *Bibliothèque Rose* is considered classic children's reading in France, and has survived in reedited versions to this day.

<sup>59</sup> Advertisement for Đời Nay in *Ngày Nay* no. 174, 12 Aug 1939, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the only treatment of the *Pink Books* (in any language) can be found in Vu Gia's *Thạch Lam: Thân Thế và Sự Nghiệp* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoá: 1994). However, his simplistic and cursory treatment focuses only on Thạch Lam's three *Pink Books* and completely ignores the even larger contributions of Khái Hưng, Hoàng Đạo and Thế Lữ.

<sup>61</sup> Total taken from a list of Đời Nay *Pink Books* compiled from the Vietnam National Library, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and my own personal collection. Data also taken from *Dépôt Legal* information written on each book.

<sup>62</sup> An examination of two *Pink Books* illustrates the pedagogical aim of the series: to inculcate moral and

Along with children's literature, the *Đời Nay* firm also attempted to build new markets in other forms of genre fiction. In addition to his innovative poetry, *Thế Lữ* was also well-known for his flair for the dramatic and macabre, which he channeled into writing and translating detective, horror, and adventure fiction. Most of the writer's detective stories involved a Sherlock Holmes-like character named *Lê Phong*, who would approach each case with the same sense of scientific rationality as his English predecessor. Alexander Woodside wrote that these detective stories never caught on because they seemed too "superorganic and unreal" to Vietnamese, for whom science was still a very new way of looking at the world.<sup>63</sup> Neil Jamieson, citing *Phạm Thế Ngũ*, explained that the detective stories met with "massive indifference" because the "emotional foundation for such individualism was underdeveloped in the personalities of most Vietnamese."<sup>64</sup> Although they never attracted a mass following, *Thế Lữ*'s detective stories managed to gain some traction with readers; *Lê Phong* was popular enough to be featured in three works, with each receiving multiple printings.<sup>65</sup> In 1942, *Đời Nay*

---

civic values vital to citizenship from one generation to the next. As previously stated in its mission statement, the Self-Reliant Literary Group actively promoted western science in its publications. To the Group, science represented the means to dispel superstition as well as correct deep-seated prejudices and engrained habits. Their children's books also reflected this belief in science and rationality, especially those written by *Hoàng Đạo*. In a genre marked by fantasy and the supernatural, *Hoàng Đạo*'s *Pink Books* are remarkably void of such elements. The author often used the trope of a wiser and more knowledgeable elder to dispense information or explanations. His book *Lên Cung Trăng* (*Ascent to the Moon*) starts out with a long section in which an uncle explains the science of space to his nieces and nephews as they peruse a science picture book. The children listen rapturously as their uncle explains the vastness of the universe: light travels at a rate of 300,000 km/s, but it takes about 5 years for the light from the Milky Way to reach earth. Afterwards, one of the children falls asleep and dreams of an adventure to the moon, where she attends a dinner party with aliens. Upon waking, she excitedly relays this dream to her uncle. He firmly but gently brings the child "back to earth" by explaining that men are not yet capable of traveling to the moon. As *Hoàng Đạo*'s story illustrates, children's imaginations should not be allowed to run free. Instead, they should be tempered within the strictly set boundaries of rational thinking. For *Hoàng Đạo*, the cultivation of a scientific mind was more important than unbridled imagination.

Even when stories involved magical or supernatural elements, *Hoàng Đạo* took pains in explaining them away. In *Sơn Tinh* (*Mountain God*), the author retells the well-known Vietnamese folktale by framing it within a story of a father and his children. The children listen as the father regales them with a tale about the battle between the Mountain God and the Water God (*Thủy Tinh*), an explanation of the yearly flooding. When the father finishes his story, his daughter asks if it really happened. The father gives her the scientific reason for the flooding, caused by overflow from the highlands. The little girl then asks her father if such gods existed; he assures her that they probably did, but not as gods. The father explains that both *Sơn Tinh* and *Thủy Tinh* could have been men of exceptional character and accomplishments who went to war over a woman. This explanation of the *Sơn Tinh-Thủy Tinh* folk tale hints at an anxiety underpinning *Hoàng Đạo*'s story: while children should appreciate Vietnamese folktales as part of their cultural heritage, care must be taken so that they do not take them literally. With its realistic descriptions, *Hoàng Đạo*'s books aimed to inculcate a strong belief in science and knowledge as a civilizing force by marginalizing fantasy and imagination. For *Hoàng Đạo*, to successfully navigate the new modern world, a well-adjusted individual must espouse perceptions grounded in reality and not flights of fanciful self-expression. As demonstrated by the *Sách Hồng* series, the socializing and pedagogical potential of children's literature to civilize children was not lost on the Self-Reliant Literary Group. *Hoàng Đạo*, *Lên Cung Trăng* (Hanoi: *Đời Nay*: 1940); *Sơn Tinh* (Hanoi: *Đời Nay*: 1941).

<sup>63</sup> Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Vietnam*, 89.

<sup>64</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p 159. According to multiple memoirs, *Thế Lữ* kept a human skull and an unloaded pistol at the Group's headquarters to help him write his horror and detective stories.

<sup>65</sup> *Mai Hương và Lê Phong*, a detective novel featuring *Lê Phong* and a female detective, was issued twice



published Thế Lữ's two-volume translation of Jessie Douglas Kerruish's *the Undying Monster*, a classic in werewolf horror fiction. Other genre fiction works written by Thế Lữ included the suspense and detective stories *Vàng và Máu* [Gold and Blood], *Gói Thuốc Lá* [A Pack of Cigarettes], and *Bên Đường Thiên Lô* [Next to the Thunder God], and the adventure novel *Trại Bò Tùng Linh* [The Camp of Bo Tung Linh]. After the closure of *Ngày Nay* in 1940, genre fiction such as horror, adventure, detective, and children's literature came to dominate *Đời Nay*'s publishing record.

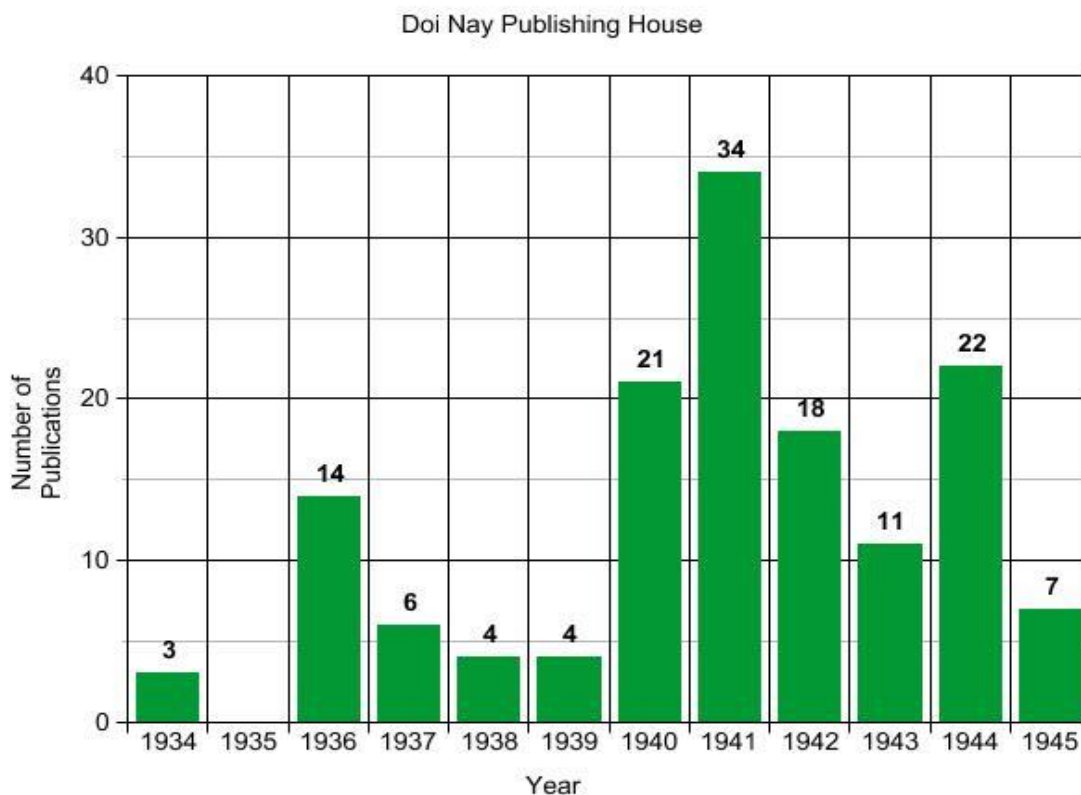
*The Đời Nay Publishing House after Ngày Nay: Quantitative Data and Demise, 1941-1946*

By 1941, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was touting *Đời Nay* as “the largest publishing house in Indochina, using new methods from Europe and America.” Although the criteria on which the Group based such a bold claim remain unclear, it does raise questions about the quantity of *Đời Nay*'s output: How many titles did the firm publish? How many copies were printed of each? Which titles sold the most? In an attempt to answer these questions, I compiled a master list of all *Đời Nay* publications, using the collections at various libraries in Vietnam, my personal collection of the firm's books, and advertisements from *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* (See Appendix B). By my count, *Đời Nay* published a total of 144 different titles, not including multiple reprints. The graph below (Figure 2) depicts the trajectory of the firm's output throughout its 12-year existence. Its data suggests that the firm published in ebbs and flows, as illustrated by the following observations: First, *Đời Nay* published no books in 1935. As discussed above, this was possibly due to the closure of *Phong Hóa* and relaunch of *Ngày Nay*. Second, the firm released only 31 books between 1934 and 1939, during the active years of its newspapers. This implies that book publishing was of lower priority than the Group's journalism and social reforms. It makes sense that the Group focused on book publishing only when they had extra time, as this type of publishing lacked the rigid deadlines and time-sensitive content of periodicals. Finally, *Đời Nay*'s output skyrocketed in 1940, and the firm published four times as many books in the period of 1941-1945 than during the *Phong Hóa/Ngày Nay* years. *Đời Nay* released over 117 books after 1940, averaging 17 books a year. These numbers suggest that after the closure of its newspapers, the Group shifted their efforts from journalism to full-time publishing.<sup>66</sup>

---

in 1937 and 1939. *Đời Nay* printed *Lê Phong Phóng Viên* at least twice. Information from the catalog of Vietnam National Library.

<sup>66</sup> A brochure issued by the *Đời Nay* publishing house in 1940-1941 confirms my list of publications, at least in part. According to the pamphlet, the firm had published about 50 titles in the seven years since its founding. My list of all known *Đời Nay* publications shows that by the end of 1940, *Đời Nay* had published 52 titles.



**Figure 2.** Number of titles published by the Đồi Nây Publishing House by year.

Of the 144 titles, the Pink Book series numbered 41 in total and comprised more than a quarter of all Đồi Nây publications. This number is surprising given the relative insignificance of children’s literature in the historiography of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Easy to write and inexpensive to produce, the Pink Books can be seen as a primary means of economic livelihood for Group members in the post-newspaper years. As Khải Hưng’s son Trần Khánh Triệu wrote in his memoirs, his father made very little gain from the publication of his fourth *Pink Book*, *Cái Ấm Đất* [A Clay Pot]. The book only generated enough money to buy a raincoat for Khải Hưng, and a pair of shoes and toy gun for his son.<sup>67</sup> The low profit from each individual *Pink Book* could very well force the writers to turn out larger numbers of books, thus accounting for the voluminous nature of the series.

While the number of titles provides a general trajectory of the Group’s publishing output, it gives little information on the volume of book sales. How many copies of each title did Đồi Nây release? A brochure published by Đồi Nây in 1940-1941 offers some insight by breaking

<sup>67</sup> Trần Khánh Triệu, “Papa Tòa Báo” in *Nhất Linh: Người Nghệ Sĩ, Người Chiến Sĩ* (Westminster: Thế Kỷ: 2004), 164. Trần Khánh Triệu (born Nguyễn Tường Triệu) was the 4th child of Nhất Linh. Because his close friend Khải Hưng and his wife had no children, Nhất Linh sent Triệu to live with the couple as their adopted son and take their name. As Khải Hưng and his family lived at 80 Quán Thánh, the boy grew up around the Self-Reliant Literary Group and observed the Group’s internal dynamic firsthand.

down the total number of books sold by title. The most popular and highest-selling *Đời Nay* titles were:

1. *Đoạn Tuyệt*, by Nhất Linh (16,000 copies)
2. *Nửa Chừng Xuân*, Khái Hưng (16,000)
3. *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên*, Khái Hưng (14,000)
4. *Đời Mưa Gió*, Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng (7,000)
5. *Anh Phải Sống*, Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng (7,000)
6. *Gánh Hàng Hoa*, Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng (7,000)
7. *Trống Mái*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
8. *Tục Lụy*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
9. *Gia Đình*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
10. *Giọc Đường Gió Bụi*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
11. *Tiếng Suối Reo*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
12. *Đợi Chờ*, Khái Hưng (6,000)
13. *Gió Đầu Mùa*, Thạch Lam (5,000)
14. *Nắng Trong Vườn*, Thạch Lam (5,000)
15. *Ngày Mới*, Thạch Lam (5,000)

The numbers also reveal the Group's top selling writers: Khái Hưng came overwhelmingly in first with 11 of 15 titles and a total of 87,000 books sold, Nhất Linh was second with 4 titles and 37,000 books, and Thạch Lam came third with only 3 titles and 15,000 books. Counting just these 15 popular titles alone, *Đời Nay* sold at least 108,000 books from 1934 to 1941. This tally does not include the other 35-plus titles published during the period, which would undoubtedly push the total much higher. Adding the sales from the Pink Book series from 1939-1945, which I had conservatively estimated at 165,000, would bring this total to 273,000 books. This total only uses data from 56 of the 144 titles; at the very least, the *Đời Nay* publishing house published over 300,000 books in its operative years. While it remains unclear if these numbers confirm *Đời Nay*'s boast as "the largest publishing house in Indochina," they were nevertheless impressive. As David Marr described, most books published during 1925-1945 were printed in runs of 1000-2000 copies, with famous writers receiving 3000-5000.<sup>68</sup> That the Self-Reliant Literary Group members enjoyed runs of 5,000-16,000 is indicative of their widespread popularity and influence during the period.

Other newspapers confirmed the Self-Reliant Literary Group's acclaimed status among Vietnamese readers. In 1937 Saigon newspaper *L'Asie Nouvelle* [*Tân Á Tạp Chí*] conducted a poll about which book was most popular amongst its readers. An unnamed *Đời Nay* publication took first place. In 1940, *Việt Báo* asked its readers for the 10 of the best books of the year. *Đời Nay* boasted that six of its titles took first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and seventh place. Five more titles made the honorable mention list. These polls suggest not only that the works the Self-Reliant Literary Group were well-received amongst readers, but also that its influence had

---

<sup>68</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p 51.

geographical reach, as evidenced by its popularity in Saigon.<sup>69</sup>

After 1946, no further evidence can be found about the Đồi Nay publishing house. The last sign of the firm's existence was a list of Tonkinese publishers printed in *Tin Văn* on May 25, 1946. Đồi Nay was listed as one of 45 publishers in Hanoi and 51 in Tonkin.<sup>70</sup> In 1945-1946, the house on 80 Quán Thánh housed the headquarters of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng's official newspaper, *Việt Nam*. In 1948, a newspaper called *Thời Sự Chủ Nhật* appeared, listing its headquarters at 80 Quán Thánh and featured Lý Toét on its covers. However, no member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group ever contributed to this paper.<sup>71</sup> The last Đồi Nay publication by a member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was *Đợi Chờ* [Waiting] by Khải Hưng in 1945. Despite the high volume of production and popularity, the Đồi Nay publishing house did not survive the tumult of Second World War and August Revolution.

## Part II: Business Practices and Finances of the Đồi Nay Publishing House

As the previous section discussed, the Self-Reliant Literary Group intended the Đồi Nay Publishing House to serve both commercial and cultural purposes. Commercially, the firm aimed to support Group members by publishing their works and promoting their careers. Culturally, Đồi Nay aspired to develop Vietnamese collective intelligence by publishing books both of aesthetic and literary value. The following section builds on these ideas by looking at the firm's specific business practices and work culture. The first subsection examines the spatial layout of the firm's headquarters and describes the division of labor and work environment within the Self-Reliant Literary Group. To emphasize how this work culture set the Group apart from its contemporaries, the second subsection compares Đồi Nay's business practices to those of its main rival, the Tân Dân publishing house. And finally, the third subsection examines the financial circumstances of the individual group members and argues against the historiographical description of the Group as "wealthy and elitist." I maintain that the Self-Reliant Literary Group's unique work environment and culture was the exception rather than the rule in late colonial Hanoi, and that its reform ideals were present even in their day-to-day business activities.

### *Organization and Work Culture*

During the first years of *Phong Hóa*, its headquarters were housed in a number of locations, including Ấp Thái Hà and 1 Boulevard Carnot, but none became so closely associated

---

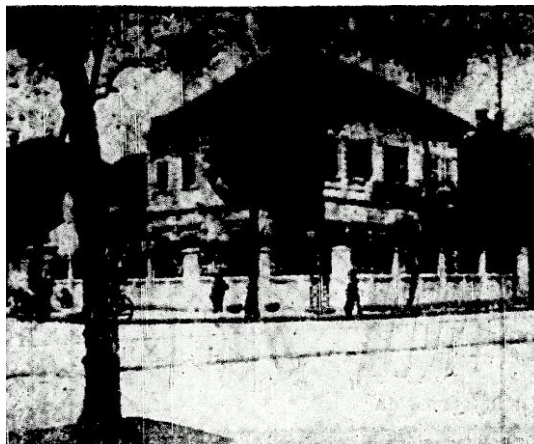
<sup>69</sup> *Nhà Xuất Bản Đồi Nay*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> "Danh sách các nhà xuất bản ở Hanoi" *Tin Văn* no. 1, 25 May 1946, p. 4, 7.

<sup>71</sup> The only recognizable name in *Thời Sự Chủ Nhật* was NGYM, the pseudonym of artist Trần Quang Trân.

with the Self-Reliant Literary Group as the house on 80 Quán Thánh Street (

Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Headquarters of the Self-Reliant Literary Group at 80 Quán Thánh, from *Phong Hóa* no. 172, 31 Jan 1936, p. 10.**

On November 1, 1934, the Self-Reliant Literary Group moved its headquarters to this spacious colonial house in Hanoi's Old Quarter, on the corner of Quán Thánh Street and Hàng Bún (formerly Avenue du Grand Bouddha and Rue des Vermicelles respectively).<sup>72</sup> The colonial mansion came to house not only *Phong Hóa* and later *Ngày Nay*, but also the *Đời Nay* publishing house. Owned by a wealthy French woman who leased it to Khải Hưng, the house was surrounded by a fence and boasted two facades. The main entrance opened onto Quán Thánh Street along the *Bưởi* cable car route. A second entrance could be reached via 55 Hàng Bún, with a flower garden and gate for automobiles. As Trần Khánh Triệu described in his memoirs, in the heyday of the Self-Reliant Literary Group the grounds of the house was hidden behind a thick bamboo hedge. In the shady garden, Group members enjoyed the lounge chairs, pingpong table and hammock while on break from work.<sup>73</sup> From the yard, 6 stone steps led to a wide veranda in front of the house. The first floor housed the Group's administrative and technical operations. Here the Group kept the printing press and the moveable type in a large room to the left. The publishing house owned a *Minerva*, a small printing machine capable of printing up to 1,250 images per hour.<sup>74</sup> The smaller room to the right housed the administrative offices of *Phong Hóa*, the *Đời Nay* publishing house, and in later years, *Ngày Nay*, *Chủ Nhật Tuần Báo*, and *Việt Nam*, the official bulletin of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Vendors who wanted advertisements printed in the paper would visit these offices, but later years all advertising sales

<sup>72</sup> Announcement in *Phong Hóa* no. 123, 9 Nov 1934, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Trần Khánh Triệu, 162.

<sup>74</sup> Vũ Hoàng Chương, *Ta đã làm chi đời ta: hồi ký* ([Hà Nội?]: Hội nhà văn, 1993), 51. James Moran, *Printing Presses; History and Development from the Fifteenth Century to Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 149.

moved to a separate office on Hàng Da.<sup>75</sup> For the brief time in 1935 when *Ngày Nay* focused on photojournalism, this area also housed a tiny darkroom and photographic equipment.<sup>76</sup> The stairs leading upstairs were located outside around the back of the house. Here, a tiled veranda was divided into a storage shed and bathroom. Further into the house, the large room on the left overlooking the bamboo hedge served as the living quarters of Khái Hưng, his wife and adopted son. In a center room, where Khái Hưng and other members would pen their works, two long tables carved with the phoenix insignia of the Self-Reliant Literary Group served as writing desks. The walls were adorned with oil landscapes by Trần Bình Lộc and Nguyễn Gia Trí. Lastly, members would receive guests in a room on the right, furnished with a sofa set, a small work table, and a large bookcase filled with gold embossed leather-bound books from the *Đời Nay* publishing house. A tiny room next to the reception was a storage space for documents and machinery.<sup>77</sup>

The spatial organization of the house yields insight into the day-to-day operations of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The building's ground floor served as the business center for *Phong Hóa*, *Ngày Nay*, and the *Đời Nay* publishing house. Here, employees worked producing the newspapers and operating the publishing house. Nguyễn Thị Thế described staff working night and day, and wrote that “my brothers treated their workers well, and paid a high salary so everyone would work their hardest.”<sup>78</sup> It is unclear, unfortunately, how many workers the publishing house employed. The second floor was reserved for the personal use of members of Group, mostly as a work and meeting space. Khái Hưng lived upstairs and served as the administrator of the headquarters in exchange for the lodging. Some of the other members lived within a few minutes travel of the headquarters: Nhất Linh's house was on Hang Be, Thạch Lam lived in Yên Phụ village, and Hoàng Đạo on Hàng Vôi.<sup>79</sup> The remaining members lived further away: Tú Mỡ lived next to the river in Láng, Thế Lữ rented a small house in Ấp Thái Hà on the Đống Đa border.<sup>80</sup> Proximity to the headquarters perhaps dictated the frequency with which certain members met collectively with the Group. For example, Tú Mỡ did most of his work at home and met with the Group once a week on Saturdays because he lived so far away.<sup>81</sup>

In regards to work, the Self-Reliant Literary Group observed a kind of division of labor, with each member managing a different aspect of the newspaper at various times. Nhất Linh managed all general tasks and set the strategy and tone for each issue. Hoàng Đạo handled the financial accounts and ledgers. Thạch Lam edited reportage and later ran the *Đời Nay* publishing house. Khái Hưng oversaw the headquarters.<sup>82</sup> After the newspapers closed, the members took

<sup>75</sup> Advertisement for *Phong Hóa*, no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách. *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua: hồi ký*. (California: Thạch Ngu, 1998), 87.

<sup>77</sup> This description of the spatial dimensions of 80 Quán Thánh was derived from four memoirs: Trần Khánh Triệu, “Papa Tòa Báo”, 162-163; Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 61-62; Hứa Bảo Liên, *Nguyễn Tường Bách và tôi: hồi ký gia đình* (Westminster, Calif: Jay Ruan, 2005), 59-60; and Anh Thơ. *Từ bến Sông Thương; Tiếng chim tu hú; Bên dòng chia cắt: hồi ký văn học*. (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2002), 109-110.

<sup>78</sup> Nguyễn, Thị Thế. *Hồi ký về gia đình Nguyễn Tường: Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam*. (Saigon: Sóng, 1974), 105. Memoirs by Anh Thơ, and Hua Bao Lien confirm that the Group hired employees.

<sup>79</sup> Trần Khánh Triệu, 162; Nguyễn Thị Thế, 103.

<sup>80</sup> Tú Mỡ, 136, Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 74.

<sup>81</sup> Tú Mỡ, 136. Lê Ta confirms this in “Phong Bút Lê Ta” *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 9, 14-15.

<sup>82</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 63.

turns running the Đồi Nay publishing house.<sup>83</sup> Other family members also joined in the venture: Nguyễn Tường Cẩm, another brother of the Nguyễn Tường Family, held the position of administrator at *Ngày Nay*, and Nguyễn Kim Hoàn, the husband of Nguyễn Thị Thế, worked in various capacities in the newspaper and publishing house. While these roles were by no means exhaustive or fixed, they do illustrate the collaborative and family-oriented nature of the Group's publishing business.

Despite the close-knit and unifying nature of their guiding principles, the work culture of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was one where members worked fairly independently. Because a few members of the Group held day jobs, the Group usually met after work or on weekends. Usually quiet during the day, the upstairs space at 80 Quán Thánh would come alive in the evenings. As Trần Khánh Triệu recounted,

In the afternoons and evenings, the middle room became more animated, cigarette smoke permeating everywhere. Uncle Thế Lữ always sat across from Papa [Khái Hưng], his build slight, his eyes sharp and brilliant... Uncle Hoàng Đạo and “Hàng Bè Papa” [Nhật Linh] worked in the reception room sometimes till very late. They often played chess when taking a break, at every checkmate uncle would slam the board laughing with gusto. Papa sometimes would come and give advice, or open the 36-string dulcimer for a song, its sounds clear and crisp.<sup>84</sup>

Triệu's memoirs describe the Group members as hardworking, yet still finding time for revelry while on a break. Tú Mỡ's memoirs described a similar camaraderie:

On Saturday nights, I met with the rest of the Group. The meetings were very family-like. In the warm and cozy upstairs of the house on 80 Quán Thánh, we gathered around, as close as when we were at Ấp Thái Hà. We would eat *phở* [Vietnamese beef noodle soup]-the *phở* of the roaming peddler on Quán Thánh was delicious, and inspired me to write the funny poem, *Ode to Phở* [Phở Đewjkúc Tụng]; drink the very tasty coffee prepared by Mrs. Khải Hưng; and smoke until the smoke filled the entire floor. During cold weather we would use the heater for warmth. The wood crackling, we kept vigil at the fire, taking about current events, which gave birth to topics for the next issue.<sup>85</sup>

When the Group was not discussing the latest news or the next issue, they were working at a manic pace to meet deadlines:

When preparing new issues, I saw that the Group worked tirelessly. Now that *Phong Hóa* was issued weekly with such demanding content, I realized even more that the Group had a truly amazing capacity for work that was admirable: working day and night, especially at night, going through a considerable amount of coffee and cigarettes, working until orn

---

<sup>83</sup> Đinh Hùng. *Đốt lò hương cũ* ([Saigon]: Lua Thiêng, 1971), 43.

<sup>84</sup> Trần Khánh Triệu, 164

<sup>85</sup> Tú Mỡ, 136.

thin, shriveled, and pale.<sup>86</sup>

Like in any other collective, relationships between group members greatly varied. Some members were closer than others, while some did not socialize outside of work.<sup>87</sup> Memoirs imply that the Group meetings were devoid of women and children other than those who lived at the headquarters, and that the meetings constituted private work time for the Group's members.

About once a month, the Group would take a jaunt to the countryside for much needed recreation and change of scenery. Borrowing a rickety old car from Nguyễn Cao Luyện (an architect that collaborated with *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*), the Group would visit nearby temples such as the Lý Bát Đế shrine, Chùa Tiên, Chùa Trăm Gian, and Chùa Phật Tích. Leaving early on a Sunday morning, the Group would bring food along for a picnic, and Nhất Linh might bring his clarinet. Tú Mỡ claimed that Khải Hưng found his inspiration for his adventure novel *Tiêu Sơn Tráng Sĩ* [The Righteous Warrior of Tieu Mountain] on one such trip to Chùa Tiên.<sup>88</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách wrote that the serene setting of Chua Phật Tích moved Khải Hưng to pen his most famous novel, *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên*.<sup>89</sup> During the early months of *Ngày Nay* when the paper focused on photojournalism, Group members would combine business and pleasure, taking their trips to the countryside with camera in tow.<sup>90</sup> Memoirs from the period suggest that the Group's work culture was well-balanced between work and leisure, independence and collective endeavor.

### *Comparisons with the Tân Dân Publishing House*

The organized work culture that the Group enjoyed—with a central headquarters, regular

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Some outside commentators thought that debauchery, not their work ethic, had caused the haggard and thin appearance of Group members. Khải Hưng in particular was often mistakenly described by other writers at the time as an opium addict. Nguyễn Vỹ wrote that Khải Hưng had once confided in him that he often wrote while under the influence of opium, which accounts for the ethereal tone and settings of his novels such as *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên*. Nguyễn Vỹ, *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến: hồi ký văn học*. (Hà Nội: Hội nhà văn, 1994), 124. The memoirs of Nguyễn Tường Bách and Tú Mỡ categorically denies this and presents a different picture, one of a disciplined and impassioned writer whose influences came from the Group's monthly day trips into the countryside. Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 62. Tú Mỡ, 136.

<sup>87</sup> As Nguyễn Vỹ wrote in his memoirs, he and Nhất Linh often reminisced about the interwar years in 1960s Saigon. Nhất Linh had told him that despite being in the same literary collective, some of the members often had conflicts. For example, Khải Hưng and Thế Lữ “often quarreled with each other.” Đinh Hùng's memoirs confirm one argument between Khải Hưng and Thế Lữ. Nguyễn Vy, 28. Some members of the Group, in this case Tú Mỡ and Thế Lữ, often complained that some received more benefits from the business ventures than others. Nguyễn Vỹ described how Thế Lữ called himself the “poor parent” in the partnership, and that Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng bullied him.” To such accusations, Nhất Linh exclaimed: “Lies! Thế Lữ received the same benefits like myself and Khải Hưng...there is nothing that Thế Lữ and Tú Mỡ could complain about us.” While it is clear from Nguyễn Vỹ's memoirs that the writer had no love lost for Thế Lữ, this anecdote nevertheless alludes to conflict within the Group. Nguyễn Vỹ, 161.

<sup>88</sup> Tú Mỡ, 137-138.

<sup>89</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 81

<sup>90</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 87.



meetings, and division of labor—was exceptional within Hanoi’s literary circles. Memoirs by writers outside of the Self-Reliant Literary Group described very different relationships between themselves and their publishers, in particular the Tân Dân publishing house. *Đời Nay*’s biggest competitor, Tân Dân was located at 93 Hàng Bông. The firm was founded in 1930 by Vũ Đình Long, a bureaucrat-turned-publisher credited for writing *Chén Thuốc Độc* [A Cup of Poison], the first modern spoken play written by a Vietnamese.<sup>91</sup> A former high school teacher who married into wealth, Vũ Đình Long had a knack for business and soon developed Tân Dân into one of the largest Vietnamese-owned publishing houses, boasting about 500 employees.<sup>92</sup>

Memoirs depicted Long as a consummate businessman: Nguyễn Công Hoan wrote that Long was always “hatching schemes,” and Ngọc Giao described him as “full of ruses.”<sup>93</sup> When the Self-Reliant Literary Group announced its founding in 1934, Vũ Đình Long tried to jump on this bandwagon and start his own literary collective. However, Nguyễn Công Hoan suspected that the clever businessman had more selfish motives:

Seeing the brothers over at *Phong Hóa* form the Self-Reliant Literary Group to unify themselves in the creation of literature, Vũ Đình Long wanted to bind me to *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* [Saturday Novel] and not allow me to write for other papers. He founded the *Saturday Novel Literary Group* [Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy Văn Đoàn], typed up the rules, and asked me to sign it. I have always hated imitation, so at first glance at the words “Saturday Novel Literary Group” I immediately had bad feelings. Reading the document, I saw a short sentence wedged in the middle of some innocuous rules. If I were careless I would have thought it ordinary: ‘A member of this group is not allowed to write for any other newspaper.’ I understood immediately the ulterior motive of this cunning person. If I was not paying attention and signed this contract out of respect for a friend, I would have tied my own feet, and perhaps even have committed career suicide.<sup>94</sup>

What the Self-Reliant Literary Group saw as the public proclamation of their financial and ideological independence was seen by Vũ Đình Long as an opportunity to legally bind successful writers to his publication. It was this kind of business savvy that made Vũ Đình Long one of the wealthiest men in Hanoi’s literary circles.

The Tân Dân publishing house employed a more expansive business model than *Đời Nay*. Unlike the *Đời Nay* firm, which specialized solely in literary publication and journals, Tân Dân was also a commercial printing service. As Thanh Châu described, the Tân Dân publishing house originally began by printing pamphlets, movie tickets, and school textbooks, eventually evolving into a literary publishing house in a few short years.<sup>95</sup> As previously discussed, *Đời*

---

<sup>91</sup> Ngọc Giao’s date of 1930 is questionable. A cursory look in the library catalog of the National Libraries of Vietnam and France reveal Tân Dân publications from as early as the mid 1920s. 1930 could have been the year Vũ Đình Long started to take an interest in literary publishing rather than just commercial printing. Ngọc Giao, “Hồi ký văn học: Chủ nhà in, nhà xuất bản Tân Dân Ông Vũ Đình Long” *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 1 (1991), 58.

<sup>92</sup> Ngọc Giao, 58-59.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 179-180.

<sup>95</sup> Thanh Châu, “Hồi ký văn học: mười năm với tuần báo *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*” *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 2

Nay often used Tân Dân's printing service to print *Phong Hóa*, *Ngày Nay*, and books by the Self-Reliant Literary Group.<sup>96</sup> In the early 1930s, Vũ Đình Long decided to try his hand at literary publishing. In 1934, he started the weekly *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*, his most well-known publication which serialized original and translated novels. In 1936, he launched *Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San* [the General Semi-monthly Magazine], a cheaper biweekly printed in a smaller size featuring a mix of novels, novellas, and short stories. These two journals lasted until 1945 and proved to be Vũ Đình Long's most enduring and highest-selling publications. His later attempts at literary journalism (similar to *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*), which included articles and editorials as well as literature, were less successful. To compete with the Group's papers, the Tân Dân firm published journals such as *Ích Hữu* [Of Use] (101 issues, 1936-1937) and *Tao Đàn* [Literary Circle] (1939-1940). Financially backed and published by Vũ Đình Long, these newspapers were mainly run by writers in his employ, including as Lê Văn Trương and Lan Khái.<sup>97</sup> None of these papers could match *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*'s popularity and longevity—they only lasted one year before closing. In another attempt to compete with the Self-Reliant Literary Group, this time with its popular Sach Hong children's series, Tân Dân began publishing a children's magazine called *Truyền Bá* [To Spread] that ran from 1941-1945.

Vũ Đình Long's shrewd business acumen paid off—for much of the decade, *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* had slightly higher circulation numbers than *Ngày Nay*.<sup>98</sup> In December of 1938, *Ngày Nay* boasted a circulation of 7,500 copies, while *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* just barely exceeded it with 8,000, making them the two highest-circulating weeklies in Tonkin.<sup>99</sup> According to Vũ Bằng, one of Vũ Đình Long's strategies was to “sell [his journals] at the lowest price so that competitors cannot keep up” and that “the types of readers he angled for most were women and children.” Evidence seems to support Vũ Bằng's claims; Tân Dân's publications cost much less than those from *Đời Nay*. For example, the Group charged ten sous for an issue of *Ngày Nay*, while Tân Dân sold issues of *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* for seven. The price difference is even more glaring considering the fact that a typical issue of *Ngày Nay* had 24 pages and *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* averaged around 60. An issue of *Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San* comprising 200 pages cost at the most 25 sous, the price *Đời Nay* charged for its *Green Books*. In other words, Tân Dân offered more reading material at a cheaper price. *Đời Nay* could never match Tân Dân's volume

---

(1991), 79.

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, that the Group often used print services of their “rivals” calls into question the nature of intellectual competition during the period. Before founding their own in-house print shop, the Group used a number of outside printers, some from their bitterest “rivals” such as Trung Bắc Tân Văn and Tân Dân. Such information suggests that on some levels, interactions remained strictly business.

<sup>97</sup> All of permits found in the archives for Tân Dân's papers were held by Vũ Đình Long's wife, Nguyễn Thị Hợi. Vietnam National Archives #1, Mairie de Hanoi, DS 611. 2660, p 104-111; DS611.2663, p 48-52. Working in education, Vũ Đình Long was not permitted to engage in commerce. To circumvent the system, his mother held the deeds for his bookstores, his wife the publishing house and newspapers. Needless to say, Vũ Đình Long held the de facto reins of these businesses. Nguyễn Công Hoan, p 164.

<sup>98</sup> In this list compiled by the colonial government, *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* had circulation numbers of 7,000, inching ahead of *Ngày Nay*'s 6,000 copies. *Listes des journaux et periodiques paraissant en Indochine*, 30 Jun 1937, CAOM, Fonds Resident Superieure, Nouveau Fonds, Carton 369, A8.2950, p 11.

<sup>99</sup> *Liste des journaux et publications periodiques paraissant en Indochine*, Dec 1938, SLOTFOM Serie 5, Carton 39.

in both newspaper and book publication: they had neither the manpower nor the capital.<sup>100</sup>

The ability of Vũ Đình Long to offer his readers such an abundance of reading material was a direct consequence of Tân Dân's work culture, which differed greatly from that of *Đời Nay*. Because the Group self-published their own works, they did not face the same conditions as other writers of the period. Memoirs written by Tân Dân writers suggest that they worked freelance and sold their work piece-by-piece to Vũ Đình Long. Although most lived in Hanoi, some of Tân Dân's writers lived all over the Tonkin and sent in submissions most likely by post. For example, Nguyễn Công Hoan's teaching jobs had him living in places like Hai Duong, Nam Sach, Kinh Mon, Lao Cai, and Tra Co.<sup>101</sup> In regards to payment, Vũ Đình Long was

famous for being tight with money. However, towards writers who had reputations for attracting readers such as Lê Văn Trương and Nguyễn Công Hoan, he showed himself to be generous within a limit, allowing them to borrow money before providing stories, paying them a bit more in royalties than those who have not yet established a name... Mr. Long has never been praised as a generous person.<sup>102</sup>

According to Vũ Ngọc Phan, the Tân Dân publishing house paid authors 8 hào or 80 sous per page.<sup>103</sup> In his memoirs, Vũ Bằng wrote that *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* paid 5 piastres for every short story.<sup>104</sup> Even so, Nguyễn Công Hoan suggested that Vũ Đình Long paid each writer on a different pay scale, depending on the writers' reputation:

I knew that the royalties he paid me were much higher than the others. And for many, he paid no royalties at all. In many of the issues, the good stories carried the bad ones. Later

---

<sup>100</sup> Sometimes the competition between the Tân Dân publishing house and *Đời Nay* erupted into all-out verbal battles across the pages of their newspapers. On February 28, 1937, *Ngày Nay* critiqued *Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San* by calling it "neither book nor newspaper" [phi thư phi báo], because the paper was essentially a novel disguised as a newspaper. The Group accused the Tân Dân publishing house of cheating the system for profit: First, Tân Dân can pay writers less by publishing their works in a "newspaper" rather than a book. The firm could also cheat the government by buying cheaper paper as well as save money in postage, all under the guise of publishing a newspaper. *Ngày Nay* accused Tân Dân of dishonest business practices that purposefully prevents other firms from competing. *Ngày Nay* warned that such deceit would only ruin the reputation of the Tân Dân publishing house, and urged it to close down the publication. Tân Dân responded through Ích Hữu, pointing out that many writers publish with *Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San* precisely because the paper is generous. The firm hit back with accusations of its own, hinting that perhaps the Group had betrayed it to the authorities. Such descriptions are consistent with the characterization of Vũ Đình Long as a smart businessman. Nhị Linh, "Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San" *Ngày Nay* no. 48, 28 Feb 1936, p. 65. Ích Hữu no. 56, 16 Mar 1937, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 90

<sup>102</sup> Thanh Châu, 80.

<sup>103</sup> Vũ, Ngọc Phan. *Những năm tháng ấy: hồi ký*. (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1987), 176. Given Vũ Đình Long's rule that each page must have at least 32 lines, this means that writers were paid about 2.5 sous per line. As Thạch Lam points out in *Phong Hóa*, 2 sous per line was the standard rate. "Bảng Thống Kê" *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 9. When Vũ Ngọc Phan published his two-volume translation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in 1944, *Đời Nay* paid him 400 piastres. It is unclear how this would compare to the other publishing houses of the time. Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Những năm tháng ấy*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> Vũ Bằng. *Bốn mươi năm nói láo* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993), 152-3.

on, with *Phổ Thông Bán Nguyệt San*, the good issues carried the bad ones. A new writer upon seeing his work published is usually so happy that he doesn't even think about asking for royalties. Therefore, *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* spent little and reaped a lot. The Tân Dân publishing house made a lot of profit, and gradually grew into a large publishing house.<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps because he paid them differently, Vũ Đình Long actively discouraged any contact between writers. Nguyễn Công Hoan wrote that Vũ Đình Long's greatest fear was that his collaborating writers would meet each other. Hoan described travelling to Hanoi to meet with Long:

When I wanted to visit a few people who wrote for *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*, I asked [Vũ Đình Long] but he wouldn't give me their addresses. Many times, from when I left the train station to go to his house, till when I boarded the train to go home, he did not let me out of his sight...<sup>106</sup>

Other memoirs describe a fragmented work culture very different from that at Đồi Nây. In addition, Vũ Đình Long was more open about what he published in order to offer his readers more abundant reading material. Nguyễn Công Hoan described *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* as “a story factory, publishing stories of every kind, as long as they were in clean prose.”<sup>107</sup> Vũ Đình Long's aim, according to Hoan, was to inundate his readers with many different types of stories so that everyone would have something they like. Furthermore, these publications required very little work on the part of the publisher: because they had very little time-sensitive material such as editorials or news, the issues were easy to prepare and print. For this reason, Vũ Đình Long often compiled *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* as many as four issues ahead.<sup>108</sup> As a result, the Tân Dân publishing house was able to offer its readers an abundance of publications in both volume and genre.

Vũ Đình Long's often tightfisted approach eventually earned him the ire of his writers; his persnickety way of tallying royalties erupted in a strike in 1939. To prevent writers from exploiting the per-page rate by writing shorter lines and extensive dialogue, Long introduced a rule that each line must have at least 11 words and each page at least 32 lines. As Đình Hùng wrote in his memoirs, Vũ Đình Long's way of “selling words had been industrialized to the point of ‘tallying lines for pay’ and even to the point of “counting words for money.” A number of writers not only rejected the publisher's parsimonious word tallying, but also demanded that he increase the price per line by a few hào. Their demands fell on deaf ears. The writers—including Vũ Trọng Phụng, Lê Văn Trương, Lan Khai, Vũ Bằng, Ngọc Giao, Nguyễn Công Hoan, Thâm

<sup>105</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 179.

<sup>106</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 179-180

<sup>107</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 176.

<sup>108</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 166. Before 1940, *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* only printed time sensitive material twice—both times responding to the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The first time was during the infamous pen war between Nguyễn Công Hoan and Nhất Linh, the second time was when Tchya responded to *Ngày Nay's* criticism of his writing.

Tâm, and Trần Huyền Trân—staged a strike to force the publisher to capitulate. Out of desperation, however, some of the writers broke rank and secretly sent their manuscripts to Vũ Đình Long. After a few months, Tân Dân finally relented and issued a new contract to the writers.<sup>109</sup> Đình Hùng’s anecdote illustrates the often contentious relationship between writers and publishers; this was exactly the kind of situation the Self-Reliant Literary Group wanted to avoid.

Literary scholars and historians such as Peter Zinoman, Phong Lê and Hà Minh Đức would often refer to the writers who churned out stories for Vũ Đình Long as the “Tân Dân Group” [Nhóm Tân Dân].<sup>110</sup> Such nomenclature can be misleading by implying collective organization when none existed. Accounts of the period suggest that in the literary world of 1930s Vietnam, only the Self-Reliant Literary Group could be considered a literary collective. The Group had well-defined guiding principles, operating procedures, and rules for membership. Moreover, the fact that Group members held an ownership stake in the Đời Nay publishing house further added to the Group’s sense of cohesion. In comparison, the Tân Dân “group” was a number of independent freelance authors that dealt on a one-by-one basis with Vũ Đình Long. Unlike the Self-Reliant Literary Group, in which all members were paid a small (but nevertheless regular) salary, only two men at Tân Dân received similar payment: Trúc Khê and Ngọc Giao. According to Nguyễn Công Hoan, Ngọc Giao was the only employee who had a salary at Tân Dân, making 35 piastres a month for copyediting.<sup>111</sup> Thanh Châu corroborates Nguyễn Công Hoan’s account when he wrote, “They called it a “newspaper headquarters” to make it sound grander, but in truth there were only two people who loitered about and received monthly salaries. . . .”<sup>112</sup> Thus, the description of the Hanoi literary world as competing intellectual cliques is not wholly accurate; most writers existed in a constant state of flux. Sometimes one of these writers would start a newspaper and would invite their friends to collaborate; oftentimes these ventures would prove short lived. When not working with a newspaper, they would sell their stories to whoever would pay for them. Such was the case with Vũ Trọng Phụng. Although often identified as a member of the so called Tân Dân “Group,” he wrote for a wide array of newspapers such as *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*, *Hanoi Báo*, *Hải Phòng Tuần Báo*, and *Tương Lai* and published his works with a number of publishers such as SADEP, Mai Lĩnh, Đông Tây, Minh Phương and Phương Đông.

### *Perpetual Uncertainty: The Self-Reliant Literary Group’s financial situation*

---

<sup>109</sup> Đình Hùng, 79-80. This impromptu writer’s strike came a little too late for Vũ Trọng Phụng. A few weeks after the Tân Dân publishing house relented, the writer died of tuberculosis at the age of 27.

<sup>110</sup> Peter Zinoman, “Introduction: Vũ Trọng Phụng’s *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism” in Vũ Trọng Phụng, trans. Nguyệt Cẩm Nguyễn, and Peter Zinoman. *Dumb Luck: A Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 20; Phong Lê. *Văn học trên hành trình của thế kỷ XX* (Hà Nội: Đại học quốc gia, 1997), 401; Đỗ Chính, and Minh Đức Hà. *Báo chí, những vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn*. [Hà Nội?]: Giáo dục, 1994), 375.

<sup>111</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 176.

<sup>112</sup> Thanh Châu, 80. Sometime in the late 1930s, Ngọc Giao left Tân Dân to go work in the South, and Vũ Đình Long hired Vũ Bằng to replace him.

Even if the royalties paid by Vũ Đình Long and other publishers seemed unfair and exploitative at the time, they later became a source of pride for some writers. The poverty in which many writers lived during the 1930s allowed them to later repackage themselves as closer to the masses than the “rich” and “elitist” Self-Reliant Literary Group. For example, Thanh Châu reminisced that

the stories in *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* only humbly reflected life, the destinies of ordinary people like teachers, clerks, small businessmen, peasants who were exploited by mandarins and landed gentry... These stories lacked the “happy and youthful” attitudes of upper strata that society at the time revered.<sup>113</sup>

Thanh Châu hinted at a kind of class divide, pitting the “humble” and “exploited” masses (represented by *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*) against the carefree and gay upper classes. Communist literary history also implies something similar. Although Thanh Châu did not mention the Self-Reliant Literary Group by name, he alluded to the “happy and youthful” slogan often associated with it. Such a description may not be wholly accurate. While Vũ Đình Long’s “story factory” may have published serious realist literature by writers such as Nguyễn Công Hoan and Nguyễn Hồng, such stories were often mixed in with more “pulp” genres of fiction like knight-errant, scholar-beauty, adventure and martial arts.

Other writers point to the imposing house at 80 Quán Thánh as evidence that the Self-Reliant Literary Group made a large profit from their newspaper and publishing ventures. As Nguyễn Vỹ wrote in his gossipy memoir *Nhà Văn Thi Sĩ Tiền Chiến* [Writers and Poets before the Revolution],

The Self-Reliant Literary Group perhaps were very rich, but I heard a lot of friends say that only Nhất Linh was the true capitalist, and that Khải Hưng and Thế Lữ had to live with the royalty money and a number of other benefits that Nhất Linh doled out... Khải Hưng was truly simple, and even though he lived at the *Ngày Nay* headquarters on Quán Thánh, that beautiful building belonged to Nhất Linh. Khải Hưng merely lived there... Outside of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, all the other writers were truly poor.<sup>114</sup>

As previously established, the Group did not own the house on 80 Quán Thánh, but rather rented it from a French landlady. Some observers interpreted the Group’s self-reliance as exclusivity, placing the Group in contradistinction to the “inclusiveness” of Vũ Đình Long’s firm. As Thanh Châu wrote about Tân Dân:

The doors to this “lair” was not shut, not picky and difficult like the door into the Self-Reliant Literary Group, a group who chose only those who have studied abroad, those with diplomas, those with positions with high salaries so the government can secure their

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>114</sup> Nguyễn Vỹ, 492.

livelihood.<sup>115</sup>

In his observation, Thanh Châu interpreted the freelance arrangements at Tân Dân as indicative of a more inclusive and egalitarian work environment. Thanh Châu barely hides his resentment of Group members for their education and employment, which he uses as evidence of their elitism. While all the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group completed at least the elementary diploma [thành chung], only Nhất Linh actually studied abroad.<sup>116</sup> In all fairness, he was only able to go to France because of his industrious wife and a generous scholarship.

Contrary to these descriptions, memoirs of those close to the Group suggest that the portrayal of the Group as a set of wealthy elite intellectuals is not wholly accurate. Even within the Group itself, circumstances varied greatly: some were well off while others lived in poverty. The difference had everything to do with supplementary income: Hoàng Đạo held the position of chief clerk of the court [commis greffier, or tham tá lục sự], a job that brought in a comfortable 140 piastres a month.<sup>117</sup> Tú Mỡ worked as a secretary in the Offices of Finance.<sup>118</sup> Khải Hưng and Nhất Linh both taught for a time at École Thang Long. Only later did Khải Hưng and Nhất Linh stop teaching to devote themselves to writing and running the newspaper, some time before September 1935.<sup>119</sup> Both men also relied on their wives for financial support. Trần Khánh Triệu wrote about Khải Hưng's finances: "As my mother told me, my father's salary at the paper was very low, luckily my maternal grandmother gave my mother some paddy fields in Quế Phương, Hải Hậu. Because of that land we had enough to spend."<sup>120</sup> Later, Khải Hưng's wife opened a small shop selling knickknacks in a storefront rented from the Thụy Kỳ printing house. Similarly, Nhất Linh's industrious wife brought in a second income with her small business selling betel and vegetables. During an interview, she confided to the young poet Anh Thơ:

I have to worry about making money to support my seven children... And sometimes I have to provide spending money for my husband, and writers have a lot of expenses, I can tell you! My husband has to host his friends, and pool resources to publish newspapers and books.<sup>121</sup>

When Anh Thơ asked her about the profits made from selling newspapers and books, Nhất Linh's wife laughed and replied, "The profit from books and newspapers is put back into capital for expansion... Lucky that my business of selling betel is easily profitable, and can help my husband pay for things."<sup>122</sup> This interview was conducted sometime after February 1938,

---

<sup>115</sup> Thanh Châu, 80

<sup>116</sup> Nhất Linh and Hoàng Đạo completed their bachelor's degrees (cử nhân) in science and law respectively. Khải Hưng, Tú Mỡ, and Xuân Diệu held at least a secondary diploma (tú tài), while Thạch Lam received his elementary diploma.

<sup>117</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thế, 103.

<sup>118</sup> Tú Mỡ, 132.

<sup>119</sup> In September 1935, an advertisement for École Thăng Long listing the teachers of the school did not include Nguyễn Tường Tam or Trần Khánh Giur. *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 15.

<sup>120</sup> Trần Khánh Triệu, 163.

<sup>121</sup> Anh Thơ, 188.

<sup>122</sup> Anh Thơ, 189.

relatively late in the Group's operative years.<sup>123</sup> This suggests that although Nhất Linh was perhaps better off than his literary counterparts, he perhaps was not wealthy enough for his wife to stop working.

Members of the Group who lacked a supplementary income and depended solely on royalties fared the worst. Among Group members, Thế Lữ and Thạch Lam may have been the poorest. With their meager salaries, most writers at the time rented their lodging. Nguyễn Tường Bách incredulously described the living situation of Thế Lữ and his wife Song Kim, both famous artists of their time:

Thế Lữ found a place outside of the city because it was cheaper and quieter. I remember the house he rented was in an alleyway... The furnishings were simple. The outer room had a large straw mat on which to receive guests, a table for working, a few wooden chairs. They were poor, truly poor ... That was the house of two famous personages of a period: Thế Lữ and Song Kim, both well-known actors.<sup>124</sup>

Nguyễn Thị Thế described Thạch Lam as the “hungriest and poorest” of all her brothers: “Living in a thatched-roof and thin-walled house, [Thạch Lam] didn't have enough money to buy a duvet. One early morning I called in on him, I saw him using a thin felt blanket, to which he added a tablecloth and raincoat because of the cold.”<sup>125</sup> At the end of his life, Thạch Lam was so poor that he lived in a League of Light style bamboo house in Yên Phụ Village on Hanoi's West Lake. This contrasts with Van Nguyen-Marshall's description of Thạch Lam as having a “romanticized perception of rural poverty,” that the author lived simply because he wanted the idealized life of a starving artist. Evidence suggests Thạch Lam was not playing poor to be closer to the peasantry, he *was* poor. So the finances of individual members of the Group varied greatly and undercut generalized characterizations of the Group as wealthy and elitist.

Not only did the wealth of individual members differ, but so did the general picture of the Group's business ventures. Memoirs reveal that the financial situation of the Group fluctuated over time. During the first years of *Phong Hóa*, Nhất Linh and his associates faced financial difficulties in starting the paper, and any profit made was immediately reinvested to cover production costs. As Nguyễn Tường Bách wrote, “At first, everyone had to work without salary so that the money could be spent on paper and printing. Everyone was happy to do it because they liked to write and the readers encouraged them.”<sup>126</sup> Only once *Phong Hóa* had taken off did Group members accept a small salary of 30 piastres monthly, and even then only some members were paid.<sup>127</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách described how these salaries afforded only a

<sup>123</sup> During the interview, Nhất Linh's wife mentioned that her husband was away in Phuc Xa, where the League of Light was building its housing development. *Ngày Nay* announced the plans to build this development in its Feb 27, 1938 issue; this places Anh Thơ's interview sometime after this date.

<sup>124</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 74-75.

<sup>125</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thế, 103-104.

<sup>126</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam những ngày lịch sử*. ([Montréal]: Nhóm nghiên-cứu sử-địa Việt-Nam, 1981), 31.

<sup>127</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thế, 103. In Tú Mỡ's memoirs, however, the salary was 50 piastres. A possible explanation for this discrepancy: the Group very well may have increased the salary periodically once *Phong Hóa* became more



minimal existence:

The salaries at the newspaper were only enough to provide at the most for clothing, two meals a day with vegetables and beancurd, and a bit of fish or meat for the young children. Only when a book was published did life become a bit more adequate.<sup>128</sup>

Bách's comment suggests that Group members would supplement their salaries by publishing books. In addition to the salaries, the Group also received dividends from their original 500 piastre investment; these yearly dividends usually amounted to some 100 piastres a year. Despite the paper's skyrocketing circulation shortly after Nhất Linh took over, it took some time before *Phong Hóa's* financial situation became sustainable.

In the process of building up their newspaper enterprise, the Group made mistakes that set back their financial growth. Nguyễn Thị Thế described how the Group's passion for writing often eclipsed their business acumen. So they could spend more time writing literature, the Group members entrusted the job of printing and advertising sales to an unnamed friend. After two years,

... someone informed my brothers, they examined the ledgers and found that he had skimmed a large amount of money from the register. It was truly bitter--all of their hopes, hard work, and suffering were in vain. When my mother heard the news, she gave my brothers a tongue-lashing. She said things had to come to this for them to see the light, and not everyone had pure ideals like they did. Because of what happened, all suggested that Fourth brother [Hoàng Đạo] would take charge of the publishing house, and my husband [Nguyễn Kim Hoàn] will serve as assistant.<sup>129</sup>

This incident ultimately yielded positive results. After the embezzlement came to light, the Group took direct control of its business affairs. Because of the new management, "The printing house became grander, with employees working day and night, helping people have a livelihood."<sup>130</sup> Not only did the Group enjoy higher profits a few years later, but they were able to buy a new machine and moveable type. According to Tú Mỡ, the Self-Reliant Literary Group's most lucrative period was after 1938, when the Group purchased its own in-house printing press.<sup>131</sup> After years of hiring outside printing services, the Group celebrated its new

---

lucrative. Nevertheless, a salary of 30 piastres would hardly been enough to support a family in Hanoi. Thirty piastres a month was less than what IDEO paid their linotypists. It was also less than what Vũ Đình Long, the head of Tân Dân publishing, paid Ngọc Giao his copyeditor. See CAOM, Commission Guernut, Carton 24, Dossier B.E. p. 3; Nguyễn Công Hoan, 176.

<sup>128</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 56. This observation could help explain why members of the Group published so prolifically after the newspaper shut down—the lack of salaries from the newspaper forced Group members to continually push out more publications.

<sup>129</sup> While the culprit in question was never named, in 1934 *Phong Hóa* advertised that it entrusted its advertising sales to a man named Nguyễn Trọng Trác. *Phong Hóa* no. 113, 31 Aug 1934, p. 13. Nguyễn Thị Thế, 104-105

<sup>130</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thế 104-105.

<sup>131</sup> Tú Mỡ, 147.

machine with a play on words: “*These Days* these days prints in an in-house print house.” [*Ngày Nay* ngày nay in nhà-in nhà].<sup>132</sup> But even in its heyday, the Group’s finances were never assured.

Nhất Linh’s ultimate goal was for the Group to reach a level of economic security so that the members could completely dedicate all their time to writing. After purchasing a printing press for *Đời Nay*, Nhất Linh turned his attention to securing the Group’s financial future, a plan he had nurtured for a long time. He intended to establish a model commune on ten hectares of land at the foot of Tam Đảo mountain, which will be called *Từ Lâm* after his first short story. With the help of his brother Nguyễn Trường Cầm, an agricultural engineer, the commune would thrive off the land and would boast all the trappings of civilized living advanced by the Group’s League of Light, such as schools, medical clinics, nurseries, sports clubs, etc. With all of these basic needs met, the Group would devote themselves entirely to writing and publishing. However, Nhất Linh’s dream never came to fruition.<sup>133</sup> However, the Group did manage to establish a mutual assistance plan that would protect its members from unforeseen debilitating costs. As Nguyễn Thị Thế wrote, “When my brothers’ salaries were raised, they started an emergency fund for the editorial board in times of illness or other life expenses. Depending on the situation, sometimes a small amount was taken out of wages or given free.”<sup>134</sup> The various memoirs provide a nuanced picture of the Group’s finances; first, its individual members had different financial circumstances, which directly contrast with the historiography describing the Group as wealthy elites. Additionally, the profitability of the Group’s business ventures fluctuated. While the Group fared better after 1937, a degree of uncertainty always remained over its financial stability, which was why achieving economic self-sufficiency was never far from the mind of its founder Nhất Linh.

### Part III: *Đời Nay*’s publishing process: The 1936 Special Tết Issue

Along with books, the *Đời Nay* Publishing House also published the Group’s newspapers. The annual special Tết issue, published the week before lunar new year, was a mainstay of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s newspaper publishing practices. The yearly issues began appearing in 1933, the first Tết under Nhất Linh’s editorialship, and appeared without fail until 1940, shortly before the abrupt closure of *Ngày Nay*. The Lunar New Year signified the coming of spring and renewal, a fact not lost on the Group; it often used the special Tết issue to inaugurate new columns and reforms. In its very first Spring issue in 1933, the Group republished Phan Khôi’s *Tình Già* [Elderly Love], effectively relaunching and reviving the New Poetry Movement.<sup>135</sup> In the 1934 Tết issue, Lemur’s very first fashion column appeared,

<sup>132</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay* no. 208, 18 May 1940, p. 4, 16.

<sup>133</sup> Tú Mỡ, 148. Nguyễn Thị Thế, 105-106. Accounts differ as to how far Nhất Linh got with his plan. Tú Mỡ wrote that the Group had petitioned the government for the land, but the petition was discarded. Nguyễn Thị Thế wrote that the land had already been procured and was ready for construction. Regardless, Nhất Linh’s ultimate plan never became reality.

<sup>134</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thế, 105.

<sup>135</sup> Although the Group did not start the movement, it did pioneer it.

outlining the designer's reasons for reforming women's clothing. *Ngày Nay* made its debut during the Tết season of 1936. In the Spring issue of 1937, Thế Lữ penned a glowing article introducing the young and talented poet Xuân Diệu, who would later join the Self-Reliant Literary Group as its 7<sup>th</sup> member. Tết was also the season to look back on the past; the Group often included articles celebrating its past achievements or revisiting its most well-known projects. For example in 1940, the Group recounted the history of Lý Toét, its most famous cartoon character.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group spared no expense for the Tết issue. For the occasion, the editorial board expanded the issue from the usual 16-20 pages to as many as 44 pages, hired Hanoi's most famous artists such as Nguyễn Gia Trí and Tô Ngọc Vân to design the cover and layout, and used the city's most expensive and specialized printers. The Group saw the special Tết issue as a way to thank its readers for their support. As the heartfelt greeting of the 1939 *Ngày Nay* issue read:

The *Ngày Nay* Tết issue is in your hands; you are about to turn every page. Before you begin reading it, please let us say that this literary and artistic effort was made for you. We want to please our readers, and thank them for their sincere trust in *Ngày Nay*. We wish to present you with a lovely gift for the spring, that is why we published the Tết issue... Spring provides us with an opportunity to give back for your support.

According to the Group, the Tết issues allowed the Group to push the boundaries of newspaper production and experiment with new content and layouts:

We can honestly say, without unnecessary modesty, that every *Ngày Nay* Tết issue published is a step for us in the newspaper world. Every layout and content of each Tết issue is different, the articles are new and different with every issue, and the art is more and more graceful. The *Ngày Nay* Tết issue is an annual Tết gift that longs to please everyone, to bring to everyone happiness the entire Tết holiday season. We do not hesitate in the face of any difficulty; the special insert, cover of 6 colors are all printed by the largest print house in Hanoi.<sup>136</sup>

The annual special Tết issue served dual purposes for the Group: it kept readers interested by giving them something other than the usual fare; and it allowed the Group to try out new content and layout designs, thus keeping the Group competitive and dynamic.

In the January 31, 1936 issue of *Phong Hóa*, the Group gave its readers a rare glimpse into its publishing process. In an article titled "Producing our Spring Issue" [Chúng Tôi Làm Số Báo Mùa Xuân], Thạch Lam described the process of financing, planning, organizing, printing, and distributing the special *Phong Hóa* Tết issue.<sup>137</sup> Tracing the publication through its various stages sheds light on the editorial and publishing practices not only of the Đời Nay firm, but also of the Vietnamese publishing industry in general.

<sup>136</sup> "Ngày Nay cùng các bạn đọc yêu quý," *Ngày Nay* no. 149, 15 Feb 1939, p. 6

<sup>137</sup> Thạch Lam, "Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân," *Phong Hóa* no. 172, 31 Jan 1936, p. 10-11.

### *Planning*

According to Thạch Lam, the Group began planning for its Tết issue three months in advance. The Group would convene a meeting of the entire publishing house, including the management and administrative team, and staff of the newspaper headquarters. During this meeting, the Group sketched out a larger plan for the Tết issue, which included the “general spirit, the form the issue will take and the content of articles.”<sup>138</sup> The meeting addressed financial concerns of producing the issue, from factoring the cost of production to projecting anticipated revenue. These calculations would dictate the physical form the issue would take, such as number of pages, appearance of cover, centerfold insert, etc. Other memoirs described Nhất Linh as the principle organizer of the paper, delegating tasks to its members. According to Thạch Lam, the most difficult aspect of planning the issue was that

there is still three more months till Tết, the weather and earth looks nothing like spring yet, but all the writers must pretend that spring had already arrived and write prose about Tết, or compose poetry celebrating spring. Thus we celebrate Tết before everyone else by at least two months.<sup>139</sup>

As Thạch Lam described, any special issue required extensive planning not only for its contents, but also to ensure its profitability.

### *Advertising*

When planning the special issue, the Group outlined how it would be promoted. As the issue would have to be advertised well in advance, the Group needed to make sure they could deliver the product promised: “We believe that planning is the most necessary thing in all tasks...Sincerity is the key, if we deceived the readers regarding the number of people or content, even if only one time, the next time we would lose everyone’s trust.”<sup>140</sup> As Nhị Linh wrote, advertising was a necessary aspect of the publishing industry: “even if a book is of value and is worth reading, if people don’t know to buy it, then the publisher would have failed.”<sup>141</sup> However, he also acknowledged that advertising was only important insofar as it went simultaneously with literary merit; a badly written book aggressively advertised would only draw in customers that one time only. The next time, readers would not be easily taken in by flashy advertising. Nhị Linh concluded that the key to the longevity of a publishing house lay in the aggressive marketing of a high quality product. As proprietors of the business, Group members

---

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Nhị Linh, “Viet Sach, Xuat Ban Sach.”

were aware of the benefits of advertising and actively promoted their newspapers and *Đời Nay* publications.

The Group advertised *Phong Hóa*, *Ngày Nay*, and *Đời Nay* books on the pages of their journals as well as on the flyleaves of their books. Advertisements for the *Đời Nay* publishing house itself appeared almost on a weekly basis. Notices for special issues and soon-to-be-released books appeared well in advance, often months before their release. Most of the advertisements in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* pitched individual books. While sometimes these ads simply featured the book's title and author circumscribed in a box, other ads featured catchy or evocative descriptions. For example, an advert for Khái Hưng's *Trống Mái* described the novel as "A pretty girl falls in love with a handsome fisherman in a beautiful setting."<sup>142</sup> The Group would also use advertisements to promote the *Đời Nay* publishing house itself. Around Tết and other holidays, the Group would print general announcements to keep readers abreast of the firm's publishing plans: what books sold out, what were being reprinted, forthcoming titles, etc. In such advertisements, the Group never failed to boast their latest sales and circulation numbers. For example, in 1936, the Group proudly announced that in the *Đời Nay* publishing house's short 3-year existence, they had sold over 58,000 books.<sup>143</sup>

In addition, the Group endeavored to parlay their reform goals of quality literature and beautiful printing into a marketing campaign for *Đời Nay*. Advertisements emphasized the firm's commitment to high production quality. For example, the first photograph ever published in *Phong Hóa* was of *Đời Nay* books, while previously the paper had featured only illustrations.<sup>144</sup> That *Phong Hóa* chose to use a real image and not a rendition suggests that the Group wanted its readers to see how beautifully printed *Đời Nay*'s books were. In addition, the firm actively promoted the idea of the "family bookshelf" [*tủ sách gia đình*]. In one advertisement, the firm featured its current titles on display on a bookshelf, categorized by availability (

Figure 4):

---

<sup>142</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 33, 8 Nov 1936, p. 417.

<sup>143</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* #18, 26 Jul 1936, p. 54.

<sup>144</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 130, 28 Dec 1934, p. 5.

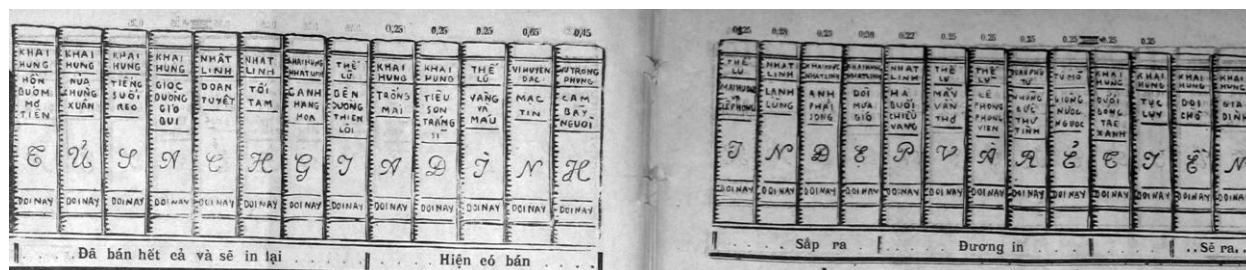


Figure 4. Advertisement for the *Đồi Nay* family library, *Ngày Nay* no. 43, 17 Jan 1937, p. 658-659.

The advertisement was intended to encourage readers to collect all the *Đồi Nay* books; the aesthetic design of the books would entice status-conscious readers to buy them as decorative objects for a modern home. For the *Đồi Nay* publishing house, the outward appearance of the book was just as important as the contents therein, and it appealed to the vanity of readers wanting to appear sophisticated. Readers who purchased, read and displayed books published by the *Đồi Nay* publishing house would stand out as discerning individuals who have refined tastes and lived a modern lifestyle. This part of *Đồi Nay*'s marketing strategy entailed selling the desirability of reading, or the appeal of books as status symbols that display a person's intellectual cultivation.

Other advertisements emphasized the firm's high-minded business principles. As a pamphlet for the firm proclaimed, "*Đồi Nay* hopes to bring to this country the latest methods of the publishing industry. This is a very new industry in our country, for a long time chaotic and unregulated..."<sup>145</sup> Here, *Đồi Nay* very consciously offered itself as a shield from the substandard fare produced by "unregulated" publishers, implying that the *Đồi Nay* label represented a brand that readers could rely on for books worth reading. In this regard, *Đồi Nay* treated a cultural object the same as any other commercial product and could have made the firm seem just like any other business. However, it was meant to put readers at ease because they could trust that the firm's principled business practices guided it to select only the books of the highest literary value. While the *Đồi Nay*'s marketing campaign aimed to convince readers that the firm was commercially disinterested, the goal was to create an impression of stability and integrity by emphasizing the high-minded seriousness with which the firm selected its books.

Along with ads in their newspapers, the Group often gave promotions or discounts to further encourage book sales. The Group encouraged its readers to subscribe to the newspaper by offering a *Phong Hóa* supplement [*Phụ Trương Phong Hóa*], available only to long term customers. Printed in pamphlet form and distributed in the post with the newspaper, the supplement often included extra short stories or a novella written by a Group member or

<sup>145</sup> *Nhà Xuất Bản Đồi Nay*, 2.



case in point: In March of 1937, the fledgling Marxist critic Trương Tửu penned a scathing attack in *Thời Thế* [World Times] on Nhất Linh's *Lạnh Lùng* [Loneliness] which set off a virulent pen war on the nature of female morality that lasted almost two months. Vietnamese readers were riveted as other newspapers soon jumped in and took sides, while individual observers wrote to express their opinions.

*Ngày Nay* not only stoked the flames of the debate, but also exploited it to sell *Lạnh Lùng*. Less than two weeks after Trương Tửu's original critique, an ad for *Lạnh Lùng* appeared in *Ngày Nay*, featuring blurbs from Hanoi's most illustrious literary critics. After an entire section of favorable praise from Trần Thanh Mai of *Sông Hương*, the advertisement excerpted a particularly vitriolic quote from Trương Tửu: "All ladies and misses who are concerned with women's issues must condemn the novel '*Lạnh Lùng*.' In this case, indifference or forgiveness is a sin."<sup>149</sup> By quoting Trương Tửu's controversial book review, *Đời Nay* hoped to pique the curiosity of readers to see what all the fuss was about. The firm invited its readers to buy *Lạnh Lùng*, read it, and form their own judgments. In other words, it gave readers the opportunity to be, or at least feel like they were, participants in the larger intellectual debates raging at the time. In addition, *Đời Nay* believed that effective advertising constituted not only praise and appeals to readers' imaginations and emotions, but also strategically used and placed criticism. The Self-Reliant Literary Group was not afraid to capitalize on controversy to create a buzz about its books.<sup>150</sup>

### *Censorship, Printing and Archiving*

Once the special issue had been compiled, it was time to send it to the censors and printers. Before the French colonial government dismantled censorship in 1937, *Đời Nay* had to submit three copies of the issues: two went to the censorship office, and the third to the printers. The printers would set up the moveable type and wait for permission to commence printing from the censorship office.<sup>151</sup> The largest expense for the Group remained the purchase of paper and cost of printing. For *Phong Hóa*'s 1936 Tết issue, the costs of paper and printing totaled 50% of the revenue collected for that issue, or about 1,150 piastres.<sup>152</sup> In an attempt to cut costs, the Group publishing house would often use different print houses for various parts of their newspapers and books. For example, the Group would print the text of books and newspapers at a less expensive shop, while using a more specialized service to print the cover.<sup>153</sup>

The characteristic look of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* owed everything to the printing

---

<sup>149</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay* no. 54, 11 Apr 1937, p. 213.

<sup>150</sup> In addition, the ad could very well been a dig at Trương Tửu; *Đời Nay* was using his condemnation of *Lạnh Lùng* to sell more books.

<sup>151</sup> Lê Ta, "Phóng bút của Lê Ta: Hay một vài truyện thóc mách công việc và nhân viên trong tòa soạn *Phong Hóa*." *Phong Hóa* no. 154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 9, 14-15.

<sup>152</sup> My own calculations. The printing costs of the multicolored insert and cover totaled \$980, and I am assuming the 170 piastres would pay for the rest of the magazine.

<sup>153</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, 170-171.



technology available in Indochina at the time. *Phong Hóa* and perhaps the later issues of *Ngày Nay* were printed by lithography, an imagemaking process based on the chemical repellence of oil and water.<sup>154</sup> For multicolor printing, such as the covers of special Tết issues and artistic inserts, the newspaper turned to chromolithography, in which a stone was used for each color, and applied to paper one color at a time. A single sheet of paper would be printed on numerous times, depending on the number of colors used. This painstaking process required numerous plates (which added to the expense) and a very precise method for positioning them. If each plate is not aligned exactly to the one before, the colors would appear out of register. While the Group tolerated minor printing mistakes its regular covers (later *Ngày Nay* issues would often have imperfectly aligned colors), the covers of special issues and centerfold inserts were almost always of the highest quality. Such painstaking printing made the covers extremely expensive to print. Perhaps the most impressive cover was from the 1938 Special Tết issue (

Figure 6).

---

<sup>154</sup> Thạch Lam, “Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân.”

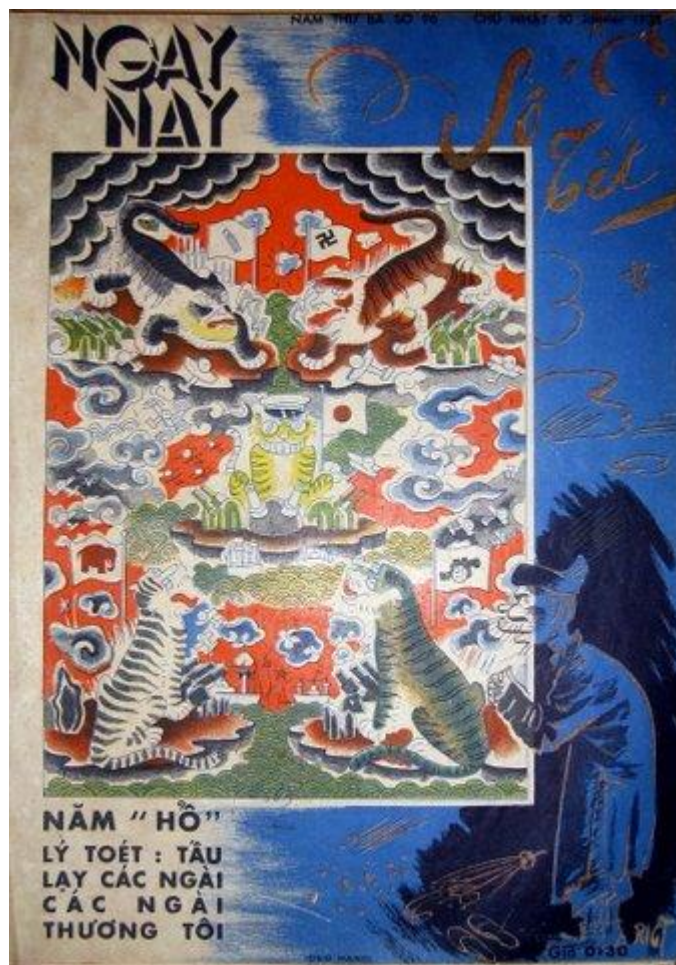


Figure 6. Cover from Special 1938 Tết Issue, *Ngày Nay* no. 96, 30 Jan 1938.

This cover featured printing in 6 colors, including metallic gold. The detailed drawing of the panel required that every color be printed carefully in register, and the shading on the tigers' bodies would have incurred additional cost.

Because of the fledgling nature of modern printing technologies, high-quality printing still remained expensive in Vietnam at the time and was thus used sparingly by any newspaper hoping to turn a profit. *Đời Nay* reserved color printing only for the cover of the *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*'s special Tết issue and for occasional artistic inserts. The cover of the 1936 Tết issue required five colors, and its special insert six, no small expense for even such a successful publication as *Phong Hóa*. As Thạch Lam wrote,

If you readers could imagine that an insert must be printed 6 times, the cover 5 times, you would know what an effort it truly is. For this reason, the cost of printing those two items already costs nearly 1000 piastres (the insert 500, the cover 480), and that not including

paying the artists for their work.<sup>155</sup>

In an attempt to cut costs, *Ngày Nay*'s regular covers only used black and one other color. For the special 1936 Tết issue, *Phong Hóa* used the government-owned L'Imprimerie D'Extreme Orient [IDEO], also known in Vietnamese as Viễn Đông Ấn Quán, the largest printing service in Indochina at the time. A specialty firm that printed paper money for the colonial government, IDEO boasted the newest technology from France--the offset lithography printing press. In a report dated 17 Feb 1937 written for the Commission Guernut, a representative of IDEO boasted a workshop space covering over 10,000 square meters located near the Hoan Kiem Lake.<sup>156</sup> Employing over 500 workers, IDEO was divided into eight branches: typography, lithography, off set, photogravure, bookbinding and pamphleting, design studio, foundry, and photo studio.<sup>157</sup>

After printing and before distribution, it was standard protocol for the Group to archive a copy of their publication. In the case of a book, the Group would often print its publications on different types of paper in addition to the version sold to the general public. For example, in 1941 *Đời Nay* published the young poet Anh Thơ's *Bức Tranh Quê* in three different editions: fifty copies in regular paper [giấy lụa dó thường] marked in Arabic numerals, five copies in premium paper [giấy dó thượng hạng] with Roman numerals, and ten copies in *Imperial a la Cuve* paper marked in Roman numerals with an A prefix. After the author autographed these copies, the publishing house always kept copy #1 for its archives, gifted the author with a few copies, and perhaps sold the rest as autographed collector's editions.<sup>158</sup> Although Anh Thơ's memoirs describe the publication of a book and not a newspaper, the Group most likely also saved issues of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. When commemorating an anniversary or event, the Group often included material from past issues, which suggests that the Group had some kind of archival system for its newspapers.

### *Shipping and Distribution*

Once the papers had been printed, they must somehow reach their readers. According to Thạch Lam, the second largest expense for the newspaper was handling and distribution, which totaled about 35% of revenue. To avoid damage to the newspapers during the delivery process, issues were rolled in cellophane and tied with string. When the newspaper included a special artistic insert, special preparations had to be made. The larger size of the inserts prevented them from being easily folded into the newspaper, so they were kept separate. For this reason, the post office would not accept the insert as a legitimate part of the paper, and considered it a flyer or advertisement, which carried a separate handling fee of 0\$50. To avoid paying this additional sum, the newspaper had to include an article related to the insert, legitimately linking the insert to the newspaper as a mere illustration for the article. Even without having to pay this fee, the

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> IDEO's old building on Tràng Thi street now houses the French cultural center, L'Espace.

<sup>157</sup> Note sur le situation des ouvriers et salaries indochinois dans La Société Imprimerie D'Extreme Orient et dan l'imprimerie en general du Tonkin." CAOM, Commission Guernut, Carton 24, Dossier, B.E. p 1-4.

<sup>158</sup> Anh Thơ, p 101-102.

total cost of postage for the 1936 Tết issue still totaled around 230 piastres.<sup>159</sup>

Most of the mailed copies went to the paper's long term subscribers. Because they paid for an entire year, the subscribers were charged a regular price (0.07) for the Tết issue that would have cost .25.<sup>160</sup> The numbers provided by Thach Lam revealed that 1643 people subscribed to Phong Hoa and received the Special Tết issue in the mail.<sup>161</sup> This calculation is fairly consistent with Thach Lam's statement that subscribers made up 20% of Phong Hoa's readership, whose circulation at the time was roughly more than 8500 copies per week. Phong Hoa and Ngay Nay encouraged its readers to subscribe to the newspaper, even offering large discounts on *Đời Nay* books to longterm subscribers.

In addition to the postal service, *Phong Hó*a also used retail distributors and newsboys to sell its newspapers. The retail distributors included bookstores and newspaper stands, who would receive a commission for every issue they sold. As Thach Lam writes, "The distributors have it the best, because they had to do nothing difficult and still receive 20% profit, for each Tết issue they receive 5 sous..."<sup>162</sup> As a practice, *Phong Hó*a never sent its distributors exactly the number of issues requested--for the Tết issues, the newspaper delivered only about 2/3 the number requested. Because of the high costs of producing a Tết issue, the Group would lose capital if even 500 copies were left over. More often than not, distributors would sell out and request more copies.

An example of such a retailer was Le Messenger de la Presse, a periodical distribution company owned by Nguyễn Văn Tam, the head of the newspaper *L'Essor*.<sup>163</sup> The company had just expanded its operations into Tonkin and hoped to set up a network throughout Vietnam to distribute and sell newspapers in even the remotest areas. Le Messenger de la Presse also hired newsboys to sell the newspapers in the cities; they were recognizable by their jackets embroidered with the company logo (

Figure 7).<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> Thach Lam, "Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân."

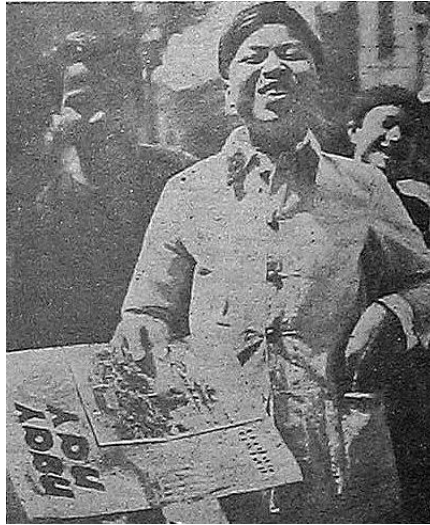
<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> This figure was obtained by dividing the revenue from longterm subscribers by 0.07 (the amount they paid for the Tết issue).

<sup>162</sup> Thach Lam, "Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân."

<sup>163</sup> It is unclear which *L'Essor* Nguyễn Văn Tam headed: *L'Essor Indochinois*, *L'Essor Commercial*, or the earlier *L'Essor Cochinchinois*.

<sup>164</sup> As it turns out, I also owe a small personal debt to Le Messenger de la Presse. The company provided the Bibliotheque Pierre Pasquier (now the Vietnam National Library) with part of its *Ngay Nay* collection, on which this dissertation is based. Some issues of the paper are stamped with Le Messenger's logo.



**Figure 7. A newsboy working for Le Messenger de la Presse, trying to sell a copy of *Ngày Nay* to its own photographer, from *Ngày Nay* no. 10, 20 Apr 1935, p. 6.**

According to *Ngày Nay*, such a specialized company provided an important service, as newspapers could not possibly handle such large-scale distribution on their own. The paper stated that that since entrusting its retail sales to Le Messenger de la Presse, *Ngày Nay*'s newsstand sales had doubled.

In addition to the retail distributors, *Phong Hóa* also hired freelance children, who received a 20% commission. As Thạch Lam describes, selling *Phong Hóa*'s Tết issue was such a lucrative venture for these children that even those who do not have the money to spare would try their hardest to put together a small amount of capital. Some were ready to borrow large sums over a few days; even children without a lot of money could purchase 5 issues, making a profit of 0.25. Because of the high overhead costs, the children are careful about which newspapers they choose to sell. Thạch Lam saw the children's enthusiasm for certain papers as an indicator of how well a paper is doing financially:

...the children are very careful, only buying newspapers they know will surely sell. The enthusiasm of the newsboys is a yardstick for the financial health of a newspaper. If children are lukewarm or unenthusiastic towards any newspaper, then that paper is in a lot of trouble.<sup>165</sup>

Using Thạch Lam's own yardstick, *Phong Hóa* did not seem to be in any financial trouble. When the paper released its special Tết issue on January 27, so many children crowded the gate of *Phong Hóa*'s distribution center that the paper had to hire two policemen to maintain order. That year, newsboys sold 2300 issues, contributing 25% of the paper's revenue.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Thạch Lam, "Chúng tôi làm số báo mùa xuân," *Phong Hóa* no. 172, 31 Jan 1936, p. 10-11.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

*Phong Hóa* seemed sympathetic to the plight of these children, many of whom lived on the streets. As Thạch Lam wrote, “The children selling newspapers in Hanoi are mischievous and clever, relying on selling newspapers to live independently, without depending on anyone... The *Phong Hóa* Tết issue is their Tết spending money.”<sup>167</sup> The year before, *Phong Hóa* decided to help out the children by distributing the papers for free, and they would return the cost of the papers to *Phong Hóa* and pocket the profits. The program failed miserably, as many children scampered off with the profits and *Phong Hóa*’s capital. But despite its sympathy towards the children, the journal also warned their readers about the children’s trickery and to be wary when purchasing from them. When the children knew that the papers had sold out in the distributors, they would immediately increase the price. Oftentimes, the children would remove the inserts from the papers and sell them separately. They would often sell an insert for 4 hào (40 sous), almost twice the price of the entire Tết issue. Oftentimes, the duped customers would go to the newspaper headquarters demanding the missing insert. Because of the high cost of printing, the paper never had extra copies.<sup>168</sup>

After all expenses have been paid, the newspaper’s profit for a special issue remained a mere 10%, or 230 piastres, not including any other losses. For a regular issue, the profit would have been even less. As Thạch Lam writes, this meager 10% is what is used to pay the writers and artists; a single Tết issue could include anywhere from 20-30 collaborators. As the Group asserted and Thạch Lam’s report makes clear, in the business of publishing newspapers, the writers and artists were the least paid. It is this disparity that the Nhất Linh and company tried to remedy by establishing the Đồi Nây publishing house and the Self-Reliant Literary Group—to create an economic collective autonomy which did not exploit writers and their labor. By most accounts, labor conditions and salaries for all involved in the publishing process were dire, from the writers who penned the stories to the linotypists who printed them.

#### *The end result: the 1936 Special Tết Issue*

After the long three-month process of planning, advertising, compiling, printing, and distributing, the 1936 Tết Special issue would finally reach its readers. What would they see? What would their reading experience be like? At first glance, the issue itself comprised 36 pages, and featured a cover drawn by artist Nguyễn Gia Trí. The articles were a combination of literature and humorous essays: three serialized novels, 17 shorter humorous articles, 3 short stories and 1 short play.<sup>169</sup> The issue’s 45 advertisements ranged from full-page ads to small boxes that filled empty space. Along with the advertisements, 20 single-panel cartoons were interspersed throughout the paper. No special issue of *Phong Hóa* was complete without Lý Toét—the country bumpkin appeared in six items. The paper also included a number of Tết activities, including riddles, coloring by numbers, games, pranks, and 5 poems. About 25-30 writers and artists contributed to this Tết issue.

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> *Mai Hương và Lê Phong* by Thế Lữ, and two by Khải Hưng: *Trống Mái* and *Tiêu Sơn Tráng Sĩ*

The 1936 issue included a number of tropes readers would recognize from previous special Tết issues. They always began with a greeting from one of the Group members, usually Tú Ly. In this particular year, the paper reiterated its reform project:

Reform society and improve conditions. Although we have not yet attained our goals, your welcoming words of encouragement from our readers far and close, has made us resolute and happy... The road is long, so let us stop and rest for a few days during the serene spring holiday. Like the flowers that smile to welcome the spring, let us raise our glasses... to welcome the new and reformed life that we all hope for.<sup>170</sup>

Readers would also recognize *Phong Hóa*'s Tết "visits" to other newspapers, "*Đầu Năm Phong Hóa Đến Xông Các Nhà Báo!*" [*Phong Hóa visits Other Newspapers in the New Year*]. Playing on the Vietnamese tradition of being the first to visit a person's home on New Year's Day, this trope gave *Phong Hóa* the opportunity to recap events of the past year in the newspaper world. The paper visited papers such as *Le Cygne*, *Hanoi Báo*, and *Khoa Học*, making fun of their editors in the process. Of course, *Phong Hóa* always dropped in on Vũ Đình Long at *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*, erupting into a war of puns.<sup>171</sup> In another article, *Phong Hóa* "visited" individual writers, including Bùi Xuân Học, Phạm Lê Bồng, and Ngô Văn Phú.<sup>172</sup> After visiting various newspapers and writers, *Phong Hóa* paid its respects to the dead. *Phong Hóa* visited the newspaper cemetery and recapped all those that closed down in the past year: *Hồn Trẻ*, *Phụ Nữ Thời Đàm*, *Phụ Nữ Tân Tiến*, *Đàn Bà Mới*, *Đuốc Tuệ* and *Đuốc Nhà Nam*. The paper visited the graves of 96 newspapers, the total number of failed journals since *Phong Hóa* began.<sup>173</sup> Although it may seem that the Group wanted to gloat about its success over the graves of its rivals, the Group's visit was actually a salute to those who came before as well as to its contemporaries. The act of visiting a gravesite during Tết is one done out of sentiment and respect for the dead, the means of maintaining the connection between the living and their ancestors. The Group knew all too well the firsthand the difficulties of the newspaper business, that starting a journal was a financially-risky venture undertaken only by those passionate and compelled enough to do so. While the Group often made fun of its rivals on the pages of *Phong Hóa*, it also harbored a sense of camaraderie for its colleagues of the same profession. Thus, *Phong Hóa*'s humorous visit to newspaper cemetery was a way of acknowledging its intellectual predecessors, and sheds light on the dynamics of competition and cohesion within the newspaper world.

---

<sup>170</sup> Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh, "Đầu năm Phong Hóa đến xông các nhà báo," *Phong Hóa* #171 21 Jan 1936, p. 5, 22.

<sup>171</sup> Upon their arrival, Vũ Đình Long offers his guests a "cup of poison," referring to his famous play. Nhất Dao Cạo [Razor Wound] angrily responds, asking the publishing magnate if he had a "Court of Conscience" (referring to another of Long's plays), and threatening to give him a "razor wound" if he persists in forcing his guests to drink the cup of poison. Vũ Đình Long offers to leave the cup of poison to Nhất Linh so he could "Sever all Ties" with the past life, and that he will the razor to peel "Lê Ta," a *Phong Hóa* writer whose name could be loosely translated as "Vietnamese pear." Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh, "Xông các nhà văn," *Phong Hóa* #171 21 Jan 1936, p. 6.

<sup>173</sup> Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh, "Xông mộ các báo," *Phong Hóa* #171 21 Jan 1936, p. 22.

The issue also featured humorous poems about Tết written by Tú Mỡ or Thế Lữ. The special Tết issues were famous for including activities designed to entertain readers while at home over the holidays. For example, the issue introduced harmless pranks that readers could play on unwitting victims. One such prank involved inserting a match into a cigarette, which would spark when lit. Another activity described a game similar to hide and seek. One elaborate game satirized the traditional practice of fortunetelling on Lunar New Year. Readers would randomly choose the answers to humorous questions such as “Should I follow art for art’s sake or art for life’s sake?” “How many brick houses does my fiancé own for rent?” and “Would I get a stomach ache if I eat rice cakes this year?” Even the most lighthearted of activities carried a reformist bent—by poking fun of the Tết tradition of fortunetelling, the paper reiterated its rejection of superstitious practices.

The Tết issue of 1936 illustrates that the process of producing a newspaper, even one as successful as *Phong Hóa*, required extensive planning, large amounts of capital, and intensive labor. Because the material gain remained so meager, producing a newspaper can be nothing but a labor of love by individuals passionate about the work. An examination of the Tết issue of 1936 reveals that the Group took enormous care in its preparation, and saw the issue as a means not just to reciprocate their readers’ support, but also as a means to experiment with new ways of organizing a newspaper.

### Conclusion

Celebrating the 3<sup>rd</sup> year anniversary of *Phong Hóa*, Nhật Linh recounted a number of funny and poignant stories about the early days of the paper and the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Before the establishment of its own print house, *Phong Hóa* hired the Imprimerie Moderne located at 62 Hàng Bạc, which printed the first issues of *Phong Hóa*. Contrary to the “modern” implications of its name, this tiny printing house was neither professional nor up-to-date. As Nhật Linh described,

That modern printing house back then, to be exact, was a kitchen or almost like a kitchen. Whenever we would go there to copyedit the paper, there was always blue smoke wafting in: the printing house would look ethereal like a Chinese calligraphy painting. Other times the smell of sautéed beef, the smell of pork omelet would waft in with the wind, permeating the entire place.<sup>174</sup>

This poorly ventilated kitchen of the printing house not only let in smoke and smells from surrounding tenements, but also the winter cold: “The wind came in through the completely broken windows, which did not allow us to copyedit our paper carefully.”<sup>175</sup> In fact, the cold nearly prevented *Phong Hóa* from publishing the first of its famous Tết issues. As Nhật Linh recounted,

---

<sup>174</sup> Nhật Linh, “Nói Truyện Cũ,” *Phong Hóa*, #154, 20 Sep 1935, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



We will never forget the night before the Tết issue of 1933 was to go to press. It was about 10 o'clock at night. We at the paper headquarters were about to go home to sleep, when a phone call notified us that the printing press would not print. When we arrived at the print shop, we found that because it was so cold, the red ink to print the covers of the Tết issue had frozen into a solid block. Petrified, we all looked at the printing press pitifully. Every time the technician would try to print a page, the machine kept shaking like a person shivering in the cold. In the end, the owner put out a brazier full of red coals near the machine to heat it. It started working again. We found it strange that a machine also needed warmth like a person, and that the print house was exactly like a birthing ward.<sup>176</sup>

In retrospect, Nhật Linh recalled the Imprimerie Moderne with humor, but his stories illustrate both the realities of producing a newspaper and the fly-by-night nature of the printing and publishing industry at the time. The “birthing” process of a single issue required hard work; editors and writers would stay late to polish a paper’s content and meet deadlines. Even then, printing the physical newspaper was wrought with setbacks. As Nhật Linh’s anecdote illustrates, printing contractors were often unreliable, using outdated equipment that would often break down. In fact, these smaller print “firms” were often no more than shoestring operations run from a spare room in someone’s house, often using antiquated and secondhand machinery. Even when the printing house managed to deliver the finished issues, the shoddy production quality often rendered the issues almost illegible. As Nhật Linh reminisced:

...on the door of that modern printing house was placed an amulet to ward off evil. Perhaps that was why the paper looked as dirty as if covered with evil charms. Did it ward off any bad spirits? One thing for sure was that it warded off a customer—that customer was *Phong Hóa*.<sup>177</sup>

Perhaps fed up with outside printing services, *Phong Hóa* started what will become the *Đời Nay* publishing house a little over two months later<sup>178</sup>. For the Group, the *Đời Nay* publishing house offered a measure of security in regards to its livelihood; however, a level of financial insecurity always remained. Other intellectuals faced similar difficulties in starting journals. It was remarkable that newspapers proliferated in Tonkin despite such conditions.

This chapter examines Vietnamese publishing in the late colonial period through the lens of the *Đời Nay* publishing house. I describe the publishers of the firm as cultural entrepreneurs who sought to reconcile the often opposed commercial and cultural impulses of the publishing industry. Contrary to the historiography of the late colonial publishing boom, which focused on the proliferation of books as the birth of a modern Vietnamese political identity or consciousness, the early history of the *Đời Nay* publishing house and the Self-Reliant Literary

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Advertisement in *Phong Hóa* no. 45, 5 May 1933, p. 2.

Group revealed more immediate economic concerns. At the beginning, the firm wanted to ameliorate the problems it saw with the Vietnamese publishing industry. Through its humane business practices, *Đời Nay* wanted to transform the exploitative relationship between writers and publishers. In addition, the *Đời Nay* publishing house aimed to produce beautiful books in response to the poor quality of printing at the time. This was not merely a cosmetic reform aimed at enticing readers to buy their books, but one that would transform how Vietnamese buy, collect, and thereby read books.

To shield themselves from the financial uncertainties of the journalistic and publishing world, Nhat Linh and his associates founded the Self-Reliant Literary Group and established for themselves a uniquely autonomous work environment. As opposed to its rival the *Tân Dân* publishing house, which was a loose network of freelancers, the Group's organizational structure and work dynamic was more of a literary cooperative in which each member held a financial stake. Despite the Group's endeavors to strike out on its own, producing publications still yielded very little profit. Even after intensive labor at every stage of production, the final profit on one issue of *Ngay Nay* was no more than a mere 10%. As a result, the Group's business ventures fluctuated throughout the decade, despite later descriptions of Group members as wealthy and elitist. While some members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were indeed well off, others lived in almost abject poverty.

Despite its economic origins, the Self-Reliant Literary Group later came to encompass loftier, more idealistic meanings. With publishing of the Group's manifesto, the Group had established self-reliance as a guiding principle in its first cultural reform project—the creation of a national literature. Group members encouraged Vietnamese to find their own voice in both language and content, not just borrow from outside influences. It insisted that its members write in *quốc ngữ*, using simple, unadorned language that eschewed complicated Chinese-influenced idioms and constructions. The content of Self-Reliant Literary Group's writings should reflect on contemporary society, and express the everyday experiences, preoccupations, and aspirations of the common people. In the ensuing years, this literary philosophy will take on an even larger scope, defining the Group's cultural, social, and eventually, political thinking. The Group's future reform projects—such as fashion, cartoons, public housing and politics—all carried the same message of self-reliance. The Vietnamese must do the hard work of civilizing themselves; this included achieving economic self-sufficiency, developing a modern worldview and identity, educating the peasantry and women, and learning of the habits of citizenship.

For the *Đời Nay* firm, its reform ideals could not be separated from the realities of publishing. It was the lamentable state of the publishing industry at the time that started the Group on its way to self-sufficiency. As Nguyễn Tường Bách wrote, “To understand the realities described above is to understand the effort to overcome hardship of artists at the time, and to judge the value of the artist and their works.”<sup>179</sup> In the light of these realities, the publishing boom in late colonial Vietnam and the commercial and literary accomplishments of the Self-Reliant Literary Group seem all the more remarkable.

---

<sup>179</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua*, 75.

## CHAPTER 2

---

# Wearing Modernity: *Phong Hóa*, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, and Fashion

### Introduction

In 1935, *Ngày Nay* described a random act of violence that took place in Saigon. During an evening fair benefiting the anti-tuberculosis foundation, a group of young women wandered around the festivities. They were dressed in the height of fashion—colorful, diaphanous tunics with puffed sleeves, worn over flowing white pants and dainty heeled shoes. Taking in the sights and sounds of the carnival, the ladies hardly noticed an older middle-aged woman following them. Thinking that the woman merely wanted to look at their beautiful attire, the young women paid her no heed. The older woman followed them the whole time, never leaving their side. Once in a throng of people, one of the ladies heard the sound of ripping fabric from behind. The young woman whipped around and found her tunic slashed down the length by a sharp blade. The perpetrator had disappeared swiftly into the safety of the crowd.<sup>1</sup>

This incident was no senseless act of random violence—it represented the physical confrontation between the forces of tradition and modern change that overtook Vietnam in the 1930s. The victim of the attack wore the preferred uniform of the “modern” woman—the new-fangled tunic designed by Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường and published in *Phong Hóa*. Given her ire towards the garment, the old woman understood (perhaps not consciously) that the Lemur tunic was not merely an item of clothing. It probably terrified and enraged her with the message it communicated: that women were breaking from traditional gender norms and entering society in the rapidly changing times. The older woman, so incensed at what she perceived as the unsightly display of femininity hinting of immorality, took swift and savage action by stabbing the garment. In a certain sense, she tried to slay the modern culture she found so threatening.

This chapter examines the object of the old woman’s wrath—the tunic designed by Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường—as both a physical entity and as a historical and abstract symbol of modernity. This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with Lemur and his fashion reforms. It first introduces background information on Vietnamese clothing before Lemur, presents biographical information about Lemur and the nature of his collaboration with the Self-Reliant Literary Group, and examines his fashion writings in *Phong Hóa*. In the first part, I argue that Lemur’s work marked the first instance of modern fashion in Vietnam. The second part explores public opinion surrounding Lemur’s fashion reforms, and depicts how fashion was the ground on which significant battles—those of gender, class, aesthetics and the Vietnamese nation itself—were fought. Although it is only one small aspect of modern culture, fashion can serve as a useful “slice of life” that embodies and reflects the characteristics,

---

<sup>1</sup>Chiêu Anh Kế, "Cô Hồng Vân Với Quần Áo Mới," *Ngày Nay* no. 5, 10 Mar 1935, p. 15.

aspirations, anxieties and preoccupations of some Vietnamese intellectuals towards modernity writ large. At a more local level, the debates surrounding the Lemur fashion reforms also reveal the attitudes of Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group towards modernization and social reform. While not an official member of the Group, Lemur is most famous for his fashion column in *Phong Hóa*, and thus has become identified with the Group's brand of social reform.

### Theoretical Considerations and Historiography

Despite the powerful symbolism embodied in clothing as evidenced above, fashion is often poo-hooed in any “serious” discussion of social and cultural phenomena. Roland Barthes expressed his own frustrations when he wrote that fashion “at best has nothing to be said about it, and at worst invites pure tautology.”<sup>2</sup> In a colonial context like Vietnam, especially in light of the massive upheavals in society, economics, and culture caused by foreign domination, clothing seemed very trivial indeed. However despite its supposed frivolity or insignificance, clothing represents a material intersection of topics such as construction of identity (collective or individual), gender, cultural representations, body image, economics and aesthetics. In spite of his frustrations about fashion, Roland Barthes devoted six years to study clothing as a type of language. For Barthes, cultural items—including illogical or commonplace ones such as clothing—communicate meanings and thus can be read like text. Clothing and appearance not only inform people's sensibilities towards themselves and others, but also serve as signifiers of collective or individual identities. As fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson puts it, fashion and clothing serve as a sort of “connective tissue of our cultural organism.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, clothing serves as an abstract link between the “natural” body and outside society and culture, the means by which the body projects itself into the world.

Central to my analysis of Vietnamese fashion in the late colonial period is the philosophical difference between “fashion” and “clothing.” To my understanding, the term “fashion” has much wider implications than “clothing.” To borrow again Roland Barthes' words, “clothes are the material basis of fashion, whereas fashion itself is a cultural system of meanings.”<sup>4</sup> Thus while clothing merely refers to the physical garments used to cover the body, fashion is more complicated to define. In his book *Fashion: A Philosophy*, Lars Svendsen defined fashion as something that “functions in a socially distinctive way and is part of a system that replaces it relatively quickly with something new.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, fashion is defined by two necessary factors: first, it sets an entity apart from the rest, and second, it constantly and rapidly changes. This definition acknowledges the existence of “fashionable” phenomenon other than clothing. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will only discuss the development of Vietnamese fashion as it relates to dress.

Fashion and clothing differ not only in meaning, but also in historical development. While clothing has always existed, fashion is a historically-specific phenomenon intimately linked to modernity. Social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky argued that

---

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes and Andy Stafford. *The Language of Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Lars Fr H. Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Fashion does not belong to all ages or to all civilizations: it has an identifiable starting point in history. Instead of seeing fashion as a phenomenon consubstantial with human life and society, I view it as an exceptional process inseparable from the origin and development of the modern West.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Wilson goes even further and identifies the defining factor that gave rise to fashion: “The growth of the European city at the early stages of what is known as mercantile capitalism at the end of the Middle Ages saw the birth of fashionable dress, that is of something qualitatively new and different.”<sup>7</sup> For Wilson, fashion is inextricably linked to capitalism, the hallmark of modern life. I am interested in how similar historical circumstances of burgeoning modernity gave rise to a comparable phenomenon in Vietnam. Because the country’s experience with the modern came as a result of a particular colonial condition and not centuries of historical development, I also aim to describe the eccentricities and culturally-specific aspects of modern Vietnamese fashion.

Academic scholarship on Vietnamese fashion is usually limited to the *áo dài*—the Vietnamese tunic that has become the national costume. Perhaps the only scholarly treatment of Lemur and his tunic is in Nguyễn Văn Ký’s encyclopedic *La Société Vietnamienne Face à la Modernité: Le Tonkin de la fin du XIX siècle à la second guerre mondiale* [Vietnamese Society in the Face of Modernity: Tonkin from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Second World War]. As Ký writes, the reform of women’s clothing

divided opinion into two antagonistic camps: the conservatives that denigrate modern women accused of “bad morals,” the progressives that welcomed the reversal and seeing them turn their backs to tradition... In short, the emancipation of the ‘weaker’ sex also passed through the adoption of a new costume. This evolution undoubtedly went further that those of men, who on their part, were content to adopt without change the Western fashion (the three-piece suit and tie).<sup>8</sup>

I maintain that the debates surrounding the reform of women’s fashion were much more multifaceted and complex than merely a clash between progressives and traditionalists. A wider reading of colonial papers reveals that the debate over women’s fashion was much more nuanced, and covered a wide range of topics such as aesthetics, nation, class and gender.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, New French Thought (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Văn Ký, *La Société Vietnamienne Face à la Modernité: Le Tonkin de la Fin du Xixème Siècle à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*, Recherches Asiatiques (Paris: Harmattan, 1995), 253.

<sup>9</sup> Vietnamese-language sources remain the most varied and prolific on the subject. Đoàn Thị Tinh’s *Tìm Hiểu Trang Phục Việt Nam* [Understanding Vietnamese Clothing], remains an oft-cited source in western-language scholarship. Ngô Đức Thịnh’s *the Traditional costumes of Vietnamese ethnicities (Trang phục cổ truyền các dân tộc Việt Nam)* provides a general overview of Vietnamese clothing through the ages. Vietnamese-language sources on fashion range not only from academic works, but also popular media such as magazine, newspaper, television and radio. Unlike Vietnamese language-sources, only a few western-language sources exist on Vietnamese fashion. In English, anthropologist Ann Marie Leshkovich examines the effects of globalization on the *áo dài* during the mid to late 1990s in the collaborative *Re-Orienting Fashion: the Globalization of Asian Dress*. In French, Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận’s 1962 *Un siècle d'histoire de la robe des Vietnamiennes* provides a detailed yet flawed fashion history of women’s clothing until the Ngô Đình Diệm period. Both Vietnamese and western-language

This chapter makes use of a number of primary documents. It focuses on Lemur's writing on fashion itself, which consists of his fashion column in *Phong Hóa* and his responses to outside critiques. Most scholarship dealing with Lemur and women's fashion have not read the column and the ensuing debates as a body of discourse. I also use articles from other colonial newspapers when applicable, particularly *Ngày Nay*, *Loa* [the Loudspeaker], *Đông Phương* [the East], *Tương Lai* [the Future] and *Tiểu Thuyết Tuần San* [the Weekly Novel]. Lastly, I examine novels, advertisements, and pamphlets written during the time.

I supplement the primary sources with secondary sources such as memoirs and academic monographs. Because so few documents on Lemur exist, I look to memoirs for additional biographical information. Nguyễn Tường Bách's autobiography, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua* [Vietnam in the Past Century] proved valuable in that it provided not only information on Lemur, but also on the nature of his collaboration with the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Nguyễn Tường Thiết's memoirs *Nhất Linh: Cha Tôi* [Nhất Linh: My Father], while further removed than Bach's autobiography, also provided some information on Lemur. In addition, general works on fashion as a social/cultural phenomenon have provided important analytical tools. I look to the works of Roland Barthes, Gilles Lipovetsky, Lars Svendsen, Ulrich Lehmann, and Elizabeth Wilson to offer insight into the nature and development of fashion as a western social phenomenon.

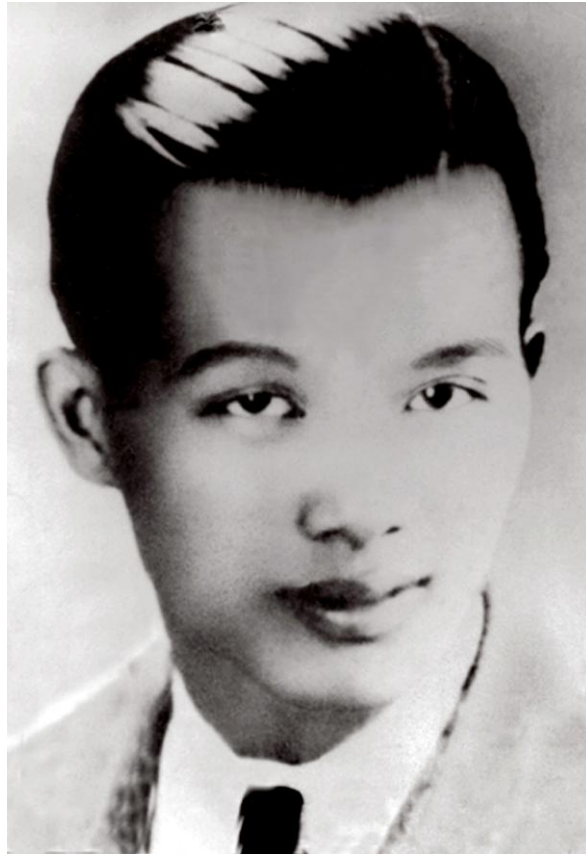
### About Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường

Lemur was the pseudonym of designer Nguyễn Cát Tường, born in 1911 in Son Tay province (

Figure 1).

---

scholarship often cite Lemur as the “inventor” of the ao dai, despite the fact that he never called it as such. While Lemur is often credited with the modernization and even invention of the Vietnamese national costume, he never referred to his tunic as an “áo dài.” I am curious to know when this term first became associated with the Vietnamese tunic. Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận, *Un Siècle d'Histoire de la Robe des Vietnamiennes*, Collection: Aspects Culturels Du Vietnam No. 14 (Saigon: 1974). My thanks to Erica Peters for her help regarding this source. Đoàn, Thị Tinh. *Tìm hiểu trang phục Việt Nam: dân tộc Việt* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1987). Ngô, Đức Thịnh. *Trang phục cổ truyền các dân tộc Việt Nam*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa dân tộc, 1994. Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones, *Re-orienting fashion : the globalization of Asian dress* (Oxford, UK ; New York : Berg, 2003).



**Figure 1. Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, from the personal collection of Nguyễn Trọng Hiền.**

His nickname was derived from the French translation of his Vietnamese name, meaning “the wall.” In 1928 at the age of 17, Lemur was admitted to the Indochinese Fine Arts University [École de Beaux Arts d’Indochine or Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương], where future colleague Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam and League of Light architects Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp also attended. Before his graduation in 1934, Lemur would certainly have been exposed to the influence of the school’s founder Victor Tardieu. The Fine Arts University emphasized a classical curriculum based on the French Beaux-Arts tradition, but also encouraged students to explore Vietnamese artisanal techniques as a way to create art that captured the Vietnamese national character. In particular, Tardieu inspired his students to search for “indigenous” art forms through the potentially transformative power of material objects such as buildings, books, and in Lemur’s case, clothing. When Tardieu died in 1937, *Ngày Nay* wrote an obituary that celebrated his work and founding of the Fine Arts University. Interestingly, the article emphasized Tardieu’s interest in the aesthetic design of everyday objects. *Ngày Nay* wrote that before the school’s founding,

the public did not know how to enjoy art. Ugly designs in houses, gaudy table and chairs, and ostentatious paintings back then was indicative of chaos, and small manufacturing did not have art to support it...Art has changed how we live. We now function within a

more beautiful environment. Our lives are now more elegant. The clear evidence is the newspapers of the present, the beautifully printed books we did not have before.<sup>10</sup>

This statement suggests that Tardieu's greatest influence on his students was not in the techniques of the fine plastic arts, but in the principles of applied design. This is where Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group were of one mind: in their mutual belief that the reform of everyday material objects will result in the transformation of human behaviors and attitudes. The designer's work on fashion, which he launched in *Phong Hóa* the same year he graduated from the university, bore the characteristic marks of Tardieu's influence. Lemur believed that changing what women wore and bought will lead to their embracing of the perpetual dynamism inherent in modern life. Likewise, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was convinced that if publishers reformed the superficial design and quality of books, readers would eventually appreciate the knowledge contained within their pages. As discussed in the previous chapter, this belief became the guiding principle behind its *Đời Nay* Publishing House. In later years, *Nhật Linh's* League of Light sought to fight the darkness in the minds of Vietnamese peasants by eradicating the darkness of their houses. While surely Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group were interested in art made purely for aesthetics, their social reforms indicate they were clearly more interested in the practical application of art into objects of function, and its implications for transforming human behavior.<sup>11</sup>

Lemur's work in *Phong Hóa* also raises the issue of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its collaborators. While Group members were responsible for the majority of their journals' content, *Nhật Linh* often contracted the services of outside contributors, especially those that offered a unique perspective, provided technical expertise, lent credibility or prestige, or reported from afar. For example, a number of well-known artists and architects provided their expertise to the Group; *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay's* covers often featured the artwork of Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Gia Trí, Trần Quang Trân or Lemur himself. Even before the League of Light, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp published articles and blueprints of their latest housing designs in the Group's journals. In *Phong Hóa's* earliest issues, Phan Khoi wrote a series of articles on the importance of humor. In this case, printing articles by a well-respected elder intellectual helped legitimize *Phong Hóa* by suggesting that the paper's project went deeper than mere comedic entertainment. The Group often published articles written by female writers for their unique perspective on women's issues; "Co Duyen" [Miss Grace] was a familiar name in the weekly women's column. The Group also maintained a few correspondents in Saigon, who would report the news and events in the South. Nevertheless, despite the wide array of collaborators, the Group maintained majority control over its journals and their content.

However, not anyone could submit articles and editorials to the Group; contributors had to submit work that dovetailed with the Group's own vision of social reform. As mentioned elsewhere, the Self-Reliant Literary Group outlined a clear set of literary and ideological guidelines for its members. Among other things, Group members had to use the simple language, produce works that reflect on society and embodies the Vietnamese spirit, as well as embrace populism, science and individualism. Given the strict discipline and high standards for its own

<sup>10</sup> "Ông Tardieu" *Ngày Nay* no. 64, 20 Jun 1937, p. 449.

<sup>11</sup> In the famous and fiery debates over "Art for humanity" and "art for art's sake," the Self-Reliant Literary Group remained conspicuously silent. According to southern literary critic Thanh Lang, this was not because they had no opinion on the matter, but that they personally disliked all parties involved in the debate. Thanh Lãng. *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*, vol. 2 ([Saigon?]: Phong Trào Văn Hóa, 1972), 149.



members, it made sense that the Group had similar expectations from its contributors. Under the leadership of Nhất Linh, the tightly-run editorial process resulted in a unity and consistency of message unseen in any other Tonkinese publication. As will be discussed in this chapter, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường's fashion reforms clearly dovetailed with the Group's own vision of social reform. Lemur gradually focused on dressing the individual woman and not an archetype; he argued that his tunic represented a "Vietnamese" style. Most importantly, Lemur and the Group were bound in their belief that by changing what women bought and wore could transform their behavior and attitude to suit a modern world. As a result, Lemur's fashion reforms became closely associated with the Self-Reliant Literary Group and remain arguably the most oft-cited of *Phong Hóa's* reforms. As will be discussed later in this chapter, while the Group sanctioned and encouraged Lemur's fashion designs, Group members did not hesitate to add to his work to suit its social message.

Despite the credit Lemur receives for "inventing" the Vietnamese *áo dài*, very few documents exist about him. Memoirs mention Lemur only in passing, and the Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures (*Tư Điển Nhân Vật Lịch Sử Việt Nam*) not at all, despite elaborate entries dedicated to his contemporaries such as Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Gia Trí, and even Lê Phổ, who collaborated with him in fashion design.<sup>12</sup> According to Nguyễn Tường Bách, the youngest sibling of the Nguyễn Tường family, "Lemur was a tall and slender fellow, agile and merry. He was famous not for his artistic talent, but because he created a few modern clothing designs for women, called the Lemur-style tunic."<sup>13</sup> Đào Đăng Vỹ of *La Patrie Annamite* mentions Lemur as one of Hanoi's more successful artists, describing him as

always smiling, always with a pen or brush in hand and in the process of creating a new style for the capricious misses or sketching a plate for a periodical. Because our friend Cát Tường has had social success, one can see it is difficult for him. He is also very busy with his business and his relations with the directors of newspapers, his tailors, the laces or even the lacquers that absorb a large part of his time."<sup>14</sup>

Such descriptions depict Lemur as a good-natured artist preoccupied with many ongoing projects and business ventures.

However, not all accounts about Lemur were favorable. The November 29, 1933 issue of *Nhật Tân* described a fistfight between Lemur and Vũ Công Nghị (director of *Tiểu Thuyết Tuần San* [Weekly Novel]) at the Stade Mangin in Hanoi. The fashion designer punched Nghị, who did not respond in kind. As it turned out, Lemur was angry at the paper for lampooning him in a poem and for not paying him for drawings he rendered.<sup>15</sup> But perhaps the most enduring

---

<sup>12</sup> Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thế, *Tư Điển Nhân Vật Lịch Sử Việt Nam*, 8th ed. (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Tổng Hợp TPHCM, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Westminster: NXB Thạch Ngừ, 1998), 64.

<sup>14</sup> Đào Đăng Vỹ, "Enquête Sur La Jeunesse Annamite: La Jeunesse Intellectuelle," *La Patrie Annamite*, 1936/9/26 1936, 3. In addition to all the activities above, Lemur supposedly was also involved in boy scouts. However, research into the boy scout newspapers at the time revealed nothing.

<sup>15</sup> See *Cả Một*, *Nhật Tân*, 29 Nov 1933 1933, 2. and *Tiểu Thuyết Tuần San*, 4 Mar 1934 1934, 3. As Nguyễn Tường Bách recalls in his memoirs, Lemur seemed sensitive to criticism of his designs. During an outing to the Perfume Pagoda with Lemur, Bách, and a young woman, Thế Lữ asked the woman her opinion on the Lemur tunic. She curled her lip and answered "Those styles? Even if the designer gave them to me as a gift, I still wouldn't

representation of Lemur can be found in the pages of Vietnamese literature—as the frivolous and hypocritical Mr. ILL (I Love Ladies) in Vũ Trọng Phụng’s satiric masterpiece *Dumb Luck (Số Đổ)*. In the introduction, Peter Zinoman writes,

Many of the characters in *Dumb Luck* can be read as caricatures of the leaders of the Self-Strength Literary Group or of the “modern” individuals whom they celebrated in their work. Mr. ILL bears an obvious resemblance to Nguyễn Cát Tường (aka Lemur), the designer who invented the *áo dài* and wrote a trend-setting fashion column in *Phong Hóa*.<sup>16</sup>

Even after the column had ended, Lemur continued to contribute to *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* with his cartoons, illustrations, photographs, and the occasional piece of writing.<sup>17</sup>

### Vietnamese Clothing Before Lemur

In order to understand Lemur’s fashion reforms, it would be helpful to have an idea of the fashion history and general context from which they emerged. Most academic works on Vietnamese fashion focus on two garments as emblematic of traditional Vietnamese clothing: the 5-flap [áo ngũ thân] and the 4-flap [áo tứ thân] tunics. In a variation of its 5-flap counterpart, the 4-flap tunic (Figure 2) was open down the front middle seam and the panels slit up to the waist, creating two flaps in both front and back. This removable outer garment was worn over a backless halter-top [yếm], which remains the outfit’s most recognized trait. Unlike its 5-flap tunic, the 4-flap dress was traditionally worn over a long skirt rather than pants. The garment did not require buttons and was tied in front of the abdomen, with the two back flaps hanging freely. Women would accessorize the outfit by adding brightly colored sashes. As described in the Veritable Accounts of Đại Nam (Đại Nam Thực Lục Chánh Biên), the 4-panel tunic or “was commonly called the Giao Lĩnh tunic...because of 4 panels which the two front panels are tied...and a skirt.”<sup>18</sup> According to Ngạc and Luyện, this style of garment appealed to the tastes of younger rural women by allowing for color clash between the *yếm* and the outside tunic.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the differences between the 4-flap and 5-flap tunics are the presence of the 5<sup>th</sup> or small flap, the front flaps sewn or tied together, and worn over pants rather than a long skirt.

---

wear them.” Lemur did not respond and sat there silent. According to Bách, afterwards Lemur put all his design sketches away in the cupboard, embarrassed. In Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Zinoman, “Vũ Trọng Phụng’s *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism,” in *Dumb Luck: A Novel by Vũ Trọng Phụng*, Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, Memory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 19. Zinoman writes that *Dumb Luck* was published in Hà Nội Báo in October of 1936, but Lemur’s store on Lê Lợi Street did not officially open till July of 1937. The possibility that Lemur served as a fashion “consultant” at various tailor shops around Hanoi could explain this discrepancy.

<sup>17</sup> In his unpublished memoirs *Life in Journalism (Đời Làm Báo)*, Nhất Linh explicitly lists the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and outside contributors. Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường was listed among the contributing artists. See Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua*, 302-04.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



**Figure 2.** Daughter of Đê Thám wearing the 4-Flap tunic. From *Ngày Nay* no. 7, 20 Mar 1935, p. 7.

Before the 1930s, textile production dictated how Vietnamese clothing was constructed, as was the case with the 5-flap garment, a loose-fitting tunic worn over pants (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Women in 5-Flap tunics. From Hương Kiều Loan, “Áo Dài Việt Nam qua các Thời Đại,” [http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg\\_id=00Chvv](http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=00Chvv). Accessed 16 April 2008.

Because of rudimentary weaving technology, Vietnamese fabrics measured only 35-40 cm in width. This forced tailors to cut half panels and join them down the middle longitudinally, since the fabric's narrow width prevented the cutting of one large panel. Two panels formed the front and two formed the back, with a seam down the middle (Figure 4). Underneath the right front panel, a small panel (*vạt con*) stretched the entire length from the chest to the knees, forming a 5-panel garment. The collar almost always remained unbuttoned, and threaded with a stiff piece of fabric called a "lotus leaf" (*cánh sen*) to help the collar stand up.

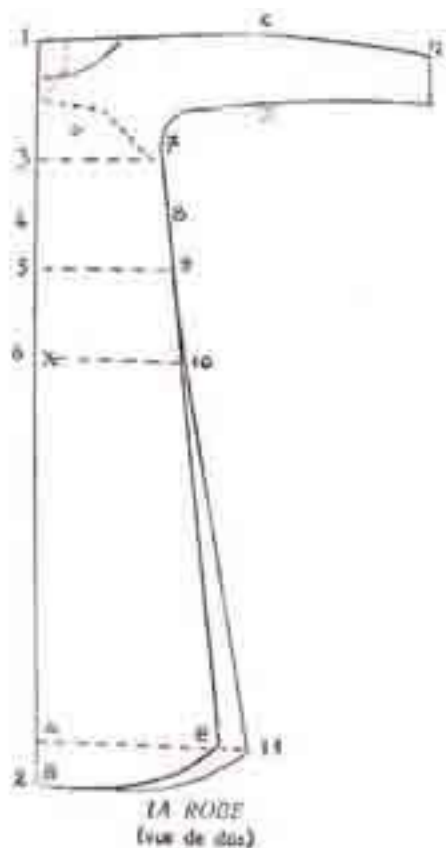


Figure 4. Diagram of 5-Flap tunic. From Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận, 26.

As seen in Figure 4, the 5-panel tunic was cut loose without curved lines and darts, and thus did not accentuate the human form. Poorly-constructed tunics would often place the side slits too high, exposing the waistband of the pants and/or the ribs. In the North, this garment differed from its Southern counterpart in that the collar is not completely closed, with a gap of about 6 cm at the front of the throat.<sup>20</sup>

Although studies of Vietnamese traditional dress differ as to which tunic came first, existing information seems to suggest that the 4-flap tunic predated its 5-flap counterpart, which became more widespread during the colonial period. As Nguyen Van Ky wrote, the Chinese introduced pants to the Vietnamese during the Ming occupation of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In

<sup>20</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận, 33-38.

a policy of cultural and social sinocization, the Chinese required the Vietnamese to wear pants (in accordance with Chinese modes of dress) and abandon the long skirt [váy], which they saw as immodest. This suggests that the 4-flap outfit predated the 5-flap, as the skirt remains one of the distinguishing characteristics of the 4-flap tunic, and pants associated more with the 5-flap. As Đoàn Thị Tinh described, women in rural areas wore the 4-flap dress, while urban ladies preferred the 5-flap. Part of the rationale was perhaps economic—constructing a 4-flap dress required less material than the 5-flap. In addition, rural women preferred the long skirt for more practical reasons—they found it easier to work in the fields wearing a skirt than pants, usually hitching up the skirt and tying the bottom hems together between the legs. Women of upper classes wore pants to indicate their status, preferring them because of their impracticality for labor and their association with Chinese culture—keeping with tradition set by Minh Mạng’s sinocizing 1826 edict forbidding women from wearing “bottomless pants”.<sup>21</sup> Even before Lemur’s reforms, clothing had a social agenda—to differentiate between mandarin and labor classes and accentuate the rural-urban divide.<sup>22</sup>

These social distinctions through clothing lasted until the late colonial period. As in the rest of Asia, the early twentieth century brought dramatic changes to Vietnam, due to French colonial influences. The country faced transformative forces that seemed to threaten the very foundation of Vietnamese culture and identity, namely urbanization, modern technology and the impersonal rationality of market economics. Every aspect of Vietnamese society and culture appeared affected, and the rapid change manifested itself perhaps most visibly in material consumption, especially fashion. An interview with Ms. Trịnh Thục Oanh, a headmistress at a Hanoi school, revealed that the first stirrings of sartorial reform took place around 1920. Women began shedding their traditional dull earth tones and donning tunics made from vibrant colors and unusual imported fabrics. They also rejected black pants, which they considered drab and old fashioned, and replaced them with more youthful white pants.<sup>23</sup> However, these changes only introduced new colors and fabrics to Vietnamese women’s clothing—the style and cut remained the same.

Unfortunately, women’s clothing remained generally unchanged, as these changes constituted timid, cautious steps forward. Looking back at the 1920s, Lemur acknowledged these initial changes as important, but he lamented that “in the end, everything remained the same. The effort to change was futile... Most women still wear the older frumpy [loè soe] tunic with black baggy pants. Some women prefer to wear white pants, but unfortunately that is rare.”<sup>24</sup> Lemur attributed this lack of change not to practical considerations, like the fact that white pants are generally more difficult to keep clean, but to public opinion. Women were afraid to don the new fashions because they are afraid of the short-sighted public opinion of fogeyish Vietnamese. He defended the changes in fashion: “white pants are like the side part and high heels, I am afraid they do not stand for looseness and immorality.”<sup>25</sup> Writer Nhất Chi Mai would have agreed with Lemur’s position, for he wrote that a woman’s worth is not based on clothing, but on beauty, meekness, and chastity. Women should be able to wear their white pants and colored tunics, he argued, as long as they know their responsibilities and do not stray from

---

<sup>21</sup> Nguyễn Văn Ký, 238.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones, eds., 90.

<sup>23</sup> Việt Sinh, “Quần Áo Mới” *Ngày Nay*, no. 1, 30 Jan 1935, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Tính ưa đẹp và hay trang điểm” *Phong Hóa*, no. 85, 11 Feb 1934, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

righteousness.<sup>26</sup> However, the slow changes suggest that very few embraced such open-minded sentiments, and the general public remained suspicious, if not hostile, about the reforms. Despite their failures, the rudimentary changes in women's clothing of the 1920s paved the way for Lemur's reforms in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup>

### About Lemur's Column, Pamphlets, Shop

Lemur's column, titled "Beauty: dedicated to women young and old," ran in *Phong Hóa* from February to August of 1934 and generally appeared on a weekly basis. Numbering 20 in total, the column covered various topics pertaining to women's beauty, including physical exercise and accessories. However, the main focus of the column remained clothing—Lemur included styles not only for wealthy urban ladies, but also for rural women and children. The columns usually included illustrations done by Lemur himself, in addition to text explaining the new designs.

Lemur's column first appeared in the special Tet issue of *Phong Hóa* on February 11, 1934. His first two installments gave justification for the column's existence. He began the column by acknowledging that vanity is a common human characteristic: "Except for a few that feign morality, or those go against the common grain, the rest, no matter man or woman, should try being honest and ask, 'who does not like to look good?' The desire to be beautiful is a collective trait and not a bad one, so we need not hide it."<sup>28</sup> For Lemur, the immediate connection between the desire to look beautiful and material life did not render that desire insignificant or immoral. Lemur opined that "materialism is intimately related to the soul, and the soul is what clearly differentiates between humans and animals. Humans are different from animals in their intellect and because they wear clothing."<sup>29</sup> For Lemur, humans naturally desire to look beautiful. As clothing is the material means to achieve beauty, it thus serves as the means towards satisfying human desires and bringing happiness. While perhaps a bit oversimplified, Lemur's statement drew a link between material goods, quality of life, and psychological well-being.

Lemur further justified the importance of his fashion work by discussing the relationship between fashion and a sense of "civilization." He argued that "even though clothing is used to cover up the body, ultimately, it can be the mirror that reflects outward a nation's level of intelligence. To know which nations have progressed, and have a high level of aesthetic, just look at the clothing of its people..."<sup>30</sup> Observing European and American women, he noted that not only was their clothing neat, tidy, and suitable for their climate, but also beautiful and varied in style. He concluded that their clothing served as material proof and manifestation of their high level of "collective intellect" [dân chí], the sign of a civilized and constantly progressing people.

---

<sup>26</sup> Nhất Chi Mai, "Quần Trắng Áo Lam," *Phong Hóa* no. 4, 7 Jul 1932, p. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Most academic studies dealing with Vietnamese fashion (mine included) automatically assume that Vietnamese clothing barely changed over the centuries, and suddenly experiencing its first transformations in the colonial era. Even Lemur seems to accept this discourse in his fashion column. I am curious if a study of premodern Vietnamese fashion would ascertain or dispel the myth of an immutable traditional Vietnamese dress.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Y Phục Của Phụ Nữ," *Phong Hóa*, no. 86, 23 Feb 1934, 4; "Tính Ưa Đẹp Và Hay Trang Điểm," 22.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Y Phục Của Phụ Nữ," 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Looking at his own country, he found it sorely wanting: “I am not free of grievances. Apart from the clothing of us males, which follows the clothing of Europe and America, in the clothing of our female friends I notice many inconveniences along with not much aesthetic style.”<sup>31</sup> In Lemur’s opinion, men’s clothing had progressed sufficiently, while women’s clothing remained inexcusably backward. As a result, he made the reform of women’s clothing his first priority.

Taking his cue from western women, Lemur established the guidelines for his clothing reforms. In his view, women’s clothing

must be suitable with the climate of our country, with the weather in all seasons, with one’s work, with one’s shape and size, with the bodily form of each woman. In addition, it must be neat and tidy, simple, bold, aesthetic and respectful. No matter what, it must have the characteristics of our nation.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, Vietnamese women’s clothing should suit not only practical needs, aesthetic tastes, and existing social codes, but also must communicate nationality. The latter seems somewhat out of place especially in terms of fashion, but it suggests that Lemur’s intellectual preoccupations and priorities went beyond aesthetics or style. The issue of nation would later become the primary point of contention between Lemur and his critics. In later years, the League of Light would establish similar guidelines regarding climate and national style. This insistence that aesthetic style—be it in clothing, architecture, or otherwise—must take its cue from indigenous conditions and influences would be a guiding principle of all Self-Reliant Literary Group reforms.

Once he laid out the justifications for the column, Lemur wasted no time in proposing concrete reforms for women’s clothing. His initial reforms focused more on practical changes rather than stylistic or aesthetic considerations. Lemur targeted women’s sleeves and collars first. The sleeves must be changed because not only did they limit movement, Lemur argued, but also because they violated the rules of healthy living:

People often compare blood to a food truck for all the cells in all the systems of the body. If unlucky, the food truck is late, the cells will not have enough nourishment and weaken the body. To avoid this, we should pay attention to the roominess of clothing, and that roominess does not affect the aesthetic.<sup>33</sup>

To stop the sleeves from cutting off circulation, Lemur advised that women should have their sleeves cut a bit puffier: they should be roomy from the upper arm to about 10-15 cm past the elbow, and gradually taper from there to the wrist. To adjust the sleeves for summer, the designer advised sewing a button at the wrists or flaring the sleeve so as to allow the sleeve to be folded up. For the winter, the sleeves need to be closed so that body heat does not escape and that cold does not seep in.<sup>34</sup> Lemur then finished the article with an illustration of sleeves he designed for spring (Figure 5).

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

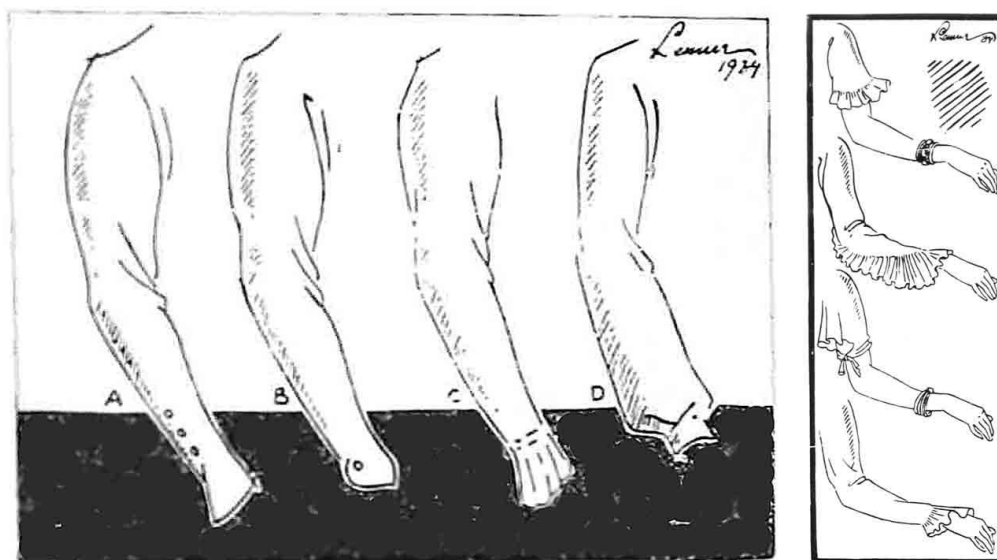


Figure 5. Sleeves designed by Lemur. From *Phong Hóa* no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 4 and “Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” respectively.

Calling the collar “unemployed”, Lemur maintained that the collar did not match with the country’s climate:

All the other annoyances aside, we should just take women’s clothing in our country and compare it to women’s clothing in other countries. We can see how strange and out of place it really is. Just the collar is enough to prove this. European and American women, having to deal with cold year round, do not even need a collar. Tonkin is a hot climate, the strange tunic coupled with a collar—even though it is not buttoned and is small. In the south, even in Ca Mau where the weather is really hot, women do up the collar.<sup>35</sup>

Lemur saw eliminating the collar altogether as the best solution, because “not only does it match the climate in our country, it also has its own aesthetic appeal.” His subsequent collar designs eliminated the Chinese-style mandarin collar and consisted of low or lapel-style collars (Figure 6).

<sup>35</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ,” *Phong Hóa* no. 88, 9 Mar 1934, p. 9.





Figure 6. Collars designed by Lemur. From *Phong Hóa* no. 89, 16 Mar 1934, p 13, and no. 97, 11 May 1934, p 13 respectively.

After changing the sleeves and collar, Lemur then turned his attention to reforming pant styles, for more aesthetic reasons than practical. He writes in his column: “From olden times till now, women’s pants in our country have changed only a little. Nothing is really different except the color.”<sup>36</sup> Referring to the 1920s, Lemur recalled the first changes to women’s dress, when women abandoned the drabness of traditional black pants in favor of white. However, the designer pointed out that the design and cut of the pants have not changed at all—they remain baggy and dowdy. Lemur advocated sewing pants tighter from the hip to the knee, and gradually flaring out to the ankle. That way, the pant legs remain loose to better cope with the summer heat, but also form-fitting to flatter and define the female body.<sup>37</sup> A few issues later, Lemur offered women a few new styles of pants for their choosing—all three flared, but with different trim (Figure 7).

<sup>36</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 89, 16 Mar 1934, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

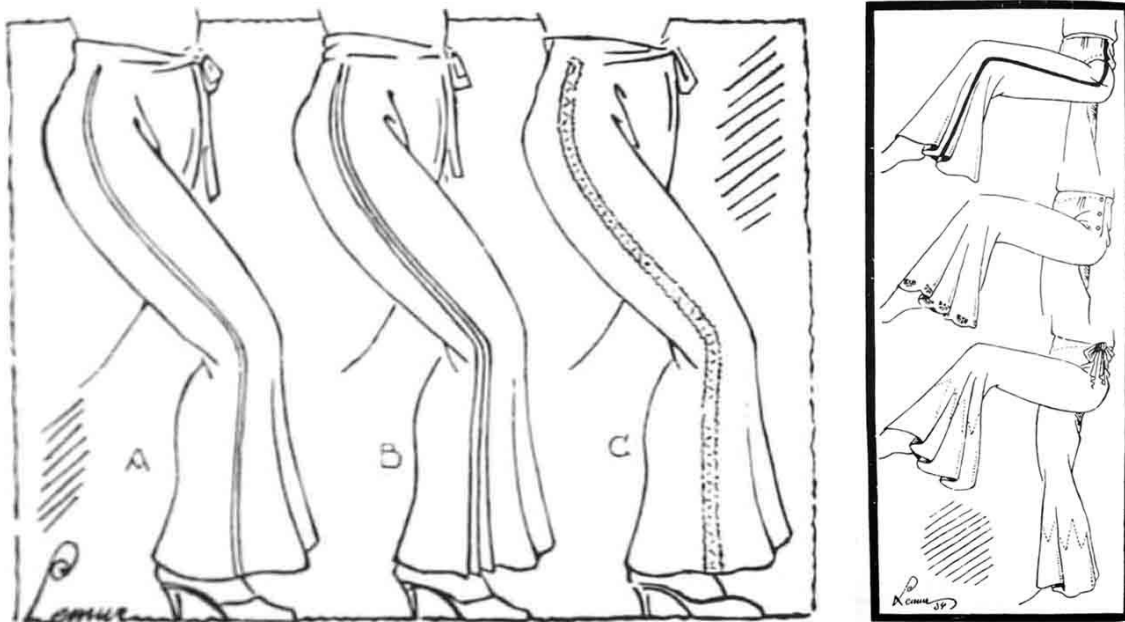


Figure 7. Pants designed by Lemur. From *Phong Hôa* no. 96, 4 May 1934, p. 13, and “Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” respectively.

Up until this point, Lemur’s column focused merely on reforming aspects of women’s clothing. However, on March 23, 1934, Lemur combined all these changes and introduced his first complete outfit, for which he would become famous (Figure 8). On top of the changes in the collar, pants, and sleeves, Lemur eliminated the 5<sup>th</sup> flap altogether. He argued that it no longer had any use, other than for wiping hands and noses. Furthermore, when women layer multiple tunics during the winter months, the 5<sup>th</sup> flap would inconveniently puff up and look lopsided.



**Figure 8. New tunic designed by Lemur. From Phong Hóa no. 90, 23 March 1934, p. 4.**

The designer also lengthened the flaps of the tunic to create a longer silhouette, which he believed was more graceful and elegant. However, the most significant change in the outfit was the fit of the bodice. Lemur fashioned the bodice more form-fitting than before, “to clearly differentiate the chest and waistline.”<sup>38</sup> As if anticipating the criticism that this new fit was likely to provoke, Lemur writes: “There are those that when they see a woman with well-developed bust, they often react scornfully, because they see that as unsightly, as immoral. With those kinds of people, if we explain to them European ideas, and the spirit of aesthetics to them, surely they will never understand.”<sup>39</sup> In keeping with his own guidelines, Lemur created an outfit that was simultaneously practical, aesthetically pleasing, and in accordance with what he saw as Europeanized social sensibilities. But most importantly, the outfit communicated a national message: “Even though this outfit as something rather unfamiliar, I ask that you do not worry. Not only does it have its own style, it conveys to other people that: our country has reached the time of reformation and has a national costume that is with the times.”<sup>40</sup> For Lemur, this new outfit was the sartorial manifestation of the hybridity of Vietnamese culture; Walter

<sup>38</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ” *Phong Hóa*, no. 90, 23 Mar 1934, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Benjamin described a similar phenomenon in Europe as a dialectic image between the past and the present.<sup>41</sup> The *áo Lemur* thus can be seen as a pan-historical garment that simultaneously reminds Vietnamese of the past but also symbolizes the present, both of which will be projected into the future.

Past descriptions of the *áo Lemur* merely describe the physical changes in the tunic, but neglect its overarching concept. Essentially, the “Lemur” tunic was composed of standardized units or sections that allowed for flexible arrangement—a type of “modular” garment. Essentially, the basic structure of the tunic remained the same—form-fitting bodice, front and back flaps, worn over pants. However, the wearer can mix and match their choice of collar, sleeves, flaps and pants, not to mention the type and color of fabric. The drawings of collars, sleeves and pants shown above, in their serial placement, suggest interchangeability—a kind of “movable parts” in clothing terms. Rather than replacing the traditional 5-flap with merely another garment, Lemur instituted a system of dress, which allowed the wearer to make choices within set parameters. A caveat: to call the Lemur tunic a “modern” garment is perhaps jumping too far ahead, despite the novelty of the tunic and the spirit of reform that gave birth to it. It still represented change within a set system, and at best could be seen as a transition toward the complete sartorial freedom espoused by modern fashion.

The idea of the Lemur tunic as a hybrid garment becomes more apparent when considering the garment that was its actual precursor. Lemur’s column suggests that the designer had used the 5-flap dress as the starting point for his modular tunic. In the March 23, 1934 issue of *Phong Hóa*, in which he first introduced the Lemur-style tunic, Lemur explained the changes he made:

there is one thing that I want you to follow over everything else—you should *abandon the small flap* and include it with the major flaps. Apart for wiping one’s hands and nose, the small flap has no use anymore, and it is inconvenient because during cold weather, women usually wear two or three tunics together. Those minor flaps on top of one another not only will be uncomfortable, but also the body will have one side completely puffed up and the other flattened.<sup>42</sup>

The fact that Lemur focused on the small flap and targets pants, not skirts, for change suggests that the designer used the 5-flap tunic as his departure point and not the 4-flap tunic as Nguyen Van Ký wrote. The hybrid nature of Lemur’s tunic can be seen in its use of Chinese-influenced pants and French-style collar and sleeves. One can easily perceive the Lemur garment as a material metaphor for Vietnamese culture—a conflation of multiple cultural influences. This suggests that Lemur, like the Self-Reliant Literary Group, were not uncomfortable with borrowing from different influences to construct a modern vision of the Vietnamese nation.

Apart from transforming women clothing, Lemur’s fashion column also encouraged women to exercise, and provided detailed descriptions of exercises they can perform at home (Figure 9). As Lemur pointed out, “Women in our country, few have beautiful bodies: not short and overweight, not skinny like a water pipe, or dried out like a fermented fish. To correct these

---

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 462.

<sup>42</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ” *Phong Hóa*, no. 90, 23 Mar 1934, p. 4.

imperfections, there is nothing like exercise.”<sup>43</sup> However, Lemur never meant for women to overexert themselves with intense physical activity; his idea of women’s exercise consisted of 15 minutes of light exercises in the yard in the morning or before bedtime. The purpose of the exercises was more to beautify than for recreation. For example, the column prescribed a stretching exercise that claimed to help women become taller. Describing an exercise by Dr. C. Calixte Pagés, a French physician specializing in physical education, Lemur wrote that “Women should perform exercises that stretch the spinal column like swinging and shoulder stretches. Each day, stand on tiptoes and walk, the body must be straight and both arms extended up as if reaching for something.”<sup>44</sup> While Lemur did not guarantee that women will grow taller, he did reassure them that with continued effort, they will see results. A few weeks later, he introduced another exercise, this time to develop the bust. He pointed out that contrary to the Vietnamese, who believe that a large bosom is the physical manifestation of brazen behavior, European and American women view the bust as essential to beauty and health. Vietnamese women do not have developed breasts because they do not exercise, Lemur maintained, and prescribed an exercise (similar to push-ups) to help expand their bosoms.<sup>45</sup>

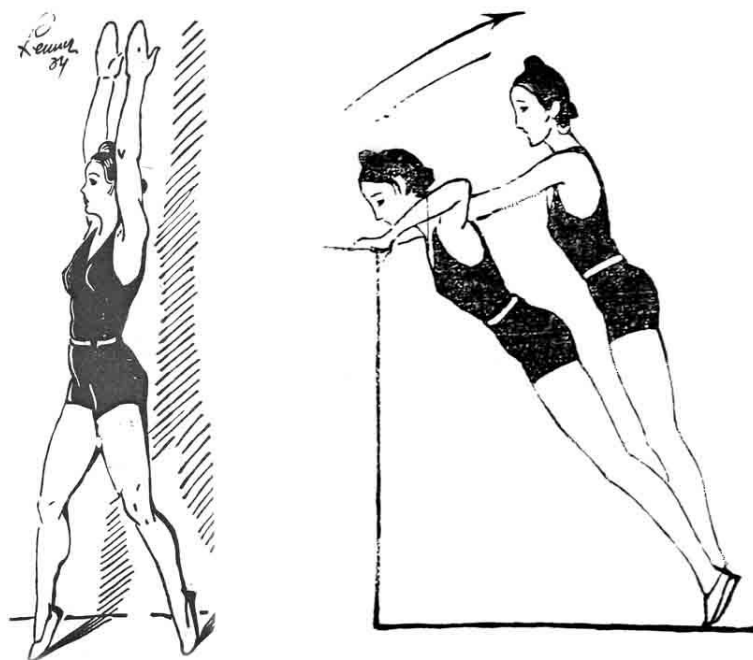


Figure 9. Exercises prescribed by Lemur. From *Phong Hóa* no. 92, 6 Apr 1934, p. 4, and no. 102, 15 June 1934, p. 4, respectively.

These columns on physical exercise reveal much about the construction of body image and standards of beauty in 1930s Vietnam. While essentially Lemur’s view, the column can shed light on what some highly-educated urban intellectuals (like Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group) thought constituted a beautiful figure. For Lemur, “a well-proportioned body, arms and legs have toned muscles, a developed bust, but the body still looks on the tall side, that is

<sup>43</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Một môn thể thao” *Phong Hóa*, # 91, 3 Mar 1934, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Một môn thể thao” *Phong Hóa*, # 92, 6 Apr 1934, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Một môn thể thao: Cách luyện bộ ngực” *Phong Hóa*, # 102, 15 Jun 1934, p. 4.

beautiful.”<sup>46</sup> Of these criteria, Lemur found Vietnamese women’s bust and height the most lacking, as evidenced by his columns dedicated to them. In the end, all these criteria culminated the ultimate determinant of beauty—health. Lemur writes,

The primary thing is that the person must be healthy, and healthy does not mean bulging shoulders or muscles, or plump and round like a jackfruit seed—it just means that that person is disease-free, eats and sleeps normally. An overweight person is not necessarily healthy, because they have too much fat so the muscles do not develop... exercise is necessary to the body like food. Women in Europe and America all attest to that.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that the designer considered physical exercise a determinant part of beauty suggests that he believed beauty to be less than just mere physical appearance, but more the product of a full, active lifestyle.

While writing the weekly column in *Phong Hóa*, Lemur also produced a 28-page fashion pamphlet for the summer months titled, “Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” [Đẹp: Mùa Nực 1934] (Figure 10).

---

<sup>46</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Một môn thể thao” *Phong Hóa*, # 91, 3 Mar 1934, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

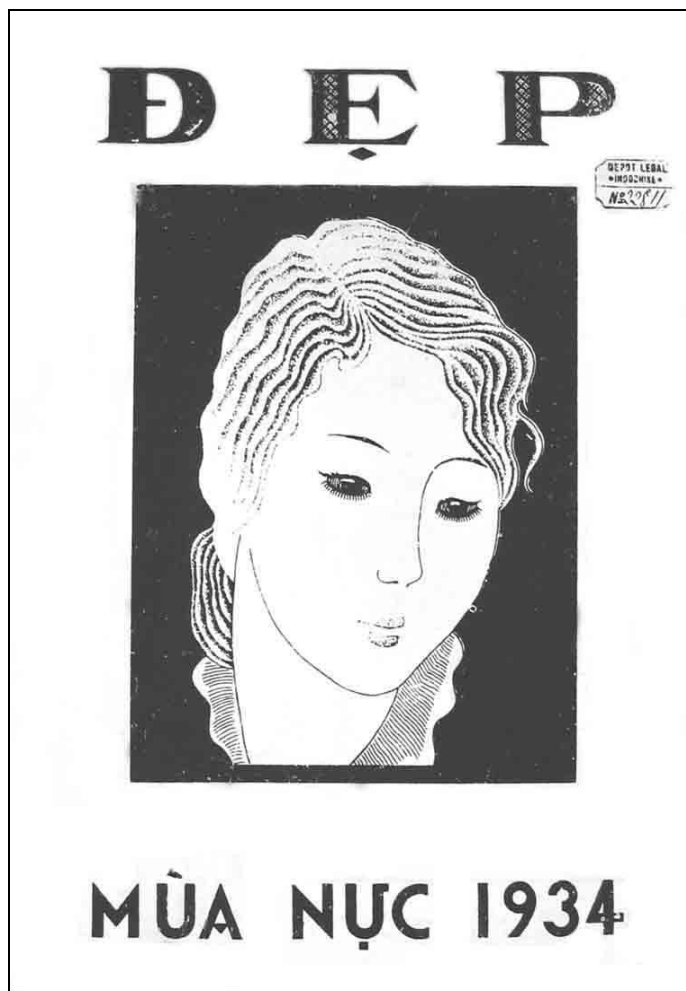


Figure 10. Fashion pamphlet titled, "Beauty: Warm Weather 1934"

Published in mid-September of 1934 (rather late for a publication about warm-weather clothing), the pamphlet was the product of a collaboration between Lemur and some of the most well-known artists of the day, including Lê Phổ, Tô Ngọc Vân, and Trần Quang Trân. Because women did not have “an organ that focuses on...the new reforms of women’s clothing,” Lemur intended “Beauty” to be the “friend that women have waited for.”<sup>48</sup> The pamphlet covered every aspect of women’s attire—loungewear, beachwear, footwear, and even accessories. In addition to providing women with different styles of clothing, the pamphlet also included an article by Tô Ngọc Vân advising women how to choose colors harmonious to their complexion, and tips on how to dress to hide their physical imperfections. It is also here that Lemur introduces Mlle. Nguyễn Thị Hậu, the young woman often cited as the first woman to wear Lemur’s new tunic.<sup>49</sup> As the advertisement for the pamphlet indicated, “Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” was to be the first in a series of fashion pamphlets that would advise women on wise fashion choices. To the best of my knowledge, no other pamphlets followed—“Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” remained the only one of the “Beauty” series Lemur ever published. In spring/summer 1939, Lemur and

<sup>48</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, ed., *Đẹp: Mùa Nục 1934* (Hanoi: Trung Bắc Tân Văn, 1934), 6.

<sup>49</sup> Nguyễn Thị Hậu also appears in the first issue of *Ngày Nay* (most commonly cited). However, her appearance in *Beauty: Warm Weather 1934* predates that.

Đời Nay published another pamphlet titled, “50 clothing styles for women—by Lemur.” Unfortunately, this publication was lost in the ensuing decades.<sup>50</sup>

“Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” marked a radical shift in Lemur’s work on fashion: it represented his departure from merely reforming women’s clothing and his first venture into “fashion” in a Euro-historical modern sense. As previously discussed, modern fashion can be seen as a system that sets an entity apart from the rest, and is characterized by constant and rapid change. Lemur’s 1934 pamphlet marks the first instance that both these factors appear in any discussion of Vietnamese fashion. Even Lemur’s language on the subject changed. Hitherto, Lemur only referred to women’s “clothing” [y phục]—it is in this pamphlet that he first uses the Vietnamese term for “fashion” [thời trang]. This Sino-Vietnamese word for fashion can most literally be translated as “décor of the times“. The word “décor” [trang] removes clothing from mere practicality and elevates it into aesthetic and ornamental categories. More importantly, this linguistic shift negates the idea of an immutable physical object by adding a temporal element, as evidenced by the word “time” [thời].<sup>51</sup> Even on a linguistic level, Vietnamese perceptions of fashion have been transformed.

“Beauty” constituted Lemur’s first venture into modern fashion because it aimed to set a particular entity apart from the rest. While it is true that Vietnamese had used clothing to set themselves apart from others in the past, these distinctions pertained to group identities, such as class, social status, and gender. Thus, despite the fact that Lemur’s fashion column showed women how to set themselves apart from other women—“modern” from “traditional” women—it still remained identity within a group. “Beauty: Warm Weather 1934” marked a move from general group identities to individual distinction. Tô Ngọc Vân called for women to choose colors harmonious with their individual attributes in his article “Clothing colors and the visage” [Màu áo với sắc mặt]. He established guidelines to help women choose clothing and makeup colors, because “every time you apply makeup with a heavy hand like those other “dames,” it means that everyone looks the same.”<sup>52</sup> Tô Ngọc Vân pointed out the undesirability of women looking like one another, and suggested that colors should be matched to the individual’s complexion.<sup>53</sup> From Tô Ngọc Vân’s point of view, only when women embrace their individualism do they become fashionable. For the Self-Reliant Literary Group, who championed individualism in its literature and reform projects, this sense of personal liberation applied not only to women’s important life decisions like marriage, but also to everyday choices like their clothing and daily toilette. In addition, the pamphlet also included a section that acknowledged the existence of many types of figures and offered advice on how to hide physical imperfections. Thus, the contents of *Beauty* underscored a concerted effort on the part of designers to fit clothing to the individual woman, not an archetype. It was a transformation that Ulrich Lehmann described when he wrote, “Imitation, being the terms on which classical art was based was superseded by invention and it is precisely through these developments of imitation and differentiation that the fruits of modern fashion began to grow.”<sup>54</sup> It transgressed fashion as discussion of “national costume” and into one of individual differentiation. In other words, *Beauty* advocated and represented the first stirrings in Vietnam, however small, of fashion as individualistic self-expression.

<sup>50</sup> See the advertisements for the pamphlet in *Ngày Nay* no. 154, 25 March 1939, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> My thanks to Bradley Davis for his help with the etymology of this word.

<sup>52</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, *Đẹp: Mùa Nực* 1934, 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 143.



*Beauty* also represented an attempt to achieve the hallmark of modern fashion—the relentless and rapid cycles of stylistic change. The mere idea that the pamphlet was the first in a series suggests a constant renewal, a process that Walter Benjamin describes as “the eternal recurrence of the new.”<sup>55</sup> Even though it added new styles to the “modular” Lemur tunic, the pamphlet also broke new ground in introducing completely new garments like separates and long dresses. These stylistic changes broke through the “change within a set system” limitations of the Lemur tunic and allowed for even more personal choice. The perpetual search for novelty establishes women as a social entity through their acts of shopping, fitting, consuming and ultimately, wearing. Such activities negate the idea of the immutability and timelessness of women’s gender roles, and allow them to move through a linear and progressive time. This newfound female individualism through fashion fit completely within the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s more general support for women’s emancipation. The fact that the pamphlet was never followed up, however, indicates the limitations and fledgling nature of this condition in Vietnam.

The publication of *Beauty: Warm Weather 1934* and Lemur’s fashion column in *Phong Hóa* spanned a total of seven months—the last column appeared on August 3, 1934, and the pamphlet was published a month later. Despite the end of the column and the publication of his sole fashion pamphlet, Lemur’s activities in the world of Vietnamese fashion did not end. In July of 1937, Lemur opened his own tailor shop on 16 Lê Lợi Street. Promoting himself as “the first to design modern clothing,” Lemur ensured the satisfaction of his female clientele with his constant presence at the shop, “to advise women how to choose colors, give beauty tips, and design clothing on-the-spot according to each woman’s form to better enhance her beauty.”<sup>56</sup> The shop seemed to cater only to women, calling itself the largest tailor shop of modern women’s clothing in Tonkin. In subsequent years, the shop would advertise seasonal merchandise in the pages of *Ngày Nay*, such as coats and various fabrics. By 1937, the Lemur tailor shop even ventured into millinery, hats designed by Lemur himself, with distributors as far away as Haiphong and Phnom Penh.<sup>57</sup> In August 1939, the shop relocated from 16 Lê Lợi street to 14 Hàng Da.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the shop’s products seemed to gradually diversify and geographically spread suggests that the shop moved to expand its enterprises. This is even further buttressed when in October 1939, the shop extended its services to a demographic previously ignored—men. Advertising a “Grand exposition of ‘le dernier cri’ in English fabrics,” the shop promised that even “the most discerning man will surely find his choice here.”<sup>59</sup> In later years, Lemur spearheaded a number of other projects in addition to running his tailor shop, including redesigning the cycle rickshaw [cyclo], opening a tea house and sanitary hot-water barbershop.<sup>60</sup>

The August Revolution in 1945 brought an abrupt end to Lemur’s short career and life. In the political tumult and subsequent return of the French, Nguyễn Cát Tường closed down his Hanoi businesses and fled with his family to Tràng Cát, just outside the city. In 1946, Nguyễn Cát Tường was captured by the Vietminh on Hàng Bông Street along with Phạm Giao (the eldest

<sup>55</sup> As quoted in Svendsen, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Advertisement for the Lemur Tailor Shop from *Ngày Nay*, no. 67, 11 July 1937, p. 527.

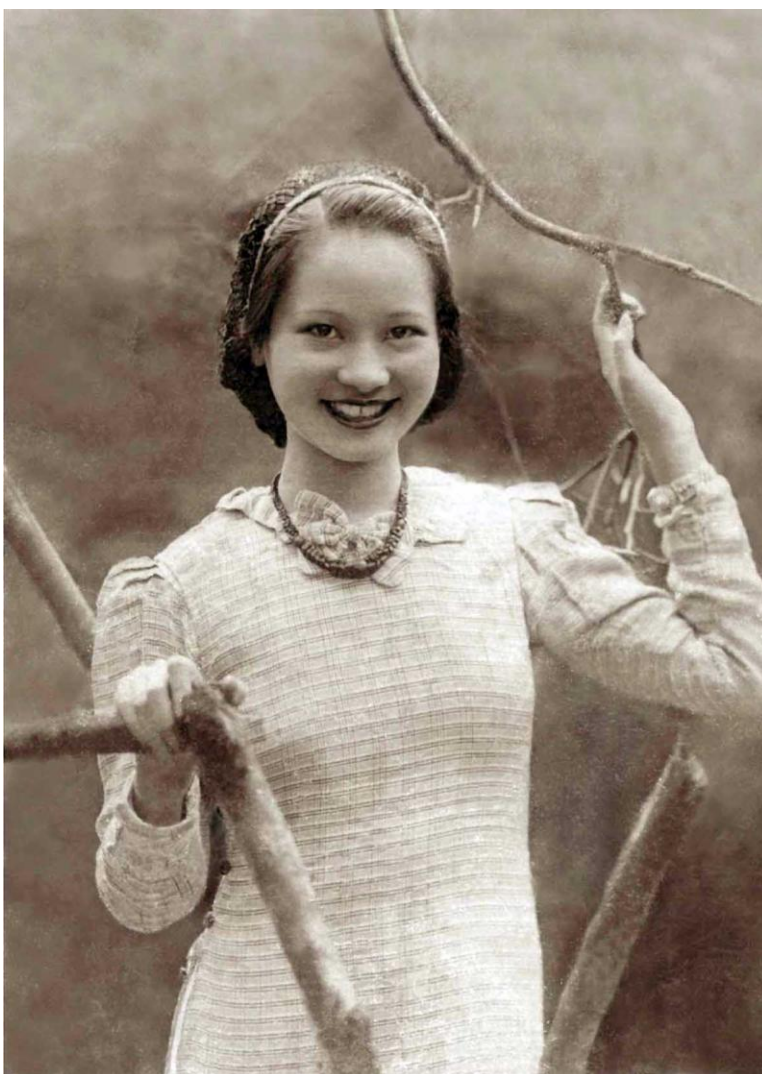
<sup>57</sup> Advertisement for the Lemur Tailor Shop from *Ngày Nay*, no. 90, 19 Dec 1937, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Advertisement for the Lemur Tailor Shop from *Ngày Nay*, no. 175, 19 Aug 1939, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Advertisement for the Lemur Tailor Shop from *Ngày Nay*, no. 183, 14 Oct 1939, 7.

<sup>60</sup> The tea house (called Thiên Hương) and barbershop were both on Hàng Da street, in storefronts Lemur rented from Phạm Quỳnh. Nguyễn Cát Minh Nguyệt, “Cha Tôi Trong Tâm Tưởng,” *The Ky 21*, no. 201-202, Jan-Feb 2006, p 40.

son of Phạm Quỳnh) and associate Tôn Thất Định while searching for news of family and friends. The designer was 35 at the date of capture; he and his companions were never seen alive again. Later eyewitness accounts would place them in the Việt Bắc labor camps, where they were believed to have been executed.<sup>61</sup> Although Lemur's work was not political in nature, it is possible that lesser Viet Minh cadres found his work on fashion and applied design tainted with "bourgeois decadence," the Lemur tunic contributing to the "moral downfall" of young women, his successful business ventures branding him a member of the "petit bourgeois capitalist class." Also, Lemur's close ties with prominent non-communist intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group and other well-placed figures in Hanoi society could have earned him the ire of the revolution. When asked about Nguyễn Cát Tường's fate, Võ Nguyên Giáp (who was on friendly terms with the designer and his family) was said to have answered cryptically, "Regretfully...the revolution had lost its way."<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 11. Miss Vũ Thị Hoa Vân in Lemur tunic, 1938. From the personal collection of Nguyễn Trọng Hiền.**

<sup>61</sup> Nguyễn Cát Minh Nguyệt, p 42.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Võ Nguyên Giáp and Lemur had previously taught together at the Ecole Thang Long. See advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 74, 29 Aug 1937, p. 708.

### Public Opinion of Lemur's designs: gender, national identity, and aesthetics

The debate about fashion did not remain only on the pages of *Phong Hóa*; intellectuals of all stripes discussed Lemur's reforms in their respective publications, while readers submitted their comments directly to the paper. While most of the comments remained one-offs, others sparked sustained debates across newspapers. Public opinion on Lemur's work varied just as much, from glowing agreement to outright dismissal. While some of the commentators focused on the actual physical design of the clothing, most used the designs as a springboard to discuss larger social issues related to the burgeoning modern condition in Vietnam, namely gender, national identity and the nature of Vietnamese aesthetics. Considering the other massive transformations in Vietnamese society during the time, some intellectuals saw Lemur's work as silly or misguided. This scorn for fashion as a topic can be seen in Vũ Trọng Phụng's satire *Dumb Luck*. Miss Civilization, proprietress of the Europeanization Tailor Shop, justifies her sale of sexy undergarments by saying, "Never mind what those old-fashioned moralists say about us. We do not simply *reform the outside*. A slip or a pair of panties from our shop may be thought of as a secret weapon in the fight to retain one's husband."<sup>63</sup> The weekly paper *Tương Lai* remarked sarcastically that women wearing Lemur tunics "see themselves as a hero saving their country...And Lemur has also become a hero to this blessed society."<sup>64</sup> These negative depictions suggest that no matter how much social or cultural importance is placed on the reform of women's clothing, ultimately it remains just that—clothing. However, the fact that Lemur's fashion reform erupted into a full-fledged debate about larger topics of gravity belies these belittling statements. Lemur's reforms and the discussions surrounding it provides a case study to examine underlying Vietnamese anxieties about the country's burgeoning modern condition.

#### *Women and Gender Roles*

While it is important to describe the trajectory of Lemur's designs, one must also examine their reception among women, the target and object of his column. Did women actually wear his designs? If so, who and how many? Despite the difficulty of finding quantitative evidence, it is possible to piece together a general picture of women's reception of Lemur's designs. Shortly after the Lemur's column began appearing, *Phong Hóa* started running an advertisement for the Phạm Tá dye and tailor shop. Usually printed below the column, the ad read:

Many women complain that the designs by Cát Tường, when given to tailors (even specialists), do not produce satisfactory products. To satisfy these women, we will open a tailor shop and will ask Mr. Cát Tường to help out. Then you will have modern and beautiful outfits like you always desired. Phạm Tá: graduated from dye and tailor schools in Paris. #23, Lakeside Street, Hanoi.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Zinoman, 63.

<sup>64</sup> "Những kết quả của một cuộc cách mệnh" *Tương Lai*, no. 10, 1 Apr 1937, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Mấy mẫu quần mới," *Phong Hóa*, no. 96, 4 May 1934, 13.

Whether or not Phạm Tá realized this plan, the advertisement suggests that a demand for Lemur clothing existed, high enough to warrant the opening of a shop with enough expertise to execute the designs. As Nguyễn Vỹ described in his semifictional “Tuan: A Vietnamese Man, 1927-1945,” “the trend of the Lemur tunic was first embraced by the dancers.”<sup>66</sup> The Lemur tunic was introduced in Saigon by popular *cai luong* singers such as Phung Ha, who was a personal friend of the designer.<sup>67</sup> Even if fear of public opinion caused women to think twice about wearing the new tunic, that fear quickly dissipated. Miss Hồng Vân, the victim of the old woman’s attack, reminisced: “Women were timid at first, but it is like that with anything. Once they were accustomed to it, everything was fine...If a woman was shy and easily frightened, she would start sweating.”<sup>68</sup> After the initial novelty wore off, the Lemur tunic became more widespread, in part due to *Phong Hóa*’s high circulation, and quickly became the outfit of choice for “modern women.”<sup>69</sup> By 1935, women wore Lemur’s designs even in small towns like Hội An. Phan Thị Nga, a contributor to *Ngày Nay*, described how a number of Hoi An women boldly wore the Lemur outfit to the Lạc Thiên festival, braving the scornful and hostile public opinion of several thousand small-town Vietnamese. When asked what caused the Lemur tunic to become so quickly popular and widespread, she replied that Lemur’s outfit enhanced the gracefulness of the female form and that “Cát Tường knew how to start a movement that addressed the secret desires of women, secret hopes that we often have but do not dare to pursue.”<sup>70</sup> As late as 1939, women were still wearing the Lemur tunic. Poet Ứng Bình Thúc Giạ Thị penned a poem describing a young woman he saw at the Hue fair: “Her shoes were high-heeled, her tunic was Lemur...”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the success of the Lemur tailor shop as mentioned above also supports the view that the Lemur tunic quickly caught on as a staple for any modern and sophisticated Vietnamese woman.

Despite its far-reaching popularity, the Lemur tunic also had its fair share of female detractors. In a competing journal, a woman writer named Mộng Quyên criticized Lemur’s designs:

Vietnamese women, especially Northern women...in the past have had a separate outfit used to cover the body that suits the climate: brown silk gauze. Until the encounter with foreigners...buried the era of “thúng” hats and dark gauze...In those days we thought dressing like that was already very proper and elegant ...<sup>72</sup>

She maintained that the older outfit “suited the aesthetic tastes of Vietnamese women,” and disappointedly added that the somber dignity of the outfit was now usurped by the flamboyance

<sup>66</sup> Nguyễn Vỹ, *Tuan, chàng trai đất Việt*, Vol 2, (Saigon: Dai Nam, 1970), 177.

<sup>67</sup> A picture of the singer in Lemur tunic was found in the CAOM archives.

<sup>68</sup> Phan Thị Nga, “Chị em Hội An với y phục Cát Tường” *Ngày Nay*, # 5, 10 Mar 1935, 15.

<sup>69</sup> By my calculations, the circulation of *Phong Hóa* during the run of Lemur’s fashion column numbered an average of 8,900 copies weekly, making it one of the highest-circulating papers in Vietnam at the time.

<sup>70</sup> Phan Thị Nga, 15.

<sup>71</sup> Nguyễn Gia Miêu “Trông Màu Trời, Chọn Sắc Áo,” *Lao Động*, no.165, 13 Jun 2004.

[http://www1.laodong.com.vn/pls/bld/folder\\$.view\\_item\\_detail%28103833%29](http://www1.laodong.com.vn/pls/bld/folder$.view_item_detail%28103833%29) . Accessed 14 Feb 2012. According to Nguyen Gia Mieu, Lemur went to the Hue Fair in 1939 to promote his fashion designs, but this cannot be independently verified.

<sup>72</sup> The *nón thúng* was a large round flat hat worn by women in the north. Đỗ Thục Trâm, “Mộng Quyên và Cát Tường” *Đông Phương*, no. 6, 3 Dec 1934, p. 3.

of colored tunics and white pants, relegating the old outfit to more mature women. Lamenting the “flashiness” and “floweriness” of the Lemur tunic, Mộng Quyên argued that the “too-tight” garment does not match the disposition of Vietnamese women: “Women in our country are physically weak, their actions and gestures are relaxed and slow, completely different from European women who are strong and quick. So in terms of clothing, we should just follow the softer and slender, better than anything glitzy and ornate.”<sup>73</sup> Mộng Quyên’s comments shed light into the self-image that some Vietnamese women espoused—as weak and soft—in comparison to the strength and vigor of western women. The discussion of Lemur’s styles reveal not only what women thought about the new modern world, but of themselves and their place in it.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to women’s reception and opinion of his tunic, it is also necessary to examine Lemur’s own views and motives regarding the women he claimed to serve. Despite the implications of his work, Lemur was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a champion of women’s liberation. Lemur did not intend for the reform of women’s clothing to allow her to make her own place in the modern world; rather, he meant for her newfound sartorial freedom to help her better fulfill her duty as a wife and mother. Women are blessed by the Creator with beauty, innocence, grace, and amiability, he argued, and thus must “try their best to heighten and prolong it. For this reason women need to beautify themselves, so they could be more attractive, to fulfill the wishes of Heaven.”<sup>75</sup> To accomplish this heavenly duty, women must use not only their gentle demeanor, but most importantly, their physical beauty: “From infancy to maturity, who would not admit that: without women, life would become without flavor. Women make our lives more savory, happy—it is truly a difficult duty.”<sup>76</sup> Lemur’s fashion column advocated modern women within a limited context—not for their own self-actualization, but to become wives and mothers suited for a modern world.

To Lemur, it is imperative that a woman maintain her looks not only to please her husband but also because her personal happiness depended on it. Lemur chastises women who use the excuse of family for their slovenly appearance: “I think this is sloppy thinking. Everyone knows that...people also have the tendency to become bored or tired.”<sup>77</sup> Because such a tendency is innate, women must do their best to avoid it. Upon seeing a disheveled wife, overworked and tired, Lemur opined, “Even though the mouth won’t admit it, the heart secretly tires. In a family, if the husband tires of his wife, can you imagine what kind of situation that would be?” He answered his own question by saying that husbands “would find some distraction, some secret fun...”<sup>78</sup> Lemur did not describe what constituted “secret fun,” only that it would ultimately harm family life. Neglecting a man’s own hand in the unhappiness of his marriage, Lemur finished, “That a woman’s happiness and worth is in her beautifying herself is not an overstatement.”<sup>79</sup> In the new modern Vietnam, a woman not only must fulfill the duties her predecessors performed, but also had the added responsibility of keeping her husband interested. At the heart of this argument lies the assumption that marriage should exist on the

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Lemur did not even have to respond to Mộng Quyên’s criticism—a rival paper defended the designer. Đông Phương lashed out, calling her old-fashioned and pointing out that weak and strong people exist in all countries.

<sup>75</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Tính ưa đẹp và hay trang điểm” *Phong Hóa*, no. 85, 11 Feb 1934, p. 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

basis of romantic love. While surely infidelity is not a modern phenomenon, the idea that young people should marry who they choose became increasingly widespread during the colonial period.<sup>80</sup> The fact that young couples can now choose their life partner created the ideal that marriage should be based on mutual affection and attraction. This changing ideal of marriage compels women to not only demand more of their husbands emotionally, but also to be more proactive about keeping them.

This rationale for women's fashion is satirized brutally by Vũ Trọng Phụng in *Dumb Luck*. Mrs. Civilization, helping a female customer, advises her, "As you know, Madame, one can no longer remain ignorant of the latest fads in beauty maintenance and hope to maintain family happiness. Nowadays, all young girls dress in a modern way—the competition is increasingly brutal."<sup>81</sup> When the young woman wholeheartedly agreed with the proprietress and adds that her husband spends all his time chasing after modern tramps, Mrs. Civilization gives her some simple advice: "If you can't beat them, you must join them. You must dress just like them."<sup>82</sup> Despite the cynical tone of the story, Vũ Trọng Phụng seemed to have clearly understood Lemur's point, even though he might have disagreed—that modern life has affected everyone, and a person can do nothing about it except join in. The fierce competition of the modern world, which to the Vietnamese has meant the loss of social ties, meaning, and values, has seeped even into personal life.

### Critiques of the Lemur Tunic

Surprisingly, despite the far-reaching popularity and the large number of women who wore the Lemur tunic, only a few women voiced their opinions in the weekly pages of the "public sphere." The discourse remained almost entirely the domain of men, and the one instance of a woman entering the discourse was dismissed, because "whenever women get involved, things become a ruckus."<sup>83</sup> These men had a ruckus of their own to deal with: collective anxieties about modernity and Vietnam's ability to navigate this complex, foreign, and new sociocultural landscape spilled into public discourse. The debates surrounding the Lemur tunic reveal the concerns of these Vietnamese intellectuals regarding modern life. The critiques of Lemur and his work fall into three main categories: economics and class, national identity and aesthetics.

#### *Economics and Class*

The debates over Lemur's tunic revealed a preoccupation with socioeconomic class. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group defended Lemur against his critics, some of whom saw the Lemur tunic as catering to a particular urban bourgeois class of women. In a front-page editorial of the March 16, 1934 issue of *Phong Hóa*, Nhị Linh responded to a letter from a people's representative [nghị sĩ] regarding Lemur's designs.<sup>84</sup> The representative criticized the reforms as not "universal" [phổ thông] enough and that *Phong Hóa* "only thinks about rich, elegant women." Nhị Linh strongly disagreed with the representative's criticism, and pointed out that the paper's reformation of women's clothing had every intention to be universal,

<sup>80</sup> Nguyễn Văn Ký, 270-82.

<sup>81</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck*, 61.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Tư Húi, "Mép thợ ngòi" *Loa*, # 14, 17 May 1934, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Nhị Linh is a pseudonym often used in editorial writing by Trần Khánh Giur, better known by yet another pseudonym, Khải Hưng)

regardless of whether or not the public welcomed it. Nhị Linh wrote that Lemur's designs were "not just universal, but very universal."<sup>85</sup> He argued that current modes of dress are only different in terms of colors and types of fabrics. However, nothing in the overall design had changed; it was still the same tunic with the annoying 5th flap used to blow one's nose, the same stiff buttons and slip-on shoes that always fall off. The current state of Vietnamese dress, Nhị Linh argued, are especially not universal. Only a young woman from a wealthy family would be able buy different colored silks and foreign fabrics. Financial constraints force poorer women to look old-fashioned because they can only afford to buy inexpensive gauze [lương]. Because the tunics were exactly the same, only women with money can look "modern." Nhị Linh was confident that "when our reforms take effect, everyone can dress in the modern way. The designers will find ways of cutting, of sewing, so that a woman can keep her softness, luminosity..." no matter what fabric she used.<sup>86</sup>

To take its argument even further, the Self-Reliant Literary Group launched its own fashion designs aimed at the peasantry. A few weeks after the representative's criticism, Nhất Linh published his drawings for a new peasant outfit in the June 1, 1934 issue of *Phong Hóa* (Figure 12). Nhất Linh (using his illustration pen name Đông Sơn) wanted to "show that rural clothing could also be changed, could also be aesthetic but also not cost more than the old styles. We think that not only city or rich people, but rural folk, poorer folk can also share in the beauty of clothing." In later years, Nhất Linh and the League of Light would make a similar statement about architecture; that rural houses can be both aesthetic and inexpensive for the benefit of the peasantry. If the cut was the key to reforming peasants' clothing, then the rational reorganization of living space would transform their houses. Lemur had used the urban 5-flap tunic as the basis for his reforms; Nhất Linh wanted to reform the 4-flap dress favored in the countryside. Nhất Linh intended to keep his outfit similar to the older style, but much more aesthetic. Rather than the 4-flap garment tied in front, Nhất Linh replaced it with a cardigan-like blouse with a lapel collar and short sleeves, so as not to be a nuisance while working. The lack of long flaps in the front and back suggests that Nhất Linh removed them for economical purposes. In addition, the new outfit is made more modest by replacing the *yếm* with a sheath undershirt to avoid baring the ribs. The wearer can keep the collar of the sheath buttoned or open to their liking, and the belted waist remains the same as before. Nhất Linh added pleats on both sides of the skirt for better movement; when standing, the skirt remains slim and does not snag when walking. The sandal has an added strap close to the ankle to allow for easier walking.<sup>87</sup> Nhất Linh's design suggests that the Group might have secretly agreed with the representative (to a certain extent) that Lemur's fashion reform did not pay enough attention to rural women and sought to remedy that discrepancy by bringing the designer's project more in line with the Group's populist views.

---

<sup>85</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Vẻ đẹp của các bà các cô" *Phong Hóa*, no. 89, 16 Mar 1934, p. 1-2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Đông Sơn, "Một kiểu y phục nhà quê" *Phong Hóa*, no. 100, 1 Jun 1934, p. 4.



Figure 12. Rural outfit designed by Đông Sơn (Nhất Linh). From *Phong Hóa* no. 100, 1 June 1934, p. 4.

Nhất Linh's interest in reforming rural women's clothing reveals much about the writer's own social preoccupations. Nhất Linh's new rural dress represented an attempt to bring the urban phenomenon of fashion—and by association, modernity—to the countryside.<sup>88</sup> This concern is highlighted by Lemur's disinterest in rural issues, as the designer's clothing seemed to cater only to citified bourgeois women. Nhất Linh's removal of fashion from this realm can be viewed as a way not only to democratize fashion, but to bring the modern to those that would probably be the last to experience it. However, despite the good intentions of Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh, these idealistic reforms did not take into consideration the practical realities of tailoring. As the debates over the Lemur tunic revealed, the cost of tailoring a Lemur outfit will cost at least twice, if not triple or quadruple, the amount to tailor the traditional outfit.<sup>89</sup> In the end, the Lemur outfit remained accessible only to wealthier women in urban areas, and no evidence exists that Nhất Linh's rural outfit ever caught on. The discrepancy between ideals and realities will become a common theme in the social reforms not just of Lemur, but of the Self-Reliant Literary Group as a whole. This was the case especially in the Group's full-blown social activism, such as

<sup>88</sup> Incidentally, Nhất Linh's other contribution to Lemur's column was a design for a little girls' dress. His interest in children's clothing belies an attempt to bring fashion to younger generations, to plant the idea of perpetual change early.

<sup>89</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Bức thư ngõ cùng Ông Thanh Lam," *Phong Hóa*, no. 96, 4 May 1934, 4.



its founding of the League of Light. Nevertheless, the concern of Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh towards issues of class and the countryside revealed anxiety about the uneven spread of modern life and the disparity it produces.

### *National Identity*

The bitterest debates over Lemur's tunic pertained to the message it communicated about Vietnamese national identity. As previously discussed, the tunic itself constituted a hybrid garment—a historical appropriation of Chinese and French influences—a fact not lost on Vietnamese intellectuals at the time. Perhaps the most vocal and prolific criticism of Lemur's designs in this regard came from *Loa*, started by figures associated with the rival Tan Dan publishing house and self-styled alternative to *Phong Hóa*. In April 1934, a university student who called himself Thanh Lâm launched a lengthy critique of Lemur's fashion column. He called the garment “Franco-Annamite” and addressed Lemur directly: “Everything you have claimed to design, you have taken from Western clothing to apply to Vietnamese clothing.”<sup>90</sup> Citing the French women's magazine *Femina* as the potential source of Lemur's ideas, Thanh Lâm quipped that Lemur's outfit

has so many Vietnamese characteristics that the Vietnamese must accept it as their own, but any Vietnamese that accepts it becomes French...Vietnamese aesthetics would never excuse a Vietnamese outfit that lacks Vietnamese characteristics.”<sup>91</sup>

For Thanh Lâm, the fact that the garment was a material pastiche of French and traditional influences was particularly offensive. His reaction reflected a deep-seated apprehension about the ongoing process of constructing national identity—the possibility that Vietnamese identity was something derivative.

Lemur's response seemed less concerned with this uneasiness. In his response to Thanh Lâm, Lemur not only conceded to the accuracy of calling the tunic “Franco-Annamite,” but also admitted that its hybrid nature was intentional. He pointed out that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French influence had touched every aspect of Vietnamese culture—customs, intellect, politesse, literature and art, even its food and language. For Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Vietnamese cannot deny the realities of French influence; however, Vietnamese can exercise their own agency by choosing aspects of foreign culture to adopt. As Lemur wrote,

I have purposefully found and filtered the beautiful and the convenient from Western women's clothing to replace the inconvenience and ugliness in the Vietnamese outfit. The things you say that I have left alone are all that I have purposefully retained, because in my opinion they are beautiful.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Thanh Lâm, “Ông Nguyễn Cát Tường cùng y phục phụ nữ” *Loa*, no. 11, 26 Apr 1934, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Thanh Lâm, “Y phục phụ nữ ‘Mo-déc’ hay là kiểu Lemur của ông Nguyễn Cát Tường” *Loa* no. 16, 31 May 1934, p. 16.

<sup>92</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Bức Thư trả lời ông Thanh Lâm,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 101, 8 Jun 1934, p. 4.

His description suggests that the designer espoused an instrumental view of French influence; that one can remove the “negative” aspects of Vietnamese culture, replace them with the “positives” of French culture, and create an improved version that is still essentially Vietnamese. As Lemur and the Self Reliant Literary Group saw it, French influence was a fact of life, and any anxiety regarding it constituted a form of cultural denial.

In his response, Thanh Lâm agreed with Lemur that French influence had permanently permeated Vietnamese society and culture, but only because of “forced circumstances.”<sup>93</sup> He argued that if Vietnamese clothing had to be cross-bred [lai] to match the times, then sooner or later everything else will follow. In the end, the entire foundation of Vietnamese art would be adulterated, and Lemur would have “dragged Vietnamese art down a hole.”<sup>94</sup> Although Thanh Lâm was describing Vietnamese art, one can easily extend this argument to Vietnamese culture in general. Underpinning his argument was the fear of modern changes spinning out of control and irreparably changing Vietnamese culture to the point of non-recognition. Thus Thanh Lâm and Lemur represented two opposing views regarding Vietnamese culture in the new modern world: one looked for a “pure” Vietnamese culture coexisting with modern life, the second advocated a dialectic fusion. Interestingly enough, both only referred to French influence; neither Lemur nor anyone else (especially the cultural purist Thanh Lâm) seemed to remember that pants were a Chinese legacy. As outside observer Tứ Ly pointed out:

So even if it is half-French or half-Chinese, as long as the outfit is pleasing to the eye, it isn’t necessary to find a unique Vietnamese style!! But as for the outfit women wear today, Mr. Thanh Lâm...where are the Vietnamese characteristics there? From *the pants* to the tunic, it is influenced by the Chinese.<sup>95</sup>

This oversight suggests that some Vietnamese intellectuals had a short collective cultural memory in their construction of Vietnamese “culture.” Such was especially the case with what is to be known as the *áo dài*: denigrated as pastiche and cultural hodgepodge in one era, unequivocally accepted as symbol of the nation in another.

Yet a remarkable point about the pen war between Thanh Lâm and Lemur was that they never discussed what actually constituted “Vietnamese characteristics.” For all the sound and fury over the “Vietnameseness” of the outfit, neither Lemur nor the other participants tried to define it, or even set guidelines to capture it in clothing. It seemed that for these intellectuals, “Vietnameseness” was a given, and any attempt to verbalize it would emphasize the flimsiness of the term. However, this oversight did not escape an outside observer of the debates. Writing as NGYM, Trần Quang Trân commented on this in a brief but pointed letter to *Phong Hóa*.<sup>96</sup> He wrote,

The Lemur outfit doesn’t have Vietnamese characteristics. And what are Vietnamese characteristics? Please ask someone else and not me. Come to think about it, I criticize the Creator for creating the Vietnamese when it is clear that he cut from the French a

---

<sup>93</sup> “Thanh Lâm” “Họa sĩ Lemur và khoa mỹ thuật của Ông ấy: Bức thư trả lời ông Nguyễn Cát Tường” *Loa*, #19, 21 Jun 1934, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>95</sup> Tứ Ly, “Từ Nhỏ Đến Nhớn,” *Phong Hóa*, # 104, 29 Jun 1934, p. 2-3.

<sup>96</sup> Pseudonym of Trần Quang Trân, an artist who often collaborated with the Group.

little, the Chinese a little, the Japanese a little, from the montagnards a little, etc... Only black lacquered teeth are truly Vietnamese.<sup>97</sup>

Tú Ly also added, “And if you prefer an outfit that is completely Vietnamese, then I suggest you go into the forest and find primitive hill tribes and look at their clothing...”<sup>98</sup> NGYM and Tú Ly’s self-deprecating comments openly admitted for the first time the anxiety underlying the debate—that the positive aspects of Vietnamese culture came from abroad, and that the truly Vietnamese aspects came from the jungle and are not worth keeping. As expected, Loa responded scornfully, quipping that “NGYM graduated from the Fine Arts University, the school with the program intended to rebuild the foundations of Vietnamese art—with Vietnamese characteristics”<sup>99</sup> and he does not know what that means. Such a statement suggests that some intellectuals viewed “Vietnameseness” as an innate quality that did not need verbal definition, one that can only come from being Vietnamese. With its appropriation of foreign influences, the Lemur tunic did not conform to Thanh Lam’s own definition of Vietnamese identity.

Any analysis of this particular pen war begs the question of the writers’ preoccupation with national costume. Modern fashion, as a historical phenomenon, often communicates national character or an interpretation of such, but it is one of many identities embodied in clothing. Why then, did Vietnamese intellectuals have a knee-jerk impulse to discuss clothing on national terms? The answer lies in the fact that Lemur’s reform of women’s fashion ran concurrently with the nation’s construction of its own identity during the colonial era. Therefore, it is not surprising that with the introduction of his tunic, Lemur also used the word “national costume” [quốc phục] for the first time in the discourse.<sup>100</sup> As a product of modern social, cultural, and political forces, national folk costumes are essentially constructed phenomena. As Elizabeth Wilson writes,

...what is now known as ‘national costume’ is in many cases a hybrid adaptation of peasant styles to symbolize a newly created national identity when the nineteenth-century nation states were formed. Some of the most seemingly ‘authentic’ of these costumes may therefore represent the rewriting of history, a kind of sartorial lie.<sup>101</sup>

In the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam, the construction of a national costume by Lemur seems less like a “sartorial lie” than an admittance of the culture’s hybrid nature. The Lemur tunic materially acknowledged that Vietnamese culture was molded by multiple foreign cultural influences, including the Chinese and the French. Rather than adapting a peasant style to symbolize the nation, Lemur used the 5-flap dress, a garment worn by urban women of higher status than their rural counterparts, as the starting point of his tunic. Because the national garment symbolized an understanding of national character, it is no wonder that some Vietnamese intellectuals were so averse to accepting the hybrid nature of Lemur tunic—it physically acknowledged modernity’s victory, and negated the existence of an enduring Vietnamese culture. Where other Vietnamese intellectuals saw defeat, Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group saw possibilities—that Vietnamese culture, like the 5-flap tunic, could be

<sup>97</sup> NGYM, “Một Bức Thơ,” *Phong Hóa*, # 104, 29 Jun 1934, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Tú Húi, “Mép Thợ Ngồi,” *Loa* no. 21, 5 Jul 1934, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Y Phục của phụ nữ” *Phong Hóa*, no. 90, 23 Mar 1934, p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, 23.

refashioned using western influences into a modern entity that serves and represents a newly-constructed Vietnamese nation.

### *Style and Aesthetics*

Along with the issues of gender and national identity, the debates over Lemur's tunic also discussed matters of style and aesthetics. With Lemur's designs as the focus, the debates easily turned into a discussion of what constitutes beauty and the best approach to it. The debates shed light on how some Vietnamese intellectuals defined beauty and appropriated Western design and aesthetic principles. The pen wars also reveal the attitudes of some intellectuals towards commercial mass culture—reflecting the perennial debate between “high” art and pop culture. Consistently throughout the debates, *Loa* contributor Thanh Lâm showed a dislike for the vulgarities of popular culture, of which he saw Lemur's designs as the ultimate representative. Lemur, on the other hand, not only embraced modern popular culture, but set out to serve as its vanguard, as evidenced by his fashion column.<sup>102</sup>

Some of Lemur's critics thought Lemur's immediate focus on women's clothing premature and vague. Thanh Lâm opened his critique of Lemur's design by attacking the vagueness of the designer's definition of beauty:

He [Lemur] discusses art, a topic not many in our country have discussed, and he uses language that hasn't been properly defined. He does not define it, what it means. What characteristics are considered beautiful? He only praises something as beautiful, criticizes something else as lacking style, but never why something is ugly or beautiful, or even where. How would anyone understand you? ... He is a graduate of the Fine Arts school. He is right to encourage art, and knows better than anyone that art should be loved and cared for, because he understands positive influences of art on people's lives and on the morality of individuals and society. People need to know what these influences are before he begins to discuss Vietnamese women's clothing.<sup>103</sup>

For Thanh Lâm, any discussion of fashion must be preceded by an introduction to art, not only to define the nature of beauty, but also to discuss its positive effects on individuals and society at large. For him, women's clothing comprises only a small portion of the entire question and that Lemur took the wrong approach when he jumped straight into the practicalities of fashion design. At the heart of Thanh Lâm's critique is the loftier view of the artist as a cultural pedagogue. Because the artist occupies the privileged position of understanding art and beauty, he bears a Promethean responsibility to proliferate ideas of aesthetics to the unknowing masses. That Lemur merely focused on practical and applicable aspects of art, of which fashion is most emblematic, implies a lost opportunity to better educate the Vietnamese on aesthetics.

---

<sup>102</sup> Thanh Lâm's snobbery and Lemur's sympathy towards mass forms of culture mirrors the attitudes of various theorists associated with the Frankfurt school. As Marxists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer both espoused views that urban mass culture constituted the standardized expression of the ideology of market capitalism. Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, not only sympathized with popular culture, but also passionately studied it as part of the modern condition.

<sup>103</sup> Thanh Lâm, “Ông Nguyễn Cát Tường cùng y phục phụ nữ” *Loa*, no. 11, 26 Apr 1934, p. 15.

Thanh Lâm immediately anticipated Lemur's response to this critique. He sensed that Lemur would argue for man's instinctual knowledge of beauty by writing that, "Beauty is a stranger to no one! Everyone knows what is beautiful!" To that Thanh Lâm retorted, "Please sir, if that is true, there is no need for you to polish the seats of the Fine Arts School. Even what's right and wrong, everyone understands it not in the same way, so what is beautiful and ugly needs a trained eye to be able to discern the difference."<sup>104</sup> Thanh Lâm's comment suggested that beauty remains the domain of an elite group, educated to logically differentiate between the beautiful and ugly. Although Lemur never made this argument himself, Thanh Lâm placed this artistic elite in contradistinction those who make judgments of aesthetic value at an instinctual and sensory level.

When Lemur did not respond to this critique, Thanh Lâm focused his next attack specifically on the tunic itself—he criticized its lack of simplicity. He declared that simplicity was a principle of modern art: "In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, simplicity in art is necessary to intellect, like food to the body... Whatever is not simple is not with the times, and not with the foundations of modern art." Thanh Lâm wrote of simplicity in design terms:

art these days pay the most attention to the unique characteristics of each object, with other objects, and finds beauty in simple elegant lines, in the harmony of colors and beauty in proportions, and not emphasis on complex decoration like in older art. For this reason, you see many things designed with straight lines replacing the complicated, curly lines, circles replacing ovals, smooth surfaces replacing carved...because straight lines are simpler than curled, circles are simpler than oval... Art these days is simplicity.<sup>105</sup>

For Thanh Lâm, modern simplicity was defined in contrast to the ornate and intricate aesthetic of traditional décor. Turning to Lemur's designs, Thanh Lâm lambasted its lack of simplicity:

His lapel collar, his heart-shaped sleeves, and his "snakelike" hem, his pleats, his dentelle trim, all of these ideas of Mr. Tường have made women's clothing more complicated, lose all its natural simplicity, lose all of the usefulness of an everyday outfit. If he had said that the outfit was used for dancing it would make more sense.<sup>106</sup>

He then pointed out that the current tunic already exhibits this principle of simplicity, and that Lemur's efforts amounted to fixing a perfectly fine garment.

Lemur finally responded to Thanh Lâm's critique by taking his argument to its most ridiculous and extreme conclusion:

You criticized my women's outfit as complicated, which means that you have thought about them carefully. Just look around—has anything that could be called artistic ever escape complications? ...Clothing is no different. If you want to look good then of course there will be complications... and if you don't need things to be beautiful, just extremely simple then I advise you that there is nothing simpler than following the nudist lifestyle

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>106</sup> Thanh Lâm, "Y phục phụ nữ 'Mo-déc' hay là kiểu Lemur của ông Nguyễn Cát Tường", 14.

of the Germans... Because throwing a piece of fabric over one's body is complicated and annoying.<sup>107</sup>

Lemur's comment suggests that he defined simplicity on more practical terms, equating simplicity with functionality, a complete clash with Thanh Lâm's definition. Such a difference suggests not just a difference in their opinion, but in their entire approach to art. Thanh Lâm took a highbrow, elitist attitude towards art and the artist's social responsibilities, while Lemur preferred working with material objects with widespread appeal.

Along with the issue of simplicity, Thanh Lâm also found that Lemur's tunic lacked uniformity of style—and was unforgiving to anything seen as pastiche. Thanh Lâm wrote, “Because of his zeal to change, Mr. Tường also violated another essential principal of art. All aspects of any design object must follow the same style, same spirit.”<sup>108</sup> He cited an example of this kind of offensive aesthetic—a western-dressed male sitting on an ornate wooden chair carved with dragons and phoenixes. To Thanh Lâm, such stylistic incongruities could never exist harmoniously. To further illustrate his point, he compared Lemur's tunic to a gaudily decorated room with Greek statues, Roman columns, and Chinese paintings discordantly thrown together. Thanh Lâm's attitude is one typical of artistic snobbery—he saw pastiche as the superficial and thoughtless imitation of preexisting styles, the recycling of past tropes into new works of art. As evidenced by his fashion designs, Lemur had no reservations about fusing the styles of western clothing with the traditional 5-flap tunic. Thus, Thanh Lâm and Lemur are divided along the lines of “high” art and popular culture.

After criticizing Lemur's tunic for its lack of simplicity and stylistic uniformity, Thanh Lâm then lambasted Lemur for not understanding art, calling his taste “the aesthetic of men of wealth...they see a phoenix no different than a chicken, the beautiful can never move their dry hearts; they think that just because they have money that they understand art.”<sup>109</sup> Thanh Lâm's comment reveals his disgust for the vulgarity of money, and for those who buy cultural items without the expertise or finesse to truly appreciate them. Only those who do not have any aesthetic taste would find such a cultural mishmash beautiful. He dropped a pointed hint to Lemur:

An artist does have to always follow the desires of the public. The obligation and responsibility of artists is to bring works of value to train the artistic sensibilities of the public. Because of those works, the public will gradually understand the beauty and meaning of art. That is the first reward of talented artists. But to follow the tastes of the public, to think of oneself as a great talent after a few praising comments, that only shows a person lacking an artist's soul.<sup>110</sup>

In so many words, Thanh Lâm accused Lemur of pandering to the demands of the public, shirking his noble responsibility as an artist to promulgate high aesthetic ideas. Thanh Lâm's comment implied a deep distrust of the masses; their tastes would only disintegrate into aesthetic

---

<sup>107</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, “Bức Thư trả lời ông Thanh Lâm”, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Thanh Lâm, “Y phục phụ nữ ‘Mo-déc’ hay là kiểu Lemur của ông Nguyễn Cát Tường” *Loa* no. 16, 31 May 1934, p. 14-15.

<sup>109</sup> “Thanh Lâm” “Họa sĩ Lemur và khoa mỹ thuật của Ông ấy: Bức thư trả lời ông Nguyễn Cát Tường”, 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

bastardization and therefore must be properly educated. Thanh Lâm saw fashion, the commodification of art for mass consumption, as the ultimate manifestation of this vulgar aesthetic anarchy. As the most visible figure in fashion, Lemur became an easy target for such attacks.

Lemur's response to Thanh Lâm stressed the realities of making art: "A L'oeuvre, on connait l'artisan" [In work does one know the artist]. Lemur also added, "In life it is true with anything, to critique is easy, but to jump in and do things is difficult."<sup>111</sup> For Lemur, it is action that defines the artist, not his commentary, an attitude that fits into the Self-Reliant Literary Group's action-oriented philosophy. He then dropped a challenge to Thanh Lâm:

So if your designs are published, if they are filled with Vietnamese characteristics, without a bit of French influence and especially if they are more beautiful and convenient/functional than my designs, then I will immediately be impressed. You don't have to use vague philosophies to criticize and scorn my work, and especially hindering the road to progress. To any person with a bit of conscience, those actions constitute no small sin.<sup>112</sup>

Lemur saw the divide not as the clash between a high-art and commercial pop culture, but the difference between words and action. For Lemur, social reform remained his ultimate goal, while stylistic considerations were of lesser concern. As seen in his approach to fashion design, Lemur first focused on the practicalities of women's fashion, aiming to fix things that he saw as inconvenient and unnecessary. Only after changing such things like sleeves and collars did he start emphasizing aesthetic style. His approach to fashion mirrored the other reform projects that of the Self-Reliant Literary Group; changing material goods can bring about transformations in mentalities. For reformers like Lemur and the Group, the transformation of women's clothing constituted the first, albeit small transformation in social attitudes and perceptions. He would agree with Việt Sinh when he wrote that: "Change is something to be welcomed. Material things often come before mentalities; the reformation of clothing should, and must come before the reformation of mentalities and ideologies of women. One reform helps and nurtures the other."<sup>113</sup> For Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group, intellectuals should not fear the commodification of aesthetics, but instead harness it for social good. For all Thanh Lâm's comments on the artist's responsibilities and stylistic pontification, he remained among the type of intellectual that *Phong Hóa* most despised and most often lampooned—one that only lamented the current social situation but did nothing to change it.<sup>114</sup>

The debate between Lemur and Thanh Lâm reflected the recurrent debates between high art and a mass-produced consumer culture. Fashion, as the commodification of aesthetics for mass consumption, served as the battleground for different attitudes towards art and its place in the modern world. Thanh Lâm snobbery towards Lemur's tunic—what he perceived as its lack of simplicity, stylistic uniformity and its commercial implications—hinted at an anxiety towards the market and the force it represented—modernity. Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary embraced modern life and had no anxieties towards it—they actually viewed it optimistically, as

---

<sup>111</sup> Nguyễn Cát Tường, "Bức Thư trả lời ông Thanh Lâm", 4.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Việt Sinh, 3-4.

<sup>114</sup> The targets of *Phong Hóa*'s criticism often included old-fashioned moralists such as Tân Đà Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, and Hoàng Tăng Bí, and even younger intellectuals like Nguyễn Tiên Lãng and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường.

a force for the betterment of Vietnamese society. In the end, the heart of the debate remained the difference between words and action—making one's place in the modern world, or sitting on the sidelines as a spectator.

### Conclusion

This chapter considers the tunic designed by Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường as a physical, historical, and abstract entity. I use Lemur's fashion column and newspaper pen wars to argue that 1) Lemur's work constituted the first instance of modern fashion in Vietnam and 2) that the debates served as means to discuss issues of gender, class, national identity and aesthetics. The debates also revealed the attitudes of Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group towards modernization and societal change.

My first goal was to describe the historical rise of modern Vietnamese fashion. In order to contextualize Lemur's fashion reforms, I offered a description of two staples of Vietnamese traditional clothing, the 4-flap and 5-flap tunics. Analysis of both garments revealed that not only did the 4-flap tunic precede the 5-flap, but that the garment came to emphasize demographic differences, such as the rural/urban divide and class distinctions. Prior to Lemur, other changes in women's clothing had occurred, but did not constitute a modern system of fashion. Lemur's column itself did not accomplish this either. His column changed women's clothing, from the sleeves and collar to pants, culminating in the introduction of a new system of modular dress, known colloquially as the Lemur tunic (*áo Lemur, or áo kiểu Lemur*). However, this endeavor can only be seen as a one-off, as it did not exhibit the type of cyclical change characteristic of modern fashion. It was Lemur's pamphlet, *Beauty: Warm Weather 1934* that marked the beginnings of modern Vietnamese fashion. Its contents suggest an increased endeavor to dress the individual woman and not an archetype, which one can view as the first but small instance of self-expression. Intended to be the first in a series, the pamphlet represented a structured organ for constant change, the hallmark of modern fashion. Its failure to become a sustained publication revealed the undeveloped nature of modern Vietnamese fashion and reflected the often fleeting nature of reforms in the colonial period.

My second goal was to trace how the debates on the Lemur tunic comprised a intricate dialogue that exposes Vietnamese anxieties on modernity. While some of the debates focused on the actual design of the Lemur tunic, most debates used the designs as a way to discuss larger social issues related to modernity, like gender, national identity and aesthetics. In terms of gender issues, the discourse seemed to exist at two levels—the women that wore the tunic and the men that discussed them on the pages of newspapers. Lemur, as the designer of the tunic, intended the tunic to help women become better wives and mothers in a modern world, and not for their individual self-actualization. Linked to gender, the debates also shed light on national identity. The hybrid nature of the Lemur tunic caused much discomfort with intellectuals, because acceptance of the tunic would constitute an admission of the crossbred nature of Vietnamese culture. The instinct of such intellectuals to discuss the tunic in terms of national costume mirrors the construction of Vietnamese national identity in a colonial context. Tied to both gender and national identity, the debates also focused on aesthetics, revealing the tension between a “high” art and popular mass culture. In this debate, one can view how some Vietnamese intellectuals perceived capitalism, the most marked characteristic of modernity.



The debates on fashion also revealed the attitudes of Lemur and the Self-Reliant Literary Group towards modernization and societal change. As intellectual collaborators, Lemur and the Group not only espoused similar values, but also comparable methods to bring about social reform. Lemur's work on fashion exhibited a number of preoccupations shared by the Group and outlined in its manifesto. His desire to dress the individual woman and not an archetype mirrored the Group's own commitment to individualism; his insistence that his designs captured a "Vietnamese" visual style paralleled the Group's own emphasis on establishing a national literary style. However, the Group did not hesitate to add to Lemur's work when to bring it in line with its own social message, such as the case of rural clothing. Nhất Linh may have felt that Lemur's work did not pay enough heed to the attire of rural women and contributed his own designs. Nevertheless, the Group and Lemur did wholeheartedly agree on one guiding principle of social reform: that material goods held the power to potentially transform human behavior and attitudes. This idea will come to guide all the Self-Reliant Literary Group's projects and closely associate the Lemur tunic with the Self-Reliant Literary Group's social vision.

Despite the lively debates and popularity, the Lemur tunic soon petered out of fashion. As Nguyễn Tường Bách describes, "It is true that it was new, but it was too hodgepodge and cumbersome, like the too-high collar, puffed shoulders, tight waist, and flamboyant dentelle trim, detracted from the natural beauty of the Vietnamese *áo dài*. Not long after, it became even more outdated than the older styles."<sup>115</sup> Thus, the one of the first instances of modern fashion in Vietnam eventually fell victim to its relentless stylistic changes. However, that is the nature of the system—that casualty could not have been avoided. Self-Reliant Literary Group member Việt Sinh understood this process when he wrote,

"There are those that complain that clothing gives rise to too many styles, that it is too complicated, forcing people to change their clothing all the time. *But the basis of "mode" is in that change, that complication, that difference*—and the new clothing is better than the old in those aspects. Only in difference will there be many beautiful styles, only in change can we find our way to beauty."<sup>116</sup>

Việt Sinh's comment reflected the Self-Reliant Literary Group's attitudes on modernization—although the modern future may be unknown, it was far preferable to the familiar present. On a historical level, Lemur's work represented Vietnam's first foray into modern fashion, no matter how limited or stunted. However, to the women of late colonial Vietnam, the tunic represented not only a way to beautify themselves, but to participate in the spectacle of modern life. The tunic allowed women to take control of their bodies on a sartorial level. The novelty of the modern condition always had its detractors, and sometimes the clash between new and old would erupt in verbal, textual, or even physical violence, as evidenced by the knife-wielding tunic slasher. Miss Hồng Vân, the old woman's victim, remained vigilant even after the vicious attack: "We should not be discouraged because of other people's criticism. When we see what's beautiful, what's right, we need to boldly follow it and not hesitate at all."<sup>117</sup> For these women, the Lemur tunic came to represent multiple layers of meaning: not just something beautiful to wear, but an entire *zeitgeist* embodied in cloth.

---

<sup>115</sup> Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> Việt Sinh 3-4. Emphasis added.

<sup>117</sup> Chiêu Anh Kế, 15.

## CHAPTER 3

---

# Humor as Modern Sensibility: Lý Toét, Jokes, and Irony in *Phong Hóa*

### Introduction

The scene in Hanoi's Old Quarter on the morning of September 22, 1932 was nothing out of the ordinary. Food vendors dished out steaming bowls of noodles to customers along the sidewalk while rickshaw drivers pulled elegantly dressed patrons in the street. Shopowners leisurely watched the goings on while waiting for the first customer of the day. Wandering peddlers carried their heavily laden yokes while carefully dodging pedestrians. It looked like every other morning in the 36 Streets. Children roamed the streets selling newspapers, their arms full of newsprint fresh from the press. Only today, they were hawking something different. "A new change in the world of journalism! Buy it here! *Phong Hóa*, buy it here!" they cried as they walked. A Vietnamese reader, curious to see what this new change was, paid the seven sous for the newspaper. Settling down with a cup of coffee at a sidewalk cafe, he perused his new purchase. If we were to peek over his shoulder, what would we see?

Scanning the broadsheet format of the paper, we would be immediately drawn first to the only picture on the page (Figure 1):

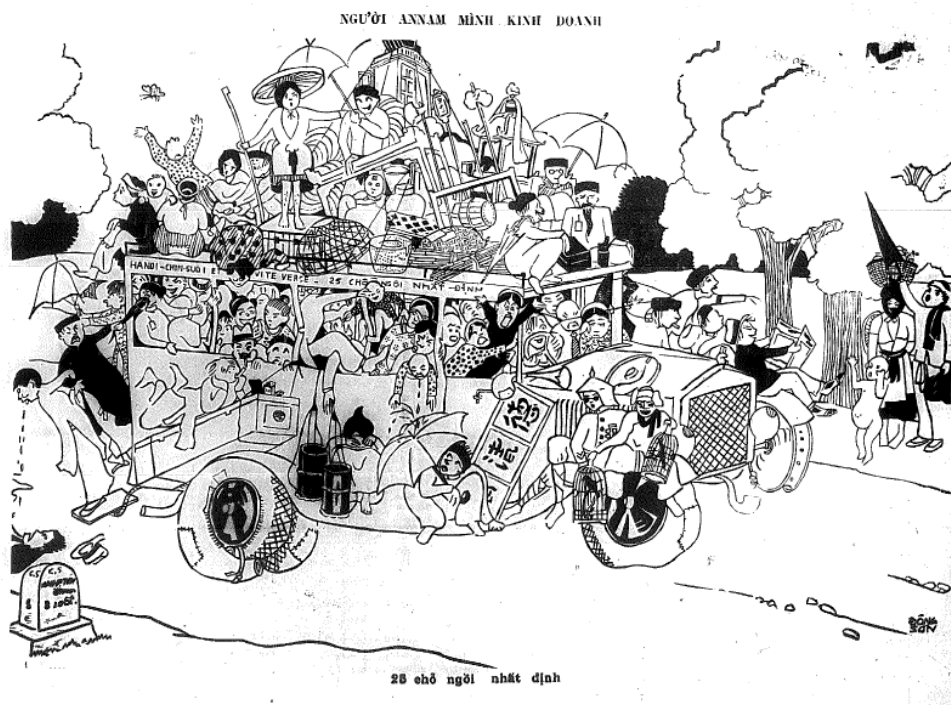


Figure 1. *Phong Hóa* no. 14, 22 Sep 1932, p. 1.

A dilapidated bus stuffed full of people and belongings, every inch of space utilized. Passengers are hanging out of the windows, even sitting on the roof and splashguards. The title above the cartoon read, “How we Annamese conduct business,” while at the bottom a caption deadpanned, “Strictly 25 seats.” It was a scene that anyone in Hanoi would recognize well.

Examining the cartoon more carefully, we see that beneath the humor of this cartoon lay a pointed commentary about Vietnamese business culture. Despite safety regulations that dictate a vehicle’s maximum capacity, Vietnamese bus operators cram as many passengers on as possible to make more money. To skimp on expenses, the business owners do not replace old and worn tires but merely patch them. Sometimes they do not even both at all, as seen in the bare metal wheel in the cartoon. Most of the bus riders in the cartoon are dressed in traditional garb, which suggests that buses are a new phenomenon to them. They do not know the etiquette of public transport, as evidenced by the clunky and inappropriate luggage they bring onboard—live animals, a coffin, a carrying yoke, and furniture, among others. Furthermore, rural Vietnamese are physically unused to travelling in a moving vehicle, illustrated in the cartoon by the vomiting passengers. By titling the cartoon “How we Annamese conduct business,” the journal placed the blame on the business owners and not the passengers. The rural Vietnamese are innocent because of their ignorance; rather, the cartoon criticizes the slapdash, profit-motivated, lack of specialization “anything goes” business habits of many Vietnamese entrepreneurs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the cartoon hinted that the *Phong Hoa*’s humor had a social aim to it.

Examining the front page more thoroughly, we would see that the writings were divided into columns, the most prominent one in the center. The large, bold banner gave the column’s title

<sup>1</sup> *Phong Hóa* would later make the same criticism of Vietnamese publishing businesses. See Chapter 1.

as *From Small to Large* [Từ nhỏ đến lớn]. Written by *Phong Hóa*'s editorial staff, the column's introduction explained that

We were going to launch our newspaper on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, but we suddenly remembered that we needed to do something of the utmost importance. So we respectfully and solemnly opened a copy of Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's *Calendar-Almanac* [Niên lịch thông thư] to see whether that day was auspicious or unlucky.<sup>2</sup>

Directly below, the newspaper reproduced the entry from the *Calendar-Almanac*, which stated: "September 22: An inauspicious day [Ngày Tứ Ly]. One should not do anything today." The introduction went on to describe that after such a prophecy, the worried *Phong Hóa* writers wanted to choose another day. Unfortunately for them, the *Calendar-Almanac* listed lucky days for almost every imaginable activity—building a grave, buying beasts of burden, collecting debts, sweeping the house, even opening a midwifery clinic—everything except for launching newspapers. The paper's tongue-in-cheek conclusion: "Although our launch date fell on an unlucky day, we still had to take the risk."<sup>3</sup> The remainder of the column poked fun at a variety of topics, such as Vietnamese returning from France, Chinese commemorating the anniversary of the Mukden Incident, and the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay. One item discussed the economies of Canada, Argentina and Brazil with their overproduction of wheat, beef, and coffee respectively. The paper expressed regret that such delicious food would have gone to waste, and cheekily requested that it be sent to the people of Annam. From its introduction to its commentary on world events, the main column lampooned everyone and spared no one.

The articles flanking *From Small to Large* were less prominently displayed. They had no bold banner emblazoning their titles, just simple matching typeface lettering. In contrast to the eye-catching cartoon and humorous column, these articles were more serious. To the far right was a short story written by Tòng Lương called *Nùng woman named Chi Lan* [Nùng Chi Lan]. Set in the northern highlands, the story described a tragic love triangle between a montagnard woman, a fellow tribesman, and an ethnic Vietnamese schoolteacher. It was the only item of fiction on the front page. To the left of the main column was an article written by Nguyễn Đông Sơn titled *Know the Peasantry* [Biết dân quê]. The optimistic essay encouraged young urban intellectuals to engage with their rural counterparts. Đông Sơn wrote that

At present peasants live very narrow lives. To expand their livelihoods, each village must have a few knowing people to take part in the affairs of the community...to help them

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Calendar-Almanac* was a book used for divination and fortunetelling published by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, one of the era's illustrious Francophone intellectuals. The Self-Reliant Literary Group found it absurd that such rational and modern intellectual such as Vĩnh would publish such a book. As a result, Vĩnh and his superstitious publication became the butt of many of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*'s jokes. That the Group launched an attack of Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh on the front page of *Phong Hóa*'s first issue is particularly telling. It signified that the Group was differentiating themselves from their predecessors and announced the arrival of a new, young generation of intellectuals on the scene.

<sup>3</sup> In commemoration of *Phong Hóa*'s "unlucky" launch day, Nguyễn Tường Long took the pseudonym Tứ Ly and continued to use it for the rest of the paper's run. He later took the term for "auspicious day," or Hoang Dao, as his literary pseudonym, by which he was best known.

plan collectively for such things like technology, traffic, hygiene, crime, and how to interact with authorities...

In a similar vein, an article by Tú Ly just to the right of *From Small to Large* argued that it was no longer viable for Vietnamese to be inward-looking. Tú Ly believed that his fellow countrymen must expand their worldview:

These days, people see and travel a lot. We need to have wide knowledge. Events in places thousands of miles away also affect us, and as we well know, their effects can be dangerous. But they are especially dangerous for those who sit around gazing at their navels, those who never leave the green bamboo groves of their villages.

Despite the gravity of the social topics discussed in these articles, *Phong Hóa* kept its tone upbeat, its language simple and unadorned.

As its front page revealed, *Phong Hóa* placed humor in the foreground; the cartoon and humorous column were the most prominent items on the page. The placement of *Phong Hóa*'s more serious social discourse on the margins did not mean that it was unimportant, but rather suggests a rhetorical strategy on the part of the editors. Rather than bombard its readers with serious discussions of intellectual topics from the very beginning, *Phong Hóa* wanted to first draw them in with its humorous cartoons and columns. Once the paper had captured their readers' attention, it can then begin to transmit its message. What's more, the front page gave readers a taste of the paper's overall content and ethos. *Phong Hóa* covered a variety of mediums and genres, from intellectual essays and literature to lighthearted fare such as cartoons, jokes and humorous editorials. Even when topics turned towards issues of grave importance such as the peasantry or Vietnamese collective intelligence, the paper's tone never changed; it always kept an upbeat, youthful, and cosmopolitan focus on Vietnamese society. *Phong Hóa* embraced and advocated an expansive worldview, one which allowed its writers to discuss the League of Nations, Latin America, and Chinese-Japanese relations all within the same column.

When *Phong Hóa* was relaunched on September 22, 1932, it became the first journal of its kind in Vietnamese publishing history—a journal completely dedicated to humor. As the above examination illustrated, the most prominent items on the paper's very first front page were humorous in nature. Humor was no longer banished to the margins of newspapers, a means of filling up space leftover from serious treatises; it was integrated into the paper's entire ethos as a defining characteristic. This chapter will explore the nature of humor in *Phong Hóa*. I argue that *Phong Hóa*'s humor did not merely serve as an instrument toward social reform; it involved an entirely new way of being and seeing that was thoroughly modern.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part is a general discussion of *Phong Hóa*'s humor; I look at the Group's early discussions on laughter and how it conceptualized its newspaper as a comic play. I discuss two tropes of *Phong Hóa*'s humor, its joke column and antiphrastic irony, and link them to the larger modern sensibilities the Group wanted to impart on its readers. In the second part, I will focus on Lý Toét, the largest and most well known of *Phong Hóa*'s humorous topoi, as a way of examining the nature of humor as a modern sensibility. I describe the Lý Toét character as a "laboratory" of humor—a form or framework that allowed readers to experiment with new modern sensibilities. Although the Group

would try to steer the Lý Toét discourse towards desired discussions, it was inevitably shaped by its many contributors and reflected the issues at the forefront of Vietnamese public consciousness at the time. Vietnamese readers were particularly preoccupied with the clash between the forces of tradition and modernity; and indeed, this theme dominated the Lý Toét cartoons. However, as Lý Toét was a multifunctional and versatile character, he covered a wide range of topics including politics, social issues, intellectual life, and the newspaper industry.

## **Part I: General Discussion of Phong Hóa's Humor**

### **Before Phong Hóa: Historiography and Premodern Humor**

In Vietnam, studies of humor usually focus on the premodern era and are most closely associated with the study of folklore and oral narratives. While such anthologies of humor abound, scholarly studies that deal with the nature of Vietnamese humor, literary or otherwise, remain scarce. Most analyses of Vietnamese humor are limited to brief introductions at the beginning of story collections, and pertain more to the content of such texts rather than to humor as a concept. Characterizations of Vietnamese humor point to a handful of premodern writers, such as Nguyễn Du, Nguyễn Công Trứ and Hồ Xuân Hương as evidence of a primordial Vietnamese sense of humor. Others look at bodies of oral narratives and folktales, like the stories of Trạng Quỳnh (also known as Cống Quỳnh in the South) to show how some Vietnamese cleverly conveyed their contempt for those in power. These studies support nationalistic narratives of Vietnamese struggle against foreign aggression.

For example, take the following two studies on the subject of humor and laughter: Vũ Ngọc Khánh's *Satirical Poetry and Prose of Vietnam from the 13<sup>th</sup> century until 1945* [Thơ Văn Trào Phúng Việt Nam từ thế kỷ 13 đến 1945] and Dương Tân Tươi's *Laughter: its Causes and Nature* [Cười: Nguyên Nhân và Thể Chất]. Khánh's book traces Vietnamese satire through the centuries and includes excerpts from both well-known writers and unexpected sources (apparently Ho Chi Minh was a master humorist in his own right). The work periodizes Vietnamese humor and satire into three distinct eras: the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the French conquest in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the 20th century until 1945<sup>4</sup>. Published in the North in 1974, the work suffers from the same teleological shortcomings that characterize the scholarship of the period: a nationalistic impulse to prove that Vietnamese have always stood up to oppression in one form or another. Dương Tân Tươi's book, on the other hand, examines laughter ahistorically from a psychological perspective. Drawing from theories of humor of such thinkers as Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and Max Eastman, the book explores the psychomechanics of laughter using premodern literary examples. Tươi concludes that the Vietnamese have kept their sense of identity through laughter<sup>5</sup>. Although it takes a different route, Tươi's book makes the same argument as Khánh's: that an enduring Vietnamese character existed through historical hardships and oppression, manifested in its use of humor as a coping mechanism. As Khánh's book was published in the north in 1974 and Tươi's in Saigon in 1968, both these works in different ways reveal less about the nature and cultural status of Vietnamese humor than their own presentist

<sup>4</sup> Vũ Ngọc Khánh, *Thơ Văn Trào Phúng Việt Nam từ thế kỷ 13 đến 1945*. (Hanoi: Văn Học, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Dương Tân Tươi, *Cười: Nguyên Nhân và Thể Chất* (Saigon, Phạm Quang Khải, 1968).

preoccupations. It seems somehow fitting that two studies of humor should emerge during watershed periods of the war, as these works reflect the larger questions preoccupying Vietnamese on both sides of the 54<sup>th</sup> parallel. Both Khánh's and Tươi's work both attempt to articulate competing views of how Vietnamese national identity was formulated; Khánh's analysis is enconced in Marxist historical determinism, while Tươi's book takes an ahistorical pseudoscientific approach to arrive at the same conclusions.

A common premise runs through all these analyses of premodern Vietnamese humor—that these writers and folktales are circumscribed by and are reactions to the social and political institutions of the period. Hồ Xuân Hương's poems constituted her reaction to the stricture and oppression of traditional marriage and gender roles in the same way that Trạng Quỳnh mischievously subverted the power of the Trịnh lords or the Chinese. Such characterizations essentially espouse an instrumental view of Vietnamese humor—that humor is something Vietnamese can “use” to channel their frustrations towards larger communal or political institutions. By looking at humor as an object to be used, such scholarship provides simplistic analysis of its role in premodern Vietnamese culture.

Bringing the discussion of humor up to modern times, Greg Lockhart has also adopted this characterization of Vietnamese humor. In his analysis of Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry, Lockhart argued that “premodern mockery and laughter... can be conceived as a political device for the venting of spleen and the release of communal tensions.”<sup>6</sup> According to Lockhart, the difference between premodern Vietnamese humor and its modern strain is the shift from laughter as a mere reaction to social institutions to an agent of social and political change. Lockhart points to the directness of the mockery as evidence of the writer's awareness of the futility of their mockery vis-à-vis their targets. The modern era questioned the very credibility of those institutions, and only then can comedy be truly accepted as an instrument toward social reform. Yet this sort of analysis serves to describe more the continuity underpinning the centuries of Vietnamese humor and less what makes modern Vietnamese humor truly unique and a rupture from the past. What Lockhart completely misses and what I assert is that *Phong Hóa*'s intended for humor not only to be utilized, but also internalized as a positive human value. In other words, humor did not stand separately from its audience, but rather, it took a particular kind of modern audience—one imbued with particular modern sensibilities—to understand it.

In regards to the Lý Toét cartoons, the only scholarly treatment of them to date can be found in George Dutton's “Lý Toét in the city”. Dutton argued that the Lý Toét cartoons “reveal a considerable ambivalence towards modernity on the part of *Phong Hóa*'s editors despite their rhetorical commitment to the new and the modern.” Dutton's analysis of Lý Toét is emblematic of an overwhelming impulse on the part of scholars to read topics of momentous importance into documents, thus marginalizing local or narrower contexts that could prove illuminating. Such preoccupations lead to static analyses, descriptive snapshots that undermine the multiplicity of levels of intellectual discourse. What's more, because Dutton only read the Lý Toét cartoons as a self-contained discourse, he misses their relationship to the rest of the newspaper and to the Self-Reliant Literary Group's reform project at large. The Lý Toét cartoons did not exist in a vacuum; they constituted a part of *Phong Hóa* and should be read as such. Readers in 1930s Hanoi surely did not read just the cartoons by themselves, but read them in tandem with the other items on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Lockhart, Greg. “Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's ‘Going to France.’” Trans. Greg and Monique Lockhart with an introduction and commentary by Greg Lockhart. *East Asian History* 8, 1994, p. 84.

page, within the issue—and if they were avid readers—with the entire run of the newspaper. As interesting as Dutton’s analysis may be, he completely removed the cartoon from the context of the newspapers, and misses the peripheral discourse that (literally and figuratively) surrounded the cartoons. Furthermore, Dutton only looked at the Lý Toét cartoons from *Phong Hóa* and completely ignored those in *Ngày Nay*, thus missing a significant chunk of the story.

Not only is it important to look at the characteristics of Vietnamese humor, but also its cultural status—that is, the attitudes towards humor espoused by Vietnamese. Enough evidence suggests that when the Self-Reliant Literary Group launched *Phong Hóa* in 1932, the Vietnamese intelligentsia did not hold humor and laughter in high regard. Given the social upheavals occupying the discourse of colonial era newspapers and writers, humor seemed trivial indeed. For intellectuals at the time, the perceived weakness of Vietnamese civilization, the impending collapse of Vietnamese social institutions, and the decline of morality was no laughing matter.

These attitudes are reflected in the spatial banishment of humor to the margins outside of serious discourse. For newspapers before *Phong Hóa*, humor was compartmentalized and contained, placed away from the gravity of serious discourse. Boxes or heavy lines would separate cartoons and joke columns from its main articles. Nam Phong even went so far as to specially label its funny poem column as “hai van” (comic literature), so its readers would not mistake its humorous content from its intellectual treatises. In the early issues of *Phong Hóa* before Nhat Linh took over, humor was similarly marginalized; cartoons were usually placed at the end of serious articles or towards the back of the issue. Such spatial placement suggests that newspapers perceived humor as secondary to serious discourse, as a bit of light entertainment in between articles on important social topics. In addition, many intellectuals saw humor and laughter (although pleasurable enough) as belligerent behavior borne of hurtful aggression, jealousy, or scorn toward its subject. This low cultural status of humor was later reflected in the criticism of other intellectuals who did not see eye to eye with the Group’s Lý Toét project.

Perhaps the first litterateur to argue for humor’s potential as a social corrective was Phan Khôi. An intellectual predecessor of the Self Reliant Literary Group who often contributed to *Phong Hóa*, Phan Khôi maintained that humor was a fitting criticism of human foibles. In December of 1932, *Phong Hóa* printed a series of articles by the intellectual titled *the Status of Humor in the Literary World* [Cái địa vị khôi hài trên đàn văn], which discussed how humor received short shrift amongst writers. As an example Phan Khôi referred to the prejudiced treatment that Cống Quỳnh (as Trạng Quỳnh was called in the South) received from the literary community:

Even though there is praise that has reached present times, people still like it as if liking something different, and anyone who praises him do so in a different way. People praise Cống Quỳnh as if praising a comic role in a play, praising for his witty mouth only, but in their hearts they still disdain him like the clowns in the theatre.<sup>7</sup>

According to Phan Khôi, Vietnamese do not truly understand and appreciate humor and pointed out the incredible difficulty of writing satirical literature. The Vietnamese, he argued, did not recognize the potential of humor to change and reform:

---

<sup>7</sup> Phan Khôi, “Cái Địa Vị Khôi Hài trên Đàn Văn,” *Phong Hóa* no. 26, 16 Dec 1932, p. 8. and *Phong Hóa* no. 30, 30 Dec 1932, p. 12.



If a man had a bad habit and someone wrote a humorous piece that criticized it, upon reading the piece he must laugh until his stomach hurt without getting angry. Gradually and naturally that man will break the bad habit and not even know it. That is truly a great humorous piece and its use is like that.<sup>8</sup>

Phan Khôi cited Molière as a master humorist in the western tradition, and noted that his position in the French literary corpus was evidence of humor's exalted position in the west. Phan Khôi was careful to mention that humor is by no means a western monopoly, and that Chinese writer and historian Sima Qian had recognized the value of humor in the first century BCE. Phan Khôi believed that the simplistic dismissal of humor by Vietnamese was backward, especially compared to the humoristic traditions in the west and China. As a result, Vietnamese held humor in low regard. It is against this backdrop that *Phong Hóa* emerged on the journalistic scene in 1932.

### The Nature of Humor in *Phong Hóa*

When they relaunched *Phong Hóa* in 1932, Nhật Linh and his colleagues were aware that the journal was the first of its kind; they made an effort to explain and justify its motivations for publishing a satirical newspaper from the very first issue. The paper published a prolonged discussion on the nature of humor that stretched for over five months, ending only right before the appearance of the Lý Toét cartoons.

*Phong Hóa* began discussing humor in earnest in issue #15, the second under Nhật Linh's editorship. In a front-page article titled "Enough Sorrow and Despair," Việt Sinh bemoaned the current state of Vietnamese literature, with its excessively depressing tone and subject matter. Việt Sinh singled out some of the most popular literature at the time for criticism: Trương Phố's poetry mourning the death of her husband, Hoàng Ngọc Phách's tragic novel *Tổ Tâm*, and Nguyễn Tiến Lãng's lamentations over the fall of Rome. Việt Sinh pointedly asked: "Crying and lamenting, what purpose does that serve? Tears only weigh down and weaken the spirit. Will a few tears change the never-ending tasks in life?" He resoundingly answered: "To cry and lament is to accept defeat!" Popular literature, with its maudlin and drippy sentimentality, only served to exacerbate the depressing mood among Vietnamese youth. According to Việt Sinh, this current mood and lack of enthusiasm had turned into defeatism. He concluded with a call to action: "Why don't we laugh wholeheartedly to destroy the malaise of yesteryear, so that our society will have a strong active spirit!"<sup>9</sup> For Việt Sinh, the first step to instilling a "strong active spirit" was the simple act of laughing. The Group reiterated this theme throughout the pages of *Phong Hóa*, from its columns to the Lý Toét cartoons.

In the following issue, Tòng Lương pointed out that depressing literature was merely a symptom of a much larger problem—a general malaise and crisis of spirit amongst Vietnamese youth. Tòng Lương attributed this malaise to the clash of new and old:

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Việt Sinh, "Sầu Thâm Nhiều Rồi," *Phong Hóa* no. 15, 29 Sep 1932, p. 1.

In the past, the old Confucianists always followed the old ways. Youth went along with what they are taught; they never doubted nor felt restless. Our country is now following western education, and taken science to replace the teachings of sage masters. It is as if youth are going through a period of spiritual crisis.

According to Tòng Lương, some turned to escapism to avoid confronting this crisis; depressing literature was one such distraction.<sup>10</sup> He argued that western ways had developed over centuries, while Vietnam's encounter with it has only been a few decades. As a result, no outcomes can yet be seen. For this reason, he argued that "the spirit of the youth is in crisis. They are alienated and restless, and do not know where to get direction, like a fallen leaf flying in the wind. They are looking for a credo to action."<sup>11</sup> Tòng Lương stopped short of defining such a credo; what was clear was that Vietnamese youth needed to cheer up.

Along with these assessments of Vietnamese youth and popular literature, *Phong Hóa* also discussed the nature of laughter itself. Around the same time, *Phong Hóa* published an article by T. Cầm titled "Tiếng Cười" [The Sound of Laughter].<sup>12</sup> It was an attempt by *Phong Hóa* to establish the importance of its humor project by showing that laughter itself was no simple act, but one intimately connected to human nature. As T. Cầm wrote,

Even laughter has many types. There is the innocent laugh, the sinister laugh. There is the cheerful and bright laugh, and the bitter sneering laugh. When one hates life one laughs scornfully like Zhou Yu, when satisfied one laughs gleefully like Dong Zhuo. Laughing is laughing, but there are pure laughs and vulgar laughs.<sup>13</sup>

T. Cầm argued that laughter could also be intellectual, as evidenced by the work of famous European humorists: "Courteline's laugh is half-laughter, half-pity; Molière's laugh is very natural but very sad, the laugh of Shakespeare is not without a deep philosophy."<sup>14</sup> For T. Cầm,

---

<sup>10</sup> In other articles, *Phong Hóa* focuses on the current yoyo fad as another such useless activity. See "Yo...yo!" *Phong Hóa* no. 24, 2 Dec 1932, p. 4. These statements suggest that the writers of *Phong Hóa* were aware of their current position as a new generation of intellectuals. One observer even went so far as to describe the youth's crisis as a "fin de siècle" malaise. This suggests the writers equated the current situation as a kind of "end of an era." Tòng Lương, "Tinh Thần Khủng Hoảng" *Phong Hóa* no. 16, 6 Oct 1932, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. This 1930s youth malaise is widely mentioned in both Vietnamese and western language scholarship of the period. However, this scholarship often cites the politics as the cause: as the Great depression, the failure of the Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh and Yên Bái revolts, and subsequent *Sûreté* crack down on political activity. The fact that the Self-Reliant Literary Group describes it as a cultural reason, writing in the 1930s presents a conflicting viewpoint from these secondary accounts. See Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: the Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2002), 20-22. For a Vietnamese communist perspective, see Hà Minh Đức, *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn: Trào Lưu Tác Giả* (Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục: 2007), 11.

<sup>12</sup> T. Cầm, "Tiếng Cười," *Phong Hóa* no. 19, 27 Oct 1932, p. 1. T. Cầm is possibly Nguyễn Tường Cầm, the second oldest brother of Nhất Linh and acting director of *Phong Hóa*. Cầm was an agricultural engineer and did not often participate in his brothers' newspapers.

<sup>13</sup> Zhou Yu and Dong Zhuo are iconic characters from the Chinese 14<sup>th</sup> century epic, *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

laughing was “an instinct given by heaven” that helps one bear the difficulties of life, as even the most painful and tragic aspects of humanity often have comic elements.

But such discussions of humor and laughter merely set the scene—two weeks later, *Phong Hóa* finally tied this discussion of humor to its own journalistic project. Two months after Nhất Linh’s first issue, *Phong Hóa* made its boldest statement of its modus operandi on the cover of issue #21:

*Phong Hóa* doesn’t want to teach anyone. In the end, we only hope that in the humorous words printed on these 16 pages, our readers would find things they can call necessary. We think that no matter how necessary or beneficial something is, it would be hard for readers to welcome it without humor. And when readers don’t welcome it, then there is no hope of teaching anyone anything. Therefore we see newspaper like a comic play: the public reads it and laughs. If they see a lesson hidden in there, that’s even better.<sup>15</sup>

For *Phong Hóa*, humor took precedence over pedagogy. This quote suggests that at this stage in its history, *Phong Hóa* saw humor as a way to develop rapport with their readers, so that they will “welcome” whatever message they recognize. As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, this strategy was illustrated in the paper’s first cover. *Phong Hóa* made no claim to truth about its content, placing the intellectual burden on their readers to figure out for themselves what lessons they learn from its pages.

Moreover, Nhất Linh and company conceptualized their newspaper as a “comic play” and themselves as actors putting on a show for their readers’ entertainment. The performative nature of the newspaper can best be seen in the Group’s use of pseudonyms. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were well known for assuming multiple pseudonyms (and in fact were sometimes better known by them than their given names). As this list illustrates, Group members often took different names for different columns or genre of work (list is by no means exhaustive)<sup>16</sup>.

1. Nguyễn Tường Tam: Nhất Linh (novels and prose), Bảo Sơn (short stories), Đông Sơn (cartoons and drawing), Tân Việt (poetry), Tam Linh, Lãng Du.
2. Trần Khánh Giu: Khái Hưng (novels), KH, Nhất Dao Cạo (), Nhị Linh (editorials), Hàn Đãi Đậu, Bán Than.
3. Nguyễn Tường Long: Hoàng Đạo (novels), Tứ Ly (editorials), Tòng Lương, Tương Vân, Phúc Vân
4. Nguyễn Tường Lân: Thạch Lam (novels), Việt Sinh (editorials), Thiện Sĩ
5. Nguyễn Đình Lễ or Nguyễn Thứ Lễ: Thế Lữ, Lê Ta
6. Ngô Xuân Diệu: Xuân Diệu
7. Hồ Trọng Hiếu: Tú Mỡ

<sup>15</sup> Tứ Linh, “Giây Đờ,” *Phong Hóa* no. 21, 11 Nov 1932, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Trong Bếp Núc Của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn,” (In the Kitchen with Tự Lực Văn Đoàn.) *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn Trong Tiến Trình Văn Học Dân Tộc* (Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa-Thông Tin: Hanoi: 2000). “Đời làm báo” the unpublished memoirs of Nhất Linh from the personal collection of Nguyễn Trọng Hiền.

A number of the pen names, such as *Thế Lữ* and *Tòng Lương*, were a play on the author's real name. Other pseudonyms hinted at the Group's cultural reform project. For example, *Nguyen Tuong Long* chose the pseudonyms *Hoàng Đạo* and *Tử Ly*, respectively the most auspicious and unlucky day, to highlight his opposition to fortunetelling and other superstitious practices. Others were meant to be humorous or playful; for example, *Nhát Dao Cạo* translates to "razor wound."

The practice of pseudonymous writing was not new among intellectuals at the time, as strict colonial censorship necessitated a level of anonymity for writers. In the case of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, however, this practice took on an additional function; each of the pseudonyms constituted a "role" or persona in the comic play that was the newspaper.<sup>17</sup> The names began to take on their own fictional identities, people whose stories differed from those of their author. Sometimes these pseudonymous characters would interact with each other, despite being the same person. For example, *Lê Ta* (himself a pseudonym) described *Nhị Linh* and *Khái Hưng* (pen names of *Trần Khánh Giu*) as two separate people in the same room: "Khái Hưng was coming to the last word of the story he was writing. *Nhị Linh*, having finished his work, sat around joking with everyone." The two characters had distinctive personalities, work ethic, and enjoyed differing relationships with the paper's editor *Nhat Linh*. As *Le Ta* wrote:

*Nhị Linh* and the editor are two people who are very similar, and as a result, they often argue. We often witness their fierce debates—sometimes over a cartoon, a submitted article, an event in the journalistic world, or even the virtues of various brands of champagne. All of a sudden, they become radically opposing sides. Only *Khái Hưng*'s clever and sensitive nature could reconcile them.

Despite referring to two pseudonyms of the same writer, *Le Ta*'s description treated *Nhị Linh* and *Khái Hưng* as if they were two separate persons. Such descriptions suggest that the Group had constructed a fictitious, humorous and self-contained world within the pages of *Phong Hóa*. To protect this world and the performance of the paper, the Group assiduously safeguarded their anonymity. Only rarely did Group members use their real names, usually in matters pertaining to legalities or official newspaper business. During pen wars with the Group, critics would often demand to know the identity of the writer behind the pseudonym; the Group almost never responded to such requests. For the Group, the maintenance of the various authorial personae was vital in upholding the journalistic project of *Phong Hóa*. In other words, the Group's pseudonyms were not necessarily used to conceal identity, but to create an alternative collective one.

The performative nature of *Phong Hóa* can be interpreted in two ways. At one level, the use of *noms de plume* meant that the Group did not have to hold back its satire or commentary. At a deeper level, the performance of *Phong Hóa* forced its readers to approach everything in the paper with a sense of skepticism; the kind that, when combined with suspicion of authority and doubt of absolutes, defines a modern sensibility. *Phong Hóa* made no claims to "truth" or "serious" discussion; rather, it cautioned readers not to take its work merely at face value. The Group believed that readers should not be passive students to the authority of pedantic newspapers, but active readers and participants. It is the performance of the newspaper as an approach that is qualitatively different and new. This caused no small measure of discord between

---

<sup>17</sup> In addition, multiple pseudonyms hid the fact that one writer was contributing in more than one aspect to the newspaper, and creates an illusion of a multiplicity of voice.

*Phong Hóa* and its critics, who espoused more traditional views of newspapers as straightforward informative medium. The Group anticipated this when it wrote:

Education in the past has taken two parallel roads. The first road wants to take us to a perfect ideology according to the ideals of a number of people we revere. Another road takes us around and around humanity, so that we have direct contact with both the worthwhile and lamentable aspects of mankind, then use our intellect to recognize the good and copy it, the bad to avoid it. We only take our readers on the second road and even though we crack a smile at the lamentable things, it is only because we are cheerfully discussing it with our readers. We are not trying to teach, and we don't want to!<sup>18</sup>

By rejecting the idea of a “perfect ideology,” the Group had repudiated absolutism. *Phong Hóa* put the responsibility directly on its readers to recognize their own lessons from the newspaper—it would never browbeat its readers with pedagogical treatises. In short, humor served as the means towards intellectual independence.

Finally, after five months of discussing humor on almost a weekly basis, *Phong Hóa* finally linked it with a call to action. Going back to the original problem of the youth malaise, *Phong Hóa* offered its boldest and most forceful call to date. As Tứ Linh writes in “Yêu Đời,

All around us are the sounds of crying, of whining. If we stand still and watch them, then they look like a bunch of crazy people crying for something somewhere that is unattainable. The ennui and sadness comes out in their words, their writing, as if they had forgotten that they are alive!”<sup>19</sup>

Tứ Linh called for youth to abandon their sorrows, love life and embrace happiness. This did not mean indulging in mindless optimism, but to accept life for all its foibles and inconsistencies:

To love life does not mean that we think everything is good—loving life like that will not lead to progress. However, we want people to know that life is full of happiness and suffering, good and bad, and to still love life for what it is. To know that life often leaves dirty marks and not to become frustrated by them. And happily clean those stains away. To love life is to hope to make it more beautiful by the day. All work for the good of life was done by people that love, people who work out of love.<sup>20</sup>

In Tứ Linh's view, to love life is to embrace it in its entirety, faults and all; in fact, he even went so far to say that life's imperfections make it even more worthy of love. As a result, Tu Linh advocated a shift in attitudes and perceptions. He argued that those who see life as never-ending suffering, who believe that the only solution is to “die and get it over with” are already defeated by their own psychology.<sup>21</sup> Tứ Ly maintained that these sorrows are figments of the imagination, and serve no purpose other than to destroy people's enthusiasm and fortitude. He concluded that

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Tứ Linh, “Yêu Đời,” *Phong Hóa* no. 35, 24 Feb 1933, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

sorrow and sentimentality are self-serving indulgences and young Vietnamese must have the courage to look at life calmly and confront its difficulties. Thus, humor was an important way to dispel sentimentality and gloom.

For *Phong Hóa*, humor was not just a tool to be used towards a purpose; it was a new kind of sensibility and attitude to counteract the spirit-crushing pessimism currently dominant among Vietnamese youth. The Self-Reliant Literary Group, by introducing humor into Vietnamese journalism, wanted to help Vietnamese readers develop and internalize a sense of humor. As Daniel Wickberg described, such sensibilities were tied to modern ideas of individualism:

It is the sense of humor as a capacity for what comes to be called “self-objectification,” a willingness for the self to be the object of its own amusement, that makes it such a valued and ubiquitous trait in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sense of humor suggests both a deep interiority capable of perceiving incongruities and a capacity for infinite adaptation to the circumstances of social life. It is one of the fundamental traits of a personhood characterized by accommodation between psychological and social modes of seeing and being.”<sup>22</sup>

In the Group’s view, humorlessness was tied to dogmatism, single-mindedness, intolerance, rigidity and adherence to absolutist morality. On the other hand, people with a sense of humor were flexible, balanced, insightful, capable of seeing from multiple points of view without falling victim to fanaticism. It was this kind of Vietnamese reader that *Phong Hóa* aimed to cultivate—one with balanced perceptions and a solid sense of self capable of negotiating the uncertain modern future.

### **Other Organs of Humor in Phong Hóa: Jokes and Antiphrastic Irony**

How did *Phong Hóa* transmit its brand of humor and modern sensibility to its readers? What were the most prominent of its various comic topoi? As a self-styled humorous newspaper, *Phong Hóa* never lacked funny columns full of witticisms. However, while most of *Phong Hóa*’s columns and tropes used humor towards other means (i.e. criticizing other newspapers, describing local goings-on), only a few actually dealt with humor in form rather than content. In this section, I will focus on two of these humorous forms: jokes and antiphrastic irony. I describe the joke as a clear-cut humorous form with which *Phong Hóa* encouraged its readers to experiment, while antiphrastic irony constituted an inside joke in which only readers who espoused similar sensibilities can understand.

Perhaps the most obvious organ of humor in *Phong Hóa* was a weekly column called “Laughter” (Vui Cười). While many of *Phong Hóa*’s columns would often skip a week on occasion, not an issue would be released without this half-page section of jokes. At first, members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group would pen the jokes themselves, but announced an open-ended

---

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9.

joke and cartoon contest six weeks later.<sup>23</sup> The newspaper asked its readers to submit jokes and cartoons, with the best published in every issue of *Phong Hóa*. These entries would be eligible for a monthly prize of a year's subscription to the paper. Over the years, readers sent in a steady supply of jokes; the Group stopped writing them altogether and relied solely on these contributions. The reader's name and city was printed directly below the joke, which offered a glimpse into the geographic reach of *Phong Hóa*'s readership. While the overwhelming majority of readers submitted jokes from local areas such as Ha Dong and Hai Phong, some readers participated from as far away as Saigon and Chau Doc. On occasion, *Phong Hóa* even published entries from Vietnamese in Ventiane and Phnom Penh. Not only did *Phong Hóa*'s readers hail from large urban hubs such as Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon, but also from rural areas such as Quang Ngai, Lao Cai, even as far as Kampot in Cambodia.

The joke column constituted an entirely new and modern genre in Vietnamese publishing, one that reflected the increasingly disparate and fragmented nature of Hanoi's urban landscape. An extant body of scholarship describes the joke not as a universal phenomenon spanning all cultures, but a specific genre that must be historicized. These studies define the joke as less a comic narrative than modern unit of humor: a tightly standardized, stripped down, contextless story that ends in a punchline. As Daniel Wickberg defined it, "The comic story, or joke is designed to build up to the point of a central incongruity, which is released in the final line; everything extraneous to that point is irrelevant and, if the form is to achieve its effect, must be eliminated."<sup>24</sup> Wickberg and Lutz Rohrich argue the modernity of such a form and link it to the industrialization of humor and its transformation into a mass commodity. In other words, jokes were humor as "moveable parts." Only when the joke is conceptualized in such a way that one can think of "trading" jokes, the industry of joke writing, or even stand-up comedy, where each routine consists of a fast-paced succession of jokes.

According to Daniel Wickberg, the change from folk stories to the modern joke had its origins in industrialization and the emergence of a popular form of amusement aimed at the new urban working and lower middle classes.<sup>25</sup> This form of entertainment was called variety or vaudeville in the US, music hall in Great Britain, and revue or cabaret in continental Europe. In their study of British music halls, Paddy Whannel and Stuart Hall have pointed out that mass culture differs from folk art forms in that the latter relied on a professionalized type of performance to transform the folk "community" into an urban "audience."<sup>26</sup> In other words, the resulting change in taste from traditional to more professional forms of amusement arose in response to the rapid urbanization of previously rural populations during the industrial revolution. These new urban communities, made up of migrants removed from their cultural origins, required new and accessible forms of entertainment; the fragmented nature of this urban audience necessitated the standardization and decontextualization of both the form and content of humor.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> "Vui Cười," *Phong Hóa* no. 21, 11 Nov 1932, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Wickberg, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Wickberg, 128-132.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel. *The Popular Arts* ([London]: Hutchinson Educational, 1964), 56-57.

<sup>27</sup> While no evidence exists that the writers of *Phong Hóa* and others of their generation had ever actively attended revues in Hanoi or abroad, they were nevertheless aware of the culture. In his "Going to France," Nhất Linh mentions his desire to see the legs of Mistinguett, perhaps the biggest cabaret star of her generation. Vũ Trọng Phụng's characters sing *J'ai deux amours*, a popular song by Josephine Baker, Mistinguett's rival and American star

The population of Hanoi approximated such an uprooted population, especially in the decades following Paul Doumer's massive urban restructuring project. During his tenure as Governor-General from 1897 to 1902, Doumer oversaw the transformation of Hanoi from a regional city to a glittering capital worthy of a unified Indochina. He undertook large-scale construction projects within the city, commissioning grandiose municipal buildings and modern infrastructure. Vietnamese from all over flocked to Hanoi looking for work, which began the city's growth of urban sprawl. By the 1930s, Hanoi's population had almost tripled. Made up of migrants from all over the region, this new urban population possibly provided the type of displaced audience most receptive to the joke form.

If one accepts the premise that the joke is a modern phenomenon, then *Phong Hóa* was a pioneer of this genre as well. Through its joke column, *Phong Hóa*'s readers actively participated in the performance of the newspaper and organically shaped the modern genre of the joke itself. The pages of *Phong Hóa* can be seen as a sort of parallel to the urban music halls: a locale or entity that brings together disparate groups. As *Phong Hóa*'s readers were located in all parts of Indochina, the genre had to be stripped down in favor of easily recognizable stock characters and situations. Among the common tropes: husband talking to wife, teacher to student, and once the trope became increasingly developed, Lý Toét to his sidekick Xã Xê. And while the Group themselves may or may not have introduced the joke, the genre itself became honed on the pages of *Phong Hóa* by its readers. The jokes in the first few issues of *Phong Hóa* were longwinded and descriptive, such as this example:

A master thief snuck into a home. Seeing the owner of the house laying on the bed smoking opium with his son next to him, he hid under the bed to lay in wait.

On the bed, the child was playing with an apple. All of a sudden, he dropped it and it rolled onto the floor. The father said, "I'll pick it up."

Upon hearing this, the thief became worried. He thought, "If the owner picked up the apple, he'll see me." Thinking fast, he picked up the apple and placed it in the owner's shoe.

As he predicted, the owner slipped his foot into the shoe. Seeing the apple, he reached down and grabbed it without leaving the bed.

The thief thought he remained undetected. He never guessed, however, that the owner was of the clever sort. The owner thought "Strange! I remember hearing the apple rolling on the floor, how did I end up in my shoe? There must be someone in the bed, if I'm not mistaken."

The owner calmly called out "Whoever is hiding under the bed is a smart one! But its best if you go away."

---

of the Parisian revues. At the very least, the Group members would have had contact with the forms and genres that emerged from the variety show, one of which was the modern joke.



The thief had no choice but to leave.<sup>28</sup>

This story lacks the characteristics of a modern joke. Unnecessarily long, it does not build up an incongruity, nor does it have a punchline that resolves it. However, in *Phong Hóa*'s later years, readers sent in more streamlined jokes. For example, the following joke was sent in by a reader in Saigon:

In a restaurant:

--I can tell an old chicken from a young chicken by the teeth.

--But chicken don't have any teeth!

--I meant mine!<sup>29</sup>

Compared to the above, this joke has no detailed descriptions or extraneous words. Furthermore, the build up is resolved by the punchline, and the scenario one easily recognizable by the audience. In other jokes sent by readers, the punchline often was not verbal but a series of punctuation or question marks (“!!!” or “???”) intended to convey surprise or incongruity.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that the readers not only came to an understanding of this “industry” of trading jokes but also developed their own rules of engagement.

*Phong Hóa*'s humor was not just limited to the joke section; it was also conveyed through its editorial columns. Shortly after its launch in September 1932, *Phong Hóa* quickly established a column written by Tú Ly as its main organ of antiphrastic ironic humor<sup>31</sup>. Titled “*A Sideways Discussion*” (*Bàn Ngang*), the column was one of the tropes of the newspaper that, like the joke column, appeared weekly without fail. Defining a concept such as irony is hard enough in English, but it is just as difficult to find an equivalent term in Vietnamese. The closest (albeit unsatisfying) translation in Vietnamese would be “noi mia,” or to mean the opposite of what one says.<sup>32</sup> The column's name, *A Sideways Discussion*, aptly hinted not at straightforward discourse, but one that deviated from expectations. Sometimes the column discussed a topic in a straightforward manner, while other times it was deeply ironic. This combination of both serious and ironic tones created an instability of meaning that kept readers constantly guessing. The constant and unannounced shifting between straightforward and ironic modes was characteristic of Tú Ly's column; saying the opposite of what one meant was a natural and logical corollary with saying exactly what one meant. The resulting ironic atmosphere, with its linguistic tests and tacit winks, created a conspiratorial connection between the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its readers. Much of the time, the writers would barely have to do any work; the column would parrot the rhetoric of other intellectuals of the period almost verbatim. For example, Tú Ly deadpanned:

<sup>28</sup> “Vui Cười,” *Phong Hóa* no. 18, 20 Oct 1932, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> “Vui Cười,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 189, 29 May 1936, p. 6

<sup>30</sup> For examples of this, see “Vui Cười,” *Phong Hóa* no. 84, 2 Feb 1934, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Traditionally defined as a rhetorical device that creates two or more disparate meanings in a text, irony has come to describe a questioning attitude and critical stance because of its iconoclastic rejection of tradition, authority, religion, and providential metaphysics.

<sup>32</sup> As defined by Lưu Quý Khương and Phạm Thị Kim Sa in “Các chức năng ngữ dụng của lời nói mỉa trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt.” *Tạp Chí Khoa Học và Công Nghệ, Đại Học Đà Nẵng* 4 (33), 2009. <http://www.kh-sdh.udn.vn/zipfiles/So33/25.nng.Khuong-Sa-so%2033.pdf> Accessed 30 June 2012.

The West has western culture, we have our own culture. Why do we need to add the aspects of their culture to dilute...dilute our strength? In the west they are dynamic and active and value time like gold and silver, curious to know about everything, to know more than everyone else...what is the point, why be dynamic and active? Life is short, like a horse's shadow passing by a window, why should we purposefully step into a difficult situation? Rather we spent those days and months in leisure, admiring the ancient trees, the pond of goldfish, the mountains while reciting a sentimental poem. Born like that, live like that, and die like that. If one is not of any use to anyone else, at least one is of use to oneself...When we see someone with child out of wedlock, or when the neighbor's house burns, we should turn away and ignore it, and follow the philosophy of "stillness." That is our culture, our national soul, our national essence!<sup>33</sup>

Readers familiar with *Phong Hóa* and its message would find it difficult to imagine any Self-Reliant Literary Group member writing such a column in earnest. As the Group's campaign against pessimism and passivity made clear, the Group did not believe that Vietnamese should reject western culture, recite sentimental poetry, or shirk difficult situations. The Group gave this tongue-in-cheek treatment to any number of issues it wanted to reform: Confucianism, Vietnamese customs, and superstitions among others. Such columns constituted a kind of linguistic test; readers and other intellectuals who did not understand the Group's irony and sense of humor were lambasted brutally in *Phong Hóa*. For example, a writer who called himself Công Luận (Public Opinion) from rival newspaper *Thực Nghiệp Dân Báo* criticized the Group's humor when he exclaimed that "the forum of discourse is not the place to act out comic plays!"<sup>34</sup> In response, Nhất Linh quoted Phan Khôi, an intellectual respected in most circles: "Only the intelligent can speak funny jests, to recognize the humor in good jests; only the stupid cannot see when others are joking, when others are telling the truth, and deserve to be left in a corner."<sup>35</sup> Nhất Linh equated stupidity with a lack of a sense of humor. For the Self-Reliant Literary Group, intelligence was directly tied to one's ability to laugh; just as one had to be clever to write comedy, one had to be equally as smart to recognize it.

Despite its merciless assault on self-righteous intellectuals, *Phong Hóa*'s humor did not just result in the exclusion of those unable to "get it." More importantly, both the joke column and *A Sideways Discussion* can be seen to unite the writers and readers into a community of co-conspirators and co-collaborators. The act of "trading" jokes via the joke column could arguably be seen as a small, imperceptible mechanism which flattened regional cultural differences, and allowed Vietnamese from all geographical areas began to see themselves as part of a larger community. Likewise, the irony of *A Sideways Discussion* was itself an inside joke—only for those readers who could interiorize the deeply self-conscious modern sensibility of doubt. *Phong Hóa* invited its readers through irony to join the authors in a community of "readers in the know" by recognizing the correct interpretation of an ironic statement and rejecting its most literal reading. Although irony is seen as one of the defining modes of individualism and the modern

---

<sup>33</sup> Tứ Ly, "Bàn Ngang," *Phong Hóa*, no. 18, 20 Oct 1932, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Công Luận, "Độc Bài Thơ Con Cóc của Ông Nhất Linh trên *Phong Hóa*" *Thực Nghiệp Dân Báo*, no. 3563, 4-5 Jan 1933, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Nhất Linh, "Thơ Con Cóc," *Phong Hóa*, no. 31, 24 Jan 1933, p. 19.

self, here it served to formulation of a kind of modern collective identity. In forums such as these, a fragmented readership can work through and arrive at a unique modern identity, an “imagined community” as described by Benedict Anderson.

It is also no surprise that *Phong Hóá*'s emphasis on jokes and ironic humor coincided with their own modernization of the novel. The genre of the joke can be seen as the mirror opposite of the stylistic form of the modern novel. As Daniel Wickberg writes,

Both the novel and the joke...are characteristically modern, one standing for the uniqueness of the individual work of art and the artist behind it, the other representing the interchangeability of parts, the techniques of mass production, the anonymity of modern life.<sup>36</sup>

If the joke reflected the mechanization and impersonality of modern life, then the irony and interiority expressed in *A Sideways Discussion* had its fullest expression in the form of the novel. The interiority of the novel implies a deep understanding of the subjectivity of meaning, a sensibility conveyed in the Group's use of antiphrastic irony. As George Lukacs described, the novel itself constitutes the embodiment of irony in literary form, and irony itself is “the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God.”<sup>37</sup> As Group members were devoted to secular rationality and campaigned against traditional superstitious practices, they sought to free their compatriots from the strictures of social institutions through their novels. Such concerns were tied to larger questions of the Vietnamese nation, and it is no coincidence that the Self-Reliant Literary Group used the novel and the newspaper as its tools of social reform. Benedict Anderson referred to the novel and the newspaper as “the technical means for ‘representing’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation.”<sup>38</sup> *Phong Hóá*'s humorous project reflected the tension and connection between the alienating effects of mechanization (as seen in its joke column), and the deep self-reflection of modern individualism. Although these impulses seem opposed, they nevertheless comprised different characteristics of the modern sense of humor the Group worked so hard to impart.

Interestingly enough, the modern sensibilities touted by the Self-Reliant Literary Group—self-doubt, reflexivity, suspicion of dogma and ideology—lacked the cynicism that undergirded modern attitudes in the European intellectual tradition. In fact, the Group's approach toward these deeply interior modern sensibilities seemed optimistic and hopeful, the complete opposite to the deeply cynical postwar irony described by Paul Fussell in his *War and Modern Memory*.<sup>39</sup> Rather than self-doubt reflecting disillusionment with the Enlightenment project, the Self-Reliant Literary Group saw these modern sensibilities as a means toward progress

---

<sup>36</sup> Wickberg, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, (Boston: MIT Press: 1974), p 56. I interpret Lukac's use of the term “God” to mean any kind of providential truth or ideology, and not necessarily a supernatural deity.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson discusses the novel and the newspaper as the structures that best convey simultaneity, or what he termed “homogenous, empty time.” He does not discuss, however, the implications of the novel for exploring the subjective self, another sensibility attributed to modernity.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Fussell, the ironic sensibility that emerged in the immediate World War I period was a direct result of disillusionment with the Enlightenment project: the bloody and destructive experience of what was supposed to be a “good” war.

particularly for the Vietnamese nation. In other words, the Group was unironic in its irony—it simultaneously embraced both skepticism as well as positivistic ideas of human progress. From the standpoint of the European intellectual tradition, this seemed strange and paradoxical indeed, but was a by-product of intellectual life in a colonial context. The encounter of Vietnamese intellectuals with various strands of the European intellectual tradition was decontextualized and removed from its origins, and reflected the fragmented and patchy nature of such exchanges.

Its intellectual goals aside, *Phong Hóa* became a resounding success. Not only did other humorous newspapers emerge to duplicate it, but even the serious journals then made efforts to include more humor into its issues. Following *Phong Hóa*, a number of humorous journals appeared such as *Con Ong (The Bee)*, *Vịt Đực (the Male Duck)*, and *Loa (the Loudspeaker)*<sup>40</sup>. All of them proved to be short-lived—*Phong Hóa* remained the first and most enduring. After *Phong Hóa*, almost every newspaper had a column of humorous stories or jokes, or made an effort to include light reading in their issues. As the joke column and *A Sideways Discussion* illustrated, *Phong Hóa* raised the cultural awareness of humor by foregrounding it as well as defining it as a commodity to be consumed by an increasing number of readers.

## **Part II: Lý Toét as Multifunctional Comic Form**

Despite the enduring popularity and longevity of the joke column and *A Sideways Discussion*, no other trope was as ubiquitous and prominent as a visual and textual character named Lý Toét. A country bumpkin, this character became a cultural icon of the 1930s, and the trope most associated with the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its brand of humor. Lý Toét constituted the first sustained fictitious character in any Vietnamese newspaper: a multi-genre figure that broke through the “fourth wall” of cartoons to feature in short stories, articles, poems, advertisements, and essays. His ubiquitous presence in *Phong Hóa* reflected and embodied the paper’s humorous ethos.

About Lý Toét himself: Lý Toét, as a country bumpkin, embodies backwardness in all respects. Illiterate but curious, he attempts to understand the modern novelties around him, but inevitably fails. Ridiculous but neither offensive nor malicious, he is often the first victim of his nonsensical initiatives. Around sixty years old, Lý Toét is as ugly as he is badly dressed. As befitting a comic character, the name “Lý Toét” itself has humorous meaning. The title “lý” refers to *lý trưởng*, or village mayor.<sup>41</sup> “Toet” can have a variety of unpleasant meanings depending on the context used: it can refer to swollen and infected eyes, a wide, gaping grin (Lý Toét has both), or festering sores.<sup>42</sup> As the cartoons often portray Lý Toét with squinting eyes, “Lý Toét” most likely translates to “The Village Mayor with swollen, rheumy eyes.” Such imagery would be familiar to Vietnamese readers in the 1930s, as newspapers of the time often discussed epidemics of ocular disease in rural areas as a result of unsanitary conditions.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> These newspapers lasted less than two years: *Con Ong* (1939-1940), *Vịt Đực* (1938-1939), *Loa* (1934-1936).

<sup>41</sup> *Tự Điển Việt-Anh*. (Hanoi: Hanoi University Press, 1986), 486.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 852.

<sup>43</sup> For an example of such an article, see *L’Annam Nouveau*, 2 Apr 1939, p. 4.

As the representative of traditional customs, Lý Toét dresses in the garb of the Confucian literati—long, black flowing tunics and loose white pants hanging slackly from his tall and lanky figure. He wears his hair in a traditional bun and turban and never shaves, so his long sparse whiskers always jut out from his face. Lý Toét always carries with him an umbrella, the mark of the “modern” man. As early as 1908, Dr. Charles Grall, a French physician working on hygiene and public health in Indochina, made note of the umbrella as a status symbol:

Our establishment in this country is expressed for him (the Vietnamese) by a conquest that he considers as a veritable benefit, that of the umbrella, of which the usage was reserved before for persons of mark, and which today is universally widespread. The native keeps it open for all time and at all hours.<sup>44</sup>

Contrary to Dr. Grall’s description, Lý Toét rarely if ever opens his umbrella. Instead, he proudly carries it with him everywhere, usually under his arm or propped up against his shoulder. It seems that Lý Toét wants everyone to know that he owns an umbrella, but does not want it to suffer the wear and tear that comes from actual use. For example, the following cartoon illustrates the pains Lý Toét takes in order to maintain the quality of his possessions (Figure 2).

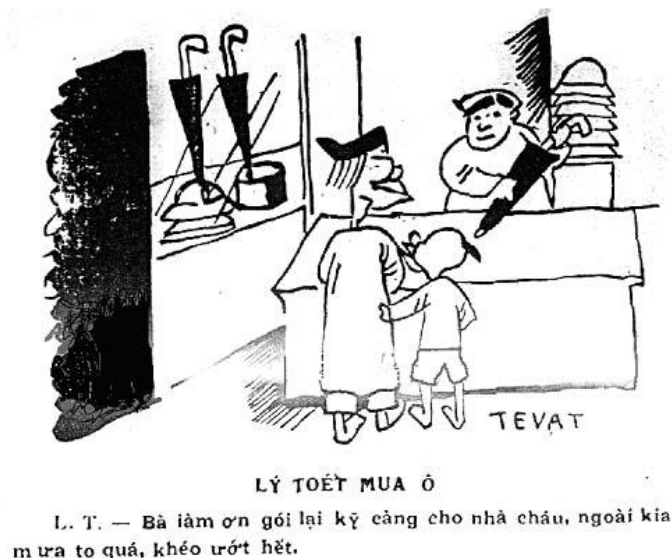


Figure 2. Ngày Nay, no. 221, 17 Aug 1940, p. 6.

Lý Toét and his son are in a shop, purchasing a new umbrella. He asks the saleswoman to carefully wrap his new umbrella, as it is raining so hard outside. The cartoon characterizes the predicament facing the Vietnamese peasant: the tension between the aspiration to own modern items and the high cost of that possession. Lý Toét adopts the same attitude towards

<sup>44</sup> Charles Grall. *Hygiène coloniale appliquée; hygiène de l'Indo-Chine*. (Paris: Baillière, 1908), 44. As cited by Nguyễn Văn Ký, *La Societé Vietnamienne Face à la Modernité: le Tonkin de la fin du XIXème Siècle à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 205.

his shoes; he rarely puts them on, instead opting to hang them from his umbrella so as not to wear them out so quickly. Despite Lý Toét's careful preservation of his "modern" belongings, a common trope of the cartoon involved someone absconding with his precious shoes or umbrella.

As befits a village mayor and a country peasant, Lý Toét has a large family. However, Lý Toét's wife, a nondescript, quiet peasant woman, rarely appears in the cartoons. On the other hand, Lý Toét's children play a role in their father's misadventures. The most well known is his daughter Miss Ba Vanh (Miss Three Rings), who left the village at an early age to find work. She later married the French owner of the mine where she worked, and now lives in the city (assumedly Hanoi)<sup>45</sup>. Visiting her is the only reason prompting Lý Toét to go to the city at all, and such trips provide the basis for all his misadventures in the modern world. Lý Toét also has a young son name Toe, whose name when combined with his father's (*Toe Toét*) means "to show ones teeth while grinning or talking," a trait often seen as uncouth or vulgar.<sup>46</sup> A country bumpkin like his father, Toe gets bad grades in school, sasses his teacher, and shamelessly eats food off of the ancestral worship table.

Despite his image as rural simpleton, Lý Toét also has his vices. Like any upstanding rural official, Lý Toét has a healthy opium addiction, as well as a penchant for drinking. A number of cartoons and short stories featuring Lý Toét portray him in various states of inebriation. His extramarital sexual exploits, although not explicitly stated, are suggested in his endorsements for various venereal disease treatments (Figure 3).

#### LÝ TOÉT MẮC LẬU

Một hôm, nhân khi cao hứng, Ba-Ếch đố Lý Toé đố ngô - sàm-công để thưởng thức từ ú phong lưu Hà-thành. Sau trận mây mưa được ít lâu, cả 2 đều mắc phải bệnh kín. Ba-Ếch bị giang mai, Lý-Toét bị bị lậu. 7 thuốc men mãi không khỏi, ma bệnh một ngày một nặng thêm; sau nước có người mách xuống Thanh-Hà Dược-phòng 55 Route de Huế, vừa uống thuốc xưa thụt rửa chỉ trong 1 tuần lễ là hết. Ở đây có bán đủ các thứ thuốc chữa về bệnh tình, uống vào không mệt học và không hại đường sinh dục. Nhân chữa khoán có thấy đỡ mấy phải đặt tiền.

THÀNH-HÀ-DƯỢC PHÒNG  
HANOI, 55, Route de Huế, 55, HANOI

Figure 3. Venereal disease ad featuring Lý Toét, *Phong Hóa*, no. 126, 30 Nov 1934.

Other cartoons depict Lý Toét with Vietnamese songstresses (*Cô Đâu*) declaring their love for him, but his simplemindedness prevents him from recognizing their affections.

Lý Toét is often depicted with his rotund sidekick, Xã Xệ. Like Lý Toét's name, the alliterative name "Xã Xệ" also has comic meaning. The title "Xã" refers to *xa truong*, or commune chief.<sup>47</sup> "Xệ" means to sag, to droop, referring to the character's obese, rotund figure and thick, flabby lips.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, "Xã Xệ" means "the Saggy Commune Chief."<sup>49</sup> Like Lý Toét, Xã Xệ also dons the long flowing tunic of the literati, but without the turban.

<sup>45</sup> Minh Chính, "Truyện Vặt về Lý Toét" *Phong Hóa*, no. 79, 22 Dec 1933, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Tự Điển Việt-Anh, 852.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 964-965.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 974.

<sup>49</sup> A village (*làng*) is a unit made up of multiple communes (*xã*). Lý Toét, as the head of a village, is of higher rank than Xã Xệ, the leader of a commune.

Instead, a single curly hair—reminiscent of a pig’s tail—stands straight out of his bald head. Compared to Lý Toét’s slovenly and unhygienic appearance, Xã Xệ dresses himself more respectably. A little vain, he often buys things for himself, such as eyeglasses (something that perhaps Lý Toét needed more), hair growth tonic for his bald head (which only made his one hair grow longer), and slimming cream (which clearly did not work).

A jolly, good-natured character, Xã Xệ goes along with and is often the unwitting victim of Lý Toét’s ideas and schemes. As Nhất Linh described, “Heaven made Xã Xệ for the purpose of enduring injustices, for that reason, everyone feels more for Xã Xệ than Lý Toét.”<sup>50</sup> The victim of Lý Toét’s ill-founded schemes, Xã Xệ is unexpectedly agreeable, never melancholy or suicidal (unlike Lý Toét at times). As Nhất Linh commented, “To put it succinctly, Xã Xệ’s is glorious history of a hair, a hair that is the core of a person. Xã Xệ’s one strand of hair encompasses his entire life. Xã Xệ himself even states: If by pulling one hair benefits me a hundred times over, I still won’t pull it.”<sup>51</sup> The butt of slapstick jokes, Xã Xệ was well loved by readers. As Nhat Linh wrote “it is hard to dislike a character that the world always picks on, especially since he himself never picks on anybody.”

Lý Toét was not the product of only one artist or writer. My reading of over 700 Lý Toét items reveals at least 270 different contributing authors and artists. Readers submitted their own Lý Toét cartoons and jokes, which varied in artistic quality from crude sketches to elaborate renderings. Drawings by collaborating artists such as Tô Ngọc Vân (as Tô Tử), Nguyễn Gia Trí (as Rigt), Trần Bình Lộc (as Nhất Sách), and Lemur often featured on the covers of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. The Lý Toét items authored by the Self-Reliant Literary Group and their contributors totaled about 85 of 707. Despite the relatively small number, these were usually full-page items more prominently displayed in the paper.

### The “Birth” of Lý Toét

Lý Toét emerged gradually over a period of eight months, from September 1932 to May 1933. In Nhất Linh’s second issue of *Phong Hóa* (#15), a drawing of a comical peasant (which readers would later identify as Lý Toét) first appeared in the title banner of the jokes column (Figure 4).



Figure 4. First image of Lý Toét from *Phong Hóa* no. 15, 29 Sept 1932, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Nhất Linh, “Lịch Sử Lý Toét, Xã Xệ, và Ba Ếch.” *Ngày Nay* no. 198, 3 Feb 1940, p. 23

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Although not yet given a name, the peasant bore all the identifying features later associated with Lý Toét—turbaned head, long whiskers, and shoes dangling from an umbrella. This drawing continued to appear on an almost weekly basis over the next few months. At this point, the cartoon peasant did not have a name. The moniker “Lý Toét” did not appear until three months later in December of 1932 in a humorous story titled “Lý Toét Goes to the Fair” (Cụ Lý Toét đi xem hội chợ). The image and Lý Toét name continued to appear separately until February of 1933. In a story by Tứ Ly titled “Cuộc Chợ Phiên” (A Carnival), the image of the funny-looking peasant became associated with the Lý Toét name for the first time.<sup>52</sup> The story described Lý Toét gawking at the sights in a fictional urban fair hosted by *Phong Hóa*.

However, the first Lý Toét cartoon did not appear until three months later, on May 26, 1933 (Figure 5). The unnamed artist titled the cartoon “Lý Toét in the City” and portrayed a bewildered Lý Toét confusing a public water spout with a funerary headstone. As the theme of Lý Toét in the city had already been introduced in Tứ Ly’s story, this first cartoon merely continued it in cartoon format. Unlike his later incarnations which portray him in more exaggerated or stylized renderings, Lý Toét looks younger and realistically depicted.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 5. First Lý Toét cartoon, *Phong Hóa*, no. 46, May 26, 1933, p. 5.**

The Self-Strength Literary Group and *Phong Hóa* also helped proliferate the Lý Toét character by announcing a contest in November of 1933. The paper accepted jokes, short stories and cartoons featuring Lý Toét: “The best of every ten will receive a prize of 4

<sup>52</sup> According to Hà Minh Đức and a number of other scholars, the character of Lý Toét was originally the brainchild of Tú Mỡ, who first published humorous stories titled “Lý Toét goes into town” in 1925 in *Việt Nam Thanh Niên Tạp Chí* and *Tứ Dân Tạp Chí*. Although plausible, my own examination of the Lý Toét cartoons suggest that Nhật Linh came up with the character. See Hà Minh Đức, *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn Trào Lưu Tác Giả*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> Although the artist of this first cartoon never identified himself, my informed guess would be Nhật Linh as Đông Sơn. Subsequent Đông Sơn drawings would feature Lý Toét standing in a similar stance and also use parallel lines to render Lý Toét’s sparse hair. See *Phong Hóa* no. 59, 11 Aug 1933, p. 1 and no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 4.



piastres, and at the end of the year, *Phong Hóa* will award the best Lý Toét cartoon a ‘special prize.’”<sup>54</sup> *Phong Hóa* published 39 reader entries within a six-month period, which suggests that the journal only printed a fraction of the total submissions. In fact, only two months into the contest, *Phong Hóa* announced a temporary halt in its January 19, 1934 issue. The fact that the paper continued to print submissions for over five months after suspending the contest suggests that the reading public responded more enthusiastically than *Phong Hóa* expected.

Soon after, the already popular Lý Toét character became part of a cartoon comedy duo. The first cartoon depicting both Lý Toét and Xã Xệ together appeared in the March 16, 1934 issue of *Phong Hóa* (Figure 6). In the first drawing, they both contemplate a scale, an item of modern technology. Behind them a sign reads, “Insert one sou to weigh.” Xã Xệ asks Lý Toét, “Hey Mr. Toét! We only have one sou, how can we both weigh ourselves?” The next frame shows the two of them on the scale, Lý Toét nearly edged off by the obese Xã Xệ. Lý Toét exclaims, “This is the best way! We’ll weigh both of us at the same time, then divide the number in two!” Neither of them realizes the disparity between their weights: Lý Toét’s lanky body bears no comparison to Xã Xệ’s corpulent figure. Contrary to Lý Toét, Xã Xệ appeared as a fully developed character and was completely the brainchild of one person. Drawn by Saigonese contributor Bút Sơn, Xã Xệ was “born on a scale. . . and born immediately as Lý Toét’s friend.”<sup>55</sup> Xã Xệ became so popular that he sometimes appeared in cartoons without his comedic partner. The duo was beloved by readers—over 180 cartoons featuring the two appeared in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* from 1934 to 1940.

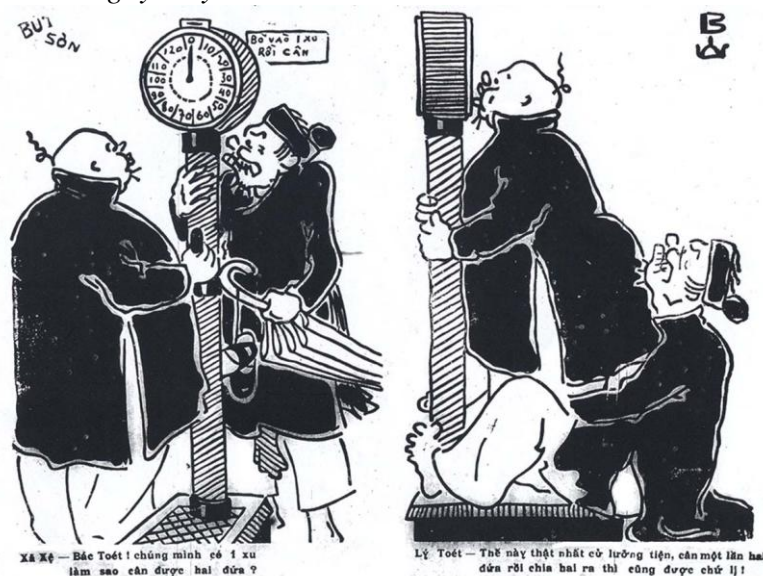


Figure 6. First Cartoon featuring Lý Toét and Xã Xệ together. *Phong Hóa*, no. 89, March 16, 1934, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Announcement in *Phong Hóa* no. 73, 17 Nov 1933, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Nhất Linh, “Lịch Sử Lý Toét,” 22. A native son, Xã Xệ also proved popular in Saigon. He continued to appear by himself in Southern newspapers such as *Mai*. For example, see *Mai*, #82, 12 May 1939, p 9. In his unpublished memoirs, *Đôi Lam Bao*, Nhất Linh wrote that he had hoped to find the elusive Bút Sơn, but was unsuccessful.

Once Xả Xệ entered the scene, the Lý Toét trope can finally be described as “fully developed,” the personalities and mutual chemistry of the various characters well-established. Over the years, contributors would flesh out details about their lives, activities, and preoccupations, but the characters themselves—how they looked, thought and interacted with one another—remained the same. As a result, the Lý Toét trope became a means for contributors to reflect upon Vietnamese society at the time. As the chapter will discuss, the theme of tradition and modernity loomed large for many readers, while others used the characters to reflect upon politics, journalism or just to revel in a bit of silliness.

### Public Reactions to Lý Toét

As previously discussed, the Lý Toét character was wildly popular with readers, who enthusiastically submitted their own cartoons and jokes to *Phong Hóa*. However, the Lý Toét cartoons elicited a mixed reaction from other newspapers. Two of *Phong Hóa*'s rivals, *Trung Bắc Tân Văn* and *Thanh Niên*, launched their own Lý Toét copycats. *Thanh Niên* printed a cartoon of a peasant looking suspiciously like Lý Toét at the cinema, which it called “Xả Dừ.” *Trung Bắc Tân Văn* went even further and used the character outright in an article “signed and stamped by Lý Toét.” *Phong Hóa* immediately took issue with each paper. In a pointed message to *Trung Bắc Tân Văn*, Nhất Dao Cạo wrote, “Lý Toét has asked *Phong Hóa* to rectify this issue, because this article was not written by him! The main evidence is that he has retired for a long time now, and does not even have the official seal anymore! So surely there is someone posing as Lý Toét to deceive people... Lý Toét will begin proceedings to sue *Trung Bắc*.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, *Phong Hóa* used the character of Lý Toét to make a veiled threat to sue another newspaper for plagiarism. As Lý Toét was the paper's most well-known trope, it made sense that *Phong Hóa* would go to such lengths to protect its creation.

While some wanted their own Lý Toét copycat, others did not find the character so funny. The constant jibes at Lý Toét's expense did not go unnoticed—some readers and competing newspapers found the cartoons unnecessarily mean-spirited towards the peasantry. One critic even went so far as to print and distribute his own anti-*Phong Hóa* pamphlets. A writer named Xuân Thiên exclaimed that the Lý Toét cartoons were

truly a deplorable, ignominious act for our rural compatriots, shameful for all people of Annam, especially in the eyes of foreigners, because they will think that such savagery, such baseness could happen among our people. We should have asked the “Nguyễn Tường Tam” gang who their ancestors were. Chinese, Japanese, Siamese, or American, perhaps?<sup>57</sup>

For Xuân Thiên, the character of Lý Toét ruthlessly made fun of the peasantry, which the writer equated to self-loathing on the part of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Interestingly enough, Xuân Thiên did not criticize the Group out of a sense of compassion towards the peasantry, but because he was embarrassed that foreigners would find the Vietnamese contemptible. He continued: “the

<sup>56</sup> *Phong Hóa*, 26 Jan 1934, pg 8 and 2 Feb 1936, p 7.

<sup>57</sup> Xuân Thiên, *Tội Phong Hóa* (Hanoi: Imprimerie Indochinoise: 1935), p 4

cartoons in *Phong Hóa* only make us lose respect, make us laugh the laughter of scorn and derision, the laughter of the wicked who only hope to fill their pockets, who can care less of conscience or duty.”<sup>58</sup> Xuân Thiên saw the Lý Toét cartoons as a gimmick to sell newspapers. While it was certainly the case that Lý Toét contributed to *Phong Hóa*'s large readership and commercial success, Xuan Thien completely missed the paper's larger project regarding humor. Xuân Thiên comments reflected exactly the type of attitudes *Phong Hóa* lampooned and worked hard to dispel: self-righteousness indignation and lack of a sense of humor.

To such criticism, the closest *Phong Hóa* came a response can be found in its February 2, 1934 issue. A letter signed by “Former Head-of-Village Nguyễn Van Toét or Lý Toét” was addressed to Tú Mỡ. It starts with polite greetings to the satirical poet, then humbly asks him for a favor:

I ask that you take a little effort and go to the newspaper, and speak with the proprietor that: Lý Toét is an honest and upright man, when organizing humorous stories, there are thousands of other humorous topics, why always make him the butt of jokes? I ask you to please think of our past, and speak on my behalf, and please don't mince words. And when this matter is settled, I will gratefully repay you liberally.<sup>59</sup>

The author of this letter remained unknown; it could have been someone from a competing newspaper critical of the cartoons, a reader, or even Tú Mỡ himself. If Tú Mỡ or another Group member wrote the letter, he did so in response to accusations that the Lý Toét cartoons cruelly and unjustly lampooned the gentle peasantry. Tú Mỡ's response to the letter, however, probably proved disappointing to Lý Toét:

Answering your letter, uncle, I am amused as well as troubled... *Phong Hóa* newspaper held the “Lý Toét contest... not because we disliked nor resented anyone... but anyone who sees you, uncle, can't help but laugh... Please do not be angry about this... but you see uncle, there are so many people of Hanoi city... that *Phong Hóa* also makes fun of...”<sup>60</sup>

*Phong Hóa* assured Lý Toét that it did not single him out as a target; rather, it lampooned everyone. Tú Mỡ went on to name a few victims such as Nguyen Van Vinh and Phan Khôi (throwing barbs at them in the process). He ended with

If I, like you, received such attention, I would be happy, not upset. All over Vietnam, everyone would know my name... But never mind! Uncle, please don't worry so much, happily water your fields and garden. I leave you here, and wish you the best.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> *Phong Hóa*, February 2, 1934. pg 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Phong Hóa*, February 2, 1934. pg 4

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Tú Mỡ's response implied no malice on the part of *Phong Hóa*, just good-natured fun. (Un)fortunately for Lý Toét, *Phong Hóa* did not leave him alone. Instead, Lý Toét became a mainstay of the paper and the cultural icon of the decade.

### Lý Toét as Commentator on Modernity and Tradition

The Lý Toét character covered a variety of themes in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*, but largest and most easily noticeable was its commentary on tradition and modernity. On his jaunts to the city, Lý Toét encounters the trappings of modern life—and his response always exposes his boorishness. A reading of the over 700 Lý Toét items reveals that the Lý Toét cartoons were predominantly focused on two aspects of modern life: first, the material trappings which encompass tangible objects such as technology and commodities, and second, modern society with its customs and mores. The cartoons feature Lý Toét coming across strange items and finding himself into unfamiliar social situations.<sup>62</sup>

Much of Lý Toét's encounters with the physical aspects of modernity involve technology, usually involving Lý Toét contemplating some contraption or machine. In every case, he completely misunderstands the technology, or comprehends it in such a way that only a backwards peasant could. The following cartoon illustrates the cultural gap between modern machinery and Vietnamese traditional religious beliefs (Figure 7). Lý Toét and Xã Xê watch a station attendant dressed in western clothing pump gasoline, perhaps from an underground tank. A concerned Lý Toét puts his arm around Xã Xê and says, "Hey Mr. Xã, if they keep pumping the water up from the ground like this, what will happen to the *dragon vein*?" In feng shui cosmology, *dragon vein* [long mach] describes flows of concentrated life energy [*qi*], the underground lifeline of the reigning emperor. Inadvertently violating the vein could potentially endanger not only the life of the emperor, but also the entire dynasty. Lý Toét's concern for the dragon vein illustrates the disparity between traditional Sino-Vietnamese superstitions and modern science. In addition, the fact that Lý Toét and Xã Xê mistake gasoline for water further demonstrate their complete ignorance of industrial development and the resources that fueled it.

---

<sup>62</sup> This study is based on 422 and 247 instances of Lý Toét images and text taken from *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* respectively, totaling about 707. Although best known as a cartoon character, Lý Toét also featured in texts such as humorous articles, short stories, skits, philosophical tracts, scientific articles and political commentaries. Of the over 700 Lý Toét items collected, cartoons numbered 550 or 78%.<sup>62</sup> Textual items consisted of 14 poems, 41 humorous articles, and 3 plays. A reader favorite, Lý Toét appeared in over 91 joke columns, comprised of short jokes sent in by readers from all over Indochina.

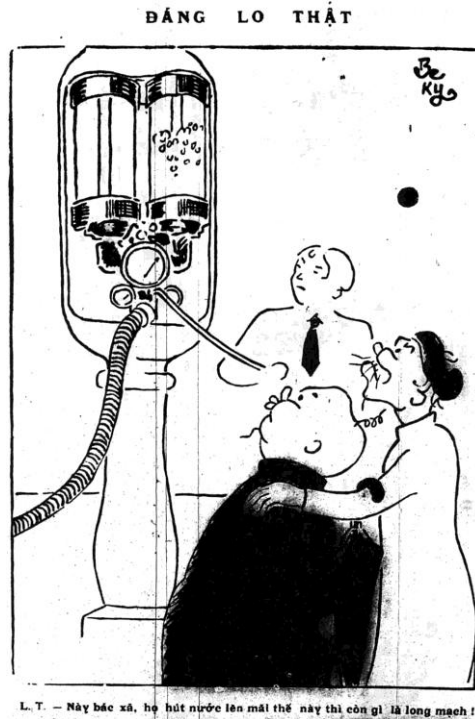


Figure 7. *Phong Hóa*, no. 100, 1 Jun 1934, p. 2.

What makes the Lý Toét character so comical is his own lack of self-awareness; he almost never realizes his own backwardness. On the contrary, Lý Toét believes he is civilized and has an inflated sense of superiority about it. In the following cartoon, Lý Toét looks down into an open manhole and holds his nose (Figure 8). He says to himself, “They say that people in Hanoi are civilized. This well where people get drinking water is so dirty. The well in my village, as bad as it is, is still cleaner.” Lý Toét completely misunderstands the purpose of the sewer. Rather than appreciating one of the marvels of modern civil engineering, a drainage system that effectively removes sewage out of the city, Lý Toét rules his own rural lifestyle as more “civilized.”

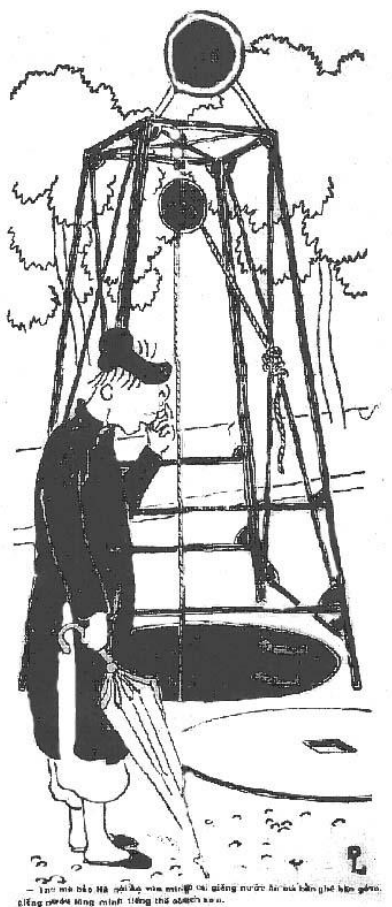


Figure 8. Phong Hóa, no. 91, 30 March 1934, p. 8-9.

In addition to his run-ins with strange technologies and other novelties, Lý Toét also encounters modern society with its mores and customs. Lý Toét aspires to be civilized and endeavors to act according to “modern” modes of behavior, but always falls short. Lý Toét always acts in a way contrary to expected decorum, or he views the custom through the distorting lens of tradition.

The cartoon in Figure 9, titled “At the Movie Theater,” shows Lý Toét and Xã Xệ at watching a Western couple passionately kissing onscreen. Xã Xệ turns to Lý Toét and asks, “What are they doing?” Lý Toét, who assumes that the couple are engaged in the rural practice in which a mother prechews food and feeds it to her children mouth-to-mouth, replies condescendingly to his sidekick, “They are feeding each other rice, that’s what.” The humor in this cartoon lies in Lý Toét’s ignorance of the modern notions of romantic love. In opposition to traditional views of arranged marriage, in their novels the Self-Strength Literary Group advocated the ideas of romantic love through individual choice. Lý Toét’s ironic condescension mocks the more traditional attitudes that continued to hold sway the countryside.

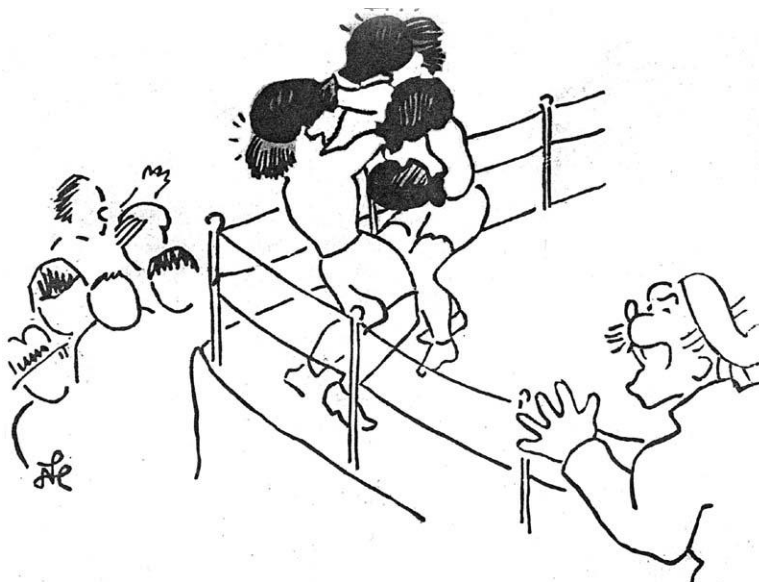


**TRONG NHÀ CHIẾU BÓNG**

- Họ làm gì thế nhỉ ?
- Họ mớm cơm cho nhau chứ  
quái gì.

Figure 9. *Ngày Nay*, no. 152, 11 March 1939. *Ngày Nay* no. 178, 9 Sep 1939, p. 5.

On his jaunts in the city, Lý Toét also comes in contact with modern forms of recreation. While at a boxing match (**Error! Reference source not found.**), he watches two contenders violently beat up on one another in the ring. Lý Toét tries to make peace and tells them, “Stop, there’s no use in fighting, making peace is the right thing to do.” For Lý Toét, the idea of hand-to-hand combat as a sport seems completely unfamiliar.



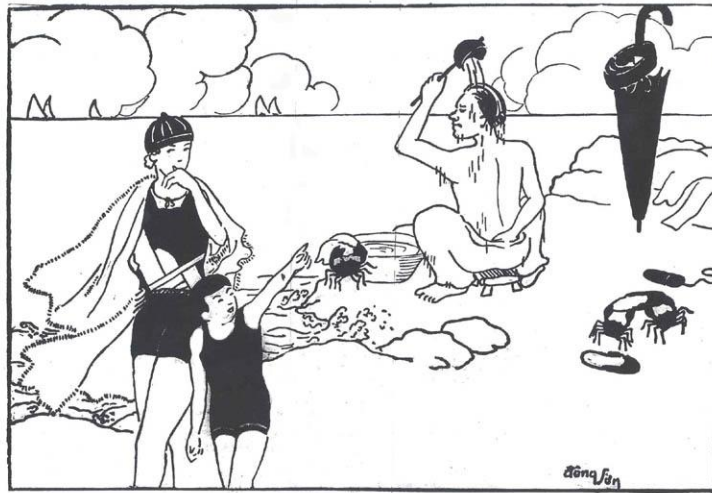
LÝ TOÉT – Thôi, hơn thua mà làm gì, nên đi hòa vi quý là phải.

Figure 10. *Phong Hóa*, no. 136, 15 February 1935, p. 2.

Along with contact sports, Lý Toét also encounters the new modern practice of beach going. The following cartoon by Nhật Linh (as Đông Sơn) titled “The Confucian Literati at the Beach,” portrays the gulf between traditional and modern recreational bathing, represented by Lý Toét and the two young beachgoers (Figure 11). Lý Toét comes equipped with the basic essentials of the rural bath—a bucket for water, a large ladle, and a short stool. His trademark turban, umbrella, and shoes placed on the sand next to him, he does not go into the water as expected, but sits on the shore and bathes himself from the bucket. Always modest, Lý Toét keeps his pants on while he pours water over his head with the ladle. The crabs that surround Lý Toét suggest that perhaps Lý Toét does not keep the most proper of personal hygiene. Walking along the water, two modern beachgoers in maillots, swim caps, and towels see the bathing peasant, point and laugh at his backwardness. The cartoon illustrates the difference between traditional and modern ideas of bathing: bathing for hygiene purposes versus recreational bathing at the beach. That the modern beachgoers want to bare their bodies in their bathing suits while Lý Toét modestly keeps his pants on further illustrates this cultural gulf.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> For another interpretation of this cartoon, see Nguyễn Văn Ký, pg 205-206.





NHÀ NHO TÂM BÈ!!

Figure 11. Phong Hóa no. 55, 14 July 14, p. 1.

This next cartoon lampoons differing ideas of commemoration between the Vietnamese and the French (Figure 12).

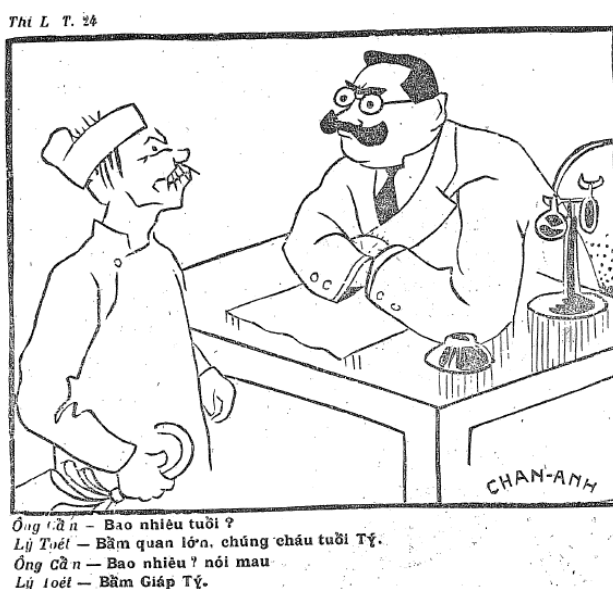


Figure 12. *Phong Hóa* no. 104, 29 June 1934, p. 1.

In the first frame, Lý Toét talks to his sick son Toe, who lies in bed. He scolds his son, “You probably caused some mischief in a temple somewhere and the gods made you sick, right?” His son answers: “No, I didn’t go into any temple. Yesterday in Hanoi, I picked a flower near a statue of some man next to telegraph station.” Lý Toét, terrified, says to himself, “Oh no! I must go there and worship!” In front of the memorial statue of a Frenchman, Lý Toét prays aloud, “With such beautiful scenery like this, I don’t blame you for being angry!” He then sets out a banquet one would see on an ancestral altar, falls to his knees and prays in front of the statue, “I beg of you please, my son is young and ignorant, he offended you, I beg you please forgive him, and make him well.” The cartoon’s humor lies in the difference between French and Vietnamese practices of commemoration. In traditional Vietnamese belief, the souls of dead ancestors reside in spirit tablets placed on ancestral altars. These likenesses are thus meant to be worshipped; in times of need, one can lay out offerings and pray to the image for assistance. Such ideas do not exist in Western notions of commemoration, in which people erect statues of

heroes for civic remembrance—the statues themselves have no supernatural spiritual value. The cartoon illustrates the fact that rural Vietnamese, as embodied by Lý Toét, find the idea of statues for secular commemoration completely unfamiliar.

Along with modern customs and practices, Lý Toét also encounters the diverse population of modern colonial society. Hanoi's urban growth not only attracted Vietnamese from all regions, but also brought together people from abroad. In colonial Hanoi, it was not uncommon to see Indian chettys, Chinese businessowners, African soldiers and of course, white Europeans. While non-white foreigners crop up from time to time in the Lý Toét's cartoons, white Frenchmen very rarely if ever appear. Even if they do, the cartoons depict them in positions of authority, such as a police officer or judge (Figure 13).



**Figure 13. Rare example of Lý Toét cartoon featuring a white Frenchman. The man asks Lý Toét his age, to which he replies “Venerable mandarin, I was born the Year of the Snake.” Frustrated, the Frenchman repeats his question again, and Lý Toét further clarifies, “Sir, Year of the Yin Water Snake.” From Phong Hoa no. 19 Jan 1934, p. 2.**

The strict censorship regime at the time perhaps explains the lack of white Frenchmen in the cartoons; however, this did not stop *Phong Hóa* from printing cartoons about black Frenchmen. The following cartoon depicts Lý Toét walking outside his house on the first of the lunar year, as evidenced by the customary pole with gifts hanging from the top (Figure 14). He encounters a well-dressed black Frenchman swiftly walking by with a briefcase under his arm. Lý Toét mumbles to himself, “How unlucky, first of the year and I run into a black Frenchman!” Lý Toét refers to a traditional superstition that the first person one meets on the first day of the lunar year predicts either good or bad luck for the rest of the year. In common Vietnamese usage, the color red is associated with good luck and prosperity, while black signifies misfortune. As a result, Lý Toét believes that meeting a black man on the first day of the lunar new year will bring bad luck. Likewise, Lý Toét would probably think encountering a white Frenchman would bring prosperity and good luck, especially given his aspirations towards civilization. This cartoon suggests that to a certain extent, even the

colonized had adopted the racial hierarchies of their colonizers. This was certainly the case with the Self-Reliant Literary Group, who often compared Tonkin to France's African colonies and expressed indignation that "less civilized" African nations would receive more freedoms than the "more civilized" Indochinese.



Figure 14. *Ngày Nay* no. 198, 3 February 1940.

The cartoons above represent a number of aspects of modernity Lý Toét encounters on his forays into the city. In his attempts to figure out the material trappings of the modern lifestyle and understand the new customs and mores, Lý Toét always falls short. The popularity of the theme suggests that issues of modern and tradition were prominent in the public consciousness at the time. The comic situations that confront Lý Toét and sometimes Xã Xệ are certainly exaggerated, but they nevertheless reflect the meeting of two worlds that until this point had only little interaction.

### Modernity Made Complicated: Lý Toét and Ba Éch

The theme of tradition and modernity easily caught on with readers, who provided the overwhelming number of Lý Toét items over the years. As a result, the character began taking on a life of its own, mostly independent of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The spontaneous introduction of Xã Xệ illustrates how readers shaped the trope's development separate from its creators. This did not mean, however, that the Group did not try to guide the Lý Toét discourse from time to time. Many of the Group's earliest attempts at contributing to the Lý Toét discourse involved another fictional regular in *Phong Hóa* named Ba Éch.

His name translated into "Three Frogs," Ba Éch first appeared in *Phong Hóa* #14 (the first issue under Nhất Linh's editorship) and exemplified the youthful, playful attitudes of *Phong Hóa*'s editorial board. Nhất Linh described Ba Éch as a prankster, "a person who makes fun of

those deserving to be picked on.”<sup>64</sup> Often portrayed as a dapper young man in a three-piece suit and fedora, Ba Éch embodied the idealized image of the urban youth—clever and enterprising. The quintessential city slicker, Ba Éch was completely at ease in Hanoi, where his good-humored resourcefulness would get him out of scrapes with the authorities, or allow him to flirt with the ladies. Ba Éch’s jovial urbanity made him an ideal foil to the country boorishness of Lý Toét. The character predated Xã Xệ as Lý Toét’s sidekick and drinking buddy, and was featured with in his earliest appearances.<sup>65</sup> If *Phong Hóa*’s readers loved the character of Xã Xệ and featured him in many of their Lý Toét items, Group members and their collaborators seemed to prefer Ba Éch. The majority of the articles featuring the country bumpkin and the city slicker were written by Tú Ly, who penned at least a dozen items in 1932. Most of these appearances took the form of random conversations called *Meandering Stories* [*Câu Truyện Loanh Quanh*]. These stories never really had a point to them—they were merely vignettes of conversations between two friends.

For example, in one meandering story from 7 July 1933, Ba Éch explains to Lý Toét the difference between the German Brown Shirts and Italian Black Shirts. Ba Éch then suggests that they pick a shirt color for their own hypothetical political party, and they both decide on white. Always practical, Lý Toét points out that white shirts serve a dual purpose—if someone dies, party members would not have to buy additional funereal clothing. The conversation moves on to Lý Toét telling Ba Éch about how he bought a failed amulet from a fortuneteller and gambled away the yearly tax revenue collected from his village. When Lý Toét laments that his predicament is like being burned alive, Ba Éch sympathizes and compares Lý Toét’s situation with German authors whose books were burned in the Nazi bonfires. The conversation ends with Lý Toét suggesting that rather than burning the books, people should have used them for practical purposes such as plugging up bottles or wrapping fish. The story ended with an epilogue, in which Tú Ly reported that Mussolini was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He commented that

It is unbelievable that a politician known for his zeal in raising the military would receive this award. People who do not know would probably think that the intellectuals in Sweden are oblivious and do not hear the cannons on the shores of the Mediterranean. Mussolini has given hawkish speeches threatening this nation or another.<sup>66</sup>

Tú Ly predicted that with Hitler’s current aggressive tendencies, it would not be long before the Swedes award him the Nobel Peace Prize too.

On one level, the story can be seen as a means to explain current events as well as allow Tú Ly to express his political opinions. However, the fictional conversation between Ba Éch and Lý Toét also reveals much about how the Group’s envisioned the relationship between tradition and modernity. Ba Éch never attempts to impose his beliefs on Lý Toét, nor does he speak condescendingly to him. Despite his savvy urbanity and reputation as a jokester, Ba Éch does not

---

<sup>64</sup> Nhất Linh, “Lịch Sử Lý Toét,” 23

<sup>65</sup> In fact, that the very first mention of Lý Toét’s name was in side-by-side articles titled, “Lý Toét goes to the Fair” and “Ba Éch goes to the Fair.” The juxtaposition of Lý Toét and Ba Éch’s experiences at the fair clearly suggest that *Phong Hóa* had intended their readers to compare and contrast these two characters. *Phong Hóa*, no. 25, 9 Dec 1932, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> *Phong Hóa*, #54, 7 Jul 1933, p 3.

make fun of Lý Toét's often inane comments or irrational beliefs. In short, Tú Ly's story recounts a conversation between equals. Ba Éch's large, cosmopolitan worldview allows him to speak casually about Italian or German politics, while Lý Toét's parochial one is limited to superstition and village rituals. Yet despite the cultural gulf that separates them, they exhibit mutual sympathy towards one another. Lý Toét tries to understand the difference between Brown and Black shirts on his own terms, while Ba Éch finds a parallel in the plight of both Lý Toét and persecuted German writers. As stand-ins for modernity and tradition, Ba Éch and Lý Toét do not argue violently, nor do they shut one another out. What's more, the meandering nature of their conversations—without beginnings or endings, consensus or disagreement—reflects the messy and often mundane nature of the encounter between the two worlds. Unfortunately, the beginning of Lý Toét and Ba Éch's friendship was short-lived; readers seemed to prefer the dual buffoonery of Lý Toét and Xã Xê instead. Nevertheless, Ba Éch would appear on occasion, mostly in cartoons by Group members or their collaborators. This suggests that although the Group may have wanted to guide the Lý Toét discourse, the country bumpkin ultimately remained the domain of *Phong Hóa*'s readers.

The mutual affection between Lý Toét and Ba Éch also reflect conflicting impulses in the Group's very own reform project. Although the Group unquestionably advocated modernization and fought against tradition, they were also sympathetic to the plight of the peasantry. The Group never believed that urban intellectuals should remain alienated from their rural counterparts. Nor did the Group see the Lý Toét character, as George Dutton described, as a way that "urbanites could congratulate themselves on their own sophistication, a sophistication that rested on a knowledge and experience that Lý Toét did not possess."<sup>67</sup> While this description may have possibly applied to contributing readers, it certainly did not represent the sentiments of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. In Tú Ly's "meandering stories," the debonair Ba Éch never patronized his less cultured friend, or nor did he ever self-congratulate himself on his own sophistication. Rather, their relationship exemplified the reform project that lay beneath *Phong Hóa*'s humor. The Group wanted young intellectuals to change their attitudes; it warned young intellectuals not to isolate themselves and wallow in sadness, but to go out in the world, happily work to transform society and engage with their rural counterparts. In later years, this impassioned plea to Vietnamese youth and deep sympathy for the plight of the peasantry will be reiterated in the Group's other projects, namely the League of Light.

### Lý Toét as Political Commentator

The closure of *Phong Hóa* and the relaunch of *Ngày Nay* marked a shift in the history of the Lý Toét character. When the Group's two journals briefly overlapped in 1935, Lý Toét remained the domain of *Phong Hóa*, while *Ngày Nay* focused on more serious topics. But when *Phong Hóa* shut down operations in 1936, the Group relaunched a newly conceptualized version of *Ngày Nay* that combined the humor of its predecessor with the

---

<sup>67</sup> George Dutton, "Lý Toét in the City: Coming to Terms with the Modern in 1930s Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 1, February 2007, p. 81.

seriousness of *Ngày Nay*'s previous incarnation. One of the tropes from *Phong Hóa* that survived the switch to *Ngày Nay* was Lý Toét. Beginning in 1936, over 240 Lý Toét items appeared in the Group's new journal. During those years, readers still continued to submit cartoons to the paper; however, as the times and Group's activities evolved over the years, the Lý Toét items also reflected this change. In *Ngày Nay*, the Lý Toét discourse became increasingly politicized. It should be noted that almost all of the political cartoons came from members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group or their collaborators; outside contributors were still submitting Lý Toét items on the topic of tradition and modernity.

Even during the *Phong Hóa* years, the Lý Toét cartoons often commented on politics, which contradicts George Dutton's description of the character as a "non-political commentator."<sup>68</sup> Although the character perhaps never directly addressed the French colonial regime, Lý Toét was always good for a jab at local politics, especially the Tonkin Chamber of People's Representatives<sup>69</sup>. In this cartoon (Figure 15) by Đông Sơn (Nhật Linh), titled "the election from our point of view: At the Ballot Box" Lý Toét stands in front of the ballot box, about to hand in his vote. A toadying Lý Toét says to the mandarin: "Please sir, please, please, please, do I put it in...here?" Lý Toét's servile hesitation underscores how out of place western democratic practices must have seemed to some Vietnamese. Despite the egalitarian premise of elections, Lý Toét still displays the obsequiousness that characterizes Vietnamese hierarchical relations, especially in the mandarin state. For Đông Sơn, holding elections did not necessarily mean that Vietnamese are modern or democratic; they must first abolish the servile attitudes and groveling, and begin to see one another as equal citizens.



Figure 15. *Phong Hóa*, no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p 4.

This next cartoon, taken from *Phong Hóa*'s special issue dedicated to the Chamber, is titled "As Đông Sơn imagines it" (Figure 16). The image of the chamber comprised of Lý Toét's

<sup>68</sup> Dutton, 85-86.

<sup>69</sup> Established in 1908, the Chamber of the People's Representatives constituted the indigenous consultative body to the French colonial government. Made up of government appointees, elected representatives, and appointed businessmen, the Chamber became increasingly seen as an ineffectual and powerless institution by intellectuals and journals by the 1930s. The Self-Reliant Literary Group's coverage of the Chamber of Representatives will be discussed later in this dissertation.

immediately sends a clear message: the political body that represents the Vietnamese people is out of touch, ineffectual, and antiquated. Such cartoons pepper *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* through the years, and highlight local political contexts often missed by scholars. While the Group never directly attacked the French colonial government, they were not afraid to criticize the political institutions that buttressed it.



Dưới mắt Đông-Sơn tưởng tượng

Figure 16. *Phong Hóa* no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 5.

In *Ngày Nay*, the cartoon's function as a political commentator became even more diversified, moving from local politics to the national and international levels. In the following cover of *Ngày Nay* from June 1938, Lý Toét and Xã Xê are having a conversation (Figure 17). A blurb at the top of the cartoon explains that Paris had sent 3 million francs to Indochina to help flood victims, with 1.5 million set aside for wealthy Southern absentee landlords (*dien chu*) to borrow without interest. Lý Toét says to Xã Xê: "In the North, we have suffered many floods and droughts but the government only gave us one million French francs. In the South, you are already wealthy but the government gave you 1.5 million." Xã Xê responds:

Dividing it like that is fair. You Northerners are so thin and haggard, how much could you possibly eat? We're so fat and healthy, we have to eat so much more. What's more, we absentee landlords need money to buy gas for our automobiles. How on earth would you guys be able to buy autos?

In this cartoon, the Lý Toét and Xã Xê represent Tonkin and Cochinchina respectively, their appearances mirroring the wealth of their regions. Emaciated and clothed in rags, Lý Toét reflects the secondary status and poverty of Tonkin. Dressed in the clean white suit and pith helmet of colonial officials, the portly Xã Xê conveys not only the prosperity of Cochinchina



but also its privileged standing as a full-fledged French colony. Their conversation draws attention to two main realities of French colonial policy: first, that economic interests always outweigh humanitarian causes; and as a result, the wealthier colony of Cochinchina is of greater priority than Tonkin. In addition, the exchange between Lý Toét and Xã Xê also highlights prejudices between regions; the Cochinchinese belittle their northern counterparts for being poor and less civilized. By using humor, the Lý Toét cartoons become a means to comment on, and even criticize, regional politics in a thought-provoking way while reaching the most readers.

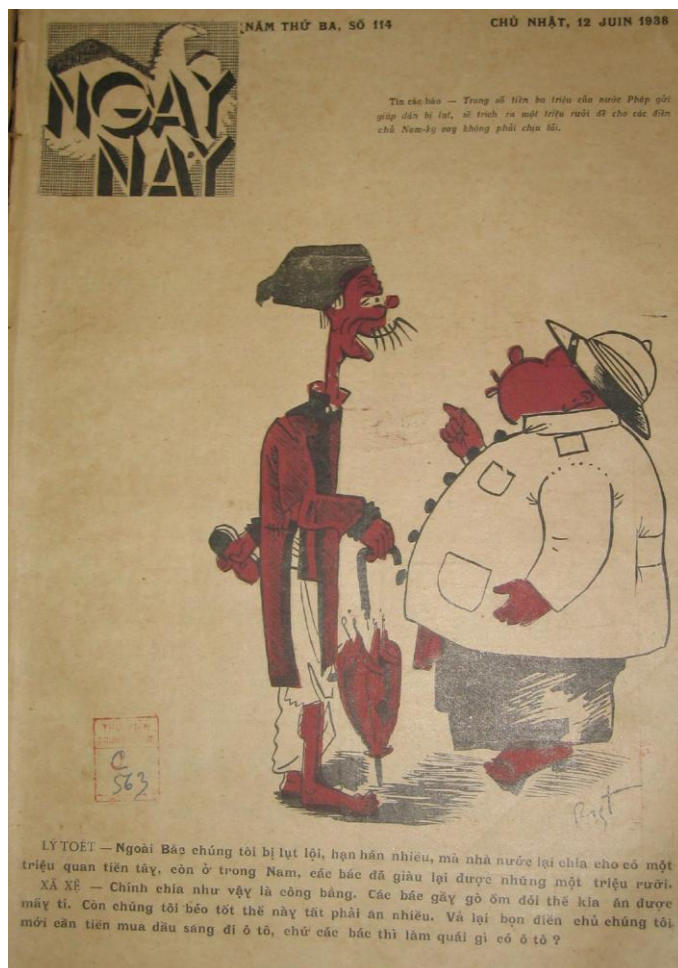


Figure 17. Cover of *Ngày Nay*, #114, 12 June 1938.

In *Ngày Nay*, the Lý Toét cartoons were sometimes daring enough to poke fun of French colonialism directly. In the next cartoon (Figure 18), Lý Toét looks on as a French gendarme leads a Vietnamese prisoner away in chains and comments, “How precious, Vietnam and France and tightly bound in spirit.” Despite the boldness of the cartoon, the illegible signature suggests

a fear of reprisal. The unknown artist's forceful criticism of the colonial government was a product of its time; the cartoon was published in October of 1937, 17 months after the rise of the Popular Front government in France. The buoyant and modernizing rhetoric of Leon Blum's new leftist government raised the hopes of many Vietnamese, who believed that it would herald an era of new legal and social reforms for the colonies. By the time this cartoon appeared, however, the Popular Front had already proved disappointing to many Vietnamese. In France, Blum's government had already collapsed and was replaced by one led by the more conservative Camille Chautemps. In Indochina, the breakdown of the Indochinese Congress, the failed implementation of a comprehensive labor code and the continued persecution of political prisoners revealed the emptiness of the government's progressive rhetoric. The cartoon highlights the contradiction between French rhetoric and colonial realities, that despite the talk of increased freedom and Franco-Vietnamese fraternity, the Vietnamese were still in a state of colonial bondage. As illustrated by this cartoon, Lý Toét also served as a useful mouthpiece for Vietnamese to voice criticism of the colonial government.

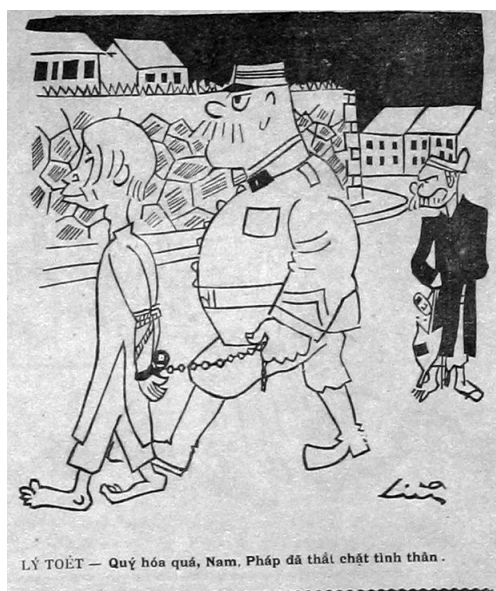


Figure 18. *Ngày Nay* no. 80, 10 Oct 1937, p. 838.

Not only did Lý Toét comment on colonial policies at the regional and national level, he also visually represented Vietnam in discussions of international politics. The following cartoon by Nguyen Gia Tri is from the cover of *Ngày Nay*'s February 13, 1938 issue, the first issue after the Tet holidays (Figure 19). Titled "The first dream of the spring," the cartoon features Lý Toét lying asleep and dreaming. In a dream cloud floating above him, Lý Toét is riding a tiger, triumphantly lifting a wine bottle in one hand while holding the reins of four tigers in another. Each tiger carries a flag that identifies it as a country. Lý Toét's tiger represents imperial Vietnam, as symbolized by the bronze cannon on its flag. This refers to the Nine Holy Cannons (Cuu Vi Than Cong) housed at the Imperial Palace, cast by Emperor

Gia Long shortly after founding the Nguyen Dynasty. The other tigers carry flags bearing the Japanese Hinomaru, the German Nazi swastika, the Italian fasces, and the Thai white elephant. At the time, these four fascist countries were admired across Asia for its military power. Japan and Thailand were two of the remaining independent states in Asia that underwent rapid militarization in the 1930s. Italy and Germany enjoyed great prestige throughout the region, especially by Asian nationalists who looked to fascist organizational techniques for examples of nation building, technological advancement and discipline. As Burmese leader Ba Maw wrote:

We must never forget the spell that Hitler and the Axis cast over the East generally. It was almost hypnotic. The Axis leaders were believed irresistible. They would create a new world order, as they declared they would and were actually doing; and the East as a whole was longing for some kind of really new order.”<sup>70</sup>

As Nguyen Gia Tri’s cover illustrates, Vietnam can only dream of being in a league with such militaristically powerful nations, let alone stand at their helm. The fact that the boorish Lý Toét is the visual representative of the Vietnamese nation makes this dream seem even more unattainable.

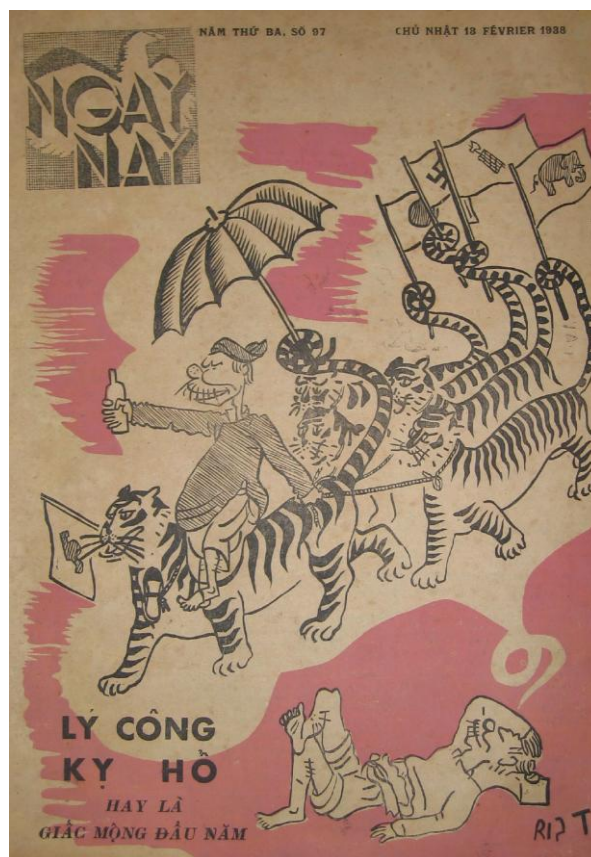


Figure 19. Cover of *Ngày Nay*, no. 97, 13 February 1938.

<sup>70</sup> Clive Christie, *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (London: Tauris, 1998), 91.

Over the years, the Lý Toét cartoons often remarked on politics, from nuanced observations on local politics to bolder statements about French colonialism. Although this theme was not as prominent as that of tradition and modernity, it nevertheless highlights the versatility of the Lý Toét character for social commentary. Descriptions by Vietnamese and western scholars that describe Lý Toét as a purely cultural or non-political character do disservice not only to the multifaceted nature of the discourse, but also to the larger humorous project of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Most of the political cartoons were produced by the Group and its collaborators, which suggest that the Group were trying to harness the popularity of Lý Toét to transform Vietnamese attitudes towards political issues and institutions. The Group's political humor encouraged its readers to develop the habits of citizenship through the critiquing of institutions; the Lý Toét cartoons can be seen as the Group's earliest and most subtle attempts at civic education. Its political cartoons exemplified the Group's belief in the transformative power of humor—first the laugh, then the lesson.

### Other Functions of Lý Toét

As described above, the Lý Toét character served not only as a forum for readers to explore the theme of tradition and modernity, but also as a political commentator. But Lý Toét's functionality did not end there—the character's versatility made it an ideal medium to discuss any issue at the forefront of public consciousness. Over the years, Lý Toét appeared in discussions of any number of topics, such as the mandarin, alcoholism, childbirth and population control, agriculture, and civilian armament.

In addition to exploring issues of importance, the Self-Reliant Literary Group also used Lý Toét for more trivial reasons—to attack their intellectual rivals and other newspapers. In some items the character served as a passive yet comic observer of these rivals, while in others Lý Toét spoke as *Phong Hóa*'s mouthpiece. For example, in a “letter” written by Ba Éch to Lý Toét (most likely written by Tú Ly), the city slicker regales his friend about his recent visit to a Chinese herbalist, who gave him a number of remedies for common ailments. Sufferers of insomnia should

take an issue of *Nam Phong*, choosing an issue that specifically discusses ‘national soul and national essence,’ remove the translated Tang poetry by Tùng Vân, and mix with colonialism. Boil into a paste and form into cakes... whenever one needs to sleep, eat one cake and see results instantly.”<sup>71</sup>

The Group often made fun of Pham Quỳnh's *Nam Phong* as “Old Lady *Nam Phong*” (*Bà Lão Nam Phong*) for its didactic tone and pretentious sensibilities. *Phong Hóa* argued that *Nam Phong* no longer held any relevance for the current generation of young intellectuals. Its discussion of “national essence and national soul,” rather than inspiring youth to action, now put them to sleep.

---

<sup>71</sup> “Từ Nhỏ Đến Nhớn” *Phong Hóa*, no. 76, 8 Dec 1933, p. 2.

To counteract the epidemic of “laughing sickness,” Ba Ếch recommends to Lý Toét this most potent remedy:

Take the three articles in which Nguyễn Tiến Lãng laments the fading of flowers, 10 lines of Trương Phó crying for her husband, six lines of Đông Hồ mourning his wife...add the “Sad Flute Song” by the Gentleman Tiêu...and grind into a powder. Then take 5 of Trần Tuấn Khải’s songs, slice thinly, and mix with 10 pages of Tô Tâm, three pages of “the Tearful Tale of Tuyết Hồng”, boil with water and mix with above powder to form capsules. If you could find a copy of “Mồ Cô Phương” or a copy of “Bé Oan” still left in any bookstore, chew raw with one capsule for added effect.<sup>72</sup>

Readers at the time would be undoubtedly familiar with the works listed, each well known for its dolorous, lamenting tone. As previously discussed, the Group detested such literature and believed that such self-indulgence undermining the spirit and enthusiasm of Vietnamese youth. Through this fictitious correspondence between Ba Ếch and Lý Toét, the Self-Reliant Literary Group advanced a number of attacks both on their intellectual rivals and the current state of Vietnamese literature. The Group chose to engage its readers through humorous means, without resorting to serious treatises or essays.

Not only did Lý Toét serve as the mouthpiece through which the Group launched attacks on their rivals, but the country bumpkin also came to visually represent *Phong Hóa* itself. This is not surprising, given Lý Toét’s position as the most well-known trope of *Phong Hóa*. The character would often stand in for the newspaper or make commentary on its behalf. In this cover of *Phong Hóa*, taken from the 12 Jan 1934 issue, Nhất Sách gave his opinion on the current state of Vietnamese journalism (Figure 20). The cartoon is set in a hospital ward, the patients representing different newspapers. Placards indicate the various “diseases” afflicting each newspaper—*Kinh Tế* (Economics) is ill with dysentery, *Đông Thanh* has a form of “ancient” disease, and Bao Tuổi Trẻ (Youth) suffers from “childhood diseases.” Some of these ailments even result in death; Rang Dong lays with its face covered on a hospital bed, while medics carry out a dead *Đông Phương* on a stretcher. The paper’s cause of death was chronic tuberculosis, referring to the Dong Phuong’s slow but gradual demise. The cartoon highlights the problems plaguing Vietnamese newspapers, namely antiquated ideas, boring content and lack of dynamism. *Phong Hóa* is represented by Lý Toét, who just arrived at the hospital carrying a suitcase with PH monogrammed on it. Lý Toét suffers from a “rash of undercooked beans”, referring to Khái Hưng’s weekly column from the newspaper. Lý Toét’s presence in the cartoon implies that *Phong Hóa* is also facing difficulties. However, the fact that Lý Toét is the only patient walking unassisted suggests that he is faring better than his counterparts. As the visual representative of *Phong Hóa* in this cartoon, Lý Toét allows the paper to insert itself into its own commentary on Vietnamese journalism.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.





Figure 21. *Phong Hóa*, no. 129, 21 Dec 1934, p. 11.

At other times, many of the cartoons would play with the tropes of the Lý Toét character. A common gag featured a thief in the process of stealing Lý Toét's precious shoes or umbrella, usually while Lý Toét is distracted. In Figure 22, Lý Toét cheers a young man climbing a greased pole, an activity reserved for lunar new year in the villages. As Lý Toét is egging the young man to reach for the shoes, a thief is cutting his own from his umbrella.



Figure 22. *Phong Hóa*, 20 July 1934, p. 1.

Others would make fun of Lý Toét's love of opium (Figure 23):

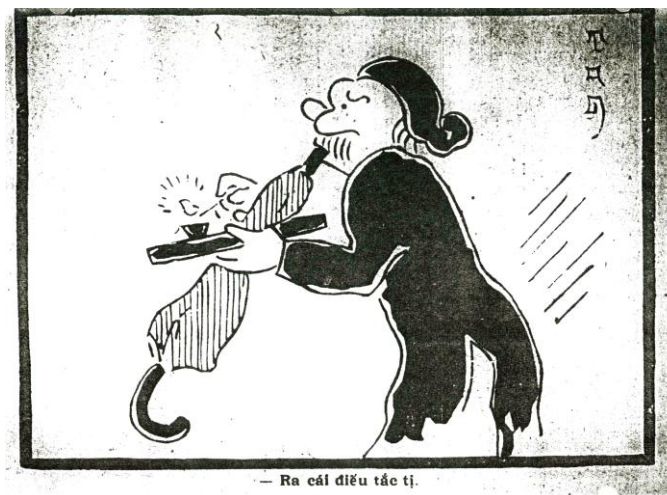


Figure 23. *Phong Hóa*, no. 114, 7 Sep 1934, p. 3.

None of these cartoons had a message or agenda, and highlights the fact that while most of Lý Toét cartoons pertained to large issues at the forefront of public consciousness, a sizeable number were meant purely for a laugh.

Vietnamese and western scholars working on the Lý Toét cartoons tend to read into them social issues of grave importance, that the humor of the cartoons must serve some larger purpose. While this was certainly the case with much of the Lý Toét discourse, it is important to remember that for the Self-Reliant Literary Group, humor was not merely the vehicle of the message, it *was* the message. The multiplicity of uses and topics suggest that the character of Lý Toét constituted a playful romp through a new modern form. Lý Toét was not the sole property of any one author or cartoonist, but a free and flexible medium used by the Group and its many readers. Thus, Lý Toét can be seen as a role adopted by the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its readers as part of the larger performance of the newspaper. As such, the Lý Toét character was not merely a tool to make a social or political point, rather it became a self-sustaining discourse, developing its own rules of engagement and emerging from topics at the forefront of public consciousness. In other words, the Group wanted their readers to participate in the Lý Toét form and derive their own conclusions. Perhaps the Group hoped that by participating in the Lý Toét discourse, young urban intellectuals were actively dispelling their own crisis of spirit. The emphasis thus, was not on the content, but the laboratory of humor that the form represented.

### The “Death” of Lý Toét

By 1940, the collective mood in Indochina had already begun to change. In Europe, the failure of Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy led to German occupation of Czechoslovakia and Poland, erupting into the Second World War. In Asia, the war in Europe and the ongoing second Sino-Japanese war and threatened to engulf Tonkin. The colonial government tightened security and censorship as supplies became increasingly scarce. Vietnamese newspapers at the time commented on the unfolding events in Europe and the region with fascination and anxiety. Perhaps trying to inject some humor into the somber political atmosphere, Nhat Linh decided to revisit the history of Lý Toét and Xã Xê in an article from the February 3, 1940 issue of *Ngày Nay*. As Nhất Linh wrote,

As the world situation becomes more and more serious, we have not kept you up to date on the activities of your favorite characters: Lý Toét, Xã Xê and Ba Éch. The pages of the journal are usually saved for Hitler and Stalin. Irked for this reason, the trio has recently sent letters to *Ngày Nay* complaining and demanding their “revered place” in the journal that they have enjoyed in the past. They have a point, and since Hitler and Stalin could not be anymore important to us, we will keep you up to date on the very important actions of these characters, beginning with this issue. To reacquaint you with them, *Ngày Nay* presents below the histories of Lý Toét, Xã Xê, and Ba Éch, characters that have joined the annals of ‘history.’<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Nhất Linh, “Lịch Sử Lý Toét.”



This history confirms many of my own findings about the origins of the Lý Toét character. Nhat Linh wrote that Lý Toét's name was established long before the readers knew what he looked like. The name first appeared in 1930 in *Tứ Dân Tạp Chí*, the brainchild of Tú Mỡ. The physical appearance of Lý Toét that *Phong Hóa* readers knew so well actually began as a doodle by Nhat Linh himself. While perusing a June 1931 issue of *Phụ Nữ* (Women's Journal), Đông Sơn "mischievously drew a picture of a country bumpkin and thought his face looked kind of neat." Nhat Linh tore the picture out and kept it, not knowing what he wanted to do with it. In Đông Sơn's first sketch (Figure 24), Lý Toét looks much younger, but all the identifying tropes are present: umbrella, shoes, tunic, turban and bun.



Figure 24. Nhat Linh's first sketch of Lý Toét, reprinted in *Ngày Nay*, no. 198, February 3, 1940.

Nhat Linh wrote that the picture of Lý Toét appeared in the Funnies heading from the very first issue, albeit without a name.<sup>74</sup> The history also verified my finding that the first mention of Lý Toét (in name and in image) was in a short story by Tú Ly called *Phong Hóa Fair*. As mentioned before, the article had drawings of Lý Toét and Ba Éch embedded in the text. Finally, the history confirms my claim that the first official comic of Lý Toét that includes both name and physical appearance was published in May 26, 1933. Nhat Linh summed up, "Lý Toét was born in the years 1930-1931, had rheumy red eyes since birth. . . almost dies many times, tried to commit suicide once, actually died once already, and is now about to go to France."<sup>75</sup>

Although Hanoi offered Lý Toét no small number of encounters with modern technology, it still remained a colonial city, incompletely and unevenly touched by modern forces. In 1940, Lý Toét had the opportunity to visit the place that loomed largest in the Vietnamese imagination—France. In the February 2, 1940 issue of *Ngày Nay*, Nhat Linh (as Đông Sơn) penned a large cartoon titled, "Lý Toét Goes to France" (Figure 25).

<sup>74</sup> My findings show that the drawing did not debut until the second Nhat Linh issue.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



Figure 25. *Ngày Nay*, no. 198, 3 February 1940.

As the cartoonist commented,

Lý Toét has decided to travel to Europe to understand all about Western civilization. Xã Xệ, Mrs. Lý, and Miss Ba Vành tried their best to dissuade him, but to no avail. Lý Toét says, ‘People say that I am simpleminded and backward. I am that way because all I do is stay at home with my wife... So I am going to go for a couple of years, and I don’t even know if I will return.’ (Personally, I hope Lý Toét goes and never comes back.)<sup>76</sup>

The rest of the cartoon depicts Lý Toét in the process of packing, which provided Nhất Linh with a chance to revisit classic Lý Toét cartoons from previous years. Among the things Lý Toét decides to pack are: a hairbrush (for brushing his teeth), his pants (a pullover turned upside down), and his opium pipe (despite the difficulty of procuring opium in France). While Lý Toét sailed to France, Nhất Linh invited readers “who have seen Lý Toét to please let us know so we can keep other readers posted.” Unfortunately, by 1940 the élan with which readers responded to previous calls for contributions must have diminished, as *Ngày Nay* never followed up on Lý Toét’s trip to France. To the best of my knowledge, the last Lý Toét cartoon under Nhất Linh’s editorship appeared on September 7, 1940. Lý Toét continued to appear in later newspapers, such as the short-lived *Chủ Nhật Tuần Báo* and 1944 revival of *Ngày Nay*, but the character seemed outmoded, a cultural icon of a bygone era.

<sup>76</sup> Đông Sơn, “Lý Toét Đi Tây” *Ngày Nay*, no. 198, 3 Feb 1940, p. 34.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues that the humor exhibited in *Phong Hóa* did not merely serve as an instrument toward social reform; it involved an entirely new way of being and seeing that was thoroughly modern. As described in the previous pages, the Lý Toét character can be seen as a “laboratory” of humor, set up by the Self-Reliant Literary Group where readers can experiment with a new modern form and participate in the performance of the newspaper. In the fun and hilarity of the Lý Toét cartoons, did Vietnamese readers internalize the modern sensibilities—skepticism, self-awareness, and independence—inherent in a sense of humor? How successful were readers in seeing their own lessons in the cartoons?

The answer may lie in the cartoons themselves. As argued in this chapter, the Lý Toét cartoons in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* were not a simple discourse, but a multilayered one that reflected the complex encounter of Vietnamese with modern life. Incidentally, the Lý Toét discourse can also be read as a larger conversation between the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its readers. By separating the items produced by the Group and those from readers, I described how differing treatment of the Lý Toét character emerged. As evidenced by the interactions between Lý Toét and Ba Éch, which were almost exclusively produced by Group members and their collaborators, the Group wanted young urban intellectuals to engage with their rural counterparts. Western-educated youths should not scorn the peasantry, but come to some level of mutual sympathy. Thus, while the Group’s version of Lý Toét was indeed backward and uncivilized, he was nevertheless lovable and deserving of compassion. Readers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly stuck to Lý Toét’s most recognizable routine—that of a country bumpkin in the city. While readers expanded the narrative elements of the Lý Toét discourse—fleshing out other characters, scenarios, etc—they hardly developed the character itself. The popularity of Xã Xê over Ba Éch implied that readers preferred to watch the hijinks of peasants amongst themselves rather than the imagined encounter between tradition and modernity. This suggests that the cultural gap between young urban intellectuals, those most likely to read *Phong Hóa*, and the peasantry still remained unbreached.

While readers were generally more preoccupied with the cultural questions of tradition and modernity, the Self-Reliant Literary Group directly dealt with the salient issues of the day. Group members and their collaborators took full advantage of the Lý Toét’s versatility, using the character to discuss international and local politics, attack their rivals, and comment on the state of Vietnamese journalism. The Group’s introduction of the Ba Éch character and its subsequent rejection suggests that readers did not see the lessons the Group had intended. The Group acknowledged this risk early on and perhaps as a result, it increasingly turned to more overt messages in later years. Although humor never disappeared from the Group’s journalism, it was gradually eclipsed by more impassioned and serious social discourses.

Nevertheless, the Group’s early reform project sought to develop a readership with a modern sense of humor. *Phong Hóa* kept its readers on their toes by not delineating where humorous and serious discourse stopped and started. In this sense, the Group’s joke column and antiphrastic irony had the same goal—by creating a community of skeptical thinkers that will form the foundation of an informed citizenship. Irony can create a sense of community among

those with the inside know-how to decipher it, in the same way that trading jokes required participants to be familiar with the genre's conventions. *Phong Hóa*'s ideal reader rejected absolutist morality and ideologies, examined issues from multiple perspectives, and engaged the world thoughtfully. In *Phong Hóa*'s earliest issues, Phan Khôi drew a link between those with a sense of humor and intellectual independence:

...they do not view power as anything, and all of life is a jest... That independence of mind, that autonomous sense of purpose, among those who read books, among the great figures, how many people have it?<sup>77</sup>

It is this independence of mind, the deep interiority and skepticism at the heart of the modern self that *Phong Hóa* invited their readers to espouse. The ability to weather the social and cultural upheavals in Vietnamese society was embodied not in defeatist pessimism, but a flexible and optimistic sense of humor. And for the newspaper, the first step to this was the simple act of laughing at oneself.

---

<sup>77</sup> Phan Khôi, "Cái Địa Vị Khôi Hài," 8.

## CHAPTER 4

---

# Reform vs. Revolution: The Self-Reliant Literary Group, Colonial Republicanism, and the Politics of the Center Left

### Introduction

As arguably the most influential group of intellectuals in 1930s Tonkin, the Self-Reliant Literary Group have received widespread historiographical treatment through the years, but perhaps the most pervasive characterization of the Group remains that it was made up of bourgeois romantic intellectuals who advanced a predominantly cultural reform program. Trường Chinh wrote in his influential 1958 essay, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*:

The bourgeois class was afraid of political and military confrontation with the imperialists and switched to fighting the feudal mandarin state with cultural weapons, (through the columns of the magazines *Phong Hóa*, *Ngày Nay* and the publications of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn).<sup>1</sup>

Literary historians would later echo Trường Chinh's analysis. Trần Đình Huợu argued that the Group's "reform project advocated personal liberation as well as some social reform but without calling for political or economic revolution...when they jumped into political activity, they wandered into wrong, counterrevolutionary ways."<sup>2</sup> Phan Cự Đệ described the Group's project as a "cultural struggle for personal freedoms, opposing feudalism and aristocracy, modernizing of literature and bourgeois reform." Although from time to time, Vietnamese historians would allow the Group such descriptions as "progressive" or even "radical," they nevertheless reflect the starkly polarized, traditional left debate of reform vs. revolution. This historiography privileges the patriotic Communist revolutionaries who fight for the political overthrow of colonialism over intellectuals (such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group) who advocate social or cultural reform within the system.

Western language scholarship reflects these same biases, having often described the Group and its journals *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* as being apolitical in nature. Alexander Woodside was more generous than his Vietnamese counterparts, going so far as to call the Group's project a "social revolution," but one that did not "[consider] very closely the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Marxism and Vietnamese Culture," in Trường Chinh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1977), 253.

<sup>2</sup> In Hà Minh Đức, *Tự lực văn đoàn: trào lưu-tác giả: khảo luận và tuyển chọn bài viết về Tự lực văn đoàn* ([Hanoi?]: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2007), 48.

relationship between such a revolution and political power...”<sup>3</sup> Greg Lockhart described *Ngày Nay* as a “gentle journal partly founded on Paris Match,” a description often echoed by Vietnamese scholars and western scholars like David Marr.<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Văn Ký wrote about the Group: “Because they could not carry out a political revolution, they set their sights on profound reforms regarding modes of thinking, behavior and beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> This scholarship also makes a distinction between the Group’s privileging of “soft” social reform rather than “hard” political revolution.

Descriptions from both Vietnamese and Western language scholars point toward a narrow definition of what constitutes “politics” and “political discourse” in studies of Vietnamese history. They reflect the Marxist-Leninist historiographical privileging of revolution and nationalism as the yardstick for political history, as well as the historical bias against the Self-Reliant Literary Group because of Nguyễn Tường Tam’s fall from political grace in 1947. Contrary to Woodside’s assessment, the Group’s emphasis on social revolution did not detract from, but rather served as the means to, its ultimate goal of political empowerment. By claiming that *Ngày Nay* found its inspiration in a lifestyle and celebrity magazine (an anachronism to boot, Paris Match in its current incarnation was not even launched until 1949), Lockhart and Marr echoed the tendency of Vietnamese Marxist historians to purposefully disregard the explicitly political nature of the paper by emphasizing its social and cultural content. Nguyễn Văn Ký’s description, as well as those advanced by Vietnamese scholars, needlessly and artificially separated the Group’s politics from their reforms, and relegated their cultural activities to a secondary project because political action was not an option. Such descriptions do disservice to the overtly political nature of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and their journals. *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* were indeed political publications, but not in the way that these scholars anticipated.<sup>6</sup>

Vietnamese and western-language scholars, in their search for overt declarations of anticolonial sentiments or direct references to violent revolution, would find themselves disappointed. However, one only has to read barely below the surface to discover a wealth of political discourse. *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* often remarked on politics at all levels, including municipal, regional, national and global developments. A close examination of this understated commentary would yield illuminating insight into the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s political views and agenda. While trying to remain relatively apolitical on larger questions of colonialism (not surprising considering the strict censorship regime), the Group often clearly hinted at where their political sympathies lie. In fact, politics permeated the Group’s entire social and cultural agenda. Even while arguing for housing reform, transforming women’s dress, and building a publishing business, politics was never far from the minds of Group members.

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Lockhart, Introduction to “Broken Journey: Nhất Linh’s ‘Going to France’”, *East Asian History* 8 (December 1994), 93. David G. Marr, “The Passion for Modernity: Intellectuals and the Media,” in Hy Van Luong, *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 263.

<sup>5</sup> Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon, p 34, 37. Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký. *Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon*. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 34, 37.

<sup>6</sup> The only instance in the historiography when the Group’s journals were described as overtly political came from a Saigon publication published in 1959. Writer Ha Xuan Liem wrote that during the late 1930s, “we saw many newspapers with open political messages, supporting ideologies and parties, and focusing on society. *Ngày Nay* was one such example.” Such a statement hints at differences in historical interpretation over the Self-Reliant Literary Group between the Communist north and the Southern republic during the war. From “Lược sử báo chí Việt Nam,” *Lành Mạnh*, no. 32, 1 May 1959, p. 12.

This chapter attempts to complicate the reform vs. revolution dichotomy dominant in Vietnamese historiography by not only showing that the Self-Reliant Literary Group had political aims, but also that those aims were far more substantive and radical than previously described. I argue that the political aims of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were to achieve republican ideals through the politics of the center left. The Group's political project can be seen as the synthesis of classical French republican values of democracy and freedom with the moderate socialist objectives of decreasing social inequalities and promoting social cohesion through participation in the state. The Self-Reliant Literary Group did not necessarily believe in the overthrow of colonialism (at least not at this point), and in fact rejected the idea of a progressive, violent revolution. Rather, the Group demanded that the French to live up to the ideals they so forcefully proclaimed by granting the people of Tonkin a number of political and legal rights and reforms.

This chapter tells a story of the moderate mainstream left, one that has been long eclipsed or subsumed in the historiography by the more radical strains of Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism and Trotskyism. History favors the victor, and in this case, Vietnamese history has been told vis-à-vis the eventual triumph of Marxism-Leninism over its rival ideologies or political factions. Despite the historiographical telos of communism, its victory, even as late as 1939, was by no means assured. A reading of colonial newspapers in this period reveals that at this point, communists were seen as fringe or marginal in the eyes of these more mainstream intellectuals, many themselves sympathetic to leftist political ideas. While the ideological differences between the Trotskyist Southern intellectuals and the Stalinist ICP have already been clearly described by scholars, I hope that this chapter will illuminate and create finer distinctions between factions of Vietnamese leftists of the period. Hue Tam Ho-Tai's description of the Group as "progressives" is more accurate, but even this terminology is not exact enough to describe the Group's political project.<sup>7</sup>

To better clarify the argument of this chapter, a few definitions are in order. Republicanism, especially as borne out in France, has always been a multifaceted and elastic political idea. The ideal of the republic and what it represents fluctuated in meaning through the decades and centuries, as evidenced by the fact that thinkers from all over the political spectrum have considered themselves upholders of the same tradition. Sudhir Hazareesingh argued that despite its changes in meaning, republicanism has always upheld a set of five core values:

it established the principle of popular sovereignty (and specifically linked its application to the exercise of critical reason), affirmed both the possibility and desirability of constructing a rational political order, emphasized the universality of the principles and values created by this new political order, projected a new construction of patriotism and nationalism, and finally, highlighted the notion that political structures could be used to promote greater equality and (of outcome) and social justice.<sup>8</sup>

As Hazareesingh pointed out, these five republican principles of popular sovereignty, rationality, universality, patriotism, and belief in political structures should not be necessarily taken as ideological absolutes. Throughout French history, they were often at odds with the realities of running a republic. Depending on the context, French republicans often had to

---

<sup>7</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 249-250.

<sup>8</sup> Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Sudhir. Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68.

balance their republican values with the practical need for political survival, working through these internal inconsistencies by managing conflicting goals. As Hazareesingh wrote,

Republicanism was not a rigid ideological construct; its real essence lay in its capacity to accommodate different political groups on the basis of an appeal to a limited range of common interests. These common interests were derived from the bedrock of republican principles...but their specific interpretation was almost always open to bargains and compromises.<sup>9</sup>

One such compromise was over the issue of colonialism. While colonialism was perhaps inconsistent with the republican project, nevertheless, survival of the republic itself superseded any moral objection. Furthermore, the idea of France's civilizing mission gave further justification and rationalization to the colonial project by giving economic exploitation a benevolent veneer.

Borrowing this yardstick from Hazareesingh, one can see these various republican principles in the intellectual, cultural, and social activities of the Self-Reliant Literary Group; the Group's coverage of the Chamber of Representatives illustrate its commitment to popular sovereignty and its expression in political structures; its campaigns against superstition and championing of science highlights their faith in a rational, secular political order; its patriotism is manifest on its insistence on writing in quốc ngữ and its desire to create a modern Vietnamese national literature; and finally, its desire to improve the conditions of women and peasants emphasizes its belief in the universality of democratic ideals.

But to describe the Self-Reliant Literary Group as colonial adherents to French Republicanism is still too general. Because republicanism is a large encompassing concept, it would be more helpful to describe in greater detail what kind of republicans they were. I maintain that within the larger category of colonial republicanism, the Self-Reliant Literary Group espoused a brand of moderate mainstream socialism that most closely aligned with French social democracy. In its writings, the Group rejected the passivity and economic determinism characteristic of orthodox Marxism and believed that political forces must prevail over economics. They thus came to champion a kind of "third way" between laissez-faire capitalism and Soviet communism and advocated using the power of the state to tame the capitalist system. Although social democracy did not emerge as a political force until after the Second World War, its ideology, according to Sheri Berman, was already fully developed by the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Avid readers of French newspapers and keen observers of political development in the metropole, the Self-Reliant Literary Group would have arguably been aware of the debates consuming the French left through the years. Although no evidence exists that any of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were members of the Tonkin branch of the Socialist Party (*Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*, or SFIO), their writings in *Ngày Nay* indicate that they were, at the very least, sympathetic to its program.<sup>11</sup>

Of the Self-Reliant Literary Group members, Hoàng Đạo contributed most prolifically to formulating the Group's political ideology. Sometimes using the pseudonym Tú Ly or Tú Linh, Hoàng Đạo would pen editorial commentaries on local and national news, theoretical essays on various ideologies, and analytical articles on aspects of colonial policy. He had a

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Although this will not be discussed in this chapter (but will be in the next), the Group also espoused attitudes of antimilitarism, a stance that was in line with moderate socialists; it was precisely the issue of pacifism over the Spanish Civil War that split the French socialists in the 1930s.



penchant for writing serialized educational articles on politics; for example, one in 1939 dealt with various forms of governance, while another from 1940 explained the basics of “Citizen’s Education” [Công Dân Giáo Dục].<sup>12</sup> After Hoàng Đạo, Khải Hưng (who also wrote as Nhị Linh) would also play a role in articulating the Group’s political outlook, despite his reputation as the most “romantic” member of the Group. His *Ngày Nay* column “The Story of the Week” [Câu Truyện Hàng Tuần] would comment on politics at all levels.<sup>13</sup> Other members such as Thạch Lam and Thế Lữ would occasionally comment on politics, but never enough to discern their individual political sympathies. Although he would become the most politically active of the Group in the post-1945 period, Nhất Linh contributed little to the political conversations in the 1930s. During the period of 1936-1940, the Group’s most politically interested period, Nhất Linh was mostly preoccupied with the League of Light.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that Hoàng Đạo wrote most of the political essays and commentary, it would not be farfetched to say that his political ideas represented those of the Group in general. While the goal remains identifying the collective politics of the Group, I will point out differences in opinion amongst group members as they arise.

This chapter will outline the major tenets of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s political project in two main sections. The first section deals with the Group’s republican tendencies, focusing on their demands for institutional reform, colonialism and legal reform, and rejection of monarchy. The second section focuses on the Group’s moderate leftist leanings, touching on the Group’s sympathies with the French Socialist Party, its particular interest in the figure of Jean Jaures, and its views on capitalism and labor.

### Colonial Republicanism

The Group’s calls for political reform spanned its entire eight-year journalistic career, from the early issues of *Phong Hóa* under Nguyễn Tường Tam’s editorship to the final closure of *Ngày Nay* in 1940. In *Phong Hóa*, the Group’s subtle and understated political message focused on ways of building an informed readership. In *Ngày Nay*, the Group’s demands for political reform became more strident, demanding legal and institutional changes outright. This section touches on several aspects of the Group’s republican politics: first, its enthusiasm for representative democratic institutions, its views on colonialism and legal reforms, its belief in personal freedoms, and finally, its complete rejection of monarchy.

#### *Institutional Reform and the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives*

The earliest and most sustained discussion on politics surrounded the Tonkinese Chamber of the People’s Representatives [Chambre de Représentants du Peuple, or Nghị Viện Dân Bieu], the protectorate’s indigenous elected consultative assembly.<sup>15</sup> The colonial

<sup>12</sup> *Ngày Nay* no. 99, 27 Feb 1938, p. 3 and *Ngày Nay* no. 194, 30 Dec 1939, p. 15 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Khải Hưng’s column began in *Ngày Nay* no. 97, 13 Feb 1938, and ran until a week before the start of World War II, *Ngày Nay* no. 177, 2 Sept 1939. Save for this column, Khải Hưng’s writing rarely ever mentioned politics.

<sup>14</sup> Memoirs of the period, such as Nguyễn Tường Bách and Nguyễn Thị Thê, would claim that Nhất Linh was engaged in clandestine politics at the time.

<sup>15</sup> Created by Governor General Paul Bert in 1886, the institution underwent a number of transformations in the decades before the 1930s. Originally named the Indigenous Consultative Chamber [Chambre Consultative Indigène], it was renamed the Consultative Commission of Indigenous Notables [Commission Consultative des Notables Indigène] in 1908 by Governor General Antony Klobukowski. As the

government convened the Chamber once a year in autumn, usually to discuss budgetary matters. Coinciding with this meeting, the Self-Reliant Literary Group published an annual special issue (or sometimes a series) dedicated to the Chamber. After its special Tet issue, coverage of the Chamber remained the longest-running yearly feature in the Group's journals, spanning both *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* from 1932 until 1938. The issue enticed its readers with both straightforward news and scintillating insider tittle-tattle: "Reports, interviews, and analysis of the chamber and its members. How the representatives work. Scheming and plotting by various members. The secret negotiations in the battle for Chamber President."<sup>16</sup> During the early *Phong Hóa* years, the Group used its unique brand of humor to lampoon the chamber; the issues almost always included a tongue-in-cheek reportage piece about the Chamber's proceedings and election of the head committee, cartoons about various representatives, as well as irreverent poems and articles. The Group intended for its coverage to serve two main purposes: first, to inform readers of the inner workings of their government, and second, to serve as a whistleblower to expose the ineffectuality of the chamber and its members.

1932 marked the first year journalists were allowed to attend the annual sessions of the Chamber, and the reporters at *Phong Hóa* took full advantage of this new access.<sup>17</sup> Every special issue included a humorous reportage of the chamber's minutes, describing carefully the dynamics of the meetings in painstaking detail. Without fail, the accounts depicted lethargic scenes of apathetic representatives participating halfheartedly in the political proceedings. For example, Tú Ly wrote about the 1933 session:

The scene at the Chamber's meeting this year is as silent and drowsy as the autumn day on which it began. 8 AM: In the spacious meeting room the representatives sat in clumps of three and five, gossiping in whispers. A few bored journalists sat listlessly at a table covered in green cloth. Even at this hour, a few of the representatives have not yet arrived, as many believe that tardiness is the height of politeness for the elite classes. And it is true—those that come late are always the 'fat cats' [tai to mặt lớn].<sup>18</sup>

---

names implied, these early incarnations were meant to serve in a purely consultative capacity and given no legislative powers. The Varenne reforms of the 1920s expanded the chamber's powers, changed its name to the "Chamber of the People's Representatives," and established its counterpart in Annam. Its new role was to provide the indigenous population with a representative body, and advise the government on budgetary, economic, and social matters. The chamber itself was divided into government-appointed and elected officials. The colonial government, through the resident superior, would appoint roughly one-fourth of the chamber; the remaining three-quarters were divided into Commercial and the People's Representatives. Serving a constituency of 30,000-40,000, People's Representatives were elected by a group of taxpayers comprising village or city notables, functionaries, and degree holders. Commercial Representatives served trade interests and were chosen by a group of licensed business owners. Despite the democratic implications of its name, the chamber held little influence and no power. After the Varenne reforms, the colonial government quickly moved to limit the chamber's powers to write, propose, or pass laws. Representatives could only communicate requests to the colonial government so long as they were of a nonpolitical nature. Statutes merely required the government to consult the chamber once a year regarding the budget. This yearly meeting took place every autumn for eight days, when its members would elect a head committee consisting of a President, Vice-President, and a Secretary. "Lịch Sử," insert in *Ngày Nay* #128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 5; Truong Buu Lâm, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan, 2000), 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sept 1938, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Phong Hóa* commented that "This year, journalists have the right to attend the Chamber's sessions. More like they have the right to yawn... They came, they listened, they yawned, and they fell asleep—no one noticed." "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 22, 18 Nov 1932, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Việt Sinh, "Lại đi xem bầu nghị trường," *Phong Hóa* no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 2.

Once the opening formalities—flag salute, greeting by chamber president, speech by the French resident superior—were over, the representatives finally sat down to discuss the pressing issues of the day. As Tú Ly described, the depressing scene did not improve: “After a few moments, we already saw a few of the representatives yawn, at least four of them shaking their legs in sync out of boredom, while others had already removed their shoes and hoisted their bare feet up onto their chairs.”<sup>19</sup> Dong Son (pseudonym for cartoons used by Nhất Linh) provided an illustration of this behavior, titled “Scenes often seen by Dong Son” [Figure 1]:

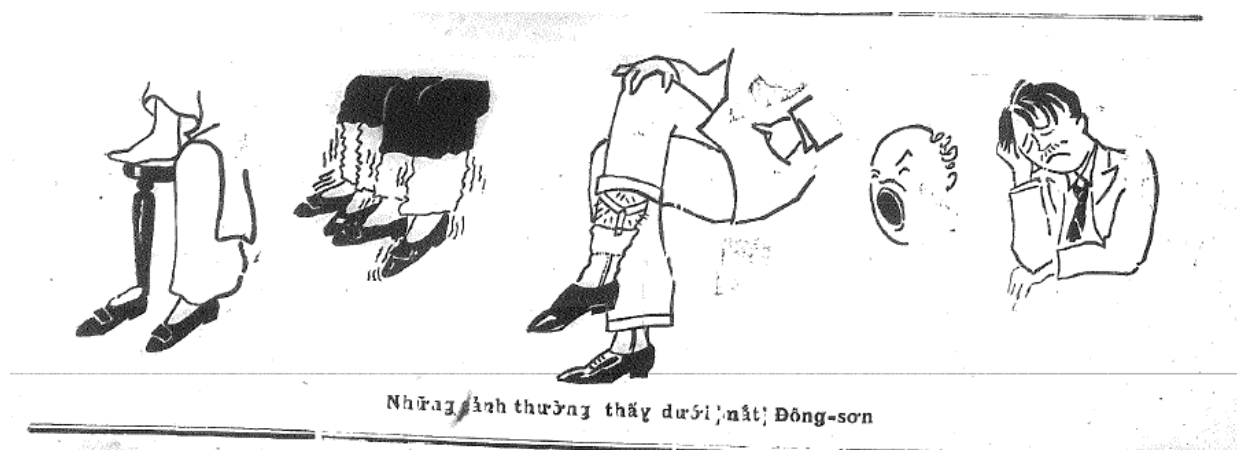


Figure 1. Cartoon from *Phong Hóa*, no. 22, 18 Nov 1932, p. 3.

up of unenthusiastic, arrogant, bored and bad-mannered individuals. Once drawn in by the funny articles and cartoons, readers could explore the more serious issues that lay beneath them. Along with its humorous content, *Phong Hóa* would often sneak in transcripts or outlined summaries of the important speeches made by the Resident Superior or other members of the Chamber. As the paper often pointed out, humor made the truth easier to swallow.

The reportages provided detailed information about each representative, including which clique he belonged to, who his rivals were, as well as caricatured images of how they looked. Quite often, the paper would also include cartoons that identified all the representatives serving in the chamber [Figure 2]:

<sup>19</sup> “Đi xem bầu nghị trường,” *Phong Hóa* no. 22, 18 Nov 1932, p. 3.

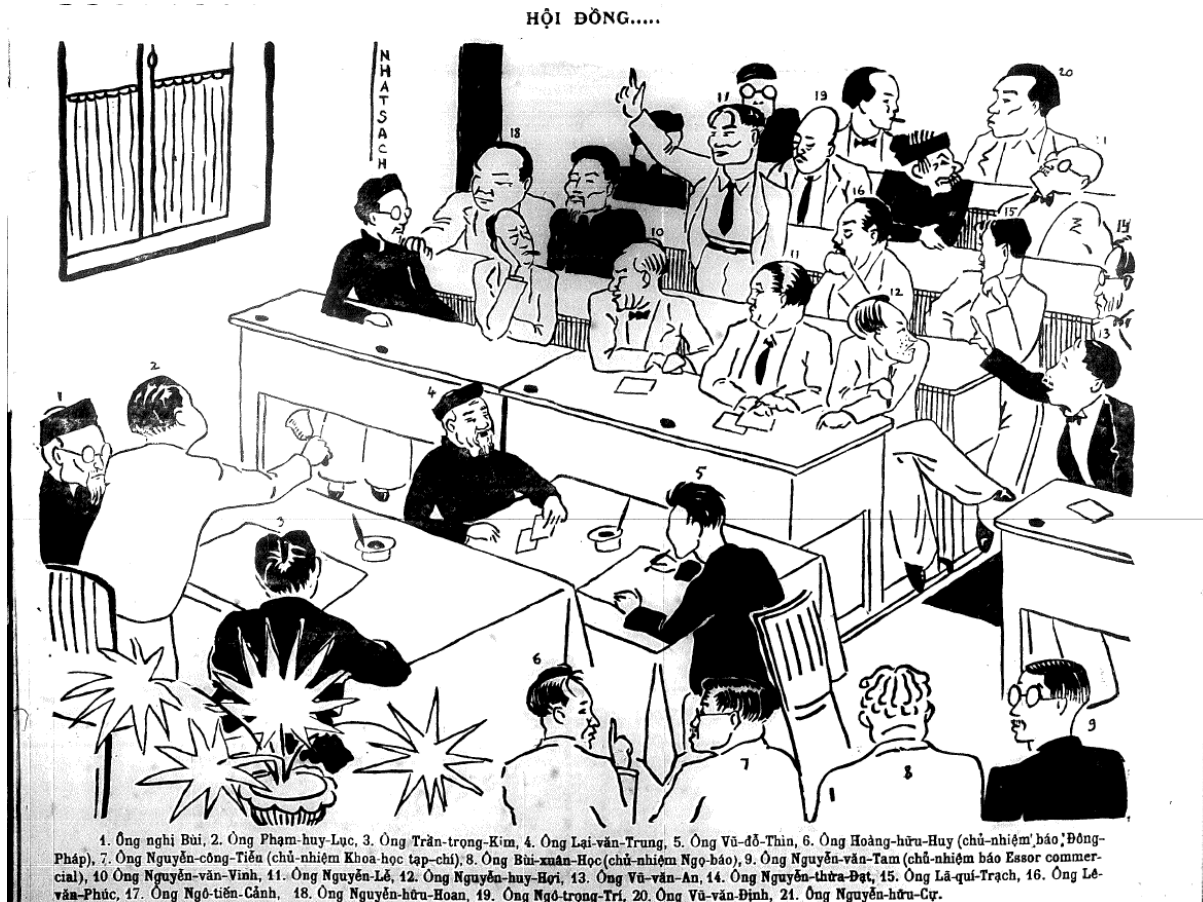


Figure 2. Cartoon from *Phong Hóa* no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 1.

Readers of *Phong Hóa* would immediately recognize Lý Toét sitting among the representatives. His appearance not only hinted at the presence of the traditional mandarin in the proceedings, but also at *Phong Hóa's* low opinion of the Chamber. More importantly, however, this cartoon provided the means for readers to put faces to names, creating a visual language with which *Phong Hóa* could easily communicate with its readers in the future. For example, readers could later easily recognize Nguyễn Huy Hội's freckles (#12), the bags under Le Văn Phúc's eyes (#16), and Ngô Trọng Trí's egg-shaped head (#19) in *Phong Hóa's* future caricatures and cartoons. The immediacy of knowing what these officials looked like made the chamber's political proceedings seem less removed, inviting readers to know exactly what was happening in their representative body. To further encourage Vietnamese to follow the events of the chamber, *Phong Hóa* launched a "Chamber of Representatives Contest" in 1933. Readers would send in their votes in a kind of mock election, which meant that they had to be somewhat knowledgeable of their local government. As most Hanoians were not eligible to vote, the contest served as a way for readers to both engage with the political process and voice their opinion. To its readers eligible to vote, the paper made a direct appeal:

Now is not the time for hesitation, for apathy.  
 Now is not the time for money to defeat talent.  
 Now is not the time for the old to vanquish the new.  
 Now is not the time for those who yawn and fall asleep to replace the active and

strong.

Vote for a serious and thoughtful candidate, then vote for a hundred more. Only then would we have a Chamber worthy of our respect.<sup>20</sup>

Through such detailed and humorous coverage, *Phong Hóa* invited its readers to be entertained while keeping informed on their government. Each special issue promised an in-depth look into the internal workings of the Chamber, so that readers “*know* how the representatives are working and *observe* the actions of the chamber.”<sup>21</sup>

Not only did the Self-Reliant Literary Group want to inform and entertain its readership, but it also served as a public whistleblower by exposing the ineffectiveness and corruption within the Chamber. The writers at *Phong Hóa* could scarcely contain their scorn for what they perceived as the pomposity, laziness, and incompetence of the representatives. *Phong Hóa* would often single out and shame representatives by name, calling them to task. Once, the paper noted that Nguyen Van Vinh had ducked out early from the meetings, commenting that “Mr. Vinh was not tired or bored, but that his Calendar-Almanac [niên lịch thông thư] told him it was an inauspicious time to work.”<sup>22</sup> *Phong Hóa* made fun of Lê Văn Phúc for his subservient politeness, telling him to “have a backbone when you’re in the chamber!”<sup>23</sup> The paper lambasted conservative mandarin Lai Văn Trung for remaining quiet and not contributing to discussions, commenting that he was “following the example of his most venerated Confucius.”<sup>24</sup> In another instance, *Phong Hóa* castigated two representatives from Phú Thọ when they gave conflicting facts about the head tax in their own province: “You don’t even know the policies of your own province! How could you discuss other important issues with any mastery? You’d better go and learn the taxation policies of your area.”<sup>25</sup> Along with laziness and incompetence, the Group abhorred pomposity and grandstanding, reserving its most sustained criticism for showboating representatives, in particular the chamber president Phạm Huy Lục.<sup>26</sup> The paper often poked fun of Lục’s dramatic avowals of patriotism and selflessness, once describing scene in which he “beat his chest with conviction and pledged his heart to the chamber and the nation. He pounded his chest so hard, we were afraid he would hurt himself...”<sup>27</sup> Such humor suggests that the Group wanted to hold the representatives accountable for their actions (or lack thereof) in the public forum.<sup>28</sup> As the Group boldly stated, “The representatives will answer to us.”<sup>29</sup> The special issues suggest that the Group had truly wanted the Chamber to be a viable, functional representative body, and that its intention was to inculcate the habits and practices of engaged citizenship in its readers.

In its coverage, *Phong Hóa* also described and analyzed a number of reasons for the chamber’s sad state of affairs, pointing to larger schisms within the chamber’s internal group

<sup>20</sup> Announcement in *Phong Hóa* no. 38, 17 Mar 1933, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 127. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> The idea that a rational and modern individual such as Nguyen Van Vinh would publish a book used for divination and fortunetelling seemed absurd to the Group, and they criticized him mercilessly in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* for it.

<sup>23</sup> “Từ nhỏ đến nhớn,” *Phong Hóa* no. 22, 18 Nov 1932, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Tứ Ly, “Từ cao đến thấp,” *Phong Hóa* no. 69, 20 Oct 1933, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Phạm Huy Lục was editor of *Annam Nouveau*, *Trung Bac Tan Van*, owner of *Ha Thanh An Quan*, member of SFIO, as well as close friend and right hand man of Nguyen Van Vinh.

<sup>27</sup> “Tu Nho Den Nhon,” *Phong Hóa* no. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Phong Hóa* also gave credit in the rare instance when it was due. In 1933, the paper praised the representatives for asking the government to give to charity money that would have funded a movie night at the local cinema. “Từ cao đến thấp,” *Phong Hóa* no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 127.

dynamics. The Vietnamese in Tonkin did not enjoy the right to form political parties, thus the Chamber of Representatives was not divided along political and ideological lines like other European parliaments. Rather, it reflected the social and cultural differences of its members. When representative Nguyễn Công Tiễn lamented the lack of organized groups in the Chamber, Tứ Ly sarcastically corrected him that the chamber did in fact have them: those that wear medallions and those that do not, those that wear western clothing and those in traditional tunics, as well as the young, the old, and the middle age. Not only that, Tứ Ly continued, the Chamber even modeled itself on representative bodies in Europe: “We have leftist groups: people who sit in the chairs on the left. We also have rightist groups: people who sit in chairs on the right. And centrist groups: those who walk down the central aisle...”<sup>30</sup> Underlying Tứ Ly’s humor was the critique that the Vietnamese chamber merely aped western democratic practices without espousing the substantive meaning behind them. In European parliaments, the tradition of sitting on the left and right signified important and deep ideological differences, representing diametrically conflicting worldviews and bitter disputes over the role of society, economy, and the state. The Group implied that the Tonkinese Chamber lacked this sense of ideological and political difference that would not only set opposing groups apart but also encouraged cohesion from within. Without clear political or ideological divisions, members of the Chamber would disintegrate into petty factionalism and venality. And judging from *Phong Hóa*’s criticism of the Chamber, this is what the paper believed to have happened.

*Phong Hóa* described the Chamber as being internally divided along a number of fissures, predominantly reflecting the social and cultural gulfs between traditional village elders and modern urban elites. Keeping with the Group’s belief that outward appearances reflect the interior, this schism can be observed even at the most superficial of levels—clothing. As Việt Sinh wrote, “According to clothing, we can divide the Chamber into two groups: those that wear western clothes and those that wear traditional clothes... Those in western clothes sits on the left, those in traditional clothes on the right... Thus, appearances also reflect spirit.”<sup>31</sup> Visually signified by clothing, the clash between tradition and modern factions of the chamber is more profoundly manifest in such differences as education, language, and generation. The “traditional” faction of the chamber was usually made up of elderly men educated in the Confucian classics, usually a member of the mandarin class from the countryside. The “modern” camp was composed of middle-aged urban notables, usually business owners or bureaucrats primarily educated in French. As the Group lamented, these wide social and cultural differences did not necessarily translate into opposing political programs that generated debate in the Chamber. Rather, the Group viewed both factions as equally deplorable, each having its own unique set of problems and faults.

Although the writers at *Phong Hóa* would have identified themselves more closely with the modern, western-educated representatives in the chamber, they nevertheless criticized it for being the most corrupt. *Phong Hóa* bemoaned their selfish motivations, absence of political vision and lack of respect for their constituencies. In one instance, Tứ Ly accused them of petty scheming and nepotism:

Speaking to the representatives from Hanoi, I wanted to know their ideas and plan of action. But depressingly, it seems that all of the urban candidates run for public office for one reason only—to form cliques. Are these cliques actual political parties? (What do these people even know of politics, anyway?) They form cliques to jockey for personal gain. They form a large group to elect one of their own as President of

<sup>30</sup> Tứ Ly, “Đảng Phái,” *Phong Hóa* no. 121, 26 Oct 1934, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Việt Sinh, “Lại đi xem bầu nghị trường,” 2.

the Chamber. Then the president would distribute positions of power amongst his cronies. For them, it is as easy as cake. Although an election is always held, the clique would always vote for the person nominated by the President. Each position would bring with it a salary of over 100 piasters a month.<sup>32</sup>

*Phong Hóa*'s coverage would describe the various cliques, their power struggles and underhanded tactics in great detail. For most of the 1930s, the most dominant group was controlled by chamber president Phạm Huy Lục. The editor of *Annam Nouveau* and *Trung Bắc Tân Văn*, as well as the owner of Hà Thành Ấn Quán, Lục was the close associate and right hand man of Nguyen Van Vinh. As *Phong Hóa* described, "Mr. Vinh is the first Mr. Lục, and Mr. Lục is the second Mr. Vinh."<sup>33</sup> Vinh's support and patronage gave his protégé a stranglehold on the chamber; Lục established an extensive political clique that consistently reelected him year after year, from 1931 to 1938.<sup>34</sup> Over the years, rival cliques would arise to take on Phạm Huy Lục's dominance; describing these political skirmishes became a mainstay of the annual special issue.

In 1934, *Phong Hóa* excitedly reported such a challenge to the Vinh-Lục clique. After enjoying two uncontested years as chamber president, the middle-aged Phạm Huy Lục faced Hà Văn Bình, a young schoolteacher from Hanoi. *Phong Hóa* depicted the election as a battle between the entrenched older generation and a more dynamic youth, with Bình representing "sincerity and enthusiasm," and Lục "the love of order and stability, and a hatred of sudden and strong change." "This election," *Phong Hóa* summed up, "can be seen as the showdown between enthusiasm and ebullience of youth, against the steadfastness of the middle aged."<sup>35</sup> The campaign was particularly fierce. In support of his crony, Nguyen Van Vinh attacked and belittled Hà Văn Bình on the pages of *Annam Nouveau*, calling him "mean spirited" and a "despicable person" [mauvais maître], his supporters "brats" [moutards].<sup>36</sup> Both candidates resorted to dishonest tactics to secure votes, including hiring fleets of automobiles to drive voters to and from the polling station, sending supporters to pass out prefilled ballots and pressuring voters in the polling room. The bitter campaign captured the attention of voters: a record 1154 of the eligible 2027 electors turned out for the election, compared to only 99 the previous year. In the end, the incumbent won, with 653 votes going to Phạm Huy Lục and 476 to Hà Văn Bình.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Bình's loss, *Phong Hóa* optimistically commented on his strong showing: "Mr. Lục was barely reelected this time around because he encountered fierce opposition. People rejected Mr. Lục because he has such a high opinion of himself. People rejected Mr. Lục because they reject Nguyen Van Vinh. People rejected Mr. Lục because they wanted him to know that Vietnam would go on without him."<sup>38</sup> For *Phong Hóa*, Hà Văn Bình's solid support at the ballot box signified a generational repudiation of Nguyen Van Vinh's intellectual project. To the generation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the ideas of their intellectual predecessors such as Nguyen Van Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh seemed tired and dated.

<sup>32</sup> Nhị Linh, "Các ông nghị," *Phong Hóa* no. 94, 20 Apr 1934, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Tứ Ly, "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 97, 11 Mar 1934, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Phạm Huy Lục's domination of the chamber finally ended in 1938, when he was defeated in a nasty and expensive election by Phạm Lê Bổng, head of *La Patrie Annamite*. *Ngày Nay* reported this election with fascination.

<sup>35</sup> "Ông Lục, Ông Bình," *Phong Hóa* no. 96, 4 May 1934, p. 3; Viet Sinh, "Lại đi xem bầu nghị trưởng," 3.

<sup>36</sup> Tứ Ly, "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 97, 11 Mar 1934, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> "Ông Lục, Ông Bình," 3; Việt Sinh, "Lại đi xem bầu nghị trưởng" *Phong Hóa* no. 68, 13 Oct 1933, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Tứ Ly, "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 97.

The Group saw the election of 1934 as a positive beginning—a dynamic younger generation had begun to supplant the entrenched old guard.

Not only did *Phong Hóa* criticize the urban representatives of cronyism and factionalism, it also accused them of exploiting the chamber's social prestige to promote their respective businesses. In 1933, the chamber held a snap election to fill Hoàng Tích Chu's vacant seat after his unexpected death. Eight candidates vied for the position, all of them Hanoi business owners. *Phong Hóa* sarcastically commented that of course, none of them ran for public office to promote their personal enterprises. With nothing to differentiate the candidates, *Phong Hóa* commented that it was "so hard to choose. It may be easier just to write their names onto scraps of paper and draw them out of a hat."<sup>39</sup> The lack of political parties in the chamber meant that candidates did not run on political platforms or clear-cut programs, but on name recognition and popularity. Once in the chamber, they became part of an exclusive club of Tonkin's most well-known businessmen and other society figures. In between meetings, these savvy and ambitious businessmen took the opportunity to network and advance their latest business ventures. *Phong Hóa* described one such instance of commercial grandstanding:

This year, Mr. Ngạc Văn Đông ran around promoting his new newspaper Thanh Niên. How very clever!...After the chamber had elected its president, he invited all the other representatives into the next room for a private tea party. All of his colleagues oohed and ahed at his generosity. After plying his guests with refreshment, he took out copies of the new paper and asked everyone to help spread the word.<sup>40</sup>

The paper believed that the chamber's annual meeting was in reality more like a business convention, having strayed far from its original purpose of representing the Vietnamese constituency.

If the modern members of the chamber were cliquish, status-hungry, and obsessed with promoting their businesses, the older, more traditional representatives faced a different set of problems. To *Phong Hóa*, they were hopeless in their backwardness and submissive groveling. The wily representatives from the city lacked respect for their colleagues from the countryside and found them "easily manipulated."<sup>41</sup> During Chamber meetings, these two camps hardly communicated:

These canton chiefs, still attached to their "national essence and national soul" remain in the side room. Sitting around a water pipe with tobacco smoke fogging up the room, the scene reminded me of a rural village meeting... These men, sitting and stroking their bamboo water pipe, cannot be seen as the clever and progressive element of the Chamber.<sup>42</sup>

For *Phong Hóa*, the Confucian literati represented the remnants of an antiquated worldview; there is nothing that can be done but wait until they die out. The paper had no patience for their feeble subservience and overly deferential language:

A rural canton chief came by. He was submissive and groveling, scratching his ear as he implored us: 'Venerable mandarins, this year your humble servant, through the

---

<sup>39</sup> Tứ Ly, "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 37, 10 Mar 1933, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Tứ Ly, "Từ cao đến thấp," *Phong Hóa* no. 8, 13 Oct 1933, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Nhị Linh, "Các ông nghị."

<sup>42</sup> Việt Sinh, "Lại đi xem bầu nghị trường," 3.



boundless generosity of the government, is running for representative. I beseech that you great mandarins would deign to cast your ballot for me.’

Nhị Linh bemoaned the fact that “this person will represent us in the Chamber... When I think of the rural representatives, I feel even more depressed.” His frustration with the Confucian literati stemmed from their considerable influence over the rural population:

I feel depressed especially because the intellectual and material progress of the peasantry depends greatly on them. There is nothing more beneficial and worth rejoicing for the peasantry than a representative that knows how to communicate to the government all its injustices, suffering, and oppression. As someone who lives among the peasantry, that representative would understand their aspirations and see their poverty.<sup>43</sup>

Since the Self-Reliant Literary Group had long criticized the mandarin government for its corruption and backwardness, Tú Ly had little faith in its ability to communicate the needs of the peasantry to the colonial government. He lamented that the problem lay not in the representatives, but in the peasants themselves: “What good has the Chamber done for the peasantry? If peasants knew how to choose people of talent to represent them, we would not be having this conversation. However, they do not know how to choose, or more precisely, never bothered.<sup>44</sup> For Tú Ly, the real issue was not that the peasants did not choose the best candidate, as they did not even have the right to vote, but rather, their lack of participation in the political process as a result of their general state of backwardness and ignorance.<sup>45</sup> Until this was remedied, *Phong Hóa* believed that such ineffectual mandarins will continue to populate the chamber.

The culture clash within the chamber between the “modern” and “traditional” factions was exacerbated by disparities in language. If colonial officials were present, the representatives would conduct their business in French; amongst themselves, they would use a confused mix of French and Vietnamese. Mastery of the French language fell along the usual lines: the traditional, Confucianist members of the chamber usually understood little, while many of the younger urban representatives would speak almost exclusively in French. Describing the linguistic disparities in the chamber, Nhật Linh commented that “previously I wished that everyone in the chamber would understand French, because I thought it would make things so much simpler. Now I realize that I was wrong—understanding French is easy, but understanding the French spoken by the representatives is truly difficult.” He described the mandarin Bùi Trọng Nga, his hair in a “top knot the size of a tiny shallot,”

<sup>43</sup> Nhị Linh, “Các ông nghị,” 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Nhị Linh, “Các ông nghị ... Nhà Quê,” *Phong Hóa* no. 95, 27 Apr 1934, p. 1-2

<sup>45</sup> While the Group disapproved of the current situation in the Tonkinese chamber, they still believed it better than its Annamese counterpart. Upon the news that the newly-elected President of the Annamese Chamber was 58-year-old mandarin Ha Dang, *Phong Hóa* incredulously had this to say:

As bad as the Tonkinese chamber may be, compared to its counterpart in Annam, is still more youthful. It's true. The new representatives in Annam are mostly elderly, old-fashioned men over 50, mandarins with *cu nhan* or *tu tai* degrees in the Confucian examination system, or aged canton chiefs. These grandfatherly, hobbling representatives drag their long beards to the Chamber to discuss national issues. It is no different than old men with loose teeth and dirty faces trying to teach the peasantry to follow modern ways. Could a chamber made up of senile men with walking canes accomplish more than one comprised of young and vigorous representatives? ... The only thing we can be sure of is that these aged men are close to shedding this mortal coil and their work would be as old and out of date as they are.

Tú Ly, “Từ cao đến thấp,” *Phong Hóa* no. 69, 20 Oct 1933, p. 5.

giving a speech in French that sounded like “a face-painted montagnard trying to speak Lao.” The word “minister” became “min-nít-so,” “problem” pronounced “bơ-lo-lem.” Even some of the western-educated representatives had a difficult time communicating in French. Nhất Linh described another episode in which Nguyễn Huy Hợi’s pronunciation of “impot quinquinal” (quinine tax) was so bad that the French official had to ask for the word in Vietnamese to properly understand it.<sup>46</sup> Nhất Linh implied that the language barriers prevented the French and Vietnamese officials from understanding one another, thus allowing worthwhile reforms to be lost in the linguistic massacre. He cites an example in which one representative gave a fervent speech condemning the practice of bribery in the mandarin:

He spoke very forcefully, his demeanor resolute. Unfortunately, he spoke so passionately that no one could understand him. All we could hear was “Les Ly Truong com ça” [Les chefs de canton sont comme ça]. When giving a speech, use either French or Vietnamese, but don’t make up your own language, no one will understand you!<sup>47</sup>

For Nhất Linh, the varying levels of fluency and linguistic confusion amongst the representatives prevented the exchange of ideas within the chamber and contributed to its inefficacy.

Yet despite the detailed descriptions and strident criticism, *Phong Hóa* offered no solutions for the dismal state of affairs in the Tonkinese chamber. In *Ngày Nay*, its subsequent publication, the Self-Reliant Literary Group changed its tone. *Phong Hóa*’s general calls for greater awareness and engagement in local politics became overpowered by more serious polemical tracts in *Ngày Nay*. The Group still kept much of the humorous content of its first publication, but it also included a crescendo of specific demands for immediate political and legal reform. In the November 14, 1937 issue, *Ngày Nay* boldly announced that “The Chamber of Representatives must change.” Tú Ly described the chamber as a “tree whose worm-eaten roots cannot produce good leaves, beautiful flowers, and delicious fruit.” It was no longer useful to focus on the corrupt behavior of individual representatives, as it was merely a symptom of larger systemic problems plaguing the chamber, of “the decay at the roots.”<sup>48</sup> The Chamber’s problems were so severe that Nhị Linh even called for the government to “dismantle the chamber.”<sup>49</sup> This amounted to little more than a shock statement; what Nhị Linh meant was he would rather the Chamber be abolished completely rather than exist in its ineffectual and dysfunctional state. The Group would hardly dedicate an annual special issue to the Chamber if it really wanted the institution shut down. Instead, the special issues suggest that the Group truly had wanted the Chamber to be a viable, functional representative body.

Tú Ly called for two major political reforms: first, to expand the powers and prerogatives of the Chamber, and second, to extend voting privileges to a greater number of people. He argued that the chamber held no substantive power as a mere consultative institution. As previously mentioned, the colonial government convened the chamber only once a year to discuss budgetary matters. In reality, this practice was merely a formality; the government had no legal obligation whatsoever to act on the opinion of the Chamber. Tú Ly wrote that “such powers are too narrow and not worthy of the exalted name “Chamber of the People’s Representatives” that Governor-General Varenne graciously gave it in 1926.

<sup>46</sup> Nhất Linh, “Tiếng tây trong viện” *Phong Hóa* no. 122, 2 Nov 1934, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Từ nhỏ đến lớn*, *Phong Hóa* 22, 18 Nov 1932, p 4.

<sup>48</sup> Tú Ly, “Viện dân biểu cần phải thay đổi” *Ngày Nay* no. 85, 14 Nov 1937, p. 952.

<sup>49</sup> Nhị Linh, “Các ông nghị nhà quê,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 95, 27 Apr 1934, p. 1-2.

Rather, we should have kept the old name “Consultative Chamber” to save us the shame and to match more closely with reality.” He called for the expansion of the chamber’s powers: “It must have the power to make decisions, at least similar to the Colonial Council in Cochinchina.”<sup>50</sup> Tú Ly believed that a chamber with greater legislative power would instill in its members a greater sense of responsibility, which in turn would encourage people of talent and drive to run for public office, replacing the disreputable representatives and thereby invigorating the Chamber with new worth and substance.

Along with expanding the chamber’s powers, Tú Ly also advocated the expansion of suffrage. He argued that the people do not support the chamber because they do not directly elect their representatives. “A quarter of the chamber is appointed by the government,” Tú Ly wrote, “and the remaining three-quarters do not represent all citizens, only a few. The overwhelming majority of the people do not have the right to vote.” For the Chamber to be a respected and authoritative institution, it must stand for the interests of a large electorate. Therefore, Tú Ly argued, “We must change the eligibility to vote. For the chamber’s voice to have impact it must have the widespread support of the people. For this to happen, we must expand suffrage by allowing the freedom to form political parties, to assemble, and to freely speak.”<sup>51</sup> For Tú Ly, the right to vote cannot be separated from a thriving political culture in which the people could debate ideas, meet in public and form societies. *Ngày Nay* would continue to make these demands through the years, forming the foundation of the Group’s republican politics.

Not only did the Self-Reliant Literary Group use its journals to make political demands and publicize its own political opinions, it also wanted to report what the average person thought of the Chamber. In 1938, *Ngày Nay* introduced what was perhaps one of the first instances of public opinion polling in Vietnam. In its annual special issue, *Ngày Nay* published the opinions of 21 Vietnamese titled, “Surrounding the Chamber” [Chung Quanh Nghi Vien]. Thé Lữ himself realized the novelty of this kind of journalism when he wrote that “In our country, interviews like this have never been done by any newspaper. Reporters are also not accustomed to conducting such interviews, and the subjects are not used to being interviewed.”<sup>52</sup> The paper had intended for its polling sample to serve as a representative cross section of Tonkinese society, as it featured men and women from different classes, professions, and geographical areas. In the introduction, *Ngày Nay* promised to its readers that, “the answers here are word for word, candid, and sincere. This is the honest public opinion [đur luận] of all classes towards the Chamber of Representatives.” Those polled included a Buddhist monk, a rickshaw driver, a songstress (cô đầu), a bookstore owner, a roaming peddler, and Confucian village elder. Subjects were asked a series of questions about the Chamber:

1. Are you aware that the chamber is about to go into session?

---

<sup>50</sup> The Chamber’s counterpart in Cochinchina—the Colonial Council [hoi dong quan hat]—enjoyed far greater powers. It was allowed to set the personal property tax rate, vote on the colonial budget and public works, and take action in the name of Cochinchina unless otherwise performed by the Governor General. The Colonial Council also had the authority to consult, consent, and draft laws pertaining to taxes and use of public property. Even with these powers, all laws and government action were subject to the approval of the Governor General. Allan E. Goodman, *Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 15; cited from Jean LeClerc, *De l’évolution et du développement des institutions annamites et cambodgiennes sous l’influence française* (Rennes: Edoneur & Ruesch, 1923), 120.

<sup>51</sup> Tú Ly, “Viện dân biểu cần phải thay đổi.”

<sup>52</sup> Thé Lữ and Trọng Lang, “Chúng tôi đi phỏng vấn” *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sep 1938, p. 15. Thé Lữ regaled his readers with a number of funny anecdotes that illustrates this new way of interviewing.

2. What kind of person should a representative be? Who is superior, a representative or a mandarin?
3. Does the chamber benefit the people? Should it remain or be abolished?
4. What purpose do government-appointed delegates serve? Should they be allowed or abolished?
5. Do you believe this new Chamber to be better than previous ones? What are your hopes for it?
6. Would you ever want to be a representative? What would you change?
7. For women: (Married) Would you want your husband to become a representative? (Unmarried) Would you want to marry a representative?

To show that the responses had not been interpreted or biased in any way, they appeared verbatim next to the subject's photo and biographical information. An examination of the answers reveals that most Vietnamese held apathetic, suspicious, or ignorant attitudes towards the Chamber. Two-thirds of the people polled did not realize that the Chamber was going into session, while well over half of the interviewees answered that the Chamber did not benefit them or were completely ignorant about the subject. One respondent, a secretary named Lê Đình Nhai, believed that the Chamber "was perhaps the most meaningless institution... It should be abolished—the creator made representatives to be of no good to anyone but their wives!" Others were completely ignorant or apathetic that the Chamber played any role in their lives. Mr. Đản, a postman, commented that "I do not know if the Chamber is a benefit or a harm. To keep or abolish it does not affect me." Even those who felt that the Chamber should be kept advocated its reformation. Cable car operator Nguyễn Văn Thụ thought that the Chamber would be of use to the people only if "it were made up of many young people." Roaming newspaper vendor Nguyễn Văn Mao answered that the Chamber should be kept only if it had the power to "reduce the head tax."<sup>53</sup> Despite their unfavorable opinion of the chamber, many of the interviewees preferred it to the mandarin; a third of respondents chose representatives over mandarins, as opposed to one-seventh. The interviews published in *Ngày Nay*, although not using a large sample, hinted at the extent of the Chamber's lack of influence in the everyday lives of Vietnamese.

The poll also showed that many Vietnamese overwhelmingly disapproved of government-appointed representatives in the Chamber. Of the 21 interviewees, only one spoke in favor of these representatives. The rest was split between abolishing them altogether (43%) and complete ignorance that such appointees existed (52%). Lê Đình Nhai, the strongest critic, exclaimed, "The government-appointed representatives are all insolent (láo tóet)!" Other respondents bewilderedly wondered what place do government-appointed representatives have in a chamber working for the people. Nguyễn Xuân Đào, a government functionary, believed that these members actually hindered the work of the elected Vietnamese representatives: "Why should we let this group of "mother-in-laws" spoil the work of the "young brides?"<sup>54</sup> The colonial government finally abolished government-appointed representatives on 17 August 1939, much to the delight of *Ngày Nay*.<sup>55</sup>

What was the purpose of the public opinion poll? What was the Self-Reliant Literary Group trying to accomplish? The poll's attempt covering a cross-section of Tonkinese society suggests that the Self-Reliant Literary Group had two main goals: first, to hold the Chamber of Representatives responsible and second, to express to the views of common citizens. The Group perhaps hoped that knowledge of its low opinion in the eyes of the

<sup>53</sup> "Chung quanh nghị viện," *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sep 1938, p. 12-14.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "Lời hiệu triệu của thanh niên dân chủ Hà Nội," *Ngày Nay* no. 176, 26 Aug 1939, p. 20-21.

people would encourage the Chamber to reform. In this way, *Ngay Nay*'s public poll is linked to its usual coverage of the Chamber. Second and more importantly, the Group was emulating the practice of public opinion polling in western countries as a means of fostering democratic sensibilities and encouraging the development of civil society. The Group was most likely aware of the power of public opinion in western democracies to influence political developments; it communicates to a country's leaders about what the public are actually thinking and allow them to tailor their policies accordingly. In fact, *Ngay Nay*'s 1938 poll appeared a few short years after the 1935 founding of the world's most famous professional polling bureau—the American Institute of Public Opinion, the precursor of the Gallup Organization. Branches of this organization soon followed in Britain (1937) and France (1938), as well as an unassociated firm in Germany (1934)<sup>56</sup> Previously, newspapers in Vietnam conceptualized the reading public as impressionable and unknowledgable, empty vessels ready to receive entertainment, education, or in the case of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, both. Despite the popularity of reportages, which tried to capture the previously unseen aspects of Vietnamese life, no real attempts had been made to scientifically quantify and express public attitudes to influence political developments. Although *Ngay Nay*'s poll makes no claim to scientific quantification, it did, however, have clear political implications by giving voice to the disenfranchised. The Group perhaps wanted their readers to know what their fellow Vietnamese thought, creating an “imagined community” of informed readers with similar political opinions. For the Group, the *vox populi* was closely tied to inculcation of republican pluralist values.

As its coverage in both *Phong Hóa* and *Ngay Nay* illustrates, the Self-Reliant Literary Group believed that the Tonkinese Chamber of Representatives was worth reforming. The detailed reportages as well as the multitude of cartoons, articles, poems, and features point to a sustained campaign to encourage their readers to demand reform, or the representatives to change their own behavior. The Group believed that although the representatives may be ineffectual and corrupt, the institution itself was not necessarily a lost cause. As *Tứ Linh* wrote in 1932,

To such a depressing situation, some people sigh and blame the representatives. Their dislike of the representatives then infects their opinion of the entire institution. They believe the Chamber is good for nothing. But the Vietnamese have always been like that: they are not able to distinguish ideals from individuals... The current situation and standards of the people do not allow us to reap the benefits of an effectual chamber with the talent and power to govern.<sup>57</sup>

The Group realized that to reform the behavior of corrupt politicians alone would not solve the chamber's problems—they required larger changes in the political system and civic culture. On the one hand, the people need to learn how to take part in government, hold it accountable and demand their rights. On the other, the government must endow the people with the tools necessary to build a civic culture—freedom of speech, assembly, and political activity. Only then could political institutions such as the chamber have real authoritative substance. *Tứ Linh* expressed optimism that the Chamber could be reformed through a new political culture:

---

<sup>56</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History, Theory and Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 14. Susan Herbst, “Surveying and influencing the public: Polling in politics and industry” in Ted Porter and Dorothy Ross (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 7: *The Modern Social Sciences*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 585.

<sup>57</sup> *Tứ Linh*, “Các ông nghị,” *Phong Hóa* no. 22, 18 Nov 1932, p. 1.

We should not be discouraged. Collective intelligence [dân chí] is improving by the day. Those in the Chamber who only know how to fall asleep, or pontificate idly, or exploit their position for their personal gain, will gradually disappear. The powers of the Chamber will expand. Who knows, maybe the Chamber will have a bright future? It would depend on when this new culture permeates all people.<sup>58</sup>

This “new culture” amounted to nothing short of building a civil society, and the Group saw *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* as doing its part to inculcate these habits and values. The Group’s aim was to inform and entice their readers to become an active informed readership, the first step in building a learned electorate responsible for holding their officials accountable. *Phong Hóa*’s coverage of the Tonkin chamber through the years reveals their belief in democratic institutions and processes. Their calls for the expansion of suffrage underscore their commitment to popular sovereignty and the universality of republican ideals.

*Ngày Nay*’s last major coverage of the Chamber was the 1938 session. That year, *Ngày Nay* commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the chamber, looking back on its various transformations and major events. Always critical, the paper commented that the only improvement in the chamber in 20 years was that “more representatives are wearing western clothing, and that the number of people in traditional garb decreases each session. The canton-chiefs-cum-representatives in bell-sleeved tunics, with one pant leg hiked up and the other down, are also diminished.” However, they were being increasingly replaced by a different breed of representative, equally as corrupt: “Unfortunately, the decreasing power of the more conservative and traditional elements in the chamber is no cause for celebration because the new representatives in dapper western clothes, cleanly groomed faces have the most questionable and spottiest morals.”<sup>59</sup> The Group had harbored high hopes for this new generation, but what it did not foresee was that these younger politicians did not necessarily want to transform the system. Rather, they jumped headfirst into dirty politics with even more gusto than their predecessors. Hà Văn Bình, the young schoolteacher who bitterly battled Phạm Huy Lục for chamber president in 1934, had become a key player in the scheming tribal politics of the chamber by 1938. He even joined forces with the Vĩnh-Lục clique he challenged so vigorously in his youth. Such perpetual corruption in the Chamber sheds light on the ultimate victory of Marxism-Leninism; when liberal democratic institutions are so thoroughly discredited and rendered completely impotent through the colonial government, radical and more revolutionary options become viable. It is hardly no wonder that many Vietnamese opted to overthrow the entire system rather than reform it.

### *Colonialism and Legal Reform*

Given the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s belief in French republican values, how did it define the Vietnamese nation, especially vis-à-vis France and other modern nations? An examination of the Group’s analysis of nationalism reveals much theoretical sophistication. In May 1939, Hoàng Đạo posed the question, “What is a nation?” The answer, Hoàng Đạo argued, was something that any informed member of the public should know:

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Thạch Lam, “Đến 1938, Tấn trò dân biểu đã diễn 30 năm,” *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 2.

As a citizen, a member of society with responsibilities, the most important thing is to understand clearly what it means to be a nation... What is a nation? What are its characteristics?

The first characteristic of a nation, according to Hoàng Đạo, involved “a number of people living among one another.” While some may argue that this group of people must be of the same race, for Hoàng Đạo this was not necessarily the case. Using the example of France, a multiracial nation, he argued that “if we travelled the world, we would not find a single nation whose people belong to the same race.” Even the Vietnamese, he pointed out, was not a single-race nation: “The people of Annam are not a pure race: we are made up of Giao Chi, Muong, Hoi, who lived together throughout the centuries before becoming the Vietnamese. Thus, race has no influence on nationalism whatsoever.”<sup>60</sup> Whether this modern conceptualization of a multiracial Vietnam now included ethnic minorities remained to be seen.

What did matter, for Hoàng Đạo, was that a group of people lived together on the same land: “People of the same nation do not necessarily have to be from the same race, but do they need to live on the same stretch of land? Absolutely.” Looking at the Jewish diaspora, Hoàng Đạo commented that the Jews uphold a very strong sense of ethnicity by maintaining their customs, but they live scattered all over the world. Hoàng Đạo argued that still they are not a nation, because they have not lived for many generations on an area of land. Geography also explains the split between Great Britain and the United States: “They are people of the same race, so why do they divide themselves into separate nations? Because they do not live amongst one another.” For the Americans, the experience of “living in different territories created a different culture, thus forming a new nation, the United States.”<sup>61</sup> In Hoàng Đạo’s definition, the influence of land in the formation of national consciousness was of fundamental importance.

But even if a group of people, regardless of race, live on the same territory, it still did not necessarily form a nation. A cultural element must bind them as well. For Hoàng Đạo, it is language: “To use the language of another nation, people can lose their national character. For example, the Visigoths and Romans became French. Like the Chinese who came to our land to make a living: they spoke our language, and generations later, their descendents have become Vietnamese.” Language can also bring a nation back from the point of extinction:

Moreover, a country that has been destroyed would often begin with language when rebuilding itself. When Norway and Sweden became independent, they first started by rehabilitating its old language. It was the same with Greece--it returned to the Greek of ancient times, creating a separate language currently used in schools, representative bodies, and newspapers.

This analysis goes no short way in explaining the Self Group’s insistence on using the vernacular quốc ngữ in their newspapers and literary writings. Although the Group members were well-read in the classics of western literature and completely fluent in French, they avoided writing with it for fear that they “lose their national character” through the use of foreign language. Likewise, the Group’s resolved to avoid Chinese literary forms and tropes. For Hoàng Đạo, the link between language and national consciousness was fundamental:

---

<sup>60</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Thế nào là một nước?” *Ngày Nay* no. 161, 13 May 1939, p. 10-11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

The influence of language is so strong that people say that it is the soul of a nation... Language is the vehicle that transmits literature, the character and ideals of a nation. Those characteristics and ideas, evolve into a culture and personality of a nation, different from any other that we can call a national personality [quoc tinh]. This is hard to analyze, yet it is clear; it is the result of a nation's cultural foundation.<sup>62</sup>

This strong sense of linguistic nationalism lies at the heart of all the Group's literary and journalistic endeavors. They wrote only in vernacular Vietnamese in an attempt to trailblaze a new style of simple, unadorned literary writing that will modernize, popularize, and revitalize Vietnamese language, and by extension, the Vietnamese nation. Their publishing ventures, in their emphasis on quality printing of quality writing, addressed the material means through which such nationalistic language is transmitted.

Hoàng Đạo's definition of a nation—a group of people living on the same land and bound by a mutual culture—showed clear influence from Ernest Renan, albeit with significant divergences. He borrowed Renan's title, "What is a nation?" [Qu'est-ce que une nation?] for his own article, and even quotes him in it: "a nation is the marriage of a group of people and a land."<sup>63</sup> An examination of Hoàng Đạo's article reveals, however, a selective reading and appropriation of Renan's ideas to suit the Vietnamese case, by highlighting certain factors and downplaying others. For example, in Hoàng Đạo's analysis language is of paramount importance for national cohesion. For Renan, while language can certainly contribute to nationalism, it is hardly a definitive factor: "Language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so."<sup>64</sup> In fact, Renan warned against the insular dangers of linguistic nationalism when he wrote that language can make a nation "enclose oneself in a conventicle with one's compatriots. Nothing could be worse for the mind, nothing could be more disturbing for civilization."<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Hoàng Đạo argued that geography "absolutely" influenced the formation of nation, and was one of the crucial factors in his definition of nationalism. Again, Renan believed it a contributing factor, but not a fundamental one: "Geography, or what are known as natural frontiers, undoubtedly plays a considerable part in the division of nations." However, Renan went on to argue that the idea of geographical determinism is too bound in materialism to adequately explain the spiritual nature of modern nationalism. "No," Renan wrote, "it is no more soil than it is race which makes a nation. The soil furnishes the substratum, the field of struggle and of labour; man furnishes the soul. Man is everything in the formation of this sacred thing called a people."<sup>66</sup> For Renan, the material boundaries of land or cultural institutions do not make a nation—what mattered was that people felt themselves a nation. He wrote that "man is a slave neither of his race nor of his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor of the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy of mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral consciousness we call a nation."<sup>67</sup> This is where Hoàng Đạo diverged most sharply from Renan; he insisted that a nation could be rationally defined and inscribed.

Hoàng Đạo rejected instinctual or intuitive definitions of a nation when he wrote that

Many have the feeling that when pondering the idea of "nation," one does not have to think too far, that one can understand its meaning just by hearing the word. Even so,

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ernest Renan, "What is a nation?" in Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 20.



the word “nation”, like many other commonplace words, seems simple at first, but actually encompasses many complicated ideas.

He insisted on a rational and systemic method of studying nations, based on analysis of the observable political world: “To know for certain, we must take the real world as our basis. We need to observe and examine countries currently thriving, both the strong and the weak, and find common characteristics between them.”<sup>68</sup> This raises a number of interesting questions: Why did Hoàng Đạo reject Renan’s premise of nationalism as consciousness or emotion? Why did he insist that a nation must be rationally defined and described, like a scientific phenomenon? The answer lies in how Hoàng Đạo conceptualized Vietnam’s own status as a nation and its acceptance by the larger world community. Nationalism based on emotion or consciousness, while acceptable for established nations, can be easily dismissed by France and the larger global community as too subjective or impossible to prove. If a nation could be defined rationally, Vietnam’s own nationhood could be justified to other countries without ambiguity. In other words, Hoàng Đạo made the case for Vietnam to be considered a modern nation on premises that are western, rational, and universal. This becomes even more apparent in his discussion of Vietnam’s own nationhood.

If a nation, at least according to Hoàng Đạo, is defined as a group of people living on the same land sharing the same language, did he consider Vietnam a nation? To answer his question, he traced Vietnamese history as he saw it: the people of Vietnam began in the Red River delta, where they lived for thousands of years, enduring Chinese domination. They slowly expanded their territory to the South, where they intermingled with other ethnic groups. Centuries of living together, these peoples “created their own language, shared a culture, endured the same suffering and victories.” By the time the Vietnamese had nearly occupied the entire Indochinese peninsula, they had “already exhibited a strong spirit, with proper organization, and a unified sense of purpose. In addition, Vietnamese land was linked economically: “People have compared the north and south to two ricebaskets, with the center as the yoke carrying them. There is no better way to describe this relationship.” Having reviewed this version of Vietnamese history, Hoàng Đạo concludes that yes, Vietnam was very much a nation:

Living on the same stretch of territory, speaking the same language, living a shared history and culture and connected together in economics, the Vietnamese people have reached nationhood a long time ago.

The entire discussion begs the question: “Why all this insistence on Vietnam’s nationhood?” Hoàng Đạo’s analysis suggests a self-consciousness:

A number of foreigners, when speaking of Indochina, often think of Africa and do not believe that conquered peoples like the Annamese can reach nationhood. Their chauvinism has clouded their thinking. They often say that the Annamese people are no different than the black savages of Africa or the montagnards of the highlands, unorganized and lacking in national spirit.

Such a sentiment underscores the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s self-consciousness of how foreigners perceived Vietnam and a longing to be accepted as an equal among other nations. Below the Group’s various reform programs through the years lay an acute sense of inferiority, a fear of being laughed at, judged, or embarrassed in the eyes of the French or the

---

<sup>68</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “The nao la mot nuoc?”

rest of the civilized world. This fear translated into an ambitious desire to prove that Vietnamese too can achieve civilization. And as a nation, Vietnam had a right to participate in the world community as much as any other:

Vietnam deserves to be called a nation, with the right to exist and livelihood as other nations. The Vietnamese people have the right to love their nation, to hope that their nation will have the talent and strength to follow its own ideals so that one day it will be a whole and complete one, working with other nations to build happiness for all mankind.<sup>69</sup>

For Hoàng Đạo, the right to livelihood comes from “natural law” [luat thiên nhiên], ideas born of the French Revolution: “The right of autonomy of nations has been clearly asserted. However, those transcendental ideas have been gradually forgotten, even by France.”<sup>70</sup> By defining Vietnam as a modern nation, Hoàng Đạo laid the philosophical premise for Vietnam to demand greater rights, freedoms and self-autonomy enjoyed by other nations.

Given the Group’s beliefs in popular sovereignty and democratic institutions, what did it think about colonialism, the most blatant infringement of national sovereignty and republican values? In September 1937, Hoàng Đạo penned a series of articles asking a pointed question: “Is it ethical to take colonies?” His answer was a resounding “no.” He argued that even those who support colonialism “cannot hide the fact that from the beginning, colonialism is the brutalization of the weak by the strong, a selfish undertaking for the profit of one side.” Hoàng Đạo believed that the root cause of colonialism lay in the profit motive:

European countries, during a period of flourishing capitalism, soon realized that the national market is not enough to sell their manufactured products and brought them to other countries. The competition was fierce, often to their own detriment. They had to find new markets, meaning they conquered the territories of weaker nations, to extract resources at a cheap price, as well as sell their goods easily. Colonialism and imperialism began to appear.<sup>71</sup>

France had vowed that it “will never wage war for the purpose of conquest and will never use violence to destroy the freedom of any other people.”<sup>72</sup> For its own economic profit, however, France had ignored its own ideals and joined the scramble for colonies.

Hoàng Đạo proceeded to refute a number of arguments that justified French colonial endeavors, beginning with social Darwinism: “They say that colonialism merely follows the laws of nature, of natural selection, that the strong live and the weak die. All animals big and small follow those laws, as do humans.” However, Hoàng Đạo argued that this rationale does not hold, “because it makes humans respect only one thing—violence. It lowers mankind to the lower levels of non-thinking animals.” For Hoàng Đạo, what made humans more than animals is its “conscience, its knowledge of justice.”<sup>73</sup> While violence can defeat the weak, it can never make the vanquished respect the victor. This sentiment served, not only as the philosophical justification for the Group’s anticolonialism, but also its advocacy of pacifism and non-violence.

---

<sup>69</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Nước Nam” *Ngày Nay* no. 165, 10 Jun 1939, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Quyền sống của mọi nước” *Ngày Nay* no. 162, 20 May 1939, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Lấy thuộc địa có chính đáng không?” *Ngày Nay* no. 77, 19 Sep 1937, p. 759-760.

<sup>72</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Quyền sống của mọi nước.”

<sup>73</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Lấy thuộc địa có chính đáng không?”

He then addressed apologists who argued that “Western countries have brought to their colonies order, peace, knowledge, health, all the necessities of daily life.” He borrowed a quote from an Egyptian leader [possibly Saad Zaghloul] who asked, “What if we prefer our own chaos to the order brought by foreigners?” For Hoàng Đạo, all the advances in medicine, knowledge and technology do not negate the fact that they were brought to colonies “under coercion.” He then confronted the global rationale for colonialism, which posited that “resources do not belong solely to a nation, but of all mankind. With mankind becoming increasingly linked, the world’s resources must be used for everyone’s benefit.” Hoàng Đạo countered that resources could be utilized for the good of collective humanity without resorting to the seizure of territory through violent and militaristic means. He concluded that “there is no just reason why a country must use its troops to take another’s land as a colony.”<sup>74</sup>

As morally wrong as colonialism may be, Hoàng Đạo admitted that “colonies are already a reality.” Therefore, the colonizers “must find a way to benefit the colonized, even at their own expense. Only then could they erase the memories of past violence and have enough reason to stay in another people’s land.”<sup>75</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, the only conscionable way to deal with the already existing colonies is to gradually phase them out: “the barely just way is if colonialism is on a temporary basis.”<sup>76</sup> He advocated international mediation in colonial matters. Hoàng Đạo explained that the negotiations following World War I “rehabilitated the idea of self-determination,” from which emerged a new conceptualization of colonialism. In the League of Nations’ Mandate system,

Peoples who have not achieved the standards to self-govern, who lack organization and a government with enough power to maintain order [such as Syria] are placed under the protection and guidance of a mandate country designated by the League of Nations entrusted with the power and responsibility to tutor that country in how to govern themselves. The mandate country must report yearly to the League and must move their charge country towards autonomy.

This way, Hoàng Đạo writes, “colonialism is not as before, but to guide the way for the colonized to become autonomous, and when they are ready they will enjoy the right of self determination.”<sup>77</sup> Hoàng Đạo’s argument suggested that he did not believe that France would willingly give up its rights to the Indochinese colonies, but held greater trust in the international community. Although he never stated it outright, it is possible that Hoàng Đạo envisioned Vietnam following such a program.

In his discussion of colonialism, Hoàng Đạo completely rejected the traditional French policy of assimilation, in which the colony would become an integrated yet remote part of France, its people refashioned (as best as possible) into Frenchmen. He believed that assimilation has worked in “semi-civilized” places such as Reunion and Antilles, where the people have adopted French ways “like printing words on a blank page.” However, “in regards to peoples with a glorious history, with a solid foundation of civilization, assimilation should be avoided at all costs. I repeat, assimilation should be avoided.” Of course, Hoàng Đạo considered the Vietnamese to be such a people, “with a past that could be called glorious, who have reached a high level of civilization, with a cooperative spirit and unified in character and language. Here, the policy of assimilation would be a mistake.” He

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Cộng tác đề huề” *Ngày Nay* no. 78, 6 Sep 1937, p. 783.

<sup>77</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Quyền sống của mọi nước.”

patriotically asserted that the Vietnamese do not want to be Frenchmen. Instead, they want “to enjoy the freedoms of democracy and gradually observe and take responsibility for the affairs of their country. When the people of Annam have the right, in freedom, to choose those who will govern them, their wishes would be largely fulfilled.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, the Vietnamese want self-autonomy and national sovereignty.

For Hoàng Đạo, the most important condition of freedom for colonized peoples was legislative power: “If the power to create laws rests in the hand of the colonized, they can self-govern and put themselves at the same level with the mother country.” Hoàng Đạo pointed out that British colonies enjoyed such freedoms, but that France still followed the Napoleonic practice of “rule by edict or decree.” Under such a policy, “there is not a single instance where a representative chamber is necessary, as the President of the Republic is all that is needed to rule. In the colonies, his power is as great as a king in an absolute monarchy.” He criticized the president’s power to change colonial law at will. But even when the French president issues an edict, it is up to the colonial government to enforce it. At times, such as during the Popular Front, governor generals and residents would delay or completely block the implementation of metropolitan decrees. For Hoàng Đạo, the flexibility and quick response of the edict system was not necessarily an asset in legislative matters: “a law needs to be clear and adequate. For this to happen it must be carefully discussed and debated, then enforced. Once in place, to change the law should be difficult; any reason to actually change a law must be a legitimate one.”<sup>79</sup> He advocated a more deliberate and procedural lawmaking process in colonial matters.

Hoàng Đạo further criticized the edict policy as “absurd in the context of a republic.” Because the colonies were of vital importance to the power and influence of the metropole, the French parliament must be able to supervise their administration. Rule by edict undermined parliament’s oversight privileges and concentrated both executive (hành pháp) and legislative power in the same hands, which Hoàng Đạo argued was “something not allowed in a republic.” His final criticism of the edict system was that it did not take into account the individual circumstances of the different colonies: “Normally, decrees designed for one colony are extended to others, although they may be as different as Indochina and French Africa. While this may be a convenient and efficient way of managing colonial affairs, it does not accomplish anything for the colonies.” He concluded that “no one can possibly support the policy of decrees and edicts anymore.”

The Self-Reliant Literary Group found the edict system most unjust when it came to an issue of utmost importance to its members—freedom of speech. The Group had experienced the arbitrariness of the colonial legal system firsthand in 1936, when the authorities suspended Phong Hoa for three months without explanation. Through the years, Ngay Nay demanded freedom of speech, even publicly defending rival newspapers they felt received unfair treatment. On a number of occasions, Ngay Nay supported communist paper *Le Travail* against the colonial government. When its editor Trinh Van Phu and writer Nguyen Van Tien were arrested by authorities for “disturbing the peace and creating a disturbance of a political nature,”<sup>80</sup> Hoang Dao defended the pair by pointing out the injustice of that particular law.<sup>81</sup> Ngay Nay even went so far as to convene a meeting at its

---

<sup>78</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Thuộc địa Pháp—Chính sách,” *Ngày Nay* no. 80, 10 Oct 1937, p. 831-832.

<sup>79</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Thuộc địa Pháp—Chế độ chi dụ,” *Ngày Nay* no. 81, 17 Oct 1937, p. 855.

<sup>80</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 44, 24 Jan 1937, p. 682

<sup>81</sup> Calling it a “catch all” law used against Vietnamese, Hoang Dao wrote that “such an opaque law would never be countenanced in a free and civilized country like France...only in ours.” Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 59, 16 May 1937, p. 328.

headquarters to discuss ways to help the *Le Travail* writers and helped play a role in their eventual release.<sup>82</sup>

Not only did the Group defend its rivals from arbitrary persecution, it also attacked the inconsistent press regimes across the colonies. In 1936, Hoàng Đạo reported in *Ngày Nay* that the Minister of Colonies had granted Tunisia a new, less restrictive set of press laws. Arabic language newspapers no longer had to obtain government permission to operate, the government could not arbitrarily shut down a publication except through a court of law, and suspensions must not last any more than 8 days. Hoàng Đạo indignantly wrote that

This press regime, although not perfect, is still far better than the laws for quoc-ngu. And objectively speaking, the people of Tunisia are not necessarily more civilized than us. If we had freedom of the press, I guarantee that we will not abuse it, no more than the Tunisians would. Quite the opposite.”<sup>83</sup>

Hoàng Đạo found it inconceivable that the Popular Front government would grant new freedoms to the Tunisians and not the Tonkinese.

Hoàng Đạo took even greater umbrage to the fact that the press regimes were arbitrary even within Indochina. In Cochinchina, quốc ngữ newspapers did not have to seek government permission while in Tonkin, newspapers were subjected to a lengthy and difficult process to obtain a permit. The difference, as Hoàng Đạo pointed out, lay in the fact that Cochinchina enjoyed full status as a French colony. Hoàng Đạo explained that the “the French press laws have a clause that states that ‘these laws apply to all overseas colonies.’” As protectorates, Tonkin and Annam did not receive these privileges. To such a press regime, Hoàng Đạo exclaimed, “What a confused jumble. But in Indochina, everything is complex, especially the law. We must fix this confusion. Southerners or Northerners, we are

---

<sup>82</sup> The first instance involved a strike in Hon Gay, when authorities arrested *Le Travail* reporter Nguyễn Mạnh Chất. According to French newspapers, Chất had prevented people from enjoying their “freedom to practice their profession” by persuading striking workers to not allow others from crossing the picket line. *Le Travail* and *Việt Báo* countered that when officials told to leave Hon Gay, Chất insisted on staying to do his duty as a journalist. *Ngày Nay* sided with the Vietnamese papers, writing that “if what *Le Travail* wrote was true, then the authorities had violated Mr. Chất’s freedom to practice his profession. A citizen of Annam, travelling to Hon Gay, a territory of Annam—no one has the right to tell him to come and go. If this is true, then this is a abuse of power.” Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 38, 13 Dec 1936, p. 540. A little over a month later, *Ngày Nay* again came to the defense of *Le Travail* when its editor Trịnh Văn Phú and writer Nguyễn Văn Tiến were arrested by authorities for “disturbing the peace and creating a disturbance of a political nature.” Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 44, 24 Jan 1937, p. 682. Hoàng Đạo pointed out that this particular law did not exist in France. Rather, the colonial government had added it later as a “catch all” law to be used with the Vietnamese. Describing the law as “shady and unclear in meaning,” Hoàng Đạo explained how just the mere suspicion of causing a disturbance would be enough to convict. “Such an opaque law,” he wrote, “would never be countenanced in a free and civilized country like France...only in ours.” Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* #59, 16 May 1937, p 328. As a participant in the committee, *Ngày Nay* played a role in the release of these two political prisoners. It should be noted, however, that the Group’s defense of *Le Travail* had less to do with their political sympathies than its belief in freedom of the press. This did not mean, however, that the writers of *Le Travail* and *Ngày Nay* had unfriendly relations; when Trịnh Văn Phú was temporarily released from prison, he made a personal visit to the headquarters of *Ngày Nay*. Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 81, 17 Oct 1937, p. 856. Later, when Phú and Tiến were rearrested, *Ngày Nay* convened a meeting at its offices to discuss how to help them. “Bảo giới bắc kỳ can thiệp lần thứ hai vào việc hai bạn Phú, Tiến, bị bắt giam.” *Ngày Nay* no. 122, 7 Aug 1938, p. 4. Despite the mutual suspicion between the two organizations, the Group had no issue against defending the ICP against persecution by the colonial government.

<sup>83</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 37, 6 Dec 1936, p. 514.

all Annamese, we should live under the same legal system as well.”<sup>84</sup> Hoàng Đạo’s complaint about the willy-nilly application of press laws all over Indochina is linked to his larger grievance about the colonial rule by edict: that the Vietnamese are forced to deal with arbitrary and perpetually changing governance, rather than enjoy a procedural system characterized by consistency and transparency.

For Hoàng Đạo, the “confused jumble” of the press laws was but a symptom of a larger legal problem created not just by the edict system, but one that stemmed from Tonkin’s status as a protectorate. He lamented the indeterminate state of protectorates: “...a protectorate is not a separate nation, nor can it become part of the mother country... [its people] cannot become citizens of France, nor can they enjoy the rights reserved specifically for the colonies.”<sup>85</sup> The Self-Reliant Literary Group argued on a number of occasions (especially regarding the Chamber of Representatives and press laws) that Tonkin should enjoy equivalent rights, legal system, privileges, and status as Cochinchina, and that the only way to build civil society among the Vietnamese was through the uniform implementation and equal representation under the law. In other words, the Group suggested that they would have rather Tonkin become a full-fledged French colony rather than the ambiguous and ad-hoc status of protectorate. Tú Ly argued that Tonkin was ready for legal reforms: “Some have said that the collective intelligence in the North has not yet reached those standards... That is an unfounded statement. The Colonial Council in Cochinchina has had the power to make decisions since 1880—would anyone dare to say that the collective intelligence of the South at that time was any higher than the North today?”<sup>86</sup> From the Group’s point of view, the only way for Tonkin to enjoy greater political rights and privileges was, paradoxically, to be further enchained—by going from arbitrary rule by edict as a protectorate to the legal privileges and procedures enjoyed by a full colony. Hoàng Đạo demanded that France develop “a law that clearly states the rights of colonial citizens, a foundation. A constitution for the citizens of the colonies.” Legislative powers should be delegated to each colony, “so that the laws made would meet the unique needs of that colony and the people can participate in the affairs of their country.”<sup>87</sup> This constitution would “affirm that Annam will enjoy democratic rights and freedoms, and enjoy a representative body elected by universal suffrage.”<sup>88</sup>

### *Rejection of Monarchy*

Given the Group’s disdain for traditional customs and mores (as seen in their Ly Toet cartoons) and its enthusiasm for democratic institutions and freedoms, it is understandable that the Group did not hold the most visible and representative institutions of tradition, the mandarin and the monarchy, in very high regard. While the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s low opinions of the monarchy and various figures within the Hue Court—most notably Phạm Quỳnh—has always simmered beneath the surface of their satire, it openly proclaimed them in 1939. In August of that year, the Francophone newspaper *Volonté Indochinoise* leaked rumors that the French colonial government had finally decided to formally honor the Patrenotre Treaty of 1884 and return Tonkin to the control of the monarchy. Under the actual

---

<sup>84</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tự do ngôn luận: Mở báo quốc ngữ không phải xin phép nhưng chỉ ở thuộc địa” *Ngày Nay* no. 34, 15 Nov 1936, p. 442.

<sup>85</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Các hạng thuộc địa,” *Ngày Nay* no. 79, 2 Oct 1937, p. 807.

<sup>86</sup> Tú Ly, “Viện dân biểu phải thay đổi.”

<sup>87</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Thuộc địa Pháp—Chế độ chi dụ,” *Ngày Nay* no. 81, 17 Oct 1937, p. 855.

<sup>88</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* no. 176, 26 Aug 1939, p. 4.

terms of the 1884 treaty, the French would control Cochinchina as a colony, while emperor would hold administrative power over the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam. However, these terms were mostly ignored by the French, who gradually eroded imperial authority over the ensuing decades. Shortly after signing the treaty, the French began undermining imperial power by imposing what William Duiker called a “parallel structure of administrative authority” consisting of advisors and counselors at every level of the administrative hierarchy. Although initially meant to advise and serve as a liaison between the colonial government and the Vietnamese, this layer of French functionaries through the decades slowly encroached on the imperial court’s decision making powers. By the 1920s, the political reality was that the French held real administrative authority while maintaining the emperor and court as figureheads for trivial formalities and rituals. Finally in a coup d’etat, the Convention of November 6, 1925 divested the emperor of what little remaining power he held and gave it to the French Residents Superior<sup>89</sup>.

Over the years, supporters of the monarchy continued to call for the restoration of imperial power as outlined by the treaty. In 1930 the most famous of these supporters, Phạm Quỳnh, advanced his ideas in a famous article in *Nam Phong* titled, “Vers une Constitution” [Towards a Constitution]. He called for the French to formally honor the terms of the 1884 treaty, return executive power to the Emperor, and give the Vietnamese a greater national identity under the French. In Phạm Quỳnh’s view, the best way to meet these demands was through the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. He believed that the best way to accommodate Vietnamese political aspirations as well as French interests was not to overthrow the traditional institutions of the monarchy and mandarinat, but to modernize and transform them. He argued that the corruption and decay of these institutions lay in their complete lack of authority, which can be reformed by restructuring the power-sharing relationship between the French and the Hue court. He advocated the French setting up a true protectorate according to the terms of the treaty, in which the colonial government plays a limited advisory role and the emperor holds administrative and executive powers. The Resident Superior of Annam and a representative in Hanoi would represent French interests, while a Council of Ministers would advise and assist the emperor in matters of state. The Vietnamese people would be given limited democratic representation through the Chamber of Representatives, which would be given wider legislative powers. In the case of dispute between the colonial government and the monarchy, the Resident could request that the chamber be dissolved and all conflicts mediated by the metropole. The mandarinat would be completely overhauled and advised by the French. While the colonial government would manage secondary and university level education, the Vietnamese would be responsible for an elementary curriculum based on morality and national values.<sup>90</sup>

Even in 1930, Phạm Quỳnh’s idea was met with criticism. As William Duiker described, reaction to Phạm Quỳnh’s proposals amongst nationalist circles was generally unfavorable, but perhaps the most vocal of his critics at the time was Nguyen Van Vinh. The editor of *Annam Nouveau* forcefully rejected any attempt to modernize the monarchy and mandarinat. In his view, the feudal system was completely dysfunctional and should be scrapped altogether. The emperor wielded no power whatsoever and the mandarinat was pitifully antiquated. Duiker wrote that the “best solution would be a new type of mandarin who had a clear idea of his duties as a bureaucrat and was not indebted to the rule for his continuance in office. Such training could better come from the French.”<sup>91</sup> This debate

---

<sup>89</sup> William J. Duiker. *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 170-171.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 172-173.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

between Phạm Quỳnh's idea of "Lập Hiến" (constitutionalism) and Nguyen Van Vinh's Trục Trị (supervised rule) would define political and intellectual discourse of their generation. The subsequent generation, that of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, would have most likely agreed with Nguyen Van Vinh, but nevertheless would formulate its own political ideas. The Group often criticized Nguyen Van Vinh for his elitism and almost too enthusiastic love of French language and literature, all the while touting their own brand of quốc ngữ linguistic nationalism.

Despite his Vietnamese detractors, Phạm Quỳnh found an ally in Pierre Pasquier, Governor General of Indochina from 1928-1934. Pasquier believed that a rejuvenated monarchy could help advance French aims in Indochina. In 1932, the two worked together to bring 19-year-old Emperor Bảo Đại back to Vietnam as part of a larger plan to reform the imperial court (he had been studying in France). It all started promisingly enough. The Convention of 1925 was abolished, and a royal decree issued outlining a reform program to be executed in the areas of education, mandarin, justice, and the Chamber of Representatives. Much to the surprise of observers, the young emperor himself showed some initiative in this plan to revive the monarchy. Shortly after his return, Bảo Đại banned the kowtow, dismissed the old Council of Ministers, and toppled the Catholic mandarin Nguyễn Hữu Bài as prime minister to take over the position himself. He named a new council, inviting younger and more progressive figures including Phạm Quỳnh as Minister of National Education, Ngô Đình Diệm as Minister of the Interior, and Bùi Bang Đán as Minister of Justice. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that despite French promises for greater self-autonomy, the colonial government had no intention of relinquishing any real authority. In a move that would win him much respect as a man of integrity and conviction, Ngo Dinh Diem resigned in protest after less than three months in office. Phạm Quỳnh stayed on, wiping out whatever little remained of his nationalist credentials and cementing the criticism from nationalist circles as a collaborationist and French stooge.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, Phạm Quỳnh doggedly kept agitating for a "return to 1884" throughout the decade of the 1930s.<sup>93</sup> Still determined in 1939, he traveled to Paris to persuade the French Ministry of Colonies (now headed by Radical Georges Mandel) to adopt this plan. Back in Vietnam, rumors began circulating in the press that Paris intended to return Tonkin to imperial control. These rumors set off a series of strong objections among the Tonkinese elite, especially the Chamber of Representatives and western-educated intelligentsia. As *Ngày Nay* described, the entire city of Hanoi awoke on the morning of August 19 to find anonymous banners plastered in public areas all over Hanoi, including the Palace of Justice, the Resident Superior's mansion, and major thoroughfares. "To stop further suffering, we oppose the expansion of monarchical power... Resist the return to the 1884 Treaty," the banners read.<sup>94</sup> The paper also printed an open letter protesting the move from a group called the Democratic Youth (Thanh Niên Dân Chủ), part of the Indochinese Democratic Front (Mặt Trận Dân Chủ Đông Dương). The letter described how thousands of young men and women participated in demonstrations voicing their opposition to the return of Tonkin to imperial rule, and called for "all generations of youth to unify their efforts... without regard to ethnicity, class, gender, religion, or ideology."<sup>95</sup> Even the much-criticized Tonkinese Chamber of Representatives published their own, albeit less forceful, letter to the Minister of

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 172-173; Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 45-47.

<sup>93</sup> Neil L. Jamieson *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 89.

<sup>94</sup> Tô Lê Phôn, "Tin Tức Ngày Nay," *Ngày Nay* no. 176, 26 Aug 1939, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> "Lời hiệu triệu của thanh niên dân chủ Hà Nội" 20.



Colonies. Signed by 93 of the 121 members, the letter “ardently implores your Excellency to not allow the Residents Superior or their successors to fall into such dangerous decisions. We cannot believe that in the year 1939, the return to the 1884 Treaty—one that was never even properly followed—can be considered progress.”<sup>96</sup> Conspicuously missing from the list of signatures was monarchist Phạm Lê Bổng, the editor of *La Patrie Annamite* and president of the Chamber. The fact that over three quarters of representatives opposed returning illustrates the overwhelming unpopularity of the initiative, even amongst the fragmented and self-serving cliques that comprised the Chamber.

Like other western educated Vietnamese of this new generation, the Self-Reliant Literary Group vehemently voiced its objections to Phạm Quỳnh’s proposal. In his analysis of the situation, Hoàng Đạo believed that the arguments advanced by the pro-monarchist factions were based on a fundamental misreading of the Treaty. He quoted the monarchist newspaper *Nam Cường*, who argued that:

if we radically adopt the Terms of the 1884 Treaty, France will assist our Emperor to bestow upon us a constitution, a responsible national government, a cabinet that holds power, a united National Chamber united like the lower chamber in France, which holds legislative powers and checks the autocratic impulse of the emperor, and laws limiting his powers and those of the mandarin. There will never be dictatorship again.

While pleased that a monarchist journal would even entertain the thought of a limited monarchy, Hoàng Đạo pointed out a deep flaw in *Nam Cường*’s optimism—the conflation of the imperial court with democratic institutions. Hoàng Đạo analyzed the terms of the 1884 Treaty and cautioned that the Treaty only outlined the extent of imperial power and does not necessarily provide for the expansion of representative institutions. He wrote,

*Nam Cường* is jumping ahead of itself. Who knows if it is unintentional or wishful thinking? To return domestic control to the court according to the 1884 Treaty is one thing, but to expand the power of the Chamber and extend citizen’s rights to the people of Annam is something completely different, let’s not mistake that. This error is one with grave consequences.

Hoàng Đạo pointed out that even if executive control was returned to the king, it still remained royal prerogative to establish a representative chamber and extend civil rights. The imperial court could very well revert back to absolutism, or as Hoàng Đạo put it, “move heaven or earth if it pleased them,” while France would lose its oversight privileges to check the monarchy.<sup>97</sup>

Not only did Hoàng Đạo dismantle the monarchist argument for the 1884 treaty, he went so far as to completely reject the idea of a constitutional monarchy—which had its most ardent supporter and theoretician in Phạm Quỳnh. Hoàng Đạo exclaimed that “To take the freedom and rights of a entire people and place it at the whim of a few is a dictatorship, nothing else!” He believed that monarchy and democracy were fundamentally at odds:

A constitutional monarchy [chính thể quân chủ lập hiến], as many have argued, does not make sense at all; neither the divine right of kings nor democracy is followed

---

<sup>96</sup> “Việc trở lại hòa ước 1884,” *Ngày Nay* no. 177, 2 Sep 1939, p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Trở lại hòa ước 1884: Tiến bộ hay thoái bộ?” *Ngày Nay* no. 175, 19 Aug 1939, p. 11,

completely. If one follows the divine right of kings, the king's power is derived from God, the desires of his subjects, the people, cannot limit it. The king can allow them to enjoy of a few rights, a few freedoms, but the king always maintains the right to revoke them. If he cannot, then there is no way that his power is god-given.

According to democracy, the issue of succession cannot be reconciled with its most fundamental ideal, that of the rule of the people. It is true, even if a king is elected by the people, then only he represents the people; his children and descendants ascending the throne has nothing to do with the people. That way, reconciling the power of the king with the rule of the people, is something that does not coincide with reason.<sup>98</sup>

In later writings, Hoàng Đạo would deny the divine right of kings to the Vietnamese monarchy when he described it as a “manmade bond, loose and without any strength.”<sup>99</sup> Hoàng Đạo did not trust the monarchy to establish representative institutions and expand citizens rights. After all, the establishment of constitutional monarchies in Europe was the result of long fought processes of chipping away at absolutist power.

The reason why such a constitutional monarchy would not be acceptable to the Vietnamese, *Ngày Nay* argued, was because the Vietnamese had become increasingly enlightened in the decades following the 1884 Treaty. To the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the return of Tonkin to imperial control essentially constituted regression. Lê Ta (a pseudonym used by Thế Lữ) put it most succinctly: “An easy calculation. 1939 and 1884 are apart by: 1939-1884=55 years. Conclusion? Backward Progress.”<sup>100</sup> Other collaborators poked fun of this idea in cartoons. The following cartoon by Tô Tử (Tô Ngọc Vân), titled “What would happen if the 1884 Treaty is enacted,” featured exercise by kowtowing, a powerful army made up of swordsmen, and a strong economy through the selling of royal badges (

Figure 3).

---

<sup>98</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Chính thể quân chủ và cộng hòa” *Ngày Nay* no. 103, 27 Mar 1938, p. 3-4.

<sup>99</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Công dân giáo dục: Nước Nam” *Ngày Nay* no. 165, 10 Jun 1939, p. 10.

<sup>100</sup> Lê Ta, “Tin Vắn... Vắn,” *Ngày Nay* no. 175, 19 Aug 1939, p. 7.

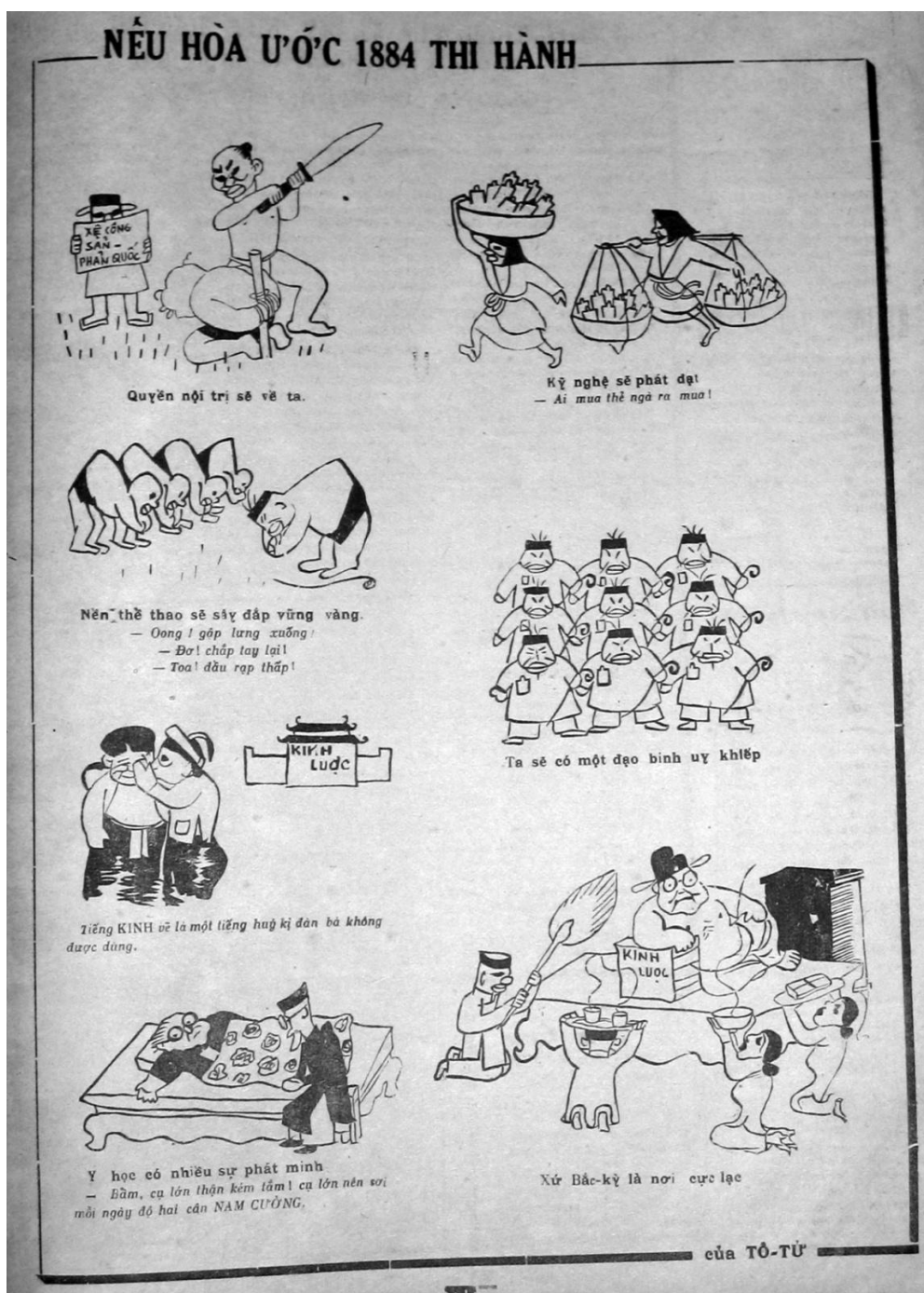


Figure 3. Cartoon by To Ngoc Van from *Ngày Nay* no. 176, 26 Aug 1939, p. 19.

Khái Hưng wrote that: “1939 is not 1884. The people of Annam today are no longer like the Annamese of the past.” Vietnamese are no longer content to be ruled at the pleasure of a few privileged people, he explained, “we understand our rights. We want to fight for our rights. The Treaty was signed by those who did not represent us with Frenchmen who came to conquer us--we had no part and we do not recognize it.”<sup>101</sup> Khái Hưng surmised that the French had leaked the rumors to counteract expansionist rumblings from the Japanese. In a

<sup>101</sup> Khái Hưng, “Câu chuyện hàng tuần” *Ngày Nay* no. 175, 19 Aug 1939, p. 4.

move similar to Pu-Yi in Manchukuo, Khái Hưng believed that the Japanese wanted to establish a puppet state in Indochina and install Prince Cường Đế on the throne. He wrote that “these days, to win over the Annamese is not to give them a handsome king, but to give them democratic freedoms.” If the French really wanted to foil the Japanese, Khái Hưng challenged, “why don’t they stand up to their enemy and establish a democracy in this land?”<sup>102</sup>

Rather than reverting to the old Paternotre Treaty, a number of Self-Reliant Literary Group members suggested signing a new pact with France. As Khái Hưng wrote, “We are ready to sign another Treaty with France, one in which our rights would matter.” Hoàng Đạo added in his column, the monarchists

have forgotten that even if we abrogate the 1884 Treaty, we could always sign a new one. Yes, why don’t we sign a new treaty between Vietnam and France, one that matches the current level of Vietnamese development and progress? Why don’t we convene representatives to negotiate with France government towards a genuine constitution that that protects freedom of democracy and unalienable human rights for the Vietnamese people? Why can’t we do that?

Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were suspicious of monarchy in all its forms, even a potentially benevolent one. For them, it was far preferable to build a civil society on transparent political procedures, not the whims of a few. The Self-Reliant Literary Group made the case for a secular liberal democracy founded on popular representation.

Not only did the Group reject the return to the 1884 Treaty, they also heaped scorn on Phạm Quỳnh, whom they believed was the architect of the objectionable proposal. They criticized the Minister of National Education for what they saw was his complete disregard and arrogance towards the opinions of the people. Such accusations were not necessarily without merit—Phạm Quỳnh had indeed tried to broker the entire deal without inquiring about public opinion or even consulting the Chamber of Representatives. Had he done so, the rumors would not have taken the Tonkinese elite by surprise, nor would they have elicited such a ferocious response. As *Ngày Nay* indignantly put it,

Such an important issue pertaining to the destiny of the entire region and [Phạm Quỳnh] views it as his own private matter. He has forgotten that the region has its own Chamber of Representatives and institutions that represent more than 7 million people. He keeps his business to himself, without bothering to ask anyone’s opinion... He knows that if he puts it to the people, no one would agree to it.<sup>103</sup>

For *Ngày Nay*, Phạm Quỳnh’s indifference to the opinion of the Tonkinese was evidence of just how out of touch he was, not only with the people, but also with the changing times. For *Ngày Nay*, the Vietnamese have moved beyond being told what is good for them—they now demand a say in their own governance.

Incensed at Phạm Quỳnh, Hoàng Đạo wrote a scathing article addressed directly to him, demanding him to resign. The usually level-headed political theorist used an caustic tone to describe the Minister’s increasing alienation from the people. The people of Annam, Hoàng Đạo writes, “remembered Phạm Quỳnh the journalist, a student who passionately wrote words of patriotism for his country and people, a thinker who had advanced ideas of

<sup>102</sup> Khái Hưng, “Câu chuyện hàng tuần” *Ngày Nay* no. 173, 5 Aug 1939, p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> Trang Quỳnh Bao, “Ét lăm! Phạm Quỳnh công ty!” *Ngày Nay* no. 176, 26 Aug 1939, p. 10.

civil rights. Yes, civil rights, I am not mistaken.” He recalls Phạm Quỳnh’s idea of a constitutional monarchy, outlined in the famous pen war with Nguyen Van Vinh:

They remember your ideas of constitutionalism. An idea that reconciles civil rights with the monarchy, to place equal importance on three powers that would seemingly be at odds: the monarchy, the citizens, and the colonial government. You dreamed of a self-governing Vietnam, under the guidance of the king but the real power belonging in the hands of the representative chamber elected by the people. You were a person who loved democracy and hoped for a strong and free Vietnam like Great Britain or Sweden.

As Hoàng Đạo writes, the period after the uprisings in 1930 presented the idealistic writer and intellectual with the chance to put his ideas into action. Phạm Quỳnh gave up his pen and joined the Bảo Đại’s cabinet as Minister of National Education in 1932, raising the hopes of Vietnamese like “Wang Anshi being called to the imperial court, waiting for you to enact your ideas in a short time.”<sup>104</sup> As Hoàng Đạo bitterly describes, the reforms never came:

then, seven years passed. Seven years, a long period of time, enough for a talented politician like yourself to announce the positive results of your grand experiment... But what are those results? Has Annam, your grand laboratory, become the utopian model worthy of emulation yet? ...The truth makes us sad to answer that: the results of your experiment has come to nothing. Annam is still the place where the people enjoy the least freedom, where they are the least educated, and receive the least justice... Your experiment completely failed. Where is the constitution, where is the civil rights in Annam? And now you want to extend the boundaries of your laboratory to Tonkin too?

Calling Phạm Quỳnh “just a pitiable puppet,” Hoàng Đạo argued that any independent thinker and talented politician would not stomach the humiliation and failure of such an experiment. He urges Phạm Quỳnh to save his reputation and reestablish himself as a man of integrity by admitting to himself: “We had advanced a policy, thinking it was feasible, but the realities do not allow it.” Hoàng Đạo believed that “Only in that way, you are not shamed for deceiving the people, there is only one way to assuage your conscience: resign.” His biting letter ended with: “We ignorant citizens, call for you to go home! Resign, Mr. Phạm Quỳnh!”<sup>105</sup> Hoang Dao’s letter shed light on why the Group criticized Pham Quynh so

---

<sup>104</sup> Wang Anshi (1021-1086) was a statesman of the Song Dynasty who enacted large-scale reforms in Chinese economics, politics and society during his short 6-year tenure.

<sup>105</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Về đi thôi! Về đi! Ông Phạm Quỳnh!” *Ngày Nay* no.175, 19 Aug 1939, p. 6. Coincidentally, *Ngày Nay* was in the middle of publishing perhaps its most irreverent serial aimed at Phạm Quỳnh and the monarchy when the uproar over the 1884 Treaty erupted. Written by Hoàng Đạo and titled the “New Journey to the West” [Hậu Tây Du], the serial began appearing in *Ngày Nay* less than a month before the rumors broke. Hoàng Đạo modeled his satirical story on the Chinese epic “Journey to the West” by Tang dynasty writer Wu Cheng’en, and paralleled Phạm Quỳnh with its hero, the Monkey King Sun Wukong. Explaining the premise of his story, Hoàng Đạo wrote that “in olden times, the Monkey King and his two companions escorted the monk Xuanzang in search of the Sutras, braving many hardships and difficulties. For this reason, their contemporaries called their strange and wondrous story the ‘Journey to the West.’” The author saw Phạm Quỳnh as a modern equivalent, using a mock-epic tone by invoking the exalted language of Tang literature: “Today, Master Phạm Quỳnh, though his magical powers do not equal those of the Monkey King, nevertheless stirred mischief in the Celestial court of the Jade Emperor and purloined heavenly edicts. But he also did some things of interest—he used his spells to invoke national essence and soul, jumped into the Imperial court, and donned a mandarin’s hat. Judging from his face and bearing, he is also far pleasing to the

harshly over the years. In addition to their intellectual differences, the Group saw Phạm Quỳnh as a western-educated intellectual, full of big ideas and plans, who lost his idealism once he attained power.

In the wake of the objections by northern intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the Minister of Colonies Mandel finally put the rumors to rest by declaring them without validity. As William Duiker points out, archival documents indicate that the French had no intention of giving away their administrative authority over Tonkin, at least while Japan remained a threat.<sup>106</sup> The brouhaha over the 1884 Treaty lasted a little over three weeks. Nevertheless, this short episode illustrates the Group's antimonarchical sentiments and their disdain for its supporters. Their writings on Phạm Quỳnh and the monarchy reveal that the Self-Reliant Literary Group believed the monarchy a hopelessly obsolete institution not worth reforming, rejected the idea of a constitutional monarchy, and reiterated its support for a secular, liberal democracy founded on the rule of law.

Writing in July 1939 to commemorate the anniversary of the French Revolution, the Group subtly criticized the wide gulf between the exalted ideals of French Republicanism and the inherently unequal realities of French colonial rule in Indochina. *Ngày Nay* printed a Vietnamese translation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, as well as a detailed analysis of the document. Towards the end of the same issue, *Ngày Nay*'s readers encountered a series of cartoons critical of colonial rule. Drawn by Tô Ngọc Vân and titled, "Games and Diversions: the 14<sup>th</sup> of July in France and Indochina," these cartoons would portray the relationship between France and its Indochinese colony as a series of fairground contests and events (Figure 4).

---

eye than Sun Wukong." Hoàng Đạo compares Sun Wukong's search for redemption and nirvana with Phạm Quỳnh's voyage to another place of enlightenment—France. He writes, "Master Phạm Quỳnh is now escorting the Empress across the seas to the West, facing hardships and difficulties. Whatever their eyes saw and ears heard, what they dreamed and thought, is perhaps a thousand times more strange and wondrous than in the original tale. This is why we are calling their trip the "New Journey to the West." Hoàng Đạo, "Hậu tây du," *Ngày Nay* no. 170, 15 Jul 1939, p. 6. The story tells of Phạm Quỳnh's arduous search for "enlightenment" (cheekily described by Hoàng Đạo as a position in the mandarin state) and his subsequent adventures amongst the immortals. He encounters eccentric personages along the way, such as his teacher the Righteous Master Mac (Louis Marty) who forces him to eat a wad of green phlegm to prove his sincerity and loyalty, Tan Da who he drives away for having inferior powers (poetry writing), and archnemeses Nguyen Van Vinh who wages an epic magical fight to the death using the weapons of *lập hiến* and *trục trí*. Two weeks after Hoàng Đạo's scathing indictment of Phạm Quỳnh and demands for his resignation, the "New Journey to the West" ended abruptly, its text censored and replaced by a large black "X." Hoàng Đạo, "Hậu tây du," *Ngày Nay* no. 177, 2 Sep 1939, p. 14.. Although the colonial authorities had no intention of satisfying Phạm Quỳnh's political demands, they nevertheless still believed his good standing needed protecting against irreverent satirists, despite delaying six weeks to do so. On the other hand, censors managed to suppress the story before the appearance of the Empress, which suggests that her reputation, and by the extension that of the monarchy, was of greatest priority.

<sup>106</sup> Duiker, 176.



Figure 4. Cartoon by Tô Ngọc Vân, from *Ngày Nay* no. 170, 15 Jul 1939, p. 14.

One of the cartoons, called “Blindman’s Bluff,” featured a blindfolded Ly Toet and Xa Xe chasing two goats labeled “Freedom” and “Equality.” In another cartoon, A caption below explained that “Newsreel on screen: An image of Georges Mandel sharing a piece of the “sweet cake of Rights.” In a flash, the “cake” has disappeared. The Vietnamese craned their necks in anticipation, their mouths watering.” When read as a single discourse, the Group intended the paradox to be clear—France, the birthplace of republican ideals was also the holder of colonies.

From *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*’s coverage of the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives, articles on colonialism and legal reform, and campaign against the monarchy, it becomes apparent that the members of Self-Reliant Literary Group believed in French republican ideals. The Group’s calls to expand suffrage and widen the chamber’s powers underscore its belief in popular sovereignty and trust in political structures. Its demands for greater Vietnamese self-autonomy and equality under the law echo the Enlightenment values of universality and patriotism. Its complete rejection of monarchy

emphasizes its conviction that democracy and transparent political procedures were preferable to arbitrary rule of a vested few. Fervent colonial supporters of Republican values, the Group also campaigned against rule by edict, criticized harsh press laws, and called for a colonial constitution—in short, it demanded that the colonial government live up to the ideals it so openly proclaimed. As a vehicle for making these demands, the Group turned increasingly toward the politics of the moderate left.

### Politics of the Center Left

While the Group's championing of republican values have been apparent since the earliest issues of *Phong Hóa*, their center-left political leanings did not emerge until much later. The ascendance of the French Popular Front government in 1936 marked a sudden transformation in the way the Group discussed politics. In the more relaxed political atmosphere, the Self-Reliant Literary Group became increasingly emboldened in their discussion of politics, openly supporting and endorsing parties, individuals, and institutions whose policies dovetailed with their own views. Most notably, the Group exhibited an inclination towards moderate leftist politics, in which the excesses of capitalism—namely exploitation and inequality—were tamed by state political institutions. This section will discuss the Group's center-left politics; first, its support for the Tonkin branch of the French Socialist Party, admiration for the party's founder Jean Jaures, and finally, its embrace of a Marxist-inspired framework for examining labor relations.

#### *Support for SFIO*

In May 1938, announcements and commentary backing the Tonkin branch of the French Socialist Party, or SFIO began appearing in *Ngày Nay*. Khái Hưng, the Group's most prolific member, became more and more vociferous about his support of the Socialists in his weekly column, *Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần* (Story of the Week), and even interviewed SFIO general secretary Louis Caput.<sup>107</sup> The timing of such coverage coincided with the failed attempt at creating a Tonkinese Journalist's Association—during which Khái Hưng worked with Communists such as Võ Nguyên Giáp, Trần Huy Liệu, Khuất Duy Tiến and Trương Tửu, as well as Socialists Phạm Hữu Chương and Vũ Đình Hòe.<sup>108</sup> This suggests that this collaboration introduced Khái Hưng if not to leftist politics, then to the party apparatus of these ideologies.<sup>109</sup> Even after the association had disbanded, Khái Hưng kept in touch with Trần Huy Liệu, interviewing him for the *Ngày Nay*'s special issue dedicated to Youth.<sup>110</sup> During this period, Liệu also contributed a number of articles to *Ngày Nay*: In the annual issue on the Chamber of Representatives, he wrote an article about leftist candidates in the election. In the Tet 1939 issue, *Ngày Nay* published Liệu's memoir "Tet in Prison," recounting his experiences on Poulo Condore.<sup>111</sup> While no evidence exists that Khái Hưng or

<sup>107</sup> Nhị Linh, "Chúng tôi phỏng vấn Ông Caput" *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 16.

<sup>108</sup> An interesting coincidence: no sooner had the journalists' association had begun to wane, between February to April 1938, announcements for the SFIO Tonkin branch began appearing in *Ngày Nay*. The first one was the party's announcement of the May Day demonstrations, in *Ngày Nay* no. 108, 1 May 1938, p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> An announcement by the journalist's association mentions the names of various members. "Ủy ban thường trực của hội nghị báo giới Bắc kỳ làm việc" *Ngày Nay* no. 65, 27 Jun 1937, p. 472.

<sup>110</sup> Khái Hưng, "Ông Trần Huy Liệu," *Ngày Nay* no. 115, 19 Jun 1938, p. 9-10.

<sup>111</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, "Cử viện trưởng: Những hành vi trong bóng tối" *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 7-8; Trần Huy Liệu, "Tết trong tù," *Ngày Nay* #149, 11 Feb 1939, p. 24-25.



any member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group was a member of the SFIO, his sustained and consistent commentary on the party suggests no small amount of support on his part.

Very little has been written about the SFIO in Tonkin, and the existing scholarship focuses more on French membership than Vietnamese. Nevertheless, it provides information that would help contextualize the party and its Vietnamese members. Before the victory of the Popular Front, Socialist activity was illegal in Indochina, but tolerated as it was mostly limited to French nationals. At the National Council of November 1936, the Popular Front government allowed the SFIO to establish branches in Indochina. The party was to serve as the instrument of France's new humane and egalitarian brand of colonialism. In his unpublished thesis, Fabien Poussier described the Socialists in Indochina as

innovators of a principle that would have revolutionized the old colonial order based on inequality between the colonizer and the colonized: The principle of integration [*mixité*]. ... This principle is interpreted, in a sense, as a way towards assimilation, bringing about the arrival of Indochinese socialism being through the intermediary of the French section of the Second International.<sup>112</sup>

To bring about this new Indochinese socialism, Vietnamese were allowed to join the party as members. For the metropole, the SFIO's purpose was essentially the same French civilizing mission, only now under the guise of bringing socialist consciousness to the Indochinese. On the other hand, more radical anticolonial French members of the SFIO in Indochina saw the principle of integration as a genuine symbol of Franco-Vietnamese equality. For Vietnamese such as Khái Hưng, the SFIO was a welcome sign that Vietnamese were finally allowed to legally participate in politics.

Despite the avowals towards greater parity, the reality was that the French members of SFIO still held deep suspicions about the Vietnamese. As a result, the party set selective criteria for membership, making it prohibitively difficult for Vietnamese to join. According to Fabien Poussier, Vietnamese applicants must demonstrate the ability to read and write in both French and quốc ngữ, as well as prove that they are not "politicized."<sup>113</sup> In addition, each application must bear the signatures of two SFIO members in good standing willing to vouch for the applicant. The exclusivity of the SFIO was borne out in the statistics: Caroline Deschamps observed that Vietnamese members were more strictly screened than French, with 30% of Vietnamese applications for membership rejected versus only 5% of French.<sup>114</sup> Even after the party had approved an application, it could revoke membership at any time, especially for members who they believed lacked "socialist conviction." For example, the SFIO expelled Tài Văn Tấn for his communist sympathies and Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn for being a "known nationalist."<sup>115</sup> Later on, this chapter will discuss the expulsion of six Vietnamese members from the SFIO for cutting political deals with other groups. The strict membership criteria and subsequent expulsions suggest that the SFIO may have wanted to work with the Vietnamese, but only those whose politics met with its approval.

The relationship between the SFIO and other leftist groups, namely the Vietnamese Communists, remains unclear. As Sophie Quinn-Judge suggested, the ICP actually initiated the founding of a Vietnamese branch of the SFIO in Tonkin beginning in 1937. Because of

---

<sup>112</sup> Fabien Poussier, *Louis Caput: La Section SFIO D'Indochine face a la guerre Franco-Vietnamienne, 1936-1950*. (Maitrise thesis, Université Paris VII, 1990), 8.

<sup>113</sup> Poussier, 17. My thanks to Paul Sager for sharing these documents.

<sup>114</sup> Caroline Deschamps, *Être socialiste en Indochine: 1905-1952. Recherche sur le socialisme européen en situation coloniale*. (Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Histoire: Université de Paris VII, 1996),

27

<sup>115</sup> Poussier, 18.

the lack of a strong mainstream political party in the North such as the southern Constitutionalists, the ICP faced no competition in forging political alliances with middle-class groups, and thus seem to have had a significant role in the creation of the Tonkin branch of the SFIO. She wrote that “by January 1937, the Le Travail group was cooperating with the SFIO and the Radical Party (both French organizations) on a plan to create a Tonkin section of the SFIO.”<sup>116</sup>

Considering the fragmented nature and intense infighting of these various political groups during this period, such claims seem rather overstated. Scholars such as Hue Tam Ho-Tai and Daniel Hémerly have thoroughly established that rival Trotskyist groups were indeed not fronts, which becomes particularly evident when their members are pursued and murdered by ICP agents. Since this was also almost surely the case with non-Leninist groups, the relationship between the SFIO and the ICP seems more likely to have been cooperation or collaboration. Fabien Poussier described the SFIO attitude towards the Vietnamese communists in particular as one of “reticence” and “anxiety,” and that “the SFIO was afraid to see its influence decline in favor of the PCI, with good reason especially around 1938.”<sup>117</sup> This lingering suspicion of the ICP could very well have prevented a close working relationship between the two groups. Although both hail from general leftist traditions, it is difficult to believe that an established mainstream political party like the SFIO would be prone to the intrigues of what was then a relatively weak and underground ICP. Furthermore, given the complicated and often acrimonious history of the French left, it would make sense that the SFIO would be apprehensive in collaborating with the colonial offshoot of its Communist rivals.

Nevertheless, even if the ICP was behind the founding of the SFIO Tonkin branch, it certainly had little control over the party’s activities once established. As previously mentioned, membership criteria was dictated and executed by the French contingent of the party, resulting in a rather disparate collection of members. Caroline Deschamps breaks down the Vietnamese membership by profession: 28.7% state employees, 16.66% private sector white and blue collar workers, and 54.63% “independents” (businessmen, farmers, writers, students, etc.)<sup>118</sup> As Trần Huy Liệu wrote, the SFIO Tonkin branch

was very complicated... The membership of this branch included a number of Frenchmen, a large number [đại bộ phận] of Vietnamese, which included many freemasons [hội tam điểm], and a number of people with communist tendencies.<sup>119</sup>

Liệu’s description calls attention to the presence of communist sympathizers in the SFIO, which implies that such members had to downplay their radicalism and political allegiances.<sup>120</sup> This account suggests that the collaboration between the SFIO and ICP was not close, at least not enough that the ICP would play a role in the establishment of the

---

<sup>116</sup> CAOM, SPCE 377, note conf. no. 90/S, 5 Jan 1937; also cited in Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 216.

<sup>117</sup> Poussier, 17, 32.

<sup>118</sup> Deschamps, 27.

<sup>119</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, and Lương Bích Nguyên. *Lịch sử thủ đô Hà Nội* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Hà Nội, 2000), 186. The French had introduced Freemasonry into Indochina during the colonial conquest, but it was not open to Vietnamese until the 1920s. The two lodges that admitted Vietnamese included some of Indochina’s most well-known elites and intellectuals: Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Phạm Quỳnh, and Phạm Huy Lục, Bùi Quang Chiêu, and Trịnh Đình Thảo, among others. See Jacques Dalloz, “Les Vietnamiens dans la franc-maçonnerie coloniale,” *Revue Française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 85, no. 320, 3<sup>rd</sup> trimestre 1998, p. 103-118.

<sup>120</sup> One SFIO member in particular, Phan Thanh, is claimed by the Communist historiography as one such sympathizer.

Tonkin branch. Trần Huy Liệu would not have left out such an achievement in his memoirs, given that he was all too willing to tout the achievements of the ICP during this period.

A closer examination of Deschamps and Liệu's accounts reveals that the bulk of these Vietnamese members—state employees, businessmen, writers, students, white-collar workers—belonged to some of the most educated groups in Tonkin. This suggests that the SFIO's political message appealed for the most part to more mainstream and reformist-minded middle class educated Vietnamese. A cursory look at the various SFIO announcements in *Ngày Nay* confirms this observation. Vietnamese members of the SFIO numbered among some of Hanoi's most well-known figures. They included newspaper editors and owners such as Dương Mậu Ngọc, Phan Trần Chúc, Nguyễn Văn Luân and Đinh Khắc Giao; local businessmen and politicians such as Phạm Tá, Nguyễn Đình Tiếp, Vũ Văn An; and finally, intellectuals such as Vũ Đình Hòe. A few of these characters, such as Vũ Văn An and Dương Mậu Ngọc, were easily recognizable as key players in the factional power politics of the Chamber, Indochinese Congress, and Tonkin journalist's association. The Group took keen interest in the SFIO at the city level, following closely the party's performance in the Hanoi City Council elections of 1938. Similar to its coverage of the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives, *Ngày Nay*'s treatment of the elections also included detailed accounts of proceedings, descriptions of the various factions and cliques, commentary on developments, and the usual satirical cartoons. The week before the elections, held on December 4, 1938, *Ngày Nay* identified three groups running for office: first, a clique made up of Hanoi business owners and professionals Bui Xuan Hoc, Phạm Ta, and Dr. Phạm Văn Phan. According to *Ngày Nay*, this group had no coherent program, “just beating their chests and adamantly declaring that they will devote all their strength to their work, although no one knows what that work is.” The second group comprised the incumbents from last year's city council: Dang Vu Lac, Bui Tuong Chieu, Phung Nu Cuong, and Le Thang. The Self-Reliant Literary Group seemed most excited about the newcomers to the political scene, SFIO members Dr. Phạm Hữu Chương, Bui Ngoc Ai, and Phan Thanh. *Ngày Nay* pointed out that this was the only group out of the three to have a coherent plan of action.

In a show of support, the Group published a SFIO announcement in *Ngày Nay* that painstakingly detailed the party's political program. The Vietnamese socialist candidates promised to fight for three reforms: 1) the number of Vietnamese seats on the council would equal the French; 2) the Mayor of Hanoi would be elected by popular vote rather than appointed, and 3) the expansion of voting privileges. Realizing that their program was a lost cause on the French-dominated council, the candidates vowed to publicly resign in protest, run for office again, and resubmit their demands, for as long as necessary.<sup>121</sup> Although skeptical that such actions would change anything, Khải Hưng still endorsed the party by writing, “The socialist program is rather clever and interesting. They're threatening to resign before even running, resigning so that they can run again, running to resign, etc. They'll keep doing that until the number of Vietnamese seats equal the French, which will never happen. Nevertheless, it will be something diverting to entertain the people of Hanoi. Let's vote for them to see what kind of antics they'll pull.”<sup>122</sup> Even if the Socialists do not accomplish their reforms, Khải Hưng reasoned, at the very least they would have engaged in a bit of political rabblousing at the expense of the French.

The Socialist party won three seats on the municipal council. As per usual in its coverage of elections, *Ngày Nay* described the various tactics used by wealthy candidates to buy votes, including the time-honored ploy of hiring automobiles to ferry electors to the

<sup>121</sup> Hoàng Đạo, Người và việc, *Ngày Nay* #139, 3 Dec 1938, p 5.

<sup>122</sup> Khải Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 139, 3 Dec 1938, p. 4.

polling station. One candidate, Phạm Ta, enlisted the services of 35 automobiles, while Le Thang, despite disingenuously claiming that his wife used his only car to bring him lunch, was later found to have a convoy of 20.<sup>123</sup> Even despite the expense they incurred, many of the candidates did not win. *Ngày Nay* noted with admiration that the Socialists won their seats without reverting to such dishonorable tactics, and viewed it as a sign of political maturity from the Hanoi electorate. As Khải Hưng commented, “The results of the recent city council election holds much meaning. Everybody must see that the citizens of Hanoi are now the most honorable anywhere; candidates can no longer spend money and hire cars to buy their votes. In these times, honor is rare, and in our country it is more precious than diamonds.”<sup>124</sup> Such a statement may seem overly optimistic considering that only 1480 of the approximately 4000 eligible voters took part in the election.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, Khải Hưng saw the elections as a sign of a fledgling civic culture in which voters voice their demands through the ballot box.<sup>126</sup>

The first meeting of the newly elected City Council soon revealed the deep fissures amongst the Vietnamese members. The non-socialist incumbents struck a mollifying tone in a statement by Le Thang: “Many people say that we cannot accomplish anything because we are too few in number. We do not believe this is true. Let us join hands and work together.”<sup>127</sup> This statement will be much lambasted in *Ngày Nay*. The following cartoon by Nguyen Gia Tri pokes fun of the emptiness of Le Thang’s statement [Figure 5].



Figure 5. Cartoon by Nguyen Gia Tri, from *Ngày Nay* no. 143, 31 Dec 1938, p. 3.

<sup>123</sup> Nhị Linh, “Bầu!,” *Ngày Nay* no. 141, 17 Dec 1938, p. 9. What is interesting to note is that while these candidates were running against each other in the city council elections, they were working together as members of the League of Light, both on the administrative committee. Illustrates how interconnected and small the participant pool was for various organizations.

<sup>124</sup> Khải Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 141, 17 Dec 1938, p. 4.

<sup>125</sup> “Việc tuần lễ” *Ngày Nay* no. 141, 17 Dec 1938, p. 21.

<sup>126</sup> In addition to the other groups, the Communist party advanced two of their own candidates, Đặng Thái Mai and Nguyễn Đăng Thục. They received only 6 votes each, suggesting the relative unpopularity of the party amongst more mainstream voters. Nhị Linh later quipped that perhaps “their readership consists of only 4 people because one has to subtract their own votes, 6-2=4.” This highlights the nature of the ICP as a relatively unknown entity at this time.

<sup>127</sup> Lê ta, “Hội đồng thành phố Hanoi” *Ngày Nay* no. 142, 24 Dec 1938, p. 6.

As the cartoon makes clear, the French had no intention of working with the Vietnamese delegates, instead wanting to keep them ineffectual and powerless. In another cartoon, Nguyen Gia Tri also commented on the impossibility of the French relinquishing any of its power on the city council. The only way for Vietnamese to equal the number of seats on the council, is to actually become French citizens.<sup>128</sup>

In contrast to the conciliatory incumbents, the Socialist members of the city council dispensed with such niceties. True to their word, they immediately began to demand reforms. The young and fiery Phan Thanh rose and gave an impassioned speech for equal representation for Vietnamese on the Council. According to Leta, who was present at the meeting, Phan Thanh used “bold, polite, resolute, and straightforward words” to argue the inherent injustice of the municipal board-- that six Vietnamese councilmen represented over 150,000 people, while the French had 12 to serve a mere 7,000. In reaction to his speech, “the French, for the most part, smirked.” Immediately after Phan Thanh, Dr. Phạm Hữu Chương took the podium to advocate that the city government establish a deputy mayor position held by a Vietnamese, as well as open the mayoral elections to a popular vote. The Frenchmen on the council erupted in protest. The Mayor himself castigated the two men, reminding them that they did not have the right to raise “political” demands. Another council member, Dassier, leaped to his feet and bombastically announced that “We French fought in battle. We French were wounded. Therefore, we French should have more rights than you.”<sup>129</sup> Other French council members used a legalistic and historical rationale: “Hanoi is a French city, the product of a treaty between the Emperor and the Republic of France. We must follow the agreement and leave the council as such.” One Dr. Marlingeas, whom Hoàng Đạo described as the “leader of the French faction,” blatantly told Phạm Hữu Chương that he did not need a reason, he just did not want the Vietnamese to have equal representation on the city council.<sup>130</sup> Even at the municipal level, these Vietnamese activists faced a difficult battle against an entrenched and obstinate opposition.

In the ensuing issues, members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group personally defended the Socialist council members, responding to each of the French arguments against municipal reform. To the legal claim that Hanoi was a French city by treaty, Hoàng Đạo responded, “And what treaty might that be, I ask you? People often say that the French do not know geography, please do not give them a reason to say they do not know their history as well.” He pointed out there was no treaty, that the emperor had “suddenly had the good heart to issue an edict that gave France the cities of Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Tourane, kind of like a village elder giving his friend a bottle of champagne.”<sup>131</sup> This edict was neither submitted to nor ratified by the French government, therefore, “it does not possess the characteristics of a treaty agreed on both sides.” Furthermore, Hoàng Đạo indicated that nowhere does the edict stipulate how the city government should be organized, much less that there must be 12 Frenchmen and 6 Vietnamese on the city council.<sup>132</sup> In the same issue, Nhị Linh chimed in, highlighting the fact that the Vietnamese pay the taxes used to run this “French” city.<sup>133</sup>

In reply to Dassier’s outburst about the French serving in the military, Hoàng Đạo reminded him that the Vietnamese had done the same:

---

<sup>128</sup> Cartoon by Rigt, *Ngày Nay* no. 142, 24 Dec 1938, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> Leta, Hoi dong thanh pho Hanoi, *Ngày Nay* #142, 24 Dec 1938, p. 6.

<sup>130</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc”, *Ngày Nay* no. 142, 24 Dec 1938, p. 5.

<sup>131</sup> As plausible as it may have sounded, Hoàng Đạo’s claim cannot be independently verified. Michael Vann’s dissertation discusses that Hanoi was considered French “territory,” he does not however, discuss the legalities that made it thus.

<sup>132</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc” *Ngày Nay* no. 143, 31 Dec 1938, p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Nhị Linh, “Hợp tác” *Ngày Nay* no. 143, 31 Dec 1938, p. 6.

The Annamese also fought in the Great War of 1914, and many died. They enlisted voluntarily, which means they've done far more than the French, who were conscripted. What's more, even if the Annamese want to fight, they cannot, because despite their pleading, there are no laws establishing compulsory military service. How can they fight when no one has shown them how to hold a gun? It is not their fault.<sup>134</sup>

Le Ta reiterated Hoàng Đạo's argument, albeit more sarcastically: "and the Vietnamese who went to France during the Great War were on holiday."<sup>135</sup> As far as the Group was concerned, the French had no sound reasons to maintain the status quo, other than their own chauvinism and intransigence.

At the next council meeting to discuss the city budget on January 18, 1939, the socialists resigned in protest. Anticipating that a Vietnamese audience would applaud the Socialists' resignation, the French council members did all in their power to prevent the meeting from becoming a public spectacle. The despised Dr. Marlingeas quickly petitioned the Mayor to bar the meeting from public attendance and keep the proceedings private. The Mayor put the motion to a vote; predictably, the 12 French city council members outvoted the 6 Vietnamese. The public as well as the press were ushered out of the meeting room. In dramatic style, Phan Thanh rose and announced that he

had always been ready to work with the French council members, but only in the spirit of true cooperation, when the number of Vietnamese delegates equal the French. To this request, the French members had responded with obstinacy, which shows that these members are not sincere in their desire for cooperation.

At this, a Mr. Ortoli stood up and angrily spoke out of turn, calling Phan Thanh "a liar." The Vietnamese socialist calmly continued, announcing that because earnest cooperation did not exist, the Socialist members of the city council must resign their posts.<sup>136</sup> Khải Hưng's reaction to the news: "...this is something we must be sad about! This means that the French and the Vietnamese do not sincerely want to work together."<sup>137</sup>

In the days and weeks following the resignation, *Ngày Nay* showed its support for the Socialists. Hoàng Đạo agreed with Phan Thanh's statement when he sardonically wrote, "according to the French council members, cooperation is very good. They've already thought of the rights of the Vietnamese. Whatever they decide, the Vietnamese members only need to bow their heads and obey. That is their idea of genuine and sincere cooperation. Anyone who says differently is a "liar," such as Mr. Phan Thanh and the entire people of Hanoi."<sup>138</sup> *Ngày Nay* berated the remaining Vietnamese council members, asking, "What did they hope to accomplish? Even with 8 people on the council they've done nothing, did they think they can fight for the Vietnamese with only 4? If they knew what's what, they would follow the example of their Socialist colleagues and resign."<sup>139</sup>

To replace the resigned council members, the city held elections the following month. As they had promised, the same socialists—Phạm Hữu Chương, Phan Thanh, and Bui Ngoc

<sup>134</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Người và việc", *Ngày Nay* no. 142, 24 Dec 1938, p. 5.

<sup>135</sup> Lê ta, "Hội đồng thành phố Hanoi."

<sup>136</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Người và việc", *Ngày Nay* no. 146, 21 Jan 1939, p. 5.

<sup>137</sup> Khải Hưng, "Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần," *Ngày Nay* no. 146, 21 Jan 1939, p. 4.

<sup>138</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Người và việc", *Ngày Nay* no. 146, 21 Jan 1939, p. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Người và việc" *Ngày Nay* no. 154, 25 Mar 1939, p. 5.

Ai—stood for election. As they explained in an open letter published in *Ngày Nay*, “We resigned to give our voters the opportunity to respond to the French councilmembers... We resigned, but we do not retreat in our struggle.”<sup>140</sup> Khái Hưng joined in: “Personally, I think these three men are right to run again. If they are reelected—and they will be reelected—their victory will express the silent indignation of the Hanoi and Annam.”<sup>141</sup> No one else ran against the Socialists, which Hoàng Đạo saw as a sign of moral support, that these candidates had won the respect of Hanoians.<sup>142</sup> However, political maneuverings again attempted to thwart the candidates. First, a number of French councilmembers questioned the eligibility of the Socialist candidates.<sup>143</sup> Then the Mayor called for the election to take place over Easter weekend, when many of the city’s registered voters would be on vacation. Finally, the mayor posted heavy security in the polling stations, as a means of voter intimidation. Such schemes worked—a mere 305 of the almost 4000 registered voters turned out for the election. As Thạch Lam wrote, “the polling stations at Ham Long and City hall were all deserted. Everyone knew that whoever showed up would be voting for the Socialists.”<sup>144</sup> None of the candidates received enough votes to be elected outright, so another election was scheduled for the 16<sup>th</sup> of April.

Less than a month later, the city held elections to replace the socialists. True to their word, the socialists ran again, and were reelected in a resounding victory by a margin of almost two to one. Tu Mơ penned a humorous poem titled, “Well done, people of Hanoi!”<sup>145</sup> Nhị Linh jubilantly wrote, “the automobiles are defeated!”<sup>146</sup> Unfortunately, the socialists’ campaign on the Hanoi municipal council came to an end when Phan Thanh, the most fiery and outspoken of the candidates, died unexpectedly at the age of 31.<sup>147</sup> After Phan Thanh’s death, *Ngày Nay* published an obituary and biographical information about his life, as well as an account of his public funeral that drew thousands of mourners. The writers at *Ngày Nay* wrote that “His death is a huge loss not only for his family, but for all the people of the region. We have lost an enthusiastic and talented youth, who was always ready to work towards an equal and compassionate society that we all dream of.”<sup>148</sup>

What would have attracted the Self-Reliant Literary Group, and in particular Khái Hưng, to such a party? What would motivate a relatively apolitical writer to openly support its political program on the pages of *Ngày Nay*? The answer lies in the fact that the SFIO fulfilled a number of factors that dovetailed with the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s own political views. First, the SFIO touted its policy of parity and cooperation between the French and the Vietnamese. Attending a general meeting of the SFIO, Khái Hưng reported that he “had a good feeling: the French and the Vietnamese seemed to collaborate to find mutual happiness for both peoples.”<sup>149</sup> While the Group had always believed that while the Vietnamese had much to learn from their French counterparts, it also insisted that they be

<sup>140</sup> “Cùng các bạn cử tri thành phố Hanoi” *Ngày Nay* no. 156, 8 Apr 1939, p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> Khái Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 156, 8 Apr 1939, p. 4.

<sup>142</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* #156, 8 Apr 1939, p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> “Cùng các bạn cử tri thành phố Hanoi,” *Ngày Nay* no. 157, 15 Apr 1939, p. 19.

<sup>144</sup> “Việc chính trong tuần lễ” *Ngày Nay* no. 157, 15 Apr 1939, p. 20; Thạch Lam, “Ngày bầu cử hội viên thành phố” *Ngày Nay* no. 157, 15 Apr 1939, p. 21.

<sup>145</sup> Tú Mơ, “Khá lắm! Dân Hà Thành,” *Ngày Nay* no. 158, 22 Apr 1939, p. 5.

<sup>146</sup> Nhị Linh, “Ngày bầu cử hội viên thành phố,” *Ngày Nay* no. 158, 22 Apr 1939, p. 21.

<sup>147</sup> Because of his fervor and charisma, communist historians are eager to claim Phan Thanh as one of their own. The *Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures* states that “although he was a member of the Socialist party, he was, in truth, a Communist.” Even David Marr describes this young Socialist as an “ICP infiltrator.” However, I have not been able to find evidence that Phan Thanh was a member of any party but the SFIO.

<sup>148</sup> “Một chiến sĩ xã hội từ trần” *Ngày Nay* no. 160, 6 May 1939, p. 5.

<sup>149</sup> Khái Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 145, 14 Jan 1939, p. 4.

treated like citizens of a sovereign state. Second, the SFIO was relatively reformist-minded and progressive. Given the Group's emphasis on reforming Vietnamese society—in fashion, literature, publishing, and public housing—the SFIO's message of reform through politics seemed attractive indeed. And perhaps most importantly, the SFIO was a legal mainstream party. To intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group, who had long hoped that the government would lift the ban on political activity, the establishment of a legal political party in Tonkin was not just novel, it was revolutionary. The Group, especially in its discourse on the Chamber of Representatives, had long bemoaned the lack of political parties and organizations in Tonkin. Vietnamese politics often degenerated into factionalism because the Vietnamese have lacked a political culture in the modern sense. Khái Hưng wrote: “Organization, order, discipline, those are the things we lack, things which we need to learn from the French. In this regard, the Socialist Party is a shining example for us...”<sup>150</sup> In short, the SFIO seemed just the party that would help the Vietnamese inculcate the civic values that the Group advocated.

### *Admiration for Jean Jaures*

Along with support of the SFIO at the municipal level, the Self-Reliant Literary Group's inclinations towards moderate socialism was revealed in its admiration for the party's founder Jean Jaures, the republican socialist and prominent figure in the French social democratic movement. In 1937, Nhị Linh (a pseudonym used by Khái Hưng) penned an article in *Ngày Nay* expressing admiration for Jaures, describing him as a “great man [vĩ nhân] of the socialist party and of humankind.” Nhị Linh recounted the story of his life, from his high-achieving academic career to his compassion for the plight of workers. He wrote that Jean Jaures used his “talent, his will to fight to serve society and humanity. The suffering of individuals and society as a whole stirred his compassionate heart. He hated war because it was the root of suffering and misery of humanity.” Nhị Linh was impressed that a man with such an erudite education, who quickly mastered latin poetry and learned both Spanish and Portuguese within a matter of days, would use his legendary eloquence to fight for the powerless and oppressed. Nhị Linh also admired Jaures' antimilitarist views, lamenting his death at the hands of “reactionary gangs “ [bọn phản động]: “Because he hated war, he became the first casualty of the Great War of 1914-1918. They killed him because they were afraid that if he had lived, he would bring his oratory talent and integrity to oppose the war they had already decided to wage.” Comparing the current violence in Spain and China to the tensions before World War I, Nhị Linh asked his readers, “Who wouldn't be afraid for today's Jean Jaures?”<sup>151</sup> Interestingly, Nhị Linh's account of Jaures' life focused more on his intellectual talents than his political career or cofounding of the SFIO. Nhị Linh account echoed the calls of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* for educated young intellectuals to participate in social works for the good of Vietnamese society. Nhị Linh's admiration for Jaures seemed to stem not necessarily from his political ideas, but what he exemplified for young Vietnamese intellectuals: a patriotic, civic-minded, outspoken intellectual deeply engaged with the society around him.

Yet given the Self-Reliant Literary Group's political leanings, it is difficult to disregard the ideological implications of its admiration for Jean Jaures. After all, Nhị Linh could have chosen any number of public French intellectuals to write about; that he chose Jaures to hold up as an exemplary figure suggests that he must have been, at the very least,

<sup>150</sup> Nhị Linh, “Tiệc trà tiễn Ông Caput” *Ngày Nay* no. 159, 29 Apr 1939, p. 20.

<sup>151</sup> Nhị Linh, “Jean Jaurès,” *Ngày Nay* no. 71, 8 Aug 1937, p. 619.



somewhat sympathetic to Jaures' political views. And he was, openly supporting the French Socialist party Jaures founded during the Popular Front period. Jaures espoused a revised version of Marxism, rejecting the scientific economic foundation for socialism as well as the premise that "workers have no fatherland." Instead, he believed that socialism could be realized through human action and that the Republic, democracy, and socialism were not just compatible, but indivisible. Democracy found its "logical and supreme form" in the Republic, and was the fundamental driving principle behind socialism. Jaures equated socialism with the Republic when he wrote that "The triumph of socialism will not be a break with the French Revolution but the fulfillment of the French Revolution in new economic conditions."<sup>152</sup> For this reason, Jaures urged socialists to participate in parliamentary democracy and work for reforms to achieve liberty and justice.

Jaures' humanist republican socialism stands in stark contrast to the Marxist materialist views of his rival Jules Guesde. Historians often conceptualize the tension between the "revolutionary" and "revisionist" camps of the SFIO through the contrasting figures of these two founding members.<sup>153</sup> Guesde came to embody the orthodox view, employing what Kenneth Tucker described as a "scientific, deterministic, and ultimately simplistic Marxist materialism."<sup>154</sup> Guesde advocated the internationalist organization of workers and cooperation of socialist movements. He vehemently opposed Jaures' willingness to cooperate with the bourgeoisie to achieve reforms for the proletariat, arguing that reforms do not bring any fundamental change and that socialists should instead work towards a classless society. Secondary scholarship describe the reformist and humanist idealism of Jaures as the legacy of the pluralist and syndicalist views of early French Utopian Socialists (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, and Charles Fourier), juxtaposing it with the hard-line dogmatism of Guesde, the pious adherent to German Marxist scientific socialism.<sup>155</sup>

But Khái Hưng was not the only member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group who admired Jean Jaures; Hoàng Đạo was also influenced, albeit indirectly, by his writings on the French Revolution. To commemorate the anniversary of Bastille Day in 1939, the writer penned an article titled, "the Meaning of the French Revolution" [Ý Nghĩa của cuộc cách mệnh Pháp]. Hoàng Đạo wrote that July 14 was not just an important day for the French but for all people, as "its heroes started the revolution thinking about all of humankind, the beautiful principles they upheld were not reserved for one people, one race, but all people, regardless of yellow, white, black skin, independent or colonized." In his analysis of the French Revolution, he argued that it was a result of economic development combined with new ideology: "A successful revolution like France's is not merely the immediate victory of soldiers, it is the natural result of its economic regime and the strength of legitimate ideas that captured people's minds." The condition that made the French Revolution possible was the advent of capitalism:

The capitalist class, a class that emerged from the Middle Ages, became rich and powerful, and wanted to seize political power to destroy the old regime that prevented the development of commerce and industry. They had to pay tax, while aristocrats

---

<sup>152</sup> Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 156.

<sup>153</sup> See Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1966), 1; J. P. Mayer, *Political Thought in France from the Revolution to the Fourth Republic* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1949), 96.

<sup>154</sup> Kenneth H. Tucker, *French Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Public Sphere* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>155</sup> Byron Criddle, *Socialists and European Integration: A Study of the French Socialist Party* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 9-10.

and clergy were not only exempted, but also enjoyed unfair benefits... The peasants also paid heavy taxes to the king, aristocrats and clergy. They lived in suffering and hardship, always worried about hunger or cold. Of course they felt no love for the old regime.

Interestingly enough, Hoàng Đạo explained the French Revolution in terms of class struggle. Examining the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, Hoàng Đạo acknowledged that the document itself was flawed because it created a new form of class conflict: “Some people criticized this declaration for advocating freedom and equality but not giving an exact plan to make everyone free and equal. Moreover, the declaration paves the way for another kind of oppression, that of the capitalist class.” Hoàng Đạo’s analysis echoed the dominant Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution at the time. Historians often credit Jean Jaures and his mammoth four-volume *Socialist History of the French Revolution*, published in 1901-1904, as the first to examine economics and class conflict as the driving force behind the revolution.<sup>156</sup> Later on, influential scholars such as Albert Mathiez and Georges Lefebvre would further develop this historiography. These intellectuals rejected the triumphalist descriptions of the Revolution as heroic acts spearheaded by bold political activists, and focused on the unfolding of larger socioeconomic processes. More specifically, Marxist scholars argued that the French Revolution emerged from class struggle, a “bourgeois revolution” that overthrew feudalism in favor of capitalism. Although it is unclear how such ideas were transmitted to Indochina, Hoàng Đạo’s explanation of the French Revolution bears the influence of classic Marxist interpretation prominent in metropolitan public discourse at the time.

### *Writings on Labor and Capitalism*

But the Group’s admiration for the center left was not merely limited to endorsements for the SFIO in their journals or its admiration for Jean Jaures; their leftist sensibilities went deeper to the way it analyzed history and economies. Hoàng Đạo’s writings suggest that the Group embraced a Marxian-influenced framework for examining labor issues. Over a period of four months beginning in September 1939, the writer penned a series of articles on labor history. His articles followed a progressive series of changes that roughly resembled Marx’s own narrative of economic development; the first five articles dealt with slavery, the next two on feudalism and guilds, and the remaining 12 on capitalism and modern labor issues. Two fundamental Marxian premises are prominent in Hoàng Đạo’s writings on labor: class struggle and historical materialism.

Marxian influence on Hoàng Đạo’s writing become even more apparent when examining his analysis of each economic stage. It is clear that Hoàng Đạo accepted a rather crude materialist view of history, especially when he wrote that “everyone has accepted as natural law the idea that economics is the moving factor of morality and law... everything emerges from economics.” Regarding slavery, Hoàng Đạo echoed Marx when he wrote that “when man moved from hunting-gathering to agriculture, he stopped the nomadic life to stay in one place, we see the emergence of slavery.” As he described, slaves become constituted

---

<sup>156</sup> Florin Aftalion, *The French Revolution, an Economic Interpretation* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2; Martyn Lyons, “Cobb and the Historians,” Gwynne Lewis, Colin Lucas, and Richard Cobb, *Beyond the Terror: Essays in French Regional and Social History, 1794-1815* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2; Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 12.

into a “type of person, a class in society.” He viewed slavery as a relative “progress” because it “brought about the division of labor in society. The ruling class were the soldiers who protected the tribe, the slaves worked to maintain the tribe.” Like Marx, Hoàng Đạo also believed that the class dynamics would force society to enter the next stage of development: “The division of labor affected society under slavery. It allowed the ruling class to expand boundaries, build and organize cities and towns, new countries, bringing mankind along the road of evolution. The slave class, forced to work, gradually had found in their bondage the tools of their own freedom.”<sup>157</sup> Slaves, oppressed by the ruling classes, would eventually revolt. Through the centuries, “the ruling classes would win a few times, but they would always ultimately lose. They would gradually give greater freedoms to the slaves. Mankind would move from slavery to feudalism.”<sup>158</sup>

Compared to slavery or capitalism (which was Hoàng Đạo’s real interest), feudalism received cursory treatment. Yet the most important aspect of feudalism, for both Marx and Hoàng Đạo, was that the foundations of capitalism lay in the feudal order. As Hoàng Đạo wrote,

buying and selling have made people rich, and commerce and technology have made towns flourish. One day, those small industries have eclipsed those in the family, and guilds developed. A new class emerged with wealth and power—the capitalist class. That class grew by the day in number and strength; they formed associations to support one another and fight the ruling classes. It usually begins with merchants, the people most active in fighting for freedom from feudalism.<sup>159</sup>

From the wreckage of the feudal order emerged capitalism. Hoàng Đạo argued that capitalism began with the destruction of the guild system: “capital and wage labor went their separate ways,” meaning that labor itself is now a commodity. He explained that “guilds had their rules and boundaries. The industrialists made it their task to destroy those limitations, to radically use the division of labor, to create freedom in labor.” Once they succeeded in creating the freedom to buy and sell, “on one side owners buy the worker’s labor, on the other side the workers sell their labor. Manpower is now a product, like the multitude of other products, its price dictated by the market.”<sup>160</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, the selling of labor for wages was the hallmark of capitalist development.

Like Marx, Hoàng Đạo believed that inherent in the capitalist system was the roots of its demise—class conflict. Under capitalism, Hoàng Đạo writes, “society gradually divides itself into two separate classes: capitalists and workers.” He defined the capitalist class as “those with enough money, machinery and resources to manufacture,” while the working class was “those who sell their labor.” Like Marx, his definition involved the ownership of the means of production: “If they have the resources they use to make a product, then they cannot be considered a worker.” He wrote that

Naturally, the workers would be the most exploited...the capitalists with their wealth and power, would pay low wages and force their workers to work long hours. The workers, not knowing how to band together, and not protected by the law, are exploited, meaning they are forced to sell their labor at a low price.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Chế độ nô lệ”, *Ngày Nay* no. 126, 4 Sep 1938, p. 3.

<sup>158</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Chế độ nô lệ”, *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sep 1938, p. 3-4.

<sup>159</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Phường, bạn”, *Ngày Nay* no. 135, 5 Nov 1938, p. 3.

<sup>160</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Chế độ nhân công”, *Ngày Nay* no. 136, 11 Nov 1938, p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

Hoàng Đạo argued that through time, workers would learn to form unions to demand their rights against the capitalist class.<sup>162</sup>

At the capitalist stage of history, Hoàng Đạo departed completely from Marx and his disciples. He did not lay out a predictive model of a socialist or communist revolution; rather, he focused on labor relations under a capitalist system. Hoàng Đạo condemned the system when he wrote that “capitalism, in its excesses, can only bring humankind to suffering, exploitation, and destruction.”<sup>163</sup> Indeed, he spent more than half of the twenty articles in the series discussing various issues surrounding labor disputes: contracts, laws, trade unions, collective bargaining, strikes, unemployment, and the dangers of wage labor.<sup>164</sup> The copious amount of attention paid to industrial labor disputes indicates that Hoàng Đạo’s sympathies lay with the workers, and that he wanted to educate and inform Vietnamese of their labor rights. Furthermore, the lack of revolutionary rhetoric in his writing suggests that Hoàng Đạo did not necessarily advocate the overthrow of the capitalist system, but rather find ways to ameliorate its excesses. This puts Hoàng Đạo more in line with moderate socialists than revolutionary Marxists.

In the last article of the series, Hoàng Đạo applied his theories to the case of Indochina. He pointed out that just a century before, Vietnam lived under the economically antiquated regime of the family: “It was as if we were frozen in the time of Confucius and Mencius, the centuries passed as if water under the bridge, and left no mark on our society.” He espoused an economic deterministic view of societal development:

In the past, people have accepted as a natural rule the idea that economics dictates morality and laws. What strength does a moral system have that would force a society to stand in one place? It would be more fitting to say that because our economic regime has not changed, everything else has also stayed the same.

For Hoàng Đạo, the institution of family did not entrench the economic order, but the other way around. Over time, the family became the dominant paradigm for social organization: “Because our country is overwhelmingly agricultural, like ancient Greece or Rome, the nuclear and extended families stayed in one location and became so powerful, that when kings and lords emerged, they followed the organization of the family to establish the mandarin state.”<sup>165</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, the family was not merely a social or cultural institution, it was an economic system. This goes a long way in explaining the Group’s campaign against the familial oppression in their literary works and journals. For the Self-Reliant Literary

---

<sup>162</sup> An interesting observation: Hoàng Đạo’s terminology for discussing labor issues seemed to differ somewhat from that used by the ICP in the same period. For example, in Hoàng Đạo’s usage, wage labor is synonymous with capitalism. In his writing, he uses the Vietnamese terms for “wage labor” [nhân công] and “capitalism” [tư bản] interchangeably. An examination of ICP documents from the Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập [Complete Collection of Party Documents] reveal that the party and its cadres had used a standardized vocabulary to discuss revolutionary issues that differed from Hoàng Đạo’s. The ICP documents rarely ever use the term “nhân công,” much less interchangeably with “tư bản.” Both differed in their use of the term for “industrialization:” Hoàng Đạo used “đại kỹ nghệ” while the ICP preferred “công nghiệp hóa.” This difference in jargon suggests two things: 1) that Hoàng Đạo had come to Marxist ideas through a different route other than the ICP; and/or 2) that he was inventing his own terminology for such ideas. Either way, this suggests intellectual independence from the ICP; that the ICP did not have the monopoly on Marxist categories for analyzing the economic and political world. However, more comprehensive work would need to be done to fully ascertain this hypothesis.

<sup>163</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Lợi hại của chế độ nhân công” *Ngày Nay* no. 146, 21 Jan 1939, p. 3-4.

<sup>164</sup> These articles ran in *Ngày Nay* nos. 136-147.

<sup>165</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Ngó qua Đông Dương” *Ngày Nay* no. 147, 28 Jan 1939, p. 3.

Group, fighting the stranglehold of the family did not merely constitute a social reform, but a fundamental reshaping of an entire economic regime.

Hoàng Đạo argued that Vietnamese society had remained stagnant because it lacked the glaring differences between the rich and the poor, the catalyst for class conflict: “in the past, a rich mandarin in the countryside was not really different from a poor person.” Ultimately, it was French colonialism that pushed Vietnam into the capitalist stage. Vietnamese left their villages to flock to factories and mines to sell their labor for wages: “Their destinies lay in the hands of the owners. If they are lucky, they’ll get a good one, a few will have an easier life. .. But the majority live in suffering that even French workers cannot possibly imagine.” To protect their mutual interests, the capitalist class would always join forces:

Everytime the government even mentions the helping exploited workers, the capitalists find all ways to stop it, to force the workers back into their wretched place. For this reason, for the past fifty years laborers have been oppressed without anyone helping them, and without the right to assert themselves.

The Group believed that legal reform spearheaded by the state could regulate unchecked capitalism. According to Hoàng Đạo, the power of the capitalist was so strong in Indochina that only in 1927 did labor laws appear. Part of the Varenne reforms, these new laws protected workers migrating to other regions within Indochina for work, such as Northern workers working on Southern rubber plantations. In 1930 and 1934, an edict established organizations to mediate labor disputes. Yet despite these reforms, a comprehensive labor code still eluded Indochina.

The rise of the Popular Front in France raised Hoàng Đạo’s hopes that Indochina would finally have a clear set of labor laws. When Leon Blum’s government finally passed a “definitive social law for labor” for Indochina, Hoàng Đạo hailed that such a day should be commemorated in a “white marble plaque.” He explained to readers that Indochina had desperately needed the laws; as a result of industrial development, large numbers of workers left their native villages to work in factories, mines and plantations. Far away from their support networks, these laborers were at the mercy of their industrialist masters, those who “enjoy elaborate meals and smoke cigars that cost a few day’s wages for one of their employees.” The laws safeguarded labor rights by specifically eliminating the practice of deducting fines from wages, reducing the exploitation of workers by their immediate supervisors and industrialists, establishing a minimum wage, and preventing children under the age of 12 from working. In cases of occupational accidents, workers incapacitated for more than 4 days would be given compensation. The newly-passed laws, which Hoàng Đạo described as “very slow in the making, but better late than never,” were valuable in that it was a “definitive code” that spelled out the specific rights of workers.<sup>166</sup> He encouraged Vietnamese workers to quickly learn the new laws.

While rejoicing at the momentousness of the new labor code, Hoàng Đạo warned workers that their employers will do all in their power to avoid compliance: “the capitalists will complain and act forcefully to protect their position, to coerce workers into slavery. They will do all they can to stop the law from taking effect...”<sup>167</sup> Sure enough, Hoàng Đạo reported that when the industrialists’ appeal to the government backfired, they began intimidating their employees. Some downgraded their workers to the status of day laborers,

<sup>166</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Phiến đá trắng”, *Ngày Nay* no. 48, 28 Feb 1937, p. 63.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Hoàng Đạo’s analysis of the new labor laws also applied to office workers. See *Ngày Nay* no.

others threatened to fire their night staff. The purpose, he surmised, “was to frighten workers with the prospect of losing their jobs, make them dependent on day-to-day wages, or waive their new rights of their own accord.” Some areas, the paper reported, they did not enact the new laws at all, forcing the laborers to “grit their teeth and bear it.” Hoàng Đạo took the Popular Front government to task, saying that it should “finish what it started. To pass labor laws to benefit workers is one thing, but they must be enforced so that workers would be able to enjoy their benefits. The law must be obeyed. Otherwise, it is nothing but a sheet of paper in a stack of papers in a locked cabinet.”<sup>168</sup> To pass laws at the top levels in Paris was not enough; they must be observed in the colonies.

Hoàng Đạo argued that the best way to enforce such laws was to allow workers to form labor unions. When laborers can collectively bargain, they can protect themselves against exploitation by their employers. Such negotiations between workers and industrialists need not be violent or confrontational. As an example, Hoàng Đạo describes a peaceful strike in Cam Pha, where miners had reached a deal with industrialists to raise their daily wage to three hao. He wrote that once the terms were agreed upon, “the miners happily returned to work,” and that “nothing regrettable happened during this strike.” The miners made their grievances known and negotiated calmly in the spirit of cooperation. He concluded that “their demeanor shows that Annamese workers know how to act with dignity and within the confines of the law. To them, forming labor unions is not to disturb the peace, but to protect their communal rights. They are deserving of this privilege. My verdict: workers have reached the level deserving of freedom to form unions.”<sup>169</sup> Such commentary suggests that Hoàng Đạo wanted to dispel colonial fears of industrial action and violence by assuring officials that Vietnamese were willing to negotiate labor disputes.

But despite the new progressive labor laws, the freedom to unionize continued to elude workers. For the colonial government, the Vietnamese were too politicized.<sup>170</sup> This freedom, Hoàng Đạo sarcastically commented, “like anything else from France, was transformed when it arrived in Indochina. Perhaps it was seasick crossing all those oceans.” He explained that the new laws were merely “a hazy shadow” of the significant French labor laws of 1884 that officially recognized trade unions. In France, workers have the right to threaten industrial action to pressure employers to concessions. They can form unions without having to seek government permission, and the unions can only be dissolved by a court of law. In the colonies under the new laws, however, union policy remains the sole discretion of the colonial government. Unions must have the official authorization, and their members must meet strict criteria. Unions do not have the right to strike, undertake political activity, or form larger labor coalitions. The colonial authorities can dismantle unions with a simple edict. This new labor regime, according to Hoàng Đạo, was no different from “a bird with clipped wings,” and “not strong enough to help workers to demand their rights in the colonies, where capitalists wield extreme power.” In a feeble attempt to enforce the labor laws, the government established an Office of Labor and issued bulletins to inform business owners of the new labor regime. Frustrated, Hoàng Đạo wrote that “for the labor law to be implemented properly, it is not enough to form an office of labor. Workers must have the means to demand their rights. This means they must have freedom to form unions.”<sup>171</sup> Such top-down governmental institutions accomplish little if the Vietnamese lack the freedom to

---

<sup>168</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Luật xã hội” *Ngày Nay* no. 35, 22 Nov 1936, p. 466.

<sup>169</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuấn lễ một” *Ngày Nay* no. 36, 29 Nov 1936, p. 490.

<sup>170</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *French West Africa and Reformist Colonialism*, in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 163.

<sup>171</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tuần lễ một” *Ngày Nay* no. 82, 24 Oct 1937, p. 880.

make their demands known. While the Self-Reliant Literary Group applauded the Popular Front's intentions to reform labor conditions, it also criticized in no small measure how the government executed them. While the Popular Front provided the legal and institutional basis for change, it still denied Vietnamese the vital tool they needed to exercise their rights as workers—the freedom to unionize.<sup>172</sup>

Hoàng Đạo's framework for analyzing labor relations and his commentary on Popular Front labor policy reveals that the Group's commitment to center left politics went deeper than endorsements in its journals. His analysis of economic history revealed the influence of Marx, especially in its emphasis on class struggle and economic basis of history. However, his lack of revolutionary rhetoric and predictive model of revolution departs from orthodox Marxist or communist thinking. Instead, his focus on the intricacies of labor negotiations, legal reform, and industrial action suggests a more moderate stance—that capitalism should not be overthrown, but rather limited and tempered by political forces. Furthermore, his insistence that the Popular Front government fully enact the comprehensive labor code for Indochina highlights his belief that the state should intervene to prevent the exploitation of workers. These stances align Hoàng Đạo and the Self-Reliant Literary Group closer to the moderate leftist politics of social democracy than radical Marxism or communism.

### Conclusion

Throughout its eight year existence, the Self-Reliant Literary Group commented on politics at all levels and of all kinds. Curiously, it said relatively little about communism, the ideology that would come to shape Vietnamese history and politics more than any other.<sup>173</sup> Although the Group had collaborated on a number of occasions with members of the ICP and even engaged in brutal pen wars with them, it never really revealed its opinion on

---

<sup>172</sup> In keeping with his belief that Vietnamese must “depend on ourselves,” Hoàng Đạo made an attempt to organize workers in late October 1937. He wanted workers to organize what he called “Disaster Victims’ Sunday” [Chủ nhật của nạn nhân]. The rural peasant, Hoàng Đạo explained, already faced innumerable hardships due to their lack of education and poverty. On top of that, natural disasters create a perpetual cycle of flood and drought that. He appeals to industrial workers, who themselves are peasants who, because of extreme hardship, left their villages to go to the mines, factories and plantations. He did not ask for these workers to pool their money, as they have their own problems of poverty, but asked for their time and labor: “You do not have money to help disaster victims. But you do have one precious commodity that surely you can use to help: your strength and your labor.” He called for industrial workers to “set aside a Sunday to work to help disaster victims.” Hoàng Đạo explained that currently, workers receive Sundays off. In this case, he calls for workers to arrange with their employers to work on Sunday and “use the wages from that day to help disaster victims.” His rationale was so that workers can “show your sincerity to help and express solidarity with your suffering compatriots.” “We believe that employers would be open to such a charitable and socially-minded event, and the Office of Labor would readily give its permission.” Hoàng Đạo, *De di toi ngay chu nhat cho nan dan*, *Ngày Nay* #83, 31 Oct 1937, p 907. Nothing came of Hoàng Đạo's call to action. Two weeks after his impassioned article, he admitted that the response was not what he expected: “Workers who heeded my call to organize a “Disaster Victims’ Sunday” responded in large numbers but expressed hesitation. They worried that their sympathy for their compatriots and show of solidarity with the peasantry would be seen in a bad light by some.” He admitted that an “atmosphere of suspicion” will work against any such event, no matter how charitable or well-intentioned. He encouraged the workers not to give up: “Rather, we hope that such difficulties strengthen your resolve to participate in charitable works. You should proudly stand up and ask your employers. In doing so, you would have already done your duty.” The idea of the “Disaster Victims’ Sunday” was never mentioned again, nor did *Ngày Nay* continue to comment on Popular Front labor policy with any sustained interest. Hoàng Đạo, “Tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 86, 21 Nov 1937, p. 974.

<sup>173</sup> In April 1939, Hoàng Đạo penned a series of articles explaining the various political ideologies to his readers, including socialism vs. communism, and the Third vs. Fourth International. Even then, Hoàng Đạo neutrally described the ideologies, taking care not to support one side or the other.

Communism or Marxism as an ideology.<sup>174</sup> Such an absence is particularly telling, and suggests that the Group never seriously considered communism as a viable option in its political vision for Vietnam. However, Hoàng Đạo hinted at the Group's attitudes towards communism in October 1936. He reprinted a few excerpts from a piece written by *L'Effort Indochinois* writer Thái Nam Vân, for the purpose of giving his readers "a wider perspective." One of these excerpts dealt specifically with Communism:

People can have whatever opinion they like about communism, but we must admit that the current situation in society, politics and economics is not at the place where we could experiment with that ideology. The majority of people are still undeveloped in their intellect and still ignorant about many things. If we directly appeal to and mobilize them, then things could easily fall into demagoguery.

Although Hoàng Đạo cautioned that "some of these [excerpts] don't completely match our beliefs," his writings in *Ngày Nay* suggest that he would have agreed with this particular quote.<sup>175</sup> Hoàng Đạo and other members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group often lamented that the peasantry had not yet reached the sufficient level of intellectual development, and they encouraged educated young intellectuals to help teach their rural counterparts. Such was also the case with the Group's demands to reform the Chamber and freedom of speech; to speak of Communist revolution is still too premature when the populace had not yet been educated in the basic habits of citizenship.

Instead, the Self-Reliant Literary Group advocated the building of civil society on the foundation of republican values. In its coverage of the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives, the Group's desire to bring to its readership in-depth knowledge of government affairs underscores its goal of informing and educating their readers and holding officials accountable. The Group called for increased legislative powers for the Chamber and the expansion of suffrage, which highlights its belief in popular sovereignty and increased Vietnamese autonomy. Yet despite the Group's enthusiasm for the procedures and institutions of democracy, reforming the Chamber was hardly the end goal—rather, it saw the institution as a means to building a new political and civic culture, to inculcating the habits of citizenship in Vietnamese. In other words, the Group wanted to build a readership, and eventually an electorate, that is engaged, knowledgeable and committed to the collective good.

In its discussion of colonialism and legal reform, the Group affirmed its belief that colonialism was unethical, but that it was already a global reality. It argued that the colonizer had an obligation to make up for past violence by providing the colonized the tools for future self-autonomy. For Vietnam, the Group called for France to dismantle arbitrary rule by edicts and decrees and allow Vietnamese to write their own laws. Paradoxically, the Group believed that the way for Vietnamese in the north to enjoy greater democratic freedoms was to be further enslaved—for Tonkin to become a full colony rather than remain an indeterminate protectorate. The Group's demands for a comprehensive and transparent colonial constitution and its rejection of the monarchy reveal that the Group unequivocally chose France over the emperor as the guide to constructing a modern Vietnam. It believed that monarchy had no place in this new Vietnam, and dismantled the previous generation's call for a constitutional monarchy. In their writings, the Group often commented on the

---

<sup>174</sup> This is in spite of having collaborated with various members of the Indochinese Communist Party during the Popular Front period, especially in the failed attempts to create a Journalists' Association, the Indochinese Congress, and Indochinese Democratic Front.

<sup>175</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Giống song rộng" *Ngày Nay* no. 30, 18 Oct 1936, p. 344.



dilemma presented by their republican views. They ardently believed in the Enlightenment values of the French Revolution—of patriotism, popular sovereignty, rationality, universality, and belief in political structures—and envisioned a Vietnamese nation founded on those values, but all the while enduring the way France circumvented, withheld, or ignored those values from her colonies.

But the Self-Reliant Literary Group's belief in republican values did not stop at political institutions, legal reforms, or even civil society—it also wanted to decrease social inequalities it saw plaguing Vietnam. Towards this end, the Group found themselves increasingly drawn to the politics of the center left. As revealed through its writings, the political views of the Self-Reliant Literary Group more closely align with moderate socialism rather than radical Marxism. The Group's support of a mainstream party such as the SFIO and its admiration of Jean Jaures' humanism indicate that their political sympathies were more radical than revolutionary. In regards to labor, the Group was influenced by Marx in the way it analyzed historical development and class. However, the Group departed from Marx and his disciples in the most profound way—by rejecting the idea of violent, progressive revolution to overthrow capitalism. Rather, the Group believed in the importance of political forces and the state to check uncurbed capitalism and decrease inequality. Thus, the Group championed a middle ground between liberal capitalism and communism, a stance taken by French social democracy.

Contrary to Vietnamese and western language historiography, the Self-Reliant Literary Group's social and cultural reform project was not separate from its politics—they were one and the same. The building of civil society in Vietnam lay below *Phong Hóa's* humor and satire, in the same way that the Group's attack on familial oppression constituted the destruction of an entire feudal economic order. The Group's insistence on writing only in quốc ngữ had clear patriotic implications, while its publishing enterprises is linked to the creation of a informed polity. Along with these cultural and social reforms, the Group also had a substantive and far-reaching political vision for Vietnam—one in which its citizens enjoyed democratic freedoms, transparent political procedures, representative institutions, and the rule of law. The Self-Reliant Literary Group's championing of republican values and embrace of center-left politics envisioned no less than a complete restructuring of Vietnamese society—a “revolution” in its own right.

## CHAPTER 5

---

# The Politics of the Self-Reliant Literary Group in Local and International Context, 1936-1941

### Introduction

The previous chapter has described the Self-Reliant Literary Group's political philosophy and agenda, arguing that the Group wanted to build a modern Vietnamese nation on the foundation of French republican values through the politics of the center left. This second chapter on the Group's politics will look at its practical political choices and positions regarding local and global current events. While the previous chapter focused on the Group's political *values*, this one examines their political *activities*: How and when did the Group interact with other political organizations? How did it define itself vis-à-vis these other groups? What do the Group's political maneuverings reveal about the nature of politics during the period? This chapter makes two arguments, one specifically about the political instincts of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and another about the general nature of political activism in 1930s Tonkin. First, this chapter argues that the Group's belief in self-reliance, while the reason for its journalistic success, became a political liability. The Group's principled and idealistic stances isolated it from other organizations, especially during the crucial formative years of the late 1930s, when Vietnamese intellectuals forged political relationships and identities that defined the revolution to come. This chapter also suggests that the intense sectarian squabbling of the period overstates the depth of political cleavages between various groups and that the political culture of the era was marked by ideological fluidity and lack of dogmatism.

While the previous chapter spanned the entire career of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, this one begins in 1936, a landmark year in the Group's history. In July, the Group stopped publishing *Phong Hóa* and resurrected *Ngày Nay*, which had previously been shut down because of high costs and overstretched members. This new *Ngày Nay* combined both the humor and literature from *Phong Hóa* with the social commentary of its previous incarnation. Not surprisingly, this relaunch also coincided with a radical departure in the Group's *modus operandi*: its members moved away from merely commenting on social and political issues to acting on them in earnest. Instead of making fun of the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives in *Phong Hóa*, the Group now were demanding specific reforms in the pages of *Ngày Nay*. And while the Group discussed education of the peasantry in *Phong Hóa*, they began founding the League of Light in *Ngày Nay*. As a result, 1936 marked the Group's first foray into political activity, as it interacted more with outside organizations. As the chapter will describe, the victory of the Popular Front in France in May sparked optimism in Indochina, as many Vietnamese hoped for social and political reforms. The colonial government relaxed repression in Tonkin,

and Vietnamese began to organize groups and associations in the somewhat more relaxed political atmosphere. During this period, the Self-Reliant Literary Group participated in a few such organizations, clashing with its intellectual and political rivals in the process.

This chapter addresses three discrete periods of the Group's political activism and writings. The first focuses on the Popular Front period (1936-1938), during which the Group participated in the Indochinese Congress movement and the campaign to form a Tonkin Journalist's Association. The second examines the end of the Popular Front in 1938 to the beginning of World War II, a period in which the Group's supported the Tonkin branch of the Socialist party and took part in the Indochinese Democratic Front. Finally, the chapter addresses the Group's views on World War II and related global political events.

### **French Popular Front, 1936-1938: the Indochinese Congress and Freedom of the Press**

The Self-Reliant Literary Group's earliest political discourse surrounded the Chamber of Representatives and its problems, and the year 1936 marked a sudden transformation in the way the Group discussed politics. The events unfolding in Europe would soon transform the political landscape in French Indochina. Faced with the increasing threat of fascism the Comintern called for the temporary postponement of revolutionary objectives in 1934. It appealed to all leftist organizations—including communist, socialist and liberal bourgeois parties—to halt their ideological infighting and form a united alliance to resist fascism. National components of the Popular Front began springing up all around Europe, although they culminated in the rise of leftist governments only in France and Spain.<sup>1</sup>

In France, the Popular Front coalition of the Socialists, Radicals and Communists won the majority of seats in the French legislature in May 1936 under the slogan of "Bread, Peace, and Freedom." Leon Blum, the new head of government, formed a cabinet comprised of Socialists and Radicals; the Communist Party refused ministerial posts but supported Blum in the legislature. Soon after its election, the Popular Front government immediately began implementing its progressive domestic policy. The Matignon Agreements granted wage increases averaging 10 percent, introduced the 40 hour work week, established the institutions for arbitration and conciliation, and laid down the principle of two weeks paid holidays for all employees. Other important reforms quickly followed. The Popular Front government sought to stabilize grain prices, enhance transparency at the Bank of Indochina, and increase the school-leaving age from thirteen to fourteen. Despite pushing for sweeping reforms, the Popular Front remained a shaky alliance even at the height of its influence in 1936. The pervasive ideological fissures that characterized the French left soon began to emerge. The Radicals, comprising about half of Blum's cabinet, were often at odds with their Socialist colleagues. Major international and domestic issues worsened these divisions; the Front faced internal dissention over the Spanish Civil War and solidarity with the Spanish Popular Front, fierce external opposition from the ultraconservative French right, and the lingering economic effects of the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of the origins of the Popular Front movement in Europe, see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-38* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17-51.

<sup>2</sup> W. Scott Haine, *The History of France* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000), 155-158.

On the issue of colonialism, the three component parties of the Popular Front held relatively conservative views, despite the Left's traditional anticolonial stance. Given the mounting influence of fascism and increased German aggression (both of grave concern to the Soviet Union), the Popular Front argued that France must temporarily put off colonial liberation in the interest of national defense. The government believed that under the current circumstances, it was best that the colonies maintain their close ties to Paris. Even the French Communist Party, the most vociferous and consistent critic of colonialism, agreed to this rationale. Although they never favored assimilationism or more moderate socialist colonial policies, the Communists now tacitly accepted the *mission civilisatrice* and democratic France's fraternal responsibility to instruct colonized peoples. Moreover, the Popular Front parties did not outline a unified colonial platform—rather, they agreed on general policies such as increased local autonomy, the right to form unions, amnesty for political prisoners, and better medical facilities and schools in the colonies.<sup>3</sup> For its new Minister of Colonies, the Blum government appointed Marius Moutet, a socialist with a history of opposing oppressive colonial policies.

The historiography of the Popular Front's reception in the colonies emphasizes the rise of hope followed by disappointment. Tony Carter and Amanda Sackur, for example, described the response in the colonies as a “passionate initial enthusiasm which was rapidly replaced by recrimination and disillusionment.”<sup>4</sup> For Carter and Sackur, the Front were never able to reconcile its reformist intentions with the political and economic realities of maintaining an empire. Writing about French Indochina, Peter Zinoman described how “the wave of optimism that had surged through Vietnamese society...gave way to widespread disillusion.”<sup>5</sup> In her piece on Algeria, France Tostain described 1936 and 1937 as years of “great expectations and shattered illusions.”<sup>6</sup>

A close examination of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's views on the Popular Front over time complicates this narrative of “hope and disillusionment.” While the Group expressed some enthusiasm and optimism towards the Popular Front, this was also accompanied by skepticism and frustration. In general, *Ngày Nay* maintained a cautiously optimistic, wait-and-see approach to the new government. It focused much of its commentary on the difficult logistics of reform, gave credit where it was due, and offered constructive criticism and recommendations. In other words, the Group used its newspapers to provide a running commentary on the successes and failures of the Popular Front.

The Group's first comments on the Popular Front appeared in mid-July 1936, over six weeks after the Blum government came to power. The election of the Popular Front and its early months in office straddled perhaps the most chaotic period in the Group's publishing history. As previously mentioned, May to July 1936 was marked by the closure of *Phong Hóa* and the relaunch of *Ngày Nay*. The Group had to release the final issues of *Phong Hóa* as well as design and produce the first issues of *Ngày Nay*. Consequently, Nhật Linh and his associates had more

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Francis Rice-Maximin, *Accommodation and Resistance: The French Left, Indochina, and the Cold War, 1944-1954* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur. *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Zinoman, “Hải Vân, *The Storm* and Vietnamese Communism in the Inter-War Imagination,” in Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, James T. Siegel, and Audrey Kahin. *Southeast Asia Over Three Generations: Essays Presented to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2003), 140.

<sup>6</sup> France Tostain, “The Popular Front and the Blum-Viollette Plan,” in Chafer and Sackur, 227.

immediate concerns at the time than French metropolitan politics. The last few issues of *Phong Hóa* merely reported the news of the election, so the Group's commentary on the Popular Front began in earnest with the new *Ngày Nay*. In one of its first commentaries on the Popular Front, the Group expressed suspicion of the new government. Tú Ly wrote:

We should not go overboard with the celebrations. The Socialist Party is one thing, but a socialist elected government is something different. Mr. Leon Blum the Socialist Party leader is not going to be the same as Mr. Leon Blum, President of the Council. The only certain thing is that we must depend on ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

The above quote reveals two important details about the Group's attitudes towards the Popular Front. First, the Group's suspicion of the new government came from a realistic and thorough understanding of French parliamentary politics. Addressing other writers hailing the Front as a "silent revolution", Hoàng Đạo cautioned that such enthusiasm may be premature: "Although the Socialist Party holds power, it still cannot enact its policies because it only holds 146 of 614 seats in parliament. This is not a majority. For this reason, the objectives of the newly-formed Socialist cabinet can only be the general program of the leftist parties."<sup>8</sup> Because of the broad and fragmented nature of the coalition, Hoàng Đạo believed that any radical program or initiative would most likely be diluted by the more moderate or conservative elements of the Front.

A second important idea expressed by Hoàng Đạo was his insistence that "we must depend on ourselves" a notion that highlights the Group's enduring belief in self-reliance. Because of the uncertainty of French leftist politics, the Vietnamese could not possibly depend on Paris to improve conditions in Indochina. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group harbored no illusions that everything would be handed to the Vietnamese, or that the Popular Front would herald a new era of political reform and newfound parity in the Franco-Vietnamese fraternal union. Throughout the Popular Front period, Hoàng Đạo frequently referred to the failed reforms of the Varenne years as proof that Vietnamese should not to place hopes for reform in an external government. Rather it was up to the Vietnamese themselves to develop civic values, demand rights, and reform society.<sup>9</sup> However, Hoàng Đạo also saw some promising signs. Given the Front's domestic reform agenda, he surmised that "At present, the Popular Front cabinet is strong. After only a month in power, the results seem rather effective." In regards to the overseas territories, Hoàng Đạo allowed himself to express a modicum of optimism: "Towards the colonies, the government will enact a more humane policy. For starters,

---

<sup>7</sup> Tú Ly, "Từ nhỏ đến lớn," *Phong Hóa* no. 189, 29 May 1936, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Tả đảng với hữu đảng trong nghị viện Pháp" *Ngày Nay* no. 16, 12 July 1936, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Alexandre Varenne served as Governor General of Indochina in 1925 to January 1928. Many Vietnamese welcomed his appointment, as his socialist credentials raised hopes of greater freedoms and reforms. As they would do in the Popular Front period, a number of Vietnamese organized a "wish list" to present to Varenne upon his arrival in the colony. Varenne enacted a number of reforms, including greater opportunities for Vietnamese in civil service and increased powers to the representative assemblies. Prominent intellectual Phạm Quỳnh advocated a party that would operate legally and cooperate with the French to bring about Varenne's policies. As tepid as they were, his reforms proved too much for the conservative French *colons* in Indochina, who launched a recall effort. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group would have observed these events as young adults, and the lessons of the Varenne years made a considerable impression on their political attitudes. William Frederick, "Alexandre Varenne and Politics in Indochina, 1925—1926," in Walter Vella, ed., *Aspects of Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 96-159.

we have already seen them discussing amnesty for political prisoners. That's a positive sign."<sup>10</sup> However, this hopefulness should not be misconstrued as wholehearted enthusiasm. For Hoàng Đạo, the government can only help provide the general environment for meaningful change—the ultimate responsibility of social reform lay with the Vietnamese.

Hoàng Đạo continued to express caution throughout the Popular Front period. When the government amnestied over 600 political prisoners in late July 1936, he did not convey the same sense of joy as many other writers at the time.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he warned of the limitations of the amnesty policy: “Amnesty [ân xá] and pardoning [đại xá] are two separate issues. Amnesty is when a person is freed from prison, but his conviction still stands. A pardon frees the prisoner and clears his record as if they never committed the crime.” Hoàng Đạo cautioned that amnesty left open the possibility that the freed prisoners could face future recriminations. As the power to grant pardons required the approval of the legislature in Paris and not just the governor general, Hoàng Đạo hoped that “there will be a large wave of pardons as mentioned in the program of the French Popular Front.”<sup>12</sup> He also requested pardons for three Vietnamese emperors exiled abroad: Hàm Nghi, Thành Thái, and Duy Tân. He argued that they posed no significant political threat: Hàm Nghi has married a Frenchwoman and is raising a large family, while Duy Tân has worked in a number of trades including raising horses, and photography.<sup>13</sup> Hoàng Đạo's misgivings about the government's amnesty of political prisoners seem to be justified in April 1937, when he reported the plight of freed political prisoners. Unable to find work in their villages, former prisoners often left their registered residencies in search of employment only to be thrown back into jail. He criticized the government for their predicament: “That is an injustice that should never exist. An amnestied political prisoner needs to have enough freedom to find work like any other person. If not, they are still in prison. The only difference is that at least in jail they have food to eat, while outside they starve.”<sup>14</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, it was unconscionable that amnestied political prisoners faced discrimination even after their release.

While maintaining a moderate attitude toward the Popular Front, the Group mocked the overblown optimism and knee-jerk populism expressed by other newspapers at the time. “Since the election of the Popular Front,” Hoàng Đạo wrote, “it turns out that everyone loves populism.” The most unexpected figures trumpeted populist sensibilities—industrialists, mine owners, and leaders of the southern Constitutionalist Party. Hoàng Đạo ridiculed the emptiness of populist rhetoric. In Hue, “the Ministry of Rural Economy headed by Minister Nguyễn Khoa Kỳ is dedicated to populist works...even if it is for profit.” In Tonkin, “the Chamber of Representatives is so populist that it elected industrialist and mine owner Phạm Kim Bằng, the person responsible for everything populist over in New Caledonia, to attend the economic conference.”<sup>15</sup> The populism craze had become so widespread that “even the squawks of crows sound more populist than before. Even the peacocks and the cranes are populist. Before they would eat two grains of rice. Now they only eat one grain, but they make sure to choose a big, fat

<sup>10</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tả đảng với hữu đảng trong nghị viện Pháp.”

<sup>11</sup> Peter Zinoman describes the outpouring of joy on the part of some newspapers as “amnesty fever,” in his *The Colonial Bastille A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 273.

<sup>12</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 18, 26 Jul 1936, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 23, 30 Aug 1936, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 56, 25 Apr 1937, p. 256

<sup>15</sup> New Caledonia is an island in the southwest Pacific, where the French undertook massive mining projects to extract natural resources.

one, a habit which is not exactly populist.”<sup>16</sup> Such hypocrisy may have further annoyed the Self-Reliant Literary Group because they had been advocating their own brand of populism for years.<sup>17</sup>

As Hoàng Đạo’s commentary on amnestied prisoners and populism illustrate, the Self-Reliant Literary Group kept a running commentary on the government’s actions and policies. Of all the topics covered by the Group during the Popular Front period, the most sustained and prolific was freedom of the press. Having experienced firsthand the difficulties of working under a strict and arbitrary press regime, the Group fervently believed that the press in Tonkin must be free. The Group’s campaign for press freedom was linked to the Indochinese Congress and the efforts to form a Tonkinese Journalist’s Association.

### *The Commission of Inquiry, the Indochinese Congress and Freedom of the Press*

Almost immediately after taking power, the Popular Front announced it was sending a parliamentary Commission to investigate conditions in all French overseas territories and to record the wishes of its colonized peoples. Hoàng Đạo’s initial response was enthusiastic: “The task of collecting the honest opinions of the people is very important,” he wrote on August 23, 1936, “we should remember that governor generals come and go, but our requests will forever remain in the files of the commission.”<sup>18</sup> While voicing guarded optimism about the Commission, he also recorded a note of skepticism: “Many fear that this commission will be just like all the others. It will “investigate” the conditions in Indochina at champagne parties, and search for the aspirations of the Annamese people in Ha Long Bay or the Perfume Pagoda.” Past experience, he suggested, had given Vietnamese many reasons to be suspicious. Recalling Alexandre Varenne’s tenure as Governor General, during which Minister of Colonies Reynaud undertook a similar fact-finding trip, Hoàng Đạo wrote, “Time passed and with time, the books that recorded the dreams and aspirations of a people also disappeared.” However, he offered a “ray of hope” by suggesting that although Varenne himself was a Socialist, he served under a conservative government that actively hampered his reforms. On the other hand, “this commission is from the Popular Front government. We can hope that the members of the commission will look at us with fresh eyes...”<sup>19</sup> Although himself a realist regarding the Popular Front government and its policies, Hoàng Đạo warned his readers not to let skepticism breed paralysis. The Vietnamese “depend on themselves,” he wrote. Now was not the time for hesitation or suspicion. Whatever the outcome, the Vietnamese must act.

In contrast to the cautious and hesitant response to the Commission among northerners, southerners responded to the initiative with enthusiasm. The Indochinese Congress movement, spearheaded by the Constitutionals and the Communists, exploded in the South. By the time Hoàng Đạo discussed this movement in the pages of *Ngày Nay*, it had already been underway in Cochinchina for three months.<sup>20</sup> He described how Constitutionalist Party member Nguyễn

<sup>16</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tin...khó tin,” *Ngày Nay* no. 36, 29 Nov 1936, p. 496.

<sup>17</sup> The Group’s definition of populism will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuàn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 22, 23 Aug 1936, p. 163-164.

<sup>19</sup> Hoàng Đạo “Phái bộ điều tra,” *Ngày Nay* no. 24, 9 Sep 1936, p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the Indochinese Congress, see Daniel Hemery, *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine: communistes, trotskystes, nationalistes à Saigon de 1932 à 1937* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1975), p.

Phan Long mobilized, “a large number of intellectuals, capitalists and workers to form a preliminary committee charged with organizing a large congress for all of Indochina.” The purpose of the congress was to collect popular views and opinions to be presented to the Commission of Inquiry. The preliminary committee in the South was led by an elected council consisting of Long and fellow Constitutionalist Lê Quang Liêm, as well as Marxist intellectuals Trịnh Đình Thảo, Nguyễn An Ninh, and Nguyễn Văn Tân. The committee spearheaded the formation of grass-roots “action committees” which compiled “*cahiers des vœux*” [wish lists] from all sectors of the Vietnamese population. Hoàng Đạo described how these action committees mushroomed all over Cochinchina, and included a wide range of members including “Saigon barbers, workers from Chợ Đũi and Chợ Quán, and printmakers.” Offering a strong endorsement to the Congress, he wrote: “If all of Indochina expresses our collective aspirations with one voice, then our demands would look more important. The commission will see ten, twenty million people standing up behind those demands.” He also addressed skeptics: “Many are afraid that one group will exploit another, others are afraid of complicated opinions and disorganized thinking that will come to nothing.” Nevertheless, he suggested that the endeavor was worthwhile, and called for all Vietnamese to “try our hardest to overcome these obstacles, trust one another, discipline ourselves, put aside our prejudices, and sincerely work together.”<sup>21</sup> Hoàng Đạo agreed with the purpose and aims of the Indochinese Congress movement, and encouraged Vietnamese to take part.

Among the various demands to be presented to the commission, the Self-Reliant Literary Group showed particular interest in freedom of the press. Not only was this issue relevant for the Group’s economic livelihood, but it also went to the heart of its political, social, and cultural project. As Hoàng Đạo wrote:

Freedom of the Press is important to the destiny of the entire nation. As everyone knows, newspapers are a rapid and easy method of transmitting ideas for all people in society. Because of newspapers, everything necessary, everything worth our concern, every new initiative worth following, every new idea—is spread everywhere, helping people in the most mountainous areas and most remote villages engage with the source of knowledge from all civilized countries. Because of newspapers, the people of the West had become the model countries for all peoples. The accomplishments of newspapers towards culture is truly great, we must bow our heads in respect. The first wish of our people—no matter what party or class—is to see our newspapers be independent.<sup>22</sup>

The capacity of newspapers to transmit ideas was strongly felt by the Self-Reliant Literary Group, who made their journals the primary organ of their reform project. Having experienced

---

281-332 and Sud Chonchirdsin, “The *Indochinese Congress* (May 1936-March 1937): False hope of Vietnamese nationalists,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30:2 (1999), p. 338-46.

<sup>21</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Phái bộ điều tra,” *Ngày Nay* no. 24, 9 Sep 1936, p 212. In a rare instance, Hoàng Đạo discussed the other states and ethnic minorities of Indochina. In response to the question of Laos, Cambodia, and montagnards participating in the Indochinese congress, he wrote presumptuously that “I thought that we ethnic Annamese represent Indochina. Our desires are the same as other ethnic groups, not only the Lao and Cambodians but also the moi, man, and nung. We should just form a Congress of the North, South and Central first, and if Laos and Cambodia want to send their representatives, that is even better.” Hoàng Đạo believed that the needs of the ethnic Vietnamese should be addressed before those of the ethnic minorities.

<sup>22</sup> Hoàng Đạo, *Báo chí tự do*, *Ngày Nay* no. 23, 30 Aug 1936, p 188.



firsthand the difficulties of working under a strict and arbitrary press regime the Group believed in the virtues of a free press:

Now, as we have mentioned before, the most important thing is to demand freedom of the press. That freedom will help us work to raise the standards of the people. When they have begun to understand their rights, they don't even have to demand them—the rights will come. To demand freedom of the press—and other freedoms—we must be united.<sup>23</sup>

The Self-Reliant Literary Group worked with other intellectuals and activists to bring about these new freedoms. Unfortunately, as the unfolding events of the Indochinese Congress will show, working together proved a difficult task.

In late August 1936, activists in Tonkin joined the movement as well. Phạm Huy Lục, president of the Chamber of Representatives, convened a provisional committee responsible for forming a unified council. The council would compile and organize the people's demands and present them to the Commission of Inquiry when it arrived in Tonkin. Various classes and groups were preselected to represent Tonkinese society; they numbered 16 in total, including farmers, merchants, workers, young intellectuals, bureaucrats, and women. Each group was to designate two representatives to serve on the final council and submit demands on behalf of the entire group.<sup>24</sup> The Self-Reliant Literary Group took part in these efforts to organize, with Nhất Linh serving as a member on the provisional committee.<sup>25</sup> The Group's involvement with the Indochinese Congress marks the first instance in which it stepped beyond literary journalism and social commentary and into collaborative political activity. Rather than simply reporting on politics and society in Hanoi, they began participating in them.

While involved with Lục's provisional committee, the Group tried to maintain its journalistic independence and neutrality. *Ngày Nay* printed announcements for the committee but it also offered criticism and suggestions for organizing the *cahiers des vœux* and associated meetings. When the provisional committee first announced its plan of action, Hoàng Đạo cited two problems in Phạm Huy Lục's organizational strategy: the difficulty of collecting information from groups lacking social organization such as peasants and laborers, and the problem of reconciling opposing requests from different sectors. He took issue with the neglect of peasants:

Only the peasants do not have a delegate. And peasants deserve the most attention, as most of the people in our country work in the fields. We hope that people from other groups, especially young intellectuals and journalists would help them find their demands. We don't have to describe the difficulty of their lives—everyone knows about that. But what are their wishes?<sup>26</sup>

This comment reflected the Self-Reliant Literary Group's concern for the peasantry. To draw attention to the plight of the peasantry, Hoàng Đạo called for reform of the mandarinates, usury, education and the head tax. The Group's involvement in the provisional committee did not mean

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Ủy ban điều tra sắp tới” *Ngày Nay* no. 25, 13 Sep 1936, p. 224.

<sup>25</sup> Nhất Linh, “Muốn cho tình thế sáng tỏ,” *Ngày Nay* no. 26, 20 Sep 1936, p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Lời bạn,” *Ngày Nay* no. 25, 13 Sep 1936, p. 224.

that it accepted Phạm Huy Lục's program without question. By offering constructive criticism, the Group still maintained a level of neutrality and journalistic objectivity.

Although it participated in the Tonkin efforts to organize demands, the Group tried to steer clear of the political intrigue that surrounded Phạm Huy Lục's committee. In Cochinchina, a leftist coalition including members of the ICP and Trotskyists had fallen out with the Constitutionalist over how to organize the Congress. The mushrooming of action committees and public demonstrations associated with the Congress alarmed the colonial government, who sought ways to suppress the movement. Phạm Huy Lục's northern committee emerged as a result of these southern conflicts. Daniel Hémery argues that the Governor-General masterminded Phạm Huy Lục's organization to diffuse political tensions in Saigon:

His first reaction was to try to channel the campaign by putting at its head "official" nationalists. In Tonkin and Annam, this operation ran successfully. Chairman of the House of Representatives of Tonkin, Phạm Huy Lục, succeeded in advancing the idea of convening a congress made up of notables, taking the initiative on August 26 to establish a provisional committee which contained no representative of the left.<sup>27</sup>

As political parties were still mostly illegal in Tonkin, leftist groups were identified by the name of their publications—*Hồn Tré*, *Khỏe*, *Sống*, *Avenir* and *Le Travail*—but were for the most part members of the Indochinese Communist Party.<sup>28</sup> Sud Chonchirsin, on the other hand, located the origins of the Tonkin committee less in the political meddling of the Governor General than in the thinking of Southern Constitutionalist. Incensed when the left-dominated Congress rejected their proposed program of expanding French citizenship, the bourgeois Constitutionalist approached Phạm Huy Lục with the idea of starting a rival organization that better represented their mutual interests.<sup>29</sup> As journalists observing the Tonkin political scene from outside, the Group most likely was not privy to these power struggles behind the scenes. Even if they had knowledge of such political scheming, they chose not to address it in *Ngày Nay*.

Almost as soon as it began, fissures began to emerge in the northern provisional committee. The ICP in Tonkin, which considered itself the legitimate wing of the Indochinese Congress, did not take well to Phạm Huy Lục establishing the committee without its input. It protested Lục's efforts to usurp control of the committee to record popular demands. Trần Huy Liệu described in his memoirs that Lục had intended to "falsify the demands of the people" by purposefully pre-selecting demands to be discussed, rather than directly asking the Vietnamese people.<sup>30</sup> Believing themselves underrepresented in the committee, the Left demanded more delegates and the provisional committee agreed. Even then, the ICP refused to recognize the provisional committee and decided to organize its own group called the "Tonkin Branch of the Indochinese Congress" [Chi Nhánh Đông Dương Đại Hội Bắc Kỳ].<sup>31</sup> *Ngày Nay* described the current standoff between Phạm Huy Lục and the ICP: "It seems that workers want to organize separately. They believe they have too few representatives, afraid that the powerful

<sup>27</sup> Hémery, 321-322.

<sup>28</sup> The colonial authorities were constantly shutting down ICP newspapers: *Hồn Tré* lasted 15 issues, *Đời Mới* 5 issues, *Tiếng Vàng Làng Báo* one issue.

<sup>29</sup> Chonchirsin, 341.

<sup>30</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, and Như Thơm Phạm. *Hồi ký Trần Huy Liệu*. (Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 1991), 183, and *Lịch sử thủ đô Hà Nội*, 183.

<sup>31</sup> *Lịch sử thủ đô Hà Nội*, 183.

classes opposing them would find a way to suppress them.”<sup>32</sup> As a result of these disagreements, strikes and demonstrations broke out in Hanoi, mostly organized by the ICP.

In a strange turn of events, the ICP joined forces with Vũ Văn An, Lục’s nemesis and a Hanoi businessowner who became the most prominent figure in the rival committee. Trần Huy Liệu describes this alliance as a political marriage of convenience. He wrote that Vũ Văn An’s purpose “was to borrow our strength to topple Phạm Huy Lục or at least reduce his influence, so that he could seize the chamber presidency and use it for his own self-interests.” For Trần Huy Liệu and the ICP, Vũ Văn An was a convenient scapegoat and decoy. Liệu wrote:

Of course, the people’s struggle should not have helped one servile clique of French lackeys topple another servile clique, but we could exploit the conflict between them and forge a temporary alliance to help our movement advance. From then on, every time we needed to deal with the imperialists in a legal way, we “stuck” Vũ Văn An out. The people in that group we had close contact with were Vũ Văn An, Trần Văn Bình, and Nguyễn Văn Lộ.<sup>33</sup>

In response to escalating factionalism, the Group took pains to remain neutral, called for unity and condemned the conflict as divisive and unproductive. Nhất Linh did not want the Tonkinese committee to go the way of the Constitutionists and the La Lutte group in Saigon: “The best way is to work together. That way, we would avoid the sad situation in the South, where two groups had cooperated, but now split because they lacked the patience to work with one another.”<sup>34</sup> Hoàng Đạo, in his commentary on the standoff, was more emphatic: “It seems that their mouths proclaim that they work for the people and our country, but in truth, they work for their parties and cliques, and most of all for themselves. At meetings, all people could argue about are these two boring characters—Mssrs. Lục and An.” He believed that this petty political squabbling was distracting from the real task at hand: “The important thing right now is to sift through the demands and choose the worthy ones that match the desires of the people... Why should we even bother to think about or discuss Mr. Lục?” As for Vũ Văn An, Hoàng Đạo believed that “if he has such great ideas, he should proclaim them loudly so people will follow his lead. But if his ideas are unoriginal, then he should know better than to complicate matters.” What frustrated Hoàng Đạo the most about the entire standoff was that politicians had managed to create a fuss over what should have been a relatively straightforward task:

What is the big deal? It’s just placing a list of demands to the Inquiry commission. No one is going to demand stupid things—and who is going to let them?... If Mssrs. Lục, An, X, Y, and Z each form their own committee and the demands are all the same, then the Inquiry commission will think that the Annamese... are all children.

He reiterated Nhất Linh’s call for Lục and An to put their petty differences aside: “Everyone needs to think carefully, before it is too late. Put your interests at one side. Work for the collective good: sort through the demands and discuss them with other committees at the

---

<sup>32</sup> Nhất Linh, “Muốn cho tình thế sáng tỏ,” *Ngày Nay* no. 26, 20 Sep 1936, p 248.

<sup>33</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi ký*, 186-187.

<sup>34</sup> Nhất Linh, “Muốn cho tình thế sáng tỏ.”

Indochinese Congress. Let's work together to make our country's demands a reality."<sup>35</sup> Such calls for unity ultimately proved futile. After the elections for the Unified Council, Nhất Linh stopped collaborating with Pham Huy Luc and turned towards his real priority—demanding freedom of the press.

### *Organizing the Journalist's Association*

After Nhất Linh withdrew his participation, the Group stopped discussing the Northern committee and soon became involved in another effort to organize demands, this time involving only journalists and writers. Hoàng Đạo reported the initiatives of southern journalists to compile their own *cahiers des vœux* and called for Tonkin to do the same. He described how Nguyễn Văn Sam, head of the Journalist Association of Cochinchina, had organized a meeting at *Đuốc Nhà Nam*'s headquarters and came up with a preliminary list of requests. To emulate their southern colleagues, Hoàng Đạo called for Tonkinese journalists to act: "The commission of inquiry from the Popular Front government is about to arrive in Indochina. We journalists must quickly meet to decide ahead of time how to express our communal wishes." He laid out a number of issues that warranted discussion, such the kind of press regime the journalists would demand and how to proceed. Hoàng Đạo hoped that the Tonkinese press association would link up with its counterparts in Annam and Cochinchina to form a unified organization to represent all Vietnamese journalists. In addition, he wanted the association to send its delegates to participate in the Indochinese Congress as well as play an active role in helping other groups publicize, discuss and collect their demands.<sup>36</sup>

After months of discussion, northern journalists began to organize in April 1937. *Ngày Nay* announced the formation of a nationwide association of journalists and writers devoted to the cause of freedom of speech. The announcement included the names of representatives from over 18 newspapers including *Ngày Nay*, *Le Travail*, *Tương Lai*, *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy*, and *Hà Thành Thời Báo*. From April to August 1937, writers and journalists began organizing a special Committee. Its members included Communists Võ Nguyên Giáp, Trần Huy Liệu, and Khuất Duy Tiến, Marxist literary critic Trương Tuu along other well-known writers such as Vũ Đình Liên, Vũ Ngọc Phan, Đoàn Phú Tứ, Vũ Đình Chí, Nguyễn Triệu Luật, Lê Tràng Kiều and Phan Trần Chúc. Trần Khánh Giu (Khái Hưng) served as *Ngày Nay*'s representative in the organization.<sup>37</sup> In late June 1937, the association held elections for its administrative board; communist Võ Nguyên Giáp, and noncommunists Đoàn Phú Tứ and Nguyễn Trọng Trác were chosen as the committee chairmen.<sup>38</sup> The committee worked quickly to establish contacts with counterpart organizations in Annam and the South, and to recruit the well-known agitator Nguyen Thế Truyền as its representative in Paris. Truyền had invited the committee to join and attend the Unified Colonial Journalists' Association [Hội Liên Hiệp Thuộc Địa], a larger organization linking groups from other French colonies, but the committee stopped short of joining.<sup>39</sup> In

<sup>35</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Tùng tuần lễ một," *Ngày Nay* no. 28, 4 Oct 1936, p. 296.

<sup>36</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Báo giới và phái bộ điều tra," *Ngày Nay* no. 25, 13 Sep 1936, p. 224-225.

<sup>37</sup> "Hội nghị báo giới Bắc kỳ đã khai mạc," *Ngày Nay* no. 57, 2 May 1937, p. 279-280.

<sup>38</sup> "Ủy ban thường trực của hội nghị báo giới làm việc" *Ngày Nay* no. 65, 27 Jun 1937, p. 472

<sup>39</sup> "Ủy ban thường trực của hội nghị báo giới làm việc", *Ngày Nay* no. 66, 4 Jul 1937, p. 496, 514; "Tùng tuần lễ một," *Ngày Nay* no. 70, 1 Aug 1937, p. 592, 609; "Tùng tuần lễ một," *Ngày Nay* no. 71, 8 Aug 1937, p. 616.

October 1937, the committee convened a “jury of honor” to preside over a nasty pen war between *Ngày Nay* and *Tân Thế Giới* over slander accusations. *Ngày Nay* seemed more enthusiastic about working with the journalist’s group rather than Phạm Huy Lục’s Provisional Committee, perhaps because it dealt specifically with freedom of the press, an issue of great concern to the Group.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group seemed to drop its suspicion of the Popular Front government’s during any discussion of Freedom of Speech. It was most optimistic and animated in its writings about transforming the press regime in Indochina, perhaps because it involved a reform that the Popular Front Government could actually enact. When Jules Brévié, the new Governor General appointed by the Popular Front, arrived in Indochina in January 1937, he said in his inaugural speech that “It is now time for us to work together.” Hoàng Đạo saw this as a positive sign that the colonial government was going to allow greater freedoms in Tonkin. Many Vietnamese remained suspicious of Brévié because of his previous post as Governor General in French Africa, which they viewed as an even more repressive regime than Indochina. Nevertheless, Hoàng Đạo gushed with enthusiasm:

We journalists are ready to work as well. Work in freedom. We want to help raise the material and intellectual standards of the people. But for these hopes to become reality, the livelihood of newspapers must be assured, not shaky. We cannot know whether we live or die like under the current press regime... We hope, sincerely hope that the Governor General representing the Popular Front government will happily dismantle the current narrow press regime, cut the ropes that bound all mediums of quốc ngữ speech.<sup>40</sup>

In the following weeks, however, Brévié confirmed the suspicions of the Vietnamese. *Ngày Nay* reported that Brévié had told Nguyễn Văn Sam, the head of the Cochinchinese journalists’ association: “I cannot allow the newspapers in quốc ngữ to be free.” Hoàng Đạo responded dejectedly: “There can be no mistaking this... Quốc ngữ newspapers will not be free. They will not progress, must bear its current sad destiny, a flimsy and insecure destiny.”<sup>41</sup> But reticence on the part of the colonial government did not stop the Group—they continued to take their own advice and work towards a Tonkin Press Association.

But the Tonkin journalists’ association fragmented and ultimately fell apart. Commercial rivalry pitted government-sponsored Francophone dailies against smaller independent quoc-ngu weeklies. Soon after the committee held elections for its leadership, it received a letter signed by a number of newspaper bosses who refused to recognize the committee as representing all journalists in Tonkin. Bùi Xuân Học, Lê Thăng, Vũ Đình Dy, Phạm Lê Bông, Ngô Tự Hạ, and Nguyễn Văn Luận cited unfair voting practices and the fact that the chairmen were elected without an absolute majority.<sup>42</sup> As Thạch Lam recounted, at a general meeting of the journalists’ association, a number of journalists including Dương Bá Trạc and Dương Mậu Ngọc, walked out in protest after Đoàn Phú Tứ was selected as meeting chairman over Nguyễn Văn Luận.<sup>43</sup> Trần Huy Liệu believed this was an act of sabotage. As he wrote in his memoirs, the bosses of the

---

At this point, Nguyễn Thế Truyền was a member of the SFIO, as stated in his letter to the committee. He would later join the Communist party, but it is unclear exactly when.

<sup>40</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Nước bài cuối cùng: Tự do ngôn luận” *Ngày Nay* no. 44, 24 Jan 1937, p. 681-682.

<sup>41</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tự do ngôn luận: Có thực như vậy chăng?” *Ngày Nay* no. 45, 31 Jan 1937, p. 705.

<sup>42</sup> “Tùng tuấn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 67, 11 Jul 1937, p. 520, 535.

<sup>43</sup> Thạch Lam, “Chung quanh hội nghị” *Ngày Nay* no. 64, 20 Jun 1937, p. 451.

daily newspapers, supported by the local colonial government, interfered with the association in public and behind the scenes.<sup>44</sup> The Francophone dailies shared a close relationship with the colonial government; they received financial support and served as the government's mouthpieces. Privately owned quốc ngữ papers had neither the finances nor the manpower to produce daily issues. As a result, the quốc ngữ weeklies could not stand up to the financial and political clout of the daily newspapers.

Once the daily newspapers had withdrawn their support, the committee could not have been said to represent the entire journalistic profession anymore. In addition, Tonkin's strict laws concerning assembly and association severely hampered its ability to convene meetings and legally organize. As a result, the committee stopped calling itself the "Unified Committee of Journalists," [Liên đoàn báo giới], using the less authoritative and political "Journalist Friendship Society." [Hội ái hữu báo giới]. As a member of the committee, Khái Hưng angrily commented: "The Unified Committee of Journalists! Just talking about it makes me angry. All the calls to mobilize and nothing has happened. Even downgrading to "Journalist Friendship Society" has not helped!" He lamented the fact that things have now taken yet another step backward: the daily newspapers had now started the "DAILY Newspaper Friendship Society."<sup>45</sup> As Trần Huy Liệu described in his memoirs, the committees in Hue and Saigon also suffered a complete breakdown. The effort failed, and *Ngày Nay* never commented on the newspaper committees again.

#### *The Self-Reliant Literary Group and the ICP: Beginnings of Mutual Suspicion*

Nhất Linh's participation in Phạm Huy Lục's provisional committee and the Khái Hưng's involvement in the failed Tonkinese Journalists' Association marked the Group's entrance into political activism. This first foray into politics meant that the Group came into contact with outside political actors, in particular the organization that was to define twentieth-century Vietnamese history more than any other—the Indochinese Communist Party (or ICP). Consequently, first impressions were not favorable, and set the tone for the two groups' future interactions. Despite the Group's attempts to maintain a neutral distance from the factionalism and infighting surrounding the Indochinese Congress, the ICP accused the Group of taking sides. Some on the Left believed that by participating in Phạm Huy Lục's committee, the Group was betraying their progressive leanings. Như Tiết, a writer from the Communist publication *Tân Xã Hội* [New Society], wrote that the Group had gone from being "conservative" [bảo thủ] to "reactionary" [phản động]. The Group had "betrayed populism, betrayed young intellectuals, betrayed even the bourgeoisie" through its apathetic response to "the movement currently rising in the people during this time of great upheaval in our country." Như Tiết argued that by working with Phạm Huy Lục, the Group condoned his underhanded procedure of preselecting the *cahiers des vœux*. He maintained that the demands must come directly from the people: "If they quietly prostrate themselves and send their hopes to that bunch of people [Phạm Huy Lục's committee], then it is no different than laying at the foot of a fig tree with open mouths. Do you

<sup>44</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi ký*, 194-195.

<sup>45</sup> Khái Hưng, "Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần," *Ngày Nay* no. 152, 11 Mar 1939, p. 4.

understand, Mr. Tam and associates?”<sup>46</sup> For *Tân Xã Hội*, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was guilty by association.

Nhất Linh, who previously had been subdued on all matters related to the Popular Front (the League of Light was currently in full swing), took time to explain his own involvement in an article titled, “To clarify recent events.” He asserted his non-partisan stance from the outset: “I maintain a neutral position without taking sides or criticizing anyone.” Defending his participation, he wrote, “I joined the provisional committee not as a member of any party, nor as an official delegate representing the newspaper profession. I participated in the capacity of a journalist—to listen, observe, and work with others.” Nhất Linh described how he avoided infighting by refusing a nepotistic offer from the provisional committee. A number of newspaper bosses (Phạm Huy Lược included) had approached him with the prospect of serving as the official representative of the journalistic profession, thus bypassing a vote. Nhất Linh declined the offer, saying that “it was my idea to convene all journalists and let them officially choose their own representative.”<sup>47</sup> After years of reporting on the Tonkin chamber of representatives, Nhất Linh was aware of Phạm Huy Lược’s lax adherence to procedure and penchant for cutting backroom deals; he did not want to compromise his own journalistic integrity by favoring one clique over another. On September 16, 1936, a group of journalists elected Nguyễn Văn Luận of *Trung Bắc Tân Văn* and Vũ Đình Dy of *L’Effort Indochinois* to represent the press in the final unified committee. Immediately after the election, Nhất Linh withdrew his participation.<sup>48</sup>

In response to Như Tiết’s criticism, Hoàng Đạo also leapt to the Group’s defense, directly addressing *Tân Xã Hội* in an article titled “the Wide River” [Giòng Sông Rộng]. Hoàng Đạo argued that Nhất Linh joined the provisional committee not to engage in partisan politics, but to work towards a nobler purpose:

As journalists writing in *quốc ngữ*, we have accomplished all we have within the confines of a narrow and controlling press regime. Under such a regime, we realize the necessity of a free press. For this reason, when we heard about the Inquiry Commission, the first priority was to demand the freedoms of a democratic foundation. For these freedoms, Mr. Tam joined the Provisional Committee.<sup>49</sup>

Hoàng Đạo maintained that participation in the provisional committee did not mean that Nhất Linh backed Phạm Huy Lược or his policies. Rather, it meant that Lược had been the first to ask. “If at that moment, Mr. An’s group had sounded the call,” Hoàng Đạo wrote, “we would have been ready to cooperate. We believe that the group or organization does not matter, just as long as the demands were just.” The Self-Reliant Literary Group saw little difference between the various factions, as they were both trying to do the same task: “As we see it, the work of Mr. An is no different than that of Mr. Lược. We don’t want to criticize anybody.” In response to Như Tiết’s argument that the demands must come directly from the people, Hoàng Đạo had this to say:

We understand, we understand even more than you. On a day when you’re thinking clearly... truthfully ask yourself if the people have enough understanding to organize their

---

<sup>46</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Giòng sông rộng” *Ngày Nay* no. 30, 18 Oct 1936, p. 344. No copies of *Tân Xã Hội* survive. Quotes are taken from *Ngày Nay*’s response.

<sup>47</sup> Nhất Linh, “Muốn cho tình thế sáng tỏ,”

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Giòng sông rộng.”

own demands? You will then admit as we do that the people—almost all of them peasants—only know that they are suffering, that they are cold and hungry. They have no idea how to fight for themselves.<sup>50</sup>

The paramount task at present, according to Hoàng Đạo, is to “do all we can so that the peasants understand their rights and duties. This is a large undertaking and cannot be accomplished in a day. For this task to be successful, it needs to rely on freedom of the press and freedom to unionize.”<sup>51</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, power in the hands of the people was of little worth if they do not even understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

The debate soon moved beyond the immediate politics of the committees and into larger differences in political philosophy and approach. The disagreement over freedom of the press, Hoàng Đạo argued, was part of a larger conflict in vision and worldview between the Group and the far Left. In addition to rebutting Như Tiết’s criticism, Hoàng Đạo made the clearest and boldest statement of the Group’s political, social and cultural aims, reemphasizing the Group’s commitment to self-reliance. To Như Tiết’s criticism that the Group’s had responded apathetically towards the current reformist and populist ethos in Indochina, Hoàng Đạo scoffed: “Funny enough, to us ‘these times of great upheaval in our country’ **is not just now—it has been a reality for a long time.** The reformist movement has been raging since *Phong Hóa* began. It has been raging until now, and it will continue to boldly progress.” He found it absurd that Như Tiết would condemn the Self-Reliant Literary Group for lackluster support of reform, especially when they had spearheaded it for years. He argued that the Group’s reform project had always been anchored to its belief in self-reliance:

From when we began our newspapers, we hoped that people will gradually transform themselves; that hope will never fade. Our idea is to transform society peacefully [êm thấm] within the confines of the law. We want us to save ourselves, to find what we need ourselves, and achieve them ourselves.<sup>52</sup>

As the Group repeated time and again, the Vietnamese could not depend on the capricious whims of an outside government—they must depend on themselves for their own liberation. The Group also clearly visualized its own role in helping Vietnamese help themselves: “We believe that the most important task for us, as young intellectuals, is to raise the standards of the populace. We have boldly taken that path for a long time.” The means through which the Group would help “raise the standards of the populace” was through its publications, both journalistic and literary:

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Marxist scholars such as Phan Cự Đệ and Nguyen Khac Vien often use this quote as evidence of the Group’s lack of revolutionary fervor and unwillingness to overthrow the colonial system. But as the Group’s writings on illustrate, they believed that the only way to build civic consciousness among the Vietnamese was through the uniform implementation and equal representation under the law. This is why Group members believed that the only way for Vietnamese in Tonkin to be free was to paradoxically be further enchained—by going from arbitrary rule by edict as a protectorate to the legal privileges enjoyed by a full colony. Furthermore, the strict censorship regime at the time would hardly allow the Group to champion anything but lawful reform, especially if the Group wanted to keep their journals alive.



Currently, as Mr. Tam had mentioned we are still operating in the domain of journalism and literature. It is not unintentional that we took the name the Self-Reliant Literary Group. We adopted newspapers and books as our means of action, the way through which we transmit new ideals. We are proud to see our ideas spread into society; perhaps Mr. Nhu Tiết has been influenced by them without his knowing.<sup>53</sup>

The Group wanted their reforms to reach the peasantry: “Most of all, we are concerned with the peasantry. The rural peasants are the majority, the overwhelming number of our people; the plight of the peasantry deserves our attention more than that of workers.”<sup>54</sup>

Hoàng Đạo provided insight into the Group’s attitudes towards the ICP and towards Communism. In his article, he attacked the shortsightedness of *Tân Xã Hội*’s political strategy. For him, the ICP was too partisan and too mixed up in local political squabbles. The mistake made by Nhu Tiết and other members of the far left was “jumping onto Vũ Văn An’s bandwagon and blindly following his orders. By following Vũ Văn An, or anyone else, your group lacks the independence to win people’s trust...” Hoàng Đạo addressed the far Left directly: “You have always known that we have felt sympathy and camaraderie with you. But now that you are following Vũ Văn An, you lose your support not only with us, but also with others. Haven’t Vũ Đình Dy’s group started to distance themselves from you?”<sup>55</sup> Here, the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s grievance towards the ICP had little to do with ideological differences. Indeed, the Group was predisposed to the politics of the far Left and aspects of their agendas were mutually compatible, including a shared focus on the peasantry and strong sense of nationalism. Rather, it was the ICP’s factional *realpolitik*—the kind that encouraged “marriages of convenience” such as the one between the ICP and Vũ Văn An—that lost the ICP the support of noncommunist nationalist intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Although it had operated underground for years, the ICP nevertheless was a relatively new player on the public scene. At least for the Group and other intellectuals, the far left proved themselves to be no different than the rest by jumping headfirst into the cliquishness and factionalism that characterized Hanoi politics.

Next, Hoàng Đạo excoriated the ICP for another mistake—focusing its reform movement on the Popular Front government.

You based your plan of action on something fleeting—it is no different than building a house on shifting sands. You should remember Mr Phạm Quỳnh in the recent past, wanting to found a political party to advocate the policies of Governor General Varenne. A political party based on one person, or foreign events cannot be secure!<sup>56</sup>

Although Hoàng Đạo did not elaborate what that “something fleeting” was, he most likely was referring to the current reformist atmosphere or to the Popular Front government itself. He contrasted this shortsightedness with the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s own reform vision, which he described as “long standing and enduring, not reliant on a sudden event or a fleeting opportunity for its survival.” The Group remained focused solely on the present: “That is the

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. All emphasis original.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

future, a near future, but nevertheless one that has not yet arrived. We do not want to be fortune tellers like Mr. Tiet. The more we work, the clearer our path becomes.” This sense of presentism helps to explain the Group’s attacks on religion and superstition. Vietnamese should not build pagodas or temples to produce good karma, nor should they hope for paradise in the afterlife—their resources and talents should be used to improve conditions in the only life that they know exists with any certainty. For the Group, the only way to make the future better is to work hard in the present. No matter the ups and downs and the unpredictability of the political and social scene, the Group’s plan was clear—all they needed to do was to follow it: “Our program has been clearly defined and determined. We have divided our plan of action into stages: we will steadfastly follow it, no force can stop us, like a wide river flowing straight into the sea without stopping.”<sup>57</sup> The Group criticized the ICP for its lack of long-term vision and its willingness to engage in dirty politics.

With the exchange between Tân Xã Hội and Hoàng Đạo, the rift between the Self-Reliant Literary Group and the ICP had begun. From then on, both groups looked upon each other with suspicion: the ICP in Tonkin never forgave the Group for working with Phạm Huy Lục, while the Group dismissed the Communists for their shortsighted partisan politics. In many ways, the Group’s valiant efforts to remain neutral and maintain journalistic objectivity proved both an asset and a liability. While perhaps the most sensible thing to do at the time, the Group’s refusal to wade into the muck of partisan politics also guaranteed that they would miss the opportunity to form alliances and networks, as well as gain practical knowledge of the various factions and groups.

### *The Populism of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and debates with the ICP*

Along with conflicting worldviews and political goals, the Self-Reliant Literary Group and the ICP also clashed over the definition of “populism” and “the people.” While active in the Indochinese Congress movement, both groups became embroiled in another heated debate over the nature of populism.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group had long trumpeted its populism, which loomed large in its ideas on the peasantry, the ethos of its journals, and its overall social, cultural, and political project. As discussed above, members of the ICP had criticized the Group for “betraying populism” as well as being “conservative” and “reactionary,” which suggested that both groups held differing definitions of the term. While critics attributed the Group’s populist fervor to the tide of optimism that swept in with the Popular Front government, the Group had promoted populism during the early years of *Phong Hóa*, and even included the concept in the Group’s original manifesto. For this reason, the populist optimism that swept through Indochina after the Popular Front victory may have annoyed members the Group, who often commented sarcastically on the growth overblown populist rhetoric in the wake of the Popular Front victory. However, despite the high profile of the notion of populism in the Group’s agenda, Nhật Linh and his associates never really defined it, using the term as if its meaning was self-evident. An examination of the *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*’s discourse on populism reveals that the Group conceptualized it merely as the opposite of “elitism.”

When the Self-Reliant Literary Group announced foundation on March 2, 1934, two of

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

its ten guiding principles specifically discussed populism. Principle three vowed to “follow populism [chủ nghĩa bình dân], to produce only works about the common people, and to encourage others to love populism.” Principle six pledged to “Praise the beauty of our homeland as it reflects the common people, which encourages others to love their country in a populist way. Do away with any sense of elitism and aristocracy [trường giả quý phái].”<sup>58</sup> In both these instances, the Group used the same word for “populism” [bình dân] as “common people” [bình dân], which it placed in direct contrast with “elitism and aristocracy.”

Another important clue involves the difference between “erudite” literature [văn bác học] and “populist” literature [văn bình dân], as explained by Khái Hưng in an article in *Phong Hóa*. Khái Hưng’s use of the term here indicates that the Group’s concept of populism was even more broad and varied than the previous examples suggest. It dealt less with the difference between the “high” elites and the “low” common people, but more in terms of “strict” versus “loose” literary forms. As Khái Hưng wrote, literature in Vietnam had been dictated by classical Chinese forms for centuries:

For time immemorial, people imitated the old rules set out by the Chinese without question: Confucian-style theses, interpretation of the classics. Poetry, poetic essays and stanza structures must be like so, word placement must be symmetrical and rhymes congruous, meter and rhythm must be exactly like so. These rules never change and have always been the same.<sup>59</sup>

For Khái Hưng, these literary rules were too rigid and stifling. As a result, Vietnamese literature influenced by classical Chinese forms was restrained, static and too academic. He contrasted this with populist literature, which “does not conform to any form or rules”:

When forced to follow rules, it is impertinent and mischievous like a restless pony. It is poetry without prosody, disregarding of all rules, its use of words and meaning all over the place. Because of that, our national literature [quốc văn] has many new words and a new, bold way of writing, such as dialects and poetry in 6-8 meter, 7-7-6-8 meter... these are all ways of making poetry with the rhyme in midline.<sup>60</sup>

Khái Hưng argued that the differences between “erudite” and “populist” literature did not stop at the rules of composition alone, but that their “content also matches these formal rules.” He described erudite literature as rife with “the traces of copying and borrowing from Chinese works... Its subject matter must remain within the boundaries of the Confucian transcendence and can never leave the realm of morals and ethics, such as the 3 fundamental bonds or 5 cardinal virtues.” On the other hand, populist literature had two primary characteristics that made it unique: it used no literary allusions and was never serious or affected. For Khái Hưng, “populist literature is simple, with sincerity and genuine aspirations. Khái Hưng’s article suggests a broader conceptualization of populism as a general sensibility oriented towards the folk—one that was unpretentious, irreverent, freeform, and earthy. This sensibility was manifest in the Group’s discourse on the peasantry and in its founding of the League of Light.

---

<sup>58</sup> “Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Phong Hóa* no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Khái Hưng, “Văn bác học và Văn bình dân,” *Phong Hóa*, no. 118, 5 Oct 1934, p. 1, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

The Group had proclaimed this version of populism throughout its *Phong Hóa* years without challenge. But after the victory of the Popular Front, competing newspapers and intellectuals began to find fault with the Group's conceptualization of populism. Most of this criticism was based on a stricter Marxist-influenced interpretation of class based on ownership of the means of production. On the other hand, the Group's use of the term implied an undefined and oppositional class dynamic which labeled as "populist" anything that was not "aristocratic." For critics such as Như Tiết from *Tân Xã Hội*, the Group was not populist because they were bourgeois intellectuals removed from the plight of the peasantry. In January 1937, Nguyễn Đức Minh wrote in *Đông Dương Hoạt Động* [Active Indochina]:

Although sometimes Hoàng Đạo deigns to write about the troubles of the peasantry, the content of *Ngày Nay* nevertheless makes readers feel the petit bourgeois tendencies of the paper. So why cover it in a cloak of populism? Is it because the populist movement and the influence of populist newspapers had diminished the Group's own principles? Are not the tendencies of the petit bourgeois also a benefit to the nation?"<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the most vicious of all attacks on the Group's idea of populism came from Đại Vô Úy in the inaugural issue of *Tiếng Vang Làng Báo* (Echoes of Journalism).<sup>62</sup> In an article titled "Smashing the Populist Banner of the Self-Reliant Literary Group," he announced that "the ideology of the Self-Reliant Literary Group is not populist," and that he would "strip away its populist pretense once and for all." He described the Self-Reliant Literary Group as "the representative of the bourgeoisie. As Europeanizers, they opposed corrupt customs, strict rituals and backward lifestyles. In other words, they fought against the remnants of feudalism, and they tried to import the civilization of the West." He admitted that the Group's reforms were indeed an accomplishment: "The Self-Reliant Literary Group played the exact role of the times, when people needed it most. However, they played it as Europeanized bourgeois, and not as populists!" "One cannot just say a few sentences and have that be enough," Dai Vo Uy wrote,

One cannot just write a few sentences in an easy to understand language, or toss out a few novels about people...most importantly, one must stand completely with the populist viewpoint, to understand clearly the plight and suffering of the people, and only side with rights for the people."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> NDM, "Phê bình báo chí," *Đông Dương Hoạt Động*, no. 2, 13 Jan 1937, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> According to Trần Huy Liệu, *Tiếng Vang Làng Báo* was a communist newspaper. Liệu, Nguyễn Mạnh Chất, and Nguyễn Đức Kính collaborated on the paper. In Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi ký*, 173-174. This is hinted when Đại Vô Úy wrote, "currently the history of mankind is in a period of transition from one system to another, the new wave of populism each day spreads wider, and the Self-Reliant Literary Group will have to yield the stage to another actor."

<sup>63</sup> Đại Vô Úy, "Đập bể bình dân của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn," *Tiếng Vang Làng Báo* no. 1, 20 May 1936, p. 3. Aspects of this inaugural issue suggests that the vicious attacks on the Self-Reliant Literary Group, while perhaps based on a true difference in political opinions, were also likely a splashy ploy used by *Tiếng Vang Làng Báo* to attract readers. First, the paper publicized its anti-Group stance with a cartoon on the cover, featuring a man using an ax to smash a sign that read "The Self-Reliant Literary Group. Populism." Second, the paper made its attacks on the Group its lead article, rather than a introductory statement about the newspaper's purpose or underlying principles. Finally, the particularly nasty tone of the article suggests that the paper was posturing for the sake of its readers. As Đại Vô Úy himself admitted, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was the "literary group with the most fame, most influence, and most productive in our country today." Newcomers to the world of journalism in Tonkin must find a

In contrast to the Group, these critics defined “populism” in dialectic terms. In the Marxist progression of history, the feudal stage began to unravel with the rise of the bourgeoisie. Growing in influence and number, these small property owners developed class consciousness and usher in the new capitalist stage of history. By describing the Group as “europeanizers” and highlighting its reformist impulses, Nguyen Duc Minh and Dai vo Uy believed the Group as representative of a Vietnamese “bourgeoisie.” In the Marxist scheme, the capitalist bourgeoisie will be supplanted by the revolutionary populist classes, which meant that they were mutually exclusive. To critics such as Nguyễn Đức Minh and Đại Vô Úy, the Self-Reliant Literary Group were deceitfully cloaking bourgeois reform projects in the language of populism.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group did not respond to NDM or Đại Vô Úy. As Hoàng Đạo observed, “It has become a ritual for new journals to seek readers by attacking the Self-Reliant Literary Group.” He wrote, “Yes, we follow populism, and fly-by-night newspapers have attacked us for it. To avoid embarrassing them, we do not bother to answer their naïve charges.” However, he made an indirect defense by explaining how the Group defined populism:

In our minds, it is not pitting those without property against those who have it, nor is it the laboring classes vs. the capitalists. We use the word “populism” to fight against the elites and aristocracy [quý phái, trường giả]. In this sense you, I, and the majority of rural people are populist. In this sense, even the capitalist classes are populist.”<sup>64</sup>

Hoàng Đạo’s statement confirms that the Group defined “populism” as a general sensibility about class. However, after receiving the criticism, Hoàng Đạo offered a more specific definition of populism based on social class. Hoàng Đạo explained that “Some find it strange that we include workers and petty capitalism [tieu tu san] under populism. We find it strange that people find it strange. The word populism, whether positive or pejorative, is wider in meaning than labor or proletarian...” What he meant was that the working classes constituted only a part of the “populist” classes. To clarify, Hoàng Đạo divided Vietnamese society into four groups:

- 1) Laborers
- 2) The petty capitalists, or middle class,
- 3) Truong Gia and local rich men [phú hào]
- 4) Aristocrats [quý phái]<sup>65</sup>

Hoàng Đạo defined “laborers” as workers and peasants who work for a wage, and do not own any capital, or means of production. “The petty capitalists” or the “middle class” are those who own capital and use it to support themselves. This included people working in cottage industries, small shopkeepers, and peasants who farmed their own bit of land. For this social class, they support themselves only if they work. About the last two groups, Hoàng Đạo wrote that “If we take the time to analyze our society, then we will see that the last two groups hold completely

---

way to set themselves apart from other publications or writers; it made sense to do so vis-à-vis the most prominent and successful. Such vicious attacks could also be attributed to a group of intellectuals defining themselves vis-à-vis the Self-Reliant Literary Group. *Tiếng Vang Làng Báo*’s showboating did not work; it never published a second issue.

<sup>64</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Giòng song rộng.”

<sup>65</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Thế nào là bình dân,” *Ngày Nay* no.33, 8 Nov 1936, p 416.

different power than the first two groups that we call populist.” He pointed out that in the countryside, petty capitalists rival laborers in number, especially in agriculture, where there are “plenty of people who have a few sao or acres of rice paddy. We must consider these peoples’ situation as much as that of the wage earners.”<sup>66</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, it was a mistake to apply terms like “proletariat” to Vietnam because it did not reflect the realities of Vietnamese society. Instead, the Group argued that the peasantry constituted the overwhelming majority of people in Vietnam, and that in rural agriculture, the living conditions of those who own the means of production and wage laborers hardly differed. Hoàng Đạo’s definition of the “populist classes” was derived from inductive observations of the Vietnamese peasantry, rather than the deductive application of Marxist model to the Vietnamese case.

As a result, the Group’s conceptualization of Populism differed than their Marxist critics. For Hoàng Đạo, wealth and power are not necessarily dependent on ownership of means of production. He observed that in Vietnamese rural society, many own the means of production, such as an ox and a small patch of land, and yet are no better off than laborers. The real oppressors of the peasantry are the local wealthy notables, usually members of the mandarin class, who wield power over the administration of the village and the collection of head tax. The point of contention between the Group and its critics was the bourgeoisie; they did not consider the bourgeoisie, petty capitalist or middle class part of the “populist classes.” The ICP conceptualized the bourgeoisie or petty capitalists as a Europeanized urban class, to which they believed the Self-Reliant Literary Group belonged. But in the end, such criticism did not matter to the Group—it would continue to follow its plan of action:

We will gradually act on all fronts to raise the standards of the peasantry. They need to become self-aware and know how to champion their own rights; only then will they progress to a just life and an equal society. They will have the freedom to represent themselves, or choose suitable people who will advocate for them... There has never been a transformative event that did not come from gradual historical process (even that of France in the past or recently in Russia). Fruit only fall from trees when ripe and history is no different. Our responsibility is to find a way to ripen the fruit on the tree, to raise people’s intellectual capacity to enlighten them. *Ideology must be supported by reality.* We cannot express all of our ideas here. As journalists, we can only do our best to support our ideology of populism. Little is better than nothing at all.<sup>67</sup>

For the Group, its unorthodox definition of populism was a not the result of applying a European concepts of class onto the Vietnamese case; rather, it emerged from their own observation and understanding of rural Vietnamese society. While Group members certainly felt sympathy for the plight of the proletariat, they targeted their reforms at the peasantry, the wellspring of the working class and the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese society.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group’s entrance into politics during the Popular Front raise a number of observations about its political habits and interacts with outside organizations. The Group’s political instincts, while realistic and prescient in certain regards, seemed too principled and idealistic in others. For example, in its commentary on the Popular Front, the Group’s skeptical, wait-and-see approach showed no small amount of common sense and political savvy.

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

In contrast, the Group's disregard of the often messy realities of Tonkinese politics and impassioned calls for principled action sounded rather naïve and emollient. This did not mean that the Group was ignorant of such machinations; *Ngày Nay*'s political reports were full of them. Rather, the Group purposefully chose a stance of principled neutrality, to rise above what they saw as petty politics.

In addition, such political tendencies were exacerbated by a level of isolation; the Group seemed to operate with almost no reference to other organizations or to ongoing events in the South. As Hoàng Đạo made clear in his debate with *Tân Xã Hội*, the Group had already outlined a plan of action; all it had to do was to boldly follow it, not beholden to anyone or any organization. Furthermore, the only instance in which *Ngày Nay* reported on the political situation in Cochinchina in any detail—covering the Colonial Council elections of 1939 between the Communists, Trotskyists and Constitutionalists—was an article written by an external correspondent in Saigon named Trần Văn Lai.<sup>68</sup> This suggests that while the Group had a clear political vision, it lacked the networks and means of communication that would make mobilization possible. The 1930s in Tonkin, especially during the Popular Front, were formative years for Vietnamese politics. During this time, Vietnamese were becoming politically socialized: forming parties and assemblies (both secret and official), developing networks and alliances, and formulating political orientations and identities. As a result, the Group's undertook its principled political stances much to its own peril, its early political activities marked by both inexperience and idealism. This political isolation came to haunt the Group in the 1940s and foreshadowed its ultimate political defeat by the ICP.

The Group's political aloofness could also be seen to stem from its unique intellectual and economic circumstances. The Group's insistence on self-reliance seemed to have implied some measure of isolation. As discussed in a previous chapter, the Self-Reliant Literary Group started by Nhật Linh and his associates to Group to take control of its basic operations and finances, a means towards economic self-sufficiency. The Doi Nay publishing house and the Self-Reliant Literary Group took the form of a literary cooperative in which members held ownership stake in the venture. Only members could make use of the Group's resources, and membership was almost impossible to attain.<sup>69</sup> This sense of autonomy and self-reliance contributed to the Group's intellectual and financial success, but may have insulated it from common experiences shared by freelancing writers. Consequently, other intellectuals of the period often interpreted the Group's collectivism and cohesion as exclusivity, snobbery, or cliquishness. This sense of isolation carried over to the Group's political activities during the Popular Front period, as intellectuals such as the ICP seemed wary of its stances.

### *The End of the French Popular Front*

---

<sup>68</sup> Trần Văn Lai, "Tình hình chính trị miền nam" *Ngày Nay* no. 162, 20 May 1939, p. 15. In addition, Nhật Linh and Nhị Linh both suggested to the journalistic community that they should send one of their own to Paris to make the case for freedom of the press. What they did not know was that someone else already had the same idea; less than three weeks later, Dương Bạch Mai would go to Paris to see Marius Moutet. The Group would learn about this later through the newspapers. Nhật Linh and Nhị Linh, "Một ý cùng ủy ban báo giới" *Ngày Nay* no. 30, 18 Oct 1936, p. 345. Hoàng Đạo, "Từng tuần lễ một," *Ngày Nay* no. 36, 29 Nov 1936, p. 490.

<sup>69</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that in its entire history, the Self-Reliant Literary Group only added one additional member to the original six; Xuan Dieu was admitted as a member in 1937.

According to Julian Jackson, the fall of Leon Blum “did not mean the end of the Popular Front as a political coalition.”<sup>70</sup> Rather, the Front petered out, as its more conservative members sought to extricate themselves from it over the next two years, culminating in its final end in the general strike of 30 Nov 1938. In Indochina, the Popular Front suffered a similar slow demise. For many Vietnamese, the departure of Marius Moutet as Minister of Colonies in January 1938 signified the end of the Front even more than the fall of the Blum cabinet. In response to the latter, Hoàng Đạo commented matter of factly that “the government of Leon Blum has collapsed,” and that “the longevity of the new [Camille Chautemps] cabinet can never be as secure as Blum’s ever was.”<sup>71</sup> When the new government replaced Marius Moutet as Minister of Colonies, Hoàng Đạo was more impassioned:

This is something that the people of Indochina regrets, because Mr. Moutet is a loyal fighter who was always willing to take care of the colonial peoples. He had grand plans that are now largely unfinished. We feel regret for ourselves, and hope that he quickly returns to his old job so he could grant us the freedoms we dream about.<sup>72</sup>

At the impending arrival of the new Minister of Colonies, Radical Georges Mandel, Hoàng Đạo expressed sadness: “For us, those destined to live in the horse stables of a faraway colony, Mr. Mandel replacing Mr. Moutet makes us lose our smile and put on funeral garb.”<sup>73</sup> *Ngày Nay* acknowledged that what happens in the metropole remained distant, but the choice of Minister of Colonies affected Vietnamese directly. *Ngày Nay* expressed even more sadness at the quiet demise of the Commission of Inquiry.

That’s it—the Inquiry Commission is no more. The wishes of the people remain just that—wishes. All those papers and forms will now have the honor of sleeping in the beautiful cabinets of the Ministry of Colonies. The people of the colonies will live as they always have, under the old ways which do not match their level of progress. Two years of hope in a better future, the belief in justice and humanity, replaced by doubt.<sup>74</sup>

But such sadness hardly resembled the “hope and disillusionment” narrative dominating scholarship of colonial Popular Front policy. Such a narrative does not give enough credit to Vietnamese intellectuals, who, while still hopeful that the Popular Front would enact sweeping, longlasting reforms, were intelligent (or cynical) enough to realize that the Popular Front could not fulfill all their political desires. The Group’s cautious optimism and constant reference to the Varenne years, when the hope of reform was also thwarted, served to keep its enthusiasm in check. As the Group constantly reminded their readers, “we must help ourselves.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Julian Jackson, 12.

<sup>71</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 65, 27 Jun 1937, p. 469.

<sup>72</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 95, 23 Jan 1938, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Marius Moutet was replaced twice as Minister of Colonies. In January 1938, he was replaced by Theodore Steeg, who served for 6 weeks in Camille Chautemps’ Fourth Ministry. Moutet was briefly reinstated in March 1938 by Leon Blum’s Second Government, and was replaced by Georges Mandel a month later when Edouard Daladier came to power.

<sup>74</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc” *Ngày Nay* no. 122, 7 Aug 1938, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Perhaps from now on, the government will quickly enact wide-sweeping large scale plans to civilize the peasantry. But before that, we must help ourselves. Before anything, we must believe in ourselves.” Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 37, 6 Dec 1936, p. 514.



Although the Popular Front period resulted in few actual freedoms, it did give emergent Vietnamese activists like the Self-Reliant Literary Group valuable experience in practical political mobilization. The whole ethos of the Popular Front, with its sense of unity, sidelining of ideology, and emphasis on political activism, widened the dimensions and scope of political activism to reach the lowest rungs of society. For the Group, the true test was to transform its message of republicanism and center-left progressivism into grassroots political movement. Although the Group had a clearcut political vision and coherent philosophy, it seemed to still lack a plan to mobilize support. This will become even more apparent in the period immediately following the Popular Front.

### **Northern Politics after the Popular Front: the SFIO and the Indochinese Democratic Front**

The demise of the Popular Front in France did not diminish political activity in Tonkin; Vietnamese mobilization efforts that had begun during the Popular Front years continued. The Self-Reliant Literary Group supported two of these efforts: the Tonkin branch of the French Socialist Party (SFIO) and the Indochinese Democratic Front (Mặt Trận Dân Chủ Đông Dương). As described in the previous chapter, Khải Hưng in particular began supporting the SFIO, with the rest of Group defending the party during the uproar over the Hanoi City Council Elections. Around the same time, the Group also participated in the Indochinese Democratic Front, and followed closely its performance in the elections for the President of the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives. This section will look at the Indochinese Democratic Front and the Elections for Chamber President, and present a number of observations on the nature of politics and ideology in 1930s Tonkin.

#### *The Indochinese Democratic Front and the 1938 Elections for Chamber President*

After the failure of the Tonkinese Journalists' Association, the Group continued to engage in political activism. Khải Hưng became increasingly interested in the SFIO, while the Group as a whole came to endorse and participate in the communist-led Indochinese Democratic Front. The Front had its beginnings in March 1938, when the ICP sought to forge a broad alliance of all existing political parties, including the SFIO. According to Alexander Woodside, the Front sought to "strengthen the movement's associational foundations, welcomed the participation of the "indigenous capitalist class" and of "reformist nationalists.""<sup>76</sup> Although Ho Chi Minh did not personally lead the Front, he encouraged the ICP to engage with "Progressive Frenchmen" as well as the "national bourgeoisie."<sup>77</sup> Woodside wrote that the front constituted a search by the ICP for "a peaceful, graduated political method that would produce what armed

---

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 203.

<sup>77</sup> As Woodside aptly points out, Ho Chi Minh himself was not ignorant of the history of labor unions in Europe. Writing in Thanh Nien in 1926, Ho had argued that the development of labor unions in Vietnam must begin with "smaller mutual aid and "friendship" societies, so that the Vietnamese people could learn the advantages of of intermediate social organizations which extended, but did not threaten, traditional communal patterns." Woodside described the Democratic Front period, during which the ICP supported the creation of such societies as "translat[ing] these prescriptions into practice." Woodside, 213.

uprisings had so far failed to produce: a mature revolutionary consciousness among the Vietnamese people.”<sup>78</sup> The coalition adopted a moderate program of political and social reforms, which included a progressive head tax, a government based on the separation of powers and freedom of press, assembly, travel, and political activity.

Like other previous attempts at building a nationwide movement or organization, the Democratic Front unfolded differently in the North, Center and South. If Tonkin reacted sluggishly to the Indochinese Congress movement, it was Cochinchina who remained indifferent to the Democratic Front. According to Huỳnh Kim Khánh, the political cleavages left over from the Congress movement had doomed the Front in the South: “The Constitutionalist, watchful of their own economic interests and position, refused to have any connection with the Communists. Only with the Trotskyists could the Party have formed an alliance; but by this time, any such cooperation was unthinkable.” In the center, the Democratic Front hardly existed at all, producing no organized political activity except for a few “sporadic workers’ strikes in Quang Ngai, Hue, and Vinh.” “Only in Bắc kỳ [Northern Vietnam],” Huỳnh wrote, “were there actual democratic front actions including the organization of workers’ strikes, mass demonstrations (the 1938 labor day demonstration in Hanoi involved more than 20,000 people) and the election of Democratic Front representatives to the Hanoi municipal council in April 1939.”<sup>79</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge corroborates this description in *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years*, when she wrote that the Democratic Front in Tonkin “took a different form” than in Cochinchina. In Hanoi, the Trotskyists did not

possess a strong organization and do not appear to have penetrated the workers movement. Moreover, there was no local equivalent of the bourgeois Constitutionalist party. Thus when the amnestied communist prisoners began to show up in Tonkin at the end of 1936, the ICP had little competition in organizing the labor movement.<sup>80</sup>

Because of the uneven response to the Indochinese Democratic Front, Huỳnh Kim Khanh’s verdict was that it “never succeeded as an organizational tactic. As a “unified front from above” with noncommunist parties, it was a failure.”<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the Democratic Front remained an important episode, a rare instance of political collaboration that reveals valuable insight into the nature of northern politics in the 1930s.

In Hanoi, the Front was directed by members of the ICP, identified by their publications. Alexander Woodside wrote that “a group led by Trường Chinh which published the journal *Tin Tức* (News)—a “public” communist group—directed the activities of the “Front,” while other party apparatus remained concealed.”<sup>82</sup> Trần Huy Liệu corroborated Woodside’s account, describing the ICP’s alliance with other political groups as mere public fronts to conceal its underground activities. He described the Democratic front in Tonkin as comprised of the *Tin Tức* Group, the SFIO and *Ngày Nay* representatives: “The reality was that the three groups above were figureheads [trọng trung], and the apparatus [cơ sở] below was the mass mobilization

---

<sup>78</sup> Woodside, 202.

<sup>79</sup> Huỳnh Kim Khánh. *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, by Cornell University Press, 1982), 222.

<sup>80</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge. *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 215

<sup>81</sup> Huỳnh Kim Khánh, 223.

<sup>82</sup> Woodside, 202.

efforts under the direct leadership of the Communist Party.”<sup>83</sup> Vietnamese living in Hanoi would have seen

orthodox Marxist revolutionaries who made little public mention of a communist program, but who published books and journals (banned before 1936) which called for the introduction into Vietnam of such modern European political and cultural heirlooms as freedom of assembly, freedom of organization, freedom of travel, labor laws, and an eight-hour working day.<sup>84</sup>

During the Democratic Front period, the ICP had downplayed its radical elements in order to build an alliance with more mainstream political groups.

Whatever the ICP’s intentions, the Self-Reliant Literary Group welcomed the Front as a good-faith effort to diminish factionalism Hanoi’s politics. In an unprecedented move, the Group made its first formal political endorsement in the Chamber of Representative elections of 1938 by announcing their support for the fledgling Front: “The Self-Reliant Literary Group supports the Democratic Front (despite not advancing our own candidate), and believes that we must join forces to demand our right to livelihood [quyền sống]. Although just a first step, it is one filled with promise.”<sup>85</sup> The endorsement signaled a shift for the Group from being an informal “gathering of like-minded comrades in the literary world” to a political entity that advanced its own candidates in elections.<sup>86</sup>

Another writer for *Ngày Nay*—who went by the pen name “One among the ranks” —also called for Vietnamese to support the Front. He depicted it as the political wing of a larger social movement, a “complete popular front” [mặt trận bình dân đầy đủ] devoted to “demanding the right to livelihood.” He argued that it was not enough “to only form a democratic group, to elect someone to the chamber or to just make demands.” The larger movement should have three interlinked fronts working together:

- 1) A Democratic Front in the Chamber to make demands on behalf of the people
- 2) A Social Front to help build and organize
- 3) A Populist Front to educate and enlighten

The first front was supposed to demand reform within the political system; the second front aimed to carry out organizational work; and the final front was to educate the people about their current situation and their rights.”<sup>87</sup> Although “One among the ranks” endorsed the Democratic Front, he envisioned it as part of a larger social movement.

“One among the ranks” remained anonymous, but he was probably a member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, most likely Hoàng Đạo or Khái Hưng. The article was full of populist discourse, a theme important to the social and political project of the Group. The idea of a “populist front” to educate and enlighten matched the Group’s belief that young intellectuals had a moral duty to raise the standards of the peasantry through education. The term “demanding the right to livelihood” [đòi quyền sống] was used often in the writings of Group members,

<sup>83</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi ký*, 204.

<sup>84</sup> Woodside, 202.

<sup>85</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay* no. 117, 3 Jul 1938, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> “Tu Lục Văn Doan,” *Phong Hóa* no.87.

<sup>87</sup> Một người trong hàng ngũ, “Mặt trận bình dân: Đòi quyền sống” *Ngày Nay* no. 117, 3 Jul 1938, p. 3-4.

especially Hoàng Đạo. “Livelihood, for a nation, is as varied in meaning as for individuals,” he wrote in 1939. “Livelihood is not just food and water, it is also freedom to decide our own destiny, to clear our own path, to achieve our desired goals. Livelihood means autonomy, complete autonomy.”<sup>88</sup> Finally, “One among the ranks” used the impassioned and exalted language typical of the Group’s writings, especially in its manifestoes. This suggests that despite ICP intentions that the Group be a figurehead for the Democratic Front, the Group had its own ideas for the organization. The article written by an author identified only as “One among the ranks” can be seen as a fusion of the political project of the Democratic Front with the populist social and cultural program of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

The Indochinese Democratic Front made its political debut in the 1938 general election for the Tonkin Chamber of Representatives. Of the 30 Democratic Front candidates who ran for office, 14 won seats in the Chamber; almost all of these new Democratic Front representatives were members of the SFIO.<sup>89</sup> Hoàng Đạo hailed the “resounding” victory, writing that it demonstrated the “strength of cooperation centered on a clear program.”<sup>90</sup> Yet this promising success was short-lived—the election of the Chamber President the following month revealed the fragility of the Front’s alliance. Despite the attempt to maintain the coalition, corruption and factionalism continued to dominate politics in Tonkin. In a fierce campaign even by Tonkin standards, Phạm Lê Bồng, editor of the pro-monarchy journal *La Patrie Annamite*, challenged longstanding incumbent Phạm Huy Lục for the chamber presidency. The Democratic Front had advanced its own candidate, SFIO member Võ Đức Diên. As a minority in the chamber, the Democratic Front had hardly any chance of winning the presidency. When Khải Hưng revealed the results for the first round of voting, he hinted at betrayal within the ranks of the Front: Phạm Lê Bồng edged out incumbent Phạm Huy Lục with 58 to 53 votes, two members cast blank ballots, and Võ Đức Diên received 7 votes. Because there were 14 Democratic Front members on the chamber, Khải Hưng deduced that “among the representatives of the Democratic Front, at least six had sold their votes.”<sup>91</sup>

The following week, readers learned the entire story in *Ngày Nay*’s annual special issue on the Chamber. Nhị Linh penned a reportage recounting a confrontational meeting of the Democratic Front held at SFIO headquarters. Before the election, the SFIO had originally selected Nguyễn Văn Lộ as the Front’s candidate to challenge Phạm Lê Bồng and Phạm Huy Lục. But rumors spread that Lo had planned to cut a deal with Bồng. When questioned at the meeting, Lộ admitted that once he was eliminated in the first round, he would pledge his votes to

<sup>88</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Quyền sống của mọi nước” *Ngày Nay* no. 162, 20 May 1939, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> Various articles in *Ngày Nay* can verify the names of 11 of these representatives:

- 1) Phan Gia Hối (Thai Bình)
- 2) Hà Văn Bình (Ninh Bình, SFIO)
- 3) Trần Cao Đạm (Thai Bình, SFIO)
- 4) Đào Đức Quý (Thai Bình, SFIO)
- 5) Nguyễn Văn Lộ (Thai Bình, SFIO)
- 6) Đặng Ngọc Phơn (Thai Bình)
- 7) Nguyễn Mạnh Hiền (Thai Nguyen)
- 8) Hồ Sĩ Đào (Thai Bình)
- 9) Nguyễn Bách (SFIO)
- 10) Phạm Hữu Chương (Hanoi, SFIO)
- 11) Võ Đức Diên (SFIO)

<sup>90</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* no. 120, 24 Jul 1938, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Khải Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sep 1938, p. 4.

Phạm Lê Bông in an effort to oust Phạm Huy Lục. The entire room erupted in anger. The chairman of the meeting, the French SFIO deputy Lacoste, angrily stood up, shook his fist in Lộ's face and shouted, "There is a traitor among us. A socialist cutting a deal with a monarchist? Is there anything more disgusting?" Humiliated, Nguyễn Văn Lộ remained quiet. To further discredit him, Khuất Duy Tiến stood up and gave precise details of his dealings with Phạm Lê Bông, giving the exact time, date, and location of their meetings, as well as the names of the other Democratic Front defectors. Khuất Duy Tiến recounted how on three separate occasions, Phạm Lê Bông had courted a number of Democratic Front electors with parties at the Shanghai Bar, Khâm Thiên houses of ill repute, and his own villa on Hàng Bô. Perhaps most embarrassing of all, Tiến detailed how Nguyễn Văn Lộ, the Democratic Front's own candidate for chamber president, had personally collected a number of other Democratic Front electors by automobile and brought them to Khâm Thiên to meet with Phạm Lê Bông.<sup>92</sup> Nhị Linh described these revelations as "thunder striking my ears." In the face of such overwhelming evidence, the Democratic Front decided to replace Lộ with fellow socialist Võ Đức Diên and forced all of the 13 Democratic Front representatives to sign a pledge to vote only for the Front's designated candidate and never for Lục and Bông.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the pledge, Bông's political courtship had worked. In the same issue of *Ngày Nay*, Trần Huy Liệu published his own account of the betrayal. He described representatives secretly convening at Nguyễn Văn Lộ's house the night before the election. Lộ, Phan Gia Hối, and Đặng Ngọc Phơn declared that they would vote for Phạm Lê Bông. Lộ had just pledged to vote for Võ Đức Diên the previous day, "his signature had not yet dried, but he had already brushed off his promise without any hesitation." Đặng Ngọc Phơn exclaimed that "A vote for Võ Đức Diên is a wasted vote! Why not vote for Phạm Lê Bông, especially when we get money and gratitude?" In the first round of voting, Võ Đức Diên received only 7 votes, which meant that half the Democratic Front representatives had defected to Bông.<sup>94</sup> In the final runoff, Phạm Lê Bông edged out incumbent Phạm Huy Lục by a close margin of 60-58, bringing to an end the incumbent's six-year dominance of the Chamber.<sup>95</sup> Incensed at the betrayal, the Democratic Front and SFIO expelled the offending representatives. Even the Democratic Front's principled program could not supplant personal politics.

The corruption within the ranks of the Democratic Front was but a small symptom of a larger problem facing Tonkinese electoral politics. While not a new phenomenon in Hanoi, the buying of votes had reached unprecedented proportions by 1938. Rumors flew about how Phạm Lê Bông funded his victory. One reporter estimated that Bông had spent 25,000 piasters to win the Chamber presidency. Hoàng Đạo claimed that Bông had borrowed 14,000 piasters and used his own Hanoi villa as collateral. Trọng Lang estimated that each vote cost Bông anywhere from 200-700 piasters each.<sup>96</sup> The corruption in this particular election was so rampant that Bùi Đình Tá, the longest serving representative who had been in the Chamber since the beginning in 1908,

---

<sup>92</sup> The most surprising aspect of Khuất Duy Tiến's testimony was how detailed and precise it was about Lo's activities and whereabouts, suggesting that the ICP had an extensive surveillance network that would rival the Surete.

<sup>93</sup> Nhị Linh, "Buổi họp ở hội quán đảng Xã hội," *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, "Cử viện trưởng: Hành vi trong bóng tối" *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> Khải Hưng, "Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuân," *Ngày Nay* no. 127, 11 Sep 1938, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Brutus, "Chung quanh một cuộc bầu cử," *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 19; Hoàng Đạo, "Ý nghĩ cuộc bầu cử nghị trưởng dân biểu Bắc kỳ năm nay," *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 14; Trọng Lang, "500\$ một lá phiếu!" *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 15, respectively.

resigned his seat in protest. Before resigning, he sent a letter in which he blasted the chamber for its corruption: “Are the representatives elected by the people like a group of pigs, buffalo and chickens, that people can buy and sell?”<sup>97</sup> One SFIO member who called himself Brutus commented that, “what little credibility the Tonkinese Chamber of Representatives had was completely lost in this election.”<sup>98</sup>

After the 1938 elections, the Self-Reliant Literary Group stopped publishing its yearly special issue on the Chamber. Perhaps the impending threat of war had turned their attention towards more pressing issues. Perhaps the corruption of that year had demonstrated once and for all that the Chamber was not worth keeping or reforming. Or perhaps they had finally grown cynical towards institutional politics. Either way, the Group lost interest in the reforming the chamber. Likewise, the Group also seemed to lose interest in the Democratic Front. While *Ngày Nay* continued to publish announcements for the Front, the Group stopped discussing it in their columns.

During the Popular Front period, with the establishment of the SFIO, the colonial government finally permitted political parties in Tonkin. As illustrated by the above elections, the introduction of institutionalized politics into Tonkin hardly changed the political habits of northern Vietnamese; rather, the SFIO and the Democratic Front merely provided another setting for the same political wheeling and dealing. Curiously, these fickle political loyalties highlight the minimal influence of ideological doctrine on the period. They suggest that northern attitudes towards political ideologies resembled those towards religion-- fluid, functional, and non-dogmatic.<sup>99</sup> After all, the 1930s was characterized by intellectual experimentation: Vietnamese freely borrowed, transformed, and appropriated foreign ideas. Writing about the SFIO, Caroline Deschamps came to the same conclusion when she wrote that in the late 30s, “the influence of Socialism on the Vietnamese seemed limited. They were, for the most part, not very susceptible to doctrine. Therefore, socialist propaganda became gradually oriented towards a propaganda of action.”<sup>100</sup> What was most striking about Tonkinese politics in the 1930s was not just the intense factionalism, but the absence of political dogmatism.

### *Observations on Politics and Ideology in 1930s Tonkin*

The political institutions and developments discussed in this chapter—the Chamber of Representatives, the Indochinese Congress, the SFIO, and the Democratic Front—raise a several points about the nature of politics and ideology in 1930s Tonkin. As previously described, the colonial state monitored assemblies and associations and banned political parties. The Self-Reliant Literary Group believed that this absence of political rights—especially the right to a free press, the right to form political organizations, and the right to vote—stunted the development of civic values and modern political culture in Tonkin. It bemoaned the fact that organizations did

<sup>97</sup> Thế Lữ, “Các ông nghị nói gì?” *Ngày Nay* no. 128, 18 Sep 1938, p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Brutus, “Chung quanh một cuộc bầu cử.”

<sup>99</sup> In his authoritative work on Vietnamese religious practices, Leopold Cadière described Vietnamese attitudes towards religion as fluid and syncretic. Perhaps such a description could also apply to other Vietnamese belief systems, such as political ideologies. L. M. Cadière, *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese* (Clayton, Vic: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1989).

<sup>100</sup> Caroline Deschamps, *Être socialiste en Indochine: 1905-1952. Recherche sur le socialisme européen en situation coloniale* (Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Histoire: Université de Paris VII, 1996), 30.

not promote serious agendas, that the voting public chose candidates based on gimmicks and bribes, and that elected officials filled their pockets while neglecting their constituents. Tonkin politics were not structured by modern ideological and political differences, but, as in a premodern village, by rival cliques centered around political bosses. Political activity in Tonkin took place intermittently, with politicians on the Chamber of Representatives convening once a year for two weeks in autumn. As a result, elected officials saw their duties as a side hobby, secondary to the running of their businesses and commercial interests. Such patterns of informal rather than institutionalized politics were based on issues unrelated to real questions of political governance, instead focusing on matters such as friendships, real or perceived slights, *quid pro quo*s, and mutual likes and dislikes.

In such a political environment, allegiances and alliances changed frequently, as illustrated by the 1938 elections for the Chamber President. Membership in a political party did not necessarily ensure loyalty, and politicians still readily sold their votes to the highest bidder or most powerful patron. This political culture may be seen in the career of a prominent politician of the period. Vũ Văn An was a power player in Hanoi political circles; *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* readers would have easily recognized his name owing to his role in the Chamber of Representatives and the Indochinese Congress. They would have also seen Vũ Văn An undergo a number of political makeovers. “Among the Annamese active in politics,” Khái Hưng wrote,

I consider Vũ Văn An a supremely bizarre character. I don’t know his deepest thoughts, and I won’t bother to guess what they are. But every time I encounter him, I see that he has transformed himself. It seems that there are three or four distinct personalities within him, each making an appearance at a different time.<sup>101</sup>

Khái Hưng recalled that during the Indochinese Congress movement, Vũ Văn An had joined forces with the ICP to oppose Phạm Huy Lục’s rival organization. After the colonial government had suppressed the movement, Vũ Văn An reinvented himself as a socialist. Khái Hưng commented that “A few months ago, Mr. An left the Communist Party and joined the SFIO. I thought to myself, “These two parties have rather similar viewpoints. Here we do not officially have a Communist Party so for him to join the Socialist party makes perfect sense.” But Vũ Văn An did not stay a socialist for very long. He soon defected from the SFIO, changing allegiances once again by shifting further to the right. As Khái Hưng wrote, “People see [Vũ Văn An] wholeheartedly help Mr. Phạm Lê Bổng, a monarchist in the recent election for Chamber president, in the same way he helped Trịnh Văn Phú, a Communist, last year. And as before, his candidate won. So does this mean that Vũ Văn An has now become a monarchist? Don’t be too sure.”<sup>102</sup> Khái Hưng recounted Vũ Văn An’s explanation, which hinted at the *realpolitik* beneath his shifting alliances:

Upon meeting him the other day, he offered an explanation before I had a chance to ask him any questions: “You must know that I hate Bổng more than Lục, but I believe Lục to be more dangerous so I helped Bổng eliminate him first. I will turn around and deal with Bổng later. And getting rid of Bổng can happen at any time, as he is hardly a threat!”<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Khái Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 135, 5 Nov 1938, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

Here, Vũ Văn An does not mention ideology or policy—his politics focused on eliminating a perceived threat. Explaining his own dealings with the ICP, Vũ Văn An had this to say: “Everything I do, I do for my children and grandchildren, I do nothing for the communists!”<sup>104</sup> This comment, which puzzled Khải Hưng, could be taken to mean that his political activity was undertaken out of loyalty not to a party or ideology, but to his own personal or familial interests.

Vũ Văn An’s political bedhopping was hardly an unusual phenomenon. Hà Văn Bình, the idealistic young schoolteacher who previously challenged Phạm Huy Lục to the chamber presidency in 1934, by 1939 had become a seasoned politician and member of the SFIO. Expelled from the socialist party for selling his vote to Phạm Lê Bổng, Hà Văn Bình quickly made new political alliances. Not long after, the imperial court had bestowed upon Hà Văn Bình the decree of Hong Lo Tu Khanh, making him a mandarin.<sup>105</sup> Yet Vũ Văn An and Hà Văn Bình were hardly typical cases of young aspirants finally gaining the acceptance of the establishment, nor did they exemplify political opportunism. The ease and frequency with which politicians of the era changed their allegiances across what would have been irreconcilable ideological differences, not to mention the frequency and ease with which they did so, points to the shallowness of doctrinal commitment or party loyalty. In such a political culture, terminology widely used in scholarship of the period such as “communist,” “bourgeois,” or “monarchist” can be misleading, as they imply codified political and social cleavages. Although the distinctions between various groups would often be expressed in terms of policy or ideological orientations, the core concern was position and power.

But perhaps the most overlooked characteristic of 1930s Hanoi politics was how small it was. The pool of elites willing and able to participate in politics and social reform was minuscule; the same names crop up time and again in participant lists of various organizations. For example, prominent businessman Phạm Tá served as a member of the Chamber of Representatives, participated in the League of Light and founded his own organization for underprivileged children. Dr. Phạm Hữu Chương was a member of the Socialist Party, a periodic member of the Hanoi City Council and the primary medical consultant for the League of Light. The same group of people seemed to be involved in everything. Because this pool of intellectuals and elites was so small, different communities of interest overlapped. These individuals brought their talents as well as their rivalries and prejudices into the activities that they pursued.<sup>106</sup>

Such was the case with the Self-Reliant Literary Group and members of the ICP. Vietnamese Communist historiography of the period tends to emphasize the difference in background between ICP members (or pro-Communist intellectuals) and the Group. Writing in the postrevolutionary period, intellectuals active in the 1930s often identify themselves as “poor” vis-à-vis the “rich” Self-Reliant Literary Group, but members of the ICP and the Self-Reliant Literary Group were not all that different in background. Members of both groups had known

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc”, *Ngày Nay* no. 153, 18 Mar 1939, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> This is a factor overlooked by Alexander Woodside in his seminal work on associationism in late colonial Indochina. His analysis of the lack of coherence of Vietnamese colonial associations takes as its primary assumption the mutually exclusive nature of clubs. Yet is precisely the overlapping membership of these organizations, especially in Hanoi, that quite possibly contributed to their dysfunction. Alexander Woodside, “The Development of Social Organizations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period”, *Pacific Affairs* XLIV, 1 (Spring 1971), p. 39-64.



each other for years; many had taught school together at the Ecole Thang Long.<sup>107</sup> Intellectuals of all stripes taught at the school such as: ICP operatives Dang Thai Mai, Huynh Van Phuong and Võ Nguyên Giáp; SFIO members Hoang Minh Giam, Phan Anh, and Phan Thanh; VNQDD member and later human rights lawyer Tran Van Tuyen; and nonaligned nationalists Nguyen Duong and Nghiem Xuan Yem. Other teachers such as architects Hoàng Như Tiếp and Nguyễn Cao Luyện, and writer and archaeologist Pham Huy Thong later joined the Communist Party. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group who taught at the school included Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng, as well as their associate Lemur Nguyen Cat Tuong.<sup>108</sup> Teachers were required to have at least a bachelor's degree (*bachelier*) or diploma (*diplome*): Giap and Huynh Van Phuong both held bachelors of letters (*bachelier es lettres*) degrees, while Dang Thai Mai had a diploma from the University of Pedagogy. Many of these intellectuals also attended the same prestigious secondary schools; Nhất Linh, Khải Hưng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp attended the Lycee Albert Sarraut (as did other ICP members Pham Van Dong and Trường Chinh). As in the case of the Soviet Union and France, communism in Vietnam tended to flourish amongst urban intellectuals. Despite their insistence that the Self-Reliant Literary Group was made up of “bourgeois” elitists, leaders of the ICP came from backgrounds that were just as privileged.

Despite the similar backgrounds of these intellectuals, an important process of ideological differentiation took place throughout the 1930s. By the time the ICP and Self-Reliant encountered one another for the first time as political groups, they both had espoused divergent political worldviews. The Group advocated building a modern Vietnamese state on Enlightenment values and Republicanism; the ICP sought the seizure of political power through revolution. The ICP embraced a kind of *realpolitik*, exhibiting the same kind of tribalism and sectarianism that existed in Tonkinese politics. Trần Huy Liệu's memoirs reveals a rigid worldview that pits the Communists against other groups in stark “us versus them” terms:

Collaborating on the [Indochinese Democratic] Front with the SFIO Tonkin branch in Hanoi and the *Ngày Nay* group was frustrating and complicated. During the Indochinese Congress, the *Ngày Nay* Group led by Nguyen Tuong Tam had joined forces with Phạm Huy Lục to *oppose* us. But when the democratic movement became stronger, they shook hands and joined us in the Democratic Front.<sup>109</sup>

In his memoirs, Liệu portrayed the Self-Reliant Literary Group as political opportunists. He depicted Nhất Linh's collaboration with Phạm Huy Lục's provisional committee as a willful attempt to undermine the ICP. As Nhất Linh's explanation made clear, he worked with Lục “in the capacity of a journalist,” to observe and report on the events—opposing the communists hardly factored at all. Nevertheless, it is this kind of rigid zero-sum approach—one that embraces categorical thinking, not to mention essentializing, polarizing, and totalizing impulses—that characterized the communist political worldview in this period. Trần Huy Liệu revealed that despite gestures towards a political alliance, the ICP remained dismissive of the Self-Reliant Literary Group:

---

<sup>107</sup> Founded in 1919 by Phạm Hữu Ninh, the school boasted a modern curriculum taught by a predominantly Vietnamese faculty. In 1932, Ninh started *Phong Hóa*, which was later taken over by Nhất Linh, who was teaching at the school.

<sup>108</sup> *Ngày Nay* no.74, p 708. Although Phan Thanh was a member of the SFIO, he also had ties to the ICP. It is possible that Phan Thanh first made these connections through the École Thăng Long.

<sup>109</sup> Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi ký*, 205-206.

On one hand, we enticed them in and joined up with them. On the other hand, we criticized their not so radical aspects. For example, when they rallied to build Houses of Light in workers' areas, we wrote newspaper articles praising their concern for the well being of laborers. But it is not enough to want to raise the living conditions of workers. They must fight for the real rights for workers and advance towards eradicating the exploitative regime. To show our solidarity and to encourage our contacts with them, we sent a number of people to join the League of Light to work with them.<sup>110</sup>

ICP attempts to “encourage contacts” with noncommunist intellectuals produced few results:

We admit that our influence on bourgeois intellectuals which [the Group] represented was very scant. Whatever sympathy they had for us it was directed towards a few people that they personally liked, not because they were loyal to the proletariat, or that they had intentions to cooperate. When the war finally exploded, we suffered losses. Those within our party that were close to them had gone, so the Nguyen Tuong Tam Group followed a different path and began opposing us.<sup>111</sup>

*Ngày Nay* provides some evidence to support part of this account. Some members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group had somewhat regular contact with communist activists. As previously mentioned, Khái Hưng had worked with Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trần Huy Liệu on the Tonkin Journalists' Association, and continued to keep in contact with Trần Huy Liệu even after its failure. No evidence exists that this particular relationship was acrimonious; Liệu and Khái Hưng may have even liked each other. However, this account misrepresents the Self-Reliant Literary Group's motivations for joining the Democratic Front. Contrary to Liệu's suggestion that the Group lacked loyalty to the proletariat, *Ngày Nay*'s commentary on labor issues during the Popular Front illustrate the Group's concern for the conditions and rights of workers. What's more, the Group had argued that it was not enough to care for the plight of workers since they were few in numbers. The Group was more concerned with the peasantry, which it argued was larger, more oppressed, and the wellspring of the proletariat.

Yet what is striking about communist intellectuals and the Self-Reliant Literary Group during this period is not their differences but their *similarities*. Both groups were deeply involved in journalism. Both organizations collaborated with other intellectuals in social reform. In 1936, the Group started the League of Light to much public fanfare, working together with architects Hoàng Như Tiếp and Nguyễn Cao Luyện. In 1938, members of the ICP along with prominent scholar Nguyễn Văn Tố started the Association for the Dissemination of Quốc Ngữ (Hội Truyền Ba Quốc Ngữ). For all the ICP's excoriation of the Group's “bourgeois Europeanization and reformism,” the ICP also took part in such reforms. In their activities, both groups tried to flatten Vietnamese social relations by eliminating the use of hierarchical pronouns. Both groups

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. According to William Duiker, by 1937 the sectarian fighting between the ICP and noncommunist groups had become so dire that the Central Committee Plenum of the Party had to criticize its own operatives for their failure to follow party directives. William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1981), 53.

promoted the use of more egalitarian pronouns such as “Anh” and “Chị.”<sup>112</sup> Likewise, the literary work championed by both groups exhibited similar characteristics. Nhất Linh’s romances (these (*Đoạn Tuyệt, Lạnh Lùng*) had clear didactic intentions, as did the social realist works of Nguyen Hong and Nguyễn Công Hoan later promoted by Communist cultural policy.<sup>113</sup> The Group’s compassion for downtrodden and oppressed classes of society dovetailed with the Ngô Tất Tố and Nam Cao’s emphasis on the plight of the peasantry. For all their claims to forging a new Vietnamese culture and identity, self-aware communist intellectuals probably realized, perhaps unconsciously, that their activities of the period were not all that different from the modernist program of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. This suggests that the animosity and suspicion the ICP had for the Group were not the result of deep ideological cleavages, but rather a kind of “narcissism of minor differences.”

These similarities did not escape one of the Group’s last remaining members. Before his death, Tú Mỡ wrote that the official Communist cultural policy developed in the 1940s bore a resemblance to the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s reform project:

The way of the nation, science, and masses that our Party had raised in the Theses on Vietnamese Culture, The Self-Reliant Literary Group had advocated well before. The belief in “Art for humanity’s sake” was in the words of Tú Mỡ on white paper in black ink, although the Group did not put it in their manifesto, but in reality we worked according to that principle.<sup>114</sup>

Written by party theorist Trường Chinh in 1943, the Theses on Vietnamese Culture outlined his ideas for defining revolutionary culture, which he later elaborated in his detailed 1948 speech *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*. Together, these two documents effectively established official Communist cultural policy, their influence lasting to the present. A more thorough reading of these writings confirms Tú Mỡ’s description, revealing deep similarities or dialogue between the Group’s manifesto and ICP later cultural policy

In his 1948 speech, Trường Chinh outlined the characteristics of Communist revolutionary culture, which he called “the New Vietnamese Democratic Culture” [Văn hóa dân chủ mới Việt Nam]. By definition, this new culture must follow three guidelines—it must be nationalist [dân tộc], scientific [khoa học], and populist [đại chúng]. Trường Chinh described the nationalist characteristics of this new culture:

The New Vietnamese Democratic Culture includes the attributes and virtues of the people and must progress by promoting the good and the beautiful while eradicating the bad and the ugly. The New Vietnamese Democratic Culture stands for the essence of our people

---

<sup>112</sup> Helle Rydstrøm. *Embodying Morality: Growing Up in Rural Northern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 64. The Self-Reliant Literary Group’s avoidance of hierarchical pronouns will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>113</sup> Although these writers were not members of the Communist Party at the time (they would join after 1945), their writings were endorsed and promoted in Communist cultural policy. See “Marxism in Vietnamese Culture” in Trường Chinh. *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1977).

<sup>114</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Trong bếp núc của Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” *Tạp chí văn học*, no.5-6 (1988) and 1 (1989). Literary historian and party member Hà Minh Đức quickly jumped on this analysis, pointing out that Tú Mỡ’s revolutionary logic was still too undeveloped to see the difference between the Group’s project and the Communist Party’s. However, he does not clarify or explain what this difference actually entails.

and nation. At the same time, it is ready to adopt the good, the beautiful, and the progressive from outside cultures. It is not xenophobic or chauvinist, and rejects pastiche and rootlessness. It refuses to accept without question the culture of others, to parrot or apply outside culture to our own like a machine, without any concern for the special characteristics and circumstances of our people and nation.<sup>115</sup>

According to Trường Chinh, this new revolutionary culture must embody the characteristics of the Vietnamese nation. It may adopt from outside cultures, but only if thoughtfully adapted to the needs of the masses. As argued in previous chapters, the Self-Reliant Literary Group adopted a similar stance in their literary pronouncements. Although made up of outspoken iconoclasts and europeanizers, the Group never wanted Vietnam to become a lesser version of France. Rather, it wanted to marshal the best of western culture, politics and society in service of the nation, to construct a modern Vietnamese national identity. As the Group's manifesto stated, members were to "use one's own ability to produce literary works of value, not just translate works from foreign countries just because they have literary worth. This is to enrich the literary corpus of the nation [văn sản trong nước]... Use a simple literary method—easy to understand, few Chinese characters—a literary method that truly embodies the Annamese character [tính cách Annam]." <sup>116</sup> The Group wanted Vietnamese to find their own voice, one free from foreign influences, and to use this voice to create a modern body of literature for the Vietnamese nation. Furthermore, by insisting that revolutionary culture also had to be nationalist, Trường Chinh downplays the internationalist elements of Communism. This parallels the Group's own lack of interest in international leftist political movements and belief that leftist ideologies must be used to serve the nation.

Regarding the scientific nature of the New Vietnamese Democratic Culture, Trường Chinh wrote:

Fighting the backwardness and degeneration and feudalism that still remains in the old Vietnamese culture, the new Vietnamese People's culture must be scientific. It respects freedom of religion, but rejects nonsensical superstition. It opposes idealistic and mystical ideas, and all complicated and unnecessary practices that no longer make sense or runs counter to progress. It strongly promotes the crusade for "A New Life" and rejects practices of freedom without purpose (*tac phong chu nghĩa tu do tan man*), and fights antiquated customs. It brings science and knowledge about sanitation and health and proliferates it among the people. It transmits the ideas of science and Marxist philosophy, fighting antiquated prejudices and wrong ideas. A special characteristic of the New Vietnamese People's culture is that it champions the practical and makes theory and practice work together. It fights the deceitful and dumbing policies of the French colonialists and champions the truth. It champions progress and struggles against anything that stands in the way forward of the people. It is not pastiche, rootless, faddish, or mechanical. It does not follow the idea of "scientific idolatry," which believes that only modern science could prevail over colonialists with high technology, that we with

---

<sup>115</sup> Trường Chinh. *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt-nam*. (Hà-nội: Sự Thật, 1974), 68.

<sup>116</sup> Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, "Phong Hóa no. 87, 2 Mar 1934, p. 2.

little science and low technology can do nothing but accept defeat. In terms of cultural production, the New Vietnamese People's Culture believes in socialist realism.<sup>117</sup>

The mention of Marxism and socialist realism aside, this passage could very well have been written by Nhất Linh, Khải Hưng, or Hoàng Đạo. The Group championed science and rationality in all of its reform projects. From its very first issue under Nhất Linh, *Phong Hóa* included a column dedicated to explaining scientific and natural phenomenon. The Group's manifesto stated that its members must "bring the scientific methods of the West [phương pháp khoa học thái tây] into Annamese literature." In his *Ten Things to Internalize*, Hoàng Đạo called for young intellectuals to "cultivate a scientific mind." The Group ardently believed that a culture steeped in science would reject superstition and mysticism and eliminate antiquated and unnecessary customs and practices. Referring to the popularity of martial arts and Wuxia novels, Thach Lam wrote that

The appetite and liking for such outlandish stories among our youth in this scientific 20<sup>th</sup> century carries a clear meaning—that our people are still behind in intellectual development. In other civilized countries, people do not believe in such mystical or nonsensical things, because they have something stronger to trust in. That is science... Our people do not know, do not understand, and do not have that, that is why they desire such foolish, illusory, and fictitious things, which brings them the false feeling of strength.<sup>118</sup>

And finally, as the next chapter will illustrate, the belief that science could bring sanitary and hygienic conditions to the people lay at the heart of the League of Light.

Lastly, the New Vietnamese Democratic Culture must reflect populist values. Trường Chinh wrote:

Rejecting isolation from the people, rejecting the masses of old colonial culture in our country and current temporary occupied areas, the New Vietnamese People's Culture must be the culture of the populace [đại chúng]. It serves the people, the many. It rejects the idea that culture must be erudite and inaccessible, the higher the more valuable, the more difficult the better. It proposes that culture must be close to the masses to guide and educate them, to raise the standards of the masses to pinpoint and nurture the talent in the masses, not following the masses, but learning from them. The joys and sorrows of the masses are the joys and sorrows of the cultural warrior. The cultural warrior needs to understand these joys and sorrows and acknowledge his responsibility to educate their ideas and answer their curiosities in a timely manner. Culture that serves the masses must reflect truthfully the hopes and ideals of a people who are producing and fighting, must rouse the people and make them enthusiastic, believe and be more resolute."<sup>119</sup>

As described previously, the Self-Reliant Literary Group had espoused a brand of populism best described as a general sensibility oriented towards the folk—unpretentious, irreverent, freeform,

---

<sup>117</sup>Trường Chinh, 69.

<sup>118</sup>Tòng Lương, "Tinh thần khủng hoảng," *Phong Hóa* no. 16, p. 1.

<sup>119</sup>Trường Chinh, 70.

and earthy, not erudite or elitist. It believed that art must reflect contemporary society. As Viet Sinh wrote, “To make readers laugh or cry, literature must resemble reality. The happenings of life—what the ears hear and what the eyes see—are all dynamic lessons, as they affect people and force people to think seriously.”<sup>120</sup> The Group repudiated flowery or grandiose language: “use simple language that anyone can understand. In particular, do not use a didactic tone of voice, avoid stodginess or pretentiousness... Most importantly, it must carry the soul of populism, the desire to eradicate antiquated customs, superstitions...”<sup>121</sup> Well before the Communist prescribed it, the Group argued that young intellectuals must engage with the peasantry, and serve as a vanguard to educating the masses on modern ways. Trường Chinh’s pronouncements on “the New Vietnamese Democratic Culture” showed deep similarities to the Group’s earlier reform projects. Perhaps the Communist Party owed a larger intellectual debt to the Self-Reliant Literary Group than it cared to admit.<sup>122</sup>

According to Alexander Woodside, the Democratic Front movement ended abruptly with the start of the Second World War in September 1939. The colonial government unleashed massive reprisals against the ICP, disbanding its various ICP organizations and closed down its newspapers. Newspapers in Hanoi reported the war with fascination; by May 1939, Khải Hưng had stopped commenting on the SFIO and like other journalists at the time, turned his attention to the events unfolding in Europe.

Despite the Democratic Front’s brief existence, however, its events had lasting effects on the politics of Tonkin. The absence of political dogmatism and party loyalty revealed the fluid and flexible nature of Vietnamese political borrowing. During this formative period, Vietnamese intellectuals forged organizational networks, built alliances, and constructed political identities that will define the tumultuous politics of 1940s Vietnam. In its interactions with other organizations during the Democratic Front period, the ICP also underwent a similar process. Its later pronouncements on culture reveal no small amount of influence by the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its earlier sociopolitical reform project. The communist belief that culture must be nationalist, populist, and scientific echoed the Group’s own calls for building a Vietnamese national literature, eradicating superstition through rationality, and creating art that served and reflected the people. These deep similarities suggest that the Communist insistence on the uniqueness, as well as their mislabeling of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and its project, masks an awareness of the borrowed nature of its “New Vietnamese Democratic Culture.”

## World War II and International Politics, 1939-1941

---

<sup>120</sup> Việt Sinh, “Một cái làm to” *Phong Hóa* no. 34, p. 1

<sup>121</sup> Tứ Ly, “Từ cao đến thấp” *Phong Hóa* no. 74, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Scholars such as Kim Ninh, have highlighted the influence of Mao Zedong’s 1942 Talks on the Ya’nan Forum on Literature and Art on Trường Chinh’s cultural theories. The Vietnamese and Chinese formulations share a number of similarities, especially in their pronouncements that 1) culture should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and 2) . A glaring difference, however, lay in the Vietnamese insistence that culture be nationalistic, while Mao was more subdued on the matter. As Kirk Denton described, even Mao’s prescriptive cultural policy was not the result of his own original thinking, but a synthesis of ongoing leftist aesthetic theories and debates raging in China since the 1920s. It is likely that that Trường Chinh’s pronouncements had similar origins in Vietnam; the Self-Reliant Literary Group dominated such debates in the 1930s. Kirk A. Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), 77.

Soon after the 1938 elections for the Chamber President, *Ngày Nay* changed its focus and tone, turning towards the events unfolding in Europe. While the Group had always paid attention to international politics, coverage had remained mostly limited to short news blurbs in the section “Main things to know each week.” Hoàng Đạo or Khái Hưng often commented on topics that interested them, but *Ngày Nay* never pretended to be a news reporting organ. The Group was more interested in shaping public opinion than providing the latest scoop. Moreover, the Group’s political interests focused on colonial rather than metropolitan issues. It saw international news and politics as a secondary priority to the local and regional politics that affected the daily lives of Vietnamese.

Given its leftist leanings, it is no surprise that the Self-Reliant Literary Group was a consistent critic of global fascism. During the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, the Group expressed sympathy for deposed emperor Haile Selassie and criticized the highhanded tactics of Benito Mussolini. Tú Ly penned a humorous imagined interview with Mussolini lampooning the Italian leader’s prevaricating rhetoric. When asked about the war in Ethiopia, Mussolini bombastically answered,

How could you call it a war? My country only brought troops to subdue the savages in East Africa. These days, civilized countries are mercilessly oppressed by barbarous countries. If we just sat there and allowed them to continue, not only do we lose our macaroni, but also twenty centuries of progress. Luckily, we blackshirts are dedicated to our duty of bringing the light of civilization to shine the way for the lowly races.<sup>123</sup>

When Tú Ly suggested that “savages” may not want to be civilized, Mussolini forcefully replied, “Even if they don’t want it, we’ll force them to be civilized. I have already sent over a million troops to Ethiopia and killed tens of thousands so that they would know what civilization tastes like.” In response to Tú Ly’s question about the definition of civilization, Mussolini replied that “Civilization is how to live scientifically, to enjoy happiness and fulfillment, to have freedom of thought and religion...to completely be a complete person.” Tú Ly asked the dictator if being civilized meant that Italians could choose to be communist or fascist, Mussolini replied: “Not possible...Only members of the Fascist party are allowed to be free. The citizens of Italy are also free, free to join the Fascists.”<sup>124</sup> In this mock interview, Tú Ly lampooned Mussolini for couching his dictatorial actions in the language of progress and peace.

Like Mussolini, Adolf Hitler figured as the butt of the Group’s jokes. Through the years, both *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* criticized and satirized German rearmament and militarism. In 1938, the Group noted that Hitler “wants to save the peace...through war.”<sup>125</sup> *Ngày Nay* particularly hated how Hitler masked German aggression behind talk of peace and fairness, calling it “false morality [đạo đức giả].”<sup>126</sup> Tú Mỡ suggested in one of his satirical poems that the dictator’s aggressive tendencies could be curbed by finding a wife.<sup>127</sup> Adding to the chorus of criticism, Hoàng Đạo wrote:

<sup>123</sup> Tú Ly, “Đến thăm thủ tướng họ Mút,” *Phong Hóa* no.161, 8 Nov 1935, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* no. 130, 1 Oct 1938, p. 5.

<sup>126</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuấn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 24, 9 Sep 1936, p. 211.

<sup>127</sup> Tú Mỡ, “Lấy vợ cho Hitler” *Ngày Nay* no. 156, 8 Apr 1939, p. 17.

The world is focused on the actions of the dictator Hitler. This dictator, from when he seized government until now has followed a policy of threatening others and has been successful. He had gradually torn up the Versailles treaty signed after the Great War as if it were a worthless piece of paper. He increased troops, bullied his own people, took over the Rhineland, conquered Austria, and now seized the wealthiest areas of Czechoslovakia! Soon, if no one stops him, he will take back older territories such as Alsace-Lorraine, even the rest of Europe, and become the overlord of the world.<sup>128</sup>

“Maybe then,” Hoàng Đạo sarcastically noted, “would Hitler would be satisfied and we’ll finally have peace.”<sup>129</sup> Appeasement was not working—stronger action needed to be taken to curb Hitler’s rampaging ways. Khải Hưng commented that Hitler had reneged on every promise he publicly made: “When has Hitler done what he declared? Quite the opposite—he announced that he would not annex Austria, and he did. He resolved to keep Czechoslovakia independent, and then he swallowed it whole. In *Mein Kampf*, all he could talk about was Eastern expansion.”<sup>130</sup> For Khải Hưng and the rest of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Hitler was not to be trusted.

Although the Group often criticized Hitler and his policies, its members also begrudgingly expressed awe at the German leader’s effectiveness in bringing about the quick reversal of German fortunes. In April of 1939, *Ngày Nay* published translated excerpts from *Mein Kampf*, introducing the book as “revealing Adolf Hitler’s reform program for strengthening Germany.” According to the paper, the book “describes the actions of a dictator,” and describes the main tenets of Hitler’s program, including the idea of political power resting in the hands of one powerful figure, the subordination of the individual to the collective, and the role of the intellectual in the new German nation. Interestingly, the paper almost completely ignored the racism and anti-Semitism of the work, focusing only on Hitler’s ideas of transforming the nation. The article underlined two quotes by the German dictator; the first, “Work is the essence of human life, the brother of struggle” dovetailed with the Group’s own impassioned calls for Vietnamese young intellectuals to dispel their malaise and happily work and struggle. As evidenced by the League of Light, the Group wanted Vietnamese to learn a positive work ethic and participation in social reform. The second quote from Hitler dealt with the worth of intellectual work: “the person who works with his hands and the person who works with his mind are both active and creative as one another.”<sup>131</sup> Such a sentiment mirrored the Group’s own reform projects, particularly in publishing, in which the Group had always argued that writers who worked with their minds should be equally paid and treated as if they worked with their hands. This, however, should not be seen as an outright acceptance of fascism, but is indicative of the fluid nature of Vietnamese ideological borrowing. Writers at the time, even in Europe, had expressed admiration of the speed and efficiency of German regeneration, but this does not necessarily mean that they approved of the regime or considered themselves Nazis.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* no. 130, 1 Oct 1938, p. 5.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Khải Hưng, “Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần,” *Ngày Nay* no. 160, 6 May 1939, p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Mein Kampf* của Adolf Hitler, *Ngày Nay* no. 155, 1 Apr 1939, p. 12. A search through an English translation of *Mein Kampf* reveals no original quotes. *Ngày Nay*’s Vietnamese translation was twice-removed from the original German, taken from an article from the French sporting magazine *Match*. This is indicative of the patchy and filtered way many ideas are transmitted to Vietnam.

<sup>132</sup> According to Gitta Sereny, much of the world had admired Hitler’s ideas in the 1930s. Gertrude Stein believed that Hitler should be given the Nobel Peace Prize, while others who defended him included George



Some scholars have claimed that some Group members espoused pro-fascist political views, with Greg Lockhart even pointing to Nguyen Tuong Tam's "Charlie Chaplin-cum-Adolph [sic] Hitler moustache" as evidence of this high regard.<sup>133</sup> However, the Group's writings during the war demonstrate that such claims are overstated. On Nazi racial policy, for example, Hoàng Đạo wrote: "We'll leave the idea that there are inferior and superior races to Hitler and his followers. There is nothing legitimate in venerating one race (such as the German race) and denigrating all others. Any race could declare itself the best and bully others into saying the same. Violence does not make others respect you."<sup>134</sup> It is understandable that the Group would reject the racial policies of National Socialism. As citizens of Tonkin, the Group experienced social and political discrimination not only vis-à-vis the French, but also their Cochinchinese compatriots. The Group's reform program—with its modern emphasis on self-reliance, the adoption of European ideas of civilized behavior and enlightened governance—reflected a self-conscious desire for Vietnamese to be seen as the equal of Frenchmen. In this context, any admiration that the Group had for Hitler's efficacy in accomplishing his goals was drowned out by its criticism of his policies.

If the Self-Reliant Literary Group found the policies of Hitler and Mussolini objectionable, they extolled those of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as an example for Vietnamese to follow. On three separate occasions, *Ngày Nay* published articles praising the political and social reforms of the Turkish nationalist.<sup>135</sup> Hoàng Đạo saw clear parallels between Turkey and Vietnam, calling the new republic "a shining example for all people who desire progress." Hoàng Đạo admired how Kemal transformed the ruins of the Ottoman Empire into the modern secular Republic of Turkey. "Six centuries in 15 years," he exclaimed. "During the Great War, Turkey was an old, backward country, trapped in the superstition of the Islamic religion," Hoàng Đạo wrote. "But since 1920, its politics had been transformed completely... Turkey has suddenly become a strong, civilized nation, whose progressive capacity has surprised the world." The reason that Turkey was able to reform itself, Hoàng Đạo surmised, was because Atatürk, "a hero who saved his country" had "directly applied a new ideology..." This new system of thought had three main tenets: "the application of western thought, the practice of democracy, and the rejection of religion." He applauded Kemal's war against the influence of religion: "A difficult task, in the same way we have Confucianism, Turkey had Islam. Its influences ran deep—customs, art, law politics—all are laid out in the Koran. But the reformers never gave up." Hoàng Đạo described how Kemal dismantled the caliphate and laid the foundation for secular rule of law based on the Swiss civil code. He explained how Kemal banned the fez, the hijab, and polygamy. While dismantling the old order, Kemal introduced a new secular school system that provided education for women, widespread economic and social reforms, even a new alphabet. He describes the Kemalist nationalist project as simultaneously destructive and creative, a theme often invoked in the social discourse of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Hoàng Đạo marveled at Turkey's rapid transformation: "Fifteen years ago, Turkey was merely a weak

---

Bernard Shaw, Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, and British statesman David Lloyd George. Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 179.

<sup>133</sup> Greg Lockhart, Introduction to "Broken Journey: Nhật Linh's 'Going to France'", *East Asian History* 8 (December 1994), 93.

<sup>134</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "Lấy thuộc địa có chính đáng không?" *Ngày Nay* no. 77, 19 Sep 1937, p. 759.

<sup>135</sup> Hoàng Đạo, "6 thế kỷ trong 15 năm," *Ngày Nay* no. 18, 26 Jul 1936, p. 68; "Người anh hùng nước Thổ Nhĩ Kỳ" *Ngày Nay* no. 66, 4 Jul 1937, p. 502; "Người cha nước Thổ Nhĩ Kỳ," *Ngày Nay* no. 145, 14 Jan 1939, p. 12.

and antiquated nation. Kemal saved it, turning into a strong and wealthy country that can keep up with European nations.”<sup>136</sup>

In another article, Hoàng Đạo described a Kemalist clothing reform that echoed one of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s earliest campaigns. Between 1925 and 1934, the Kemalist government passed laws reforming Turkish attire. To encourage (or rather, force) the Turks to wear modern European clothing, Kemal banned the fez and hijab, which he dismissed as outdated. Hoàng Đạo quoted him as saying “To change a person’s appearance is also to change their spirit within. I have banned the fez, and forced people to wear the bowler of casket hats, meaning I have forced them to abandon their old ways of the past and to think like a westerner.” Given their reformist projects regarding fashion and publishing, the Group would have agreed with this statement. Shortly after Atatürk’s death in 1938, *Ngày Nay* published an obituary with humorous stories about the Turkish leader, to encourage readers to “follow this example of struggle and mourn for a patriot that died too soon.”<sup>137</sup> To Hoàng Đạo, Turkey represented the potential of modernizing along secular, democratic lines, an example from which Vietnamese reformers could learn.

In addition to events in Europe, *Ngày Nay* commented on events closer to Indochina. Early in the Sino-Japanese War, *Ngày Nay* maintained a relatively neutral position regarding the events unfolding in the Pacific. In fact, it actually criticized the daily newspapers for their secondhand and sensationalist coverage of the war. Despite the dramatic news of casualties, military maneuverings, and photos of Chinese and Japanese generals, “reporters covering these stories have never even set foot in China.”<sup>138</sup> However, as the war progressed, the Group adopted an increasingly critical stance, especially as the war began to impinge on the lives of Vietnamese. The Group’s main concern was how the Vietnamese would defend themselves in case the Sino-Japanese war spilled into Indochina. Hoàng Đạo wrote:

We complain that the people do not have even the smallest means to protect themselves in the case of war. While the people of other countries know how to fight and wear gas masks, the people of Annam are as ignorant as jungle dwellers. They do not even know how to hold a gun! It is not theirs but the government’s fault, who refused to allow them even to learn how to shoot birds!<sup>139</sup>

By 1938, the Group expressed negative views towards the Japanese imperial endeavor in Asia. *Ngày Nay* commented that

Whatever the situation in Europe, here we would worry less if it were not for Japan. Germany has allied with Japan, meaning that if war broke out in Europe, Japan would certainly aid Germany in Asia... Indochina currently is on the frontline, waiting for war in Europe to become the battleground for Japanese and French forces.<sup>140</sup>

Later, when Japan announced its plans to establish the Greater East-Asia Coprosperity Sphere, *Ngày Nay* denounced its colonial intentions in its cover, pictured below (

<sup>136</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “6 thế kỷ trong 15 năm.”

<sup>137</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người cha nước Thổ Nhĩ Kỳ.”

<sup>138</sup> Nhị Linh, “Từng tuần lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 71, 8 Aug 1937, p. 616.

139

<sup>140</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc,” *Ngày Nay* no. 130, 1 Oct 1938, p. 5.

Figure 1).

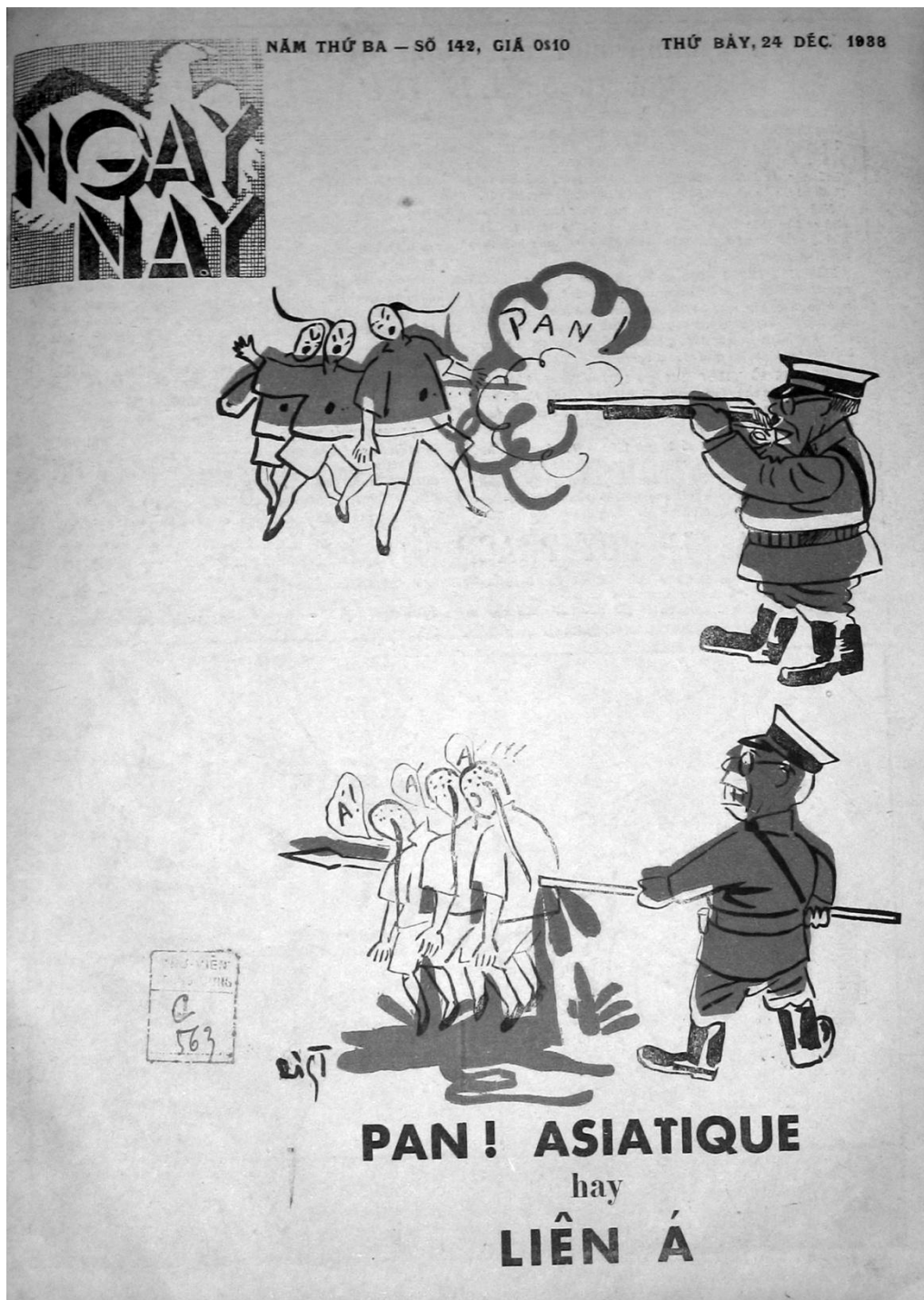


Figure 1. Cover by Nguyễn Gia Trí, Ngày Nay no. 142, 24 Dec 1938.

In this cover from December 24, 1938, *Ngày Nay* plays on the French name “Pan-Asiatique” or “Pan A” to suggest that Japanese overtures towards a Pan Asian league is actually more for its own benefit than to help other Asian countries. This critical treatment of Japan and its policies in *Ngày Nay* suggests that any collaboration in the 1940s between Japan and Nguyen Tuong Tam was more a matter of political expediency than of his belief in the Japanese project.

Through the years, the Group commented on many of the major historical international conflicts of the 1930s—Italian colonization of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese War, German rearmament and aggression—and advocated pacificism. It argued that war benefitted nobody but the manufacturers of weapons and armaments. When commenting on the bloody events of the Spanish Civil War, Hoàng Đạo wrote that “only the manufacturers of bullets and guns can rub their hands and laugh in delight. The more death and violence, the more they profit.”<sup>141</sup> He expressed a similar sentiment when discussing the Sino-Japanese War: “Only the makers of guns clap their hands in joy and hope for large profits, so they can enjoy a life in luxury while millions tragically die.”<sup>142</sup> About German aggression, he proposed that “all countries throw all their guns into the ocean, or better yet, melt them into a giant statue as a memorial. But the difficult task remains where to put it. If we put it in Germany, then they would soon remelt it to make weapons.”<sup>143</sup> For Hoàng Đạo, nothing worthwhile could come from war and violence. This antimilitaristic stance was consistent with the Group’s moderate socialism; it was precisely the issue of pacifism over the Spanish Civil War that split the French socialists in the 1930s.<sup>144</sup>

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the colonial government began cracking down on the press. In *Ngày Nay*, readers saw a growing number of blank spaces that signified where the government had censored the journal. Hoàng Đạo gloomily commented:

So we have a war in Europe. After more than twenty years, Germany has revived its aspirations to rule Europe... many innocent people in Poland now look up into the sky and see it filled with metal birds, while the doves of peace have flown to unknown lands.<sup>145</sup>

Khái Hưng was less maudlin and more hopeful:

War has begun... Millions of innocent people, women and children now must face death because of the desires of a few. We still have hope. We do not want to believe that in the world, only profit is important. We do not want to believe that only the strong win and the weak are exploited. This war, which has just begun, has taken away all our illusions and ideals. Never before has betrayal, the disrespect of treaties and pledges been raised to

---

<sup>141</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuấn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 21, 16 Aug 1936, p. 139.

<sup>142</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuấn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 69, 25 Jul 1937, p. 568.

<sup>143</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Tùng tuấn lễ một,” *Ngày Nay* no. 22, 23 Aug 1936, p. 162.

<sup>144</sup> Scholars of the military make a distinction between antimilitarism and pacifism. The latter implies the total rejection of war on moral grounds. The former denotes opposition to military aggrandizement, a stance often linked to leftist political ideologies who oppose armies as instruments of capitalist rule. In the case of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, its writings suggest that the Group were opposed to war and violence on moral grounds as well as anticapitalist grounds, as evidenced by its constant reminder that only weapons manufacturers profit from war. See Lisa M. Munday, *American Militarism and Anti-Militarism in Popular Media, 1945-1970*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 7.

<sup>145</sup> Hoàng Đạo, “Người và việc” *Ngày Nay* no. 178, 9 Sep 1939, p. 5.

the level of political tactic. In the past, circumstances may have forced people to renege on their promises, but never like now, where people are proud of such actions.<sup>146</sup>

The article stops here, abruptly cut off by the censors, leaving a blank space where the text once was (Figure 2).

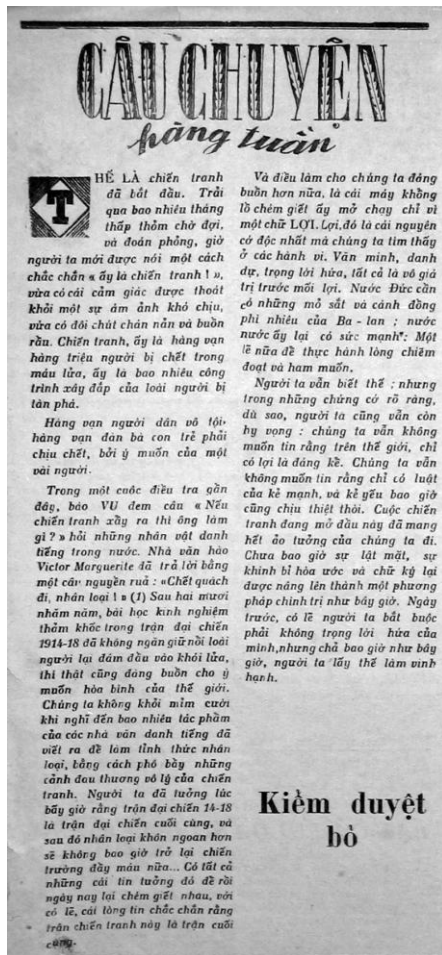


Figure 2. *Ngày Nay*, no. 178, 9 Sep 1939, p. 14.

Following the publication of these anti-war pieces, *Ngày Nay* gradually resumed its normal mix of editorial columns, articles and literature. But it did not take long for the war to damage the Group's livelihood. Because of a colony-wide paper shortage, the Group was forced to reduce its issues from 16 pages to four. On top of financial difficulties, the Group also faced problems with government censors. Khái Hưng complained that writers had to "swirl their pens seven times in the inkpot before writing a single word."<sup>147</sup> As a result, *Ngày Nay*'s overtly political commentary on the war began to wane, save for the occasional remark on the exodus of wealthy Hanoians fleeing the city or the rising cost of living. Khái Hưng's forceful weekly column was abruptly stopped and replaced by a tamer advice column called "*Ngày Nay* Answers." The Group's 1940 special Tet issue made no mention of the war, its introduction

<sup>146</sup> Khái Hưng, "Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần," *Ngày Nay* no. 178, 9 Sep 1939, p. 14.

<sup>147</sup> Khái Hưng, "Câu Chuyện Hàng Tuần," *Ngày Nay* no. 199, 12 Feb 1940, p 5.

stating that “we do not want to mention the difficulties and obstacles of the current situation...”<sup>148</sup> Rather, the issue focused on other, more lighthearted topics such as its famous cartoon character Ly Toet. The Group revisited the history of the character, traced its development, and printed a large number of new cartoons. In addition, the Group continued its annual literary prize despite difficult times, offering an award of 200 piasters to the best piece of poetry or prose. This avoidance of war or politics deepened in January 1940 when the Group announced a change in its approach: “From the next issue, #200, *Ngày Nay* will be following a new guiding theme: Happiness and Activity [Vui vẻ hoạt động].”<sup>149</sup> This was a far cry from its old motto of “allowing our readers to see the situation currently happening in our society.”<sup>150</sup> By the time authorities closed *Ngày Nay* in September 1940, the paper hardly carried any political content at all.

### Conclusion

This chapter looks at the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s activities within the context of local and international politics as the means to examine the Group’s relationship with other political organizations and parties during the period. It provided a timeline of events as well as a survey of political life in 1930s Tonkin, and described the intense sectarian struggles of the period as being characterized less by intellectual and political cleavages than by ideological fluidity and lack of dogmatism. Politicians of the period did not squabble because they espoused differing views of politics; it was because they lacked them. In many ways, politics in 1930s Hanoi still resembled those of the village.

During the Popular Front period, the Group adopted a cautious wait-and-see approach. Contrary to the “hope and disillusionment” narrative dominant in the historiography, the Group’s skeptical reaction was grounded in its clear understanding of French parliamentary politics. The Group did not place all its hopes in the Blum government bring about social transformation; that, they believed, was the job of the Vietnamese. They did, however, hope that the Popular Front Government would issue laws that would allow for freedom of the press, which would help Vietnamese change their own society to become “self-reliant.” The Popular Front period saw the Group engaging in political activity for the first time with other organizations, including the Indochinese Communist Party, which had recently taken its operations public. The Group collaborated with the ICP on two campaigns—the Indochinese Congress Movement in Hanoi and the efforts to organize a Tonkinese Journalists’ Association. However, the failures of both these endeavors resulted in mutual suspicion between the two groups that marred all their future collaborative efforts.

The Indochinese Congress was the first political encounter between the Self-Reliant Literary Group and the ICP. Disagreements over how to organize and collect the cahiers des vœux resulted in a political standoff between a group led by Phạm Huy Lược, the president of the Chamber of Representatives, and a rival group made up of the ICP along with prominent Hanoi politician Vũ Văn An. Despite its efforts to remain neutral, the Self-Reliant Literary Group was also dragged into the quagmire. Nhất Linh Nguyen came under attack by the communist

<sup>148</sup> “Số mùa xuân 1940,” *Ngày Nay* no. 198, 27 Jan 1940, p. 6.

<sup>149</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay* no. 199, 12 Feb 1940, p. 4.

<sup>150</sup> Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, “Ngày Nay,” *Ngày Nay* no. 1, 30 Jan 1935, p. 2.

newspaper *Tân Thế Giới* for participating in Pham Huy Luc's provisional committee, despite the writer's withdrawal from the committee once it had chosen its official representatives. The Group defended itself, portraying the ICP as lacking in longterm vision and all too willing to engage in opportunist politics.

In the course of *Tân Thế Giới*'s attacks, the Group's idea of populism also came under fire, the paper accusing the Group of "betraying the populist classes" through their "reactionary" politics. Rather, this clash between the ICP and the Self-Reliant Literary Group came as a result of differing definitions of the "populist classes". An examination of the Group's writings on populism reveal that the Group defined it in general terms, mainly in opposition to "elitism" and "aristocracy." Moreover, the Group's writings on "populist" literature illustrates that the Group had conceptualized the term not as a clearcut ideology or philosophy, but more as a sensibility, one oriented towards the folk. For years, the Group had used this definition of populism without challenge; however, during the Popular Front period, other intellectuals, namely ICP members such as those writing at *Tân Thế Giới*, began to challenge the Group's definition. The primary issue of contention was the bourgeoisie, the "petty capitalist" class and whether they belonged amongst the "populist classes." For the ICP, who envisioned the petit-bourgeoisie in terms of urban middle-class intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group, this class was hardly populist. However, the Self-Reliant Literary Group saw that many peasants owned "the means of production" in the form of meager landholdings or singular beasts of burden, but still suffered from poverty and oppression. From this observation of Vietnamese peasant life, the Group included the "petty capitalists" amongst the "populist classes."

Yet despite such quarrels, the Group continued its political activities with the ICP and other organizations even after the end of the Popular Front. As its writings illustrate, the Group joined and wholeheartedly supported the Indochinese Democratic Front founded by the ICP. Contrary to the historiography, which marginalizes the Group's role in the Front, the Group had a vision for the Front that moved beyond politics and into legal and social reform. The 1938 election for the president of the Chamber of Representatives showed that despite the intentions to organize and promote a concrete political program, corruption and factionalism still plagued Hanoi politics. Such scheming and corruption amongst Hanoi's small pool of politicians, while not necessarily new, had reached unparalleled proportions by 1938 and ultimately soured the Group's enthusiasm for reforming the Chamber.

The discussion of politics in this chapter and the previous one also raises a number of observations about the nature of politics in 1930s Tonkin. Tonkinese politics were less defined by modern ideological and political differences than by personal rivalries. At the municipal and regional level, politics resembled those of the rural village, where rival cliques organized around political bosses would fight for dominance. Behind the scenes manipulation and scheming were commonplace, and clientelism took place openly in the meeting hall of the Chamber of Representatives. Because the colonial government banned Vietnamese from forming parties and assemblies, Tonkinese politics exhibited a low degree of organization. Elected officials treated their political duties secondary to their businesses and financial interests. Politics in Tonkin followed were hardly based on institutional issues pertaining to questions of governance or policy, but rather focused on informal matters such as personal rivalries, mutual backscratching, common enemies, and power relations.

The careers of the period's two prominent politicians, Vũ Văn An and Hà Văn Bình, illustrate that intense factionalism and scheming curiously coincided with an almost complete lack of ideology. The willingness of these politicians to shift their allegiances across ideological

lines suggests that they were motivated not by adherence to doctrine or loyalty to a party. The careers of Vũ Văn An and Hà Văn Bình suggest that Tonkinese attitudes towards political ideologies resembled the fluid, functional and non-dogmatic approach Vietnamese often have towards religion. The period of the 1930s was marked by intellectual experimentation: Vietnamese freely borrowed, transformed, and appropriated foreign ideas. Political ideologies were no different. In such a political culture, terminology widely used in scholarship of the period, terms such as “communist,” “bourgeois,” or “monarchist” can be misleading, as they imply codified political and social cleavages. I suggest that terms such as “communist” “bourgeois” and “monarchist” refer less to developed political identities, than to cliques of people who considered themselves of the same mind, who felt comfortable with each other, and who opposed someone else. Although the frictions between various groups would often be expressed in policy or ideology, I argue that the core concern of 1930s Tonkinese politics was position and power.

In addition, scholars have tended to overlook the fact that 1930s Hanoi politics was made up of a relatively small group of interconnected figures. Not only did the same names seem to come up time and again in political and social organizations, they all seem to know one another, or at the very least, were aware of others’ activities. Such was the case with the Self-Reliant Literary Group and members of the ICP. Despite historiography emphasizing otherwise, ICP members and the Self-Reliant Literary Group were not all that different in background. Many of them had known each other for years; in the case of Võ Nguyên Giáp, Khái Hưng and Nhất Linh, they had taught together at the École Thăng Long.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their similar backgrounds, intellectuals began to form groups and differentiate themselves throughout the 1930s. The Self-Reliant Literary Group, through a period of intellectual activity, eventually emerged as champions of its own brand of colonial republicanism. Members of the ICP were shaped by the formative political experiences of prison and underground agitation and soon emerged as seasoned revolutionaries. According to writings of ICP members describing the period, the party had embraced a *realpolitik* similar to the tribalism and sectarianism that plagued Tonkinese politics in the 1930s. I suggest that it was this rigid polarizing and totalizing worldview that ultimately doomed any cooperation with urban intellectuals such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group. But yet despite the aim of these intellectuals to differentiate themselves, the political and reform activities of the ICP during the late 1930s mirrored those of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Both had journalistic careers, both launched reform initiatives, and both used literature as a means to transform Vietnamese society. In the end, communist intellectuals probably owed more to the modernist legacy of the Self-Reliant Literary Group than they liked to admit. These similarities suggest that the suspicion and hostility the ICP had for the Group were less the result of diametrically-opposed ideologies than a tacit acknowledgment of petty distinctions, a “narcissism of minor differences.”

An examination of the Group’s writings and activities on the period reveals a number of observations about its political instincts. While realistic and discerning in certain regards, the Group was perhaps too rigidly idealistic and principled in others. The Group’s skeptical, wait-and-see approach towards the Popular Front showed no small amount of common sense. In contrast, the Group’s disregard of the often messy realities of Tonkinese politics and impassioned calls for principled action appears in retrospect rather naïve. The Group’s principled attitude towards politics can also be seen in its writing on international politics, where it rejected totalizing politics of all kinds. First, Group members had criticized the “false morality” of Mussolini and Hitler, and particularly loathed how they couched their aggression in the language



of peace. The Group found Hitler's racist policies particularly loathsome. The Group was also critical of Japanese expansionist plans, and likened the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere as another form of colonial domination. These writings contradict historiographical descriptions of the Group's political activities as "pro-Japanese" or "proto-fascist." But as European and Asian countries began arming themselves in preparation for war, the Group's calls for peace and negotiations must have seemed ineffectual and wimpish.

This, however, did not mean that the Group was ignorant of political realities. After all, *Ngày Nay* covered politics from local to international levels. Rather, the Group purposefully chose a stance of principled neutrality, aiming to rise above what they saw as petty politics. Especially in its dealings with other political organizations, the Group's neutral leanings were made worse by its relative isolation; the Group seemed to operate with almost no reference to anyone else. As the Group boasted, it had a clear political vision; all it needed to do was follow it. However, it was the Group's isolation that prevented it from building the organizational networks and means of communication to politically mobilize. As a result, the Group's principled political stance became a liability, its early political activities marked by a perilous combination of idealism and inexperience. Later in the 1940s, when Nhật Linh Nguyen Tuong Tam entered political life in earnest, this rigidly principled approach was easily outmaneuvered by the organizational strength of Ho Chi Minh and the communist party. But before then, the Group tried to put its ideals into practice with the founding of the League of Light.

## CHAPTER 6

---

# The Politics of Everyday Life: The League of Light [Đoàn Ánh Sáng] and Housing Reform in Hanoi, 1937-1941.

*... crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem to be too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud and threatening to fall into it - as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage...*

—Charles Dickens, writing about Victorian London slums in *Oliver Twist*, 1838

*Damp, low-ceilinged, and barren, the houses in Vietnam are a pile of mud mixed with rubbish. They are disgusting. Puddles of water full of scum and trash make the ground perpetually damp and muddy. In hot weather, they give off a heavy odor. In winter, the moisture condenses into streams of smelly water. People and animals live and eat together, living in the same dark tight place...<sup>1</sup>*

—Nhật Linh, writing about Hanoi shantytowns in *Ngày Nay*, 1936

### Introduction

After years of promoting social reform on the pages of *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*, Nhật Linh and his Self-Reliant Literary Group colleagues Khai Hưng, Thạch Lam and Hoàng Đạo finally put their ideas into action in 1937. Together with a number of Hanoi's most well-known architects and intellectuals, they founded the League of Light [*Hội Ánh Sáng* or *Đoàn Ánh Sáng*] to combat unsanitary housing in urban and rural areas. This chapter traces the League's brief history, from its inception in December 1936 to its gradual demise sometime in the early 1940s. It explores the League's activities, philosophy and aims, and situates them within the wider contexts of housing reform and urban planning in late colonial Tonkin, as well as international

---

<sup>1</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay*, no. 38, 13 Dec 1936, pg. 537-539

progressive movements. This chapter argues that the leaders of the League of Light were interested in more than simply improving the living conditions for rural and urban Vietnamese. For the peasant masses, the League wanted to change how they thought and behaved by manipulating the physical space in which they lived. In addition, the participation of educated and urban elites in the organization served to inculcate modern ideas of community, civic duty, and social responsibility. Through the regulation of everyday life, the League's founders aspired to shape a cohesive national moral order.

### Historiography

Very little scholarship examines the League of Light in any depth; the League usually appears only in passing in more general discussions of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Alexander Woodside mentioned the League in an important research article on urban associational life, citing it as an example of a group founded by intellectuals seeking to “rectify the lack of social welfare organizations in the cities.”<sup>2</sup> According to Woodside, the League was an example of how social organizations lacked cohesion in late colonial Vietnam. He suggested a number of factors that contributed to the factionalism of Vietnamese nonpolitical organizations in the late colonial period, including:

1. The need to cultivate individualism as an antidote to family and communalism, which had its adverse effects on the formation of cohesive organizations;
2. The colonial government's suspicion of associations of any form;
3. The career focus of Vietnamese professionals divided between Vietnam and France;
4. Chronic lack of specialization;
5. Surviving importance of traditional superior-subordinate relationships;
6. Survival of certain forms of social conservatism which offered alternatives to Western-style organizations.

This chapter engages with Woodside's influential article by examining the League of Light vis-à-vis these various factors, and ultimately asserts that the League failed for completely different reasons. In fact, a number of the factors described by Woodside hardly existed for the League. Instead, the timing of the League's demise suggests that external developments, rather than internal organizational defects, contributed to the League's eventual end in the early 1940s.

Other western language works also discuss the League in passing. In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil Jamieson suggests that members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group founded the League of Light to compensate for the waning fortunes of their newspapers. According to Jamieson, Nhật Linh and his associates turned to “direct social action” only when they had failed to recapture the élan of the *Phong Hoá-Ngày Nay* years.<sup>3</sup> For Van Nguyen-Marshall, the League illustrated the paternalistic attitudes of its founders, which she described as a “reinstatement of

---

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Development of Social Organizations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period*, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. XLIV, no. 1 (Spring 1971), p. 39-64.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 158.

Confucian social responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to these impressionistic interpretations that depict the League as a failed organization, a response to an ailing publishing venture, or a conservative effort to promote tradition, this chapter describes the League as the culmination of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s unique modernist vision of social reform.

The League of Light receives slightly more attention in Vietnamese language scholarship but the interpretations of it there tend to be colored by a strong ideological bias. Beginning in 1953, architects Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp denounced their involvement in the League of Light. This *mea culpa* coincided with Chinese-inspired rectification campaigns amongst the Viet Minh units in the early 1950s. During this time, intellectuals disavowed their previous activities and works, accepted public criticism, and pledged to serve the revolution. In a joint self-criticism in *Tap Chí Văn Nghệ* entitled “the Truth about *Ánh Sáng*,” Luyện and Tiếp wrote that the League’s “voice was loud, but in truth, there was only one development—the first and the last—at Phúc Xá with 40 houses rented to 40 poor families!” The two architects attributed the founding of the League to the “*Phong Hoá Ngày Nay* Group” made up of “the children of mandarins, landowners; they owned paddies, holdings, or held high positions in the old regime.” According to Luyện and Tiếp, these “representatives of feudal capitalism” [đại biểu phong kiến tư sản] founded the League of Light with ulterior political motives: “to buy the hearts of the working classes” and “create the opportunity for France to execute its conspiracy to lead astray the burgeoning struggle.” They accused Nhất Linh and his associates of using the reforms of *Ánh Sáng* to cover their political schemes, which became apparent when they first “toadied” to the Japanese, then Chiang Kai-Shek, and finally, to France and the US. In explaining their own participation in the League, Luyện and Tiếp started by describing their class background: “our roots are feudal; we come from outdated Confucian families.” Learning “capitalist” art and culture, they devoted their talents to serving those who have money to build houses. As a means to aid their businesses, Luyện and Tiếp collaborated with Nhất Linh and his associates “so our name would be publicized on their newspapers.” Expressing regret, Luyện and Tiếp wrote that “We were so blind--we jumped on the bandwagon, and worked for their reform movement. We made opportunities for the imperialists.”<sup>5</sup> Thus Luyện and Tiếp distance themselves from the League by portraying themselves not as equal partners in the *Ánh Sáng* venture, but as duped followers.

Memoirs such as Luyện and Tiếp’s have invariably shaped Vietnamese secondary literature about the League. Views of the League in these accounts are shaped by a tendency of Vietnamese Marxist historians to view the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group as little more than “bourgeois reformists.” For example, Nguyễn Trác and Đái Xuân Ninh belittled the reformist agenda of the League of Light as insufficiently revolutionary. For these hardline scholars, the League was “a counter-revolutionary pole jammed into the wheel of history that was surging forward.”<sup>6</sup> Phan Cự Đệ adopted a more nuanced—although still pejorative—position, describing the League of Light as an example of “capitalist reform” [*cải lương tư sản*]. He asserted that Nhất Linh’s reform philosophy was influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in its

---

<sup>4</sup> Van Nguyen-Marshall, “Poverty, Gender and Nation in Modern Vietnamese Literature during the French Colonial Period (1930s-1940s), in Farid Alatas, Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia* (Leiden, the Netherlands: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004), 222.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp, “Thực chất của nhà *Ánh Sáng*,” *Tap Chí Văn Nghệ*, no. 41, Jul 1953, p. 47-50.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyễn Trác, and Đái Xuân Ninh. *Về Tự lực văn đoàn* ([TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Nhà xuất bản TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 1989), 95.

“desire to return to nature, return to the ‘good old soul’ [lòng tốt cổ sơ] and the wholeness of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Phan Cự Đệ admitted that although their sympathy for the suffering of the peasantry and desire to help was in earnest, the *Ánh Sáng* reformers remained merely the “vanquished heroes” of capitalist reform.<sup>8</sup> He wrote,

they fancied themselves in the role of noble and high-minded personages, stooping to the masses of starving, pitiful peasants. With their capitalist perspectives, Nhất Linh and Khai Hưng were blind to the strength of another public movement, emerging like large storms from the years 1930-1931 and in 1945 culminated into a revolutionary tempest completely transforming the order of society.<sup>9</sup>

For many Hanoi scholars such as Phan Cự Đệ and western researchers like Van Nguyen-Marshall, the *Ánh Sáng* reformers were capitalist elites removed from the plight of the poor. At the very least, they were misguided, no matter how sincere or heartfelt their compassion. The one exception to this historiographical trend is the work of southern scholar Vu Gia. In 1995 he refuted Phan Cự Đệ and defended the League of Light. He pointed out that a number of the League’s architectural innovations had practical uses during the First Indochina War. Citing Vũ Đình Hoè’s memoirs, Vu Gia wrote that the bamboo construction techniques promoted in *Ánh Sáng* were used with success in the Việt Bắc interzone. “The social reforms of Nhất Linh in the 1930s should be respected more than criticized,” he wrote. “Of course, compared to things we have accomplished today, we are ten thousand times better off. But in those days, with those people, with that load of work, we cannot call it “a naïve fantasy,” nor can we call them “vanquished heroes of capitalist reform.” Quoting Lenin, Vu Gia argued that “this work is a remarkable contribution to helping people “awaken and turn to the light, turn to activism and struggle.”<sup>10</sup> For Vu Gia, while the communist revolution remains the most important contribution to Vietnamese politics and society, the League of Light’s reforms were nothing to belittle either. Nevertheless, despite its defense of the League, Vu Gia’s work still did not escape the ideological biases that permeate most Vietnamese-language scholarship on the Self-Reliant Literary Group and their projects.

It is also unfortunate that the League of Light does not figure in the small body of scholarship on Vietnamese architectural history and urban planning. Stylistic, anthropological, or historical accounts of Vietnamese architecture have invariably focused on two areas: 1) “traditional” premodern indigenous structures; and 2) French colonial modern architecture of iconic public buildings. Both areas of scholarship tend to ignore residential and commercial spaces—the sites of everyday life. Most discussions of indigenous Vietnamese architecture focus on religious or village buildings such as communal houses, temples, pagodas, or ancient ruins. More anthropological or ethnographic works deal with the religious aspect of Vietnamese architecture, such as geomancy and feng-shui cosmology. Any mention of residential architecture is usually limited to a couple of token examples, almost always of rural houses. For example, Nguyễn Bá Đăng’s (et. al) *Traditional Vietnamese Architecture*, or Phan Huy Lê and

---

<sup>7</sup> I am assuming that Phan Cự Đệ’s mention of the “good old heart” is his way of referring to Rousseau’s “Noble Savage.”

<sup>8</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, *Tự lực văn đoàn: con người và văn chương*. (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1990), 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Vu Gia, Nhất Linh Trong Tiến Trình Hiện Đại Hóa Văn Học, p 245-46. Vũ Đình Hoè, *Hồi ký Vũ Đình Hoè* ([Hà Nội]: Văn hóa thông tin, 1994), IV-V.

Phạm Văn Bài's Vietnam Traditional Folk Houses are good examples of such works. Urban residential architecture is almost never addressed. In works that one would expect a discussion of urban private homes, such as Phạm Bích Ngọc's edited volume *The Architecture of Thang Long Hanoi*, they infuriatingly omit any discussion of residential buildings other than the stilt house of Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>11</sup>

If scholars of premodern Vietnamese architecture are guilty of what Eric Hobsbawm described as “inventing tradition,” those that study modern architecture only look at buildings insofar as they relate to, or are designed by, the French. In his “biography” of Hanoi, William S. Logan discussed the relationship of modern architecture to shifting French political aims and policies. In their explicitly Foucauldian works, Paul Rabinow and Gwendolyn Wright argued that colonial officials viewed the colonies as “laboratories” for experimenting with ambitious new schemes of modernist social control.<sup>12</sup> Michael Vann's unpublished dissertation described the urban development of Hanoi as part of a French plan to create a racially segregated city. This chapter will show that despite the condescension of French urbanists that the Vietnamese would never develop their own architectural style, Vietnamese architects and reformers turned the very principles of controlling lived space into a grassroots movement designed to mobilize urban Vietnamese.

More recently, the work of Caroline Herbelin discusses the League of Light. In her article “Inexpensive Housing in Vietnam: The question of social housing in a colonial situation” [*Des Habitations à Bon Marché au Việt Nam. La question du logement social en situation coloniale*], she discusses the League of Light and places it within the larger history of failed public housing policies in Indochina. She focuses on the often tendentious relationship between the League and the colonial administration, and describes the apprehension on the part of colonial officials despite government support. Characterizing the League as merely one of many failed housing policies supported by French colonial officials detracts from its unique position as arguably the largest philanthropic organization founded by Vietnamese. Herbelin describes the architecture of the League as “a pragmatic and *métisse* architecture,” in which “modernity is considered as a set of solutions, mainly technical and sanitary that improve occupant comfort.” Here she misses an opportunity to discuss the larger overarching goals of these solutions, as well as the social history and enlightenment principles behind them. She is hesitant about the political aims of the League, writing that it “...went beyond charity, but there is a question, if not political activism, at least to propose concrete solutions to change society in depth.”<sup>13</sup> This chapter places the League's activities against the backdrop of 20<sup>th</sup> century social thought and the Self-Reliant Literary Group's own discourse on the peasantry, and argues that the League's goals were both unequivocally political and aimed to transform society in profound ways.

Lastly, this chapter on the League of Light engages with a larger body of scholarship on philanthropy and social reform. Such works are particularly strong in the US in the

---

<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn Bá Đương, Vũ Phương Nguyễn, and Hoàng Vân Tạ, *Traditional Vietnamese Architecture* (Hà Nội, Việt Nam: Thế giới publishers, 2004); Phan Huy Lê and Nguyễn Văn Bái, *Vietnam Traditional Folk Houses* (Vietnam: Ministry of Culture, 2004); Phạm Bích Ngọc, *Architecture of Thang Long-Hà Nội* (Hà Nội: Thế giới publishers, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989); and Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Herbelin, “Des HBM au Viet Nam. La question du logement social en situation coloniale.” *Moussons*, 13-14, 2009, 131-136.

historiography of the Progressive Era, and in Britain, where such scholarship emphasizes the rise of the European welfare state. For colonial Vietnam, Van Nguyen-Marshall's *In Search of Moral Authority* examined the discourse surrounding poverty and charted its changes during the period between 1907 and 1939. She dealt specifically with the novels of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and adopted a similar argument to Marxist historians that privileged, educated intellectuals such as Nhật Linh understood little about the plight of the poor. She argued that the Self-Reliant Literary Group used the traditional trope of woman as nation to reinforce Confucian values. Previous chapters in this study have illustrated that while the Self-Reliant Literary Group were made up of educated intellectuals, accounts of their wealth remain considerably overblown. What's more, the Group's virulent attacks on the family, the institutional bedrock of Confucianism outside of the monarchy, could hardly be said to be reinforcing Confucian values. Rather, I argue here and in previous chapters that the Group's sympathy for women and the peasantry—the most oppressed members of Vietnamese society—was in fact genuine, and was not some cryptic way of obliquely discussing the nation. By focusing her analysis only on rhetoric and discourse, Nguyen-Marshall missed a valuable opportunity not only to discuss how a group of intellectuals *spoke* of poverty, but also what they *did* to combat it. This chapter does both: it examines how one influential group of Vietnamese intellectuals discussed poverty as well as their grassroots effort to help the dispossessed.

The chapter will be arranged in a series of chronological themes: the first and second sections will discuss the international and local discourses that gave rise to the League. The third part will describe the formation of the League of Light. The fourth section will explain the colonial government's wholehearted support of the League, which stemmed from its anxieties about overpopulation and urbanization. The remaining sections will describe various aspects of the League of Light: its organizational structure, architecture, activities and culture, and finally, the factors that led to its demise.

### **International Contexts: Progressivism and the Welfare State**

Given the timing of the League's founding in 1937, it would be easy to attribute the League of Light to the populist euphoria following the election of the French Popular Front in May 1936. However, as mentioned in a previous chapter, the Self-Reliant Literary Group remained skeptical towards the Popular Front, adopting a cautious wait-and-see approach to the new leftist government's colonial policies. The Group's skepticism of the Popular Front, along with the long-term implications of its previous reform projects, suggest that the Group was more interested in enduring social and cultural changes rather than easily reversible political policies and promises.

Rather than an idea born in the euphoria of the Popular Front period, the League of Light is best seen as the product of two streams of social discourse, one international and the other local. First, the League of Light must be placed within the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American urban reform movements, and by extension, in the larger thrust of early 20<sup>th</sup> century social thought. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an international reform movement emerged in the industrialized countries of Europe and America, aimed at exposing

and controlling the negative social consequences of capitalist development on daily lives.<sup>14</sup> In the US, this movement was manifest in the muckrakers and Progressive Era legislation; in Europe and Scandinavia, governments adopted a series of innovative social programs transforming such fields as education, labor relations, and women's rights. Within this international reform movement, unsanitary and/or inadequate housing was recognized as one of the many problems emerging from industrialization and the fast growth of urban areas, and quickly became a pet issue with reformers.<sup>15</sup> Often in tandem with the modernization of other urban infrastructure like sanitation, transport, and utilities, housing reform in Europe began as the enclave of middle-class philanthropy, in which "individual doctors and amateur philanthropists attempted to ameliorate conditions piecemeal through the documentation of ills and the construction of model housing projects."<sup>16</sup> The turn of the century marked a shift in this reform movement as a wave of housing and urban planning laws passed throughout Europe: Britain (1890), France (1894), the Netherlands (1902), and Germany (1904). In other words, housing reform had passed from the realm of private charity into the formative stages of the public welfare state.

The intellectual roots of this European urban reform movement, Nancy Stieber argued, was the

Enlightenment project for social amelioration... The aim of that project was emancipatory: to release mankind from the shackles of oppressive regimes, whether political or dogmatic... The underlying and problematic, assumption was that through the application of reason, society might be improved.<sup>17</sup>

Inherent in the Enlightenment project and the welfare state that emerged from its principles were often paradoxical elements of freedom and repression:

Its rationalistic and democratic basis provides liberation from the arbitrary rule of dogma and despot, but imposes another, nonconspiratorial and incomplete, form of coercion, the natural result of the attempt to control behavior through the derivation and application of norms.<sup>18</sup>

As part of this Enlightenment-inspired welfare state, housing reform reflected this "dual liberative and repressive character." The application of reason and science to housing problems was manifest in the approach of reformers, architects, and urbanists towards physical and

---

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Sutcliffe discusses urban planning as part of a larger international progressive reform movement in *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, the United States, and France, 1780-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). See Chapter 6: Planning as an International Movement, p 163-202.

<sup>15</sup> Scholarship on housing reform during this period is particularly rich. See Brian Ladd, *Urban Planning and Civic Order in Germany, 1860-1914* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990); Nicholas Bullock and James Read. *The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840-1914* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978); and Nancy Stieber, *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Sutcliffe.

<sup>16</sup> Stieber, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 7.



material space: the idea that the manipulation of the built environment would result in transforming human behavior, thereby imposing social and moral order. Paul Boyer described this approach as “positive environmentalism:”

the most promising long-range strategy of urban moral control was not repression, but a more subtle and complex process of influencing behavior and molding character through a transformed, consciously planned urban environment.<sup>19</sup>

Although the idea of “positive environmentalism” emerged from a decidedly urban context, it is easy to see how Vietnamese reformers in the 1930s would appropriate and apply it to a variety of reforms.

The League’s intellectual debt to the Enlightenment went further than just the superficial evocation of light in its name; the influence of this particular kind of enlightenment discourse is apparent in the League of Light’s social reform project. The League’s principal architects and president trained at the Indochinese Fine Arts University, which had profoundly influenced their approach to the built environment. The university’s architecture department was established by Ernest Hébrard, the Beaux-Arts trained urbanist hired in 1921 by then Governor-General Maurice Long to oversee Hanoi’s urban development. According to Gwendolyn Wright, Hébrard’s philosophy and approach to architecture reflected the intellectual climate of the times; he belonged to the school of thought which believed that “cultures remained stable precisely because they had a relatively high degree of technical mastery over their environments, which in turn sustained a coherent social organization.”<sup>20</sup> Central to Hébrard’s approach was his emphasis on climate. It was Hébrard’s belief that while traditional cultures evolved more or less unconsciously in response to their climate and environment, “the independent spirit of creativity and associated with the modern West could combine continuity and innovation, avoiding the cultural inertia he associated with the Orient.”<sup>21</sup> The result of Hébrard’s architectural approach was twofold: first, Hébrard defined a new “Indochinese” style by applying western rationality to local climes and their resulting stylistic forms.<sup>22</sup> Despite its lofty goals, the reality of this new style was more pastiche than radical innovation. Second, Hébrard’s ambitions did not stop at aesthetic design of mere buildings—he was most passionate about city planning. He saw himself as a master urbanist and social engineer, responsible for “giving artistic form and efficient overview to the morphology of entire cities.”<sup>23</sup> Hébrard’s extensive plans for Hanoi utilized strict zoning laws that claimed to solve many of Hanoi’s problems. *Le Plan Hébrard* attempted to impose order onto the Old Quarter by building a central marketplace (now the Đồng Xuân market), moving large industries from the city center to a designated zone, setting up a port

---

<sup>19</sup> Boyer, 221. Boyer placed the ideological roots of “positive environment” with four American thinkers: Luther Lee Bernard, Charles Cooley, Edward Ross, and Simon Patten. However, this description seems too provincial in scope; surely the simultaneous occurrence of comparable reform movements in Europe and America at the turn of the century suggests some level of transatlantic cultural pollination. Daniel Rodgers described the European travels and influences of American progressive reformers in his book *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. In addition, Boyer’s account of “positive environmentalism” should not be confused with the 21<sup>st</sup> century incarnation emerging from the context of global warming.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, 204.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, 205

<sup>22</sup> Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 49-50. Catherine Noppe and Jean-François Hubert. *Art of Vietnam* (New York: Parkstone, 2003), 183.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, 217.

across the Red River in Gia Lâm, carving out gardens and parks throughout the city, digging extensive canal systems, and building at least three grand boulevards radiating from the administrative center. Through the rational implementation of zoning laws, Hébrard sought to “order two forms of chaos—“native” life and industrial growth.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, Hébrard’s plan aimed at controlling economic development and its negative effects on urban settings, thereby containing the threat of indigenous uprisings and racial intermingling. While Hébrard did manage to complete some of his grand plan, the larger transformative aspects remained unfinished. Although Hébrard paid little or no heed to the housing of Vietnamese workers, he nevertheless still adhered to the Enlightenment principles that other progressive reformers followed at the time—that human behavior could be transformed through the technical manipulation of physical space. Before his departure in 1929, Hébrard taught in the Fine Arts University’s Architecture department he helped establish.<sup>25</sup> And as mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, the University’s founder Victor Tardieu also believed in the transformative power of material objects, his influence extending into the areas of applied design.

As 1932 graduates of Hébrard’s architecture department, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp would surely have been influenced by Hébrard and would have inherited—in altered, diluted or filtered form—a version of the environmental determinism and urban reform discourse described above. Nguyễn Cao Luyện completed his EBAI training course with studies of Auguste Perrin and Le Corbusier, who deeply influenced his ideas on urban planning and modern design.<sup>26</sup> As principal designers, Luyện and Tiếp brought Hébrard’s brand of architecture and urban planning to the League of Light. Hébrard’s influence can be seen in Luyện and Tiếp’s willingness to merge local styles with western architectural principles, their emphasis on climate, and unfaltering belief in the potential of transforming human conditions through material environment.

Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp were not the only students at the Fine Arts school influenced by these ideas. Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Tô Ngọc Vân and a number of others who collaborated in *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay* also studied at the school.<sup>27</sup> As a result, their respective reform projects espoused similar philosophies to Luyện and Tiếp. It seems that these other reformers expanded the idea of positive environmentalism to encompass not just the built environment, but also consumable goods. A common thread runs through all the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s reforms: the idea that the reforming of material conditions and objects will result in the transformation of human behaviors and attitudes. For example, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường believed that changing what women wore and bought will lead to their embracing of the perpetual dynamism inherent in modern life. Nhất Linh and his associates were convinced that if publishers reformed the superficial design and quality of books, readers would eventually appreciate the knowledge contained within their

---

<sup>24</sup> Wright, 215.

<sup>25</sup> William Stewart Logan, *Hanoi, Biography of a City* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000), 126.

<sup>26</sup> Caroline Herbelin, Les architectes de l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine et la recherche d’une architecture moderne à caractère national, Réseau-Asie, [http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/gateway.cgi?langue=fr&password=&email=&dir=myfile\\_colloque&type=jhg54gfd98gfd4fgd4gfdg&id=432&telecharge\\_now=1&file=a11\\_caroline\\_herbelin.pdf](http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/gateway.cgi?langue=fr&password=&email=&dir=myfile_colloque&type=jhg54gfd98gfd4fgd4gfdg&id=432&telecharge_now=1&file=a11_caroline_herbelin.pdf). Accessed 22 Feb 2012, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> According to Gareth Porter, Nguyễn Tường Tam had enjoyed a close relationship with his French professor at the School of Fine Arts. *Imperialism and Social Structure in Twentieth Century Vietnam*. (Thesis--Cornell University, 1978), 90.

pages. As the last in a series of reforms, the League of Light sought to fight the darkness in the minds of Vietnamese peasants by eradicating the darkness of their houses.

### Local and National Contexts of League of Light

If the League of Light can be seen as a part of a larger international reform movement, it was also the culmination of various threads of local discourse from within *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*. The League did not emerge suddenly in 1936; it was an idea that had been percolating for years in the minds of its founders. The League of Light reflected and encompassed a number of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's most dominant social concerns, especially regarding women, youth, and the peasantry. Its discussions over the years reveal that Nhất Linh and his associates believed these three groups to be in most need of help, guidance and mobilization.

Of the three groups, *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*'s discourse on the peasantry was by far the most extensive and complicated, due to the fact that it was closely tied to the Group's vision of the nation. Although this vision ultimately remained on the pages of *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*, it nevertheless reveals the vital connection between sanitary housing and the Group's aspirations for a modern Vietnam. Both Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh (one of Khai Hưng's other pseudonyms) first expressed interest in the peasantry as early as April 1933. They believed that rural Vietnamese suffered from a number of shortcomings that kept them in perpetual backwardness. Both writers immediately focused on entrenched traditions and religion, which they saw as resulting in misplaced priorities. Rather than spend their money on fixing their home, buying necessities, or investing in their children's education and future, the peasantry would spend their money to buy a position on the council of village elders (evidence of their lust for prestige), set up altars and temples (superstition), or throw lavish feasts for funeral and death anniversaries (blind adherence to tradition). As Nhất Linh exasperatedly pointed out, rural folk in Europe and America do not have "obligations towards gods and genies, village rituals, and family and relatives."<sup>28</sup> To Nhất Linh, Vietnamese peasants have neglected their immediate physical well-being for the sake of following rituals and customs that have no basis in reality. They "pay too much on spiritual matters...we must now make them focus on the material..."<sup>29</sup> This statement warrants a closer look, in order to discern not only the Group's attitudes towards the peasantry, but also their overall philosophical inclinations. The terms "spiritual" and "material" in this context do not carry the same value judgments as its most common usage; in other words, the lofty and enduring "spiritual" world is not juxtaposed with the base and transitory "material" world. To Nhất Linh, "spiritual" denotes the religious beliefs of Vietnamese peasants, a term which he uses to pejoratively describe what he views as superstitious and self-destructive practices that have no basis in observable phenomena. Conversely, he uses the term "material" to refer to the observable world, that is, the physical realities in which people live. The Group espoused a secular materialist viewpoint of the world, and believed that rural Vietnamese must be taught to do the same.

In their campaign to educate the peasantry, the Group exhibited a deep distrust of the traditional village elders to enact reforms. Nhất Linh surmised that while some elders may understand the desires and wishes of the peasantry, most use that understanding to exploit the

<sup>28</sup> Nhất Linh, "Dân quê muốn gì?" *Phong Hóa*, no. 49, 2 Jun 1933, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

peasantry for their own personal gain. *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay* often commented on the corruption in the villages, citing such practices as falsification of village accounts and misappropriation of public funds as examples. Indeed, the Group believed the elders of no use to the peasantry, spending their days “making up whiny and confiding poems while reeking of alcohol.”<sup>30</sup> The children of Confucian literati, who have received some western learning, are just as ineffectual: “they haven’t yet mastered *quốc ngữ* and have already left school. After that they spend their days merrymaking, raising fighting cocks, fly kites, partake in opium, songstresses and drinking to pass the days.”<sup>31</sup> For the Group, the village elders and mandarin class were part of the problem, not the solution.

Having dismissed the village elders, Nhất Linh argued that guidance must come from urban western-educated elites. Unfortunately, he believed that they too were separated from their rural compatriots because “when the educated have the opportunity to interact with the peasantry, they never take the chance to listen, to open their eyes and carefully look at them, to observe their rustic and simple spirit.”<sup>32</sup> Because western educated elites and the peasantry espoused different ways of looking at the world, Nhất Linh believed they were separated by a cultural gulf:

That is why reform in rural areas is often unsuccessful. Educated Vietnamese want to reform according to their wishes and the peasantry do not yet see the benefits. They only see that the intellectuals go against their set ways. For that reason, they do not cooperate and even try to find ways to sabotage reform.”<sup>33</sup>

In order for reform to be truly effective, Nhất Linh advised that “we must find ways to teach the peasantry to have the same viewpoints as we do, only then can we begin to reform.”<sup>34</sup> The intelligentsia must teach the peasantry to “eradicate and dismantle their superstitious and dull-witted viewpoints, and replace them with rational ones.”<sup>35</sup> The League of Light’s focus on clean housing illustrates their materialist sensibilities; by learning to live according to standards of cleanliness and hygiene, rural Vietnamese learn to reject superstition, focus on their physical well-being, and become contributing members of a new modern Vietnamese nation. For Nhất Linh, the connection between material needs, changing attitudes, and self-sufficiency is clear:

A clean sanitary, bright house, two nutritious meals a day, warm clothing. Those are the peasant’s first needs in life. Only when the peasantry adopt a rational, material view they can turn their sights on the pressing issues of rural livelihood—the expansion of craft industries, formation of rural work associations. They would learn how to work systematically, to learn how to be industrious and thrifty necessary for their well-being to be better. They would be able to help and understand the government on matters of livelihood.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Nhị Linh “Các trình độ học thức” *Phong Hóa* no. 58, 4 Aug 1933, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Nhất Linh, “Dân quê muốn gì?” *Phong Hóa* no. 48, 26 May 1933, p. 1, and no. 49, 2 Jun 1933, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Once peasants learn to focus on the realities at hand, they can begin to work and eventually organize themselves into cottage industries and even guilds. Eventually, they would be able to contribute on a national level. For Nhất Linh, housing for peasants is the first step to their own economic independence, a theme very dear to the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

However, rural self-sufficiency does not end with peasants organizing and working for their own livelihood; they would also contribute to economic independence of the entire nation. Even during the *Phong Hóa* years, Nhất Linh argued that the peasantry was the corner stone of a larger national economic plan. In 1934, he advocated a North-South economic cooperative bloc:

the South has fertile land, each years' rice production is enough to feed tens of millions of Annamese. In the North, the population is high, their labor is careful and detailed, and they work hard, industry (ky nghe) can utilize that, especially small industry will rapidly grow because of the inexpensive and readily available labor. So we should use the North as the market to sell Southern rice and use the South as the market for Northern manufactured goods. The two regions can compensate for each other's faults and thereby help each other flourish.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Nhất Linh's plan involved a full-scale economic transformation in which the agricultural South would supply raw materials for Northern industrial manufacturing. While such a transformation will take time, Nhất Linh pointed out that a shift from agricultural to industrial production had already happened in countries like Britain. Although he acknowledged that Vietnamese manufactured products could not compare with those from industrialized countries, Nhất Linh argued that Vietnamese goods could compete with those from other colonies. He estimated (perhaps wishfully) that with careful planning and execution, significant results might be achieved in 10 years.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, Nhất Linh's goal of Vietnamese economic independence did not coincide with the colonial government's own plans for the region. The French colonial government had little interest in developing an independent Vietnamese manufacturing economy; as David Marr and Martin Murray have argued, the preeminent goal of the colonial Vietnamese state was to facilitate the development of an export sector.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, as farfetched or improbable as his plan may have been, it is important to note that Nhất Linh's first instinct was to associate Vietnamese national independence with economics, not politics. The most important step for building a modern Vietnamese nation was to establish its economic self-sufficiency; Nhất Linh envisioned a "self-reliant" Vietnam in which Vietnamese would support themselves through their own work and resources. The ultimate goal for the Group's publishing and newspaper ventures—economic independence—would also loom large in their aspirations for its nation. The League of Light was to help facilitate this first step by help educating the peasantry, and thus be seen as the culmination of ideas that had been developing in *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay* for years.

### **Formulation of League of Light: Precedence and Public Opinion**

---

<sup>37</sup> Nhất Linh, "Một vấn đề dân quê," *Phong Hóa* no. 44, 28 Apr 1933, p. 1

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981),

The League of Light first came to public attention in December 1936, in a three-page article in *Ngày Nay*. It lamented the unsanitary housing conditions in Vietnam:

Damp, low-ceilinged, and barren, the houses in Vietnam are a pile of mud mixed with rubbish. They are disgusting. Puddles of water full of scum and trash make the ground perpetually damp and muddy. In hot weather, they give off a heavy odor. In winter, the moisture condenses into streams of smelly water. People and animals live and eat together, living in the same dark tight place.<sup>40</sup>

The article points out that poverty is no excuse for living in squalor, for even in Japan the poor live in houses “made of pine, simple but clean and bright, without a speck of dust, and with a little garden.”<sup>41</sup> The problem with the Vietnamese, *Ngày Nay* argued, lay not in their poverty, but in their ignorance: “The people are poor and don’t understand their own lives. They pay little attention to material realities, and they pray for favors from faraway spirits, beings that are supernatural and imaginary.” Such superstitious beliefs must be corrected, the article continued, and it is the responsibility of educated Vietnamese to guide the masses in this regard: “The masses are poor. We must help them. They do not know better. We must show them the light, we must bring them a bright future to replace their sad and dark existence.”<sup>42</sup> The Self-Reliant Literary Group called for the establishment of an association to eradicate “dirty, dark and cavernous rat’s nests unfit for human habitation.”<sup>43</sup> Because the League could not be officially founded until it was granted permission by the colonial administration, the article served to open a dialogue and to explore the public reception for such an organization. In the meantime, the League started campaigning for greater awareness against unsanitary housing by holding lectures and printing information about sanitary living and new innovations in architecture. The tone of the article was hopeful and determined:

For a long time, we have wished to eradicate cavernous and dark houses and replace them with high-ceilinged tidy houses. Now we are not wishing anymore. We want to make it so. We want to make it happen. Our desires must be turned into reality... In the process of reforming our desolate, stunted society, there are two things necessary for us to achieve our goal: faith and fervency. Fervency for our work and faith in a future better than the present.<sup>44</sup>

The Group appealed for experts to contribute their knowledge of architecture, advertising, law, and fundraising, and invited letters of opinion from readers. It had clearly intended the League of Light to be a collective project that called for the collaboration of many sectors of Vietnamese society. Towards this end, the Group called for unity among rival newspapers:

We ask that newspapers not see that this is one person’s project. Please work to bring this to public consciousness, so that this idea will spread and be realized. This effort must be

---

<sup>40</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay*, no. 38, 13 Dec 1936, p. 537-539.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

collective. It should not belong to any party, faction, or religion... The motto of the League of Light is: Society—Humanity—Reform.”<sup>45</sup>

*Ngày Nay*'s article marked a change in the Group's relations with other intellectuals and public figures. Although it had originally built its reputation on making fun of various personalities in Hanoi society and waging pen wars, it was now willing to put the past aside and work with their old rivals on social reform. Rival newspaper *Tân Việt Nam*, whose editor Phan Trần Chúc was a victim of *Phong Hoá*'s brutal satire, later commented that the collaborative impulse of the League was indeed a departure from the Self-Reliant Literary Group's previous tendencies:

*Phong Hoá* and its successor *Ngày Nay* has maintained a completely independent stance, in terms of the government as well as those with power in current society. Opening their hands and asking for government money, and running after *La Patrie Annamite*, *Ngày Nay* has broken with the *Phong Hoá* of the past.<sup>46</sup>

The paper accused *Ngày Nay* of currying favor with the colonial government. It published a front-page cartoon that depicted a mandarin labeled “*Patrie*,” being followed by a parasol-carrying servant marked “*Ngày Nay*.”<sup>47</sup> The cartoon implied that *Ngày Nay* was seeking favor from the pro-government Francophone newspaper *La Patrie Annamite*. *Ích Hữu*, a journal owned by the Group's biggest rival Vũ Đình Long, cynically accused the Self-Reliant Literary Group of starting the League to boost its public reputation. It remarked that the Group was now working with “well-known” pro-government figures it had satirized in the past such as Phạm Lê Bồng and Tôn Thất Bình.”<sup>48</sup> *Ngày Nay* did not respond to these comments; instead a rival journal, *Bắc Hà*, came to its defense. It chided other newspapers for accusing *Ngày Nay* of establishing the league to secure government money, and it asserted that such accusations were petty and unfounded. It also proposed that Hanoians should work for the greater collective good and not purposefully sabotage the philanthropic efforts of others. *Bắc Hà* called for other newspapers to abandon the feuds that marred relations in the past: “If you want criticize the *Ngày Nay* Group, go ahead. If you want to hate Nguyễn Tường Tam, be my guest. But do not criticize an initiative that promises significant social and charitable benefits that has required a huge effort to establish.”<sup>49</sup>

While members of the Group were indeed collaborating with those they previously lampooned, archival documents suggest that the League did not accept government money. This accusation was a common one among the League's rivals as well as subsequent Marxist historians; however, no evidence exists that any such transactions ever took place. In December 1938, the League's financial inspection committee submitted its annual report to the Resident Superieur of Tonkin. This document gives a detailed listing of the League's monetary intake and expenditures from 1937 to 1938, and does not list any financial support from the colonial government.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, archival evidence reveals that the government provided non-

<sup>45</sup> “Ánh Sáng trong mộng,” *Tân Việt Nam*, no. 4, 11 Sept 1937, p. 1, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Tờ báo Phong Hóa đến Hội Ánh Sáng: hay là ‘Gỡ mặt nạ một bọn hoạt đầu’” *Ích Hữu*, no. 109, 23 Mar 1938, p. 2-3

<sup>49</sup> Việt Thi, “Tờ nọ cười đến giọt nước mắt,” *Bắc Hà*, no. 8, 26 Feb 1938, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Vietnam Archives Center 1, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, p 55-58.

monetary help for the League, such as allowing it to use the Hanoi opera house for free, granting permission to post League banners and flyers around the city, and to list high officials as honorary members of the organization.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that the League was entirely self-funded.

The response to *Ngày Nay*'s appeal from the reading public was overwhelming. Over the next five months, *Ngày Nay* printed letters from over 70 readers supporting the Group's agenda and offering opinions about how to execute it. The letters reflected a broad cross-section of Vietnamese society; men and women of all ages, classes and regions of the country wrote in to offer their opinions. The letters printed in *Ngày Nay* represented only a fraction that the paper received. "Since the League of Light was born," a member explained, "we have received several thousand letters of support and opinion, enough for us to understand that our compatriots nowadays are enthusiastic for social works."<sup>52</sup> These letters suggest that the League's project had struck a chord with the reading public who welcomed the League's message of charity and compassion. The outpouring of support for the League was so strong that the Group had to remind its readers on multiple occasions that it could neither accept money nor register members until the League had received official government permission.<sup>53</sup>

As interesting as the abundance of letters was their content. Most simply offered support and voiced approval. Dozens of letter-writers vowed to pledge money and sign up as members, while others volunteered their time and talents. An electrician named Nguyen Huu Thang offered his skills to the League, prompting *Ngày Nay* to exclaim that "The League of Light now has someone to help with lights."<sup>54</sup> Readers living in rural areas as far away as Bắc Sơn and Qui Nhơn offered to set up local League branches. Two Boy Scout troops offered to stage a performance and donate the proceeds to the League. A textile merchant named Nguyễn Giang Nam in Nha Trang offered to sell fabric to the League at cost.

Other readers offered opinion about the scope of the League's activities. Phạm Tá, a member of the Chamber of Representatives and a frequent commentator on *Ngày Nay*, suggested that the League should start by building model homes that can be copied.<sup>55</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Phước from Thái Nguyên recommended that the League focus not only on building clean houses, but also on fixing the "dirty and narrow" roads in villages.<sup>56</sup> Đỗ Quyên from Haiphong took this idea further, saying that the League should fix the entire infrastructure of rural villages. A clean house, he argued,

provides only limited benefits if there is an open sewer at its gate and it sits in a swampy and muddy alleyway. It is of no benefit if those who live under its roof still have to dispose of their garbage, use the toilet, rinse their vegetables, and wash their rice in the same village pond.<sup>57</sup>

Mr. Duntic of Hanoi proposed a "rent to own" scheme for the League. The League should rent the houses it built for cheap rent and offer tenants ownership rights once their accumulated rent

<sup>51</sup> Vietnam Archives Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, D61.2650.

<sup>52</sup> Phạm Văn Bình, "Ánh Sáng: Một giờ với Bắc Sĩ Hermant," *Ngày Nay*, no. 62, 6 Jun 1937, p. 409

<sup>53</sup> "Ánh Sáng: Cùng các anh đoàn trưởng và anh hèm hướng đạo sinh" *Ngày Nay*, no. 69, 25 Jul 1937, p.

577.

<sup>54</sup> "Đề di tới việc thành lập hội bại trừ những nhà hang tối" *Ngày Nay*, no. 40, 27 Dec 1936, p. 605.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "Góp ý kiến về Ánh Sáng," *Ngày Nay*, no. 41, 3 Jan 1937, p. 619.

<sup>57</sup> "Góp ý kiến về Ánh Sáng," *Ngày Nay*, no. 42, 10 Jan 1937, p. 643.



equaled the cost of building the house. Phương Đan from Hanoi wrote that if the League “does not maintain the houses, they will revert back to being dirty and smelly, because the inhabitants are already in the habit of living in squalor.”<sup>58</sup> He suggested that to help upkeep the houses, the League must form examination committees to inspect them periodically. Many of these suggestions were incorporated into the League’s future operations.

A number of the readers got carried away and suggested additional programs that were unrelated to housing. For example, Phạm Tá (again) suggested that the League organize outings for children in the villages, an idea that had little to do with the League’s focus on sanitary housing. The most common suggestions concerned basic education. Three months after first broaching the subject of the League of Light, *Ngày Nay* published a lengthy letter from a reader named Đào Văn Thiết. He lamented the ignorant state of the peasantry and called for the formation of a group called the “Self-Reliant Learning Group,” in homage to the publishers of *Ngày Nay*. Each member of Thiết’s group would teach three people reading and arithmetic. In turn, the three people would each teach three more, forming a kind of educational pyramid scheme. Thiết saw his “Self-Reliant Learning Group” as part of a two-pronged plan that included the League of Light:

...if we want to save the world, we should first try to save our country. If others aim to crush physical suffering, then we should fight to destroy the ignorance and darkness of the mind. Learning how knowledge to save oneself is better than waiting to be rescued.<sup>59</sup>

Thiết’s idea caught on so quickly that it almost eclipsed the League of Light. Opinion letters for the Self-Reliant Learning Group ran side by side with letters about the League, at one point even warranting its own separate page. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm for the Self-Reliant Learning Group petered out almost as quickly as it began: less than two months later after Đào Văn Thiết published his letter, hardly anyone mentioned his project again.<sup>60</sup>

Not everyone shared the same enthusiasm for reform. During the League’s early years, some thought that its aims were misguided. In June 1937, Dr. Nguyễn Hải, writing for *Đông Dương Tạp Chí*, addressed Hoàng Đạo about the Self-Reliant Learning Group, using a quote from a French revolutionary: “After food, education is the most necessary thing for a people.”<sup>61</sup> Dr. Hai argued that by focusing first on educating the masses, Hoàng Đạo neglected the most pressing issue—that of livelihood. *Tân Việt Nam* was a bit more pointed—the paper published a cartoon in which starving people in rags stand waiting while Nhật Linh, Hoàng Đạo, and Khai Hưng bring them a gleaming new house. The paper denounced the Group, saying that it was “giving a paper toy to people who need rice.”<sup>62</sup> *Ngày Nay* replied that the League responds “not with words, but with action.” The paper challenged *Tân Việt Nam* to do the same, saying that “we hope that *Tân Việt Nam* will organize a group to help the poor and hungry, and get enthusiastically involved ... The League of Light will focus on housing... we’ll leave the issue of hunger and poverty to *Tân Việt Nam*.”<sup>63</sup> Other individuals and newspapers not associated with

<sup>58</sup> “Góp ý kiến về Ánh Sáng,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 47, 21 Feb 1937, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> Đào Văn Thiết, “Ngày Nay trông tìm: Một ý kiến hay,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 50, 14 Mar 1937, p. 116

<sup>60</sup> It is unclear how or if the Self-Reliant Learning Group was related to the Hội Truyền Bá Quốc Ngữ, run by communist operatives around the same time.

<sup>61</sup> Nguyễn Hải, “Về vấn đề di dân và giáo dục dân quê,” *Đông Dương Tạp Chí*, no. 6, 19 Jun 1937, p. 3-4

<sup>62</sup> “Ánh Sáng trong mộng,”

<sup>63</sup> “Ánh Sáng trả lời báo Tân Việt Nam,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 77, 19 Sep 1937, p. 763.

*Ngày Nay* came to its defense. In yet another opinion letter, Phạm Tá wrote that while the poor do need to eat, people should do whatever they can: “If we had to wait on each other, then nothing will ever get done.”<sup>64</sup>

As *Ngày Nay* boasted, the paper received far more letters than it published. So why did *Ngày Nay* choose to publish those letters in particular, and what was the paper trying to convey? A reading of the letters published in *Ngày Nay* reveals a number of messages and a clever public relations campaign. First, *Ngày Nay* wanted to convey the reading public’s approval for its reform project. From their previous use of publicity and controversy, the editors of *Ngày Nay* were well aware of its readers’ desire to be on the pulse of Hanoi’s intellectual and social life. By publishing letters written by readers from all ages, classes, and geographical locations, the paper created a buzz about its reform project to attract potential members. Second, the paper chose letters that dispelled criticism about the League’s project. Rather than addressing criticism themselves, the editors of *Ngày Nay* allowed its readers to defend its project, thus presenting an even stronger impression of widespread support. In addition, *Ngày Nay* published various letters that informed its readers of the various issues it was considering. By creating an open forum of discussion that allowed readers to contribute their ideas and engage with the League’s administrators, members would have felt that their opinion mattered; such inclusiveness became a hallmark of the League’s operations. Lastly, the paper published letters that would encourage other projects in the same spirit of reform, even if they pertained little to sanitary housing. The paper did not try to stifle reformist enthusiasm, as illustrated by the League’s endorsement of the Self Reliant Learning Group. It seemed that the League wanted Vietnamese to participate in social reform, even if it meant joining another organization. While the public support for the League of Light’s project surely existed—as evidenced by its large membership and successful fundraising—it nevertheless benefitted from the paper’s tactful publicity campaign.

In response to the outpouring of letters, the Group organized a provisional administrative council formed of interested parties to draw up statutes and facilitate the official establishment of the League.<sup>65</sup> This provisional council included some well known figures in Hanoi society: Trần Văn Chương, Phạm Tá, Nguyễn Gia Trí, and Phạm Lê Bồng.<sup>66</sup> While waiting for official permission, the provisional committee started an aggressive fundraising and publicity campaign for the League. It also began amassing information on hygiene and housing. Interestingly, at this point the League did not specify whether it planned to focus on rural or urban housing.

As part of this publicity campaign, the provisional council held a meeting at the Hanoi Opera House on the evening of August 16, 1937. The council intended the meeting to announce the formation of the League of Light, attract members, and inform the public of its goals. Over 2,000 people attended, twice the number of available seats in the auditorium. According to Khai Hung, people in attendance came from as far away as Huế and Hà Nam. The façade of the opera house was festooned with large vertical banners running along its columns, bearing the *Ánh Sáng* logo (

Figure 1).

<sup>64</sup> “Để đi tới việc thành lập hội bại trừ những nhà hang tối.”

<sup>65</sup> Phạm Văn Bình, “Ánh Sáng: Một giờ với Bắc Sĩ Hermant.”

<sup>66</sup> Trần Văn Chương was a well-known lawyer, who will later serve as Ambassador of South Vietnam to the United States during the Diem period, and father of the future Madame Ngô Đình Nhu. Phạm Tá was a local businessman and member of the Chamber of Representatives. Nguyen Gia Tri was one of Hanoi’s most influential artists, and royalist Phạm Lê Bồng was the editor of *La Patrie Annamite*.



**Figure 1. Façade of the Hanoi Opera House on the night of August 16, 1937. From *Ngày Nay* no. 73, 22 Aug 1937, p. 663.**

Inside, the organizers hung banners that read, “Change society at hand and reduce the suffering in the lives of the people.” The banner under the main stage read, “To succeed we must be enthusiastic and believe: we must be enthusiastic in our work and believe in a future that is better than the present” (Figure 2)



**Figure 2. Main stage at *Ánh Sáng* event. From *Ngày Nay* no. 73, 22 Aug 1937, p. 664.**

The audience heard a number of speakers covering various topics: Tôn Thất Bình and Phạm Văn Bình explained the League’s program and aims. Hoàng Như Tiếp described the League’s architectural principles. Ms. Thanh Quý discussed the importance of women to the League. Finally, founder Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam gave his speech on the social meaning and mission statement of the League (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Nhất Linh giving speech at *Ánh Sáng* Event, from *Ngày Nay* no. 74, 29 Aug 1937, p. 685.**

Nhất Linh acknowledged that housing reform is not enough to resolve the problem of poverty and ignorance:

Money is necessary, but it is not enough. We could imagine a rich man with good intentions spending millions of piastres to build houses for the poor. However, such a thing is merely a flash in the pan...Houses will crumble, money will run out, and dirty shacks will reappear.

He admitted that the League had other motives than charity: “Our organization is not merely a charity. While dispensing charity is a worthwhile activity, our League also has another goal.” In addition to providing low cost housing,

our organization has another task of teaching people how to live in a way worthy of a civilized people and bring them the beauty and happiness of a civilized life, and how to appreciate the small inexpensive joys that the poor can enjoy if they knew how...So you see, the meaning of our organization is much wider. To build houses for the poor, to devise architectural designs that can be easily copied by others. To find ways of modern living, to establish a foundation for a popular and instructive aesthetic, to teach the poor to know and understand, and to help them become examples to others by raising their standard of living to equal that of other civilized countries.<sup>67</sup>

As Nhat Linh’s speech made clear, the League of Light’s focus was not just about clean housing, but using the sanitary habits of modern living to educate the peasantry.

### **Overpopulation and Urbanization**

While waiting for official permission, the provisional committee solicited and secured the support of colonial officials. Members of the committee met with Dr. Hermant, the Health Inspector-General of Indochina, who gave his full support to the project, and Yves Châtel, the

---

<sup>67</sup> Nguyễn Tường Tam, “Ý nghĩa của Hội Ánh Sáng” *Ngày Nay* no. 74, 29 Aug 1937, p. 685

Resident-Superior of Tonkin, who agreed to serve as honorary president.<sup>68</sup> Colonial officials enthusiastically welcomed the League of Light, especially since its aims seemed to offer solutions to two longstanding French concerns: 1) overpopulation in the rural areas of the Red River Delta, and 2) unrest amongst urban laborers.<sup>69</sup> At the time of the 1931 census, the population of the Red River Delta numbered about 6.5 million inhabitants who were crowded onto 16,000 square kilometers of land, yielding an average density of 430 people per square kilometers. These figures surpass the density in areas such as the Irrawaddy Delta (88 persons/sq km), and Java and Madoura (315). The most populated areas of the Red River Delta, the lowlands situated at the river mouth, reached densities of up to 830 persons/sq km, outnumbering even Surabaya (695), Batavia (522), and Djokjakarta (497).<sup>70</sup> As Andrew Hardy pointed out in *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam*, while some researchers quibbled over the accuracy of this statistical data, the crux of the issue lay in its interpretation: “While the overpopulation debate raised considerable passions, it was based on confusion about the basic questions of what the population level was, whether it was growing or not, and what ‘overpopulation’ really meant.”<sup>71</sup> Instead, Hardy argued that French concerns about “overpopulation” actually constituted a discourse about something entirely different:

When French observers wrote about overpopulation, they had little idea of what the population was, let alone what it was ‘over...’ But to contemporaries, overpopulation was much more a euphemistic way of talking about immiseration. On this question there was little disagreement among French commentators: the people were poor and getting poorer.<sup>72</sup>

Hardy concluded that “the problem was well-understood—overpopulation caused poverty and poverty caused insurrection.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, what really lay behind the problem of “overpopulation” were not demographic or economic concerns, but political fears of uprisings by the impoverished masses. Given the Yên Bái and Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh uprisings of 1930-1931 and subsequent political crackdown, it made sense that French officials would seek ways to preemptively deal with rural unrest. To ameliorate this perceived problem of “overpopulation,” the colonial government introduced initiatives to entice Vietnamese to migrate to the arable upland areas (*thượng du*) or to the central highlands (*trung châu*). These attempts largely failed.<sup>74</sup>

In urban areas, French officials faced a different overpopulation problem in the form of a housing shortage, most notably in Hanoi.<sup>75</sup> While the population of the Red River Delta had been gradually increasing over the centuries, the city’s demographic growth was the recent

---

<sup>68</sup> *Ngày Nay*, no. 62, 6 Jun 1937, p 409; and *Ngày Nay*, no. 63, 13 Jun 1937, p 433.

<sup>69</sup> Even today, the Red River Delta (which envelopes Hanoi) remains one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Gourou, *Les paysans du delta tonkinois; étude de géographie humaine* (Paris: Les Éditions d'art et d'histoire, 1936), 161.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 77.

<sup>72</sup> Hardy, p 79.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> For more detailed information about some of these initiatives, see Hardy, 84-85.

<sup>75</sup> What is interesting to note is that the League of Light focused mainly on sanitary housing rather than alleviating the existing housing shortage.

product of capitalist modernization. During his tenure as Governor-General from 1897 to 1902, Paul Doumer oversaw the transformation of Hanoi into the capital of a new administratively unified Indochina. Urban restructuring was part of a larger plan to complete the pacification of Tonkin and the administrative centralization of all of Indochina. Doumer's ultimate goal was to build the economic and political infrastructure to transform Indochina into a profitable colony. During Doumer's tenure, workers began laying what became the rail network that connected Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, and China. This new railroad system, along with other new communication and transport systems, converged on the new imperial capital of Hanoi. Within the city, Doumer expanded the existing residential and commercial areas reserved only for Europeans, commissioned the building of grandiose municipal buildings (including the Hanoi opera house as well as a huge palace for himself and his successors), and constructed almost 30,000 kilometers of roads.<sup>76</sup> He also introduced modern technologies into the city such as electricity, water mains, sewage systems, and a cable car network.

As a result of this construction boom, Vietnamese flocked to Hanoi from the surrounding rural areas looking for work. According to Michael Vann, "this influx of manual laborers from the region dramatically increased the city's population and started Hanoi's century-long pattern of urban sprawl."<sup>77</sup> As the colonial administration did not provide housing for these workers, they built makeshift camps and shanties just outside the municipal limits as well as on the banks of the Red River. Throughout the construction boom, these camps continued to grow. To further compound the already growing housing shortage, Doumer waged war against the traditional wooden thatched houses of the old city, or *paillotes*. Deeming the houses unsanitary, unsightly and fire prone (the latter not unfounded, given a series of fires in 1886 that destroyed nearly 200 such houses), the colonial administration banned *paillotes* in the European quarter in 1902, and encouraged Vietnamese to build their homes in tile and brick.<sup>78</sup> Such cost-prohibitive materials meant that only wealthy Vietnamese could afford to build houses. The prohibition of *paillotes*, compounded by the growing influx of migrant workers, further exacerbated Hanoi's housing shortage.

After Doumer's departure, Hanoi's urban growth (and by extension its housing shortage) continued to accelerate in the ensuing decades. According to Martin Murray, economic forces gave rural Vietnamese incentive to leave their villages. The exodus was due to two factors: the erosion of subsistence agriculture in the countryside and coercive French policies that forced Vietnamese to seek wage labor in plantations, mines, and industrial areas.<sup>79</sup> Land was scarce in the Red River Delta; the practice of partible inheritance had turned the densely-populated delta into what one scholar described as "a mosaic of tiny dwarf holdings" unable to support the families that owned them.<sup>80</sup> The growing population, coupled with crude farming technology and cultivation techniques, created a gradual decline in subsistence farming output. The colonial tax system gave rural Vietnamese further reason to leave their villages; French policies were

---

<sup>76</sup> Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan, 2000), 30.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Vann, *White City on the Red River: Race, Power, and Culture in French Colonial Hanoi, 1872-1954*. (Thesis (Ph. D.)--University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999), 106.

<sup>78</sup> Vann, 95-96.

<sup>79</sup> Martin Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 228.

<sup>80</sup> Jeffrey Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*. (New York: Free Press, 1975), 289.

designed to force the indigenous population to contribute to the export sector. Vietnamese were required to pay their taxes in cash. The result was compulsory participation in the money economy: villagers would either sell surplus crop at market for cash or leave the village to seek wage-paid labor.<sup>81</sup> Murray wrote that

By the 1930s, the European mills, factories, and commercial establishments increasingly attracted wage-labor. Gradually, the wage laborers formed a permanent urban population which developed in close proximity to locations of employment. The majority of these urbanized wage laborers lived in industrial suburbs on the outskirts of large towns, Saigon-Cholon, Vinh (Ben Thuy), Haiphong, Hanoi, and Hue.<sup>82</sup>

As previously mentioned, the “industrial suburbs” of Hanoi were located outside city limits and on the banks of the Red River. Within Hanoi itself, municipal boundaries and policies served to exacerbate the growth of these shantytowns. As Michael Vann described, “Hanoi was a legal, administrative, and political entity distinct from the rest of Tonkin and Indochina. The city enjoyed a special status of being French territory in the center of a French protectorate imposed on Vietnamese territory.”<sup>83</sup> As such, the *Mairie de Hanoi* lacked the power to police and regulate the surrounding suburban areas. Urban workers congregated just beyond municipal limits to avoid surveillance, as did many migrant Vietnamese who did not declare Hanoi residency and remained registered at their ancestral village to avoid paying the head tax [*impot personnel*].<sup>84</sup> The cost of living in the suburban zones were considerably lower than in the city, and with housing becoming increasingly scarce, many Vietnamese opted to live outside municipal boundaries.<sup>85</sup> In the absence of strict zoning or hygiene laws, housing in these areas were often haphazardly built, poorly maintained, and lacked adequate sanitation. Along with migrant workers, the suburbs also attracted marginal economic sectors and vice; areas such as Khâm Thiên and Gia Lâm became well known for gambling, opium, and prostitution.

By the time that the League of Light was founded in 1937, colonial officials had reason to be concerned about housing for urban workers. Hanoi was almost literally bursting at the seams: in just a quarter century the population of Hanoi almost doubled, from around 86,000 in 1913 to 149,000 in 1936.<sup>86</sup> French officials did little to hide their anxieties about the conditions of the working class. During a meeting with the League of Light, *Résident Supérieur* of Tonkin Yves Châtel suggested that “The first task of an organization like the League of Light is to immediately build a workers’ community where the laboring classes can rent cheaply, so they can enjoy the light of sanitary, well-lit housing.” Dr. Hermant also tried to persuade the League to focus its efforts on the plight of urban workers. Just as “overpopulation” became a euphemism for “insurrection caused by immiseration,” “urban laborers” became code in the lexicon of the French officials for “potential communists.” Later, Châtel was more explicit, announcing in a speech that “if everyone had a house and a small garden then there will be no more communists.” While the government was concerned with the rebelliousness of the poor peasantry, they were

---

<sup>81</sup> The taxation system not only forced certain villagers to leave the village for the city, it ironically bound villagers to the village, dooming the government’s plans of relocating people to failure. See Hardy, 121.

<sup>82</sup> Murray, 361.

<sup>83</sup> Vann, 214.

<sup>84</sup> Vann, 205.

<sup>85</sup> Vann, 215.

<sup>86</sup> Data taken from Vann, p 206, and Civil Affairs Handbook, Appendix A, p 83.

more afraid of organized factory workers and laborers. Underneath the colonial government's seemingly altruistic and enthusiastic support of the League lay a more practical political motive—the control of potentially threatening and seditious elements in Vietnamese society. While the colonial government hoped that the League would help control labor unrest and Communism, it was clear that the League had very different reasons and goals for its social reform.<sup>87</sup>

### Organizational Structure

After almost a year of organizing and mobilizing public support, the official formation of the League of Light was sanctioned by the government on October 14, 1937.<sup>88</sup> According to the League's official statutes, the organization pursued four goals:

1. To fight against unsanitary housing;
2. To encourage and envision, with the help of the administration and individuals, the construction of sanitary developments and housing in populous centers, the digging of wells, the building of roads, the management of sewage, and the establishment of modern hamlets in villages;
3. To boost the beneficial effects of sanitary housing by morally and materially encouraging the upkeep of houses and apartments, so that through the development of household education for women for better maintenance of the family home, of practice and the application of essential principles of the domestic economy;
4. To come to the aid of as many as possible cases and in appropriate form, the families fallen victim to unsanitary housing, and placing at their disposal, in the form of renting or selling, clean and inexpensive housing that the League will construct.<sup>89</sup>

As evidenced by its aims, the League worked towards a more comprehensive view of housing reform than originally intended. It was not enough to provide clean houses; the League addressed the village as a whole. This meant laying the infrastructure for sanitary living such as roads, sewers, and ditches, as well as educating villagers on how to maintain their healthy new surroundings.

---

<sup>87</sup> This paranoia of the working classes even affected the League's fundraising activities. In April 1938, the League had planned a stage production of Vi Huyen Duc's *Kim Tiên*, a play previously performed in Haiphong. Despite the Mayor's initial permission of the production, the Surete refused to issue the necessary clearances. The police cited the final scene of the play, in which coal miners brutally kill the proprietor during a violent labor strike, which prompted the Mayor to withdraw authorization a mere 4 days before the performance.<sup>87</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, D61.2650, p. 38-46.

<sup>88</sup> Decision no. 4581 by the Resident Superior of Tonkin, 14 Oct 1937, Vietnam national archives, Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, 2858.

<sup>89</sup> "Ligue de Anh Sang: Projet de Statuts", Vietnam National Archives no. 1, Résident Supérieuree du Tonkin, D62.79250, p 62-75.





**Figure 4. Logo of the League of Light, representing rays of light piercing through darkness. From Vietnam National Archives Center 1, Résident Supérieure du Tonkin, D62.79250.**

Institutionally, the League of Light followed a form similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European middle-class philanthropic societies that the British historian R.J. Morris termed a “subscriber democracy.”<sup>90</sup> In this form of associationism, members paid a yearly subscription fee and were organized into an elaborate hierarchy. Dues funded most of the organization’s activities. The administration was led by a committee elected by subscribers, which Morris described as “rule by an oligarchy selected from higher status members of the society.”<sup>91</sup> In a subscriber democracy, the practices of procedural democratic politics are translated into the everyday administration of a volunteer organization. Such organizations were structured to secure trust as well as active participation from its membership.

The League of Light exhibited all the characteristics of a subscriber democracy. It established a finely-graded organizational hierarchy for its members that included five different categories based on subscription fee. “Honorary” membership was offered to patrons who rendered symbolic service to the league. These included government figures such as the Resident Supérieure of Tonkin Yves Châtel and Mme. Jules Brévié, wife of the Governor General. “Beneficiary” members contributed 100 piastres or more, while “donating” members paid 50 piastres. “Active” members paid an annual fee of one piaster and had to be least 21 years of age. Students, laborers, and rural folk paid a concessionary fee of .20 a year, and were accorded the status of “League” members. To leave the League, members offered a simple letter of resignation, or they could be struck off the roster for not paying dues for two consecutive years.<sup>92</sup> Morris describes the hierarchical membership of such subscription democracies as “the perfect compromise between the middle class striving for self-respect and independence and the reality of hierarchical society with its massive inequalities of wealth and power...”<sup>93</sup> In other words, such hierarchies simultaneously proclaimed the equal status of its members, while affirming differences in social status between them, in a kind of registry of social class. For Morris, it is no coincidence that subscriber democracies mirrored the form of the joint-stock company—such new associational culture reflected the burgeoning power of an emergent middle class. One’s power and influence within the organization is directly proportional to the subscription fee paid. The League’s statutes do not describe the privileges and benefits assigned to various levels of membership. This suggests that the League’s hierarchy seemed less an uncomfortable tension between democratic ideals and class realities than an inclusionary attempt to open the League’s

<sup>90</sup> R.J. Morris, “Clubs, Societies, and Associations” in F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, vol. 3 (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 412.

<sup>91</sup> R.J. Morris, 413.

<sup>92</sup> “Ligue de Anh Sang: Projet de Statuts.”

<sup>93</sup> R.J. Morris, 413.

membership to a wider public. In other words, the League's hierarchy of membership was designed to include members of all stripes to participate in a pluralist liberal democracy in microcosm.

The League was run by an Administrative Council composed of 21 elected officers that met once a month. To aid its work, the administrative council established six main committees, each charged with a specific task: purchases, festivals, publicity, housing inspection, women and technical matters. In its history, the League only held one Administrative Council election in December 1938. The League's elected committee was composed of high-status figures:

- Presidents
  - Nguyễn Tường Tam (Nhật Linh)
  - Vũ Đình Hoè
  - Tôn Thất Bình
- Secretary
  - Nguyễn Xuân Đào
- Deputy Secretaries
  - Nguyễn Văn Xuân
  - Trần Hữu Phụng
- Treasurer
  - Nguyễn Đắc Phước
- Deputy Treasurers
  - Mme. Nguyễn Đình Hoàng
  - Nguyễn Duy Thanh
- Commissioners
  - Nguyễn Văn Khải
  - Mlle. Nguyễn Tăng Phú
  - Nguyễn Tường Long (Hoàng Đạo)
  - Phạm Đình Biều
- Counselors
  - Phạm Hữu Chương
  - Trần Khánh Giu (Khái Hưng)
  - Lê Thăng
  - Nguyễn Đê
  - Hoàng Hữu Huy
  - Nguyễn Cao Luyện
  - Hoàng Như Tiếp
  - Tô Ngọc Vân
- Inspection Committee:
  - Đào Văn Nhuận
  - Nguyễn Huy Thọ<sup>94</sup>

Other than the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, some of the administrative committee members were among the most well-known figures in Hanoi society. They hailed

---

<sup>94</sup> “À la Ligue ‘Anh Sang’” *La Patrie Annamite*, no. 283, 31 Dec 1938, p. 2

from various professions and political leanings, and some would go on to have illustrious careers. The non-communist Vũ Đình Hoè would go on to found the influential journal *Thanh Nghị*, then become Vietnam's first Minister of Education in Hồ Chí Minh's provisional government. From 1946-1960, he served as Minister of Justice for the DRV, then as senior scholar specializing in economic and civil law at Institute of State and Law. The League's third president, Tôn Thất Bình, worked as editor-in-chief of the pro-monarchy francophone journal *La Patrie Annamite*, was the principal of the École Thang Long, and enjoyed social status as the son-in-law of Phạm Quỳnh. One of the League's treasurers Nguyễn Duy Thanh received his electrical engineering degree from France, regularly contributed to the scientific journal *Tạp Chí Khoa Học*, and would later serve as DRV Director General of Public Works and Minister of Planning and Reconstruction. After four years with the Viet Minh, he would defect to Bảo Đại's government. One of the Indochina Fine Arts School's most famous graduates, painter Tô Ngọc Vân would later join the Việt Minh, open a revolutionary art school in the Việt Bắc, and be named a revolutionary hero after his death in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Physician Phạm Hữu Chương would also join the Việt Minh and serve as Hồ Chí Minh's Director of Public Health Services until 1951. He later defected to the South, where Ngô Đình Diệm promoted him to Minister of Health and Social Welfare; in the 1950s and 60s a hospital in Cho Lon would bear his name. Lastly, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp would also become members of the Việt Minh and operate in the Viet Bac. Even when active with the League of Light, Luyện had already attracted suspicion for allegedly distributing communist tracts around the School of Public Works.<sup>95</sup> Luyện would later serve as Minister of Architecture and Construction in the 1950s, while Hoàng Như Tiếp would help found the Vietnamese Architecture Association. This collection of individuals reveals that the League of Light had somehow assembled a group of intellectuals that would otherwise have little in common. Artists worked together with physicians; journalists and writers collaborated with engineers and merchants. Educated women such as pharmacist Mme Nguyễn Đình Hoàng and Trịnh Thục Oanh would cooperate with various male counterparts on social reform projects. Curiously, the League also brought together people from various political persuasions, from monarchists to budding revolutionaries. The presence of such figures on the League's administrative council undermines Alexander Woodside's claim of social fragmentation and illustrates the inclusive nature and widespread appeal of the League's social reform message.

The League made financial transparency and accountability a top priority, and devised a strict regiment to prevent mismanagement. The Treasurer must submit monthly and yearly reports on the League's finances. A separate Financial Inspection Committee would independently audit the League's ledgers and verify them against the treasurer's reports. All of the financial reports were circulated not just among members, but also published in *Ngày Nay*, *La Patrie Annamite*, and other newspapers. The League's founders hoped that such an open process would contribute to building an informed trust between the directors and subscribers.

Once a year, the General Assembly convened in the last trimester. There, members listened to reports of the League's accomplishments and finances, elected officers, and voted on new projects. The League's organizational form suggests that not only did the League aim at inculcating modern values, but to give burgeoning urban elites the opportunity to practice and participate in the activities of a civil society—a kind of “school” of self-government. For R.J. Morris, urban voluntary associations can form the origins of modern civil society. The League's

---

<sup>95</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, D611.2663, p. 102.

statutes show that although the League's administration was rather top-heavy and centralized, it aimed at maximum transparency and inclusiveness. Through the ritualized and symbolic elements of public culture, civic celebrations, and meetings, the League's organizational form sought to cement collective identities. The League's organizational structure encouraged the habits of associationism and can be seen as the expression of democracy in microcosm. Given the Self-Reliant Literary Group's fervent belief in French republican values, the League's organizational form served as a means of inculcating the values of enlightened citizenship in its members. This was part of the moral order the League aimed to construct; while the peasants receive an education that would build a modern national workforce, urban elites were learning the habits of self-governance.

### *Ánh Sáng* Activities and Culture

Because financial support was critical to the operation of the League, fundraising quickly became its foremost activity. Even before receiving official permission, the League organized numerous fundraising events, all widely advertised on the pages of *Ngày Nay* and other local newspapers. For example, the League hosted an evening cabaret by a travelling troupe of Chinese performers called the May Blossom Revue in August 1937. This event made 518.65 after expenses.<sup>96</sup> Later, the League organized a performance by the well-known *cải lương* singer Phùng Há to support the building of its first housing development. In addition to cultural shows, the League sponsored a two-day fundraising sporting event held at the Stade Mangin. Presided over by *Résident Supérieur* of Tonkin Yves Châtel, the event featured a basketball game between the Hanoi Racing Club and SEPTO (Société d'Éducation Physique du Tonkin) and a soccer match between 1936 undefeated champions Éclair and their bitter rivals Stade Hanoien. The second day's event featured combat sports and promised "A Vietnamese martial artist battling a French fighter. One is an expert in the Chinese method. The other uses the technique from Great Britain... Come witness a fierce martial arts competition unlike any other."<sup>97</sup> This sporting event netted the League 306.71 piastres. Wanting to benefit from the good publicity of supporting a popular charitable organization, local businesses cooperated with the League in fundraising activities. On January 8, 1938, the largest department store in Hanoi, Les Grand Magasins Réunis (formerly known as the Godard Department Store) donated 10% of the day's sales to the League, totaling 728.69 piastres.<sup>98</sup> Once a month, the Majestic Cinema held a "League of Light" benefit on a Friday night, screening the latest films such as *Abused Confidence* starring Danielle Darrieux and *Mayerling* with Charles Boyer. One such night raised over 330 piastres.<sup>99</sup> To court high-profile patrons, the League held a tea party in January 1938 for members of the government and wealthy benefactors, earning a whopping 2,200 piastres.<sup>100</sup> These fundraising activities were highly successful; in 1937-1938, the League of Light's revenue totaled 11,212.89 piastres.<sup>101</sup>

Some of the League's money went to areas struck by natural disasters. For instance, half the money from the two-day sporting event went to help flood victims. On September 27, 1937,

<sup>96</sup> "Tùng tuần lễ một," *Ngày Nay*, no. 74, 29 Aug 1937, p. 688

<sup>97</sup> Advertisement in *Ngày Nay* no. 77, p. 759.

<sup>98</sup> Hoàng Như Tiếp, "Trại Ánh Sáng Phúc Xá," *Ngày Nay*, no. 107, 24 Apr 1938, p. 18-19

<sup>99</sup> "Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng," *Ngày Nay*, no. 112, 29 May 1938, p. 14

<sup>100</sup> Nhị Linh, "Tiệc trà Ánh Sáng" *Ngày Nay*, no. 95, 30 Jan 1938, p. 6-7.

<sup>101</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, *Résident Supérieuree du Tonkin*, D62.79250, p. 58.

members of the provisional administrative council raised and distributed \$266.22 in aid to the flood victims of Làng Tái in Bắc Ninh. Two months later, the League distributed \$512.56 in aid to flood victims in Bắc Giang.<sup>102</sup> The League's leaders were most likely aware that chronic natural disasters could undermine their projects. In an area particularly vulnerable to flooding and fire such as the Red River Delta, frequent natural disasters could worsen social inequalities by further immiserating already hard-stricken populations. Given the League's emphasis of transforming behavior through the improvement of living conditions, disaster relief would fit into the League's larger social aims.

Because more members meant more subscription fees, the League organized a recruitment drive on December 12, 1937, a month after it received official permission. Dubbed the Day of Light, the event was designed to raise awareness of the League's social project and to induct new members. The day was advertised aggressively in newspapers and on banners (designed by Tô Ngọc Vân) displayed at Hanoi's main thoroughfares. From early morning, 50 teams of League members went door-to-door around the city, informing people about their cause and soliciting memberships. Teams were made up of a uniformed boy scout, a young woman or girl, referred to as an "angel of light" [nàng tiên *Ánh Sáng*], and a committee member. Each person had a separate duty: the scout navigated the way, the committee member dealt with the money, and the "angel of light" makes the case for joining the league by "bringing light into people's homes." The Day of Light was a huge success. The teams recruited 2,352 new members and collected dues totaling 1,221.09.<sup>103</sup> In the first 2 months of existence, the League recruited 4,052 new members, mostly Hanoi residents. A similar recruitment drive held in Haiphong yielded 592 new members paying a total of 481.80 piastres in fees.<sup>104</sup> The League of Light held another recruitment drive in February 5, 1939.

In keeping with its progressive project, the League of Light actively cultivated an inclusive and dynamic group culture. The League maintained an optimistic and proactive tone calling for its members to show "faith and fervency" to achieve their goals: "Fervency towards our work and faith in a future better than the present."<sup>105</sup> Such progressive, future-minded rhetoric was coupled with statements of inclusion and cooperation: "This effort is a collective one, not belonging to any party and must be a collective one, not belonging to any party, faction, or religion."<sup>106</sup> Its founders intended the League to be a nonpartisan, nonreligious social organization, and encouraged mass participation. To facilitate membership of all classes and ages, the League provided reduced membership fees for students and workers.

In particular, the League made the recruitment of female members a high priority. Before the League received official permission, women responded enthusiastically to its call for reform; women of different ages and occupations wrote opinion letters supporting the League, donated money, or promised to join as members. Phạm Văn Bình, treasurer of the Provisional Committee, commented that the female response "is something worth celebrating—women have now enthusiastically turned to charitable social works."<sup>107</sup> The League prominently featured female members at its first meeting at the Hanoi opera house, in a speech given by a Ms. Thanh

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 88-90.

<sup>103</sup> "Kết quả một ngày Ánh Sáng ở Hanoi," *Ngày Nay*, no. 90, 19 Dec 1937, p. 6-7

<sup>104</sup> "Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng" *Ngày Nay* no. 107, 24 Apr 1938, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay*, no. 38, 13 Dec 1936, p. 537-539.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "Ánh Sáng: Kỳ hội họp công khai Ánh Sáng sẽ có vào cuối tháng Juillet," *Ngày Nay*, no. 68, 18 Jul 1937, p. 553

Quí titled, “Women and the League”.<sup>108</sup> The fact that League grouped women’s issues with other crucial topics such as social aims and architecture underscores the importance placed on the participation of women. It is no surprise that in its statutes the League established a separate committee on women’s issues as one of 6 main committees. The head of the Organization and Festival Committee was Trịnh Thục Oanh, the well-known headmistress of a francophone school in Hanoi and archetypal “modern woman.”<sup>109</sup>

The League actively recruited women and promoted itself as a space where women could participate in social work. However, women differed greatly about how they viewed their place in the League. Some, like Ms. Bích Lan, believed that women must follow the men’s lead in reforming society: “Men have answered the call to a participate in the league. Women are also part of society, we cannot sit and ignore the call.”<sup>110</sup> She couched her call to reform in essentialized terms: “As women, the creator has endowed us with an ability to easily feel emotion, we cannot watch such scenes of suffering without compassion.” Finally, she invoked the traditional notion of female selflessness, and subtly turned it on its head when she writes that “to create happiness for others is to build one’s own.”<sup>111</sup> In the traditional roles of wives and mother, Vietnamese women were expected to forsake their own personal happiness for that of their husbands and children. Bích Lan reappropriated this traditional language by arguing that women could also find happiness by directing their innate sense of selflessness out into society, by helping the underprivileged. In other words, she uses the rationale to keep women bound to their husbands and children to support their involvement in social work. Charity had now become an extension of women’s “natural” maternal and domestic attributes: extending concern for children, hygiene, and moral order beyond the confines of their own homes into those of the less fortunate.

Other women, such as Ms. Nguyễn Thị Phú, expressed an even more radical view: “We should go into society, work with our male compatriots, and shoulder the same work; we will prove that like men, we can also accomplish tasks and use our education. When we can show our strength, we do not need to demand it-- equality will be a reality.”<sup>112</sup> Unlike Bích Lan, who called for women to follow men into social reform, Nguyễn Thị Phú believed that women must go further and prove themselves the equal of men. As League members, women would learn the skills to emancipate themselves: “[The League of Light] is a way that women can train themselves to work, to apply their knowledge—it is the sure way to bring us women to permanent and genuine liberation.”<sup>113</sup> While Bích Lan couched her call to action in the

<sup>108</sup> “Công cuộc xã hội: đường lối đưa chị em đến sự giải phóng,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 95, 30 Jan 1938, p. 6-7

<sup>109</sup> *Ngày Nay*, no. 89, 12 Dec 1937, p 6. Trịnh Thục Oanh was a prominent example of the emboldened “modern woman.” She was one of the first prominent Hanoians to champion Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường’s tunic, and was interviewed about it in *Ngày Nay* in 1936. In 1939, she cowrote a novel with Marguerite Triare, titled *En s’ecartant des ancetres*, often cited by francophone scholars as the first Vietnamese novel written by a woman. Her embrace of progressive ideas and friendship with powerful officials made her widely reviled by her male counterparts, who saw her behavior as immoral and unsightly. Vũ Bằng, in his memoirs *Forty Years of Lying*, writes that Trịnh Thục Oanh was “famous at one time for setting a bad example for young female students,” and made a point of publicly humiliating her in *Vật Đục*. Vũ Bằng, *Bốn mươi năm nói láo* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993), 130.

<sup>110</sup> “Ánh Sáng,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 73, 22 Aug 1937, p. 667.

<sup>111</sup> This idea had been most recently invoked by Trương Tửu in his critique of Nhất Linh’s *Lạnh Lùng*. He criticizes the main character Nhung as a “demon” who put her own individual happiness before that of her child.

<sup>112</sup> “Công cuộc xã hội: đường lối đưa chị em đến sự giải phóng.”

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional language of home and sentimentality, Nguyễn Thị Phú viewed the League as a space where women can work towards their own individual freedom.

Despite their differences, both women were of similar mind when it came to the social responsibilities of the more fortunate towards the poor. Nguyễn Thị Phú addressed other western educated urban women: “For a long time, we women have received the “new” education. We aspired to liberation, dreamed of escaping the narrow bounds of the family, and turn our minds towards a wider and larger family—our society.” Here, by equating society with a “wider and larger family,” Nguyễn Thị Phú collapsed the difference the private realm of the family and the public realm of society, and made the case for women to participate in social reform. She wrote, “because we have absorbed this new education and understood the realities of this new world, if we do not think about using our knowledge—like the men of similar background—then that education is of no use to anyone, and is of no use to ourselves.”<sup>114</sup> Here, Nguyễn Thị Phú argued that privileged women who have received a western education must use it to help the less fortunate. Likewise, Bích Lan wrote that is not enough that Vietnamese women participated in civic or philanthropic activities—the type of work also mattered. She compared women from western countries to those from her own:

Upper class women in Europe and America often reserve time in the week for charitable works--organizing events to raise money for a charity, visiting the poor, donating money and clothing--it varies by person. On the other hand, women in our country commission statues and bells, building this pagoda, or constructing that temple. While we understand that one should practice religion, dead people do not need saving as much as the living, as those suffering hardship. The money spent on temple rituals could save many families in dire straits.<sup>115</sup>

Bích Lan urged Vietnamese women to follow the example of those from westernized countries rather than their traditional counterparts, to focus their efforts on works that have immediate effect on the world around them. Following the same sentiments of social obligation, Mrs. Nguyễn Đình Hoàng (whose doctor husband owned a pharmacy on Phố Huế) announced the formation of the League of Light’s Women’s Training Corps in July 1938. The corps was designed to “nurture and educate the poor in *Ánh Sáng* developments so that they know how to live hygienically...the women’s training corps also has the separate responsibility of guiding poor women and children, as well as distribute medication.”<sup>116</sup> The guiding principle of the training corps is that while educated women may have a duty to help the underprivileged in general, they have a particular responsibility to the less fortunate of their own sex and their children.

Reflecting this new spirit of egalitarianism and inclusion, members of the League of Light followed the seemingly radical practice of forgoing all pronouns that denote hierarchical status or professional title (*ông, bà, cô, bác sĩ*, etc). Instead, the members referred to each other through the respectful but equal pronouns of “older brother” [*anh*] and “older sister” [*chị*], regardless of age, education, class or social standing.<sup>117</sup> This practice often produced moments

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Bích Lan, “Phụ nữ với Hội Ánh Sáng” *Ngày Nay*, no. 73, 22 Aug 1937, p. 667.

<sup>116</sup> “Kỹ yếu Ánh Sáng” *Ngày Nay*, no. 119, 17 Jul 1938, p. 22

<sup>117</sup> “Sau cuộc chợ phiên Ánh Sáng” *Vật Dục*, no. 35, 15 Mar 1939, pg. 1, 2.

of dissonance. The poet Anh Thơ described such a moment in her memoirs, which took place when she interviewed Nhất Linh's wife at home:

There was a sound of a car horn, then a very elegant automobile parked in front of the house. A throng of young women, wearing Lemur tunics in vivid colors that made them look like fluttering butterflies, spilled into the house, calling loudly: “Anh Nhất Linh, let's go.” Nhất Linh's wife looked at them disdainfully, and said, still smiling, “He left early this morning. If you go to the League of Light development site, you will find him there.” The girls replied, “Really? Thank you auntie!” They called the husband “older brother,” but referred to his wife as “auntie?”<sup>118</sup>

Although Anh Thơ used this episode to describe the life of an author's wife, the incident reveals much about the particular culture within the League of Light. While the young women shared a seemingly casual and egalitarian relationship with other league members, they still observed traditional forms of address with outsiders.

While some like Anh Thơ found this practice puzzling, other members of Hanoi society found this completely intolerable. According to *Vit Đục*, such casual language between the sexes could lead to immoral conduct: “In the League of Light people call each other *anh* and *chị*. Going by the house of “*chị*” Headmistress Trịnh Thục Oanh, “*anh*” League member gets excited and calls in. “*Chị*” Headmistress entertains him. Suddenly, no more words are needed...”<sup>119</sup> In an even more perverse accusation, *Vit Đục* accused the League of facilitating lechery. According to a *Vit Đục* reporter, a League member whispered into his ear:

If an older man, who wants to use his money to have fun with beautiful girls, the League will help satisfy that desire. First join the League. Then you need a car (just buy or borrow one). After a tea party or evening performance at the opera house or the cinema, learn the art of gallantry and talk to these Angels of the Light—13, 14 years old, still wearing their hair still down. When these angels have happily jumped in your car, then their destinies are subject to your steering wheel...<sup>120</sup>

The League never responded to *Vit Đục*'s tawdry accusations. In previous years, the Self-Reliant Literary Group would have plunged headlong into a bitter newspaper feud when confronted with such provocation. For the League of Light, however, such accusations did not warrant a response.

### **Ánh Sáng Architecture: Background and Guidelines**

As previously described, the League's founder Nguyễn Tường Tam and its architects Nguyen Van Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp all studied at the Indochinese Fine Arts University, where they were influenced by early 20<sup>th</sup> century European progressive ideas of positive

---

<sup>118</sup> Anh Thơ, *Từ bến Sông Thương; Tiếng chim tu hú; Bên dòng chia cắt: hồi ký văn học* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2002), 189-190.

<sup>119</sup> “Sau cuộc chợ phiên Ánh Sáng.”

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.



environmentalism. This influence is most clear in the design of the League's housing developments. An examination of the blueprints of various *Ánh Sáng* projects reveals the League's philosophy of the built environment: unsanitary conditions can be controlled and reduced through the rational planning of space and the distribution and separation of everyday activities throughout the home.

To provide a point of comparison and to better understand the League of Light's architectural reforms, it would be helpful to know some background about the housing conditions of the rural and urban poor at the time. As mentioned earlier, scholarship on architecture in Indochina has focused on public buildings designed by French architects or traditional communal and religious buildings while ignoring residential or retail spaces. Fortunately, geographer Pierre Gourou, in his 1936 study *the Peasants of the Tonkinese Delta*, provided two examples of poor rural housing. The first example is from a village in Ha Nam (Figure 5).

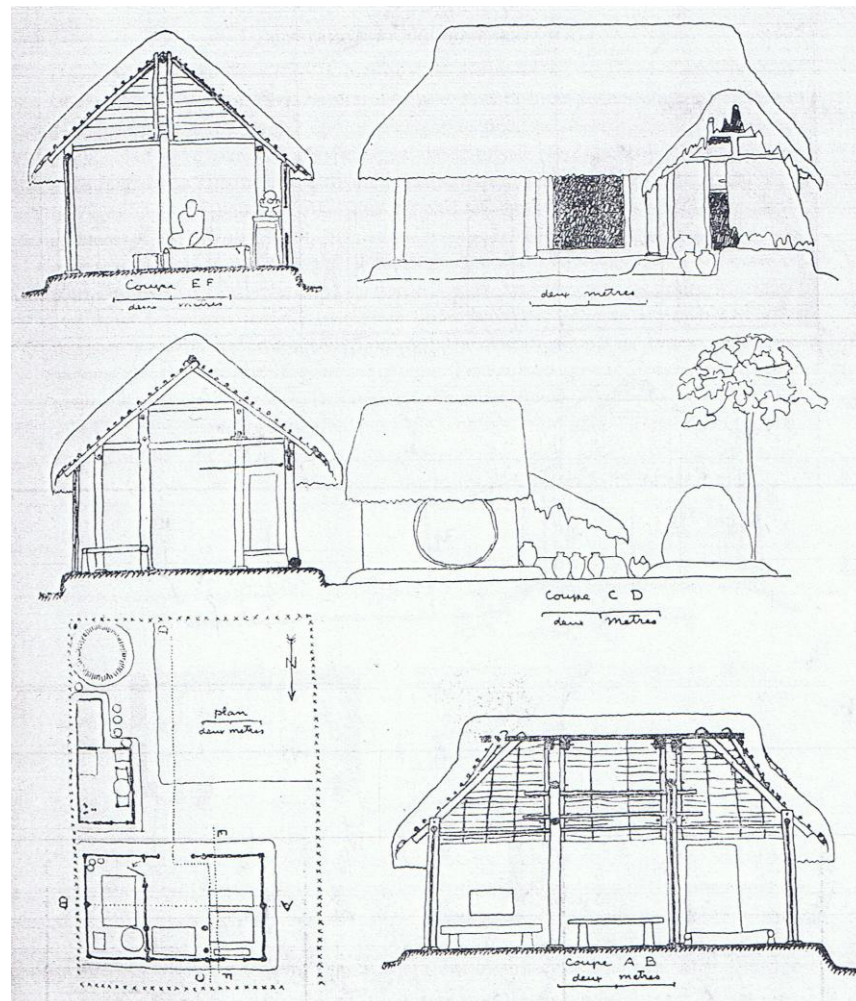


Figure 5. Rural dwelling in Ha Nam. From Gourou, *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois*, 307.

The house is supported by a simple framework supporting 2 thatched sloping roofs and is divided into two buildings: a main living space consisting of a fully enclosed room for sleeping and

storing provisions, and a reception/living area; and a tiny annex for the kitchen. Both buildings open onto a small courtyard. The only openings to the main house are the central door and a small window at the back of the reception area. As wooden doors and frames were expensive, the central door was usually left open, or covered with a plaited bamboo panel. The main house measured a mere 6x4 meters and the kitchen 2x3 meters, and were built from bamboo, thatch, and mud on wooden frames. Gourou's second example is a poor rural house in Kiên An ( Figure 6).

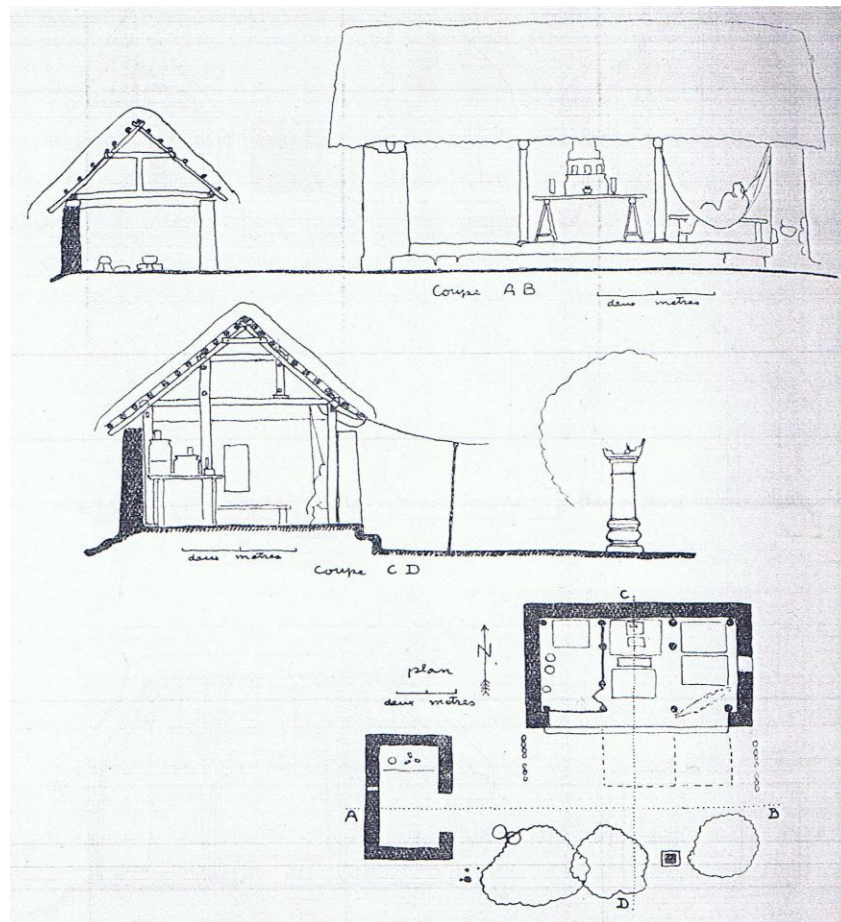


Figure 6. Rural Dwelling in Kiên An. From Gourou, 308.

Slightly larger than the first example, this house also has its kitchen separate from the main living space, both opening onto a yard. The façade of the main building is made up of 3 bays: the left bay is completely enclosed and comprised sleeping and storage areas. The right two bays were left open, and can be shaded by drawing simple bamboo awnings. This second house avoided the expense of wooden doors and frames by dispensing with them altogether. According to Gourou, the houses of ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) peasants were always built at ground level (never on stilts like montagnard groups) and used the bare ground as the floor. The kitchens did not have fireplaces, Gourou noted, and “the smoke escapes through the door, the sides of the roof and sometimes through the thatch. It is a curious sight to see some Annamite huts emitting

smoke throughout the entire roof, as if the thatch was slowly smoldering.”<sup>121</sup> For poorer peasants, small quantities of grain or food are stored in jars or baskets in the enclosed sleeping areas. Conspicuously missing from Gourou’s description were sanitation facilities for sewage and waste. Later designs by the League of Light would address this issue.

As Gourou described, religion played an important role in building traditional houses: “The building of a house is accompanied by complicated rites,” he explained, “it is as much a religious ceremony as an architectural achievement.” Once the geomancer has determined the location and cardinal orientation of the house, a number of factors dictated its dimensions and design, which often included the owner’s zodiac year and birthdate. Gourou cited a number of other *feng shui* practices:

The happiness and tranquility of the house and its inhabitants depend on the care that was taken in expelling the evil influences...A road or river in a straight line has a negative influence, one should not let a main house turn towards it, it is also not good to have any part of a house extend into a pathway. The corner of a pond, and the corner of a village dinh should never point towards the façade of a house. As an Annamite proverb states, “first is the corner of the pond, the second is the corner of the communal house [Thư nhất góc ao, thứ nhì dao đình].

Multiple rites were performed throughout the building process, such as the woodcutting ritual [lễ phạt mộc] and the placement of the master beam [*thượng lương*]. Upon completion of the house, another round of rituals must be observed before the inhabitation was allowed. As not all negative influences could be avoided, house owners could protect themselves by drawing up magic barriers, usually through strategically-placed mirrors or carved stone guardians.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to minimizing negative influences, the actual cardinal orientation of the house was equally as important as its construction. Vietnamese houses generally face south, as explained by another proverb: “to marry a good-natured wife, build one’s house facing south” [lấy vợ hiền hòa, làm nhà hướng nam]. Gourou argued that this seemingly superstitious practice had a more practical explanation: “the winds from the north are violent and cold, while pleasant summer breezes come from the south and southeast.” In addition, in Chinese cosmology, the North is the cardinal point representing femininity, or Yin, and the south the masculine Yang. Houses facing south are oriented towards the fertilizing principle, which is thought to bring prosperity. According to Gourou, houses facing southeast are “not bad;” however, homes facing west or Northeast are “in principle, disastrous.”<sup>123</sup> As Gourou described in his study of Tonkinese peasantry, folk beliefs and rituals play an important role in the orientation, construction, and layout of a new home. Because religion was so entwined with the physical construction of the built environment, it is no wonder that the League also waged war on superstition.

In his speech at the Hanoi Opera House in August 1936, architect Hoàng Như Tiếp outlined the guidelines of “*Ánh Sáng*” architecture.<sup>124</sup> He asserted that architecture should not

---

<sup>121</sup> Gourou, 310.

<sup>122</sup> Gourou, 313.

<sup>123</sup> Gourou, 314.

<sup>124</sup> The collaboration between the Self-Reliant Literary Group, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp did not begin with the League of Light—the architects had honed their designs and ideas in the Group’s papers for years. Nguyễn Cao Luyện made his debut in *Phong Hóa* in July of 1934. The paper announced its collaboration with

support only the wealthy, but also the poor. He refuted the idea that architecture was merely a superficial practice used for ornamental and stylistic purposes, and argued instead that it represented “the scientific placement of living space, the application of sanitary conditions, and the pursuit of aesthetics.” Tiệp cited a number of countries that have already implemented successful housing reforms (such as Sweden, Britain, Germany, the US and France) and described how these initiatives were supported by their governments and charitable groups. Even other European colonies had launched housing reform programs; the Dutch Indies had organizations in Bandung, Batavia, and Suryabaya. The League of Light was to follow these countries’ lead and design sanitary housing that would suit the Vietnamese.

What characteristics, then, must a League of Light house have? What should it look like? Tiệp answered: “To be an *Ánh Sáng* House, the first materials are light, sky, trees, cool breezes, and clean air.” As he pointed out, such resources are free and they should be put to maximum use. However, Tiệp warned that the overuse of these natural resources could also lead to disease; it was most important to regulate and control them. In addition to being sanitary, League of Light houses must also be economic; Tiệp assured his audience that “*Ánh Sáng* houses will never be more expensive than current houses.” To keep costs down, houses will use only readily available materials such as bamboo, and focus on scientific organization of living spaces. The League later intended to build “League of Light developments,” which would serve as models of community sanitation and planning. These developments would include communal laundry areas, water pipes and wells, as well as other community services such as a reading room, a first aid clinic, and a playground. As Tiệp’s speech makes clear, the League of Light house was not defined by a particular design or feature, but by a set of guidelines: 1) the control and utilization of natural climate to maximize sanitary living conditions; 2) the utilization of widely-available materials to keep costs at a minimum; and 3) faith in the scientific placement of living space.<sup>125</sup> Such guidelines suggest that the League’s architects were aware of the disciplinary and regulatory implications of their project.

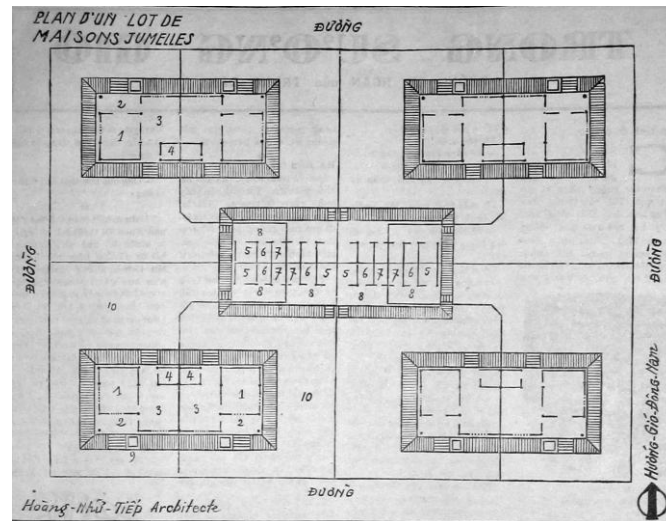
How did these guidelines translate into practice? An examination of the League of Light’s only settlement will illuminate how Luyện and Tiệp applied their theories. In July 1938, the League began construction of a housing development in Phúc Xá, a commune right outside of Hanoi. The League named the settlement Le Cité Madame Jules Brévié, after the League’s benefactress and wife of the Popular Front Governor General. Phúc Xá, located on the banks of the Red River, was particularly susceptible to annual flooding, and posed a unique challenge for Luyện and Tiệp. The League chose the site for four reasons: 1) A number of its residents were left homeless after a recent fire. 2) the land already has schools, medical clinics, and wide roads, 3) the site’s proximity to Hanoi allowed faster and easier training of peasants in new ways of living, and 4) Phúc Xá’s land was available immediately (the League’s intended second project in Voi Phục was still awaiting official permission). In response to the problem of flooding, the League’s solution was to anticipate the seasonal rise in water: “make the foundation one meter high, and build a wall about ½ meter tall on top of it, which will protect against floods about 1.5 meters high. The architects estimate that 1.5 meters will be enough to protect against most seasonal floods.”

---

the architect, who the paper described as sharing similar “social values” [chí hướng xã hội]. *Phong Hóa* would go on to publish five designs by Luyện (later joined by Tiệp) between October 1934 and January 1936. These early housing designs can be seen as the first formulations of the “*Ánh Sáng*” style house.

<sup>125</sup> Hoàng Như Tiệp “Kiên trúc *Ánh Sáng*,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 77, 19 Sep 1937, p. 762

At the time of planning, the development at Phúc Xá was divided into 4 lots, each measuring about 30 x 40 meters squared, and demarcated by roads all around. One lot was divided into 6 smaller single-family units; 3 lots contained 4 larger houses for 2 families each. Estimated at about 5-7 people per family, the entire development would have housed around 30 families, or 150- 210 people in total.<sup>126</sup> As the League reported in 1941, the site itself actually comprised 34 houses: 33 were occupied by families and one was used as an assembly house and medical clinic.<sup>127</sup> The picture below [Figure 7] depicts one of the larger lots for 8 families.



**Figure 7. Blueprints for the League's development in Phúc Xá, in *Ngày Nay* no. 107, 24 April 1938, p. 18-19.**

Each family had two living spaces (marked 1 and 3). A storage space for provisions (marked 4) was placed far back in the house. Each entrance faced southeast to best receive cool breezes and included a small veranda or patio that sheltered the interior from the sun. Shrubs or trees grown in the built-in planter by the side of the entrance would further shade the house and provide decorative greenery. Each house had its own kitchen, bathroom and outhouse, all kept separate from the main living spaces and grouped together for economy, sanitation, and fire safety. The floor space in front of the kitchens were paved or tiled, which provided fire protection and allowed kitchen activities to be spread out. For the sake of sanitation, the outhouse was placed downwind, with the bathroom between it and the kitchen.<sup>128</sup>

An examination of the the Phúc Xá development reveals how the architects applied the League of Light building guidelines. The League's belief in the scientific organization of living space can be seen in the placement of the outhouse and patio, where natural climate was used to create sanitary living conditions. The houses were built from widely-available materials: bamboo, thatch, and a little wood for the doorframes. Only the kitchen was built of brick to provide greater fire protection. This design cost little to build; the League spent 3837.35 piastres to build the entire development, or 112.86 piastres per house. Keeping in line with its belief to

<sup>126</sup> Hoàng Như Tiếp, "Trại Ánh Sáng Phúc Xá."

<sup>127</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, p. 88-90.

<sup>128</sup> Hoàng Như Tiếp, "Trại Ánh Sáng Phúc Xá."

educate the peasantry, the League intended Le Cité Madame Jules Brévié to not only be a housing development, but an entire master-planned rural community. Phúc Xá boasted a clinic where a League doctor provided medical care free of charge. An appointed director managed the day-to-day operations and maintenance of the development. One of the houses was used as a community meeting house, and as of 1941, the construction of a children's school was currently underway.<sup>129</sup>

It seemed that many Vietnamese sought to own an *Ánh Sáng* house, as the League had to organize a lottery to fairly distribute them amongst the petitioners. Tenants paid anywhere between 0.60 to 2 piastres a month, depending on the size of the lodging.<sup>130</sup> Although designed to be random and fair, the lottery system produced inequities of its own. On August 22, 1938, Hanoi's mayor Henri Virgitti received a petition requesting his help from seven of the original tenants of Phúc Xá. They had lost their houses in a fire, and although the City of Hanoi had intended to grant to each tenant a disaster relief grant of around 50 piastres, the money instead went to the League of Light to replace the burned houses.<sup>131</sup> When the Phúc Xá development was finished, the original tenants expected to receive first priority for the new lodgings. Instead, they learned that because of the high demand, they would have to participate in the lottery system. Asking the mayor to intervene on their behalf, the tenants outlined their reasons:

- 1) We are former tenants of the municipality;
- 2) Our houses were set on fire with our furniture, so we have suffered great losses;
- 3) We would have been recipients of grants from the city;
- 4) We accept the price proposed by the League.<sup>132</sup>

For the petitioners, who would almost certainly have been poor migrant workers with minimal education, producing such a petition would have been a difficult undertaking. The handwritten letter suggests that the tenants had to hire someone knowledgeable in French to help voice their grievances. One of the petitioners signed the letter with a thumbprint. Unfortunately, it is unclear what became of the tenants' request. The appeal for help was indeed conveyed to the League, but no evidence exists as to how the League handled the situation.

During its four year existence, the League of Light managed to build one housing development in Phúc Xá, on the banks of the Red River. In conjunction with its League branches in Sơn Tây and Hải Phòng, the League built a number of model homes in Bát Bạt and Kiến An respectively, as well as a model village in Bắc Giang.<sup>133</sup> Plans were underway for a second development in Voi Phục, where the League had acquired 13 acres of land and drew up a budget for 20,000 piastres.<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, it is unclear whether this development was ever built. Scholars such as Paul Rabinow and Gwendolyn Wright have described French urban planning as a top-down phenomenon in which the colonies served as "laboratory of experimentation for new arts of government capable of bringing a modern and healthy society

<sup>129</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, p. 88-90.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> This could very well be a mistake on the part of the petitioners. Archival sources do not mention money of any kind given to the League by the colonial government.

<sup>132</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, D62.2858, p. 57-58.

<sup>133</sup> "Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng," *Ngày Nay* no. 100, 6 Mar 1938, p. 14; *Ngày Nay*, no. 99, 27 Feb 1938, p. 14, 19.

<sup>134</sup> "Đoàn Ánh Sáng, 1939-1940." *Nước Nam*, no. 8, 21 Jan 1939, p. 3.



into being.” Such a description suggests that French technocratic “scientists” were conducting social and governmental experiments on mostly passive and compliant colonized populations. However, as the League of Light’s own architectural guidelines illustrate, the Vietnamese were conducting experiments of their own, in the service of their own nation.

### Ánh Sáng Fair: Beginning of the End

In January 1939, the League excitedly announced that it would host a fair on March 1-5, touting it as an “unprecedented event that will rouse and excite Hanoi.” To inaugurate the fair, the Thế Lữ theater troupe performed a stage adaptation of Nhất Linh’s *Đoạn Tuyệt* on the nights of March 1-2. The fair itself began on Friday, March 3 at the Parc Autos and included various carnival games, food and activities. In a separate event for members of Hanoi’s high society, the League hosted a garden party and ball at the mansion of the Resident Superieur on the following evening. At Paul Bert Park, a float parade organized by Vũ Đình Hoè capped off the festivities on the last day.<sup>135</sup>

The League of Light glowingly reported the fair’s success. True to the League’s promise, the *Ánh Sáng* Fair was a visually striking spectacle. Well-known Hanoi artist Tô Ngọc Vân oversaw the fair’s entire visual design; *Ngày Nay* reported that he spent the entire Friday before the fair fretting that the drizzling rain was going to ruin his elaborate decorations (which it did not). During the daytime, Hoàn Kiếm Lake hosted a floating spectacle of flower boats, gondolas, and decorated rafts. By night, the lake served as a backdrop for a dance show on Turtle Tower island and moonlit boat rides. The League promised that “the blue jade nugget of Hanoi will shimmer with a hundred colors. Scenes of Venice and the Perfume River will appear. All our dreams and wishes when promenading the Hoàn Kiếm Lake will now become reality.”<sup>136</sup> Fair goers participated in ball tosses, shooting games, horse racing, and prize raffles. The food stalls were particularly popular, with cakes and snacks made by female League members, including the wives of Hoàng Đạo and Dr. Nguyễn Đình Hoàng. The loudspeaker advertised pork patties and rolls as being “so big you’ll still be full eight days later.” The entire time, League members “enthusiastically worked, quickly pinning flowers or *Ánh Sáng* insignia, selling raffle tickets, or inviting customers into the various stalls.” By the League’s own account, the *Ánh Sáng* fair was a resounding success.<sup>137</sup>

At the AS Fair, the League announced its largest fundraising campaign to date, a raffle event called the Tombola *Ánh Sáng*. Tickets cost 0.30 piastres and entitled the holder a chance of winning the grand prize—a brick house worth 3,000 piastres within the Hanoi city limits. According to the League, the house boasted 3 bedrooms, front and back yards, a kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. Designed by Luyện and Tiếp, the house had yet to be built, as the League was still negotiating with the Mayor Virgitti for the land. The League enticed ticket buyers with fantasies of home ownership: “Everyone’s dream is to be the owner of a house in Hanoi. A house that belongs only to you. The sooner you move in, the sooner you can raise your children there in peace, with no one bothering you.”<sup>138</sup> The League estimated that the 30,000 printed

<sup>135</sup> Advertisement for *Ánh Sáng* Fair, *Ngày Nay* 150, 25 Feb 1939, p. 18; *Ngày Nay*, no. 147, 28 Jan 1939, p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> Advertisement for *Ánh Sáng* Fair, *Ngày Nay*, no. 147.

<sup>137</sup> Tô Tử, “Chợ Phiên *Ánh Sáng*,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 152, 11 Mar 1939, p. 7-8, 18.

<sup>138</sup> Flyer for Tombola *Ánh Sáng*, Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Mairie de Hanoi, D62.2858, p. 75.

tickets would net about 9,000 piastres. The house itself would cost 3,000 to build, the land and materials 1,000, leaving a profit of 5,000 piastres. With the remainder, the League planned to build 50 *Ánh Sáng* houses for 50 poor families. Hopeful patrons were directed to purchase tickets at the *Ánh Sáng* headquarters on 28 Rue Richaud (now Phan Đình Phùng) or at various pharmacies around the city.<sup>139</sup>

Unfortunately, not all members of Hanoi's society were enchanted with the fair or the raffle. Immediately after the fair, what began as a series of snide comments from a rival journal snowballed into a barrage of criticism that ultimately damaged the League's reputation. The writers at *Vịt Đực* [the Male Duck], a newspaper famous for its vitriolic attacks on its rivals and high-profile members of Hanoi society, sneeringly commented on the fair in its March issues: "On the floats sat beauty queens and dapper gentlemen. How "young and happy" [*vui vẻ trẻ trung*] they look!"<sup>140</sup> The paper directly accused the fair of promoting immoral behavior when it wrote that "they plan to play with each other in the Light." By allowing young men and women to frolic together in public, *Vịt Đực* continued, the League of Light ensured the increase of illegitimate children.<sup>141</sup> The paper predicted that the following year would bring a rash of "children without fathers" around Hanoi. Not only did the League of Light encourage the moral downfall of young women, but it also led married women astray. *Vịt Đực* described an incident in which a wife from Bac Giang ran off to go to the fair. Her husband, a schoolteacher named Truong Dinh Thi, arrived at home to find his "rice stale, soup cold, children crying" and decided to take his errant wife to court in a public divorce. Insisting that his wife abandoned her home and ran off with "four or five Hanoi dandies," Schoolteacher Thi ignored the court's attempts at reconciliation and continued to pursue the divorce.<sup>142</sup>

While *Vịt Đực*'s accusation that the League of Light promoted licentious behavior may have seemed a bit farfetched, its second attack was potentially more damaging—that the League was more of a business than a charity. *Vịt Đực* accused the League of venal motives and of taking advantage of gambling addicts through the Tombola *Ánh Sáng*. The paper suggested that the League's purpose was to build houses for rental, which made it "not much different than a land developer."<sup>143</sup> *Vịt Đực* blamed the League for unabashedly using shame tactics: "The League uses them to avoid the arrows of public opinion. They use the name of charity to sell raffle tickets at an expensive price."<sup>144</sup> The paper complained that no one dared to criticize the League of Light because no one wanted to look unsympathetic to the poor, and that the League's charity status was only an excuse to turn a profit. *Vịt Đực* warned the League to stop using the guise of charity to swindle people, and advised it to "become like the Light," because "we haven't seen any light, only darkness."<sup>145</sup>

The League remained silent in the wake of *Vịt Đực*'s accusations, while the charge that the League had misspent its money began to gain traction. *Vịt Đực* took malicious glee in describing the League's alleged dealings with a shady character named Hà Sĩ Cát, who it described as managing the Tombola *Ánh Sáng*. The paper described Hà Sĩ Cát as knowing "how

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> "Hay là cuộc thi xe hoa Ánh Sáng," *Vịt Đực*, no. 34, 7 Mar 1939, p 2; "Vịt Đực quảng cáo hộ," *Vịt Đực*, no. 34, 7 Mar 1939, p. 3.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> "Một vụ ly dị," *Vịt Đực*, no. 35, 15 Mar 1939, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> "Đừng lợi dụng việc nghĩa nữa," *Vịt Đực*, no. 35, 15 Mar 1939, p. 1-2.

<sup>144</sup> "Sau cuộc chợ phiên Ánh Sáng" *Vịt Đực*, no. 35, 15 Mar 1939, p. 1-2.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



to freely spend everyone else's money as well as his own."<sup>146</sup> *Vật Đục* recalled how the previous year Hà Sĩ Cát had held a raffle to support children's education and flood victims, with a brand-new automobile as the grand prize. A few months later, *Đông Pháp* reported the scandalous news that 2,000 piastres of the raffle money had gone missing. Hà Sĩ Cát was brought to court, and while awaiting the court's judgment, the scandal had died down.<sup>147</sup> The paper also cited another raffle organized by Hà Sĩ Cát for engineer Nguyễn Duy Thanh called the ADEPS Raffle, in which the grand prize (also an automobile) was not awarded. Even worse, Hà Sĩ Cát's relatives, Lê Cường at *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Năm* and Lê Ngọc Thiệu of *Quốc Gia*, had organized raffles for their respective newspapers without first obtaining government permission. Thiệu was brought to court on charges, while Lê Cường avoided indictment because of his wealth as owner of the Hồng Khuê pharmacy. *Vật Đục* quipped that because of their ties to Hà Sĩ Cát, "the raffle 'epidemic' had infected these two men."<sup>148</sup> Charging guilt by association, *Vật Đục* implied that the widely-advertised *Tombola Ánh Sáng* was a fraud. Two weeks later the paper made this charge explicit by announcing that the grand prize brick house did not exist.<sup>149</sup>

Emboldened by the League's lack of response, the paper continued its barrage of accusations. It referred to two cases in which the League squandered its money. First, *Vật Đục* attacked Thê Lữ for receiving 350 piastres for two performances at the *Ánh Sáng* Fair, suggesting nepotism amongst the members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.<sup>150</sup> Second, the paper repeated a rumor that while on official business in Haiphong, a number of members went on vacation to Đồ Sơn, then claimed the detour as a League expense.<sup>151</sup> According to various accounts, these members misappropriated about 100 piastres. *Vật Đục* alleged that because of such rampant financial misspending, the League was suffering an internal crisis. It cited the departure of a number of high-profile members, including Trịnh Thục Oanh and Phùng Tất Đắc, as evidence of this uproar.<sup>152</sup> Tôn Thất Bình, one of the presidents of the League, supposedly called an emergency meeting to discuss the financial scandal.<sup>153</sup> The paper gleefully saw the defections as "an event worth celebrating since it shows that there are people of conscience amongst us."<sup>154</sup>

Still not directly addressing *Vật Đục*, the League of Light published a full itemization of the *Ánh Sáng* Fair's expenses and revenues in *Ngày Nay* and *La Patrie Annamite*. The League explained that the volume of bills and bookkeeping had delayed the financial report for the League of Light Fair. The League gave a detailed listing of its expenses and revenues, broken down into events. For the entire fair, the League took in 6958.31 and spent 5189.54, making a profit of 1768.77 piastres. The League explained that it was expensive to organize a large and visually spectacular fair and that most charity fairs barely made enough to cover costs. Profits tended to come from gambling or collections, and as the League of Light Fair had neither of

<sup>146</sup> "Hay là cuộc thi xe hoa Ánh Sáng."

<sup>147</sup> In what could be seen as an attempt to deliberately mislead, *Vật Đục* divulged the fact that Hà Sĩ Cát was acquitted not in the main body of the article, but in a footnote.

<sup>148</sup> "Hai tuần lễ qua rồi, con tức!" *Vật Đục*, no. 36, 22 Mar 1939, p. 4.

<sup>149</sup> "Tombola! Tromper ta!" *Vật Đục*, no. 39, 12 Apr 1939, p. 2

<sup>150</sup> "Có hay không? Việc Ông Con Khi định đòi quyền xếp cảnh 350 đồng" *Vật Đục*, no. 35, 15 Mar 1939, p. 1.

<sup>151</sup> "Ánh Sáng! Đề mà soi vào óc tôi," *Vật Đục*, no. 45, 24 May 1939, p. 1-2; "Ánh Sáng lục đục" *Vật Đục*, no. 45, 24 May 1939, p. 4. *Vật Đục*, no. 45, 24 May 1939, p. 1, 4 and *Nước Nam*, no. 25, 27 May 1939, p. 2

<sup>152</sup> "Tiếp theo... và chưa hết," *Vật Đục*, no. 37, 26 Mar 1939, p. 3.

<sup>153</sup> "Hội Ánh Sáng lục đục" *Vật Đục*, no. 46, 31 May 1939, p. 4.

<sup>154</sup> "Ánh Sáng! Đề mà soi vào óc tôi," "Ánh Sáng lục đục."

these, the sum of 1768.77 should be seen as a sizeable profit. The League concluded its report with a statement addressing the allegations: “We want to be clear: all these criticisms are ‘canards,’ completely made up and without any proof...”<sup>155</sup> The League did not directly address any specific points, but instead explained in detail the how money was handled, counted, and recorded at the fair. The League acknowledged that organizing of such a large event would naturally result in some minor mistakes, but it asserted that “we are extremely clear and economical in regards to our finances.” The League maintained that the Inspection committee was specifically designed to prevent embezzling or misspending. “Any member near or far,” the League announced, “can ask the administrative council to examine the ledgers. If you see or notice any discrepancy, please alert the League authorities.” Obliquely addressing *Vit Đực*, the League explained that “We do not want to answer a newspaper that isn’t open-minded to us, because we believe that one cannot reason with dishonest people... We will never be discouraged or frustrated by accusations made by those bent on publicly or secretly sabotaging our project.”<sup>156</sup>

Unfortunately for the League, their defense only provoked *Vit Đực* to launch a fresh wave of criticism. Especially given the viciousness of its previous attacks, *Vit Đực* disingenuously declared that its criticisms were meant to be constructive:

In criticizing the League we do not have any intention of sabotaging a project that we believe is beneficial... Quite the opposite, we criticize *Ánh Sáng* because we do not want it to die a filthy and dishonorable death at the hands of talented conmen who use its reputation to do business with one another.<sup>157</sup>

The paper reiterated its claim that because of *Thế Lữ*’s exorbitant fee, the League had to use its profits from the ball to break even. It also repeated the rumor that some of the League members had absconded with money collected from the fair. Evidence from *Ngày Nay* actually supports this particular claim, as the paper had to publicly ask certain members by name to return *Tombola Ánh Sáng* tickets and money.<sup>158</sup>

Other newspapers soon sided with *Vit Đực*. After two months of slinging accusations and receiving hardly any response, the paper was finally joined by *Nước Nam*. This paper pointedly asked: “Did *Thế Lữ* put on a play for charity or profit? Why doesn’t the League of Light respond to these accusations?”<sup>159</sup> The two journals’ chorus of criticisms became louder and louder until finally, one of the longest running and most respected francophone dailies took notice. In its June 5 issue, the government-sponsored *L’Avenir du Tonkin* quoted a number of the allegations, and asked the League to address them.

Only then did the League issue a detailed response. In the June 24, 1939 issue of *Ngày Nay*, the League addressed an open letter to the editor of *L’Avenir*. The letter explained that “we have always considered answering the other newspapers as fruitless waste of time” because *Vit Đực* and *Nước Nam* harbored “deceitful intentions.” *Ngày Nay* believed that readers knew the reputation of these journals and can easily see through their intentions, “so we do not need to respond, because honest people are always on our side.” However, the League did admit that it

<sup>155</sup> “Kết quả chợ phiên Ánh Sáng,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 160, 29 Apr 1939, p. 14, 22.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> “Phải lôi AS ra khỏi tối tăm,” *Vit Đực*, no. 43, 10 May 1939, p. 1, 3.

<sup>158</sup> Announcement in *Ngày Nay*, no. 202, 9 Mar 1940, p. 14

<sup>159</sup> Bất Tử “Vấn Hội Ánh Sáng” *Nước Nam*, no. 25, 27 May 1939, p. 2

might have made a mistake in keeping quiet because now even *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, “a serious newspaper revered at the highest levels in the North, has taken notice.”<sup>160</sup> For this reason, the League was “forced to respond, first to put your journalists and readers at ease, and second to deal once and for all with those that shamelessly accuse us, who wage pen wars according to their own separate rules, rules that do not speak well for their reputation.” The deference showed to a government mouthpiece such as *L'Avenir* suggests that the League was trying to stay in favor with the colonial officials and stem the damage made by the accusations.

The League responded to each of *Vit Đực*'s accusations. First, the League acknowledged that the *Thế Lữ* Troupe had indeed received 350 piastres for 2 nights of performances at the Hanoi Opera House. The League retorted that the actors had to be paid: “What is so wrong or illegal about that?”<sup>161</sup> Because *Thế Lữ* was a member, he gave the League a discounted rate of 175 per night, while other acts such as the *Phùng Há* Group charged far more. The League argued that *Thế Lữ*'s fee was reasonable, as the troupe employed 12 actors, 7 singers, as well as other supporting cast and crew. For both nights, the League made 1306.75 piastres, a good return on their investment. To *Vit Đực*'s accusation that League members spent almost 100 piastres in League money on a trip to *Đồ Sơn*, the League unequivocally denied the charge. It argued that such a blatant fabrication was evidence of *Vit Đực*'s complete “lack of sincerity.”<sup>162</sup> The League described the events as follows:

On 3 Mar 1938, four members of the administrative council went to *Kiến An* and stopped in *Haiphong* along the way, at the invitation of the French Resident A. Berjoan. They intended to discuss with him building two *Ánh Sáng* model houses in an area devastated by fire. From *Kiến An*, the group then went to *Thái Bình* to set up a League branch there. They then went to oversee the activities of *Nam Định* branch. The Group was away for 2 days and 1 night. The total costs for car rental, gas, ferry and bridges, and lodgings totaled 37 piastres. All expenses were accounted for. No *Đồ Sơn* trip was made, and the total costs did not nearly approach the 100 piastres cited by *Vit Đực*.

The League then addressed *Vit Đực*'s accusations about the Tombola *Ánh Sáng*. Contrary to the paper's claims that the Grand Prize never existed, the League countered that not only was the brick house currently being built, it also had an address—154A Rue Duvillier in Hanoi. The League stated that it had purchased the land for the sum of 1640 piastres, and invited any skeptics to visit the building site to see for themselves. The League also denied any involvement of *Hà Sĩ Cát* in the management of the Tombola *Ánh Sáng*:

For the purpose of making people distrust the *Ánh Sáng* Raffle, *Vit Đực* proclaimed with all seriousness that the raffle was organized by *Hà Sĩ Cát*, who was sued for his *Sĩ Cát* raffle. The truth is Mr. *Hà Sĩ Cát* is not in the organizing committee of the raffle and was never in the administrative council of the League, and has not even been a member for two years now.<sup>163</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Đoàn *Ánh Sáng* cùng những lời vu cáo,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 167, 24 Jun 1939, p. 14

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, the League confronted the last and most serious criticism lodged against them—that the League had mismanaged and squandered its funds. The League reminded readers that the administrative mechanism for financial transparency was built into their statutes, which called for the election of a Financial Inspection Committee chosen by the General Assembly and independent from the administrative council. It invited all curious parties to inspect the ledgers.

The controversy surrounding the League of Light Fair begs a number of questions regarding the motives of *Vật Đực* and *Nước Nam*: What accounted for the particular vitriol and schadenfreude of these two journals towards the League of Light? Why did they stand apart from the rest of Hanoi journals, who, despite past squabbles with the Self-Reliant Literary Group, embraced the League’s reform project? When placed within the context of the Tonkin newspaper industry and insular nature of Hanoi intellectual life, the most vicious attacks made by *Vật Đực* and *Nước Nam* had little to do with the League. Instead, they could be read as reflections of the papers’ respective financial situations or the result of petty intellectual rivalries. For example, criticism from *Nước Nam* and *Vật Đực* seemed to focus specifically on Thế Lữ rather than the League of Light. Even before its attacks on the League, the writers at *Vật Đực* were locked in an ongoing feud with Thế Lữ, often denigrating the poet and actor as “Ape Man [*Ông con khỉ*].” These exchanges began long before the *Ánh Sáng* Fair in October 1938, when *Vật Đực* commented on Thế Lữ’s persistent writer’s block: “he’s been so stagnant that he hasn’t been able to produce a single poem. Plugged up like a pot...of fermented fish.”<sup>164</sup> Even before the League of Light Fair, the paper had already attacked Thế Lữ once for charging a fee for a different charity performance. Thế Lữ’s acting troupe had staged Vi Huyền Đắc’s play *Ông Ký Cọp* for a League benefit in Haiphong, and received 97.46 of the 365.02 piaster profit.<sup>165</sup> After the League Fair, *Vật Đực*’s initial criticism was aimed at Thế Lữ for demanding 350 piastres, not at *Ánh Sáng* for paying it. Only after the League’s response did *Vật Đực* turn its focus to nepotism, charging the League with organizing events to line its friends’ pockets. This suggests that *Vật Đực*’s hatred for Thế Lữ eventually affected its opinion of the League of Light.

The case of *Nước Nam* reveals a similar relationship—Thế Lữ’s blunt style had touched a nerve with the paper’s editor, Lương Ngọc Hiến. A few months before the fair in December 1938, the editor had run for a position on the League’s administrative council and lost. Thế Lữ (writing as Lê Ta) suggested that Lương Ngọc Hiến was still bitter about his defeat: “Do you know why he’s so angry? Because he wasn’t allowed to serve on the administrative council of the League of Light.”<sup>166</sup> Calling him “confused, cumbersome, and childishly weak,” Thế Lữ accused Hien of using his membership in the League to boost his reputation: “He joined the League because he wanted status, and was surprised to see that the League was actually working to help others rather than themselves.” When Lương Ngọc Hiến lost his bid, his “resentment turned to anger. He became the enemy of the League of Light and joined those in the darkness.”<sup>167</sup> After such commentary, it is no wonder that *Nước Nam* took particular glee in panning Thế Lữ’s stage production of *Đoạn Tuyệt*. Borrowing Thế Lữ’s own words, *Nước Nam* slammed the troupe’s staging as “confused, cumbersome, and childishly weak.”<sup>168</sup> In its response to the allegations, the League hinted that *Nước Nam* held a personal grudge when it wrote that “it is not our fault that a certain few, not necessarily without talent, were not elected

<sup>164</sup> Trần Hoàn, “Hanoi trông lo,” *Vật Đực*, no. 19, 26 Oct 1938, p. 4.

<sup>165</sup> “Cách làm việc nghĩa của bọn Ông Thế Lữ,” *Vật Đực* no. 21, 16 Nov 1938, p. 4.

<sup>166</sup> Lê Ta, “Tin văn...văn” *Ngày Nay* no. 161, 13 May 1939, p. 7.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Bất Tử “Văn Hội Ánh Sáng.”

to the administrative council as they desired.”<sup>169</sup> *Nước Nam* responded by admitting that its editor had indeed not been reelected, but that the election took place five months before the paper began criticizing the League.<sup>170</sup> Curiously, even while denouncing the League’s alleged profligate spending, *Nước Nam* continued to print its announcements. This suggests that *Nước Nam*’s resentment was indeed personal and did not necessarily extend to business arrangements with the League.

In the case of *Vật Đực*, sources suggest that the paper’s attacks were made out of desperation, as the paper was in its death throes. As *Vật Đực* writer Vũ Bằng described in his memoirs *40 Years of Lying*, the paper struggled almost from the very beginning. Although intended to be an organ for highbrow ironic humor, *Vật Đực* quickly became famous for its vicious and underhanded attacks and sensationalist stories. Vũ Bằng acknowledged that “Yes, we wrote cruel and deceitful things in the newspaper that hurt people. In our hearts we had always planned to live with grace and virtue because the Creator was watching, but it was his fault that our lives were unsuccessful, full of ups and downs and hardships.”<sup>171</sup> According Vũ Bằng’s rather self-serving account, Vietnamese readers could not get enough of the paper. But reader demand proved more a curse than a blessing—printing more copies meant higher overhead, of which the editors had very little. With nothing more to lose, the writers at *Vật Đực* went on a reckless rampage, attacking numerous targets including Emperor Bao Dai. It was during this period that the League of Light suffered the paper’s indiscriminate attacks. A little over a month after the accusations against the League, *Vật Đực* closed down after 53 issues under the weight of libel lawsuits and looming bankruptcy.<sup>172</sup> The League’s conflict with *Vật Đực* and *Nước Nam* suggests that pen wars were often waged to sell newspapers. Oftentimes, these bitter debates had little to do with intellectual or ideological differences, reflecting instead business considerations and petty personal rivalries.

Unfounded or not, *Vật Đực* and *Nước Nam*’s accusations and the uproar they caused took their toll on the League of Light. Shortly after the controversy died down, the League fell into rapid decline, and its numerous supporters began falling away. Although the League had often discussed starting its own journal, it failed to materialize for “lack of money.”<sup>173</sup> In light of the difficulty of publishing a journal even as popular as *Ngày Nay* and the hardships faced by *Vật Đực*, a League of Light journal would almost surely not be economically viable. The League’s last supporters were *Ngày Nay* and *La Patrie Annamite*, who continued publishing its announcements, but not much more than that. By June 1940, even *Ngày Nay* stopped publicizing the League.<sup>174</sup>

There were signs that the League was waning even before the *Ánh Sáng* Fair controversy. On February 5, 1939, the League held another Day of Light recruitment drive, which pulled in 598.80 piastres, less than half the 1221.09 of the first.<sup>175</sup> After *Vật Đực* and *Nước Nam*’s attacks, the League seemed to not be able to recover from the bad publicity. The widely promoted *Tombola Ánh Sáng* had to postpone the date of its drawing, the first time due to lack of ticket sales, and the second without explanation. The raffle was finally held on March 10, 1940, a year

<sup>169</sup> “Đoàn Ánh Sáng cùng những lời vu cáo.”

<sup>170</sup> Thượng Đạt, “Lần chót cùng nói tới Đoàn Ánh Sáng” *Nước Nam*, no. 30, 1 Jul 1939, p. 1, 3.

<sup>171</sup> Vũ, Bằng. *Bốn mươi năm nói láo*. (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993), 133.

<sup>172</sup> Vũ Bằng, 137-138.

<sup>173</sup> “Đoàn Ánh Sáng và báo L’Avenir du Tonkin,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 173, 5 Aug 1939, p. 20.

<sup>174</sup> The last *Ánh Sáng* item in *Ngày Nay* appeared on June 8, 1940.

<sup>175</sup> “Kết quả ngày Ánh Sáng,” *Ngày Nay*, no. 154, 25 Mar 1939, p. 21

after its announcement, netting the League 4596.54 after expenses. The brick house at 154 Duvillier Street was not given away as a prize, but was rented at the rate of 20 piastres a month.<sup>176</sup> Despite all the fanfare, the *Tombola Ánh Sáng* ended up being a much hyped housing lottery.

The last trace of the League of Light's existence was a communiqué to the Resident Supérieur dated January 26, 1941. In it, the League outlined its past achievements and activities since its founding. Among its accomplishments, the League listed the amounts of money given in natural disaster aid, the *Ánh Sáng* Fair, and its Phúc Xá development. Ironically, the report also listed the League's future plans: it still harbored hopes to build the second development in Voi Phục, which it intended on executing "as soon as the financial situation will allow."<sup>177</sup> The very last statement in the report hinted at the League's descent into insignificance: "Currently, the League continues to provide free blueprints of clean housing to individuals and villages who request them."<sup>178</sup>

### Epilogue and Conclusion

Returning to Alexander Woodside's influential article, this chapter has argued that the history of the League of Light did not necessarily exhibit the fragmentation and lack of social cohesion he described. In fact, the factors that supposedly led to the failure of Vietnamese nonpolitical organizations neither held true nor even existed in the League's case. The colonial government harbored no suspicion of the League of Light. On the contrary, French officials were all too keen on supporting the League's project because it addressed their political concerns about rural uprisings and labor unrest. Neither did the League suffer from a chronic lack of specialization; it attracted a large number of Vietnamese working in a wide range of occupations. Rather, its organizational structure allowed these members to contribute in committees best suited to their expertise. The League also did away with formal hierarchical forms of address and observed a more egalitarian group culture. Given these conscious efforts, it would be hard to make a case for the enduring importance of superior-subordinate relationships. In the end, the League of Light's failure had little to do with the organizational defects described by Woodside.

Instead, the demise of the League of Light in 1939 coincided with rapid political developments on two fronts. In Asia, the ongoing second Sino-Japanese war and the beginning of World War II threatened to engulf Tonkin. As the entry point of Western aid and arms to the Chinese, northern Vietnam's stance became increasingly precarious as the Japanese sought to stem the flow of supplies in the area. In Europe, the failure of appeasement, German occupation of Czechoslovakia, and signing of various protection treaties brought the entire continent to the brink of war. The Vietnamese newspapers at the time, *Ngày Nay* included, commented on the unfolding events in Europe with fascination. The paper devoted two large sections in its weekly news column dedicated to the events in Asia and Europe, front covers satirizing Hitler and Mussolini, as well as numerous articles of current events commentary written by Khai Hung. By May of 1939, even architects Luyên and Tiép seemed to neglect the League of Light, penning articles for *Ngày Nay* about bombs and how to build an underground bunker. They wrote, "The

---

<sup>176</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Center 1, Résident Supérieure du Tonkin, D62.79250, p. 88-90.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

current world situation right now is very tense. We should not be afraid of scaring others and not discuss the ways to protect ourselves in case of devastating attacks. We mention it so that people can prepare for it now, rather than when it is too late.”<sup>179</sup> In such a tense political climate, it is no wonder that social reform was relegated to a secondary priority.

Nhất Linh certainly felt that way. The fourth and perhaps most immediate factor that led to the League’s abrupt demise was the departure of its founder and co-president. Although a number of sources disagree about exactly when Nhất Linh left the group, they all agree that he abandoned writing and social reform for political activism. One source, Nhất Thịnh’s biography of Nhất Linh, argued that he left writing for political activity on March 25, 1939. Within the League of Light’s timeline, this departure occurred three weeks after the *Ánh Sáng* Fair and immediately after *Vật Đục* launched its attacks on the League. However, an examination of *Ngày Nay* reveals that Nhat Thinh’s description was not wholly accurate; Nhất Linh had stopped contributing to the paper on a regular basis well before this date.<sup>180</sup> As Nhất Thịnh correctly described, Nhất Linh had left the ongoing serialized novel *Con Đường Sáng* for Hoàng Đạo to finish, only the handover took place in December 1938, almost 4 months before Nhất Thịnh’s date. What is clear is that Nhất Linh gradually relegated his journalistic responsibilities to his Self-Reliant colleagues beginning in 1938.

Other sources claim that Nhất Linh was engaging in clandestine political activity while active in the League of Light. As his sister Nguyen Thi Thế wrote in her memoirs,

After establishing the *Ánh Sáng* development in Phúc Xá on the banks of the river, Tam would often travel to Đồ Sơn, Thanh Hoa, Vinh Yen, Thái Bình. Sometimes he went to the family home at Cam Giang, saying he needed peace to write. No one had suspected that he was founding a secret anti-French political party.<sup>181</sup>

Other sources corroborate Nguyen Thi The’s description. Nhất Linh’s youngest sibling, Nguyen Tường Bách, wrote that Nhất Linh had founded the Đại Việt Dân Chính Party in 1938-1939. Francois Guillemot places the founding of the party in 1938, while Ralph Smith puts the founding date later in 1940-1941. Despite the discrepancies, all these dates corroborate the claim that Nhất Linh was shifting his focus from social reform to political agitation while serving as the League of Light’s president. The waning interest of its visionary founder, along with the financial controversy and tense political climate, would have dealt a blow to the League from which it might not have recovered.

If western scholars were mistaken about the reasons for the League of Light’s failure, Vietnamese scholars mischaracterized the League’s entire social project. Phan Cự Đệ, in his article on the Self-Reliant Literary Group, belittled the League’s project as misguided and naïve. He pointed to Nhất Linh’s 1926 short story “A Dream of Tu Lâm” as the origins of not only of the League of Light, but also of Nhat Linh’s entire social vision. This early piece tells the story of an educated and westernized young man who gives up his urban lifestyle to become a rural schoolteacher and establish a utopian community in the countryside. Phan Cự Đệ dismissed “A

<sup>179</sup> Luyện Tiếp, “Những cách để tránh bom,” *Ngày Nay* no. 163, p. 21.

<sup>180</sup> Previously a frequent and prolific writer of time-sensitive items such as editorials, cartoons and commentaries, Nhất Linh was only contributing serialized novels by 1939. Such works required no deadlines, and therefore could have been written well in advance.

<sup>181</sup> Nguyễn, Thị Thế. *Hồi ký về gia đình Nguyễn Tường: Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam*. (Saigon: Sóng, 1974), .

Dream of *Tu Lâm*”—and by extension, the reforms that bore its spirit—as “obviously a naïve fantasy because there is no way to reform the lives of the peasantry by depending on the individual generosity of a western-educated landowner!” However, to look at “A Dream of *Tu Lâm*” for *Nhật Linh*’s entire social vision is to assume that it never changed or developed over the author’s prolific years of 1927 to 1937. No wonder the story’s ideas seemed naïve and idealistic—*Nhật Linh* wrote the story before his transformative trip to France as well as the intellectually and artistically active years of *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*.<sup>182</sup> As this chapter has illustrated, the League of Light was the product of local discourses in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* that were influenced by early 20<sup>th</sup> century European progressive thought. In light of its the detailed architectural guidelines, complex organizational structure, and fully-developed social manifesto, the League of Light and its social vision went beyond mere idealism—it was a comprehensive and technical social engineering project.

This chapter argued that the League of Light’s founders were not merely interested in improving the living conditions for rural and urban Vietnamese; they wanted to shape a cohesive national moral order. The idea for the League came from the reformist ethos of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe; the organization’s methods drew heavily from social thought at the time, especially in its espousal of environmental determinism. The League’s founder *Nhật Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam* and its architects *Nguyen Van Luyện* and *Hoàng Như Tiếp* all studied in the *Ecole Beaux-Arts de Indochine* under the tutelage of *Ernest Hébrard* and *Victor Tardieu*, where they were influenced by the idea that changing material goods could transform human behavior and conditions. This influence can be seen in many of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s reforms such as fashion and publishing; changing what women wore would help them embrace modern life, while the high quality printing of books would eventually help readers appreciate the contents inside them. The League of Light represented same principle applied to the built environment—by rationally organizing the space in which peasants lived, it was hoped that they will learn modern habits of cleanliness. More importantly, the League represented a grassroots movement founded by these Vietnamese reformers to use western learning to serve their fellow countrymen.

However, it is a mistake to see the League as merely copying European and American reform movements—the League of Light was also the culmination of years of social commentary in *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*. Since the early 1930s, the Self-Reliant Literary Group had discussed rural issues at length in their journals, especially as it pertained to the livelihood of the nation. They believed that the rural peasantry suffered from shortcomings that kept them in a state of perpetual backwardness, in particular entrenched traditions and belief in superstition. In the Group’s view, these failings cause the peasantry to ignore their immediate realities and focus on misguided priorities such as the afterlife and dead ancestors. Because the village elders were corrupt or backward, the Group argued that the only people who can teach the peasantry modern ways are the urban western educated elite. The League of Light constituted an attempt by this urban intelligentsia to educate peasants by applying science and rationality on the space in which they lived. The League’s goal remained a civilizing mission: once they have learned the basic habits of civilized living, they can help make their country economically self-sufficient. For *Nhật Linh*, the goal of the League of Light project was not just to help the impoverished, but to begin shaping a self-reliant workforce.

For the western-educated urban intelligentsia, the League of Light would serve a school of self-governance. The League of Light exhibited an institutional form similar to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, “” *Tự lực văn đoàn: con người và văn chương* (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1990), 30-31.



century European philanthropic societies known as “subscriber democracy,” in which practices of procedural democratic politics were translated to the everyday administration of an organization. Given the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s ardent republicanism and its desire to inculcate the values of citizenship amongst the Vietnamese, the League served as a pluralist democracy and civil society in microcosm. In addition, the League cultivated an egalitarian and inclusive culture amongst its members, encouraging women, students, and workers to join and forgoing traditional hierarchical forms of address.

In terms of architecture, an “*Ánh Sáng* house” was not necessarily a set design; rather it conformed to a number of guidelines: 1) the control and utilization of natural climate to maximize sanitary living conditions; 2) the utilization of widely-available materials to keep costs at a minimum; and 3) faith in the scientific placement of living space. It was an attempt on the part of the League and its architects to discipline and regulate the chaos of unplanned urban and rural life. The results of this social experiment are unclear. During its four year existence, the League of Light managed to build one housing development in Phúc Xá, on the banks of the Red River. A number of other housing developments were in the planning stages, but never came to fruition.

Despite the high membership and promising start, the League of Light could not withstand the damage from three simultaneous events. First, the *Ánh Sáng* Fair and its resulting financial scandal permanently damaged the League’s reputation amongst the public. While evidence exists that some of the accusations were founded, the particularly damaging ones were most likely motivated by petty personal rivalries. Second, the beginning of the Second World War necessitated a shift in focus and resources from civil life to military mobilization; defense of Indochina became a higher priority than social reform. Finally, Nhật Linh seemed to have lost interest in the League by 1939, shifting his efforts to clandestine anticolonial agitation. Most likely, the League did not survive the financial scandal, the beginning of World War II, and the loss of its visionary founder, and gradually faded away by 1941. Nevertheless, the League of Light represented a grassroots movement mobilized by Vietnamese to construct a new moral order—inclusive, internally spontaneous, hygienic, self-regulating and compassionate.

## CONCLUSION

---

The start of World War II marked the beginning of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's gradual demise. The authorities shut down *Ngày Nay* in September 1940, leaving the Group without a journalistic organ. Nhất Linh was preoccupied with clandestine political activity, and was not inclined to write or oversee the Group's operations. From 1940 until 1945, the remaining members Group kept the *Đời Nay* publishing house going, as it was their only means of livelihood. But by the August Revolution, even the publishing house ceased to operate. If the Self-Reliant Literary Group was a cooperative in which members held ownership stake, then its official end came sometime around 1945, when members dissolved the joint stock arrangement of the publishing house. According to Song Kim, financial difficulties caused by the war had prompted the Group to dismantle the *Đời Nay* publishing house, sell the printing press and equipment, and distribute the proceeds amongst Group members.<sup>1</sup> Thế Lữ expressed his sadness at the Group's disbanding with a few lines from his own famous poem, *Giây phút chạnh lòng* [Moments that pain the heart]: “Anh đi đường anh, tôi đi đường tôi, tình nghĩa đời ta có thể thôi.” [You go your way, I go mine. Our mutual destiny is at an end.]<sup>2</sup>

The war not only dealt the death blow to the Group, but also sent its members on divergent and opposing life paths. Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, and Khải Hưng participated in nationalist politics, while Xuân Diệu, Tú Mỡ, and Thế Lữ joined the Viet Minh. Former comrades in art now became sworn enemies in politics. Some members met a tragic and premature end. Khải Hưng was arrested by rival Viet Minh operatives and sent to the Viet Bac labor camps; he was never seen alive again. Hoàng Đạo, who served as his chief advisor to his brother Nhất Linh, died suddenly of a heart attack on a train in China. Thạch Lam succumbed to tuberculosis in 1947 at the young age of 32. After a few years of self-imposed exile in China and Da Lat, Nhất Linh resettled in Saigon and committed suicide in 1963. In contrast, all of the Group's poets eventually joined the Communist Party after a period of “reeducation” and “self-criticism.” All three received accolades from the Communist Party and lived till old age.

However, despite the Group's 8-year existence, its influence on Vietnamese literature, culture and society was profound. This dissertation argued that the Group constituted Vietnam's first modernist movement. No other group of intellectuals before had ever promoted such vast changes across the whole of Vietnamese society. The Group's project covered wide and varied issues such as literature, architecture, fashion, domestic and international politics, women's issues, and the family. The Group iconoclastically challenged entrenched traditions and established customs with an eye towards making the world anew. With a deep sense of introspection and

---

<sup>1</sup> Song Kim. *Cuộc đời sân khấu của chúng tôi*. (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1983), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Hồ Hữu Tường, “Nguyễn Tường Long, Nhà chánh trị,” *Văn*, no. 63 (1966): 107.

self-scrutiny, the Group reexamined every aspect of Vietnamese culture, society, and politics, and sought to replace antiquated traditions with a foundation for a modern Vietnamese nation.

Each chapter of this dissertation examined one aspect of the Group's reform project. During the period of 1932-1936, the Group was mostly preoccupied with Phong Hoa and its literary, cultural and social reforms. Chapter one looked at the history of *Đời Nay* publishing house and argued that the Group's commercial ventures had roots in its reform program. The Group sought to reconcile the seemingly opposed commercial and cultural aims of the publishing industry, combining both profitable and humane business practices without sacrificing literary quality. Chapter two focused the reform of women's clothing and how the Lemur tunic constituted the first instance of modern fashion in Vietnam. The Group held no anxieties about capitalism, modernity's most distinguishing feature, and believed that the dynamism inherent in the market can help transform the lives of Vietnamese women. Chapter three surveyed the *Lý Toét* cartoons, and argued that beneath the Group's humor lay a deeper meaning—the belief that humor expressed skepticism, a modern sensibility that it wanted Vietnamese to learn.

In contrast, the Group was more politically active in the period of 1936-1941. Chapter four examined the Group's political writings and asserted that it aimed to achieve republican ideals through the politics of the center left. The Group ardently believed in the rule of law, democracy and personal freedoms, and campaigned so that Vietnam should enjoy such reforms. Chapter five surveyed the Group's political activities from 1936-1940 and argued that the politics of the period was marked by ideological fluidity and lack of dogmatism. The Group's principled political stance, while successful, proved a liability in the uncertain political times. Chapter six examined the history of the League of Light as the culmination of the Group's reform discourse, and discussed how the League aimed to shape a cohesive moral order through the rational regulation of space and everyday life.

From this study, we see that the Self-Reliant Literary Group embodied the characteristics of iconoclasm and self-scrutiny of its European counterparts, but that it also developed a number of historically-specific themes that characterize Vietnamese colonial modernism. The first is the Group's belief that material changes would bring about transformations in human behavior, attitudes, and eventually society. This thread ran through all the Group's major reforms, including publishing, fashion, and architecture. The Group believed that transforming the outside appearance of a book will change how readers engage with its contents. It also argued that the perpetual change of clothing styles characteristic in modern fashion will help women internalize modern views and attitudes. In the same vein, the Group's League of Light advocated the manipulation of the built environment as a means for the peasantry to inculcate values of hygiene and community. This theme was inherently tied to the Group's devotion to science, as well as their ardent belief in enlightenment principles, the belief that humans and their conditions can be improved through rationality.

The second theme centers on the Group's fervent belief in Self-Reliance. The members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group were proud that they had built their newspaper and publishing business from almost nothing. The Group held a unique position in the literary world as a cooperative owned by its members for their own benefit. Although its self-reliant nature started off as a means of freedom from outside financial obligations, it soon began to encompass larger social, aesthetic, and ideological meanings. The Group insisted that Vietnamese must create a national literary corpus on its own, away from the influence of Chinese forms or unassimilated French translations. Economically, it argued that Vietnamese must do away with their unspecialized, profit-motivated and slapdash way of doing business, and develop a long-sighted

work ethic based on enthusiasm and a desire to contribute to the nation. However, this belief in self-reliance also served to isolate the Group in its early interactions with other political players, which would have important consequences in the 1940s. Nevertheless, the Group insisted that Vietnamese must forge their own civil society and develop the habits of citizenship. While French colonialism can only provide useful tools and favorable environment, the hard work must come from the Vietnamese themselves. As Hoàng Đạo consistently reminded his readers, “We must depend on ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

The third theme that underlay all of the Group’s projects was its nationalism and colonial republicanism. All of the Group’s major reforms centered on constructing a modern Vietnamese nation. The Group advanced a substantive and comprehensive political program for Vietnam—one in which its citizens benefited from transparent political procedures, properly functioning representative institutions, democratic freedoms, and the rule of law. The Group’s insistence on writing only in quốc ngữ was aimed at developing a national literature, in the same way that its publishing enterprises was linked to the creation of a future informed electorate. The building of a civil polity in Vietnam lay below *Phong Hóa*’s humor and satire, while the Group’s attack on familial oppression constituted the destruction of an entire feudal economic order. The Self-Reliant Literary Group’s championing of republican values and embrace of center-left politics envisioned no less than a complete overhaul of Vietnamese society.

This study only begins to describe the Group’s project; so much more work remains to be done to fully describe the scope of the Group’s work and its influence on modern Vietnamese society and culture. This dissertation examined the Group’s journalistic writings and only briefly touched on their literary works. Future scholars working on the Group could read its literary sources in tandem with its journalism to present an even more comprehensive view of the Group’s larger project. Another effect of the Marxist epithet of “bourgeois romanticism” was that it downplayed the sense of experimental dynamism and intellectual urgency that made the Group not only social and political reformers, but also pioneers of modern Vietnamese literature. By linking the Group’s literature to the work I have already done on its social and cultural projects, researchers can expand the scholarship on the Group by showing how its literary production, journalistic activity and social reforms were part of the same modernist vision.

A number of topics remain to be explored even within the Group’s journalistic writing. Scholars have yet to fully explore the Group’s writings on women’s issues. While writing my fashion chapter, I realized that the Group’s intended reform project for women went beyond merely changing their clothing—they had a clear role for women the new, modern Vietnam. Scholars of the period often argue that because of strict censorship, intellectuals would use women’s issues to obliquely discuss the nation, and that the image of the victimized woman became an allegory for a colonized Vietnam. I hypothesize that the Group were genuinely interested in the plight of oppressed women and worked towards their own vision of women’s emancipation. My dissertation research has already revealed that the Group did not discuss women on an abstract level; they were fascinated by the lives of women from all classes, from urban female intellectuals to brothel madams and rural peasant women. The Group also encouraged women to write for its papers and reserved a column dedicated to women’s issues. Future scholars can systematically explore these writings to identify in greater detail the Group’s modernist vision for Vietnamese women.

---

<sup>3</sup> Tứ Ly, “Từ nhỏ đến nhớn,” *Phong Hóa* no.189, 29 May 1936, p 3.

I also hope that researchers interested in the Group will explore the nature of intellectual debate in 1930s Vietnam by examining some of the most famous “pen wars” in Vietnamese history, many of which involved members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Vietnamese and western-language scholars often refer to these debates and their importance in shaping intellectual discourse, but none have actually read the debates nor have they analyzed them in any detail. I hypothesize that these pen wars had as much to do with drumming up controversy to sell newspapers as they did about actual serious intellectual discussion. For example, in 1932 the Group and its rivals became embroiled in a fiery debate over “Art for art’s sake” and “Art for humanity’s sake.” While the exchange grappled with monumental questions of art and its purpose, it also included no small amount of ad hominem attacks and petty insults. Likewise, the Group’s 1936 pen war with Marxist critic Trương Tửu over the Group’s novel *Lạnh Lùng* [Coldness] discussed lofty issues of tradition vs. modernity yet also included a titillating discussion on pornography. This topic would enhance the richness of scholarship on the Group by illustrating how both the highbrow idealism and lowbrow realities inherent in 1930s intellectual life shaped the way Vietnamese came to construct a modern national identity. Before his suicide, Nhất Linh had quickly penned these last words, which were secretly reproduced and circulated. Tam must have realized that had he appeared in the Saigon court, every aspect of his entire career, vision, and life would have been on trial. He wrote:

Let history judge my life, I refuse to be judged by any man. The arrest and conviction of nationalist opposition activists is a grave crime, one that will deliver the nation into the hands of the Communists. I oppose these acts and destroy myself, like the monk Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation, as a warning to those who trample upon all freedoms.<sup>4</sup>

But history has not been necessarily kind to Nhất Linh. As this dissertation has described, the history written by the Communist victors has selectively and subjectively judged the journalistic, literary and political career not only of Nhất Linh Nguyễn Tường Tam but also the Self-Reliant Literary Group. First, by choosing to focus mostly on the Group’s literary writings—its novels, short stories, and poetry—Marxist critics have disregarded the rich sources on its social and political reforms provided in its newspapers. In doing so, these scholars have almost completely ignored the blatantly political aspects of the Group’s reforms. Secondly, Marxist histories of the Group have misrepresented the Group and its project. By typecasting the Group as “bourgeois romantics” in both demographic and sensibility, as well as downplaying its radical political nature, party scholars draw attention away from the similarities and overlap of their political programs.

As the first systematic examination of Phong Hoa, this dissertation has shown just how inadequate the historiography has been in this regard. In an attempt to objectively assess the contribution of the Group to modern Vietnamese history, this dissertation goes back to the Group’s own writings to systematically examine its larger reform project. It argues that the Group’s journalism, social reforms, commercial ventures and politics are one and the same—led by a fervent desire to construct a modern Vietnamese civilization. Politically, the Group believed that the only political path for Vietnam was through the values and principles of Republicanism. Economically, the Group held no ambivalence about capitalism; it believed that a strong economy had significant implications for Vietnam taking its place in the modern world.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Văn*, no. 14 (1964): 35.

Like other leftists, the Group espoused ideas of historical materialism, and believed that economics provided the basis for transformative social and political change. However, the Group was wary of the vast inequality and excesses of the capitalist market economy, and advocated ways to tame its negative effects. Socially, the Group sought greater integration of marginalized groups, especially women and the peasantry, and believed that Vietnam can become a more equal society.

My examination of the Nhất Linh's early career and foundation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group revealed, at the heart of the Group's reform program was freedom: freedom from economic constraints, from censorship as evidenced by its campaign for a free press. Freedom from tradition and superstition, from strict literary conventions and forms. Freedom from absolutist ideology, from exploitation, and from the stifling institution of the family. And it was ultimately for freedom that Nhất Linh took his own life. Returning back to Nguyễn Tường Tam's funeral, we see that while the crowd was influenced in some way by the work of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. The young female students from Trung Vương high school, proudly carrying their banner, were wearing the ao dai, the traditional Vietnamese national dress. They were emboldened as women had never been before, which reflected the Group's calls for women to go out into society. The young writers and intellectuals were inspired to take up the pen themselves because of the writings of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Such was the nature of the Group's reform project—profound and real, it examined what it meant to be Vietnamese in a modern world, and addressed issues that perplexed Vietnamese through the decades to this very day.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

### Periodicals

*Phong Hóa* (Hanoi, 1932-1936, 190 issues)

*Ngày Nay* (Hanoi, 1935-1940, 224 issues)

### **Other colonial-era Periodicals**

*Annam Tạp Chí* (Hanoi, 1926-1933)

*Bắc Hà* (Hanoi, 1935-1936, 1938)

*Báo Tiểu Thuyết* (1938-1942)

*Đông Phương* (Hanoi, 1929-1934)

*Hải Phòng Tuần Báo* (Haiphong, 1934-1935)

*Hanoi Báo* (Hanoi, 1936-1937)

*Ích Hữu* (Hanoi, 1938-1938)

*Journal officiel de l'Indo-chine française* (Hanoi, 1889-1945)

*Khoa Học tạp chí* (Huế, 1922–1937)

*L'Annam Nouveau* (Hanoi, 1931-1941)

*La Patrie Annamite* (Hanoi, 1934-1941)

*Loa* (Hanoi, 1934-1936)

*Nước Nam* (Hanoi, 1938-1945)

*Thực Nghiệp Dân Báo* (Hue, 1931-1933)

*Tiếng Vang Làng Báo* (Hanoi, 1936)

*Tiểu Thuyết Chủ Nhật* (Hanoi, 1937-1940)

*Tiểu Thuyết Tuần San* (Hanoi, 1932-1934)

*Vịt Đực* (Hanoi, 1938-1939)

### **Post-1945 Periodicals**

*Độc Lập* (Hanoi)

*Lành Mạnh* (Saigon)

*Thế Kỷ 21* (Westminster, CA)

*Tin Sách* (Saigon)

*Văn* (Saigon)

*Văn Hóa Ngày Nay* (Saigon)

*Văn Học Tạp Chí* (Hanoi)

*Văn Nghệ* (Hanoi)

### **Archival Materials**

#### **Centre des Archives Outre-mer (CAOM), Aix-en-Provence, France**

*Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires Français d'Outre-mer (SLOTFOM)*  
Serie 5, Carton 39

*Fonds de la Commission Guernut*  
Carton 24, Dossier B.E.

*Nouveaux fonds (NF) of the Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin*  
Carton 369, A8.2950;

*Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire*  
Dossier 377

#### **Vietnam National Archives, Center 1 [Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1], Hanoi, Vietnam**

*Fonds de la Mairie de Hanoi*  
D611.2663, D62.2858



*Fonds de la Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin (RST)*  
D61.2650, D62.79250

### Published Sources

- Aftalion, Florin. *The French Revolution, an Economic Interpretation*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Alatas, Farid, Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh. *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia*. Leiden, the Netherlands: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004.
- Amicale des journalistes annamites de Cochinchine. *Le régime de la presse en Indochine*. [Saigon?]: L'Amicale, 1937.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., James T. Siegel, and Audrey Kahin. *Southeast Asia Over Three Generations: Essays Presented to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2003.
- Anh Thơ. *Từ bến Sông Thương; Tiếng chim tu hú; Bên dòng chia cắt: hồi ký văn học*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2002.
- Banerian, James. *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction*. Phoenix: Sphinx, 1986.
- Barthes, Roland, and Andy Stafford. *The language of fashion*. Oxford: Berg, 2006.
- Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. *The arcades project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999.
- Berman, Sheri. *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Boudarel, Georges, and Văn Ký Nguyễn. *Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.
- Boyer, Paul S. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Bullock, Nicholas, and James Read. *The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840-1914*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Cadière, L. M. *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese*. Clayton, Vic: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1989.

- Cao Quang Nghiệp, “Người thứ bảy trong Tự Lực Văn Đoàn là ai?” *Diễn Đàn Thế Kỷ*, 7 Jul 2012.  
<http://www.diendanthekey.net/2012/07/cao-quang-nghiep-nguoi-thu-bay-trong-tu.html>.  
 Accessed 24 Jul 2012.
- Chafer, Tony, and Amanda Sackur. *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Chartier, Roger. *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Chonchirdsin, Sud. “The *Indochinese Congress* (May 1936-March 1937): False hope of Vietnamese nationalists,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30:2 (1999).
- Christie, Clive J. *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*. London: Tauris, 1998.
- Cooper, Nicola. *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*. Oxford: Berg, 2001.
- Cridle, Byron. *Socialists and European Integration: A Study of the French Socialist Party*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969.
- Darnton, Robert. “What is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, Summer 1982, p. 65-83.
- Denton, Kirk A. *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Deschamps, Caroline. *Être socialiste en Indochine: 1905-1952. Recherche sur le socialisme européen en situation coloniale*. Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Histoire: Université de Paris VII, 1996.
- Đinh Hùng. *Đốt lò hương cũ*. [Saigon]: Lua Thiêng, 1971.
- Đỗ Chinh and Hà Minh Đức. *Báo chí, những vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn*. [Hà Nội?]: Giáo dục, 1994).
- Đoàn Thị Tinh. *Tìm hiểu trang phục Việt Nam: dân tộc Việt*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1987.
- Dommen, Arthur J. *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Duiker, William J. *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1981.
- Duiker, William J. *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.
- Dương Tân Tươi, *Cười: Nguyên Nhân và Thế Chất* (Saigon, Phạm Quang Khải, 1968).

- Dutton, George. "Lý Toet in the City: Coming to Terms with the Modern in 1930s Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 1, February 2007, p. 81
- Eliot, Simon, and Jonathan Rose. *A Companion to the History of the Book*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Gay, Peter. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy : from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.
- Goldberg, Harvey. *The Life of Jean Jaurès*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962.
- Goodman, Allan E. *Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973.
- Gourou, Pierre. *Les paysans du delta tonkinois; étude de géographie humaine*. Paris: Les Éditions d'art et d'histoire, 1936.
- Grall, Charles. *Hygiène coloniale appliquée; hygiène de l'Indo-Chine*. Paris: Baillière, 1908.
- Greco, Albert N. *The Book Publishing Industry*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.
- Hà Minh Đức. *Tự lực văn đoàn: trào lưu-tác giả : khảo luận và tuyển chọn bài viết về Tự lực văn đoàn*. [Hanoi?]: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2007.
- Haine, W. Scott. *The History of France*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Hall, Stuart, and Paddy Whannel. *The Popular Arts*. [London]: Hutchinson Educational, 1964.
- Hardy, Andrew. *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.
- Hazareesingh, Sudhir. *Political Traditions in Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Heller, Henry. *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006.
- Hémery, Daniel. *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine: communistes, trotskystes, nationalistes à Saigon de 1932 à 1937*. Paris: F. Maspero, 1975.
- Herbelin, Caroline. "Des HBM au Viet Nam. La question du logement social en situation coloniale." *Moussons*, 13-14, 2009, 131-136.
- Herbelin, Caroline. Les architectes de l'École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine et la recherche d'une architecture moderne à caractère national, Réseau-Asie, [http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/gateway.cgi?langue=fr&password=&email=&dir=myfile\\_colloque&type=jhg54](http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/gateway.cgi?langue=fr&password=&email=&dir=myfile_colloque&type=jhg54)

gfd98gfd4fgd4gfdg&id=432&telecharge\_now=1&file=a11\_caroline\_herbelin.pdf.  
 Accessed 22 Feb 2012.

Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân. *Thi nhân Việt Nam: 1932-1941*. Hanoi: Nguyễn Đức Phiên, 1943.

Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn Học, 2005.

Hoang Đạo, *Lên Cung Trang*, Hanoi: Đời Nay: 1940.

Hoang Đạo, *Son Tinh*. Hanoi: Đời Nay: 1941.

Hoàng Văn Đào, and Huynh Khue. *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang: A Contemporary History of a National Struggle: 1927-1954*. Pittsburgh, PA: Rose Dog Books, 2008.

Hứa Bảo Liên. *Nguyễn Tường Bách và tôi: hồi ký gia đình*. Westminster, Calif: Jay Ruan, 2005.

Huỳnh Kim Khánh. *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945*. Ithaca: Published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, by Cornell University Press, 1982.

Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam: từ khởi thủy đến 1945*. [TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2000.

Jackson, Julian. *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-38*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Jamieson, Neil L. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Ladd, Brian. *Urban Planning and Civic Order in Germany, 1860-1914*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe, "The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu, 1954-1958," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, no. 2, Summer 2010, p. 1-90

Lâm, Truong Buu. *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan, 2000.

Lê Thị Đức Hạnh. *Mấy vấn đề trong văn học hiện đại Việt Nam*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 1999.

Lehmann, Ulrich. *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000.

Lewis, Gwynne, Colin Lucas, and Richard Cobb. *Beyond the Terror: Essays in French Regional and Social History, 1794-1815*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Lockhart, Greg. Introduction to "Broken Journey: Nhật Linh's 'Going to France'", *East Asian History* 8, December 1994.

- Logan, William Stewart. *Hanoi, Biography of a City*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000.
- Lukacs, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Boston: MIT Press: 1974.
- Luong, Hy V. *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003.
- Luu Quý Khương and Phạm Thị Kim Sa. “Các chức năng ngữ dụng của lời nói mỉa trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt.” *Tạp Chí Khoa Học và Công Nghệ, Đại Học Đà Nẵng* 4 (33), 2009.
- Mai Hương. *Nhất Linh, cây bút trụ cột của Tự lực văn đoàn*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000.
- Mai Hương. *Tự lực văn đoàn trong tiến trình văn học dân tộc*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000.
- Marr, David G. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- Mayer, J. P. *Political Thought in France from the Revolution to the Fourth Republic*. London: Routledge & Paul, 1949.
- McHale, Shawn Frederick. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004.
- Moon, Nick. *Opinion Polls: History, Theory and Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.
- Moran, James. *Printing Presses; History and Development from the Fifteenth Century to Modern Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- Morris, R.J., “Clubs, Societies, and Associations” in F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, vol. 3, Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Motherwell, Robert, and Jean Arp. *Dada: The Dada Painters and Poets : an Anthology*. Boston, Mass: Hall, 1981.
- Munday, Lisa M. *American Militarism and Anti-Militarism in Popular Media, 1945-1970*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012.
- Murray, Martin J. *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Narangoa, Li, and R. B. Cribb. *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895-1945*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Ng, Shui Meng. *The Population of Indochina: Some Preliminary Observations*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974.

- Ngô Đức Thịnh. *Trang phục cổ truyền các dân tộc Việt Nam*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa dân tộc, 1994.
- Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi: Hồi ký*. Hà Nội: Nxb Hội nhà văn, 1994.
- Nguyễn Thị Thế. *Hồi ký về gia đình Nguyễn Tường: Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam*. Saigon: Sóng, 1974.
- Nguyễn Trác, and Xuân Ninh Đái. *Về Tự lực văn đoàn*. [TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Nhà xuất bản TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 1989.
- Nguyễn Bá Đăng, Vũ Phương Nguyễn, and Hoàng Vân Tạ. *Traditional Vietnamese Architecture*. Hà Nội, Việt Nam: Thế giới publishers, 2004.
- Nguyễn Cát Tường, ed., *Đẹp: Mùa Nực 1934*. Hanoi: Trung Bắc Tân Văn, 1934.
- Nguyễn, Hoàn Khung. *Văn xuôi lãng mạn Việt Nam: 1930-1945*. Hà nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, 1989.
- Nguyễn Ngọc, and Văn Luận Nguyễn. *Un siècle d'histoire de la robe des vietnamiennes*. Saigon: Direction des affaires culturelles, 1974.
- Nguyễn Phan Hách, and Vư Phong. *Tuyển tập Tự lực văn đoàn*. Hà nội: Hội nhà văn, 1999.
- Nguyễn Tường Bách. *Việt-Nam những ngày lịch sử*. [Montréal]: Nhóm nghiên-cứu sử-địa Việt-Nam, 1981.;
- Nguyễn Tường Bách. *Việt-Nam một thế kỷ qua: hồi ký*. California: Thạch Ngư, 1998.
- Nguyễn Tường Thiết. *Nhất Linh cha tôi: hồi ký*. [Gardena, CA]: Nhà xuất bản Văn Mới, 2006.
- Nguyễn Văn Ký. *La société vietnamienne face à la modernité: le Tonkin de la fin du XIXe siècle à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. [Paris]: Harmattan, 1995.
- Nguyễn Vỹ Tuan, *chàng trai đất Việt*, Saigon: Dai Nam, 1970.
- Nguyễn Vỹ. *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến: hồi ký văn học*. Hà Nội: Hội nhà văn, 1994.
- Nguyen-Marshall, Van. *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Nguyen-Marshall, Van, "Poverty, Gender and Nation in Modern Vietnamese Literature during the French Colonial Period (1930s-1940s), in Farid Alatas, Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia* (Leiden, the Netherlands: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004).
- Nhà Xuất Bản Đời Nay, Hanoi: Doi Nay: [1941?].
- Nhất Linh: người nghệ sĩ - người chiến sĩ*. Westminster, CA: Thế Kỷ, 2004.
- Nhật Thịnh. *Chân dung Nhất-Linh, hay, Thân thế sự nghiệp Nguyễn-Tường-Tam*. [Glendale, CA]: Đại Nam, 1980.

- Niessen, Sandra, Ann Marie Leshkowich, and Carla Jones, *Re-orienting fashion : the globalization of Asian dress* Oxford, UK ; New York : Berg, 2003.
- Ninh, Kim Ngoc Bao. *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Noppe, Catherine, and Jean-François Hubert. *Art of Vietnam*. New York: Parkstone, 2003.
- Paige, Jeffery M. *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*. New York: Free Press, 1975.
- Peycam, Philippe M. F. *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Phạm Bích Ngọc. *Architecture of Thăng Long-Hà Nội*. Hà Nội: Thế giới publishers, 2006.
- Phan Huy Lê and Nguyễn Văn Bái, *Vietnam Traditional Folk Houses*. Vietnam: Ministry of Culture, 2004.
- Phan Trọng Thuồng, and Cừ Nguyễn. *Văn chương Tự lực văn đoàn*. [Hà Nội]: Giáo dục, 1999.
- Phong Lê. *Văn học trên hành trình của thế kỷ XX*. Hà Nội: Đại học quốc gia, 1997.
- Phương Ngân. *Khái Hưng, nhà tiểu thuyết xuất sắc của Tự lực văn đoàn*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa-thông tin, 2000.
- Porter, Gareth. *Imperialism and Social Structure in Twentieth Century Vietnam*. Thesis—Cornell University, 1978.
- Porter, Ted and Dorothy Ross (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Poussier, Fabien. *Louis Caput: La Section SFIO D'Indochine face a la guerre Franco-Vietnamienne, 1936-1950*. Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université Paris VII, 1990.
- Quinn-Judge, Sophie. *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.
- Rabinow, Paul. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.
- Rice-Maximin, Edward Francis. *Accommodation and Resistance: The French Left, Indochina, and the Cold War, 1944-1954*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.
- Rydstrøm, Helle. *Embodying Morality: Growing Up in Rural Northern Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.
- Sereny, Gitta. *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Shaffer, Brian W., Patrick O'Donnell, and John Clement Ball. *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

- Sheppard, Richard. *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2000.
- Song Kim. *Cuộc đời sân khấu của chúng tôi*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1983.
- Stieber, Nancy. *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Sutcliffe, Anthony. *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, the United States, and France, 1780-1914*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.
- Svendsen, Lars. *Fashion: a philosophy*. London: Reaktion, 2006.
- Tai, Hue-Tam Ho. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Thanh Châu, “Hồi ký văn học: mười năm với tuần báo Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy” *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 2 (1991).
- Thanh Lăng. *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*. [Saigon?]: Phong Trào Văn Hóa, 1972.
- Trần Huy Liệu, and Lương Bích Nguyên. *Lịch sử thủ đô Hà Nội*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Hà Nội, 2000.
- Trần Huy Liệu, and Như Thom Phạm. *Hồi ký Trần Huy Liệu*. Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 1991.
- Trương, Hữu Quýnh. *Từ điển nhân vật lịch sử Việt Nam*. [Hanoi]: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2006.
- Trương Chính. *Dưới mắt tôi: phê-bình văn học Việt-Nam hiện-đại*. Hanoi: [s.n.], 1939.
- Trương Chính. *Selected Writings*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1977.
- Trường Chinh. *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt-nam*. Hà-nội: Sự Thật, 1974.
- Tự Điển Việt-Anh, Hanoi: Hanoi University Press: 1986.
- Tự lực văn đoàn: con người và văn chương*. Hà Nội: Văn học, 1990.
- Tucker, Kenneth H. *French Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Public Sphere*. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- United States. *Civil Affairs Handbook: French Indo-China*. 1943.
- Vann, Michael G. *White City on the Red River: Race, Power, and Culture in French Colonial Hanoi, 1872-1954*. Thesis (Ph. D.)--University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999, 1999.
- Vella, Walter F. *Aspects of Vietnamese History*. [Honolulu]: University Press of Hawaii, 1973.
- Vũ Bằng. *Bốn mươi năm nói láo*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993.
- Vũ Đình Hòe. *Hồi ký Vũ Đình Hòe*. [Hà Nội]: Văn hóa thông tin, 1994.



- Vu Gia. *Khái Hưng, nhà tiểu thuyết*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1993.
- Vu Gia. *Thạch Lam, thân thể và sự nghiệp*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1994.
- Vu Gia. *Nhất Linh trong tiến trình hiện đại hóa văn học*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1995.
- Vu Gia. *Hoàng-Đạo, nhà báo, nhà văn*. Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1997.
- Vu Gia. *Trần Tiêu: nhà văn độc đáo của Tự lực văn đoàn*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2006.
- Vu Gia. *Thế Lữ, một khách tình si*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2009.
- Vũ Hoàng Chương. *Ta đã làm chi đời ta: hồi ký*. [Hà Nội?]: Hội nhà văn, 1993.
- Vũ Ngọc Khánh, *Thơ Văn Trào Phùng Việt Nam từ thế kỷ 13 đến 1945*. Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1974
- Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại*. Hà-nội: Nhà xuất bản Tân dân, 1942.
- Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại: phê bình văn học*. [TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Khoa học xã hội, 1989.
- Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Những năm tháng ấy: hồi ký*. Hà Nội: Văn học, 1987.
- Vũ Trọng Phụng, Nguyệt Cẩm Nguyễn, and Peter Zinoman. *Dumb Luck: A Novel*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Wickberg, Daniel. *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. London: Virago, 1985.
- Wohl, Robert. *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1966.
- Woodside, Alexander. *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Woodside, Alexander “The Development of Social Organizations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period”, *Pacific Affairs*, XLIV, 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 39-64.
- Wright, Gwendolyn. *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Xuân Thiên, *Tội Phong Hóa*. Hanoi: Imprimerie Indochinoise: 1935.
- Zinoman, Peter. *The Colonial Bastille A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

## APPENDIX A

### Dramatis Personae: Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group

Literary scholars differ on the actual membership of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. While all agree on its principal members, no consensus exists on the Group's secondary members. Debates involve Tran Tieu, the younger brother of Khai Hung, poet Huy Can, and artists Nguyen Gia Tri and Lemur Nguyen Cat Tuong. German-Vietnamese literary historian Cao Quang Nghiep, in his paper titled "Who is the Seventh Member of the Self-Reliant Literary Group?" [Người thứ bảy trong Tự Lực Văn Đoàn là ai?] took on this debate firsthand. Comparing primary sources such as the newspapers, memoirs, and *Doi Nay* publications, Nghiep was able to ascertain definitively and persuasively the principal members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. They are: Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam, Thế Lữ, Tú Mỡ and Xuân Diệu. According to Nghiep's analysis, none of the debated figures are members.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I use Nghiep's account of the Group's membership.



#### **Nhất Linh – Nguyễn Tường Tam (1906-1963)**

Leader of the Self-Reliant Literary Group.

Born in Cẩm Giàng, Hải Dương province, the third of seven children. Elder brother of Group members Hoang Dao and Thach Lam. Studied abroad in Montpellier, France, from 1927-1929, graduated Bachelor's in Science. Taught at École Thăng Long, where he met Khái Hưng. Also worked at the colonial Offices of Finances, where he met Tú Mỡ. Took over editorship of *Phong Hóa* in 1932. Started *Ngày Nay* in 1935. Founded the League of Light in 1937. Founded the Đại Việt Dân Chính Party, later merged with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Served as Vietnam's first Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Government. Committed suicide by poison in 1963 in protest of the Diem government.

Pseudonyms used: Nhất Linh (novels and prose), Bảo Sơn (short stories), Đông Sơn (cartoons and drawing), Tân Việt (poetry), Tam Linh, Lãng Du. Best-known works: *Đoạn Tuyệt* (1934), *Lạnh Lùng* (1935), *Đi Tây* (1935), *Đôi Bạn* (1936), *Bướm Trắng* (1938).

<sup>1</sup> Cao Quang Nghiep, "Người thứ bảy trong Tự Lực Văn Đoàn là ai?" *Diễn Đàn Thế Kỷ*, 7 Jul 2012.

<http://www.diendantheky.net/2012/07/cao-quang-nghiep-nguoi-thu-bay-trong-tu.html>. Accessed 24 Jul 2012. All the biographical information in the Appendix can be found in Hà Minh Đức. *Tự lực văn đoàn: trào lưu-tác giả : khảo luận và tuyển chọn bài viết về Tự lực văn đoàn*. (Hanoi?): Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2007), 63-170. Images of Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, Thế Lữ and Xuân Diệu can be found in *Nhất Linh: người nghệ sĩ - người chiến sĩ*. (Westminster, CA: Thế Kỷ, 2004), 225; Hoàng Đạo's image from Vu Gia, *Hoàng-Đạo, nhà báo, nhà văn*. (Hà Nội: Văn hóa, 1997), title page; Tú Mỡ's image found at "Bảo quản di cảo nhà thơ Tú Mỡ," *Việt Báo*, 1 Apr 2004, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Bao-quan-di-cao-cua-nha-tho-Tu-Mo/40026830/105/> Accessed 23 June 2012; Thạch Lam's image found at "Quan hệ giữa Thạch Lam và Vũ Bằng thời ấy," Vanvn.net, <http://vanvn.net/news/20/1263-quan-he-giua-thach-lam-va-vu-bang-thoi-ay.html> Accessed 23 June 2012.



### **Khái Hưng – Trần Khánh Giur (1896-1947)**

Most prolific and best-selling novelist of the Group, essayist, columnist.

Born in Cổ Am, Hải Dương province. Educated at Lycee Albert Sarraut, graduated in 1927. Taught at the Ecole Thang Long, where he met Nhất Linh. In the 1930s, lived at 80 Quán Thánh and ran the Group's headquarters. Active in the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in the 1940s. Went missing in 1947 and assumed killed by Viet Minh forces.

Pseudonyms used: Khái Hưng (prose), KH, Nhất Dao Cạo (columns), Nhị Linh (editorials), Hàn Đãi Đậu, Bán Than.

Best-known works: *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* (1933), *Nửa Chùng Xuân* (1934), *Trống Mai* (1936), *Tiêu Sơn Tráng Sĩ* (1937), *Thoát Ly* (1938).



### **Hoàng Đạo – Nguyễn Tường Long (1907-1948)**

Main theoretician and social commentator of the Group

Born in Cẩm Giàng, Hải Dương province, the fourth of seven children. Younger brother of Nhất Linh and older brother of Thạch Lam. Attained Bachelor's in Law and worked as clerk in the colonial courts. Active with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in the 1940s. Briefly served as Minister of Finance in the Revolutionary government. Died suddenly of a heart attack on a train in China in 1948.

Pseudonyms used: Hoàng Đạo (novels), Tứ Ly (editorials), Tòng Lương, Trưng Vân, Phúc Vân.

Best-known works: *Trước Vành Móng Ngựa* (1938), *Tiếng Dân* (1941)



### **Thạch Lam – Nguyễn Tường Lân (1910-1942)**

Columnist and Writer of novels, short stories, and essays.

Born in Cẩm Giàng, Hải Dương province, the sixth of seven children. Younger brother of Nhất Linh and Hoàng Đạo. Ran the *Đời Nay* publishing house in the 1940s. Attended the Lycée Albert Sarraut but dropped out after first level diploma to join his brothers in journalism. Wrote works that focused on rural life and the peasantry. Died in poverty of tuberculosis at the age of 32.

Pseudonyms used: Thạch Lam (novels), Việt Sinh (editorials), Thiện Sĩ  
Best-known works: *Gió Đầu Mùa* (1937), *Nắng Trong Vườn* (1938), *Sợi Tóc* (1942), *Hà Nội Băm Sáu Phố Phường* (1943)



### Thê Lữ - Nguyễn Thứ Lễ (1907-1989)

New Poet, Novelist, Literary Critic, and Theatre Pioneer

Born Tiên Du, Bắc Ninh. Most famous poem, *Nho rung*, published in *Phong Hóa* in 1933. Explored new genres in Vietnamese literature such as detective stories, horror, and adventure. Started the popular Troupe Thê Lữ. Joined the Viet Minh after 1945 and renounced his activities with the Group. Served as first chairman of the newly-established Vietnamese Association for Stage Actors. Named “Artist of the People” [Nghệ sĩ nhân dân] in 1984. Died at 82 in Hanoi.

Pseudonyms used: Thê Lữ (poetry), Lê Ta (literary criticism)

Best-known works: *Nhớ Rừng*, *Mấy Vần Thơ* (1935), *Vàng và Máu* (1933)



### Tú Mỡ - Hồ Trọng Hiếu (1900-1976)

Humorous and Satirical Poet

Born in Hanoi to a poor working class family. Educated at the Lycee du Protectorat, and received a diploma in 18. Worked as a secretary in the colonial Offices of Finances where he met Nhật Linh. Wrote a popular weekly column of humorous poems in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. Joined the Viet Minh in 1946 but did not denounce the Group. Elected vice-chairman of the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Arts in 1957. Died at 76 in Hanoi.

Pseudonyms used: Tú Mỡ (poetry), HOTH (cartoons, unconfirmed)

Best-known works: *Giòng Nước Ngược*



### Xuân Diệu – Ngô Xuân Diệu (1916-1985)

New Poet

Born in Tùng Giản, Bình Định. Schooled in Hanoi and Hue, received secondary diploma [tú tài II] in 1937. Joined the Self-Reliant Literary Group in 1937. Famous for poems about love, youth, and nature. Joined the Viet Minh in 1943 and renounced his activities with the Group. Edited the influential Communist Party journal *Văn Nghe* in the 1950s. Rumored to have been in lifelong relationship with poet Huy Cận. Died at 69 in Hanoi.

Pseudonyms used: Xuân Diệu

Best-known works: *Thơ Thơ* (1938), *Phấn Thông Vàng* (1939)

**APPENDIX B****Publications by SADEP and the Đời Nay Publishing House, 1933-1945**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Series</b>	
<b>1933</b>	<i>Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên</i>	Khái Hưng	SADEP	
	<i>Vàng và Máu</i>	Thế Lữ	SADEP	
	<i>Anh Phải Sống</i>	Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh	SADEP	
	<i>Cảm Bấy Người</i>	Vũ Trọng Phụng	SADEP	
<b>1934</b>	<i>Gánh Hàng Hoa</i>	Khái Hưng		
	<i>Tiếng Suối Reo</i>	Khái Hưng		
	<i>Gánh Hàng Hoa</i>	Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh		
<b>1936</b>	<i>Mác Tin</i>	Jean-Jacque Bernard, trans. Vi Huyền Đắc		
	<i>Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên</i>	Khái Hưng	Green Book	
	<i>Nửa Chừng Xuân</i>	Khái Hưng	Green Book	
	<i>Trống Mái</i>	Khái Hưng	Green Book	
	<i>Giọc Đường Gió Bụi</i>	Khái Hưng		
	<i>Trống Mái</i>	Khái Hưng		
	<i>Gánh Hàng Hoa</i>	Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh		
	<i>Đoạn Tuyệt</i>	Nhất Linh	Green Book	
	<i>Tối Tăm</i>	Nhất Linh		
	<i>Bên Đường Thiên Lô</i>	Thế Lữ		
	<b>1937</b>	<i>Những Bức Thư Tình</i>	Đoàn Phú Tứ	
		<i>Tục Luy</i>	Khái Hưng	
		<i>Đời Mưa Gió</i>	Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh	
		<i>Hai Buổi Chiều Vàng</i>	Nhất Linh	
		<i>Anh Phải Sống</i>	Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng	
<i>Mai Hương và Lê Phong</i>		Thế Lữ	Green Book	
<i>Vàng và Máu</i>		Thế Lữ		
<b>1938</b>	<i>Trước Vành Móng Ngựa</i>	Hoàng Đạo		
	<i>Đoạn Tuyệt</i>	Nhất Linh		
	<i>Nắng Trong Vườn</i>	Thạch Lam		
	<i>Thơ Thơ</i>	Xuân Diệu		
<b>1939</b>	<i>Con Cá Thần</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #2	
	<i>Ông Đồ Bể</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #1	
	<i>Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên</i>	Khái Hưng		

	<i>Ngày Mới</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Nắng Trong Vườn</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Phấn Thông Vàng</i>	Xuân Diệu	
<b>1940</b>	<i>Bức Tranh Quê</i>	Anh Thơ	
	<i>Vỡ Lòng</i>	Đỗ Đức Thu	
	<i>Lên Cung Trăng</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book
	<i>Con Đường Sáng</i>	Hoàng Đạo	
	<i>Lửa Thiêng</i>	Huy Cận	
	<i>Quyển Sách Ước</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #5
	<i>Cóc Tía</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #8
	<i>Cái Ấm Đất</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #9
	<i>Hạnh</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Thừa Tự</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Tiêu Sơn Tráng Sĩ</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Gánh Hàng Hoa</i>	Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh	
	<i>Làm Le</i>	Mạnh Phú Tứ	
	<i>Quyển Sách</i>	Thạch Lam	Pink Book #3
	<i>Hai Thử Khôn</i>	Thế Lữ	Pink Book #4
	<i>Gói Thuốc Lá</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Mai Hương và Lê Phong</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Hai Chị Em</i>	Thiện Sĩ	Pink Book #6
	<i>Con Trâu</i>	Trần Tiêu	
<b>1941</b>	<i>Nằm Vạ</i>	Bùi Hiền	
	<i>Robinson 1</i>	Daniel Dafoe, trans. Thế Lữ	Pink Book #11
	<i>Robinson 2</i>	Daniel Dafoe, trans. Thế Lữ	Pink Book #13
	<i>Robinson 3</i>	Daniel Dafoe, trans. Thế Lữ	Pink Book #17
	<i>Mơ Hoa</i>	Đoàn Phú Tứ	
	<i>Từ Quốc Chí</i>	Emile Servan-Sreiber, trans. Hoàng Như Tiếp	
	<i>Lan và Huệ</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #10
	<i>Con Chim Gi Sừng</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #15
	<i>Sơn Tinh</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #18
	<i>Tiếng Dân</i>	Hoàng Đạo	
	<i>Trống Mái</i>	Khái Hưng	3rd edition
	<i>Thế Giới Tỉ Hon</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #16
	<i>Cây Tre Trâm Đốt</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #19
	<i>Cắm Trại</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #20
	<i>Đẹp</i>	Khái Hưng	

	<i>Đôi Mũ Lếch</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Những Ngày Vui</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Gây Dựng</i>	Mạnh Phú Tứ	
	<i>Những Ngày Thơ Ấu</i>	Nguyễn Hồng	
	<i>Bướm Trắng</i>	Nhất Linh	
	<i>Hạt Ngọc</i>	Thạch Lam	Pink Book #12
	<i>Theo Giòng</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Quê Mẹ</i>	Thanh Tịnh	
	<i>Gió Trắng Ngàn</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Máy Vàn Thơ</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Trại Bò Tùng Linh</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Vàng và Máu</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Chồng Con</i>	Trần Tiêu	
	<i>Sách Tết Đồi Nay 1941</i>		
	<i>Nhà Xuất Bản Đồi Nay</i>		
<b>1942</b>	<i>Robinson 4</i>	Daniel Dafoe, trans. Thế Lữ	Pink Book #22
	<i>Tiếng Chim Ca, Vol 2</i>	Đào Văn Thiết	Pink Book #23
	<i>Lên Cung Trăng</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #7
	<i>Tình Bạn Bè của Chị Hằng</i>	Jeanne Roche-Mazon,	Pink Book #24
	<i>Nga và Chú Chuột Nước</i>	trans. Huyền Kiêu	
	<i>Con Quỷ Truyền Kiếp</i>	Jessie Douglas Kerruish,	
		trans. Thế Lữ	
	<i>Cóc Tía</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book 2nd edition
	<i>Đông Bệnh</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Tiếng Chim Ca</i>	Lieu Ngoc Van	Pink Book
	<i>Tiếng Chim Ca, vol 1</i>	Luu Ngoc Van	Pink Book #25
	<i>Nắng Thu</i>	Nhất Linh	
	<i>Quyển Sách</i>	Thạch Lam	Pink Book
	<i>Sợi Tóc</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Lê Phong Phong Vietn</i>	Thế Lữ	2nd edition
	<i>Con Chim Nói Sự Thực</i>	Thiện Sĩ	Pink Book #21
	<i>Sau Lũy Tre</i>	Trần Tiêu	
	<i>Bóng Mơ</i>	Tú Hoa	
	<i>Vụ Kiện Trẻ Cóc</i>	Tú Mỡ	Pink Book
	<i>Bà Túng</i>	Tú Mỡ	Pink Book #26
	<i>Hai Tháng của Một Hướng</i>	V. Minh	Pink Book #28
	<i>Đạo Sinh Việt Nam, Tap 1</i>		

	<i>Hai Tháng của Một Hương</i>	V. Minh	Pink Book #29
	<i>Đạo Sinh Việt Nam, Tập 2</i>		
<b>1943</b>	<i>Đứa Con</i>	Đỗ Đức Thu	
	<i>Bông Cúc Huyền</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book
	<i>Thanh Đức</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Anna Karenina</i>	Lev Tolstoy, trans. Vũ Ngọc Phan	
	<i>Sách Rừng 1</i>	Rudyard Kipling, trans. Huyền Hà	Pink Book
	<i>Hà Nội Băm Sáu Phố</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Phường</i>		
	<i>Giai Phẩm</i>	Trần Tiêu, Nguyễn Tuân, Bùi Hiền, Thanh Tịnh	
	<i>Bạch Tuyết và Bảy Chú Lùn</i>	Tú Mỡ	Pink Book
	<i>Hương Xa</i>		
<b>1944</b>	<i>Robinson</i>	Daniel Dafoe, trans. Thế Lữ	
	<i>Cô Bé Đuôi Cá</i>	Hans Christian Andersen, trans. Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book
	<i>Con Chim Họa Mi</i>	Hans Christian Andersen, trans. Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #32
	<i>Con Đường Sáng</i>	Hoàng Đạo	2nd ed
	<i>Con Hươu Sao</i>	Hoàng Đạo	Pink Book #31
	<i>Đứa Bé Đi Câu</i>	Huyền Kiêu	Pink Book #30
	<i>Đạo Sĩ</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book
	<i>Thầy Đội Nhất</i>	Khái Hưng	Pink Book #33
	<i>Cái Ve</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Cách Ba Nghìn Năm</i>	Khánh Cung	
	<i>Châu Đảo</i>	Robert Louis Stevenson, trans. Vũ Ngọc Phan	
	<i>Sách Rừng 2</i>	Rudyard Kipling, trans. Huyền Hà	Pink Book
	<i>Sách Rừng 3</i>	Rudyard Kipling, trans. Huyền Hà	Pink Book
	<i>Sách Rừng 4</i>	Rudyard Kipling, trans. Huyền Hà	Pink Book
	<i>Bức Màn Sơn</i>	Somerset Maugham, trans. Huyền Hà	Loại Gió Bốn Phương
	<i>Hạt Ngọc</i>	Thạch Lam	Pink Book #12
	<i>Gió Đầu Mùa</i>	Thạch Lam	
	<i>Chị và Em</i>	Thanh Tịnh	



	<i>Gói Thuốc Lá</i>	Thế Lữ	2nd edition
	<i>Lê Phong</i>	Thế Lữ	
	<i>Lên Chùa</i>	Thiện Sĩ	Pink Book #14
	<i>Hoa Lá</i>		Loại Gió Bốn Phương
<b>1945</b>	<i>Hoa Vòng Vàng</i>	Đỗ Tôn	
	<i>Đợi Chờ</i>	Khái Hưng	
	<i>Miếng Bánh</i>	Nguyễn Hồng	
	<i>Hoa Niên</i>	Tế Hanh	
???	<i>Ký ức Của Con Vện</i>	Trần Tiêu	