

CHAPTER 3

Knowledge in Motion

Increasing Vietnamese acceptance of Western studies, the institutionalization of *quốc ngữ* instruction at the elementary level, and a vibrant, mobile space were significant drivers of the socio-cultural transformation of Vietnamese society during the interwar period. Mobility engendered by the development of new transportation networks revolutionized the ways Vietnamese used and perceived space. The dramatic improvements in infrastructure following the Great War gave possibility to frequent long distance travel. Far from a place of circumscription and surveillance in which mobility was restricted, the colony became a dynamic environment of near-constant movement. Vietnamese used new infrastructure and novel transportation systems, including motorized transportation and the railroad, to re-imagine the possibilities of their lived space.

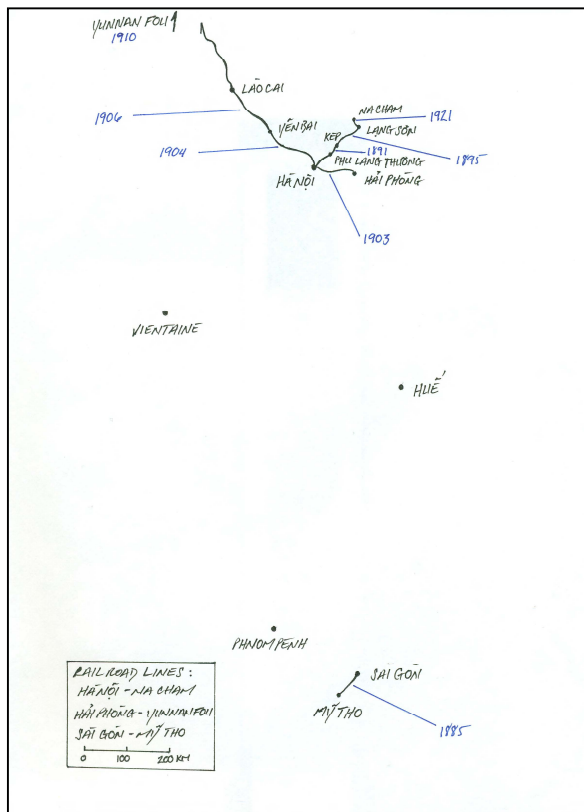
By the late 1920s, the wide acceptance of colonial education had given rise to a diffuse network of elementary and communal schools. This network reflected well-established Vietnamese socio-cultural norms concerning the utility of education. Partially because the Franco-Việt system was yet in its infancy, students who continued their studies beyond the elementary and primary levels often had to physically relocate to do so. Student movement, increasingly made possible by advancements in infrastructure, carried novel manners of thinking, acting, and being from centers of education throughout colonial space. Returning students taught family and friends the rudiments of *quốc ngữ*, providing literacy to untold numbers and dramatically altering the nature of late colonial society.

Revolution in Asphalt and Iron

One of the most striking aspects of Vietnamese literature from the interwar period is the abundance of narratives that took place ‘on the road’. From the fictionalized characters of Hoàng Ngọc Phách’s novel *Tố Tâm* leaving the city for the beach a hundred kilometers distant, to Nguyễn Tuân’s autobiographical essays in which he scales the length and breadth of Vietnamese space only to return home so that he can do it again, unencumbered mobility was central.¹ Of the many sources I have read from the period (including novels, short stories, newspaper articles, *reportage*, plays, poetry, and autobiographical accounts) in which fictional characters or real people travel in the colony, I cannot recall a single instance in which their ability to move from one location to another was circumvented by authorities, French or Vietnamese. The perception conveyed in much of the existing scholarship on colonial Việt Nam and on colonialism in general, that the colonial state possessed the power to reach into individual lives and the ability to curtail movement via bureaucratic documents and omnipresent surveillance, is not indicative of the historical record.² While such visions gel with those that proclaim an almost complete lack of liberal freedoms, they too cannot withstand closer scrutiny.

This is not to say that there were no laws regulating the movement of *indigenes* in the colony, there most certainly were. However, regulations did not inhibit the vast majority from moving within and between the three administrative zones of French Indochina that would become Việt Nam. Under the regulations governing movement in Indochina, men over 18 years of age traveling within their home ‘country’ (i.e. *Tonkin*, *Annam*, or *Cochinchine*) were required to produce one of the following documents if questioned by authorities: a tax ID card, a military booklet with photo or finger prints, or a booklet identifying the holder as a domestic worker.³ If questioned, women over 18 were asked for any form of identification. Men and women over 18 who traveled from one ‘country’ in Indochina to another (i.e. from *Tonkin* to *Annam* or *Cochinchine*) were supposed to possess an ID card which contained, amongst other information, their marital status, location of origin, and a photo or finger prints (much like the current National Vietnamese ID card).⁴ If an individual could not produce this documentation, in theory they became subject to interrogation and a fine of 1-15 *francs*.⁵

The above regulations on mobility were promulgated in 1918, the same year the colonial highway system was established. As we will see below, Vietnamese traffic increased dramatically from the mid 1920s, in large measure because of urbanization. Though it is not within the scope of this work to address all the reasons for urban migration during the interwar period, economic mobility and educational advancement were chief among them, as was the cultural and social attraction of the city, particularly amongst youth. The appearance and then exponential growth of Vietnamese bus companies facilitated and reflected the increase in people taking to the road. The growth of motor vehicle traffic on the burgeoning colonial highway system was so intense that it caused a two-fold crisis in the North in the mid and late 1920s.



Map 1. Hà Nội-Na Cham, Hải Phòng-Yunnan-fou, and Sài Gòn-Mỹ Tho Railroad lines.

First, increased traffic was destroying the roads, so much so that the Chief Engineer of Public Works in *Tonkin* advised the Governor General to drastically curtail traffic on certain routes.⁶ Second, increased motor traffic created safety concerns. From the late 1920s, a slew of reports by the Service of Public Works as well as private organizations such as the *Automobile and Motorcycle Club of Tonkin, Annam, and Laos*, explained how Vietnamese-operated buses often showed their disregard for traffic laws.⁷ The French and Vietnamese business community demanded and obtained a repeal of a law passed in 1925 at the behest of the Chief Engineer concerned with the condition of the roads; the administration had to repair and reinforce the highways rather than limit traffic.⁸ The amelioration of safety concerns was another matter. From at least 1928, the Service of Public Works and organizations like the *Automobile and Motorcycle Club* demanded the creation of traffic police. That demand was granted in the North and the Center in 1931 with the establishment of the *Police de la Route* (from here ‘Traffic Police’).⁹

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The Traffic Police were charged with policing the movement of millions in an era of drastically increased possibility and speed. They attempted to accomplish this task via three means: fixed posts, foot and bicycle patrols, and by car and motorcycle (for “important trips”).¹⁰ Fixed posts had existed for sometime.ⁱ Their duty was to catalogue traffic on a certain stretch of road. For example, they recorded how many cars, buses, bicycles, motorcycles, rickshaws, people on foot, water-buffalo, cows, and carts passed the post during a set period of time (usually several months).¹¹ Officials compiled such information into reports and sent the findings to the central authorities. Amongst their myriad other duties, the Traffic Police were charged with ensuring buses and their operators were properly licensed. Ideally, they would also check passengers for the documentation outlined above, a task that remained more fantasy than reality due to then volume of buses passing through posts daily. Police at the fixed posts sparsely dotting Colonial Routes were often the only ‘line of defense’ ensuring travelers possessed the required documentation. The administration did not have the resources to provide effective surveillance of mobility. Foot and bicycle patrols were limited to urban areas. There were not enough cars and motorcycles to adequately purge the highways of traffic violations let alone check each passenger’s documentation on the hundreds of buses on the road from the late 1920s. In a long letter to the administration the President of the aforementioned *Automobile and Motorcycle Club* lamented such impotence by imploring the Traffic Police to augment their negligible presence by at least giving the impression of “active surveillance”.¹² My research has unearthed no documentation suggesting that individuals were asked for their ‘papers’ while boarding buses (or for that matter trains).ⁱⁱ The documents I have analyzed portray a colony where such surveillance was rare to non-existent. With few exceptions, Vietnamese were free to utilize the colonial highway system and motorized transport as they wished. All evidence points to the fact that they did so with unique relish.

The interwar period witnessed the construction of the colonial highway system, a dramatic increase in motorized transport in the colony, and the completion of the pan-Indochinese railway stretching from China into Cambodia. The first railway line in Indochina,

ⁱ Note: Prior to the creation of the Traffic Police, agents from the Service of Public Works manned these posts.

ⁱⁱ Note: Because ticketing agents were supposed to gather tickets from each passenger, this type of check seems to me to have been theoretically more plausible on trains.

completed in 1885, ran from Sài Gòn southwest to the Mekong Delta town of Mỹ Tho. For much of the remainder of the 19th and early 20th centuries, railroad construction moved north and was chiefly designed to connect Hà Nội (the capital of Indochina) and Hải Phòng (the chief port in the North) to the Chinese border and beyond. Lines were planned from Hà Nội to both the northeast and the northwest. The Hà Nội – Na Cham line was the first to begin construction. Its initial segment from Kep to Phu Lang Thuong was completed in May of 1891. From there, the line reached Lạng Sơn to the northeast in 1895, and Hà Nội, to the southeast, seven years later in 1902 (see map above). It took almost twenty more years for the rails to reach Na Cham, which they finally did in November of 1921. The Hà Nội – Yunnan-fou line began construction around the turn of the century with the completion of the segment from the port of Hải Phòng to Hà Nội in 1903. Seven years later railcars were able to travel from Hà Nội into Yunnan far to the northwest. While displaying amazing feats of engineering, these early efforts highlighted the two difficulties of rail construction in Indochina: expenditure and time. The difficult topography and lack of existing infrastructure caused construction to run over budget and take much longer than anticipated. Furthermore, while their purpose was to promote trade with China and to provide commercial lubricants in Indochina, these railroads cost the administration more than they were to recoup for years to come.

Despite such concerns, railroad building continued in the first decade of the century. The main line in Indochina, that from Hà Nội to Sài Gòn, was constructed from both ends and the middle: The railroad from Hà Nội south to Ninh Bình was completed in January of 1903 and that from Biên Hoà southwest to Sài Gòn a year later. The line from Huế to Đà Nẵng was finished in November of 1906. By 1905, the line from Hà Nội reached Vinh (in northern *Annam*) while that from Sài Gòn extended north to Nhà Trang (in southern *Annam*) by April of 1912 (see map below). It would take another twenty-four years to complete the line and for trains to run directly from Hà Nội to Sài Gòn. The reasons for the delay were multiple. Like the rail lines constructed to the Chinese border, the railroad that would stretch the length of the colony proved much more difficult and costly to construct than anticipated. While the railroads were a boon for private capital, the administration received little direct financial benefit, often struggling to break-even. The First World War, which undoubtedly decreased the amount of funding available from the metropole for colonial infrastructure projects, was also a factor in the postponement of rail construction. Finally, in the second and third decades of the twentieth

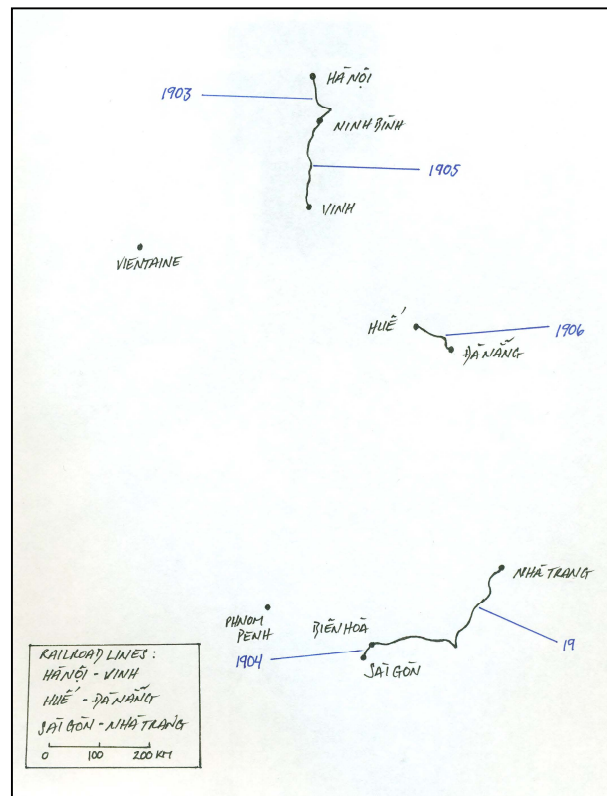
century the administration discovered that roads were cheaper and easier to augment and construct than rail lines. The ensuing dramatic increase in roads and motorized transportation had the potential to open every space in the colony in a fashion more economically feasible than the railroad.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the very year construction of the Hà Nội – Sài Gòn line was effectively suspended (1912), the Governor General of Indochina, Albert Sarraut, developed a plan to establish a pan-Indochina system of highways. Sarraut envisioned a centralized effort, the majority of funding for which would come from the General Budget of Indochina

(which also paid for the lion's share of rail construction).¹³ In June of 1918 the Government General inaugurated the highway system Sarraut envisioned.¹⁴ The new regulations called for two different categories of roads: Colonial Routes were to span provinces and administrative zones, Local Routes were meant to be provincial or regional.¹⁵ A total of nineteen Colonial Routes were to be constructed and/or improved, ideally so that motor vehicles could traverse them most of the year. The routes were numbered. For example,

Colonial Route 1, stretched from the Chinese border south and then west to the Siamese border. Colonial Route 18 went from Hà Nội to Quảng Yên (now Quảng Ninh) province to its northeast. The colonial highway system was to create arteries of communication connecting the regions and territories of the colony. Local Routes were to connect to Colonial Routes in a system that spanned the width and breadth of the colony.

A network of this type was completely novel. To the first decades of the 20th century there existed no north-south artery in Việt Nam that offered the possibility of rapid locomotion, like the Chaophraya or Irrawaddy rivers in Siam and Burma respectively. The 'Mandarin Road',



Map 2. Hà Nội-Vinh, Huế-Đà Nẵng, and Sài Gòn-Nhà Trang Railroad Lines.

which would become Colonial Route 1, became such an artery during the interwar period. Construction began on the highway in 1913 and continued without interruption well into the 1920s. The French condescendingly called the Mandarin Road a “road in name only”¹⁶, because prior to its transformation into a (two lane) ‘highway’ it was more or less a dirt path along which the most common form of locomotion was by foot. Affluent mandarins traveled the road in chairs carried by porters. They were followed by their luggage (also born by servants) creating caravan-like scenes. The development of infrastructure and transportation drastically transformed movement within the span of a decade; those who traveled by foot in the 1910s were passengers on buses and trains by the mid 1920s. By the time of the Japanese occupation in 1940, roads emanating from urban centers reached many of the most remote spaces in the colony stitching the nation of Việt Nam in gravel and asphalt.

The administration did not construct these roads for the purposes of individual or collective indigenous mobility. Like the railroad, but to a much greater extent, roads were constructed mainly for economic development and exploitation. For example, in areas already

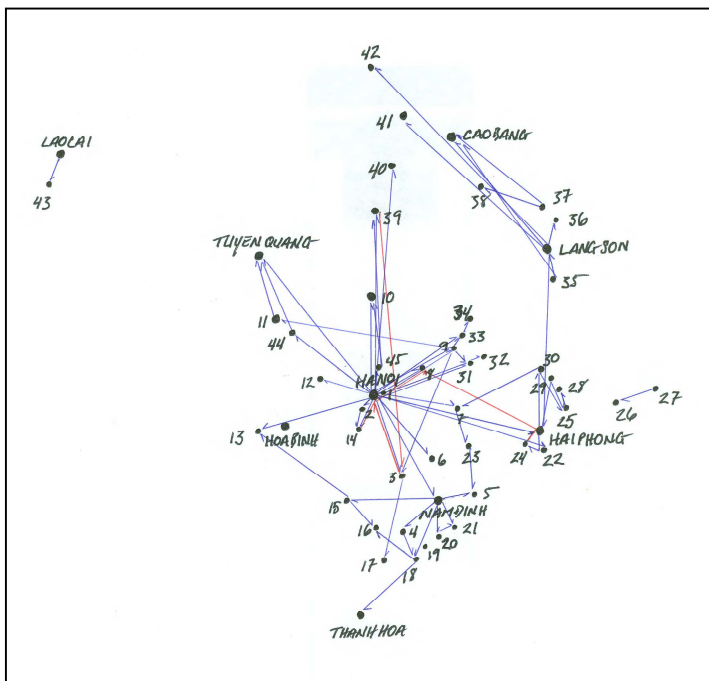


Photograph 13. Road construction, c. 1925.

exploited by foreign capital, new and/or improved roads permitted the extraction of raw materials with greater efficiency. Roads opened the vast spaces that remained ‘untapped’, like the central and northern highlands, to development and exploitation. They also created the possibility of migration to more remote areas from population centers like the Red River Delta (something the administration encouraged and at

times forced). My concern here is less how infrastructure facilitated economic development and exploitation than how the existence of these systems in conjunction with new knowledge and manners of being allowed the Vietnamese to transform their culture and society.

The development of the colonial highway system in concert with public transportation revolutionized Vietnamese relation to and use of space in all regions of the colony. From 1915 to 1918 (the year the colonial highway system was founded) the total value of motor vehicle imports in Indochina was between one and two million *francs*. In 1922 imports surpassed fifteen million *francs* and two years later were more than thirty-five million.¹⁷ By May of 1926 there were over ten thousand motor vehicles in the colony, many of which were engaged in public transportation. Indeed, as a 1926 report on infrastructure noted: “More and more *indigenes* are



Map 3. Bus itineraries, 1928. See endnote no. 20 for map key.

traveling by automobile all the time. This tendency has led to the extremely rapid development of public transportation companies.”¹⁸ In 1922 there were only seventeen bus companies in the North, three years later that number increased to ninety-six.¹⁹ Such increases corresponded to the growing number of roads that could be traversed by motor vehicle.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1928 both highways and bus itineraries crisscrossed the landscape (see map).²⁰ In the North, one could travel between almost any small or large provincial center and Hà Nội. From Hà Nội one

could also reach by bus the border areas in the far north, like Tuyên Quang, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Bắc Kạn and indeed all areas of the Protectorate. By 1937 there were close to three hundred bus companies operating in the North. The importance and popularity of motorized transport were reflected by the fact that twelve of those companies ploughed their trade between

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: The system of roads was much more developed in the South as compared to the Center and the North prior to the establishment of the colonial highway system. The reasons for this were likely three-fold: the longer period of direct colonization in the South, relative lack of railroad construction, and more developed agri-based exploitation, especially rubber. This development of roads was reflected in the much larger number of bus companies and buses in the South. In 1922 there were 268 companies operating 690 buses, by 1925 there were 513 companies and 1,075 buses.

the far northern provincial center of Cao Bằng and the town of Tĩnh Túc, seventy kilometers distant.²¹

From the mid 1920s when motor transport began to explode, most bus companies were Vietnamese owned and operated. The French did not anticipate the rapid growth of Vietnamese traffic because they assumed highway construction to be an extravagant expense whose primary purpose was to enhance the comfort of the European population in the colony.²² Indeed a comprehensive body of traffic and road regulations did not exist until November 1926.²³ At that time, regulations made for the metropole were adopted for use in the colony via Presidential decree. Rules and regulations created in and for France, including speed limits and licensing, were superimposed onto a colony whose bureaucracy did not possess the numbers or cultural acumen necessary to translate them into local idiom. The original decree was modified five times in an effort to make the metropolitan law intelligible in the colony. Finally, in June 1931, a formal body of traffic regulations was created for Indochina.²⁴

Regulations governing automobiles had existed in the colony from at least the second decade of the century.²⁵ In 1920, just as construction of the highway system was beginning, a law was passed in the North with regards to public transportation. Under this law those operating bus companies were required to provide the office of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* with the following information: number and type of vehicles, nature of service, routes of operation, days and hours of operation, and fees charged as well as the maximum speed of individual vehicles and the number of passengers they could carry.²⁶ Because the administration did not anticipate the explosion of companies and vehicles in the 1920s, this system of registration proved onerous and unrealistic. By the early 1930s, rather than provide the information above directly to the central authorities in Hà Nội, individuals and companies began to register locally. The offices of provincial Residents were made responsible for notifying the central administration of registrations.²⁷

The combination of exploding travel, an absence of traffic police until the early 1930s, and continuing highway construction rendered roads spaces of lawless fluidity. A sense of ‘freedom’ contributed to the distinctly Vietnamese manner of going and being on the road. In the 1920s and 1930s report after report lamented the Vietnamese ‘style’ of travel. In one such report in 1928, the Chief Engineer of Public Works in *Tonkin* provided the Government General with the following assessment of the state of Vietnamese buses: “Bus companies have not

stopped increasing. There are currently 162 such companies operating 353 authorized vehicles. Most of those vehicles... do not observe the rules and regulations in the '*Code de la Route*'.²⁸ This is particularly true with regards to the authorized number of passengers and the speed limit. Currently, buses operate with double or triple the number of passengers permitted. While those vehicles are authorized to travel at 25 or 30 km/hour, they often travel at over 50 km/hour. They travel at such high speeds to get their passengers to their destinations faster than their competitors...²⁹ Vietnamese companies ignored and openly flouted both general traffic regulations and those prescribed specifically for public transportation. In the late 1920s, the administration lacked the means to prevent such infractions, as the Chief Engineer noted: "An extreme number of traffic violations have been issued by the Service of Public Works' traffic agents. This method of control and punishment has proven insufficient in curbing the countless abuses that endanger public safety."³⁰ The number of vehicles on the road overwhelmed the Service of Public Works. The Chief Engineer lamented his helplessness in the report to the Governor General: "The number of violations very often overwhelms the number of agents in my service. With some justification, agents are demoralized at their inability to adequately provide public security..."³¹ The solution offered by the Engineer was to take public safety out of the hands of his office by creating an organization specially charged with policing the roads: "I advise the creation of a special service charged with policing the roads to remedy this situation. A similar service has already been created in the metropole. While I do not know the conditions of this service precisely, its establishment in Indochina should be decreed very soon..."³²

In response to such reports and demands the Traffic Police were created in the early 1930s. However, the police were scarcely more able to resolve the problems (as the administration saw them) than their predecessors in the Services of Public Works. In a letter to the Governor General in the early 1930s, M. Lecorche, the President of the *Automobile and Motorcycle Club of Tonkin, Annam, and Laos*, described the conditions of the roads thus: "At the present time, there is not an automobile in Indochina that does not encounter a multiplicity of dangers each time it takes to the road: a child wandering in the middle of the road so absorbed that he does not even hear the roar of the engine, a water-buffalo springing forth from the bush, a rundown cart with an oversized load, a bus traveling by night without headlights, an obstacle without warning, etc. etc. This situation has been the cause of numerous accidents. It urgently needs to be fixed."³³ According to the President of the *Auto Club* the solution to such problems

was relatively straightforward. He called for everyone who used the roads to strictly abide by the regulations set forth in the *Code de la Route* (the body of road regulations created in 1931)



Photograph 14. Interwar era traveler.

and for a uniform regime of street signs and signals. While the latter would not be implemented until the mid 1930s, Lecomte had an immediate solution for the former. He called for the parties that used the roads to be instructed that self-disciplined obedience to the rules of the road was in their personal interest.³⁴ He must have been in Indochina long enough to know that the value he placed on those regulations might not be shared by

the Vietnamese. Admitting that self-policing was insufficient, the President suggested the Traffic Police should at least give the impression that they carried out “active surveillance at all times”.³⁵ According to Lecomte, the Traffic Police were barely visible: “... at the moment Traffic Police are to be found only in big cities... Their existence has by and large proven ineffective. Sixty policemen at forty different posts with only two vehicles between them are, amongst other things, supposed to police more than 13,000 kilometers of roadways! It is certain that under these conditions, when almost all those who use the roads remain ignorant of their obligations, that it is absolutely impossible for the *Code de la Route* to be followed.”³⁶ It was thus because of general ignorance of the rules of the road and lack of police presence on almost any stretch of road in Indochina that the regulations were almost totally ignored.

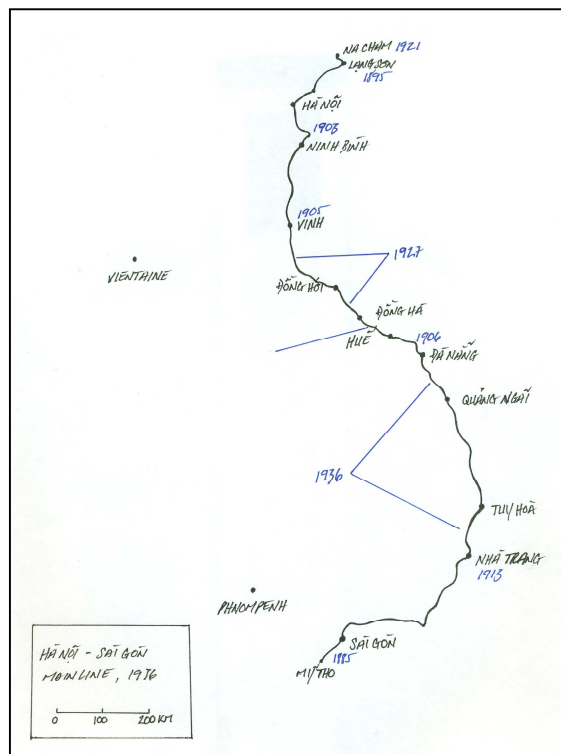
The President saved his most vociferous criticism for the motor vehicles that competed for space with those of the *Auto Club*: “We have already apprised the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* of the situation concerning buses. We asked that measures be put in place to limit the number of those diabolical vehicles...”³⁷ Their burgeoning number and speed rendered the transgressions of buses especially dangerous. In this case it was not enough to instruct drivers in the *Code de la Route* or make sure they knew strict regulations were for the mutual benefit of

everyone on the road. Those who plied their trade on the road knew of the general dearth of police. To reform the way Vietnamese buses used the road called for a special solution: “We request the creation of a specially trained detachment within the Traffic Police... with a sufficient number of fast vehicles. This detachment should have posts on Hanoi, Hai Phong, Lang Son, Bac Kan, Nam Dinh, Vinh, and Hue. Each of these seven posts should have a powerful motorcycle. The post in Hanoi should also have two motorbikes and a fast car...”³⁸ Speed was needed to counter speed. But even this idea, in theory as in practice, proved more or less useless. Vietnamese continued to pack as many people as could fit into buses and speed down the road towards their destination for the remainder of the colonial period and beyond. Like so many other phenomena during this epoch, enforcement proved impossible: there existed too much open space and non-cooperation. Vietnamese knew that their way of going was deemed ‘illegal’, but they continued to ignore the regulations because the benefits of doing so out-weighed the possibility and costs of punishment.

The dramatic increase of Vietnamese owned and operated buses was partially due to the advantage motorized transport enjoyed over the railroad. Once a navigable road was constructed its use was public. Any private individual in the colony, whether s/he was Vietnamese, French, or Chinese, with the means to start a bus company was able to obtain the requisite licensing with which to do so with relative ease. The evidence cited above, in conjunction with the Vietnamese narratives examined below, suggests that Vietnamese did so in abundance in all areas of the colony. From the mid 1920s, competition from buses created financial difficulties for the Railroad of Indochina. Following the completion of the first rail lines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became apparent to the administration that the costs incurred and time required for rail construction in Indochina meant that it would take years for them to see any return on investment. By their very nature, rail lines service a relatively circumscribed area. Because of this, secondary roads are needed if the full utility of railroads is to be realized. The administration recognized this fact via the costly experiments with rail construction in the North. The relative lack of rail lines in the South did not inhibit exploitation and economic development due to the fact that the South had a much more developed system of roads than any other region of the colony. When combined with motorized transport, roads proved to be a more efficient and less expensive means of exploiting economic possibilities. It was at least partially the case that the development of the colonial highway system following the Great War grew from the

juxtaposition of infrastructural systems in *Tonkin* and *Cochinchine*. The colonial highway system offered an alternative means of shipping, which siphoned business from the railroad. By the early 1920s the railroad was monetarily dependent on passenger traffic rather than cargo. From the mid 1920s, increased competition from bus companies took passengers off the trains. Not only did the highways under construction run parallel to the existing rail lines, many roads reached areas untouched by the railroad. Furthermore, the clientele serviced by the railroad and the buses was the same: those looking for the cheapest and most rapid form of transport. For example, in 1927 fourth-class passengers accounted for 97% of all rail passengers.³⁹ The story was the same in 1938 when 98% of all passengers traveled fourth-class.⁴⁰ Because buses provided a less expensive and more convenient option, those fourth-class passengers increasingly elected to travel by bus.

The danger posed to the profitability of the railroad by buses was recognized almost immediately. In 1923, when motorized transport in the colony began to dramatically increase,



Map 4. Hà Nội-Sài Gòn Mainline, 1936.

the Railroad of Indochina enjoyed a profit margin of 21.2%.⁴¹ By 1927 that number dropped to 8.2%.⁴² In a 1932 report, the Inspector General of Public Works recognized the railroad had to “adapt to the needs and desires of the public” in order to compete with buses.⁴³ The Service of Public Works and Railroad of Indochina sought to level the playing field in two ways. The first was to reduce the price of fourth-class tickets so as to make them more competitive with bus fares. The second was to increase regulations regarding bus travel. Amongst the new regulations enacted were those prohibiting companies from boarding their buses in the streets directly adjacent to rail stations and running routes parallel to the railroad at the same time trains were running.⁴⁴ Such measures proved largely ineffective.

In the same report cited above, the Inspector General stated that the Railroad of Indochina ran a deficit of 300,000 *francs* in 1932.⁴⁵ By the late 1930s it became clear that the railroad had lost its

“struggle” against motorized transport. While the 1930s witnessed an overall increase in the amount of passenger traffic in the colony, the railroad saw its numbers decline. In 1938 the Railroad of Indochina serviced 2.4 million fewer passengers than it had a decade before.⁴⁶

In short, while the colonial highway system and motor traffic increased the possibilities of Vietnamese mobility, they decreased the prominence of the railroad. This is not to say that the railroad was reduced to insignificance by the late 1930s, only that it had become one part of a larger, more complex system of transportation. It was in fact during those same years, in the late 1920s and 1930s, that the administration recommenced rail construction. The Hà Nội – Sài Gòn line, stretching from China into the Mekong Delta, was completed in 1936 (see map). The rail line from Hà Nội to Sài Gòn provided ultimate fluidity of movement, stitching the three administrative zones of the colony, in a manner more profound than even Colonial Route 1. Its completion allowed travel from one city to the other in two days on an express train. Perhaps more importantly, shorter, inter-regional trips became possible. For example, it became possible to take the train from Đà Nẵng to Sài Gòn or from Hà Nội to Huế. This seamlessness was imperative because it rendered fragmented journeys increasingly obsolete (see below). Buses, while prolific, were mostly intra-regional enterprises. That is, they traveled chiefly within and not between the three administrative zones of *Tonkin*, *Annam*, and *Cochinchine*. The portrait that coalesced by the mid 1930s was one in which Vietnamese were able to use both the highway system, motorized transportation, and the railroad to use space in ways unimaginable only a short time before.

On the Road

For most students during the interwar period, continuing their studies beyond the elementary level meant moving to a provincial or regional center where most primary and secondary schools were located. This presented an additional complication and/or impediment to education for the rural masses whose lives and livelihoods were very much attached to the land. Article 75 of the General Regulations on Franco-Viêt Education called for two categories of ‘primary schools’, elementary (grades 1-3) and primary (grades 4-6). Bourcier Saint Chaffray, the Director of Primary Education in *Tonkin* at the time of the advent of the system in

1917, helped formulate those regulations. Of the distinction he commented: “By providing the poor manual laborer a minimum of indispensable instruction, elementary schools will supply the rural masses with the education necessary to live modestly... After three or four years of study, the vast majority of students will return to their hometowns. Only a very small number who wish to build upon scholastic success and who possess an above average intelligence and an ambition to study will continue to primary school.”⁴⁷ While the imperial condescension of St. Chaffray's words is obvious, the system he helped establish was hardly stagnant; as I attempted to establish in the first chapter, it evolved with time in ways its creators would never have envisioned (or in many cases, sanctioned). From the beginnings of the system, primary schools were also meant to be diffuse – that is, placed throughout the colonial landscape so as to make primary education ‘reasonably available’ to children in all areas.

By 1923, almost every province and military territory in the North had at least one primary school for both boys and girls (the exceptions were the province of Hoa Bình and the military territories of Hà Giang and Lào Cai, each of which had a boys’, but not a girls’ primary school).⁴⁸ Most provinces had three to five primary schools (i.e. schools that offered both the elementary and primary cycles; grades 1-6). While this was particularly true for the provinces of the Red River Delta, the provinces and military territories to the far north like Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Tuyên Quang also had at least three schools by 1923.⁴⁹ In the North, Hà Nội was the center of education as Sài Gòn was the center in the South and Huế the hub in the Center. Each contained many primary schools, several secondary schools, and in Hà Nội's case, the Schools that would coalesce into the University of Indochina. In particular, the two poles of the bipolar realm attracted thousands of students. However, in strictly numerical terms, Hà Nội was not the capital of primary education in the North. In the late 1920s that honor belong to Nam Định province to the city's southeast which serviced 10,619 students to Hà Nội's 6,098.⁵⁰ Thái Bình province, just to the east of Nam Định rivaled Hà Nội with 5,450 students. Most provinces in the North had well over a thousand students enrolled. Along with Hà Nội, Nam Định, and Thái Bình, the municipality Hải Phòng, the provinces of Bắc Giang, Bắc Ninh, Hà Đông, Hưng Yên, Phú Thọ, and Sơn Tây, and the military territory of Cao Bằng each had more than a thousand students in primary schools by 1927.

By contemporary standards these numbers are modest. However, they are much more significant than raw statistics suggest, something covered in detail at the conclusion of this chapter and in Chapter 5. My point is not to suggest that the Franco-Viêt education system provided anything close to universal primary education, but that the opportunity to receive a Western education from grade 1 to grade 6 was relatively widespread. Be this as it may, because the Vietnamese population itself was highly diffuse, most students had to travel some distance in order to attend a primary school. Their physical movement and its larger socio-cultural implications are considered below. For many, the opportunity to travel was made possible through a multiple year stay with friends or relatives. Others boarded at dormitories or more often with teachers and locals who took in boarders to supplement income. In all cases, the content of that education, their journey to and from the school, and the school as site became an important part of a child's education.

Groups journeying to distant locales were not new to this period of Vietnamese history. People took to the road in search of work or to travel to a market town to sell their wares. In times of hardship during the pre-colonial era, families might be forced to relocate in search of a better life. Officials and their families moved from one post to another. What was novel to the late colonial period was the rapid evolution of the means of mobility, stimuli to movement, and consequent increase of the number of people on the road. Students provide ideal subjects for the study of the evolution of mobility during the late colonial period due to the facts that they were a relatively homogenous group in terms of age and purpose for relocation. Although modern schools became more numerous, the necessity of relocation continued throughout the era, particularly at the secondary level. Young people undertook frequent and regular migrations, often two to three times per year, according to the rhythms of the academic calendar. Due to the centralization of education throughout the colony, the time and reason for such migrations was basically identical south to north. Their regularity through time permits the study of Vietnamese narratives alongside the archival sources examined above. In conjunction, these sources provide a detailed picture of the development of infrastructure and corresponding services during the interwar period. Finally, 'student movement' is particularly significant because such young people were in a unique position to act as conduits and arbiters of the knowledge absorbed in the

classroom and in the towns and cities in which they studied. This final point is addressed in more detail in the final section of the chapter.

In the 1910s, young people began to appear on the road prior to the beginning of the school year in early September and again at its conclusion the following June. Their journeys represent a kind of early going (and returning) that lacked the fluency and speed they would later acquire: “Each summer vacation we saw groups of young students returning to their hometowns from the urban centers in which they studied forty to fifty kilometers distant. A few days after the last day of class, usually on the night of the 15th day of the lunar month when the full moon shone above, a group of five to ten students took to the road. They ranged in age from nine to thirteen and were either from the same hometown, prefecture, or district. After a large meal at one of their boarding houses, they set off just as lights began to illuminate the city streets.”⁵¹ Many such youths tread



Photograph 15. Voyageurs along the Mandarin Road in *Annam*

the Mandarin Road, which was being transformed into Colonial Route 1. They walked by night so as to avoid the tropical sun, choosing to make their voyage beneath the auspicious light of a full moon. This movement was representative of a new manner of ritual. Rather than going to the temple on the day of a full moon, as many Vietnamese do, they made use of its light on the road: “Frogs croaked in the rice fields at either side of the long Mandarin Route. The students teased and joked as they made their way under the moonlight so as to forget just how much longer they had to go.”⁵² The security moonlight provided was a necessary precaution, not only to avoid the utter darkness, but as protection from the dangers of the road, the emptiness of space, and the night: “The highway was completely empty, there was not a single person on it. It was well past midnight and the students had traveled over ten kilometers. As they grew tired, their laughter and the sound of their voices subsided. The increasing silence gave rise to fear... A

few of the students wore wooden clogs. The sound of the clogs hitting the asphalt began to scare them so they took them off and carried them.”⁵³

Folk-wisdom permitted students’ safe return home in the second decade of the 20th century. The voyagers’ elders taught them how to combat the most dangerous of hazards on the road and the reason for much of their fear, the ghost: “Following their parents’ advice, each student carried an iron knife or a mulberry branch (the kind of mulberry silkworms eat) to protect himself when he passed the numerous places with ghosts... Parents often told their children: ‘If you see a ghost, grab your mulberry branch and hit him – he’ll go running!’”⁵⁴ Experience breeds contingency and the case of students on the road was no exception. If a mulberry sprig did not repel the malevolent spirits, schoolchildren had alternatives in their arsenal: “‘If this doesn’t work, then pee in your pants and cover your face and head with the urine – the ghost won’t dare cast its spell on you... If you have an iron knife, ghosts won’t even come close to you...’ Those were the most popular methods of combating ghosts, which all schoolboys knew and used to defend themselves when they left for school or returned to their hometowns by foot for summer vacation.”⁵⁵ While the young people, whose method of mobility is under consideration here, held fast to mulberry branches and iron knives, they also carried the new notions of time and being they absorbed in the colonial school: “Each student had a trunk filled with clothes and books. To make things more convenient they hung their ‘suitcases’ from the middle of a long shoulder pole and took turns bearing the load at both ends as they made their way down the road.”⁵⁶ The networks created by colonial schools spread new knowledge, fostering acceptance, popularity, and prestige for the new outlook, a process that ran parallel to student migrations. Both began at a walking pace and gained speed and profundity with the passage of time.

Novel conceptions of time and new career trajectories were beginning to weave into the fabric of Vietnamese experience beside rituals like traveling beneath the light of the full moon and carrying implements to combat displaced spirits. Socio-cultural changes were initially perceived through existing practice. Nguyễn Vỹ illustrated a young boy’s departure from a rural village in his home province of Quảng Ngãi (Center) to the *Quốc Học* (National School) in Huế in the late summer of 1915. The young man completed his primary school education three years prior to the implementation of the Franco-Việt system. Thereafter he continued his studies at the *Quốc Học* in Huế, which was the only secondary school in the Center until 1920.^{iv} The inherent

^{iv} Note: The *Collège de Vinh* (*Quốc học Vinh*) was established that year.

dangers of the new and unknown needed to be appeased via the known and tested: “Before the young man left for school, his parents asked the local fortuneteller to choose an auspicious day for his departure. The medium told them that the schoolboy should leave on the second day of the eighth lunar month at the hour of the Cat. His father killed a chicken and made chicken porridge as an ancestral offering. He asked them to watch over his son and ensure his peaceful journey. After he finished his prayers, he cut off the chicken's feet and took them to the fortuneteller for his interpretation....”⁵⁷ It was in this way that new socio-cultural experiences were integrated into well-established ritual practices. While the calendar of the colonial school determined the time of year the young man would leave his home to begin his secondary school studies, the specific date and time of his departure were laid in the trusted hands of the village medium.

New phenomena were rendered comprehensible and comfortable through existing ritual. There was contextual seamlessness in the rupture: The young man leaving to study at the *Quốc Học* in Huế in 1915 was no different from his predecessors five or ten years prior who made the same journey to the same school to study the Confucian Classics in preparation for the Imperial examinations. That Western studies were radically different from their classical counterpart did not alter fundamentally the way Vietnamese perceived such a journey c. 1915. Likewise, new manners of transportation were immaterial to that perception. There was a natural fluidity to such changes in the colony, a silent step on the road to making the new and the foreign Vietnamese.

Following the selection of an auspicious date and time and the requisite prayers and rituals, the young man departed. His father accompanied him during the initial leg of the trip. The road was fragmented. The journey to the school and future was divided into legs, each of whose speed increased as the destination neared. Father and son set out early in the morning. They traversed the dike roads and earthen paths from their village to that of Thu Xà on the banks of Colonial Route 1 (which began construction two years before). From there, the boy continued by himself. In Thu Xà he rented a pair of porters who carried him north to the ancient port of Hội An. At Hội An, his pace again quickened as he was pulled in a rickshaw to the French municipality of Đà Nẵng. On the final leg of the journey his speed increased exponentially when he boarded a train for a sojourn on the line between Đà Nẵng and Huế. The young man moved into the future as his speed increased and his method of transport became more audibly and

visibly modern. As his father watched him disappear in the distance resting in a chair supported by two porters, he likely saw the reflection of a classical scholar going to Huế in preparation for the classical examinations. Seated in that chair, his son probably had the same feeling of himself and his mission. As the steel wheels ground against the paved road from Hội An to Đà Nẵng his vision of the road, the journey, and the boy began to change. His perception was irrevocably altered within the fire bellowing train. When the boy of twelve reached his destination he was transformed even before he set foot in a classroom at the *Quốc Học*. Long before the young man reached Huế, his father returned to their village along the same dirt roads whence he came.

At the beginning of the summer of 1916, the schoolboy retraced his journey from the previous August. He began with the breathtaking speed of the train that ran from Huế to Đà Nẵng. When he reached Thu Xà, the town where he parted from his father the year before, his pace became dramatically slower. The road of return was irrevocably altered due to the baggage he carried in his head (knowledge, behavior) and on his person (books, new clothing), the impacts of which are discussed below. Physical speed was cast aside in favor of the more pressing need to bring home the knowledge and prestige of his nine months in Huế: “After he reached Thu Xà, the young man's first order of business was to buy a shoulder pole. He tied his clothing and books to the ends, making them easier to transport the remaining distance home. He brought the books because he wanted to review their content during his three months of summer vacation... he began to walk the ten-plus kilometers home along the newly built road under the hot summer sun...”⁵⁸ The knowledge and experience gained in the school, in the capital, and on the road transformed his perception of space. Through his eyes, that stretch of Colonial Route 1 that formed the initial leg of his journey to the school the previous September was not the same road he encountered on his return in June: “No iron-wheeled rickshaws were to be found along the highway from Thu Xà to the village. In fact, there were no vehicles of any kind. Everybody just walked if they wanted to go anywhere, but most people did not go anywhere at all. There were only a few people who went to the provincial center to sell their wares.”⁵⁹

While continuity via ritual and slow, fragmented journeys were parts of the process of these regularized migrations at their outset, that process was transformed by the mid 1920s. Movement from one's hometown to the school became embedded in the educational experience, much as traveling to take the classical examinations had resonated among previous generations

of aspiring officials. However, as the knowledge and perception of the Western school began to seep into society at large, the visions and correlation between the young person taking to the road to study at a colonial school and his classical counterpart of the past began to blur and then disappear. Only ghosts remained. One of the most striking alterations of that new way of going was the fact that girls appeared beside their male counterparts. Despite their general lack of representation in colonial schools, young women who were permitted to study beyond the elementary level frequently had to relocate to do so. This was the case of Bạch Vân, the future journalist and schoolteacher whom we met above as she took the elementary school examination beside men of her father's age. After she passed that exam, she was able to continue her studies at the primary level. However, because there was no girls' primary school in her hometown, her father had to look for one nearby.⁶⁰ Recall that while elementary and communal schools were co-ed, primary and secondary schools were segregated by gender. By the mid 1920s, when Bạch Vân began her primary school studies, elementary schools were fairly diffuse throughout the three regions of colonial Việt Nam. Primary schools, particularly girls' schools, were scarcer. Girls who were able to continue their studies past the elementary level were required to relocate with greater frequency than their male counterparts. This was the case with Bạch Vân, who at age nine left her home and family in Tam Quan to continue her studies to the north in Đà Nẵng. The young girl did not hesitate at the prospect of continuing her education in that distant locale, the important thing was that she was able to do so: "It gave me no pause; if I had to go, I had to go. The main thing was that I was able to continue my studies. I did not want to have to stay at home and learn how to sew, embroider, cook, and clean like countless other girls."⁶¹

The fact that she was to stay with her grandmother increased Bạch Vân's sense of comfort and excitement at going to Đà Nẵng. Boarding with relatives while studying at the primary or secondary level helped to normalize this movement. Still, the very act of a young girl leaving her home and family to study at a distant locale was something unheard of only a generation before. In the mid 1920s, Bạch Vân was certainly the exception and not the rule. Her father's progressive attitude toward female education and the fact that she had relations in Đà Nẵng were imperative drivers behind her continued education. However, her journey would have been unthinkable without the expectation of her return. The fluidity provided by the developing colonial highway system was the critical new element. Bạch Vân could leave Tam Quan in the morning and reach Đà Nẵng by the early evening via Colonial Route 1. She recalled her father

gently sending her on her way in the mid 1920s: “Every time I went to Đà Nẵng, my father took me from the Thiện Xuân Gate to the Tam Quan Post Office. At the post office he bought me a ticket and then sent me to the bus driver. The bus driver placed me in the seat right behind his. It was as if I was being sent like a package.”⁶² The process became routine as she went and returned; what she did with her luggage, where she sat, and what she ate, were all predetermined. She was even equipped with a towel to wash her face and a book to pass the time on the bumpy road: “I calmly slid into my seat and gave my luggage to the driver. I kept the bag which had my lunch: rice in a bamboo container with grilled pork, a bottle of hot tea, and some bananas, oranges, or a piece of cake. The bag also contained a towel for me to wash my face and a schoolbook to read.”⁶³ Still, her father waited for the bus to exit the post office yard before he returned home. When he left, he knew his mother-in-law would be at the other end of the road to retrieve his daughter. That smoothness rounded the edges of a sojourn that must have been intimidating for the young girl, at least initially: “When we arrived in Đà Nẵng, my grandmother had someone come to pick me up and take me to her house. I did not see any reason to be scared of going on such a trip by myself.”⁶⁴

Nguyễn Vỹ illustrated the journey from a rural village in Quảng Ngãi province to the small city of Qui Nhơn in the late summer 1924, which the writer, journalist, and poet undertook to continue his studies at the College of Qui Nhơn that same year. The comfort with which Bạch Vân sat behind the bus driver on her way to Đà Nẵng was emblematic of the evolution of mobility during the interwar period. However, the increasing frequency of such long journeys in the mid 1920s did not render familiar rituals obsolete. On the contrary, it was often ritual that made the initial moments of separation bearable for both parents and children. As with the older brother who made his first trip to Huế eight years before, food brought comfort and predictability on the road for the younger brother traveling to Qui Nhơn in 1924, as his father’s words indicated: “According to custom passed down through the ages, once you start eating the chicken sausage, you had better eat it all. If you eat it piece by piece, like a chicken, your sight will go dim and you won’t be able to see the road...”⁶⁵ Whether the schoolboy believed that his vision would be blurred if he did not eat all the chicken sausage in one sitting does not matter. Unlike travelers a few years before, he did not walk any leg of his trip to Qui Nhơn. If Việt Nam became a bit blurry through the bus window, it was of no consequence. What did matter was that he carried his hometown and the essence he had grown up with on his person wrapped in

banana leaves and wound tightly with bamboo twine; a physical manifestation of something that would stick with the young man through time and space. Ritual, even one as simple as that described here, was an anchor of identity for young people who moved further and further from known familiarity as they became more deeply immersed in their studies and later in the urban spaces of the colony. Vietnamese made their rapidly evolving society comprehensible through ritual continuity (micro traditions embedded in the macro, pan-Vietnamese identity that was being fabricated during the period). The father in the illustration above had likely never been on a bus. He did not know of the spaces between his village and Qui Nhon. Equipping his son in that way allowed the older man to read the road. It translated the rubber, asphalt, and speed into a process of continuity and familiarity.

That type of translation was imperative because the pace of change was fast, and speeding up. A father's 1915 visions of his son as an aspiring classical scholar on his way to the Imperial capital were outdated by 1924. Part of this had to do with the rapid acceptance of modern studies following the abolition of the classical examinations and advent of the Franco-Việt education system. The development of the colonial highway system and the corresponding popularization of motorized transport were no less important in blurring those visions of the past, and indeed of the Vietnamese landscape itself. To the end of the Great War, the colonial highway system remained in its infancy, more ambition than reality. Đặng Thái Mai, the revolutionary encountered in the previous chapters, provided the following pre-war vision of the road from his rural village to Vinh, the capital of Nghệ An province, where he undertook primary and secondary studies: "The walking-road from Lương Điền village to Vinh was almost forty kilometers long. From Nam Đàn district, vegetation encroached on both sides of the path, beyond which were vast fields and two beautiful lotus ponds that smelled wonderful under the summer sun. Hồ Liễu were those villages that from olden times had the reputation for beautiful, but 'familiar' women..."⁶⁶ By the beginning of the Second World War paved ribbons, passable by motor vehicle, wove their way through the length and breadth of the North, Center, and South. Those roads and the buses and automobiles that traversed them, revolutionized individual and societal relationships with environment no less profoundly than the Ford Motor Company and Model T in the United States.

Recall that when the elder brother in Nguyễn Vỹ's autobiographical account made his initial journey to Huế in 1915, the trip was divided into legs of ever increasing speed and modernity: Begging on foot, he walked to the nearest town. From there, porters carried him to Hội An, where he boarded a rickshaw that pulled him the forty or so kilometers to Đà Nẵng. At Đà Nẵng he boarded a train, which took him the remaining distance to his final destination. In 1915, a road existed connecting the young man's hometown to the Imperial capital less than a hundred kilometers to its north: "The 'Mandarin Road' already existed, but it had just been leveled and paved. Guardrails were beginning to appear on its sides. However, in the rainy season, many stretches were washed out. Only the small rivers and streams had bridges over them. Large rivers had to be traversed by ferry. Despite all this, the 'Mandarin Road', or as the French called it 'Colonial Route 1' connected all the provinces, from Sài Gòn to Huế and onto Hà Nội."⁶⁷ Notwithstanding paved stretches complete with iron railings, the highway retained the natural contours of the region. Numerous rivers and streams divided the landscape. The lack of



Photograph 16. Bus stop in Hà Nội, mid-late 1920s.

bridges inhibited the fluidity that would come with time. The artery connecting north and south remained largely vacant: "During the day the highway was empty. Other than the odd iron-wheeled rickshaw, there were really no vehicles on it..."⁶⁸ Because of the fragmented and seasonal conditions of the road, rapid locomotion was almost completely absent. As indicated above, it was not until the 1920s that bus companies began to develop. During the mid teens there were only a few French-owned buses that ferried people along Colonial Route 1. Rather than promote the allure of rapid travel, the general novelty of those buses bred trepidation in the hearts of those who witnessed their passing: "The bus flew like lightning and sounded like thunder as it sped along the highway. Everyday it created a huge commotion as it passed, scaring the people in the rice fields to both sides of the road half to death; they fled as fast as

they could. The water-buffalo also ran helter-skelter.”⁶⁹ The witnesses of the nascence of what would become a new era of rapid mobility, those farmers and their livestock at the sides of the highway, were frightened and perhaps irritated by the roar of the internal combustion engine as it broke the bucolic rhythm of their lives. Groups of students returning from school by the moonlight of a midsummer's evening kept that beat. So too did the necessary starts and stops of a journey to Huế. In the mid 1920s, that broken rhythm was being reconfigured. By 1924, a schoolboy could be transported the entire 150 or so kilometers by bus from his village in Quảng Ngãi province to the small city of Qui Nhon.

Buses, asphalt, and bridges, made possible that revolution of mobility. A French-owned bus company called *STACA* (the *Societe des Transports Automobiles de Centre Annam*) pioneered modern transport in the colony from the teens. One of the very few such companies at that time, it ran two buses per day between Đà Nẵng and Nhà Trang to its south: “... The buses only had ten seats for ten people, but they also transported the mail. The ten people going from north to south, and the other ten south to north, were almost all wealthy officials or rich merchants.”⁷⁰ By the mid 1920s, competition began to appear in the form of Vietnamese owned and operated companies. As illustrated above, Vietnamese had a style of going and using the road completely distinct from, and often infuriating to, their French counterparts (and many Vietnamese!). That style connoted progress: “Those buses did not depart or arrive at any scheduled time. If they wanted to stop somewhere, they stopped. Passengers were packed in as tight as sardines; it made no difference how many ‘seats’ there were.”⁷¹ The difference between the two was more significant than a malleable vision of time and what constituted a ‘seat’. The Vietnamese bus companies that began appearing on colonial highways from the early 1920s brought the possibility of rapid locomotion to those of even the most modest means. While the affluent could afford to take the more comfortably reliable French coaches, their Vietnamese counterparts provided an alternative for the masses.

Infrastructure and motorized transport exponentially increased the ease of long distance travel, engendering dreams of the road in many. Đặng Thái Mai illustrated the feeling of possibility created by the road, the school, and urban space prior to undertaking his studies in Vinh: “... we were going to go to the provincial center to study French... My cousins and I were so excited. I was the happiest of all. I dreamt of going far from Lương Điền, our remote and deserted village, to live in the city with its large houses, wide streets, and big market and

restaurants and theatres... The city was the place to be, to live happily, to learn, and to hear more of the world.”⁷² Likewise, Nguyễn Vỹ had visions of what it might be like to go as he watched buses stop at his hometown on their way elsewhere: “I loved to go the garden across from the gate of the steel foundry to look at the buses around noon. They stopped there for an hour or so, then they started their engines, bellowed exhaust, and were on their way again...”⁷³ As he stood in that flower garden by the steel foundry surveying the buses with admiration, a question arose in the young man's mind, a query shared by countless of his contemporaries: “‘When would I be able to get on that bus and go somewhere? When?!’ I was not the only one who had never been on a bus. There were only a handful of Vietnamese who had been anywhere by bus.”⁷⁴

The Vietnamese-owned and operated bus companies did not adhere to the regiment proscribed in the *Code de la Route*. Rather, they represented a new, and perhaps more efficient, way of going and using the road. Nguyễn Vỹ illustrated that movement through a schoolboy's journey from Quảng Ngãi province to the College in Qui Nhon in the late summer of 1924. The boy took a Vietnamese owned and operated bus, which was noted both for the equality of its stature and the disparity of its operation vis-à-vis its French-owned counterparts: “The bus was as big as those of the French companies, but the passengers were sandwiched into it... I got a ‘first class’ ticket for a seat at the front of the bus beside the driver, but there were already two other people in the front seat other than the chauffeur. I had to sit between them... On the door of the bus there was a sign that said the maximum occupancy of the vehicle was 21, but there were at least 27 people stuffed into the bus like sardines into a tin. Our luggage was stacked high on the roof. A man teetered at the top of each pile wearing a hat to protect him from the sun.”⁷⁵ Vietnamese companies did not attach the same importance to time schedules as did their French-owned counterparts. The young man going to Qui Nhon in 1924 was not able to have an auspicious moment of departure allocated for him, as his brother had nine years before on his trip to Huế. He departed with the other passengers in the over-crowded bus when the driver and his colleagues had filled every available space to their satisfaction: “It was 8 am, a bright and sunny day, but the bus still had not left. My brother asked the driver: ‘Why does it say that the bus will leave at 7 am on the ticket?’ To which the chauffeur retorted: ‘Mr. Secretary, we are still waiting for two more. When they arrive, we will leave.’ Finally at 8:30 the two errant passengers showed up in a rickshaw. Their large bags were piled atop the others on the roof of the bus...”⁷⁶ The illegally overcrowded bus then took to the road, headed south for Qui Nhon.

To describe a journey like this of around 150 kilometers in the mid 1920s as ‘non-stop’ is a misnomer. It was direct, but there were certainly stops, some planned, others were not. As the bus approached the Bồng Sơn River it broke down. The driver, who was part engineer and part chauffeur, spent three hours tinkering with the engine before it once again roared to life. Other stops were precipitated by the nature of the colonial highway system, which, while much more developed than it had been a decade before, was still a work in progress. The stretch of the old Mandarin Road between Quảng Ngãi and Qui Nhơn had been paved by 1924, but it still lacked several of the bridges required for seamlessness: “The Bồng Sơn River is large and wide. There was no bridge so we had to take a ferry. All the passengers got off the bus, boarded the ferry, and crossed the river. We then waited for the bus to make the crossing.”⁷⁷ The passengers re-boarded the newly repaired bus after it crossed the river. The bus went another hundred feet before the machine again stalled. The passengers got out and waited by the side of the road for the engineer to weave his magic and take them the remainder of the journey from the edge of a river in the forest to the small city that was their destination.

Layovers could be frightening for the passengers. The mid 1920s was a time before the tigers of Indochina became extinct. Tigers were often found along that particular stretch of Colonial Route 1 where the adventurers found themselves stranded: “The Mandarin Road, which the French called ‘Colonial Route 1’, went through some really remote areas in the Center, some of which... were famous for having lots of tigers. The buses that ran at night always saw tigers. At that time, the tigers had no idea what to make of the buses. They just sat by the side of the road watching and lying in wait.”⁷⁸ The possibility of being stranded on a new road beside a stalled bus was one of the dangers faced by those pioneers. The presence of ghosts also remained, but procedures for their appeasement evolved with time. In those spaces where the road became dangerous, perhaps the stretches without guardrails, altars sprang up. The drivers, who could also be engineers, acted as priests on behalf of their passengers and themselves at those newly sanctified spaces: “... once and a while, at those sections of the road with dangerous twists and turns, there would be an altar dedicated to forsaken spirits or a tiny pagoda dedicated to the holy Mother (no one knew which holy Mother?). They were often placed at the foot of a mountain pass or in the midst of a mountain forest. Upon approaching one of those sites, drivers stopped the bus and got out. They then burned votive paper, lit incense, and prostrated

themselves before the altar. All drivers told each other that they had to pray and kow-tow at those places so the spirits would protect the buses and their passengers from accidents...”⁷⁹ Ancient rituals performed in new places were a manner of rendering predictable a process, motorized transport, that was inherently unpredictable in its infancy.

As the excitement of travel was tempered by fear and apprehension, diversion proved a necessity. One of the passengers on that bus deep in the central region of Việt Nam in the mid 1920s was an aging gentleman, whose appearance Nguyễn Vỹ described as somewhere between that befitting a classical scholar and a peer of the young man on his way to secondary school:

“Mr. Graduate wore a white pith helmet atop his short, *carre*-style haircut. He carried a black cane. His mouth was blood red from chewing betel. He spoke with great grace as he recited and then explained some of his freshly composed verse ...”⁸⁰ The scholar’s colloquial verse calmed the nerves of those waiting on the side of the road for the driver to complete the repairs.



Photograph 17. Ferry, mid 1920s.

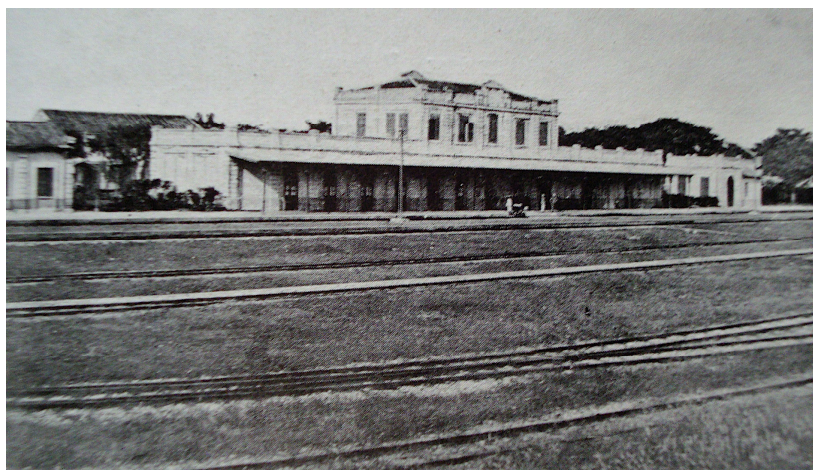
When he finished, the journey resumed.

Each passenger had escaped the jaws of the jungle beast for the moment, but they remained silent because they were literally not out of the woods. After an eternity, the somber silence was broken by their return to civilization: “The bus traveled a long way and then came to a plain. There were a few houses and thatched huts at both sides of the road. When the lights illuminated before them, the passengers were happy and relieved.”⁸¹ At that point, the old scholar with his new haircut and black cane recited some fresh verse through the beetle spittle in his reddened mouth. His creation was entitled “Meeting a tiger on the bus”.

Despite infrastructural improvements following WWI, journeys were not always accomplished with ease. For many, the road remained fragmented. However, the nature of that fragmentation evolved during the interwar period, providing greater fluidity and speed to the traveler. A journey that began on foot quickened rapidly via bus and/or train. It was the

combination of those parts – the earthen path or dike road, paved highway, and rail lines – in unison that formed mobility via a transportation system in the process of being created.

Huy Cận, the famous poet we encountered above during his time at the *Quốc Học* in Huế in the 1930s, undertook such a multi-leg journey in the late 1920s. Hailing from a poor family with a tradition of classical scholarship in Hà Tĩnh province (northern *Annam*), Huy Cận enjoyed a rural boyhood existence. Born in 1919, his first experience with education, like most of his generation, was in classical studies at the home of the local scholar in his village. Later, Huy Cận picked up the rudiments of *quốc ngữ* at a communal school near his hometown. When he was eight, it was decided that he would continue his studies in a primary school in Thừa Thiên province where his mother's younger brother was an instructor. While in their late twenties, his maternal uncle and aunt remained childless. They offered to take in the young boy and see to his education, something that Huy Cận's parents were unable to do due to the financial burden it posed for their large family.



Photograph 18. Huế Train Station, mid 1920s.

In the autumn of 1927, Huy Cận's aunt went to retrieve the young boy and take him to her home outside of Huế. Huy Cận and his mother traveled by foot several kilometers to his grandmother's house to meet his aunt, because his rural village was not yet connected to the larger network of roads on which motorized transport was

possible. Prior to leaving, Huy Cận bid his home farewell: "I stood on the veranda and looked at the raindrops falling from the roof to the yard below. I decided to go around the house one last time. I looked at the vegetable garden, the jackfruit trees, the beehive... the cinnamon trees at the side of the house which leant a bit because the water-buffalo were in the habit of scratching themselves against them... My soul ached to bid farewell all those sites and sounds I knew so well."⁸² Huy Cận would never again live in those familiar spaces. As was true of the others of his generation who left their hometowns to continue their studies, Huy Cận would never again

take-in the landscape, flora and fauna with the same eyes he had at their moment of departure. Upon their return, new knowledge and experience overlay their perceptions, rendering the images they enjoyed before soft recollections. The essence of those first trips was leaving the familiar for a wider world that was often intimidating and foreign.

Huy Cận's first steps on the road were difficult, wet, and muddy. The central region of Việt Nam is subject to strong storms and typhoons, particularly in the fall. A storm raged as Huy Cận and his mother traveled to his grandmother's house, making the going arduous: "The floodwaters from my neighborhood to my grandmother's were much higher than the day before. My mom and I had to wade through the water for a long time; in places the water reached my chest. My mom had to make her way very deliberately because the road at our feet was full of mud. She had to inch her way forward for fear of slipping and falling into the water. She took my hand to lead me through the cold water. Neither of us was wearing a warm shirt so each gust of wind chilled us to the bone. Through her clattering teeth, my mom told me: 'Keep going honey! When we get to grandma's house we'll warm ourselves beside the stove', 'Keep going so that you can study! If you turn back you'll lead a very hard life and be ashamed of yourself!'"⁸³ They eventually made it to his grandmother's house and its warm kitchen. The following morning, the young boy was to set out for Huế with his aunt. Prior to their farewell, Huy Cận's mother, grandmother, and aunt talked long into the night. His aunt provided him advice for his journey and new life: "... At that time aunt Vân was around 26 or 27 years old. She was short and thin. Her teeth were lacquered and she often wore a black velvet scarf. She pulled her hair back in a pony tail and always wore a black silk tunic... She just wanted me to be well behaved and to study well... She told me: 'When we get on the road you had better behave yourself. You need to follow me everywhere I go or you might get lost. If you want anything, just ask me. It is a long journey; we will be going by bus and by train.'"⁸⁴ The following morning, aunt and nephew departed. Huy Cận's mother said goodbye to her son of eight and watched him take to the road that would transport him to the future.

Huy Cận's journey was a portrait of how one might travel from rural Hà Tĩnh province to Huế in the late 1920s. Vinh, the capital of Nghệ An province, lay on the banks of Colonial Route 1. It was there that the travelers became connected to the transportation system transforming Vietnamese space. As Huy Cận recalled, there was a Vietnamese bus company that plied the road between Vinh and the Gianh River to its south: "... my aunt and I bought tickets

from the Phạm Văn Phi bus company. The bus took us from Vinh south to the Quán Hàu ferry terminal in Quảng Bình province. That was the first time I had ever been on a bus. I loved hearing the engine roar.”⁸⁵ When the bus reached the river, the passengers took a ferry to the other side because, as with the Bồng Sơn River hundreds of kilometers to the south, a bridge spanning the Gianh River had yet to be constructed. On the other side of the river they continued to Huế via train. By the late 1920s, the process of traveling from Vinh to Huế was relatively efficient: “After we passed the Quán Hàu ferry-crossing, everyone rushed to board the train which was waiting for us (we had bought the tickets in Vinh).”⁸⁶ The fluency with which travelers made their way from Vinh to Huế via bus, ferry, and train was born of necessity. Though the railroad from Hà Nội south to Vinh was completed in 1905 and that from Đà Nẵng north to Đồng Hà in 1909, the stretch between Vinh and Đồng Hà remained incomplete until 1927 (see map). Perhaps it became active just after Huy Cận’s trip south. In any case, the sporadic nature of rail construction had a muted impact on the possibility of fluid and rapid transit by the late 1920s. The construction of highways in conjunction with motorized transport meant that Huy Cận did not have to walk, be carried, and/or take a rickshaw the approximately three hundred kilometers from Vinh to Đồng Hà as did students ten or fifteen years before.

The central artery that was the pan-Việt railroad acted as a continuum of mobility from south to north and back again. In the 1930s, the lifestyle of the poet Lưu Trọng Lư illustrated how the ultimate fluidity engendered by those transportation systems altered possibility and perception of Vietnamese space. The poet, journalist, opium addict, and future revolutionary, like his comrade Huy Cận, undertook secondary studies at the *Quốc Học* in Huế. When forced to discontinue his studies at that institution, the young man decided to travel north in search of opportunity in the form of continued education, cultural exploration, and general big city excitement. By the early 1930s, the municipality of Hà Nội contained at least five private secondary schools.^v Lưu Trọng Lư found what he was looking for in the northern city: an avenue to continue his studies and hundreds of opium dens. He explained the situation in which he found himself in the following way: “After I was expelled from the *Quốc Học* in Huế, I applied to the Catholic school in Trường Sùng. After a while, I discovered the school was not for me

^v Note: These private schools included: Trường Tư thực Thăng Long, L’Ecole Pugneir, Trường Tư thực Hồng Bàng, Trường Tư thực Nguyễn Du, and Trường Tư thực Trương Minh Sanh.

and wandered about... I went from Huế to Hà Nội to find another place to study. I applied to the Nguyễn Du lower secondary school, a private school. The director was Hoàng Cơ Nghị, a Hanoian intellectual... His French wife named Etsevery was a lecturer for fourth year students. One time she asked me to recount a lesson. I did not do a good job so she scolded me. From that time I did not like studying at that school any longer.”⁸⁷ The malleability Lư Trọng Lư failed to find in the schoolhouse, he discovered on the road. Following his failed experiment at the private school in Hà Nội, Lư Trọng Lư returned to reside with friends in Huế.

In the mid 1930s, Lư Trọng Lư's verse began to be published in the periodicals of Hà Nội. The young man's literary career gave him the opportunity, while the railroad provided the means, for a life *between* the imperial capital and that of Indochina. That space became a dislocated blur, which provided inspiration for the young man's new style of Vietnamese poetry (a foundation on which the nation was built). As Lư Trọng Lư explained, the city, the town, and the space in-between was his environment: “Hà Nội – Huế and then Huế - Hà Nội, I considered this the ‘environment’ of my hazy life. Huế... on the banks of the Hương River, the red flowers of the *phượng* tree yet to shed... and the sound of the cicadas chirping all summer long... In the Thừa Phủ Station schoolgirls flutter about in their purple tunics morning and afternoon...”⁸⁸ The young man became unstuck. He traversed the space between Huế and Hà Nội with the same ease that schoolgirls came and went by the river in Huế. The possibility of that ‘environment’ was rendered by the iron line that tethered one point on the map to another and by the time schedule: “One time I went from the center of the citadel across the bridge and straight to the train station. The express train from Sài Gòn reached Huế in the morning. As I was about to board the train, I saw Miên... a friend whom I met in the middle of Hà Nội. To say we were friends is probably accurate, but we were more acquaintances than anything. In any case, we hung out a few times.”⁸⁹ Because he knew the train was coming and because he was wandering and being poetic, he decided to board and go to Hà Nội. Lư Trọng Lư did not have a reason to go to Hà Nội. This fluency of movement was provided by opportunity and because of opportunity (like money begetting money). Lư Trọng Lư did not have to have a reason to go, but his city and road-friend provided him one anyway: “Miên had brought his little sister to the station to board to express for Hà Nội. Miên told his sister: ‘This is my friend the poet! Now you have someone to go to Hà Nội with, ok.’ Miên then turned and asked me in a very friendly tone: ‘Help me out a bit on your way.’ So I boarded the train with her. We sat together next to a

window.”⁹⁰ The young man and younger woman sat beside each other watching Việt Nam pass as they awaited Hà Nội's arrival. Each perceived the passing distinctly. For Lư Trọng Lư, the journey had become normalized, even lackadaisical, like a commute. The spaces between Huế and Hà Nội had gained the hazy familiarity that dulls the tension of novelty. In contrast, the young girl was going into the unknown, thus the need for a chaperone. The vast spaces were broken into increments and landmarks: provinces and train stations, large and small. That great monument of urban modernity, the Hà Nội train station, greeted them upon their arrival in the city.

The Road and the School

By the 1930s, as Lư Trọng Lư was making the Huế – Hà Nội corridor his home, thousands of young people attending schools in provincial centers and urban areas were traveling from those schools to their homes in the countryside. The landscape of dynamic mobility created during the interwar period spread the knowledge of the colonial school and urban culture, altering individual and collective relations to and perceptions of space. Like the possibility and speed of movement, this process of diffusion increased over time. Students carried new clothing and hairstyles, manners of speaking and acting, stories of distant urban locales, and new forms of cultural expression, all of which were transmitted to eager audiences of friends and family in their villages. They also brought *quốc ngữ* literacy and the pedagogic acumen to teach relatives and neighbors who did not have the opportunity to study.

The Western notion of time was perhaps the most elementarily profound cultural implement spread by student movement. Prior to French colonization in general, and the interwar period in particular, Vietnamese perception and use of time was drastically different from the Western sense of time that has become the global norm. On a macro level (months and years), the Vietnamese notion of time was based on the lunar calendar. On a micro level (hours in a day) Vietnamese had a malleable system of time dependent on the natural rhythms of the day: time was told in increments – dawn, midday, dusk, night, midnight – and a specific moment's proximity to those increments. Those rhythms do not differ drastically from one time of year to another due to Việt Nam's geographic location near the equator. Because this system

of micro-time was inexact and almost certainly heterogeneous throughout the elongated Việt territory, the adoption (in word, not necessarily deed) of Western micro-time was relatively straightforward. Vietnamese notions of macro-time based on the lunar calendar were much more intransigent. The lunar calendar was and is tightly entwined with Vietnamese notions of 'self', what it means to be Vietnamese. In fact, the entire system of socio-religious life in Việt Nam is based on the lunar cycle. Auspicious days are told by the lunar calendar, as are intervals of regularized prayer and fasting, days of birth, marriage, and death and their associated astrological meanings. The lunar calendar also delineates celebrations and festivals, including *Tết* (the lunar new year), whose importance cannot be understated. Because the lunar calendar was so inextricably entwined with the rhythms of Vietnamese life, the colonial school year incorporated important aspects of that calendar, including systematizing student vacations to coincide with the mid-Autumn festival (usually in September) and *Tết* (usually at the end of January/beginning of February). Such inclusion of Vietnamese norms into Western notions of time and the school calendar permitted Vietnamese to respect and follow those new rhythms, because their own patterns of time were incorporated into the new system.

Western studies altered Vietnamese perception of and relation to time in two important ways. The school calendar regularized student migrations. From their locations of origin, students traveled to their schools in September. The following June they reversed the journey, returning to their hometowns for summer vacation. New notions of time were in this way actuated in every location of colonial Việt Nam. The Service of Education standardized Western time through the Franco-Việt education system. Students imbibed the rhythms of the clock through the time schedule while at school. Upon returning to their hometowns, young men and women carried with them and propagated (perhaps unconsciously) the homogenized, Western concept of time they lived by at the school. The schoolboy's illiterate parents and neighbors became acquainted with Western visions of time based on the Gregorian calendar both vicariously (through interaction with students) and personally (through their expectation of students' departure and subsequent return).

Colonial schools were in fact synonymous with Western notions of time. The school year began on a specific date and ended nine months later on another. Vacations were standardized, as were breaks and weekends. The school day began at a set time and ended at a set time. The same was true of courses. Nguyễn Công Hoan, one of the most prolific writers of

the 1930s whom we met above during his time at the College of the Protectorate in Hà Nội in the 1910s, noted the impact of time while being home-schooled in the rudiments of Classical Chinese and *quốc ngữ*. The clock on the wall transformed his house into a modern school: "... The way the classes were organized had a scientific air. Our house had a clock so we studied at a scheduled time. My older brothers and I studied Vietnamese history. Despite the fact we studied in Classical Chinese we really enjoyed learning about Việt Nam. My father also taught us from some recently published books written in *quốc ngữ* such as *Địa dư* by Trần Văn Thông and *Cách trí, Toán pháp* by Trần Văn Khánh. My brothers enthusiastically devoured them."⁹¹ Over twenty years later and more than a thousand miles to the south, the future musician and scholar of Vietnamese classical music, Trần Văn Khê, recalled a similar phenomenon as he journeyed to Sài Gòn from the Mekong Delta to begin his secondary school studies at the most prestigious school in the South, the Trương Vĩnh Ký School: "For seven years, from my first year of lower secondary school until I passed the secondary school examinations, I lived the life of a student-boarder. My life adhered to the rhythm of the school with the same precise regularity with which the clock ticks: when I went to bed and when I woke up, when I ate and when I studied. Every Thursday afternoon I was able to go out for three hours. Every Sunday after breakfast I could go out but had to be back prior to 8:30 that evening. Anyone who returned later than that got 'detention' and was not allowed to go out the following week."⁹² Young people like Nguyễn Công Hoan and Trần Văn Khê brought the internalized rhythms of regimented, Western time home during the 1920s and 1930s. In so doing, they translated that arbitrary conceptualization of time, rendering it meaningful for Vietnamese at large.

As people grew accustomed to Western time represented by the school year, they began to anticipate schoolboys' return from provincial and regional centers. Their sense of excitement was especially acute in the first two decades of the century due to the novelty of students' proximity to foreigners and long-distance travel. Anticipation spread. Nguyễn Vỹ described a boy's return to a village in rural Quảng Ngãi province from Huế in the mid 1910s thus: "... On the evening of his return, word spread from one person to another so that the entire town knew that he was returning from his studies in Huế. In the street, people asked each other: 'Have you heard? Mr. Ba's son is returning for summer vacation...' A few old men and women said: 'Rat, the carpenter's son just got back. He brought huge stack of French books'...' "⁹³ Schoolboys like this young man were often the only people in their villages to undertake Western studies beyond

the elementary or primary level. They were also amongst the very few to venture outside their proximate locale, let alone to a regional capital like Hué. The entire village shared the prestige engendered by scholarship and travel. Parents were particularly eager to show-off their sons' gifts, which enhanced their own social standing: "Mr. and Mrs. Ba were over the moon. They hurried to make tea and get the betel ready so they could invite guests into their home."⁹⁴ Thus a boy of thirteen, who had previously been known to his neighbors by the nickname 'Rat', held court in the middle of his parents modest home: "Young and old squeezed around the old table in the center of the room. Under the flickering yellow light of a peanut-oil lamp, they eagerly asked the young man about the capital. They imagined the solemn radiance of the Imperial court rendered Hué a heavenly paradise."⁹⁵ The young man's accounts of the Imperial capital altered his neighbors' perceptions, born in that haze between legend and distance. While his elders likely listened to the travel log-like narrative that ran counter to commonly held wisdom with a degree of the disbelief, the young man's peers were spellbound by his stories.⁹⁶ Students acted as messengers and conduits of the knowledge of the colonial school, urban centers, and the road. The attractiveness of their experiences and personal prestige rendered them advertisements for modern studies and the normalization of long-distance travel.

Part of the newfound prestige students enjoyed flowed from Western/French knowledge and their proximity to the foreign and the new. As accounts of far-off locales were told and re-told, so too were experiences with foreigners. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, students' close contact with foreigners at colonial schools dulled the frightening portrait of the French that had formed in the minds of many. This was especially true amongst the youth: "... most people were passive and afraid of the French. Little by little they grew accustomed to the new circumstances (*i.e. colonization*) and became fond of the changes brought by 'Mr. French'. This was most prevalent amongst the youth... The generation that came of age from 1910 to 1925 followed the movement of 'quitting Classical Chinese to study French' so they could keep up with the 'civilized and progressive' way of life the French introduced."⁹⁷ As I argued in the first chapter, the fact that the Western knowledge of the colonial school began to be seen as the avenue of social mobility meant that Vietnamese actively sought association with the colonial and foreign. Closeness became attractive because the French were seen as the arbiters and source of that knowledge and prestige. In 1910 people in many rural areas could pretend that the French and colonization did not exist because they remained mostly untouched by either.

However, by 1920 a new future entwined with the French confronted Vietnamese all over the colony. Students helped transform that future into a Vietnamese desire and ambition in a remarkably short period of time.

This acceptance and adoption was not only facilitated by tales of distant locales or the prestige garnered by those young men with proximity to the colonizer. Perhaps most profoundly, broad acceptance was engendered by students' ability to translate the knowledge and concepts of the classroom into local idiom. This was a process that made modern knowledge available to the majority who did not attend Western schools. It also gave rise to novel forms of art and cultural expression in a process that transformed what had been the foreign into the Vietnamese in a period of scarcely twenty years.

The periodical was of great significance to this process, a topic addressed in-depth in Chapter 5. However, the illiterate man, woman, or child was not able to relate to the printed word with the same intimacy as they could to their brothers, sons, nephews, and uncles. During school vacations Nguyễn Công Hoan returned to his village in Bắc Ninh province to the northeast of Hà Nội. Like thousands of other young people during this period, Nguyễn Công Hoan carried the knowledge of the modern school and his experiences in the school and the city in him as he moved through colonial space. Some of his earliest (unpublished) literary works were composed in his rural village amongst family and familiar faces while on break from the city school. The plays of Moliere were part of colonial curricula from the time Nguyễn Công Hoan studied at the College until the 1940s (if not beyond). The literary genre and style of performance common to French artists like Moliere were novel forms of expression in Việt Nam. It was not that performance art did not exist in Việt Nam. The Vietnamese enjoyed a rich tradition of players and troubadours for hundreds of years, if not longer. However, Vietnamese theatre was stylistically distinct from its Western counterpart. Players often sung or recited poetry. The characters and costumes were colorful exaggerations of everyday tomes. In Moliere Nguyễn Công Hoan (and countless others) discovered a way of representing the vulgarities and hypocrisy common to every society in a lively, humorous, and perhaps most importantly, realistic manner. As Nguyễn Công Hoan recalled of his brother reading an excerpt from a play by Moliere: "... My brother caught my attention because he was laughing while reading a passage aloud. The passage was from one of Moliere's comedies. Like my brother, I thought it

was hilarious.”⁹⁸ The common humanity found in that play (he did not say which one, it really did not matter) drew Nguyễn Công Hoan to Moliere. His knowledge and education provided him the hubris to think he could follow in those footsteps: “I searched for that comedy and read it from beginning to end, it cracked me up. I thought, why don't I write something like that? So I started imitating Moliere. I was also a composer of comedies.”⁹⁹ The speed of this was important. As he read that French play laughing to himself, Nguyễn Công Hoan thought: 'Why don't I do this?' His reaction to this notion was immediate; he began to do so. His education and experience at the school instilled the knowledge and the confidence to take that French form and use it in the Vietnamese context. He did so as a new form of social commentary, providing entertainment to those in his village in an act of cultural transformation whose significance was likely unnoticed.

It was via young people like Nguyễn Công Hoan that the new socio-cultural forms of expression and phenomena emanating from the modern classrooms and the cities were



Photograph 19. Theatre troop, early 20th century.

transported to and translated for a broader audience in the populous countryside. The process by which Vietnamese took novel cultural implements and transformed them from something foreign into something distinctly Vietnamese began with this movement and translation. Nguyễn Công Hoan confidently took his first steps on that journey of socio-cultural

transformation with short, manageable plays: “At first my comedies were really short. The actors would just imitate the ridiculous rhetoric of palm readers and fortunetellers. I was always the lead actor. My brothers and (male) cousins took on the supporting roles.”¹⁰⁰ The modest beginnings of Nguyễn Công Hoan's public literary career belied the deep significance behind the actions of his late adolescence. The plays he wrote were not akin to the *quốc ngữ* translations that sparked the young man's interest. During the teens many *quốc ngữ* translations of famous French works began to appear. Prominent newspapermen like Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Vũ Đình

Long adapted the content of French literature to the Vietnamese context.^{vi} Though inspired by French literature and forms of cultural expression, Nguyễn Công Hoan's plays represent a nascent form of contemporary Vietnamese originality. Nguyễn Công Hoan transformed an art form born in a completely foreign environment thousands of miles away for a rural Vietnamese audience. Among other things, the Vietnamese mentality, sense of humor, and conception of what constituted performance art were taken into account. The schoolboy created something uniquely Vietnamese which was attractive to his rural, largely illiterate audience: "Because my jokes were clever and because I had learned a thing or two from Năm Tồn and Hai Giò, two of the players at the Quảng Lạc theater in Hà Nội, the plays drew large audiences. The first night only my brothers and sisters and our household servants were there to watch. Their laughter reached the military camps nearby, so the soldiers ended up attending as well."¹⁰¹ Nguyễn Công Hoan thus brought the knowledge of the school and the city to the countryside in a way rural people could understand and enjoy.

Like the length of those initial plays, their content was kept simple. Nguyễn Công Hoan recalled that their purpose was to entertain: "The main purpose of my comedies was to make everyone laugh hardily. They really did not have any deeper meaning."¹⁰² As his audience grew, so too did their expectations. Nguyễn Công Hoan had to develop the themes because he could not rely on the same content that drew crowds to those first performances. He found ample material all around him: "After a while I became afraid that the audience would get bored, because they came back night after night. So I changed things up a bit. I started picking up on the bad habits of those around me and used them as material to poke fun of people and criticize them... I think they really liked it because they always attended the performances and laughed loudly. They also never told me any different..."¹⁰³ The pressure he felt from the audiences' expectations spurred the young man to look for alternative sources of inspiration. As he would discover in his prolific career as a writer, there were stories all around him: "I was hard pressed for new material because I was the only one writing. I started by using the antics of those in my house as inspiration. As that grew stale I relied on those outside the house as well. It was quite difficult to get good material. However, many people supplied me with good ideas – an official

^{vi} Nguyễn Văn Vinh began translating in the first decade of the 20th century. In this period, his prolific translations were often serialized in the periodicals he edited, *Đông dương tạp chí* and *Trung bắc tân văn*. Vũ Đình Long's career did not really begin until the 1920s. Rather than simply translate, Vũ Đình Long often adapted famous French works for the Vietnamese context.

taking bribes, a soldier grabbing a girl's breast, etc... all made it to the stage...”¹⁰⁴ Suffice it to say, some of those themes were too close to the people they were meant to entertain. Shortly after he expanded his repertoire, highlighting the foibles and amoral behavior of local notables and soldiers, his father terminated Nguyễn Công Hoan’s brief career as a playwright. For the young man it did not make much of a difference, because he considered his plays a pleasant diversion meant to occupy his time during summer vacation. He would soon return to the College just outside the municipality of Hà Nội.

The cultural translation Nguyễn Công Hoan engaged in was particularly profound because large groups remained uneducated and illiterate. While elementary and/or communal schools were found in most areas (North, Center, and South) by the late 1920s and early 1930s most children received little to no formal education. This was particularly the case with girls and women. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the vast majority of Vietnamese were unable and/or unwilling to send their daughters to school. The conclusion that literacy rates among women were infinitesimal until after the Revolution has become ingrained as ‘historical fact’ in scholarship and popular perception alike, contributing to the lack of critical investigation of literacy and female education during the late colonial period. I investigated *quốc ngữ* literacy as part of my broader study on the diffusion of knowledge in late colonial Việt Nam. I discovered a vast network of informal education in which the scientific perception propagated in colonial schools and firsthand interactions with space penetrated all areas of the colony. Within this larger picture, skills like literacy were taught to those who did not have access to formal education, chief among them were girls and women.

Political revolutionary Nguyễn Thị Minh was from a relatively common family in terms of size and outlook from the historic village of Phật Tích in Bắc Ninh province. She came of age in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By the time of the Revolution of 1945, Nguyễn Thị Minh was a seasoned political operative, having long left home to spend time in Hà Nội, the jails of Indochina, and those spaces in between. In the late 1920s, she was one of three unmarried sisters who acted the part of dutiful and obedient daughters by performing household tasks and taking on the brunt of the work in the fields. Nguyễn Thị Minh's family had a tradition of education, which was the reason she remained uneducated: “Despite the fact that my family valued education, my father was very stern when it came to preserving ‘classical traditions’... While

there were times when my father would tell my sisters and I that we were smart or quick-minded, he did not permit us to study one word.”¹⁰⁵ Nguyễn Thị Minh's classically educated father echoed sentiments analyzed in Chapter 1; that educating a daughter was a useless waste at best and harmful at worst. At times he could be harsher still: “He said: ‘A daughter's place is in the kitchen, what on earth should she study for?!’ He would not allow us to study, but he grew blue in the face training us in the ‘four virtues and three bonds’. One time I heard my father tell my mother: ‘Raising a daughter is no different than raising a bandit! Look here, if any suitor comes calling, you better give him one of the girls.’ After hearing him say this, I told my older sister Nhâm. She listened silently and shook her head. What else could she do?”¹⁰⁶

Despite intransigent attitudes regarding female education, young women like Nguyễn Thị Minh did not remain completely ignorant of literary and cultural knowledge. Part of the informal education mentioned above was a tradition of oral recitation often passed down from mother to daughter.¹⁰⁷ Nguyễn Thị Minh described the dichotomy in this manner: “Although my sisters and I were illiterate, we grew up in a family that valued education so we caught on to this or that pretty quickly. My mother often recited many of the old stories she had memorized to us...”¹⁰⁸ Knowledge orally transmitted from one generation of women to the next was, and still is, common. Lê Tụy Phương, the future revolutionary and children’s educator who came of age during the interwar period recalled a similar experience. Her mother not only recited stories for her enjoyment, but also taught her a bit of *quốc ngữ* prior to her entrance into the colonial school: “When I was four and my brother was two, my family went from Mạo Khê to Uông Bí, Hồng Gai to Cẩm Phả. My father found work as a secretary and clerk for the coalmines. My mother was a midwife in a poor miner's neighborhood... In her free time she taught me numbers, letters, and spelling. Each night she would recite old stories, poetry, and the *Tale of Kiều*...”^{109vii}

One might assume from her father’s demeanor that Nguyễn Thị Minh's mother did not dare teach her daughters to read and write. The older woman was herself of course illiterate. Still, like many of his peers the aging scholar loved to tell stories and recite verse, a practice lubricated by a few cups of rice wine: “Despite the fact that my father was strict, he liked reciting poetry and ancient stories for us to enjoy... On the days we plucked rice straw to make brooms into the evening, we would ask my mother for a copper to buy rice wine for my father. After a

^{vii} Note: Mạo Khê, Uông Bí, Hồng Gai, and Cẩm Phả are located in the province of Quảng Ninh, to the northeast of Hà Nội. The *Tale of Kiều* is the most celebrated Vietnamese verse, composed by Nguyễn Du in the early 19th century.

couple cups he became vibrant. He enthusiastically told stories long into the night without tiring. After he finished *Đông Chu liệt quốc*, he began *Thủy Hử*, and then *Phan Trần* and *Nhị độ mai...*¹¹⁰ The older man's recitations were accompanied by commentary and analysis: "As he lectured on a story's meaning, my father never forgot to highlight its lessons regarding fidelity, bravery, good and bad conduct, honesty and deceit..."¹¹¹ Immersed in a quasi-literary atmosphere but unable to pursue their own education, Nguyễn Thị Minh and her sisters listened enthusiastically to the tales their parents told. This transfer of knowledge sparked their unrequited dreams of education: "The more we loved the stories, the more we dreamed of studying. We just wished we were literate so that we could read and understand the things that were written in books."¹¹² Their aspirations remained silent because their illiteracy was not the exception, but the rule: "We kept those dreams to ourselves. We did not dare speak a whisper of them to anyone. My father said we could not study, which meant we could not study. Period. In any case, there was not a single girl in our village who went to school anyway!"¹¹³ The sisters' lives were emblematic of a social norm experienced by countless other girls. Their deep longing to learn was at once created and stifled by their family's tradition of scholarship and value for knowledge.

While the girls remained at home their brothers were permitted and encouraged to study: "My father distinguished very clearly between sons and daughters. Sons definitely had to study. No matter how poor we were, money had to be saved for their studies. All my brothers went to school and studied well because of that attitude."¹¹⁴ It seems natural that such a double standard might engender resentment amongst young women like Nguyễn Thị Minh. If it did, she did not mention it. The reason for her lack of resentment towards her brothers was relatively simple: In the late 1920s no girl in Nguyễn Thị Minh's village was permitted to study. That she was unable to go to school was the norm. However, young women like Nguyễn Thị Minh were presented an alternative means of education via their educated brothers: "Every once in a while my brothers would teach me some basic scientific knowledge – about the earth being round, about the stars and planets, about wind and rain..."¹¹⁵ Scientific knowledge was transmitted in the same way as were new forms of cultural expression; by mobile students on break from school. Just as Nguyễn Công Hoan's plays inspired by Moliere introduced an entire village to a novel form of art over summer vacation so too did brothers whisper the scientific knowledge of the modern school to their stay-at-home sisters. While performances and brief lectures entertained and

fascinated their audiences, they did not provide the skills necessary to independently absorb and perhaps even produce knowledge. Those opportunities were provided by literacy.

The diffusion of *quốc ngữ* literacy, scientific knowledge, and novel socio-cultural phenomena was a byproduct of student migrations regularized by the school calendar and made possible by new networks of mobility. Though not permitted to study, Nguyễn Thị Minh and her sisters labored to send their brothers to school at the College of the Protectorate in Hà Nội. The railroad, colonial highway system, and motorized transportation allowed the boys to return to the countryside to spend time with their family on school breaks. On one of those return trips, the girls' brother Uy brought something special for his sisters: "That year, all my brothers studying in Hà Nội returned home for summer vacation. One day my older brother Uy asked my older sister Nhâm, aunt Thủy, and I: 'Would you all like to study *quốc ngữ*?'"¹¹⁶ The girls responded with muted enthusiasm: "'We'd love to, but...' I silently raised my eyes to the house above indicating we were really scared of my father's response. Uy said: 'If you'd like, I'll teach you. Dad won't know a thing.'"¹¹⁷ Her brother's assurance and her own yearning to learn prompted Nguyễn Thị Minh's elder sister to utter a bit of irreverent bravery: "My sister Nhâm asserted: 'Let's start today. If dad finds out, who cares? We haven't done anything to be ashamed of...'"¹¹⁸

The three girls began to study from that June evening. Despite the assuredness expressed by Uy and Nhâm, precautions were taken to ensure their studies remained secret: "... That night after we finished cleaning the entire house we went below the house, closed the door tightly, and began to study. We started from the beginning: a, b, c... We didn't dare turn the light up too high. Uy spoke very softly. We read in whispers because we were afraid my parents would hear us in the house above."¹¹⁹ Their furtive studies continued apace throughout the hot summer nights: "... Everyday we learned a few words. We studied bit by bit, very slowly. Anytime we had a bit of free time we'd grab our books and study."¹²⁰ In their enthusiasm, they even found time to study during the arduous days of the harvest: "There were many nights when we did not finish husking rice until midnight, but Nhâm would still make Thủy and I practice our reading and writing."¹²¹ By the end of Uy's summer break the three young women had learned to read and write: "A few months later the three of us could read printed books."¹²² This seems a remarkable pace to learn such a paramount skill. However, numerous accounts from the period substantiate the claim that one could learn *quốc ngữ* in a few months.

The writer Nguyễn Hồng provided one of those narratives. In a contemporaneous account of his own youth entitled, *Những ngày thơ ấu*, Nguyễn Hồng described his days working as a private instructor in a very poor neighborhood of the port city of Hải Phòng. After completing his lower secondary studies, the future writer taught a small group of children from poor families in his rented room. This informal environment mirrored that of the classical past: parents paid Nguyễn Hồng a small sum each month, either in cash or in kind, to teach their children. Despite his own poverty, Nguyễn Hồng noted moments of elation, particularly regarding the transfer of *quốc ngữ* literacy: “During those three years, there were moments when I was so happy I wanted to cry, like when my students learned to read and write *quốc ngữ* after only a few months and when they were able to pronounce a few French words.”¹²³ Nguyễn Hồng stated that students acquired a basic grasp of *quốc ngữ* after three months of instruction: “Three months... After only spending a dollar twenty^{viii}, parents could see their children write and add. They were most proud when they heard their children read the passages I taught them in class...”¹²⁴

Huy Cận also supported claims that *quốc ngữ* could be learned in a remarkably short period of time. One Sunday morning during his final year at the *Quốc Học* in Huế, Huy Cận met a boy selling newspapers. The newspaper boy told the schoolboy that his family’s poverty did not allow him to go to school. His story of hardship resonated with Huy Cận, who promised to teach the paperboy to read the periodicals he sold for a living: “I told him I was going to teach him in the park every Sunday morning at 8 o'clock on the dot. I explained that I would teach him *quốc ngữ* an hour each Sunday and that after a few months he would be able to read and write. I told him I would not only teach him but also bring him a notebook and pen.”¹²⁵ Huy Cận kept his promise and taught the paperboy in a park across the Perfume River from the Imperial City, where Huy Cận would accept the resignation of the Vietnamese emperor Bảo Đại in the early autumn in 1945. Despite the rudimentary facilities, the boy’s progress was swift: “He was a smart kid. I meticulously taught him so that after a few Sunday's he read a bit of the newspapers. Writing was more difficult because we did not have a table. He had to practice with his notebook balanced on his knees.”¹²⁶ One Sunday morning just before summer vacation Huy Cận

^{viii} Note: A dollar twenty – “*một đồng hai*” (one *piastre*, two *sous*). This was considered a small, but not insignificant amount for a poor family in the late 1930s.

witnessed the fruits of his labor: “Just prior to summer vacation, around March or April 1935, he showed me that he had learned how to read and write properly. As I left the school grounds one Sunday morning, I saw him seated on a stone bench in the park reading a copy of the periodical *Phong hóa ...*”¹²⁷ Upon taking a seat, Huy Cận was provided further proof of the boy’s progress: “He took a piece of paper out of the newspaper he was reading. It was a letter he had written addressed to me. In it he told me how much he appreciated the fact that I taught him how to read and write.”¹²⁸

While Huy Cận's recollection of the paperboy and Nguyễn Thị Minh's path to literacy are somewhat romantic accounts, the prevalence of such accounts indicates that they were not isolated instances. The idea of learning *quốc ngữ* in months, not years, was well within of the realm of plausibility for the reading public (i.e. these authors' audience). Whether or not the paperboy was able to read an entire chapter of a novel by Khái Hưng printed in *Phong hóa* or whether his ‘Thank you’ letter to Huy Cận was written in perfect grammar with correct diacriticals is beside the point. Students like Nguyễn Thị Minh's brother Uy and Huy Cận provided a foundation that could be built upon by motivated individuals. An elementary understanding of *quốc ngữ* was developed via self and group study. The paperboy’s access to periodicals provided him ample reading practice. Nguyễn Thị Minh recalled eagerly diving into the periodicals her brother brought home from his time in the city: “Sometimes Uy brought home a few books such as *Bố cái đại vương*, *Trung Trắc Trung Nhị*, *Quận Hẻo*, etc. Most of them were from the *Nam Đồng thư xã* publishing house... He also had periodicals like *Thần chung* and *Tiếng dân*. We devoured those books and periodicals very quickly.”¹²⁹ As they practiced and became accustomed to the rhythms of the written word, the periodicals given to them by their thoughtful brother opened new worlds to the young women in the countryside: “It was through reading books and periodicals that we came to know many new and interesting things that expanded our perception and broadened our way of thinking. Before, we misunderstood or just did not understand many of the things that happened in our lives and in society. Reading shed new light on those things and changed our way of seeing the world.”¹³⁰ Nguyễn Thị Tháp, a contemporary of Nguyễn Thị Minh who lived more than a thousand kilometers to the south, echoed those sentiments. Her year or two of formal education at the elementary school near her home in the Mekong Delta ignited a passion for knowledge. The young woman sacrificed to continue learning: “I loved reading books. Every time we took bananas or betel to the market to

sell, I did not use a penny to buy snacks. I took the money home and saved it to buy books. I relished reading those small, thin books like “*Võ Đông Sơn, Bạch Thu Hà*”, “*Vì nước hoa rơi*”, “*Giọt máu chung tình*”, etc.... I never tired of them.”¹³¹ It was in this way that motivated individuals with a foundation of *quốc ngữ* literacy like Nguyễn Thị Thập, Nguyễn Thị Minh, and the paperboy were able to expand their knowledge and develop competent, though undocumented literacy.

The transfer of knowledge from the colonial school, along the road, and into the vast populated countryside rippled across the landscape. This process did not end with the students whose informal teachers were students themselves. Western knowledge and *quốc ngữ* were seamlessly woven into existing socio-cultural practices, as the theatrical performances of Nguyễn Thị Minh’s sister Nhâm indicate: “Nhâm had a strong, but warm voice. She often read aloud for all of us. Most nights we had to pound rice because my family earned extra money milling rice. Nhâm would stand on the rice mortar reading as she milled. Us older girls sifted while the children sat here and there listening.”¹³² The girls’ mother was surely delighted to see her daughters perpetuate their knowledge in this familiar way. However, a proud smile or glance had to be furtive for fear of her husband, whom the girls had openly disobeyed. When their father became aware of his daughters’ new skills, his reaction was predictable: “When my father found out that Nhâm, Thủy, and I had learned to read in secret, he was mad as hell.”¹³³ However, as Đạm Phương (a combatant in the long struggle for female education we met in Chapter 1) predicted with a self-confidence that belied her doubts, Nguyễn Thị Minh’s father noticed his daughters’ literacy had no negative effects on his expectation of their conduct: “My father calmed down when he saw that reading books and newspapers had not negatively impacted our virtue or performance of household duties. Thereafter he never scolded us again.”¹³⁴ It was that realization and the tacit permission it implied that allowed the ripples to stretch still further, fulfilling another of Đạm Phương’s aspirations: “It was only later, after we had become literate, that my brother Uy brought up the idea of a literacy group. He said we should establish a group to teach women and the masses how to read and organize. We thought we would be able to establish an association that made handicrafts, but feared that it would lack participants, especially women.”¹³⁵ Though they became literate without their father’s knowledge, the young women had to ask the proud aging scholar’s permission to share their knowledge outside the home and family: “The next day my sister Nhâm broached the idea with my parents. She chose

her words carefully and they both agreed. I talked about the association with some aunts and cousins and they agreed to join. Nhâm went to Hà Đông province to pick up a woman who had long made handicrafts to teach for our association. At the first class only a handful of people showed up, but thereafter it was really crowded with around thirty people attending.”¹³⁶ While the association began as a way to teach local women a marketable skill, it soon encompassed literacy courses: “At first there were only handicraft classes, but after a while we talked of opening a literacy course. We all agreed Thủy and I would alternate teaching *quốc ngữ*. Because the stature of the ‘teachers’ was not much above the students, we decided to keep things simple. Our goal was for students to be able to read and write...”¹³⁷

Rather than static and restricted to a privileged few, the knowledge of colonial schools was carried to every corner of the colony. Nguyễn Thị Minh’s experience as a student and a teacher illustrates how *quốc ngữ* literacy reached to and spread from those with no access to formal education. Literacy was much more widespread than most scholars believe. Due to the increasingly fluid diffusion of knowledge throughout Vietnamese space, the speed with which one could learn *quốc ngữ*, and the number of pupils who attended school for 1-3 years, I believe literacy rates likely averaged between 25% and 35% by the mid 1930s.¹³⁸ While for most this almost certainly meant ‘consumption’ (reading) rather than ‘production’ (writing), the relatively easy transfer of *quốc ngữ* literacy profoundly altered the socio-cultural landscape of the period. The interwar period witnessed a massive explosion in the number of periodicals and a flowering of new kinds of socio-cultural expression. It is somewhat obvious that the generation of young people educated in colonial schools fomented this torrent of publishing. In the 1930s, young men like Huy Cận, Lưu Trọng Lư, and Nguyễn Vỹ produced notions of identity in the colony’s periodicals. The consumers of that art and information have long been assumed to be the producers’ socio-cultural peers – those possessing a significant degree of Western education. Because this group was relatively small, many scholars perceive the direct socio-cultural impact of *quốc ngữ* periodicals to have been equally circumscribed. I believe the consumer-base or audience for these periodicals to have been much larger. The significance of periodicals and the information therein thus had a much greater societal impact due to the fact that the ability to

directly (reading) and indirectly (listening) consume content was much larger than is currently believed.

Periodicals acted as conduits through which modern knowledge and evolving socio-cultural norms penetrated society. During the late colonial period, the *quốc ngữ* periodical was *the* manual of education, information, and entertainment in Việt Nam. Periodicals were consulted for definitions of neologisms like ‘society’ and ‘freedom’ or for information on historical figures like Rousseau or Lincoln. They were used as course books and reading material in classrooms throughout the colony. Perhaps most importantly, periodicals became the most prolific form of popular entertainment. The novels, short stories, essays, and poetry published in the periodicals of the 1930s became the way contemporary Vietnamese society viewed itself and its past. Indeed, entertainment was one of the main drivers of *quốc ngữ* literacy: People wanted to be able to read so that they could participate in the popular culture being created.¹³⁹ Because economic imperatives were central to the periodicals of the 1920s and 1930s consumer participation in the form of patronage was instrumental in determining a periodical’s content. As the most prolific reading audience of the 1930s, literate girls and women were particularly influential in terms of driving narrative direction.

As the primary forum for cultural production and transformation, periodicals were paramount to the evolution of late colonial Vietnamese society. The discussion in this chapter has demonstrated that a much larger number of people had access to *quốc ngữ* print, which was generated by a fairly sophisticated group of young people educated in the colony’s schools. To understand print culture in colonial Việt Nam, it is necessary to understand how it was regulated, its content, and larger socio-cultural impact. It is to those matters I turn my attention.

¹ See for example, Nguyễn Tuấn, *Chiếc lư đồng mắt cua, Tùy bút 1, and Tùy bút 2.*

² See for example: Marr, David. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, esp. p. 1-53. Ho Tai, Hue-Tam. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, esp. p. 1-56.

³ Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia-I (TTLTQG-I) (Hà Nội). Residence Superieure au Tonkin (RST) 76954-05. *Reglementation sur la circulation interieure et exterieure applicable aux indigenes du Tonkin et des autres pays de l'Union Indochinoise*. This was the case according to Article 1, paragraph 2 of the Governor General Arrete of 9/11/1918.

⁴ *ibid.* Articles 2 and 5 of the 9/11/1918 Arrete.

⁵ *ibid.* Article 10.

⁶ Letter from the *Ingenieur en Chef de la Circonscription Territoriale* to the *Resident Superieur au Tokin*, 6 May 1925. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 44418, *Modification de l'arrete du 9 Mai 1925 sur la code de la route, 1925-1929.*

⁷ See for example: *Rapport de l'Ingenieur en Chef du Travaux Publics du Tonkin a Gov. Gen. de l'Indochine: Service de transport en commun organisation du controle sur route*, 14/9/1928 in (TTLTQG-I) RST 77762, *Organisation du controle sur route du Service de Transport en Commune au Tonkin, 1928-1937.* And “*La Circulation Automobile en Indochine*” par Le President du Club Automobile et Motocycliste du Tonkin, Annam et Lao, 1932 in (TTLTQG-I) RST 77769-04, *Voeux formulees par l'Automobile Club de l'Annam-Tonkin A.s. de la circulation automobile en Indochine en 1932.*

⁸ For a fascinating series of documents spanning three years in which French and Vietnamese business concerns fought the administration's regulation curtailing automobile traffic see AHN 4233.

⁹ See RST 77762. The *Police de la Route* for Tonkin and Annam were created by Government General Arrete on 24 June 1931 – “... comporte uniquement des prescriptions etablies dans l'interet de la conservation de routes, de la police de la circulation et de la securite des voyageurs...”. *Police de la Route* were created in Cochinchine in January of 1930.

¹⁰ *ibid.* See *Service de Police de la Route* to the *Resident Superieur au Tonkin*, 16/1/36.

¹¹ See for example, TTLTQG-I (Hà Nội). Archives de la Mairie – Hanoi (AMH) 44368, *A.s usure des routes par les vehicules automobiles en 1925.*

¹² “*La Circulation Automobile en Indochine*” par Le President du Club Automobile et Motocycliste du Tonkin, Annam et Lao, 1932. p. 5-6 in RST 77769-04.

¹³ Pouyanne, A.A. *Les travaux publics de l'Indochine, 1926*, p. 60.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.* Note: While this was the case in Tonkin and Annam, two additional categories of roads were created in Cochinchine, provincial and communal routes, which were more or less the equivalent of local routes.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 68

¹⁷ Pouyanne, A.A. *Les travaux publics de l'Indochine, 1926*, p. 83.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 89.

²⁰ Map key: Già Lâm (1), Hà Đông (2), Phủ Lý (3), Ninh Bình (4), Thái Bình (5), Hưng Yên (6), Hải Dương (7), Đập Cầu (8), Phủ Lạng Thương (9), Thái Nguyên (10), Phú Thọ (11), Sơn Tây (12), Chợ Bo (13), Vân Đình (14), Vụ Bản (15), Nho Quan (16), Hà Trung (17), Phất Diêm (18), Yên Mô (19), Vân Lý (20), Quất Lâm (21), Đồ Sơn (22), Ninh Giang (23), Kiến An (24), Quảng Yên (25), Hồn Gai (26), Cẩm Phả (27), Uông Bí (28), Mao Khê (29), Đồng Triệu (30), Lục Nam (31), Chu (32), Kep (33), Bờ Hà (34), Lộc Bình (35), Đông Đàng (36), Na Cham (37), Thất Khê (38), Bắc Kạn (39), Na Fac (40), Nguyễn Bình (41), Nam Quan (42), Chapa (43), Việt Trì (44), Đông Anh (45).

²¹ See *Liste des entrepreneurs de transports en commune au Tonkin 1937* in RST 84353, *Liste des entrepreneurs de transport en commune au Tonkin, 1937.*

²² Pouyanne, A.A. *Les travaux publics de l'Indochine, 1926*, p. 18.

²³ See *Regulation des voies et circulation* (Presidential decree), 13/11/1926 in (TTLTQG-I) AMH 4232, *Regulations generales de la circulation des automobiles en Indochine, 1924-1945.*

²⁴ *ibid.* See Arrete du Gouverneur General, 24/6/1931, *reglement l'usage des voies ouvertes a la circulation publique en Indochine.*

²⁵ See *Conditions de la mise en circulation et en exploitation des vehicules automobiles destinees a un service public de transport, 1920* in (TTLTQG-I) RST 44340, *Conditions de la mise en circulation et en exploitation des vehicules automobiles destines a un service public de transport, 1920.*

²⁶ See Articles 2 and 4 of the 18/11/20 Arrete, in RST 44340.

- ²⁷ See *A.s réglementation sur les transports en commune au Tonkin de 1930-1932* in (TTLTQG-I) RST 77763, *A.s Réglementation sur les transports en commune au Tonkin de 1930 a 1932*.
- ²⁸ “Code de la Route” here refers to the regulations promulgated by the Presidential Decree of 1926.
- ²⁹ *Rapport: Service de transport en commun organisation du controle sur route (de l’Ingenieur en Chef du Travaux Publics du Tonkin a Gouvernement General de l’Indochine)*, 14/9/1928, p. 1 in RST 77762.
- ³⁰ *ibid.* p. 2.
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² *ibid.* p. 2-3.
- ³³ *La Circulation Automobile en Indochine (par Lecorche, Le President du Club Automobile et Motocycliste du Tonkin – Annam – Lao a Gouvernement General)*, p. 2-3 in RST 77769-04.
- ³⁴ *ibid.* p. 4-5.
- ³⁵ *ibid.* p. 5-6.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*
- ³⁷ *ibid.* p. 7.
- ³⁸ *ibid.* p. 6.
- ³⁹ 10,231,164 4th class passengers as opposed to 360,878 1st – 3rd class passengers (see table 7). In *Gouvernement General de l’Indochine. Chemins de Fer, Statistiques de l’Annee 1927, Dressees a l’Inspection Generale des Travaux Publics*. Hà Nội, 1929.
- ⁴⁰ 8,089,527 4th class passengers as opposed to 129,778 1st – 3rd class passengers (see table 7). In *Gouvernement General de l’Indochine. Chemins de Fer, Statistiques de l’Annee 1938, Dressees a l’Inspection Generale des Travaux Publics*. Hà Nội, 1939.
- ⁴¹ *Chemins de Fer, Statistiques de l’Annee 1927*. The Railroad of Indochina spent 78.78% of what it brought in. Much of that revenue was then reinvested in the system. See table 33.
- ⁴² *ibid.* In 1927 expenditures accounted for 91.29% of revenue. That year revenues were 8,794,523 *francs* while expenditures accounted for 8,029,223 *francs*, profits thus totaled only 765,300 *francs*.
- ⁴³ (TTLTQG-I) RST 77781, *Rapport de l’Inspecteur General des Travaux Publics a Messieurs les Membres du Grand Conseil des Interets Economique et Financiers de l’Indochine*, re. Reglements des services de transport par automobile, 29/11/1932, p. 1.
- ⁴⁴ Note: There exists an extensive body of archival documents detailing this competition during the 1920s and 1930s which might be of interest to scholars researching public works and mobility in Indochina during the late colonial period. See (TTLTQG-I) AMH 4232 and AMH 4233.
- ⁴⁵ RST 77781, p. 2.
- ⁴⁶ See statistics in citations 77 and 78. This represents a decrease of approximately 20%.
- ⁴⁷ Bourcier Saint Chaffray, Directeur de l’Enseignement primaire au Tonkin, 7/11/18, #148. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 73395-02, *Recueil des arretes, circulaires et correspondances diverses concernant l’organisation de l’Enseignement franco-annamite et l’Enseignement traditionnel, 1912-1926*.
- ⁴⁸ Note: Unlike elementary and communal schools, primary schools were segregated by gender.
- ⁴⁹ See (TTLTQG-I) SET 222, *Nombre des ecoles de plein exercice et d’ecoles elementaires, 1/5/1923*.
- ⁵⁰ (TTLTQG-I) RST 36566(9), *Rapport sur la situation de l’Enseignement au Tonkin, 1926-1927*.
- ⁵¹ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Tuấn, Chàng trai nước Việt*, p. 162.
- ⁵² *ibid.*
- ⁵³ *ibid.* p. 162-163.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Tuấn, Chàng trai nước Việt*, p. 96.
- ⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 117-118.
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Tùng Long - Lê Thị Bạch Vân. *Hồi ký Bà Tùng Long*, p. 37.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.*
- ⁶² *ibid.* p. 42.
- ⁶³ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Tuấn, Chàng trai nước Việt*, p. 261.
- ⁶⁶ Đặng Thái Mai. *Hồi ký (Thời kỳ thanh thiếu niên)*, p. 229.

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- ⁶⁷ *ibid.* p. 93.
⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 164.
⁶⁹ *ibid.*
⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 228-229.
⁷¹ *ibid.*
⁷² Đặng Thái Mai. *Hồi ký (Thời kỳ thanh thiếu niên)*, p. 221 and 239.
⁷³ *ibid.* p. 229.
⁷⁴ *ibid.*
⁷⁵ *ibid.* p. 262-263.
⁷⁶ *ibid.*
⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 271.
⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 271.
⁷⁹ *ibid.*
⁸⁰ *ibid.*
⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 269.
⁸² Huy Cận. *Hồi ký song đôi*, p. 108.
⁸³ *ibid.* p. 108-109.
⁸⁴ *ibid.* p. 111.
⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 112.
⁸⁶ *ibid.*
⁸⁷ Lưu Trọng Lư. *Nửa Đêm Sực Tỉnh*, p. 8-10.
⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 21.
⁸⁹ *ibid.*
⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 22.
⁹¹ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*. p. 19-20.
⁹² Trần Văn Khê. *Hồi ký (Quyển 1)*, p. 52.
⁹³ Nguyễn Vũ. *Tuấn, Chàng trai nước Việt*, p. 118-119.
⁹⁴ *ibid.* p. 119
⁹⁵ *ibid.*
⁹⁶ *ibid.*
⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 45
⁹⁸ Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 73.
⁹⁹ *ibid.*
¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*
¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p. 73-74.
¹⁰² *ibid.* p. 74.
¹⁰³ *ibid.*
¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*
¹⁰⁵ Nguyễn Thị Minh. *Con đường giải phóng (tập I)*. In *Tuyển Hồi ký hay*, p. 167.
¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*
¹⁰⁷ Note: This is what scholars like Marr and Woodside refer to when discussing the storied tradition of Vietnamese education.
¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* p. 168.
¹⁰⁹ Lê Tụy Phương, p. 20-21.
¹¹⁰ Nguyễn Thị Minh. *Con đường giải phóng (tập I)*, p. 168.
¹¹¹ *ibid.*
¹¹² *ibid.* p. 168-169.
¹¹³ *ibid.*
¹¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 167.
¹¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 169.
¹¹⁶ *ibid.*
¹¹⁷ *ibid.*
¹¹⁸ *ibid.*
¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 169.
¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ Nguyễn Hồng, *Những ngày thơ ấu*, p. 101.

¹²⁴ *ibid.* p. 98.

¹²⁵ Huy Cận. *Hồi ký song đôi: Tình bạn trong sáng*, p. 244.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p. 245.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Nguyễn Thị Minh. *Con đường giải phóng (tập I)*, p. 169-170.

¹³⁰ *ibid.* p. 170.

¹³¹ Nguyễn Thị Thập. *Từ đất Tiên Giang*. In *Tuyển Hồi ký hay*, p. 335-336.

¹³² Nguyễn Thị Minh. *Con đường giải phóng (tập I)*, p. 169-170.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

¹³⁵ *ibid.* p. 172.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Note: David Marr estimated that literacy rates during the 1930s were some where between 5% and 10%. More recently, Shawn McHale indicated his belief that rates were likely between 10% and 20% in the mid 1930s. Interestingly, McHale cites DRV statistics from 1945 that state provincial literacy rates in the North averaged 34%, with some provinces enjoying rates as high as 50%. While McHale is skeptical of these findings, I am less so due to the evidence cited above and because these statistics were compiled prior to the onset of the government's Popular Education campaign. Thus the DRV had no reason to artificially inflate the numbers. Indeed it would have benefited future surveys if they had deflated initial numbers so as to highlight the effectiveness of post-independence social welfare programs (see McHale, Shawn. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, p. 27 and 190).

¹³⁹ Note: The possibility of social mobility and enhanced prestige were other factors. See my discussion of the adoption of Western studies in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 4

The *Quốc ngữ* Periodical: Evolution of Control

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a dramatic increase in periodicals brought about by the youth educated in Franco-Việt schools and the profusion of *quốc ngữ* literacy examined in the previous chapter. As the primary medium for cultural expression and creation, periodicals were paramount to the development and transformation of Vietnamese society. Prior to the interwar period there existed few *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the South, the Center, or the North. The reasons for this dearth are relatively straightforward. In the pre-colonial period, periodicals were not part of the small realm of print culture in Việt Nam. In the first decades of the century, relatively few were interested and/or able to participate in the new industry as journalists or professional writers, both of which were novel professions. Furthermore, the *quốc ngữ* literate audience remained very small. During the interwar period, colonial schools exponentially expanded both producers and consumers of *quốc ngữ* print. The variegated periodicals that developed during this period formed a vibrant public sphere, which published articles, essays, and exposes on a variety of domestic and foreign issues with increasing freedom. Periodicals also became the primary forum of popular culture. New forms of cultural expression, such as novels and satirical cartoons, were introduced, developed, and popularized via *quốc ngữ* periodicals. Indeed, it was through periodicals that Vietnamese articulated notions of a collective past, defined their present, and dreamt of the future.

Before I delve into the paramount role *quốc ngữ* periodicals played in the socio-cultural development of the period in the following chapter, it is imperative to understand how the printed word was regulated. Prior to the colonial period, there were no periodicals in Việt Nam. The colonial administration introduced and sponsored the first *quốc ngữ* periodicals published in both Sài Gòn (*Gia đình báo*, 1865) and Hà Nội (*Đại Việt Tân Báo*, 1905). The administration attempted to define the parameters of the newfound Vietnamese-language public sphere by

establishing rules and regulations to govern *quốc ngữ* periodicals.¹ The contention that the French administration was able to exercise almost complete control of the press throughout the late colonial period has led some scholars to minimize the significance of *quốc ngữ* periodicals in much the same way they have colonial schools.² More recent work has pulled back on the rhetoric of socio-cultural hegemony. In his *Print and Power*, Shawn McHale correctly asserts that French rule in Indochina could be surprisingly ineffective. In his view, the claim that colonial regimes possessed hegemonic control over society runs counter to historical evidence.³ McHale's work goes a long way towards providing an understanding of the contested nature of the public realm and how *quốc ngữ* periodicals were controlled in late colonial Việt Nam. He asserts the regulations governing *quốc ngữ* periodicals were eased during the interwar period and that Vietnamese writers and editors were engaged in a kind of tug-of-war with colonial authorities over the character of the public realm.⁴ Furthermore, McHale cogently identifies the dilemma faced by authorities: that of accommodating dissenting voices while not allowing them to undermine French rule.⁵ Yet McHale seems to have one foot tied to previous narratives even as he boldly moves into the future. While he disputes narratives of socio-cultural hegemony, he largely agrees that the colonizer dominated the public sphere.⁶ In fact he never really traces the efficacy of colonial press laws. While scholarship prior to McHale's work assumes the total and constant ability of the colonial regime to bend the public sphere to its will, McHale's work questions the administration's ability and desire to implement the letter of the law in some arenas, but not in others. For example, he seems to take pre-publication censorship and regulations necessitating prior authorization to establish a periodical as constant forms of effective control even as he admits that control grew more lenient as the interwar period wore on. While much more accurate than any previous work, the portrait of the press we are left with is one in which a yet intact image of absolutist control masks the complexities of policy formation and execution.

This chapter charts a new path dispelling notions of the constant efficacy of colonial power to provide a more complete picture of how the French administration attempted to control the public realm and how the Vietnamese both cooperated with and tried to subvert those efforts. The assumption that laws regulating the *quốc ngữ* press were enforced in a uniformly effective manner throughout the late colonial period is inherently misleading. Far from exercising absolute control, the colonial regime proved almost completely incompetent at censoring the

content of the Vietnamese-language press in the first decade of the century. The ‘success’ of the heavily state-subsidized efforts in the teens, driven largely by Vietnamese editors’ willingness to work within the parameters set by the administration, led to the privatization of *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the early 1920s. Vietnamese ownership spurred the evolution of press regulations during the interwar period. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the administration established a joint federal, regional, and local regime of the press, which grew more efficient over time. The system that evolved permitted increasingly free expression and entrance into the public sphere, while monitoring the content of *quốc ngữ* periodicals after publication. This system partially addressed the desires of both the administration and the generation of youth educated in colonial schools, which drove the explosion of *quốc ngữ* print. By the 1930s, the experience of the previous three decades demonstrated to the administration that pre-publication censorship was impractical and infeasible. A tripartite system, which attempted to control printing and official access to the public sphere, while surveying the content of the press post-publication evolved. This system provided greater freedom of expression to youths cognizant of its meaning and utility. The regime acquiesced to an ever-growing number of periodicals under less stringent regulation because they provided meaningful employment for the generation educated from the late 1910s and acted as a valve through which under-empowered and underemployed youth could let off steam – at the French colonizers, the Vietnamese mandarins and officials, and the ills that plagued their society. Finally, greater press freedoms permitted the administration to see with relative ease what Vietnamese were thinking and which issues were important to both journalists and their audience. In other words, press freedoms and post-publication monitoring provided a system of surveillance that allowed the administration a fairly accurate reading of the pulse of Vietnamese society at any given moment.

L’Annam, Babut, and 1908

The first *quốc ngữ* periodical did not appear in the North until 1905. Published in Hà Nội, *Đại Việt Tân Báo/L’Annam* (from here ‘*Annam*’) was a collaboration between a private individual, Ernst Babut, and the Government of Indochina. The administration subsidized the periodical by inserting money for mandatory subscriptions into the budgets of local Vietnamese

officials throughout the North and Center of the colony.⁷ From the beginning, the administration perceived both the promises and perils of a Vietnamese-language press. As conduits of official propaganda and Western knowledge, periodicals could serve as tools of acculturation, providing the Vietnamese population greater understanding of French views and thus instilling an appreciation of the occupation. At the same time, the administration was well aware that the establishment of a Vietnamese-language press threatened to spread views inimical to the regime, which could undermine stability.

Despite these concerns, Governor General Paul Beau came to an agreement with Ernst Babut. They signed the contract establishing *Annam* on February 21, 1905. The bilingual (Classical Chinese and *quốc ngữ*) paper was published twice weekly, on Sunday and Thursday.



Photograph 20. Mã Mây Street, Commercial Quarter of Hà Nội, 1906.

The contract reflected the administration's aspirations for the periodical. Its principle purpose was to provide the *Annamese* people with the type of "social education" that furthered the interests of the French administration and their Vietnamese counterparts, the officials who comprised most of its subsidized audience.⁸

Besides propagating "precise and exact" information meant to combat the "superstition and ignorance" that was said to permeate Vietnamese society, the eight-page periodical was also to print "practical knowledge", such as articles on hygiene, veterinary medicine, modern agricultural techniques, and the principles of Western commercialism.⁹

From the first decade of the century until after the Great War, *quốc ngữ* periodicals were governed more by the terms of the contracts that created them than by general press laws. The disappearance of these lengthy agreements during the interwar period demonstrates the evolution of control and easing of regulations. These contracts represent the *quốc ngữ* periodical in its infancy. The length and detail of the contract constructed for *Annam* are indicative of the

administration's apprehension at the establishment of the Vietnamese-language press. The third and fourth articles of the contract were central to how the administration envisaged control of the journal. The third article explicitly stated that the journal was forbidden from disparaging the administration in anyway that might lead to the loss or diminution of French prestige.¹⁰ To ensure this stipulation was carried out in word and deed, pre-publication censorship was written into the agreement itself. Babut was made responsible for providing the office of the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* three copies of each article (in French, *quốc ngữ*, and Classical Chinese) at least 24 hours prior to printing.¹¹ A mandatory French-language summary of content was also to be inserted into each issue sent to provincial officials as another means of surveillance. A single breach of any of these regulations would result in the immediate nullification of the contract and the paper's dissolution.¹² A final safeguard was inserted at the end of the contract calling for the Resident Superior to appoint a three-member commission to monitor *Annam* to ensure it did not violate the word or spirit of the contract.¹³ While this study focuses on periodicals published in Hà Nội, regulation of *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the South mirrored that in the North at the beginning of the century. The same year Babut and the Resident Superior established *Annam* in Hà Nội, Georges Garros and the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina agreed to the creation of a *quốc ngữ* journal, *Le Moniteur des provinces*, in Sài Gòn. The contract between Garros and the Lieutenant Governor was basically identical to that between Babut and the Resident Superior. The only difference between the two was the length of the agreement's duration: Garros was granted a term of five years while Babut's ran only three.¹⁴

Despite the robust system of controls and censorship written into the contract and the fact that the owner and operator of the periodical was French, *Annam* represented a colossal failure for the administration on multiple levels. While profitable for Babut, the periodical proved to be a financial sinkhole for the government. The administration provided 1,387 stipends for provincial officials to 'purchase' the journal in *Tonkin* and an additional 741 in *Annam*.¹⁵ This money was given directly to Babut, who sent the periodical to officials throughout the North and Center. In the three years of the journal's existence, the administration paid Babut 146,446.28 *francs* for the above stipends and the general costs of establishing and producing the periodical.¹⁶ Other than the 2,128 yearly subscriptions paid for by the administration, the paper gained only 200 paying subscribers, which brought in a total of 1,920 *francs* over three years. Lack of

interest in *Annam* can most likely be attributed to the general novelty of Vietnamese-language (*quốc ngữ* and Classical Chinese) periodicals in the North as well as the dearth of literacy.

While the periodical represented a financial loss, the administration was probably delighted it did not gain wider popularity. The administration proved unable to enforce both the tight, multi-layered regulations written into the contract and the general laws governing *quốc ngữ* periodicals in Indochina. This proved true even though *Annam* was initially the first and subsequently one of a small handful of *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the North and the only Vietnamese-language periodical distributed in the Center from 1905 to 1908. *Annam* was continually able to publish content later deemed subversive. Furthermore, Ernst Babut used the state-subsidized organ as a soundingboard for anti-colonial and anti-imperial views. In January of 1906, less than a year after *Annam* published its first issue in May 1905, complaints regarding its content began rolling into the Residence Superior. Ranking Vietnamese officials found the content of *Annam* offensive and perceived it as a threat to their power and interests. These officials hated the periodical because it caused them to lose face with their subordinates, many of whom also received the journal via government subsidy. In December 1907 the Resident Superior in *Annam* demanded authorities in the North intervene to stop the publication of material critical of the administration and the Vietnamese Imperial government in Huế.¹⁷ According to a highly confidential report drafted by the Second Bureau of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin*, Babut repeatedly violated his contract with the administration by permitting *Annam* to publish articles contrary to the purpose of the journal.¹⁸ The report concluded much of the periodical's content was incendiary. Particularly troubling were articles critical of the conduct of Vietnamese mandarins and those questioning the purpose of the Imperial government. The propagation of such views represented an acute threat to the colonial administration because its occupation of Indochina depended on the collaboration of Imperial officials, who governed localities throughout the Center and the North. Those provincial and district officials were the very people who received the periodical. The report concluded that *Annam* inspired ideas and aspirations that ran completely counter to its *raison d'être*.¹⁹

Around the same time *Annam* was propagating anti-colonial views, a small, Hà Nội-based group of disgruntled classical scholars and intellectuals educated in the colony's few Western schools began to criticize the Imperial government and call for modest reforms. In March of 1907, some associated with this amorphous group established a private school in the

commercial quarter of Hà Nội called the *Đông kinh nghĩa thức* (*Tonkin Academy*). The school's free classes (primarily in Classical Chinese and *quốc ngữ*) and lectures were open to the public. While, as indicated in the introduction, many scholars have greatly exaggerated the significance of this short-lived institution, the authorities at the time did not think it coincidence that the views espoused by a number of this group mirrored those published in *Annam*. In fact, it was noted that Vietnamese involved with Babut's journal gradually began to demand reforms and liberal freedoms.²⁰ The authorities came to see Babut as the center of this Vietnamese group of classical scholars and Westernized intellectuals. The administration came to this conclusion because his journal became the mouthpiece of the group's views.²¹ In addition, authorities discovered that Babut's home doubled as a *salon* where he extolled the virtues of French liberalism and violently criticized his countrymen's rule in Indochina.²² Babut's views and prerogatives seem to gel with those of his Vietnamese colleagues. Like Paul Bert, the Governor General who authorized his journal, Babut had uniquely republican views of education. He called for "modern and obligatory" education for both boys and girls in Indochina. He also sought universal suffrage for electing members of the Consultative Chamber and freedom of the indigenous press. With a confidence indicating he *knew*, Babut told colonial authorities that those were the desires and aspirations of all Vietnamese who loved their country.²³ According to the administration, Babut helped transform the aspirations of this Hà Nội-based group of scholars and intellectuals from vague thoughts into unrealistic and unreasonable demands hostile to French rule in Indochina.²⁴ⁱ

While a Frenchmen sitting at the center of a reform movement exalted by postcolonial scholarship might seem patronizing and Eurocentric to contemporary eyes, Babut's role should be taken seriously. The same report that detailed Babut's involvement with this group of classical scholars and modern intellectuals put Phan Châu Trinh, the famous reformer hostile to the Vietnamese mandarin, at the head of what the administration saw as a "clan" grouped around *Annam* and Babut.²⁵ Phan Châu Trinh, Babut, and *Annam* were seen as primary players in seemingly disparate events that unfolded hundreds of kilometers apart in the Center and North

ⁱ Regarding Babut's aspirations, the report cited above concluded: "These utopian dreams need not be discussed. The evolution of the Vietnamese toward modern ideas is desirable, but it is also necessary, from an economic point of view, to allow this evolution to proceed naturally and to have it conform to the particular character of the Vietnamese race and its traditions, which constitute its mental and moral constitution. This does not mean that the Vietnamese cannot become acquainted with our ideas of justice and humanity, only that it is necessary to let time accomplish this work."

during the first half of 1908. In early March a crowd marched from their village in Đại Lộc district to the office of the provincial French Resident in Hội An, Quảng Nam province (Center). The villagers requested the Resident ensure *corvee* obligations be distributed equally amongst all Vietnamese. Apparently Vietnamese officials excused their families and others with power and influence from performing *corvee*. The villagers' pleas fell on the deaf ears of their local mandarin, who was undoubtedly partially responsible for their grievances. Others with similar complaints against local officials involving over-taxation, joined the *corvee*-protestors at the Residence in Hội An. Some even force-marched district officials to Hội An to answer before the Resident. In one case, a Vietnamese official was rescued from his own people by armed French troops.²⁶ Similar protests spread to several other provinces in the Center. While some have interpreted these protests as a mildly violent Vietnamese reaction to French rule, they are properly seen as inter-Vietnamese disputes.²⁷ The Vietnamese protests over poor treatment and abuses of power were aimed at Vietnamese authorities. When pleas to Vietnamese officials were met with inaction, villagers approached French officials. The significance of these events was not necessarily peasant grievances regarding official's behavior or the unrest itself, both of which occurred repeatedly throughout Vietnamese history. Rather, these events were important because of the fact that rural Vietnamese approached foreign power holders in protest of their treatment by their own countrymen. Indeed, as the Resident Superior in *Annam* stated in a confidential letter dated May 11, 1908: "I have ascertained as well... how many of the indigenous people are detaching themselves little by little from their racial representatives."²⁸ The French took their appeals with much greater seriousness than their Vietnamese counterparts had. Because colonial stability in Indochina depended on the complicity of the Vietnamese administration, the French sided with the Vietnamese officials and subdued the 'protests', at times violently. These actions were taken despite the Resident Superior's argument that doing so was "impolitic" because the Vietnamese mandarins "ought logically and legally" to have carried out the repression themselves.²⁹

A few months later and hundreds of kilometers to the north, a '*coup d'etat*' was attempted against the colonial regime in Hà Nội. The coup was planned for the 27th of June. The plot was as follows: A large military banquet was to be held on the 27th at which most of the colonial garrison would be present. The food served to the troops was to be poisoned, killing or at least immobilizing the bulk of the troops in Hà Nội. At the same time, Vietnamese soldier-

conspirators serving in the colonial army were to dismantle their own artillery. Finally, armed groups, some of whom were associated with Hoàng Hoa Thám (who was in the midst of a long rebellion in the areas close to the Chinese border), would seize strategic points in the municipality.³⁰ The plot turned out to be an ill-conceived disaster. At the banquet on the 27th, the garrison was indeed poisoned.

However, the poison only made the troops sick and did not immobilize, let alone kill them. The administration, which had been tipped off, quickly declared martial law, disarmed colonial Vietnamese troops, and rounded up the conspirators.

How exactly were Babut, Phan Châu Trinh, and *Annam* central to these events?



Photograph 21. Center of the Colonial Administration in Indochina, Hà Nội, 1907.

Phan Châu Trinh was indeed involved with Babut and the dissemination of views deemed harmful to the administration. During the spring of 1908 he was not with Babut in Hà Nội, but in his hometown in Quảng Nam, the province where the protests against the Vietnamese officials began. In April 1908, a month after the first protests, Trinh sent an anti-Imperial pamphlet to the French administrations of both *Annam* and *Tonkin*. Three letters written by Phan Châu Trinh followed the pamphlet. The letters were also sent from Quảng Nam, which the administration labeled the ‘center of the protests’.³¹ Apparently Phan Châu Trinh spent much of his time in Quảng Nam writing, because the office of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* intercepted another letter sent by Trinh to Ernst Babut in Hà Nội (also sent in April from Quảng Nam). According to a 1910 report, the letter made clear that Phan Châu Trinh and Babut were involved in the protests then occurring in Quảng Nam and other provinces in the Center. As the Resident Superior in *Annam* said in the same confidential letter cited above: “... I have not failed to notice the ease with which the (demonstration) ringleaders have exploited among the people resentments apparently held against the mandarins.”³² The administration thought those ‘ringleaders’ were linked to Phan Châu Trinh and Babut who fed them anti-Imperial views via *Annam*. The

aforementioned letter from Trinh to Babut identified them as “... the instigators of this movement...”³³ It was perhaps because of this letter that the administration linked the protests in the Center with the *coup* plot in Hà Nội: “... It is reasonable to assume that M. Babut was informed about the events they were planning...”³⁴ In other words, according to a report written two years after the fact, Babut knew at least something of the events of June 1908 and did not inform the authorities. The report concluded that Babut was partly responsible for the “punishable offenses” because he not only failed to alert the authorities, but also propagated anti-colonial ideas in his home and via his periodical.³⁵

The protests and coup plot carried harsh repercussions. Even prior to the first protests, the Hà Nội school Phan Châu Trinh and Babut helped support, the *Tonkin Academy*, was shuttered in January 1908. The climate of suspicion and threat of disorder engendered by the protests and attempted coup caused the administration to move against political threats.³⁶ The group of classical scholars and Western educated intellectuals grouped around Babut and *Annam* were rounded up and sentenced to sometimes-lengthy prison sentences. Phan Châu Trinh was arrested the month after he wrote Babut, in May 1908, and sentenced to life on Côn Lôn Island (the penal colony off the south-central coast). Ernst Babut emerged from the events of 1908 rather unscathed despite the fact that he was acknowledged as a, if not *the*, ringleader of the amorphous group thought accountable for the unrest. In a puzzling twist, 1908 greeted Babut with official approval rather than sanction. At the beginning of the year, Babut appealed to extend his journal’s publication three months past the contractual deadline because publication did not begin until May 1905 (the agreement between Babut and the administration was signed in February of that year). His request to publish three full years was granted despite wide acknowledgement that he systematically disregarded both the word and spirit of the agreement. Recall that the contract Babut signed with the administration explicitly stated that the publication of any content deemed inimical to the interests of the regime would result in the nullification of the agreement and the prohibition of the periodical. Why then was Babut permitted to complete the duration of the contract when it was well known in the first months of publication that its terms had been breached? Furthermore, why was *Annam* allowed to continue after the authorities knew it was the vehicle for the propagation of the anti-Imperial views of the group of educated men apparently centered around Babut?

While my research did not unearth documents in which the administration addressed the questions posed above, I believe the following hypothesis is compelling. The administration did not have the bureaucratic infrastructure in place to competently monitor a single periodical in the first decade of the century. That is, it did not possess the ability to transform the authoritarian language of its contracts and press laws into actionable policy. Ironically, while draconian theory paired with practical incompetence in this early period, during the interwar years the administration's ability to enforce policy improved exponentially even as its treatment of the press grew progressively more liberal, as examined below. Furthermore, the administration proved unable to control *Annam* due to the fact that Babut was personally trusted to uphold his end of the bargain. Like Paul Bert, Babut seems to have been a true believer in the ideals of the French Revolution. Unlike Bert's gradual approach, Babut thought it best to introduce the Vietnamese to the fruits of liberalism and the greatness of the French nation immediately. The administration assumed Babut would self-censor. However, even when it became apparent he would not, the government could do little to remove the subversive content of the periodical or curtail Babut's personal activities. Finally, Babut was a Frenchman, living in a French municipality (Hà Nội) under French law. As continually documented throughout the archival record, the enforcement of law in practice was much more complicated than it appears on paper. Often times, the French authorities did not even know how to treat Vietnamese in the municipality – Were they under French or Vietnamese law? Who was to enforce these laws, their Vietnamese representatives or colonial authorities? For a Frenchman at the beginning of the century who had flouted colonial law and contract through the publication of a Vietnamese-language periodical, it was surely much more complicated. Was he subject to French press freedoms or the restrictions called for in his contract? Could he be prosecuted for breaching the contract that restricted his republican freedoms in French court under colonial law? Rather than tangle with such issues, it seems the administration tried in vain to contain the situation and waited for the three-year period of the contract to expire.ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ There might have been two contradictory laws at work here. Article 10 of the June 6, 1884 Treaty between the Imperial Government of Vietnam and the Republic of France ensured freedom of the press for French citizens in the North and Center (they were already granted this freedom in the South). The decision made by the *Comite*

Ernst Babut's character also might have contributed to his lenient treatment. Babut and Phan Châu Trinh were truly friends. Babut was very angry that his countrymen imprisoned for life his friend and comrade on a colonial penal island. After Trinh was sentenced, Babut returned to Paris and put up a spirited defense on his behalf. He appealed for leniency in Trinh's case to the League of Human Rights (of which he was a member) and to the Minister of Colonies.³⁷ Babut also defended Phan Châu Trinh in the French press. He wrote a series of articles published in the review *Pages libres*, which were reprinted by *Le Courrier d'Indochine* (published in Hải Phòng).³⁸ In the articles, Babut railed against the measures taken by the administration following the "affairs of June 27th 1908".³⁹ While in Indochina, apparently Babut portrayed himself as "the only representative of the liberal traditions of France" making him "very popular" amongst the "disgruntled *indigenes*" who "grouped around him" in the colony.⁴⁰ Likewise, in France Babut portrayed himself as the "only person who knew of the true aspirations of the Annamese people", engendering him to the patriarchs of republican values in the metropole.⁴¹ This tactic and Babut's work amongst high-level politicians and influence makers paid off when Phan Châu Trinh's sentence was commuted to government-subsidized exile in Paris. Immediately following the re-publication of his incendiary pieces in *L'Courrier*, Babut asked some Vietnamese 'representatives' to inform Governor General Klobukoski of his pending return to Indochina.⁴² Upon arriving in Hà Nội in 1910, Babut promised he would obey colonial press laws and promptly applied to publish another *quốc ngữ* journal. The Second Bureau in the office of the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* advised the administration to deny his application in a long confidential report, which detailed the repercussions of his previous periodical.⁴³

Annam was not the only Vietnamese language periodical in the North in the second half of the first decade of the 20th century. In 1907, another journal written in Classical Chinese and *quốc ngữ* called *Đặng Cổ Tùng Báo* (*The Old Tattler*) was established in Hà Nội. Like *Annam*, *The Old Tattler* was also a partnership between colonial authorities and a private individual,

Consultatif du Contentieux de la Marine et des Colonies on March 25, 1889 stated that the July 29, 1881 law that granted French press freedoms to her colonies applied only to *colonies* and not 'Protectorates' (like *Annam* and *Tonkin*). Articles 5 & 6 of the decision stated that a French-owned periodical was prohibited from publishing content inimical to the administration because doing so might ferment unrest in the indigenous population. The articles went on that those who brought about social disorder would be held legally responsible for doing so.

Francois Henri Schneider. That year, Schneider was granted contracts for two Vietnamese-language periodicals, the other was *Lúc tỉnh tân văn* (*News of the South*) published in Sài Gòn. In an interesting twist, Schneider brought in Đào Nguyên Phổ, the original editor the Classical Chinese section of *Annam*, to perform the same duty for his new Northern paper.⁴⁴ Nguyễn Văn Vinh, fresh from a sojourn to France, where he studied the rudiments of the newspaper business, was appointed the editor of the *quốc ngữ* portion of the periodical.ⁱⁱⁱ *The Old Tattler* was not the only periodical Schneider and Nguyễn Văn Vinh collaborated on in the first decade of the century, they also produced another Vietnamese-language journal called *Đại Nam Đồng Văn nhật báo* (*Annam Daily*). According to some sources, these were in fact one and the same – the only difference being that what had been known as *The Old Tattler* became *Annam Daily*.⁴⁵ However, in a report contemporary to their publication, the administration indicated that they were two distinct periodicals, both of which were owned by Schneider and edited by Nguyễn Văn Vinh.⁴⁶ In any case, the administration perceived the two very differently. According to Residence Superior in *Tonkin*, *Annam Daily* was a “very good” periodical (meaning it did not publish illicit content) that was “never critical of mandarins in a violent manner” (to the best of the administration’s knowledge).⁴⁷ *Annam Daily* also garnered official praise because it was said to be popular amongst the people. *The Old Tattler* was another matter entirely. In his *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, David Marr averred that *The Old Tattler* was the periodical printed by the *Tonkin Academy*, which appeared irregularly.⁴⁸ While this was not the case – *The Old Tattler* was owned by Schneider, operated by Nguyễn Văn Vinh, and printed at the *l’Imprimerie d’Extreme Orient* – the periodical did in fact disseminate content contrary to the welfare of the colonial order. The connection between *The Old Tattler* and the *Tonkin Academy* was drawn because Nguyễn Văn Vinh (one of the ‘Western educated’ intellectuals grouped around Babut and *Annam*) was involved with both. It is thus not surprising that like *Annam*, *The Old Tattler* was used as a vehicle to spread the ideas of that small group. Marr, citing *Cách mạng cận đại Việt Nam* (*The Modern Vietnamese Revolution*, a twelve volume opus on the modern Vietnamese revolution by Trần Huy Liệu, among other Hà Nội-based historians, on which his first volume heavily relies), stated *The Old Tattler* propagated views like those espoused in the poem “*Cao hu lau van*” (“Indictment of corrupt customs”), which exhorted Vietnamese officials to reform along Western lines.⁴⁹ That the periodical published this type of content was reflected in archival

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: Apparently he shared some of his responsibilities with Đỗ Thuận.

sources, which stated that it developed “dangerous tendencies” including ridiculing Vietnamese authorities and criticizing the administration of the Protectorate.⁵⁰

The Old Tattler should be viewed through the same lens as *Annam* – as an early *quốc ngữ* periodical that was continually able to circumvent colonial press laws and the stipulations of the contract under which it operated. Like Babut, Schneider was obligated by the terms of his contract to clear all content with the administration prior to publication. Also like Babut, he failed to do so. While this was purposeful in Babut’s case, it remains unclear how much the Sài Gòn-based Schneider was involved in the day-to-day operations of the periodical and whether he knew what was being printed or if he simply entrusted all responsibility to Nguyễn Văn Vinh. What is known is that the administration’s censors did not discover these violations. Rather, soon after publication began, the printing house brought the periodical’s “anti-French” tendencies to the attention of the administration.⁵¹

The year 1910 was a pivotal moment in the early history of *quốc ngữ* periodicals. By that year all contracts to publish Vietnamese language periodicals in the North had either expired or were soon to expire. Faced with applications to establish a new set of journals (by the likes of Babut and Nguyễn Văn Vinh no less) the administration was forced to decide whether it would permit the continuation of the Vietnamese-language press.⁵² In the lengthy report reviewing those new requests through an analysis of the previous five years of *quốc ngữ* publications, it was determined that Vietnamese-language periodicals fomented discontent and invited disorder.⁵³ The role the administration ascribed to *Annam* in the events of 1908 demonstrated the danger, not the utility, of a Vietnamese-language press. As both *Annam* and *The Old Tattler* illustrated, the administration found itself almost completely incapable of enforcing its own strict laws and contracts. In the general climate of instability that existed both within and without the colony in 1910, it was determined that there was “no reason” to have *quốc ngữ* journals.

Be this as it may, the administration recognized the role that it envisaged for the *quốc ngữ* periodical – that of acculturation through the propagation of official narratives and Western knowledge – remained vital to its interests. An alternative means to these ends was thus sought through publications under complete administrative control. An official journal in Classical Chinese was established to disseminate the views and dictates of the administration as well as ‘all the information literate Vietnamese needed to know’ regarding current events. “Serious works” on modern, scientific, and “practical” knowledge were translated into *quốc ngữ* and

published as inexpensive booklets. Energy was also re-directed towards the development of *quốc ngữ* teaching manuals, which were necessitated by the hybridized classical-Western schools created through the education reforms of 1908. It was concluded that the Vietnamese interested in Western knowledge and *quốc ngữ* would be better served by those booklets and manuals than they had been by the polemics of periodicals, which did nothing but invite disorder.⁵⁴ As the archival record demonstrates, *quốc ngữ* periodicals were discarded in favor of those kinds of booklets and manuals. Publications during this period included titles like, *Commerce and Accounting*, *Basic Morality*, *A Practical Method for the Study of Quốc Ngữ*, *The War in Europe*, and an almanac entitled *The Way of Heaven*, which included the subheading “Anyone who reads this book will be at peace with his destiny”.⁵⁵ Be this as it may, the prohibition of *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the North was short lived. In 1913 they reappeared under similar auspices and with familiar names.

Another Attempt

Domestic and international geo-political conditions changed dramatically in the three years that separated the abolition of Vietnamese language periodicals in the North from their reemergence. By 1913, the events of 1908 had faded in the minds of colonial officials. The low-intensity, though long-lived, insurrection waged by Hoàng Hoa Thám in the border regions of *Tonkin* had been eradicated. While not totally calm, the socio-political climate in the colony appeared much more stable than it had just a few years before. In contrast, events outside the colony were about to erupt into the first global conflict of the 20th century. Though the last of the insurrections born in the climate of the late 19th century had been squashed, the Chinese Revolution of 1911 unleashed a mercurial giant whose instability constantly threatened to cross the border. The decentralization of power caused by the Revolution also facilitated the belated imperial aspirations of some Western powers. Germany’s inroads in Asia, specifically in the east and south of the Chinese mainland, deeply worried the French in Indochina. That Germany was on the mind of the French administration thousands of kilometers from the metropole was indicative of the fact that the dizzying fog of the Edwardian Age was beginning to lift in Europe.

The administration feared both a direct assault on the colony by German forces in Asia and anti-French, pro-German views spreading from China south.

Faced with these new realities, the government of Indochina felt another attempt at the publication of Vietnamese language periodicals was warranted. The administration enlisted two familiar names, Francois Henri Schneider and Nguyễn Văn Vinh. While at first glance it appears puzzling that the authorities entrusted responsibility to two men whose broach of earlier agreements had possibly engendered unrest, further examination explains why they did so. Despite the fact that Schneider's northern effort failed in the eyes of the administration, *Lúc tỉnh tân văn* (*News of the South*), the southern journal whose publication he was directly involved with, was widely seen as a smashing success. In 1913, Schneider was the most prominent and likely the most successful newspaperman in the colony. He was thus asked to duplicate his southern success in the North. The choice of Schneider and Nguyễn Văn Vinh was also indicative of the fact that the administration was not spoiled for choice. Nguyễn Văn Vinh was certainly one of the only men in the colony with the experience and energy to take on this task. Arrested for "*complicite morale*" following the events of 1908, Nguyễn Văn Vinh returned to the newspaper business immediately after his release from prison. In 1910, his joint application to establish a new periodical, *Notre Revue* (*Báo ta*), was declined. When Vietnamese-language periodicals were abolished in the North that same year, Nguyễn Văn Vinh went south to collaborate on *News of the South* with Schneider. His time working for that journal, Schneider's confidence in his abilities, and the fact that other Frenchmen (like Babut) vouched for his character, was apparently enough to secure his involvement in the new venture.⁵⁶ Schneider's 1913 agreement with the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* created two new *quốc ngữ* periodicals, Nguyễn Văn Vinh was named the editor of both. The first of these new journals was called *Đông dương tạp chí* (*Indochina*), a literary, scientific, and pedagogic journal running 48 pages and published one time per week.⁵⁷ The second journal established was called *Trung Bắc tân văn* (*News of the Center and the North*) was officially the "special edition" of Schneider's southern paper for the North and the Center. Appearing three times per week (on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday) *News of the Center and the North* ran four pages in length and was a political, administrative, and economic journal.⁵⁸

The contract between the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* and Schneider for the publication of *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North* bore striking similarities to those signed

almost ten years before. So as to avoid the possibility of any legal ambiguity, the contract tied Schneider's person to the implementation of its provisions. Article five "strictly obligated" Schneider to adhere to the 'foreign language' press laws of the colony and to any special directives given by the office of the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* regarding the content, editing, and censoring of the periodicals.⁵⁹ As had been true with previous periodicals, the publication of any content prior to the approval of the office of the Resident Superior was strictly prohibited. The mechanism of enforcing pre-publication authorization and censorship was the principle difference between the contract for *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North* and earlier periodicals. The Resident Superior in *Tonkin* created a special office tasked with that responsibility. Schneider was responsible for providing that office with two proofs of each article his journals sought to publish. One of the proofs was to be returned to the editor with comments. After the comments were addressed, the article could be included in an issue. The contract required that each issue be provided to the Residence Superior prior to 10 am on the day of its publication. Following another review, the Residence Superior took the journal to the printer (by noon).⁶⁰ To make this system work, each periodical had to provide the censors with more than enough content for any single issue. The articles returned in time for publication were included in that issue. Schneider was also obligated to insert all texts and communiqués deemed necessary by the Residence Superior. In *News of the Center and the North* this represented up to two pages of the four-page journal. In *Indochina*, up to sixteen pages per issue could be used by the government.⁶¹ The language in the agreement to publish *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North* was both more exact and realistic than it had been in earlier contracts. For example, rather than claim 'any breach' of the contract would result in its nullification, the new agreement between Schneider and the Resident Superior stated that "three unjustified infractions" of the contract's stipulations would result in its abrogation.⁶²

These new periodicals proved very successful from the administration's point of view. By providing a vehicle of regulated acculturation, acting as a mouthpiece for official views and proclamations, and by disseminating pro-French propaganda in a time of war, they realized their *raison d'être*. *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North* were also widely popular, drawing significant readership. This proven success and popularity led to the creation of *Nam Phong* (*Southern Spirit*) in 1917. While the administration was willing to expand the realm of *quốc ngữ* journals in the late teens, their ability to adequately control content remained a

paramount concern. As with earlier journals, *Southern Spirit* was a subsidized effort with a French manager and Vietnamese editor. Louis Marty, the director of the *Sûreté* (Colonial Intelligence Service), was its founder and manager. Phạm Quỳnh, a brilliant self-made man who had worked with Nguyễn Văn Vinh on *Indochina*, was named editor. According to Marty, the journal's purpose was to provide an easily accessible platform of education, which propagated the best of both Eastern and Western traditions of knowledge and thought.⁶³ *Southern Spirit* proved even more successful than *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North* in terms both content and control.

What made *Indochina*, *News of the Center and the North*, and *Southern Spirit* so much more 'successful' than their forbearers, *Annam* and *The Old Tattler*? The experience the administration gained from its experiment in the first decade of the century and its new method of control certainly had something to do with this. However, that is only a partial explanation. The new system of control was inherently impractical and necessitated competent manpower willing to consistently perform the tasks required. I have seen no evidence to suggest the system operated effectively throughout this period. If earlier attempts at censorship are any indication, we should assume that such efforts, while improved, remained inconsistent. Rather, the 'success' of these periodicals was largely a function of their personnel. The Vietnamese individuals involved (Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh) made the conscious choice not to breach the administration's terms and limitations, a kind of self-censorship. They had seen the authorities take away their opportunity to publish. Journalism and *quốc ngữ* publishing was an industry still in its infancy that was completely dependent on the financial support of the administration. Despite their growing popularity, *quốc ngữ* periodicals remained an unprofitable venture that required a great amount of capital to establish. Nguyễn Văn Vinh in particular had felt the repercussions of his actions with *The Old Tattler*, having been sent to Côn Lôn Island for a short prison term. Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh were willing to accept the compromise they were presented – the financial ability to publish periodicals with restricted freedom of expression – because they perceived the vast spaces within this agreement in which they could work towards their own goals, as the following chapter attests.

While these journals did not establish a public sphere independent of government subsidy under private ownership, they did open the door to it. In 1919 Schneider was permitted to sell *News of the Center and the North* and its printing house to Nguyễn Văn Vinh, who became the

first owner and operator of a private *quốc ngữ* periodical in the North.⁶⁴ Also in 1919, *Indochina* became the bi-lingual (French and *quốc ngữ*) *Học Báo (Study)*, a weekly used by teachers in Franco-Việt primary schools.⁶⁵ The state subsidized periodicals of the teens created the conditions for Vietnamese owned periodicals and the flowering of the *quốc ngữ* press from the 1920s.

The Era of Vietnamese Ownership

Following the Great War, it seemed that Vietnamese-language and bi-lingual periodicals could indeed realize their promise by helping to bridge the socio-cultural divide separating the European colonizer from their Asian subjects. The success of the periodicals established during the Great War demonstrated that possibility. It was no coincidence that the same period that witnessed the establishment of the public sphere in a language that had been considered foreign several years before (*quốc ngữ*) also saw the abolition of the Confucianized examinations and the creation of the Franco-Việt education system. The previous paradigm of knowledge and understanding embodied by classical education, at whose apex sat the Imperial examinations leading to officialdom, was systematically discontinued and replaced by the initially French-arbitrated, Westernized knowledge through which greater mutual understanding was thought possible. The administration felt that if Vietnamese perceived the world in a way somewhat analogous to their conquerors that they would come to understand the reasons the French were on the Indochinese peninsula and that if the Vietnamese could feel the prestige and wonder of modern, scientific knowledge, they might even grow to appreciate French ‘generosity’ and take pride in their association with French civilization. The success of *Indochina*, *News of the Center and the North*, and *Southern Spirit*, the perception of post-war economic prosperity, and a relatively stable socio-political environment led to private, Vietnamese ownership of periodicals and less onerous regulations of the press. The system whereby the content of periodicals was basically controlled via agreements between the administration and the French owners of Vietnamese-language journals was discontinued. In its place evolved an increasingly regularized and permissive system of control.

Following Nguyễn Văn Vinh's purchase of *News of the Center and the North* in 1919, the administration began to permit other Vietnamese to establish *quốc ngữ* periodicals. Vietnamese ownership changed entirely the process by which periodicals were established. Rather than ventures created and subsidized by the government, individuals now applied to establish private periodicals. The chief mechanism of control of the *quốc ngữ* press in this early era of Vietnamese ownership continued to be what had proven effective in the past – placing periodicals in the hands of Vietnamese who would cooperate with the restrictions placed on the press. The administration tried to ensure this outcome through the 1898 law tying the creation of a periodical to the prior authorization of the Governor General. This proved relatively easy in the early and mid 1920s because of the small number of Vietnamese with the ability or interest in establishing a *quốc ngữ* periodical. For the most part, this included Westernized Vietnamese with a stake in the stability of the colonial order and the financial means to start a journal in a nascent market. For example, one of the first Vietnamese owned and operated journals in the 1920s, *Thực nghiệp dân báo* (*Vital Industry*), was founded by two successful businessmen, Nguyễn Hữu Thu and Bùi Huy Tin, and the Director of the *Đông-ích-hội*, a mutual-help Society. Authorized by the Governor General in June of 1920, the purpose of the paper was to provide its audience with helpful information in the realms of agriculture, industry, and commerce. It also printed domestic and international news and biographies of great inventors and industrialists like Edison, Gutenberg, Franklin, and Rockefeller.⁶⁶ The reliance on Vietnamese cooperation in terms of permissible content was reflected by the fact that there existed no contract between the three Vietnamese owners and the office of the Governor General of Indochina or Resident Superior in *Tonkin*. Rather, after the administration reviewed their request to publish, the Governor General issued an *arrete* authorizing the new periodical. The *arrete* in effect replaced the contract. In the case of *Vital Industry*, the only stipulation in the *arrete* was that the periodical was under the control of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* (meaning it was obligated to follow the press regulations of the Residence).⁶⁷ While the creation of *Annam* or *Indochina* took months, the process from authorization to publication for *Vital Industry* was remarkably quick – authorized on the 6th of June, its first issue was published on the 12th of July 1920.

The early 1920s witnessed the inception of a regulatory process that became mechanical (and almost lazy) by the 1930s. *Đông Pháp nông báo* (*French-Indochina Agricultural Review*),

a bi-monthly review dedicated to agricultural issues, provides a look into how *quốc ngữ* periodicals were authorized and regulated in this early period of Vietnamese ownership. The first step for the would-be owner, in this case one Nguyễn Hoa Cát, was to make a formal request to publish to the office of the Governor General. The potential owner's biographical details, the purpose and content of the periodical, and where it would be printed were included in the request. When the application was received, the Governor General asked the Second Bureau of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* to compile a report regarding the conduct and character of the would-be proprietor. During this period, when the administrative procedures were under development, it was the Second Bureau that undertook this duty and not the office of the *Surete* (the administration's intelligence service), as it would be from the late 1920s. The confidential report contained the name of the applicant (Nguyễn Hoa Cát) and his address (4 Rue des Teinturiers, Hà Nội). It also summarized his occupational history: Nguyễn Hoa Cát was a former interpreter in the office of the French Residences, where he served for fifteen years. In September 1918 he was decommissioned for health reasons. At the time of his application, he owned two small bookstores, one in Hà Nội, the other in Hải Phòng. His stores sold books in *quốc ngữ* and French as well as the works on hygiene he translated from French to *quốc ngữ*. He was a member of the Annamese Association of Intellectual and Moral Development (*AFIMA, Assoc. de Formation Intellectuelle et Morale des Annamites*) and enjoyed a 'good reputation' among French and Vietnamese alike. The Second Bureau recommended that the Governor General approve his application. The report concluded in a tone very different from that found in the contracts less than ten years before: "I do not see anything wrong with promptly approving this request".⁶⁸ Less than two weeks after the confidential report was sent to the Governor General, the periodical was approved for publication via an *arrete*.⁶⁹

Arretes were in essence the contracts of the era of Vietnamese ownership. The *arrete* authorizing *French-Indochina Agricultural Review* was indicative of the fact that there existed no well-established system to control *quốc ngữ* periodicals during this period. The second article of the *arrete* stated that because the periodical was to be dedicated exclusively to agricultural questions, the text of its articles had to be provided to the Director of Economic Development in the office of the Governor General prior to publication.⁷⁰ It did not make explicit when the articles were to be provided (as had the contract of *Indochina*) or exactly what the Director of Economic Development was supposed to do with the articles or any content he might deem

harmful to the regime (he was not a censor after all). The very next article stated that both the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* and the Director of Economic Development were responsible for the control and censorship of the periodical.⁷¹ The dissection of these documents permits a view inside the development of press controls during the interwar period. When there existed only a handful of subsidized journals, working out the mechanisms of control had been relatively simple, at least on paper. However, the advent of private ownership and subsequent profusion of *quốc ngữ* journals made these questions much more difficult. As the *arrete* authorizing the publication of *French-Indochina Agricultural Review* indicates, it was not at all clear if control should be federal, regional, or both. It was also not clear if periodicals should be regulated by topic – i.e. an agricultural journal under the control of the office of the Director of Economic Development – or whether all publications should be placed under one regulatory apparatus. These questions were in the process of being resolved during the 1920s. Rather than a constant system through time, censorship was forced to adapt with the changing social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of the colony. The administration came to recognize that it could not simply *will* cooperation to its dictates. The acknowledgement of its own limitations caused the administration to work towards its ultimate imperative of stability and continued French rule within the boundaries of what was possible.

While the premise that acculturation could lead to Vietnamese acquiescence to and appreciation of foreign rule appeared plausible in the early 1920s, by the middle and end of the decade it became ever more apparent that the education system was creating a generation of young men whose ideals and aspirations could not be met. The economic conditions in the colony were not as rosy as they had appeared and worsened with the onset of the global depression. There were not enough private sector jobs to meet the expectations of the educated youth. Full public sector employment would have bankrupted the administration. To make matters worse, a handful of youths were threatening violence and civil disobedience, often inspired by the words of their teachers and the information published in the colony's periodicals. Despite a climate in which social unrest seemed increasingly plausible, the number of periodicals increased throughout the 1920s and exploded in the 1930s. As with the decentralization of education embodied in private schools, periodicals created employment opportunities and outlets for the angst of the burgeoning educated youth. From the early 1920s, almost all *quốc ngữ* periodicals were Vietnamese owned and operated. As private enterprises they created an entirely

novel industry and occupation: the professional writer-journalist. While most writer-journalists^{iv} scarcely made enough to live on, periodicals provided psychologically meaningful employment at minimal financial loss to the state. The flowering of the press and increasingly formulaic press restrictions allowed those educated in the colony's schools the opportunity to vent their frustration at what they saw as the hypocrisy of colonial rule and to express their anger over the social evils that plagued Vietnamese society.

A federal, regional, and local system of control that surveyed the press while permitting a great degree of freedom of expression evolved to control the ever-increasing number of *quốc ngữ* publications that accompanied the coming of age of youth educated in the colony's schools. The system that materialized involved three primary mechanisms of control. The first was the



Photograph 22. Commercial Quarter, Hà Nội, mid-late 1920s.

control of paper used for printing periodicals. Because this paper was imported, printers had to apply for an annual permit issued by the Customs Office. Secondly, individuals wishing to publish a periodical had to request the administration's permission to do so. While this rule was not new (it had existed since the late 19th century) its enforcement evolved during the

interwar period to incorporate regional, local, and federal offices of government. Finally, the content of *quốc ngữ* periodicals was surveyed via a system of post-publication censorship. Even in the first decade of the century, effective pre-publication censorship proved difficult if not impossible. The exponential growth of the *quốc ngữ* press during the 1920s and 1930s rendered pre-publication censorship an impractical and unreliable means of control. It was officially abolished as policy in 1935. The creation of the Bureau of the Vietnamese Press in the Office of the Residence Superior in *Tonkin*, centralized efforts at effective control and surveillance. One

^{iv} I use the terms 'writer' and 'journalist' interchangeably throughout this text due to the fact the distinction between these new professions was muddled during the interwar period. The term 'writer-journalist' is a direct translation of the Vietnamese '*nhà văn-nhà báo*'. Because most literature was published in periodicals prior to, if ever, being published as a single volume, 'writers' were indeed 'journalists' in that periodicals were the medium for the publication of their art.

of the Bureau's responsibilities was to monitor the content of the Vietnamese language press.^v Each month it compiled a “Review of the Press” detailing articles published in the previous month deemed worthy of the administration’s interest. To be clear, this was not censorship as much as it was surveillance of the press. One of the primary goals of this chapter is to create an accurate portrait of how the administration regulated and censored the Vietnamese-language press and how this regulation evolved through time. The Review of the Press did not censor articles *to be* printed. Its purpose was to monitor a portion of what had already been printed and consumed.

Developed from the late 1920s, the first pillar of the tri-partite system was the control of paper used for printing periodicals. While this might not seem like an obvious place to start, it was in fact one of the administration’s most effective means of regulation. The special kind of paper used to print periodicals was not manufactured in the colony. All the paper used for printing periodicals in the North, Center, and South theoretically had to be imported from the metropole. I say ‘theoretically’ because private efforts to manufacture print-quality paper almost certainly occurred in the colony. However, the vast majority of periodical owners and editors willingly cooperated with the regulation described here because they wanted to print using imported paper, because it was much higher quality and more ‘beautiful’ than any paper produced in the colony.^{vi} These factors were extremely important in the highly competitive market of the late interwar period. The administration thus controlled the source of this necessary item (via the Customs Office). While the number of periodicals exploded in the 1930s, the number of publishing houses remained quite modest. Printers applied for permits to import paper on an annual basis, forcing them to account for the paper requested and ostensibly ensuring that superfluous paper would not circulate as contraband.

While the Governor General issued a decree regulating the importation of paper for the purposes of printing periodicals in August of 1928, the bureaucratic infrastructure necessary to enforce the new law was not in place until January of 1931. Enforcement of these laws in practice is indicative of French rule in Indochina in general. The 1928 decree represented the first step. That was followed by a (French) Presidential Decree in June of 1929 requiring

^v Note: In the North, the French-language press was also monitored in this same fashion. The reports on the Vietnamese-language and French-language press were in fact compiled together.

^{vi} Note: Lack of this quality-imported paper was one of the hardships of World War Two most often cited by writers and journalists.

printing houses to apply for permits to purchase the imported paper. On July 5, 1930 the permanent Commission of the Council of the Indochinese Government established the regulations for the importation of paper used for journals. A system in both theory and practice finally came into existence in January 1931 when Governor General Rene Robin signed those regulations into law.⁷²

Enforcement was initially a joint regional-local effort between the office of the Resident Superior and the Mayor of Hà Nội. Publishers applied for licenses good for one year (from January 1 to December 31) by writing a formal request to the office of the Residence Superior. These requests detailed the amount of paper sought and its proposed use. For example, if the publisher printed a periodical, it had to list the specific journal, how many times per week or month it was published, the number of pages per issue, and how many copies of each issue were printed. The Residence Superior forwarded requests to the office of the Mayor of Hà Nội. The Mayor's office then ordered the Police Commissioner to compile a report as to the validity of the application and background of the applicant. The report was sent to the Civil Service Administration in the office of the Mayor, which made the final decision based on its content. This complex process offers an explanation as to why it took over two years to establish these laws in practice.

The process also indicates the seriousness with which the administration took the importation of paper. While most requests were authorized, great caution was observed. For example, in 1931 Trần Đình Phụng, the 54 year-old owner of the *Imprimerie-Librairie Long-Quang* (located at 85 Rue du Coton, in the heart of Hà Nội), requested fifteen tons of "Norwegian paper" to print three journals and a number of booklets.⁷³ The police report, which investigated Phụng's request, determined he wanted more paper than he needed and was likely to sell the remainder.⁷⁴ Based on this report, Phụng's request was denied.⁷⁵ In response, Trần Đình Phụng reformulated his application, which was subsequently approved. The reason this process seemed to work rather effectively was because those possessing the machinery necessary to produce periodicals were far fewer than those who wrote for them. It should be noted that this process was identical for French and Vietnamese individuals, as it was for French-language and Vietnamese-language publications. Around 1932 the governmental agencies involved with the regulation of paper changed. The office of the Governor General replaced the Residence

Superior and the Customs Office began issuing permits based on the Mayor of Hà Nội's recommendation – a portrait of the complexities of the regulatory process as it unfolded.

The second apparatus of control of *quốc ngữ* periodicals during the interwar period rested on the law requiring individuals or groups to apply for authorization to establish a periodical. While this law existed since the late 19th century, it was not really utilized in practice in the North until the 1920s, when Vietnamese began owning periodicals.^{vii} During the 1920s, the system that enforced the law evolved as new and existing agencies were tasked with regulating the burgeoning Vietnamese-language press. As with the regulation of paper, authorization to publish a periodical was a joint federal, regional, and local effort. The first step in the process was the letter requesting the establishment of a *quốc ngữ* periodical. While addressed to the Resident Superior in *Tonkin*, the Bureau of the Vietnamese Press (an agency in the office of the Residence Superior created to regulate the press) received these letters. Generally speaking, the letters contained two parts. At the beginning of the letter (always written in French), the applicant provided basic information: name, age, address, and occupation. The second paragraph began with flowery language requesting the beneficence of the Resident Superior to shine on the applicant through the approval of his request (this is not an exaggeration). There followed the name of the proposed journal (in Vietnamese, often translated into French) and a brief description of its content. Sometimes a small final paragraph would be added at the bottom of the letter explicitly stating that the journal would not address political and/or religious questions. After the Bureau of the Vietnamese Press received a request, it was forwarded to the office of the *Surete* in *Tonkin*. The *Surete* then compiled a confidential report on the applicant and any other individuals said to be involved with the proposed journal. This report was sent to the Resident Superior, the Mayor of Hà Nội, and the Director of the *Surete* General. While the *Surete* report basically decided the fate of the request to publish, the Mayor of Hà Nội made the final decision. Based on the report, the Mayor sent a letter to the Bureau of the Vietnamese Press indicating his approval or rejection. If the request was rejected, the Bureau sent a notification letter to the applicant. If it was approved, the Bureau notified the office of the Governor General, which

^{vii} Note: Though the law existed well before Vietnamese ownership it was redundant due to the fact that the administration itself created the contracts by which journals operated prior to c. 1920.

issued a formal *arrete* creating the periodical. Applicants whose requests were approved often sent ‘thank you’ letters to the Mayor of Hà Nội in ornate French.

My study of this system of control centers on requests to publish *quốc ngữ* periodicals made by Vietnamese from the years 1932 to 1936.⁷⁶ I selected these dates because they represent a period when the system described above was well established and due to the fact that they fall between two periods some might consider ‘irregular’. The first of those periods, that from c. 1930 to c. 1932, witnessed the aborted uprising led by members of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*) and the later-politicized unrest in the north-central region of Nghệ-Tĩnh. Perhaps accurately analyzed, these events should be seen as the cousins of the aborted coup and peasant protests of 1908. Like those earlier events, the haphazard uprising and peasant unrest of the early 1930s were brutally repressed by the Franco-Việt regime. Because *quốc ngữ* periodicals likely came under increased scrutiny, I omitted this period from my survey. The Popular Front period (1936-1939), in which a Socialist and Communist coalition came to power in France, was also not included in this survey. The more liberal, democratic policies of the Popular Front government abolished censorship restrictions in Indochina from January 1937 to September 1939. While pre-authorization to publish a periodical continued to exist during this period, because of the liberalization of other aspects of the control of the press, I have not included the Popular Front period in my analysis.

The development of the process of pre-authorization was the cornerstone of the regulation of the press from the time it began to crystallize in the late 1920s. Most of the time, money, and resources spent on regulation were utilized in these attempts to filter those involved in the public sphere. The administration continued to believe that the foundation of control depended on the individuals involved. This lesson carried through time from the initial experiments with the Vietnamese-language press in the first decade of the century through the teens and twenties and into the thirties. By the mid 1930s, the system worked with almost mechanical precision, illustrating the capabilities and the limitations of the intelligence agency at the heart of administrative power.

The historical record disproves contentions that the administration possessed the ability (or desire) to exert iron-fisted control over the press. The actual application of the law that required government approval to establish a periodical was much more nuanced and at times haphazard than politically driven narratives assume. A record of anti-colonial activity and

incarceration did not prohibit one from involvement in journalism. In fact, many of the editors and writers of Hà Nội's top papers had long *Surete* records. Those with records of anti-colonial activity were permitted official entrance into the public sphere if their former activities ceased and/or if they partnered with an individual with no history of anti-colonial activity.



Photograph 23. Commercial Quarter of Hà Nội, mid-late 1930s.

The regime attempted to limit the involvement of those involved in continuous anti-colonial activity through the necessity of receiving authorization to establish a periodical. However, many involved in continual anti-colonial activities were able to circumvent these restrictions by simply not participating in them. Rather than involve themselves in the application process, they wrote, edited, and managed established journals that had already gained official sanction.

Despite a criminal record, Võ Đức Diên became officially involved in the public sphere in the mid 1930s. In 1930, his activities with the anti-colonial *Tân Việt* Party got him expelled from the School of Art (University of Indochina) in Hà Nội and imprisoned for five months. Those activities were cited in the *Surete* report regarding the application of *Khai Đông tạp chí* (*Children's Education Review*), on which Diên was listed as the partner of the applicant, Vũ Ngọc Liên. Despite Diên's record, the periodical was approved because Vũ Ngọc Liên, who had worked as a secretary in the provincial courts from 1923-1930, was found trustworthy.⁷⁷ Likewise, Ngô Thị Cúc's 1935 application to publish a women's fashion magazine called *Báo tân nữ lưu* (*The Modern Woman*) was approved despite the involvement of Phung Thị Vi (a.k.a. Ngọc Trân). Phung Thị Vi had been involved with the *Thanh Niên* Party in the early 1930s. The *Surete* noted that Phung Thị Vi was likely to operate the journal due to her education and journalistic experience, both of which the owner, Ngô Thị Cúc, lacked. While the report noted Phung Thị Vi's political record, it recommended approval because her political activities had ceased and due to the fact that Ngô Thị Cúc, as the owner of a clothing shop in Hà Nội, was seen

as an upstanding subject-citizen with assets to lose.⁷⁸ Examples like these are repeated throughout the archival record. However, the complicity of one deemed trustworthy by the administration did not guarantee approval. Nguyễn Đắc Lộc (b. 31/12/99) spent the better part of his adult life in the employ of the administration. From 1917 to 1920, he worked at the Central Prison in Hà Nội. Thereafter, he worked at the newly created Radio Service from 1920 to 1926. In 1926 he traveled to France. Upon his return to Indochina he was granted a post at the Bank of Indochina. In 1935, he sought approval to publish a journal called *Tinh*.^{viii} Despite his strong record of service, his request was denied due to the anti-colonial leanings of the young contributors listed on his application. The administration determined his partners would use the periodical as a vehicle for anti-French political humor.⁷⁹

The administration's efforts to prohibit those continually involved in anti-colonial activities from establishing periodicals were by and large successful. However, the regime could apparently do little to curtail the public activities of such people. Their histories can be traced through both archival and Vietnamese sources. One such case involved two brothers, Hồ Khắc Quảng and Hồ Khắc Trang. Hồ Khắc Quảng (born c. 1905) attended the College of Vinh in Nghệ An province (northern *Annam*) from 1920-1925. After he left school, he worked for a year as a teacher in Hà Đông province (which surrounded the municipality of Hà Nội to the north, south, and east). In 1926 he was implicated in the "Mon Cay Affair" in which a dozen Vietnamese sought to enter China without the proper documentation. All twelve young men implicated in the Affair were arrested and briefly imprisoned. As a consequence of his imprisonment, Hồ Khắc Quảng's license to teach in the colony's public schools was revoked.⁸⁰ He returned to Vinh when he was released from prison. In Vinh, Hồ Khắc Quảng received another government job, at the provincial Treasury Office. In April 1929 he moved to Hà Nội where he was named *correcteur* ('proof reader') at the journal *Đông Pháp* (*French-Indochina*). Despite his record, Hồ Khắc Quảng quickly became the paper's director and editor. During the early 1930s, Hồ Khắc Quảng also found time to work for many of Hà Nội's other periodicals, such as *Phổ thông báo* (*Popular*), *Peuple*, *Đông phương báo* (*East*), and *Vital Industry*. In March of 1933, the publisher of *Vital Industry*, Mai Dư Lan (who owned a publishing house of the same name), named Hồ Khắc Quảng the paper's manager (which could be done without any kind of governmental approval). Later in 1933, Hồ Khắc Quảng sought official

^{viii} The name *Tinh* implies mischievous wit.

acknowledgement of his role as the paper's manager by requesting permission to change its name to *Thời vũ báo* (*Current Events*). While the *Surete* report recognized the fact that Hồ Khắc Quảng was indeed the director and manager of *Vital Industry*, it advised against his request for formal recognition and the name change due to the young man's record and because he listed anti-colonial partners on his application.⁸¹

One of the partners listed on Hồ Khắc Quảng's application to establish the periodical *Current Events* was his younger brother Hồ Khắc Trang. Born in 1909 in Nghệ An province, Trang also attended College of Vinh (1923-1927) where he earned a lower secondary school diploma (*DEPSI*). He moved to Hà Nội after graduating to become a journalist. From 1928 to 1935 he worked for a variety of periodicals, including *Vital Industry*, *Đông Pháp* (*French-Indochina*), *French Indochine*, and *La Volonte Indochinoise*. In August of 1931 he received permission to publish his own periodical called *Tân báo* (*Modern*). The paper's authorization to publish was revoked less than a year later in March 1932 due to its 'anti-French attitude'.⁸² Be this as it may, the brothers Hồ Khắc continued not only to make their living as journalists, but also to apply for permission to publish their own periodical.^{ix} In partnership with his older brother, Hồ Khắc Trang applied to publish a periodical called *Tia Sáng* (*The Light*) in 1934. His application was rejected due to the brothers' recent history and because they were part of a group with anti-French tendencies "well known" to the *Surete* (many of this group were listed on the application). One such comrade was Trần Tiến Vỹ (a.k.a. Trần Vỹ). This remarkable man, born in Thừa Thiên province in the Center in 1901, had studied at the *Quốc Học* in Huế and the *Lycee* Albert Sarraut in Hà Nội before being admitted to the School of Medicine (University of Indochina). In April of 1926 he was expelled from the School due to his role as one of the principle 'agitators' in the school protests of 1926.⁸³ After his expulsion he returned to Huế for four years before making his way back to Hà Nội in 1930 to work as a journalist. Trần Tiến Vỹ's attitude remained 'anti-French', something the *Surete* ascertained due to his involvement with an anti-French group known as the *Huong-Ky* group (a.k.a. Group Nguyễn Lan Hương). Despite that fact, he was made manager of the popular *Đông Phương báo* (*East*) in 1932. In

^{ix} Note: This was relatively common. Part of the process that created the Vietnamese public sphere was the back and forth between this young generation and the authorities. When one periodical was either shutdown or went bankrupt, another was quickly established in its place by many of the same people who worked on the former journal.

1933 Vỹ's application to create his own periodical, to be called *Tán Văn (Drama)*, was denied. Still, he was permitted to run *East*.

Phan Trần Chúc's situation was comparable to those of Trần Tiến Vỹ and Hồ Khắc Quảng. Born in Nam Định province in 1907, Chúc studied at the Nam Định Primary Superior School and earned a primary school certificate (*CEPFI*) in 1925. Rather than remain in school to work towards a secondary school diploma, he moved to the adjacent province of Thái Bình to earn a living as a primary school teacher. While in Thái Bình he began working for *Vital Industry* in 1927. In 1928 he was fired from his position at the primary school due to his involvement in the creation of "night courses for workers" at the Minh Thành private school (also in Thái Bình). Thereafter, Phan Trần Chúc moved to Hà Nội where he made his living working for papers like *Vital Industry*, *Ngo Báo*, and *East*. Several years later he ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the Municipal Council of Hà Nội. That same year, 1935, he participated in protests against the Resident Superior in *Tonkin* and continued his political activity by calling for an Association of Journalists in *Tonkin* (which was indeed formed during the Popular Front period). In 1936 Phan Trần Chúc applied to found a journal, dubbed *Xã Hội (Society)*, which he promised the Mayor of Hà Nội would not deal with political questions. Upon further reflection, Chúc apparently recognized that the overt political tones of the name might doom his chances of success. He then composed a second letter of application amending the first in which he decided to change the proposed periodical's name to *Sáng (Light)*. In this second letter Chúc again assured the Mayor that its content would be apolitical. Suffice it to say Phan Trần Chúc's bumbling forthrightness and continued involvement in agitation doomed his nascent project. The fact that he did not garner official sanction to publish *Society/Light* did not preclude him from continuing his occupation as a journalist. He simply could not manage a periodical in his own name.⁸⁴

Continual rejections like those examined above did not dissuade young men from trying to gain governmental approval to publish their own periodicals. Many repeatedly attempted to obtain such sanction either directly or via subterfuge. Like the Hồ Khắc brothers, the name Nguyễn Mạnh Chật (a.k.a. Nguyễn Ngọc Chật) reappears continually in the archival record. Born in Hà Đông in 1912, Nguyễn Mạnh Chật was educated at the Hà Đông Primary School^x and later at the Trương Minh Sanh private secondary school in Hà Nội (a school of dubious

^x *Ecole de plein exercice de Hadong.*

reputation). In 1929 he was sentenced to two years in prison for distribution of “materials favorable to Communism”.⁸⁵ He was later acquitted of all charges. After his release from prison Nguyễn Mạnh Chật made his living as a private school teacher and part time journalist.^{x1} In late 1934, Nguyễn Mạnh Chật applied to publish the journal *Tân Trào* (*New Trends*). He described the periodical as a vehicle for the “*rapprochement franco-annamite*”. It was to offer commentary on the administration’s decisions that pertained to the Vietnamese population. In its report recommending the rejection of Chật's request, the *Surete* not only cited the young man's background and the stated purpose of the periodical, it also mentioned the fact that one of the partners in the endeavor, Hoàng Văn Tiệp, had been implicated in the 1929 plot to assassinate M. Bazin.⁸⁶ Later that same year, Nguyễn Mạnh Chật attempted to get permission to publish a periodical called *Việt dân tuần báo* (*The People’s Weekly*) by having a retired postal worker by the name of Trần Đức Tôn file the application. The *Surete* quickly spied the ruse because the application listed Nguyễn Mạnh Chật and two of his known associates as contributors.⁸⁷

Nguyễn Mạnh Chật was far from the only person to attempt this ‘slight of hand’. Cases like this were apparently so frequent that the *Surete* looked for them and ferreted them out with relative ease. Part of the reason the *Surete* spotted these cases with little difficulty was due to the fact that they were often plots among relatives. For example, a brother with a criminal record and political agenda would use his ‘clean’ sibling to apply on his behalf. This was the case with the former political prisoner Lê Thành Vỹ. Vỹ and his comrades wanted to establish a journal to publish their anti-colonial views. In 1936 Vỹ’s brother, Lê Đình Giáp, requested permission to publish a periodical called *Minh Đức tuần báo* (*Minh Đức Weekly*).^{xii} In its report, the *Surete* surmised the paper was to serve as the organ of a resurgent Vietnamese Nationalist Party, which Lê Thành Vỹ was busy attempting to organize. The scheme was spotted because of Lê Đình Giáp’s ignorance of journalism and publishing. In his letter of application the young man stated that he neither had a printer to publish the journal nor partners to help him with its publication.⁸⁸ Lê Văn Hòe attempted gain approval through a similar scheme. Unlike Lê Đình Giáp, Hòe had the Curriculum Vitae of an experienced journalist. He was the former director of the periodical *Đổi Mới* (*Reformation*), which was closed by the Government General in July 1935. Almost

^{x1} Note: It was very common among young men of this generation to have ‘day jobs’ as teachers in one of the colony’s burgeoning private schools while also pursuing a career as a writer or working for one or several periodicals.

^{xii} Note: *Minh Đức* connotes intelligence and virtue. It is also a popular given name.

immediately after, Lê Văn Hòe sought to publish three new periodicals apparently hoping at least one of them would be approved. Again, the *Surete* examined his relations and came to the conclusion that Lê Văn Hòe filed the application on behalf of his brother, Lê Việt Hổ, who would administer the periodicals with a cast of “notorious characters and old political prisoners”.⁸⁹ All three journals were denied.

One of the most intriguing cases concerned a wife who was thought to be providing cover for her husband. In early 1936 Kiều Thị Lịch sought approval for a periodical dedicated to girls and young women entitled *Bạn gái* (*Girl*). Born in 1911 in the North-Central province of Thanh Hóa, Kiều Thị Lịch was one of a handful of young women who received formal education. She attended the Thanh Hóa Primary School for Girls and earned the primary school certificate at the conclusion of her studies. Presumably after completing school, Kiều Thị Lịch married Nguyễn Hữu Co, whom the *Surete* referred to simply as “suspect”. The conclusion of the confidential report stated that neither Kiều Thị Lịch (despite her education) nor her partners possessed the means, culture, or experience to publish a periodical, an almost certainly sexist verdict. The report assumed that Kiều Thị Lịch’s husband made her apply for the journal, presumably because he thought an application in his name would be rejected due to the fact he was “known and surveilled”. Whatever the case, the application was rejected.⁹⁰

The case studies cited above reflect the reach of the government’s intelligence capabilities and of the control of the press at its apex. The *Surete*’s confidential files could be meticulous and astute while also highlighting the limits of the administration’s knowledge and control. Tremendous effort was put into the enforcement of this restriction. The administration seemed to take comfort in the efficacy of the system they created. It was sort of a ‘last line’ of defense. Once was approved, it might take weeks or months before the authorities discovered a periodical had published incendiary content, to say nothing of attempts to retrieve the offending materials. The ‘right’ to establish a journal was something the regime felt it could control. However, complete, iron-fisted control of the press was impossible for a semi-competent administration that sought to traverse the strange space between authoritarianism and liberalism. Former dissidents were allowed to participate in the public sphere. Those with continuous anti-colonial records were not granted official sanction to manage a new periodical in their name, but they were not kept from active involvement in journalism. The *Surete* reports were at once strikingly penetrating and surprisingly ignorant. At times, the dates and biographies in the

reports were incorrect and/or misplaced. Part of the reason for these inaccuracies was due to lack of inter-agency cooperation and sharing (the bane of any bureaucracy at any time). For example, the famous novelist and short-story writer Nguyễn Công Hoan was listed as a contributor to Nguyễn Mạnh Chật's effort *New Trends*. The biographical information stated Nguyễn Công Hoan was the former editor of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (*Women's News*, a periodical published in Sài Gòn) and the current editor of *East* in Hà Nội, both of which were incorrect. Furthermore the report mentioned nothing of the fact that Nguyễn Công Hoan, a primary school teacher, had been a government employee since the mid 1920s. It also said nothing of his prolific literary output. Likewise, Nguyễn Thị Hội, the wife of Vũ Đình Long (who founded the most prolific publishing house of the era, *Tân Dân*), was the official applicant of all the numerous periodicals *Tân Dân* established during the 1930s. Multiple reports listed her as the owner and operator of the *Tân Dân* publishing house. The only official mention of her husband indicated he was a former administrator with the Service of Education who had worked in Hà Đông province. Vũ Đình Long was of course the owner and operator of *Tân Dân* and each of its periodicals. He used his wife as a cover because his private business posed a conflict to his official government employ.^{xiii} Examples like these ran throughout the confidential reports, rendering the administration's intelligence capabilities a patchwork of obvious discrepancies and probing insight. The same can be said of the system of prior authorization. While it limited government-sanctioned access to the public sphere, it did little to curtail involvement via the private sector.

The final way the administration controlled the *quốc ngữ* press in the 1930s was through the post-publication monitoring. Each month, the Bureau of the Vietnamese Press compiled summaries of the content of both Vietnamese-language and French-language periodicals. These reviews were bundled together and sent from the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* to the offices of the Governor General and Mayor of Hà Nội. Called 'Review of the Press', the reports ran an average of ten pages. This method of surveillance permitted the generation educated in colonial schools increasingly free expression in print. It also allowed the administration an accurate reading of the 'pulse' of public discourse. The Bureau skimmed periodicals, highlighting content deemed important. These articles were then summarized (in French), quoted

^{xiii} Note: He could have been fired for conflict of interest between his public duties and private enterprise.

(translated), and organized under various headings such as “Administrative Reforms”, “The Annamites and the Economic Crisis”, “Political Reforms”, “The Regime of the Indigenous Press”, and “Annamese Officials”. The name of the periodical, author, and date(s) of publication were included in the summaries. A summary of the ‘mood’ of public discourse with regards to the contemporary socio-political context was also provided at the beginning of each Review.

During my archival research I poured over hundreds of pages of these reviews from the 1930s. For reasons similar to those articulated above, I chose to focus on the period between 1932 and 1936 as a barometer of the conditions of a vibrant public sphere under a well-established system of control. Below, I examine Reviews of the Vietnamese-language Press in Hà Nội from one of those years, 1935. The study of this relatively circumscribed period provides an opportunity to perceive continuity of discourse and administrative reaction. This research validated the conclusion I reached following exhaustive study of inter-war periodicals and Vietnamese-language sources – by the 1930s the system of controlling the press permitted relatively free expression on variegated topics leading to the creation of a vibrant and profound public sphere. The examples cited below are representative of the content of these Reviews and mark the contours of the *quốc ngữ* press during the 1930s. Periodicals often ran series of articles commenting on contentious political, economic, and social issues without reproach or censure. This permitted the Vietnamese to establish long conversations on multiple topics. It also allowed the administration to surveil and analyze public sentiment. As the content of the public discourse from the era makes clear, far from being shackled by the administration's censors, Vietnamese journalists and writers indulged in polemical discussions on a variety of topics.

One of the subjects continually written about was the Vietnamese Imperial government, which administered most of the areas in the North and in the Center. In August 1935 a writer named Lê Diêm ran a series of articles in the journal *Ngọ Báo* in which he proposed to alter and modernize the administration of communes and villages (in the issues published on the 24th, 26th, 27th, and 30th of the month).⁹¹ He suggested the rural spaces in the colony, ostensibly governed by officials in the employ of the Vietnamese Imperial government, would be better served if intellectuals (like him) were placed in positions of power. According to Lê Diêm, the corrupt rule of the classically educated and connected men of his father’s generation was stifling development in the countryside. Lê Diêm’s study of communal conditions continued into September via a long series of opinionated essays.⁹² Among his demands were the improvement

of village hygiene and obligatory education. Trần Ngọc Ban lent his voice to the conversation in the journal *Trung Hoà (Impartial)* on the 10th of the month.⁹³ He painted a sorrowful portrait of the countryside in the North. According to Trần Ngọc Ban, despite the extreme poverty and deprivation of the rural masses, Vietnamese officials preyed on them by levying unsanctioned taxes, charges, and fees. He asserted that the peasants' ignorance led them to endure their physical and moral suffering with equal resignation.

By November the situation had grown even worse. The brief at the beginning of the Review read as follows: "Never have the pages of the indigenous press in the Vietnamese language been filled with as much criticism as they have this month. Their attacks have never been so virulent."⁹⁴ Journalists working for papers such as *Công Dân (Citizen)* and *Tiến hoá (Evolution)* were singled out as "demagogues" posing as "defenders of the people". According to the Review, *Citizen* embarked on a "new crusade" against Vietnamese officials, asserting that they were totally disinterested in the welfare of the people. In a piece in the issue published on the 27th of the month, the paper demanded that the endemic corruption of officials be publicly denounced and combated by posting notices in every town and village informing the public and warning officials that corruption was illegal. For its part, the periodical *Evolution* attacked the head of a large district (*Tri phủ*) in Nam Định province by name. A number of periodicals also applauded the disciplinary actions taken against the ranking military commander (*Đề Đốc*) of Huế, one Lương Văn Mau, who was apparently guilty of abusing his subordinates. Among these was *Phong Hoá (Customs)*, which on the 22nd ran a cartoon that depicted "a drawing of a peasant shoveling money into the huge mouth of a fat, rich official."⁹⁵

The French administration was far from immune from this kind of continual public criticism. On the fourth of August, Phan Trân Chúc (whom we met above) published an article in *Impartial* extolling the virtues of a single political regime and set of laws for the North, Center, and South.⁹⁶ Phan Trân Chúc stated that 'Annamites' from the point of Cà Mầu (in the south) to the Chinese border (in the north) spoke the same language, had the same mores, and shared the same history. He highlighted the fact that Vietnamese were subject to different political statutes arbitrarily imposed by foreigners. Phan Trân Chúc concluded by stating that reunification of the colony (*Cochinchine*) and two protectorates (*Annam* and *Tonkin*) should be affected "without delay". Nguyễn Văn Vinh continued the discussion of the creation of single Vietnamese state in a series of articles in *News of the Center and the North* (which he still owned

in 1935).⁹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Vinh went so far as to outline a role for the Emperor of Annam and the Imperial mandarins in the future, unified Vietnamese state: The Emperor would play a more or less ceremonial role and most of the mandarins were to be replaced.

Meanwhile Mai Đăng Đệ looked to the past in a series of historical exposes in *News of the Center and the North* in August and September. He began with an account of the French conquest of the North under the heading “The French and the Vietnamese in the time of war”.⁹⁸ His study of the conquest continued with articles published on the 11th, 13th, 15th, 18th, and 22nd of September. In these retrospectives, Mai Đăng Đệ studied the reasons and rational behind Vietnamese acceptance of French suzerainty. According to the author, the Vietnamese opened the door to French rule due to China's weakened condition and lack of protection. He concluded that Chinese in-action demoralized the Vietnamese, leading to their surrender and the subsequent French occupation.

Despotic policies that permitted a measure of administrative solvency were also fair game. The November Review of the Vietnamese Press exclaimed that periodicals continued to attack the Regime of Alcohol, which the journalists felt was turning honest peasants into criminals.⁹⁹ The Regime of Alcohol represented one of three colonial ‘monopolies’.^{xiv} The Regime restricted the manufacture of alcohol to licensed manufacturers (both French and Vietnamese). This regulation was exceedingly difficult to enforce due to the fact that peasants all over the colony enjoyed a long history of brewing their own spirits in small batches. When the Regime’s efforts to outlaw this production failed, they imposed regulations requiring villages to purchase a certain amount of ‘legal’ alcohol. Those requirements provided the administration with much needed funding through taxation. They also drew the ire of the Vietnamese-language press. On the 18th of November, *Tiếng Trẻ (Voice of the Youth)* asserted that the Customs Office, which patrolled the countryside hunting illicit stills, was synonymous with terror to the ignorant masses. On the 14th and 21st of the month *Loa (The Caller)* asserted that those who brewed and sold alcohol illegally were treated as ‘enemy number one’. They went on to indict the Regime’s policies for ruining countless families whose only crime was attempting to survive (by selling their surplus home-brew). Such sentiments were echoed in *Ngọ Báo*. Perhaps the

^{xiv} The other two ‘monopolies’ were on salt and opium. While I am not sure about salt, the monopoly governing opium was a ‘monopoly’ in name only. From the time of its creation in the late 19th century, the administration fought an ever-losing battle against contraband. Archival and Vietnamese language resources indicate that likely no more than 50% of the opium consumed in the colony during the late colonial period was legal, the remainder was contraband.

most virulent attacks against the Regime of Alcohol appeared in *Customs*. The paper attacked what it labeled the Regime's policy of forced consumption of alcohol in a series of cartoons. It also demanded the Residence Superior in *Tonkin* and the Ministry of Colonies in Paris abolish consumption requirements. The attacks were so poignant that both the Resident Superior and the Governor General issued statements declaring that the Administration had never intended "to force people to consume the alcohol of the Regime". At the end of the section dealing with articles on the Regime of Alcohol, the Review offered the following summary: "In conclusion... the indigenous population unanimously support radical modifications to the present regime. They recommend permitting the public to freely distill alcohol and the institution of a tax that will compensate for the loss of budget revenue that will ensue."¹⁰⁰

A conversation regarding the efficacy and purpose of indigenous assemblies that began in November continued for well over a month.¹⁰¹ *Quốc ngữ* periodicals criticized the recently formed Indochinese Assembly as "a bastardization of the French parliament... which is incapable of originality" and was "useless". On the 15th, *Ngô Báo* asserted that the Assembly had no right to address political questions and merely served as an economic body, which rubber-stamped the administration's policy decisions. On the 18th of December, newspaper veteran Dương Bá Trắc deplored the Assembly's lack of power and its complete ineptitude in transmitting the desires and needs of the people to the government. He went on to assert that a 'real assembly' (like those in France) had the power to control the executive, but that the indigenous assemblies in Indochina were impotent to alter the administration's policies in any meaningful way.

The press not only dealt with a great variety of contentious domestic issues, periodicals were also replete with international news. Content from this period focused on events in Europe, the rise of Adolf Hitler, and how Germany was portrayed in the French press. The war in China, Japanese expansionism, and its implications on life in Indochina also figured prominently. So too did French economic woes, the devaluation of the *Franc*, and the Laval Decrees, which were acutely impacting Indochina. The Italian violence in Ethiopia was covered with thinly veiled comparisons to the French occupation. Even the French penal colony in Guyana was discussed. An article in *Ngô Báo* published on the 5th of September, plead with the administration to send Vietnamese political prisoners to domestic prisons and not put Vietnamese families through the anguish of having their sons and husbands incarcerated on the other side of the planet.

Control of the Vietnamese-language press grew progressively more liberal throughout the late colonial period to 1939. Despite the few exceptions in which press restrictions were made more onerous, the historical record bears out this general trend toward greater freedom of expression. Though rather cursory, this survey of the Hà Nội press demonstrates the fact that the period witnessed a public discourse as vibrant and colorful as Việt Nam has ever seen. Periodicals published countless articles on topics ranging from domestic political and social issues to events occurring in locales overseas and what their possible repercussions would be for Indochina. The unprecedented ability to publish and print during the late colonial period helped make *quốc ngữ* the National Language and set off an explosion of cultural production in that new idiom, which reached its apex in the 1930s and early 1940s and determined the contours of both Vietnamese ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’.

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- ¹ The law promulgated by Governor General *Arrete* on December 30, 1898 required prior authorization to establish periodicals in *quốc ngữ* and Classical Chinese.
- ² See, for example: Ho Tai, Hue-Tam. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 91 and 121-122; Marr, David. *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885-1925*. p. 184 and 214-215 and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p. 11, 32, 44-53, 150-151; Woodside, Alexander. *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, p. 79
- ³ See McHale, Shawn. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, p. 26, 40.
- ⁴ *ibid.* p. 40, 49.
- ⁵ *ibid.* p. 49.
- ⁶ *ibid.* p. 8.
- ⁷ See *Convention entre Monsieur Fourres, Resident Superieur du Tonkin, agissant au nom et pour le compte de cette colonie, d'une part, et Monsieur Ernest Babut, publiciste a Hanoi, d'autre part* (Article 12). In Trung Tâm Luru Trữ Quốc Gia-I (TTLTQG-I) (Hà Nội). Residence Superieure au Tonkin (RST) 46550, *Fondee du journal en caracter et en Vietnamienne "Dai Viet Tan Bao", 1904-1908*.
- ⁸ *ibid.* Article 2
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* Article 3
- ¹¹ See *ibid.* Article 4 and Article 6. To make this a conceivable possibility, Art. 4 stated that ideally everything would be written first in French and then later translated into *quốc ngữ* or Classical Chinese.
- ¹² *ibid.* Article 5
- ¹³ *ibid.* Article 17
- ¹⁴ This *quốc ngữ* journal was to mirror Garros existing French language publication, *La France d'Asie*, both published in Sài Gòn. The contract was approved for a term of 5 years, beginning on 1/1/05, see RST 46550.
- ¹⁵ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, A.s. "L'Annam"/Dai Viet tan bao par Babut. Hanoi, 26/2/1910* in (TTLTQG-I) RST 21421, *A.s. des Demandes presentes par Babut, Saumont, Dufour, et Nguyen Van Vinh desirant etre autorises a publier des journaux en langue indigene, 1910*.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, en Commission permanente du Conseil Superieur de l'Indochine, As. 3 demandes par periodicals en Quoc Ngu par M.M. Babut, Saumont, Dufour et Nguyen Van Vinh qui desirent etre autorises a publier des journaux en langue indigene* in RST 21421.
- ¹⁸ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, A.s. "L'Annam"/Dai Viet tan bao par Babut. Hanoi, 26/2/1910* in RST 21421.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421. This report heavily infers that *Annam* was used as the mouthpiece for Phan Châu Trinh's group.
- ²² *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, A.s. "L'Annam"/Dai Viet tan bao par Babut. Hanoi, 26/2/1910* in RST 21421.
- ²³ *ibid.*
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ *ibid.*
- ²⁶ See Marr, David. *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p. 189.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*
- ²⁸ *ibid.* p. 208 (from AOM A-50 NF 598).
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ *ibid.* p. 193.
- ³¹ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ³² Marr, David. *Vietnamese anticolonialism*, p. 208.
- ³³ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ³⁴ *ibid.*

- ³⁵ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine*, in RST 21421.
- ³⁶ Marr, David. *Vietnamese anticolonialism*, p. 194.
- ³⁷ See *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine*, and *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ³⁸ Numbers 68, 69, and 70.
- ³⁹ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*
- ⁴² *ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin No. 93c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ⁴⁴ Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam từ khởi thủy đến 1945*, p. 76.
- ⁴⁵ See Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại (NVHD)*, p. 32: “Đại Nam Đồng Văn nhật báo, Đăng Cổ tùng báo - hai tên cho một tờ báo; mặt ngoại báo có vẽ hai con rồng châu mặt nguyệt, in chữ Hán, còn mặt trong in quốc ngữ.”
- ⁴⁶ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 171.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 103c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, A.s. d'une demande presente par M. Saumont qui desire publier un journal franco-annamite, 2/3/1910* in RST 21421.
- ⁵¹ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ⁵² Dufour and Nguyễn Văn Vinh requested authorization to publish a *quốc ngữ* journal called "Báo ta" (*Notre journal*) at the same time Babut and Saumont requested authorization for their journals. See *ibid.*
- ⁵³ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 103c, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 21421.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ See (TTLTQG-I) RST 74190-06, *A.s. publication des ouvrages diverses en quoc ngu, 1915-1917. Buôn-Bán và Toán-Mục* (by H. Lợi), *Sơ học luận lý* (by Trần Trọng Kim, for use in schools), *Methode pratique pour l'etude du Quốc Ngữ* (for Vietnamese and French students), *La guerre Europeene* (translated by the EFEO), *Thiên-đạo-thông-thư* (by Nguyễn Quế Vân).
- ⁵⁶ *Resident Superieure au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 271, Rapport a Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine* in RST 2421. Babut defended Nguyễn Văn Vinh, as he had Phan Châu Trinh, in his pieces published in *L'Courier*.
- ⁵⁷ *Convention Entre: M. Le Gallen, Resident Superieur p.i. au Tonkin et M. F.H. Schneider, editeur-proprietaire au Tonkin des divers periodiques rediges en langue indigene et dument autorises*, 30/8/1914. In (TTLTQG-I) Archives de la Mairie – Hanoi (AMH) 2695. See Articles 2, 3, & 4.
- ⁵⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.* See Article 5
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.* See Article 6 for all these rules.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.* See Article 5
- ⁶² *ibid.* Article 12
- ⁶³ Marty on the purpose of *Nam Phong* quoted in a speech given by Governor General Albert Sarraut on 22/8/17. In Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam*, p. 128.
- ⁶⁴ Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam*, p. 197.
- ⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 120.
- ⁶⁶ Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam*, p. 215.
- ⁶⁷ *Le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, Arrete No. 1653-bis, 6/6/1920*. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 70282-01, *Demandes d'autorisation de faire praitre des journaux periodiques et hebdomndaires et des ouvrages rediges en Quoc ngu a Hanoi, 1919-1921*.

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- ⁶⁸ *Resident Superieur au Tonkin, 2e Bureau, No. 416 a Le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine (Direction du Personnel et des Affaires Politiques et Indigenes)*, 13/7/20 in RST 70282-01.
- ⁶⁹ Approved by *Le Gouverneur General de l'Indochine, Arrete No. 2201*, 29/7/20 in *ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ *Arrete No. 2201* (29/7/20) Article 2 in *ibid.*
- ⁷¹ *ibid.* Article 3
- ⁷² See: Governor General Decree of 17/8/28, *relatif au regime douanier de certaines de papiers et de pates de cellulose importes en vue de l'impression ou de l'edition*. President of the French Republic Decree of 29/6/29, *constituant le tarif special indochinois a l'importation des papiers destines a l'un des usages indiques ci-dessous: 1/ impression des journaux, 2/ impression des publications periodiques, 3/ edition des livres scolaires, 4/ edition des autres livres destines a l'expression de la pensee*. These stipulations from the Presidential Decree of June 1929 were included in Article 1 of the Governor General *Arrete* (No. 229) signed in Ha Noi on 14/1/31 by Rene Robin. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 75545-02, *Demandes d'obtenir une licence d'importation de papier au tarif reduit destine a l'impression des journaux et a l'edition formulees par les imprimeurs au Tonkin en 1932-1933*.
- ⁷³ *Commissaire Centrale de Police a Maire de Hanoi, No. 119-M*, 23/1/32. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 75545-02, *Demandes d'obtenir une licence d'importation de papier au tarif reduit destine a l'impression des journaux et a l'edition formulees par les imprimeurs au Tonkin en 1932-1933*.
- ⁷⁴ See *Note postal Chef local des Service de Police au Tonkin a Mairie de Hanoi* (#377/A, 13/1/32) in RST 75545-02.
- ⁷⁵ See *Mairie de Hanoi a Resident Superieure au Tonkin* (#91A 15/1/32) in RST 75545-02.
- ⁷⁶ I focus on the content of six dossiers entitled *Demandes d'autorisation de publier les journaux en langue Viet. formulees par les indigenes*, from 1932 to 1936.
- ⁷⁷ (TTLTQG-I) AMH 2664, *Demandes d'autorisation de publier les journaux en langue Vietnamienne formulees par les indigenes en 1935*.
- ⁷⁸ *Surete Note Confidential No. 2123/S. (27/2/35)*. In (TTLTQG-I) AMH 2663-01, *Demandes d'autorisation de publier les journaux en langue Vietnamienne formulees par les indigenes de 1933 a 1935*.
- ⁷⁹ *Surete Note Confidential No. 6535/S. (21/6/35)* in AMH 2663-01.
- ⁸⁰ According to *Resident Superieure au Tonkin Arrete 1040-E*, 15/3/28 in *ibid.*
- ⁸¹ *Surete Note Confidential No. 9657/S. 3/10/1933*. In TTLTQG-I (Hà Nội), AMH 2660, *Demandes de autorisation de publier les journaux formulees par les indigenes de 1932 a 1935*. The other partners listed were Ngô Tấn Tố and Phạm Quế Lâm.
- ⁸² *Surete Note Confidential No. 10298/S. (10/10/34)* in AMH 2664.
- ⁸³ *Surete Note Confidential No. 4913/S. 17/5/33* in *ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ See *Surete Note Confidential No. 8219/S. (27/7/36)*. In (TTLTQG-I) AMH 2665, *Demandes d'autorisation de publier les journaux en langue Vietnamienne formulees par les indigenes en 1936*.
- ⁸⁵ *Surete Note Confidential No. 436/S. (11/1/35)* in AMH 2663-01.
- ⁸⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ *Surete Note Confidential No. 7259/S. (10/7/35)* in AMH 2663-01.
- ⁸⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ AMH 2663-01.
- ⁹⁰ See *Surete Note Confidential No. 6348/S. (12/6/36)* in AMH 2665.
- ⁹¹ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Auot*. p. 2-4. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 80961-01, *Recueil des articles decoupees de la revue de la presse tonkinoise en langue francaise et langue indigene d'Auot et Septembre 1935*.
- ⁹² Published on the 2nd, 3rd, 18th, 23rd, 24th, and 25th of the month. See *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Septembre 1935*.
- ⁹³ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Septembre 1935*, p. 5-6 in RST 80961-01.
- ⁹⁴ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Novembre 1935*, p. 1. In (TTLTQG-I) RST 80964, *Recueil des articles decoupees de la revue de la presse tonkinoise en langue francaise et langue indigene d'Octobre a Decembre 1935*.
- ⁹⁵ See *ibid.* p. 1-4 in RST 80964.
- ⁹⁶ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Auot 1935*. p. 9-11 in RST 80961-01.
- ⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 11-12. The issues published on the 18th, 24th, and 30th of August.
- ⁹⁸ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Septembre 1935*. p. 3-5 in *ibid.* Vietnamese: “*Pháp-Nam trong thời-kỳ bình hoả*”.

⁹⁹ For citations regarding the Regime of Alcohol, see p. 3-6 in *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Novembre 1935* in RST 80964.

¹⁰⁰ *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Novembre 1935*, p. 5 in RST 80964.

¹⁰¹ See p. 8-9 in *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Novembre 1935* and p. 2-3 in *Revue de la Presse Indigene de Langue Annamite du mois de Decembre 1935* in RST 80964.

CHAPTER 5

The *Quốc ngữ* Periodical: Profusion and Impact

In this world, literature is as cheap as pig fat. – Tân Đà

Quốc ngữ, education, infrastructure, and the periodical enjoyed a reciprocal relationship in the late colonial period. The abolition of the classical examinations in the North and the Center in 1915 and 1918 respectively and subsequent creation of the Franco-Việt education system shifted the path of social mobility and prestige from classical studies toward modern studies. As I argued in Chapter 1, this shift attracted increasing numbers to colonial schools. While the number of schools at all levels grew during the 1920s and 1930s, elementary and communal schools were by far the most numerous. Most students who attended school during the interwar period did so for between one and three years. Because grades 1-3 were taught in *quốc ngữ*, literacy was the most important skill the largest number of youths learned. Students with the opportunity to study beyond the elementary level often had to relocate. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the combination of diffuse elementary education, traveling primary and secondary school students, and the ease with which *quốc ngữ* could be learned spread literacy. The increasingly literate populace of the interwar era became an eager audience for *quốc ngữ* periodicals. Rather than serving the urban-based educated elite, *quốc ngữ* periodicals had a much wider audience and greater socio-cultural impact than previously suspected. Periodicals and literacy rates were mutually reinforcing trends – as more people were educated, periodicals became more numerous. Because *quốc ngữ* periodicals were the source of popular entertainment, they increased the attractiveness and desirability of literacy. The desire to directly consume the content of periodicals as a reader, rather than a listener, also drove public aspiration for *quốc ngữ* literacy.

As literacy expanded so too did the number of contenders in what became a crowded and variegated periodical ‘industry’. The explosion of periodicals, especially during the 1930s, was

not solely driven by youth who possessed primary or secondary education, but was a reaction to a much larger segment of Vietnamese society. Like colonial schools, periodicals acted as conduits for the propagation of novel forms of knowledge and cultural expression. Most print during the 1920s and 1930s was published in periodicals before, if ever, being issued as an individual volume. From the mid 1920s the diverse content of an ever-growing number of periodicals was increasingly *Vietnamese*. Periodicals widely commented on the social, cultural, and political questions of the day in articles and exposés. The themes, characters, and settings of serialized novels and short stories became organically Vietnamese. Through the fluorecence of the trends outlined above, *quốc ngữ* periodicals became *the* forum a generation of youth educated in the colony fabricated notions of a collective past and shaped culture and identity in the present. In so doing, they laid the foundation of postcolonial Vietnamese culture and society.

The statement above places two institutions created and controlled by the colonial state at the center of indigenous change and transformation. This seems an extraordinary claim, particularly in light of the fact that much of the scholarship that exists on colonial Việt Nam has systematically delegitimized these institutions. Colonial education has been morphed into a malevolent force whose purpose was to propagate ignorance and servitude more than it was to enlighten through knowledge. Likewise, visions of overbearing and omnipresent control relegated the *quốc ngữ* periodical to the margins of significance. That such conclusions are inaccurate and produce a portrait of the proximate past that distorts its reality has been addressed in previous chapters. My analysis highlights the space youth educated in colonial schools used to transform their society through *quốc ngữ* periodicals under the administration's control.

Subsidized Print

Prior to the establishment of state-subsidized periodicals, there existed only a limited print culture that contributed to a narrow public sphere. This was the case in all three regions of what would become Việt Nam. No periodicals existed prior to French colonization. In the political and commercial centers of Hà Nội, Huế, and Sài Gòn books and pamphlets were printed using woodblocks rather than printing presses well into the 20th century. Indeed, as Shawn McHale noted: “In 1909, thirty-four booksellers, printers, and carvers of woodblocks and seals

served Hà Nội.”¹ Prior to the adoption and development of *quốc ngữ* during the interwar period, Vietnamese culture and history were largely preserved and transmitted orally. Oral traditions varied both within and between regions.

A relatively small part of that knowledge consisted of concepts of history and identity that were common to most ethnic *Kinh* Vietnamese speakers across space. The ‘macro-tradition’ engendering homogeneity overlay myriad local narratives contributing to a mosaic of disparate identities. There was a general dearth of consumers for print culture into the early 20th century. Only a small segment of the population possessed the level of literacy necessary to read verse or



Photograph 24. Bookseller, Hà Nội area

prose in Classical Chinese and *Nôm*. Much of the print that existed was driven by needs of the Vietnamese Imperial government. The Confucian texts used in classical schools were also relatively diffuse. However, the small market left print technology stagnant and underdeveloped. Few books, pamphlets, or print of any kind were in circulation. The small number of producers and consumers hampered the potential development of *quốc ngữ* during the first two decades of the century. Private individuals and entities were not willing to forge a public sphere in any language because it was not profitable. It was for this reason that state involvement was imperative – because the administration was willing to risk financial loss (not to mention political unrest).

The state-subsidized periodicals of the first two decades of the 20th century were imperative to the growth of *quốc ngữ* as the written Vietnamese language and to establishing the periodical as the medium for Vietnamese cultural expression and entertainment. The foundation for the political, social, and cultural development of the interwar period was laid by these *quốc ngữ* journals. While state-subsidized periodicals of similar character existed in both Sài Gòn and Hà Nội, I illustrate their importance through two periodicals published in the North from the mid 1910s, *Đông Dương Tạp Chí (Indochina)* and *Nam Phong (Southern Spirit)*. The reasons for this

are multiple. First, the socio-cultural impact of these specific journals was continually highlighted both during the period and after. Second, while these journals were published in Hà Nội, they impacted all three Vietnamese regions of the colony (this was especially true of *Southern Spirit*). Third, similar journals were produced in the South. Recall that it was F.H. Schneider, the owner of *Lúc tỉnh tân văn* (*News of the South*) in Sài Gòn, who established *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North*. While that journal and *Nông Cổ Mìn Đầm* (*Agriculture and Commerce Weekly*, published from 1901 to 1924 in Sài Gòn) deserve independent study, their content appears to have been broadly similar to the northern journals, even if their impact was narrower. Finally, *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* created the conditions for Hà Nội to become the literary center of Indochina during the interwar period. While Sài Gòn had been the capital of the *quốc ngữ* journal in its infancy, from the mid 1920s, the center of dynamism shifted to Hà Nội. *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* influenced that shift and help make Hà Nội the center of *quốc ngữ* literature during the 1930s.

The state-subsidized periodicals of the first two decades of the century arguably had a more profound impact on the socio-cultural landscape of Việt Nam than any other phenomena during the late colonial period. This was particularly true of *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit*. Though deemed significant, Vietnamese and foreign scholars have consistently diminished the socio-cultural import of these journals by concluding that they were shackled to administrative whims through state-subsidies. By delegitimizing journals like *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit*, they have been rendered incapable of being ‘authentically Vietnamese’. Vietnamese scholar Huỳnh Văn Tông illustrated this attitude in his excellent study on Vietnamese periodicals from the mid 19th century to 1945: “... despite the fact that the political aims of *Southern Spirit* were extremely evident, we still have to recognize that it played a very important role in developing the foundation of modern Vietnamese thought.”² Similarly, the editors of *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit*, Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh, have been tarred with the label ‘collaborator’, placing an asterisk above their work. Such designations, conjured in the Hà Nội of the mid 20th century, have no place in early 21st century scholarship.

When *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* were created in 1913 and 1917 respectively, Vietnamese society found itself at a crossroads brought about by colonization and its entrance into the global, Western world. The socio-cultural complex based on Sinic learning and Classical Chinese, on which knowledge and perception had been at least partially based for

centuries, was quickly becoming redundant. An increasing number accepted this fact. However, the questions of what would replace that way of being and, perhaps more importantly, *who* would determine the trajectory of the Vietnamese socio-cultural evolution, were much less certain. The choice before men like Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh was not between participating in a public sphere where plenty of investors queued to throw capital towards the development of yet another *quốc ngữ* periodical driven by an ever-growing audience and collaborating with their colonial overlords to further the subjugation of their own people. Rather, their choice was between not participating at all and furthering the socio-cultural development of their country through the *quốc ngữ* periodical from within the administration's parameters of censorship. They chose the latter. In so doing, men like Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh shaped the initial trajectory of that evolution and cleared a path the generation of youth educated in colonial schools would follow.

Indochina and *Southern Spirit* helped make *quốc ngữ* periodicals the medium of Vietnamese cultural expression and formation during the late colonial period. Periodicals remained a new and little acknowledged form of media during the second decade of the century. The relative antiquity of *quốc ngữ*, still considered a foreign language by most Vietnamese at the time, bequeathed but a tiny volume of literature. Very few of the classical texts that formed the foundation of Vietnamese knowledge and understanding had been translated. There was an equal dearth of Western translations. Original compositions in *quốc ngữ* were almost non-existent. As Nguyễn Công Hoan commented about his time at the College of the Protectorate in the 1910s: “When we were in Franco-Việt schools, there were no *quốc ngữ* texts. If the teacher found a text, he would bring it into class for students to read. For example, we read the book *Vietnamese Customs* by Phạm Huy Hổ. After we read it once, we read it again. In a year we would read a book like that ten times or more, to the point where we had memorized it.”³ As Western educated men like Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh gazed into the future, they were likely frightened by the possibility of a barren landscape whose borrowed present was devoid of a past and thus had no future. The space of power they were permitted in *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* allowed Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh the possibility of altering that dark portrait. They did so in three profound ways. First, *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* fabricated new perceptions of the past and tradition by translating works from Classical Chinese and *Nôm* to *quốc ngữ*. Second, they exposed their audience to new forms of art through translations of

Western literature and to new concepts and ideas through translations and lengthy explanations. Finally, they laid the foundation of Vietnamese originality through the publication of new works in *quốc ngữ*. In the process, *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* enriched *quốc ngữ* with myriad neologisms and forms of expression.

When *Indochina* was established in 1913, there had not been a Vietnamese language periodical in the North or the Center for three years. While alternative publications partially filled this vacancy, few volumes in *quốc ngữ* existed on any topic. At the same time, education in the colony was undergoing dramatic changes threatening to cut an entire people from their past and render them completely dependent on a foreign language (French) in order to progress into the future. The men who wrote for *Indochina* perceived the *quốc ngữ* periodical through that lens of acute necessity. As Phạm Quỳnh, who wrote for *Indochina* prior to being appointed editor of *Southern Spirit*, put it: “... during this epoch, the writer’s duty is tremendously important. We are the vanguard generation that is destroying a road and opening an artery. Writers of the future will follow whatever road we chose to go down.”⁴ Phạm Quỳnh could not have known the accuracy of his prophecy when those words were printed in 1915. The ‘vanguard generation’ (those born between c. 1880 and 1900)ⁱ bordered the colony’s past and future. They were cognizant that their sons and grandsons would not enjoy their own intellectual and cultural ties to the pre-colonial past. The vanguard generation felt it their “duty” to provide younger generations access to a translated past and to propagate the Westernized knowledge they knew to be the future.

The contributors to *Indochina* reflected the nature of the vanguard generation. About half were Western educated and possessed fluency in French and *quốc ngữ*. The other half was composed of former classic scholars who had replaced the brush with the fountain pen.⁵ The content of the periodical reflected that distribution. It contained translations of various works in Classical Chinese and French, as well as original compositions in *quốc ngữ*. The former classical scholar and prolific writer Phan Kế Bính wrote a column called “Classical Works”, in which he translated famous Chinese compositions on thought and philosophy. He also translated

ⁱ Men and women born between c. 1880 and 1900 whose classical education and ‘pre-colonial memories’ tied them to the past, even as they embraced and/or sought to cope with the changes French colonization had brought. It was this generation that saw the promise and possibility of periodicals and *quốc ngữ*, whose growth might also be indicative of a ‘compromise’ between those in this generation who had learned French and those who had not – i.e. it was a ‘lingua franca’ amongst Vietnamese. Many of these men (and a few women, see Đạm Phương for example) played a mentor/patron role to those of the younger generations.

Classical Chinese and *Nôm* verse composed by Vietnamese scholars, such as *Hoài cổ* (Bà Thanh Quan), *Khóc ông phủ Vĩnh Tường* (Hồ Xuân Hương), and *Hỏi tượng sành* (Yên Đổ).ⁱⁱ As Nguyễn Công Hoan recalled, such translations had an immediate impact: “... Around the time I was 11 years old I studied poetry like *Lục súc tranh công*, *Kiều*, *Chinh phụ*, *Cung oán*, etc. I really understood the compositions. We also studied the humorous verse of poets like Hồ Xuân Hương, Yên Đổ, Tú Xương, Huyện Nè, and Tú Đồng, because our teacher wanted to bring some laughter into the classroom. My friends and I would try to remember and memorize the poems so that we could recited them to each other.”⁶ Nguyễn Đỗ Mục, the other classicist on staff, translated popular Chinese stories, such as *Tây Dương ký*, *Đông Chu Liệt Quốc*, and *Khúc Chinh phụ ngâm*, into *quốc ngữ*. He also translated some of the Confucian socio-political primers central to classical studies.⁷

Like *Indochina, Southern Spirit* contained many translations of Classical Chinese and *Nôm* texts. In addition, it published historical commentaries and essays, which along with those translations, were used to fabricate notions of the Vietnamese past and tradition. The writer and literary critic Vũ Ngọc Phan, who came of age during the interwar period, stated that Nguyễn Hữu Tiến, one of the journal’s most prominent classical contributors, was “... the one writer who taught us more about classical knowledge and thought than anyone else of his generation...”⁸ Beginning in 1918, Nguyễn Hữu Tiến wrote a column in *Southern Spirit* under the heading “Rhythm of the South” (*Nam âm thi văn khảo biện*) in which he translated the works of Vietnamese poets like Ôn Như Hầu, Nguyễn Hữu Chính, Nguyễn Công Trứ, Yên Đổ, Dương Khuê, and Cao Bá Quát, from *Nôm* into *quốc ngữ*.⁹ He also wrote essays on Chinese and Vietnamese history, customs, morality, religion, and literature. In addition, Nguyễn Hữu Tiến composed essays explaining the content and principles of Confucian and Mencian thought. Nguyễn Quang Oánh, another classical scholar, translated laments and odes, such as *Ngâm khúc*, *Cung oán*, *Chinh phụ ngâm*, and *Tỳ bà hành*, many of which were accompanied by historical commentary.¹⁰ It was through these translations and commentaries that an entire generation of youth educated in Western schools became acquainted with, and sometimes enamored by, the forms of cultural expression so important to the men of their father’s generation and before. For the generation that came of age during the 1920s and 1930s, the documents written by those individuals provided a tether to an increasingly distant past. That men like Nguyễn Hữu Tiến

ⁱⁱ Note: All the works cited here were translated from *Nôm*.

and Nguyễn Quang Oánh sewed that line was important because it provided an air of authenticity to the arbitration of the past (because they were men with a classical background). While they might have unconsciously played their role as arbitrator – those who chose how to present the pre-Western Vietnamese past – their choices had tremendous impact. Just as Nguyễn Văn Vinh’s translations of Moliere and the dramatists inclusion in the curriculum of colonial schools caused an entire generation of early 20th century youth to fall in love with an early 19th century European romantic, so too did young men memorize Nguyễn Quang Oánh’s translation of *Tỳ bà hành*ⁱⁱⁱ and use it in their performances of Vietnamese ‘tradition’ in *cô đầu* houses North to South.^{iv} In other words, what these journals, and others like them, chose to present as Vietnamese ‘tradition’ not only provided the younger generation access to that knowledge and cultural heritage, it sculpted how the Vietnamese past was perceived and studied during the interwar period and into the postcolonial era.

Phạm Quỳnh, the editor of *Southern Spirit*, was a man of unique intellect and vision. Voicing an opinion almost universally shared by his generation, Vũ Ngọc Phan commented “... Phạm Quỳnh can discuss any topic – literature, philosophy, religion, politics, or society – in a firm and lucid way. He makes a focused and comprehensive study of each topic he writes on...”¹¹ That intellectual ease was reflected in *Southern Spirit*’s content, which was more sophisticated and variegated than that of *Indochina*. For Phạm Quỳnh, *Southern Spirit* was not merely a vehicle for displaying the ornaments of a new, common past. Its mission was also to teach Vietnamese how to think about a shared heritage. He performed the role of arbitrator with the conscious seriousness that a scientist like Marie Curie (whose achievements his journal chronicled) undertook her experiments.¹² Definitions and classifications were imperative to this process, because they contributed to the growing depth of thought in *quốc ngữ* and constructed parameters through which the new, pan-Việt past could be perceived. For example, the rich oral tradition that lay at the heart of Vietnamese cultures and identities was defined in order to

ⁱⁱⁱ *Tỳ bà hành*: A 616-syllable Tang-style poem composed in Classical Chinese in 816.

^{iv} The *cô đầu* house was a unique Vietnamese space in which customers participated in and listened to young women (*cô đầu*) harmonize verse to musical accompaniment (*ca trù*). Much of the verse that they recited was composed by the poets listed above, whose Classical Chinese and *Nom* verse was translated into *quốc ngữ* in the pages of *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit*, where the interwar generation became aware of it. The young singers (the *cô đầu*) were available to their patrons sexually. However they were viewed as artists rather than prostitutes. The interwar era witnessed a vast increase in the number of *cô đầu* and *cô đầu* houses in urban centers driven by thousands of young men migrating to the city. Due to this demand and proliferation many of the young women in the *cô đầu* houses of this period were not trained singers and players, rather their purpose was to serve their customers, sexually and otherwise.

articulate notions of homogeneity. Phạm Quỳnh defined the proverb in his typical fashion: “... Proverbs and adages are utterances widely known and propagated by a people, either because they are pithy or because they put things in a way that is easy to understand. These insolent sayings are most common amongst the masses of little education, who, devoid of more sophisticated language, term these vulgarities ‘custom’.” Those with a higher level of intellect were able to use language differently: “Higher still are maxims. A local saying can be a maxim if it has deep and broad meaning. Literature and philosophy are present in maxims. Unlike proverbs, maxims are not simply ‘natural’ utterances devoid of greater meaning.”¹³

Southern Spirit was not only a journal that propagated perceptions and definitions of the past. Its pages juxtaposed translations and analysis of the works of Mencius beside articles on the philosophy of perception and Kant’s notion of space (both in *quốc ngữ* of course). *Southern*



Photograph 25. Cà tru performance, including a cô đầu and a kếp. A patron is playing the drum.

Spirit also translated and explained foreign philosophical concepts, histories, and literatures. Readers were introduced to Baudelaire, France, and Maupassant. They also became acquainted with Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Comte, and Bergson (among others). Explanations to self-posed questions like “What is ‘society’?”, “What is ‘freedom’?”, “What is philosophy?”, or “What is a political party?” were provided in lengthy articles.¹⁴ Phạm Quỳnh himself defined “the novel”, a new literary genre in the early 1920s which would have a profound impact on the socio-cultural landscape during the 1930s, in the following manner: “... A novel is a story written in prose that depicts our feelings, customs, and society, or the oddities therein, in a way that holds the reader’s interest... the story must have two things, characters and a plot, meaning that

the story consists of individuals and actions...”¹⁵ The purpose of articles like this in particular, and the content of *Southern Spirit* in general, was to present foreign and/or new ideas and concepts in a straightforward way that would be easy for the *quốc ngữ*-literate classical scholar and his Western educated son to understand.

Nguyễn Văn Vinh’s translations of French novels and plays introduced a generation to an entirely new paradigm of creation and expression. They also provided readers an intimate look

into the socio-cultural world and psyche of the West. Among his translations, serialized in *Indochina* and *News of the Center and the North*, were: *La Fontaine's Fables*, Perrault's *Children's stories*, Moliere's plays, including *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *Tartuffe or the Hypocrite*, *The Imaginary Invalid*, and *Turcaret*, an 18th century comedy by Alain-Rene Lesage. He also translated and/or adapted selected works of 19th century writers like Balzac and Hugo.¹⁶ Nguyễn Văn Vinh adapted some of those works to a Vietnamese cultural context.¹⁷ His translations and adaptations attracted many new readers, popularizing *quốc ngữ*. Their popularity owed much to the texts Vinh chose: "... Look at the French books he translated... they are all popular; there is not a book that contains deep philosophical references among them. His translations are simple and easily understood. They do not delve deep into the intricacies of thought like those of Phạm Quỳnh. They are not weighed down by the heavy emotion of Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu."¹⁸ While the broad appeal of popular forms of entertainment like novels and dramas was evident by 1930, it was much less obvious fifteen years before. At that time, most thought the Vietnamese language (*quốc ngữ*) could not be used to translate Western works.¹⁹ Nguyễn Văn Vinh reflected on the utility and impact of one of his early translations, *Gil Blas de Santillane*^v, in the early 1930s: "... I practiced translating as I went. Everyday I grew a little more polished. Some of my work was a bit clumsy. I also found myself straying from the author's original meaning here and there, but not enough to regret wasted time. This translation marked a pivotal moment in the history of Vietnamese writing, from the time *Nôm* was used in attempts to articulate Western thought to the present, when *quốc ngữ* has become enriched and developed."²⁰ Vũ Ngọc Phan echoed Vinh's sentiments in his opus *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại (Modern Writers)*. Phan, who was educated in colonial schools and the French *Lycee* Albert Sarraut in Hà Nội, commented that reading *Gil Blas* was like wandering through a course on *quốc ngữ* translation. The first few pages read like "a foreigner who was just beginning to practice speaking Vietnamese". While the elementary language had vanished, Phan considered some of the second book's language archaic by 1940-standards (he commented that it was only used by people in the countryside). By the time Nguyễn Văn Vinh got around to translating the third and fourth books of the series, many of his translations were very skillful. Vũ Ngọc Phan concluded

^v Note: The translation of *Gil Blas de Santillane* was serialized in *Đông dương tạp chí* from 7 August 1913 and subsequently in *Trung Bắc tân văn* until 20 Dec. 1916. It was published as an individual volume by Nguyễn Văn Vinh's publishing house, *Trung Bắc tân văn* in 1930.

that: “Considering the environment of underdevelopment in which he wrote twenty-five years ago, it was a great accomplishment to produce such light, simple, and quick-minded prose.”²¹

Nguyễn Văn Vinh’s translations and adaptations illustrated the possibility of using the Vietnamese language, through *quốc ngữ*, in innovative ways. *Southern Spirit* continued to engendered creativity by providing a forum for the beginnings of Vietnamese originality in *quốc ngữ*. Nguyễn Bá Học, whom we encountered briefly in the previous chapter railing against the inadequacies of Vietnamese assemblies in the mid 1930s, wrote for *Southern Spirit* from the late teens. Nguyễn Bá Học was one of the first Vietnamese to compose original short stories and serialized novellas, which were published in *Southern Spirit*. His stories mixed the new genres and styles introduced by the French with well-established forms of prose. Nguyễn Bá Học was one of the first Vietnamese to adapt the sudden plot changes found in Western novels to Vietnamese stories. His use of the distant, Western ‘I’ also broke ground.^{vi} Yet, Nguyễn Bá Học mingled novelty with convention by using literary devices common to classical Chinese novels such as that in which the author’s commentary and criticism were injected into the story. For example, in his short story *Chuyện cô Chiêu Nhi (Nhi the Mandarin’s Daughter)*, the words of Confucius sprang from the lips of an old peasant woman selling flowers.²² While his stories did not represent the Vietnamese originality through Western forms of realism and romanticism that would come to dominate the literature from the late 1920s, Nguyễn Bá Học’s work certainly helped to set the stage for it.

Phạm Duy Tồn, one of the first Vietnamese to write stories in the Western-style, also published in *Southern Spirit*. Phạm Duy Tồn’s prose was even more ‘modern’ than that of Nguyễn Bá Học. The importance of the work of writers from the vanguard generation like Phạm Duy Tồn and Nguyễn Bá Học was in its proximity to the past and search for the future. Like Nguyễn Văn Vinh’s early translations, Phạm Duy Tồn and Nguyễn Bá Học demonstrated Western genre could not only be adapted, but that Vietnamese creativity could blossom through them. They began the process of forging foreign genres and styles into something organically Vietnamese through their compositions in *quốc ngữ*, set in Vietnamese spaces, and centered on recognizably Vietnamese protagonists. Nguyễn Bá Học’s short story *Dư sinh lịch hiểm ký*, published in the May 1920 issue of *Southern Spirit*, spoke to contemporary Vietnamese

^{vi} For example: *Dư sinh lịch hiểm ký* (*Nam Phong* no. 35, May, 1920), began with the sentence “*Cha tôi gọi tôi mà bảo rằng...*” (“My father called to me and told me...”). This use of pronouns was completely new.

society.²³ The protagonist, a young man named Ngô Tự Tĩnh, was from a family of proud scholars. At the age of fifteen, Tĩnh quit classical studies and began studying at a colonial school. Six years later he earned his primary school certificate and continued his studies at the secondary level. When he flunked out of secondary school, his exasperated father gave him a small sum of money and instructed him to make his own way. Tĩnh navigated a series of trials and tribulations on his way from the North to the South, where he decided to settle.

These authors began to use their environment and glean inspiration from the society in which they lived to sculpt Vietnamese character-types. In *Sống chết mặc bay*, Phạm Duy Tồn painted a portrait familiar to Vietnamese long before his story was published: A storm threatening to overcome the dike raged in a village outside Hà Nội. Peasants were running helter skelter, bailing water and attempting to save the dike, their fields, and their homes from the rising water. Meanwhile, the district official was in the communal house, making merry while servants attended to his every need. Following a thunderous crack, which his servants interpreted as the dike bursting, the mandarin instructed them to “let it be”. When a peasant approached the official, kowtowed, and informed him that the dike had indeed been breached, the pompous mandarin shouted at him violently: “If that dike has been breached then I’m going to break all of your necks! I’m going to have you all thrown in jail!”²⁴ Such seemingly simple acts carried profound importance. The early original *quốc ngữ* literature published in *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* demonstrated that foreign forms of cultural expression could be used to denote the Vietnamese people and society, opening new avenues for the enrichment of *quốc ngữ* knowledge.

The Interwar Generation

State-subsidized journals like *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* played a paramount role in the socio-cultural transformation of late colonial Vietnamese society. Through translations and original works, they stretched the boundaries of *quốc ngữ* and altered the way it was perceived. Subsidized newspapers and journals also engendered a public sphere and *quốc ngữ* print culture that revolved around the periodical. That is, during the 1920s and 1930s, the periodical became the center of publication and thought in the Vietnamese language, the significance of which

dwarfed any other form of print media in the colony. One reason for this had to do with the fact that state-subsidized journals created the *quốc ngữ* public sphere, South to North. Recall that those journals represented an agreement between a private French individual and the colonial state. The state provided financial support, ensuring the journal's solvency. For his part, the French manager, who more than likely could not read or write *quốc ngữ*, enlisted a Vietnamese editor and team of contributors to facilitate production. It was thus through periodicals that the vanguard generation became involved with the idea of a public sphere and modern printing techniques. One of the most important reasons subsidized journals were so important was because they facilitated the creation of an industry that was not initially profitable. By the time *quốc ngữ* journals could turn a profit – leading to private Vietnamese ownership – periodicals had dominated print in perception, if not reality, for at least twenty years. Therefore, it should not be surprising that norms established during the 'era of subsidies' continued through the 'era of Vietnamese ownership' in the interwar period. Individual volumes (books and pamphlets) were of secondary or even tertiary importance to the publishers that formed the foundation of the Vietnamese public sphere. Most individual volumes had already been serialized in periodicals, because it was a more cost-effective manner of publication. Once the popularity and success of a novel or collection of poetry were evident, they were re-published in book form. Such norms were at once a result of the state-subsidized antecedents of the public sphere and a reflection of the development of the private market for *quốc ngữ* print from c. 1920.

The interplay of three factors – the development of the periodical and *quốc ngữ*, greater number of Western educated youth seeking to contribute to that development, and an increasingly literate populous – set the stage for the dramatic increase in *quốc ngữ* journals from the mid 1920s. The vast majority of the young men and women who threw themselves into the development of *quốc ngữ* and the articulation of the Vietnamese past and present through periodicals were educated in colonial schools. Super-imposing the distinctions of Western-derived socio-economic classes upon the generation of Vietnamese who wrote for periodicals from the mid 1920s (born c. 1905-1920) is a mistake.²⁵ The most basic reason this sort of analysis is misplaced is due to its assumptions regarding political and economic power. In the capitalist system in which such concepts were derived, economic affluence begets political influence and power. In Việt Nam, the pre-capitalist inverse was true – political power permitted the possibility of economic aggrandizement. Without politically derived antecedents,

economic power was often perceived as a threat to the ruling status quo. However, it is inaccurate to label pre-colonial (or aspects of colonial) Vietnamese society ‘feudal’, due to the fact that dynamics completely distinct from a ‘feudal system’ were at work. Chief among those were education and the idea of social mobility. The *raison d’être* of education for Vietnamese was that it engendered the possibility of access to political power (and thus economic affluence). The entire pre-colonial education ‘system’ was ostensibly preparation for examinations that could lead to political appointment. There were two dimensions to social mobility via education. In theory education was a meritocracy, which ‘everyone’ (all males) could access to improve his socio-economic status via political appointment. Though it was possible for one from an economically poor family to reach the highest echelons of government service and wealth, the reality was often more stark. The meritocratic system of education was heavily cut with corruption and nepotism. The results created by this system of social mobility cannot be characterized as ‘capitalist’ or ‘feudal’. A tiny percentage of those educated beyond the remedial level achieved the dream of high political office and riches (both of which were more often dependent on heredity and corruption than education and talent). A larger number became mid level officials. More received appointments at the local level, which still permitted the accumulation of modest wealth. Failed examination candidates and those who received no official appointment represented a greater number than the three previous categories combined. Such educated men eked out a living as teachers, scribes, and practitioners of Sino-Vietnamese medicine (for example). The traveling ‘medicine man’ might well have studied longer and been more knowledgeable than the provincial governor. What educated men shared was not a common socio-economic status, but an appreciation for education and/or the possibilities it engendered (of both social mobility and prestige, of which the learned ‘medicine man’ remained a beneficiary). These men passed their value for education to their offspring, creating lineages with ‘traditions of education’. The men (and few women) who wrote for *quốc ngữ* periodicals during the interwar period were from such families. Some of their fathers were provincial and local officials. Others taught village children the rudiments of Classical Chinese and *quốc ngữ* in their homes. Socio-economic status was thus not what ‘united’ the young generation educated in colonial schools during the interwar era (they could correctly be labeled bourgeoisie, petit-bourgeoisie, artisans, peasants, ...). Rather, the thread that ran through their backgrounds was that they hailed from families with a tradition of education (*gia đình có nho học/nhà thi lễ*).

While familial heritage formed the foundation of commonality, this generation also shared other characteristics. Their first experience with education was likely in a private setting with a relative or the local scholar in Classical Chinese. This remained true throughout the late colonial period in both rural and urban areas. For example, Nguyễn Công Hoan, born in 1903, learned Classical Chinese with his brothers at home. Likewise, Huy Cận, born in 1919, studied with a village teacher prior to entering a Western school. As I argued in Chapter 1, at least part of the reason this remained true was so that these young men could perform the rituals at the heart of Vietnamese socio-religious life. Because the study of Classical Chinese had been made redundant in terms of social mobility, following relatively brief periods of the study, these young men enrolled in modern schools.

The vast majority of those involved in the public sphere during the interwar period went to colonial schools and never traveled outside the colony. Almost all finished at least primary school. Most went on to lower secondary school (grades 7-10) and earned their diploma (*DEPSI*). While few went on to secondary (grades 11-13) and tertiary school (university), some earned higher-level degrees, such as the *Brevet elementaire*, *Brevet primaire superieur francais*, *Baccealaureat metropolitain*, and *Baccealaureat local*, the exams for which they could take in the colony. That a significant number took those exams following lower-secondary school was indicative of another trait the young interwar generation in general and writers and journalists in particular shared: they used the skills they learned in colonial schools to develop their knowledge outside the classroom. They learned more about Eastern and Western history, literature, and philosophy through self-study in their school libraries and via periodicals like *Southern Spirit*. They were particularly interested in Vietnamese history and literature, in part because those subjects were but a small part of school curriculum (see Chapter 2). This generation threw themselves into French literature. While they studied compositions from as early as the Middle Ages, they concentrated on the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, disassembling the work of authors like Dumas, Hugo, Andre Theuriet, Maupassant, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Gide to lay bare method of construction and constituent parts – sentences and stanzas, verbs and adjectives – in the same way a curious child might have a radio or gramophone. Their fluency in French also gave them access to the pantheon of Western and Eastern knowledge in translation. In short, this generation was deeply immersed in and influenced by the French thought-world.

The fact that this generation's engagement with and love for the French language and culture manifest in a desire to enrich Vietnamese culture and society via the *quốc ngữ* periodical was a byproduct of education *in the colony*. These young men and women found themselves in two vibrant worlds at the same time. In school, most learned the history, literature, and science of the West in French. They spoke to their teachers and to each other in French. Outside the school, they were 'foreign' subjects of the French Empire immersed in an increasingly dynamic *Vietnamese* socio-cultural environment. Their love of the French language and culture did not equate to the negation or feminization of their own cultural heritage. On the contrary, their education, proximity to foreigners in the school, and engagement with Vietnamese society outside the school granted them the ability, confidence, inspiration, and deep drive to develop their own culture and society.

Vietnamese socio-cultural transformation was something this generation felt could only be done in the Vietnamese language. As I argued in Chapter 2, experience in colonial schools 'unmasked' notions of French superiority and created the confidence of equality in young educated Vietnamese, even as they were treated as inferiors (especially outside the school). The ambition to demonstrate their equality to the 'French' (at large, amorphous, non-descript) and most importantly, to themselves, was fostered by that generation's education and experience in the colony. That expressions of Vietnamese intellectual parity could not be accomplished in the French language was written into this dynamic. How could Vietnamese demonstrate their equality in the very language that named them 'inferior' in word and deed? By choosing to contribute to the development of knowledge and expression in *quốc ngữ*, this generation rejected the rich heritage of the French language and affirmed their own cultural pride. The Vietnamese who participated in the public sphere of the interwar period had impressive knowledge of and intimate access to French culture and society. In contrast, the French in the colony were almost holistically ignorant of the Vietnamese language and knew precious little about Vietnamese culture and society. By embracing *quốc ngữ*, the interwar generation at once highlighted Vietnamese ability *and* French ignorance. In so doing, they denied their colonizers direct access to the developing Vietnamese socio-cultural landscape. There was tremendous power in those acts of pride and affirmation – *we* know about *you*, but *you* cannot really know about *us*.

The possibility of such a choice owed much to periodicals like *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit*. Despite brief study as children, their general ignorance of Classical Chinese (and thus *Nôm*) cut this generation off from the thought-world of their fathers and grandfathers. The idea that they might have used Classical Chinese or *Nôm* as a vehicle for Vietnamese cultural expression defies logic, particularly in light of the fact that the Franco-Việt education system institutionalized *quốc ngữ* as the Vietnamese language and rendered Classical Chinese redundant as a conduit of social mobility. At the same time, journals like *Indochina* and *Southern Spirit* connected the modern studies generation to a new, collective past through *quốc ngữ* translations and demonstrated the creative malleability of the new Vietnamese written language. By bringing the literature, philosophy, science, government, culture, and society of the West and the East to its readers, *Southern Spirit* in particular, developed a foundation for analytical, scientific, and literary expression in *quốc ngữ*. Poets like Tấn Đà (who edited two journals in the early and mid 1920s) and Trương Phó (whose work was often published in *Southern Spirit*) demonstrated *quốc ngữ*'s ability to conjure the ethereal, sorrowful, and sometimes wine-infused tones of the classical past. At the same time, young students in the colony's schools began experimenting with the medium. Hoàng Ngọc Phách showed how *quốc ngữ* could be used to fabricate Vietnamese originality through Western genre and style. He wrote *Tố Tâm*, a tragic story of the doomed romantic love of a promising young student and a literate, urbanized young woman, while still a student at the School of Pedagogy in Hà Nội in 1922. Serialized in the School's newspaper, it was not published as a volume until 1925. *Tố Tâm* was a phenomenon from North to South, not unlike the Beatles following their appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1964. As Nguyễn Vỹ recalled: "... *Tố Tâm* created a sensation. Hoàng Ngọc Phách was the first to ignite the fuse... the popularity of *Tố Tâm* spread like wildfire. It was the portal through which an entire generation of young men and women traveled on their way to a new way of seeing the world... Students from the North to the South kept *Tố Tâm* beside them as they slept and used it as a pillow."²⁶ At around the same time *Tố Tâm* appeared, more original works using Western genre and styles to comment on Vietnamese socio-cultural themes were published.^{vii} From the

^{vii} Note: Other novels published around that time included: *Quả dưa đỏ* (Nguyễn Trọng Thuật), *Sóng hồ Ba Bê* (Phạm Bùi Cầm), *Cánh thu di hận* (Đương Tư Nguyên), *Kim An lệ sử* (Trọng Khiêm), *Tố Tâm* (Hoàng Ngọc Phách), *Nhò Phong* and *Người quay tơ* (Nguyễn Tường Tam).

mid 1920s there was no question that *quốc ngữ* could be used to conjure the past and give voice to the present. The development of the Vietnamese language became a kind of frontier – exciting, new, and full of possibilities. Once it gained momentum, it developed its own inertia – the *quốc ngữ* periodical, the idea of the professional writer, and the possibility of fame (like that garnered by Hoàng Ngọc Phách) became the dream of countless schoolboys after 1925.

The ambition of those schoolboys could not have become a reality had their not been an expanding audience for the news, literature, and entertainment printed in *quốc ngữ* periodicals. The audience for French-language periodicals and entertainment in the colony was limited to the number who had completed primary school. While all instruction in colonial schools was supposed to be conducted in French from the 4th grade, the reality was that French-language instruction in the primary cycle (grades 4-6) depended largely on the ability of the students and the teacher. Often times, French-language instruction did not begin in all courses until the 6th grade. Competent French-language literacy was not achieved with any kind of uniformity until after grade 6. Only 10%-15% of all ‘primary school students’ were enrolled in the three upper grades at any time from the mid 1920s to the mid 1940s. The majority of students who studied for one to three years left school with only very basic French-language skills. From that point of knowledge and understanding, it was very difficult to reach a level of practical literacy. The opposite was true of *quốc ngữ*. While each year of elementary school saw a heavier emphasis on French-language instruction, it remained a foreign language. In addition to basic writing and reading lessons, all other courses were taught in *quốc ngữ*. A child who attended only one year of elementary school likely attained a level of literacy that could be built on. As the writer and literary critic Thiều Sơn said in a speech before the *Hội Nam kì Khuyến học (Southern Society for the Encouragement of Education)* in 1933: “... *Quốc ngữ* is the only language the entire country can use. Because one can learn *quốc ngữ* quickly and with ease, the number of *quốc ngữ* -literate grows each and every day...”²⁷ French-literate writers and journalists wrote and published in *quốc ngữ* because the market for *quốc ngữ* print was much larger. By the early 1930s the symbiotic relationship between the periodical and spread of *quốc ngữ* literacy noted above was recognized: “*Quốc ngữ* is the avenue through which we can pursue knowledge... We can find that knowledge in two places: the *quốc ngữ* periodical and literature, which provide news and information about our society and the world, and give us knowledge and experience.”²⁸

The growth of periodicals, writers, and journalists was also a response to unemployed

educated youth in search of a meaningful occupation. As the period wore on and more youths were educated in the colony's schools, the shortage of 'competent' manpower that existed at the end of the Great War became a surplus. The government could not afford to employ the youth they were educating. *Quốc ngữ* periodicals were a private industry, created by and for Vietnamese. Like teaching at private schools, many educated Vietnamese found meaningful, though often financially deficient, employment as writers. The young people involved with *quốc ngữ* periodicals during the 1920s and 1930s continually referred to being a writer/journalist as a 'free' profession. While the term they used, '*tự do*', might often be translated as 'liberal' in this context (i.e. 'liberal profession') that was not the meaning they sought to convey. Rather, it juxtaposed the 'freedom' of being a writer against state employment, which often necessitated humiliating hierarchical interactions with both French and Vietnamese bureaucrats. Periodicals were seen as spaces of power in which one could influence and entertain through talent and ability.

Renaissance

Quốc ngữ periodicals increased at first steadily and then dramatically during the interwar period. In 1920 there existed only five in the North and seven in the South. Five years later the numbers increased to eight in both regions. By 1930 there were twenty-five *quốc ngữ* periodicals in the North and sixteen in the South. Five years later the numbers were forty-five and thirty-one respectively.^{viii} Increased numbers of periodicals directly correlated to Vietnamese adoption of Western studies and the diffusion of *quốc ngữ* literacy analyzed in previous chapters. In 1924, 61,120 students attended primary school in the North. By 1933 there were 121,780 primary school students. *Quốc ngữ* literacy was by far the most important skill students learned in their one to three years in school. Vietnamese use of colonial schools was in many ways a continuation of pre-colonial norms, in part because perception of education (as a social, economic, political, and cultural commodity) remained largely constant even as knowledge and

^{viii} Note: There were no *quốc ngữ* periodicals published in *Trung kỳ* in 1920 or 1925. Nine periodicals existed in both 1930 and 1935 in the Center. The numbers cited here (for all three regions) represent periodicals that existed in those years only. Because most periodicals lasted for only a short time, I omitted those that published fewer than four issues.

learning were almost completely transformed. While the absolute number of students increased dramatically during the late colonial period, the composition of the student-body reflected the classical past: The vast majority of students received remedial training, while only a small percentage studied at the secondary or tertiary levels. However, unlike the elementary knowledge of Classical Chinese, the product of education in the past, the literacy provided by remedial education in the late colonial period permitted participation in the newly created public sphere.

The Vietnamese public sphere and the narrative content of periodicals were deeply influenced by the expanding group of the under-educated, but literate, especially from the early 1930s. The reason for this was relatively straightforward. The vast majority of *quốc ngữ* periodicals were private enterprises that did not receive any assistance from the state. As such, they were dependent on public patronage. From the early 1920s, the diffuse network of elementary and communal schools spread *quốc ngữ* literacy creating an environment in which periodicals could thrive. By the early 1930s, the under-educated literate represented by far the largest market for *quốc ngữ* print, a potential audience that was constantly expanding. The interplay of the trends examined here – Vietnamese adoption Western education, expanding *quốc ngữ* literacy, dynamic mobility, and the development of Vietnamese culture through the periodical – created the competitive, market-driven environment in which earning a profit, or at least breaking even, were the overriding goals of periodicals. Therefore, the content of the public sphere represented by *quốc ngữ* periodicals was shaped more by public demand than by the restrictions and controls of the state.

In the 1930s, Hà Nội was a cultural Mecca that drew thousands of young men and women from the North, the Center, and the South, in search of fortune, fame, and an urban excitement that fed off and reinforced itself. Those young people fueled the creation of hundreds of periodicals. Most barely survived a few months before fading away, usually due to poor management and lack of finances. Entrepreneurs with enough capital to endure an initial loss owned the most successful publishing houses and periodicals. Such individuals or groups often established publishing houses with their own printing presses, allowing them to manage the process from layout through distribution. They published some of the most popular journals of the period. For example, the *Tân Dân* house published *Tiểu thuyết thứ bảy* (*Saturday Novel*, 1934-1943), *Ích Hữu* (1936-1938), and *Phổ thông bán nguyệt san* (*Popular Literature*, 1936-

1944), Lê Cương published *Tin Văn* (*News*, 1935-1936), *Hà Nội báo* (*Hanoi*, 1936-1937), *Tiểu thuyết thứ năm* (*Thursday Novel*, 1937-1942), and *Tiểu thuyết tuần san* (*Weekly Novel*, 1937-1942), and *Đời nay* published *Phong hóa* (*Customs*, 1932-1936) and *Ngày nay* (*Contemporary*, 1935-1945). While journals on a variety of topics existed, by the mid 1930s it became apparent that the most successful were the so-called ‘literary journals’. The periodicals listed above were amongst the most popular of this genre. As indicated in the previous chapter, no blanket prohibition on direct socio-political content existed. Indeed, periodicals published on a wide range of subjects heretofore perceived as too politically sensitive for public commentary. However, the audience attracted by such content was significantly smaller than that for literature and sensationalized non-fiction. The Vietnamese public sphere was new. There was no history of a bourgeoisie engendering fairly diffuse public participation in socio-political issues through print in Việt Nam, as there might have been in some European countries. Those who did enjoy reading and thinking about such issues, the better educated and urban (or mobile), represented a small percentage of the total audience for *quốc ngữ* print. Self-censorship, at times by writers but more often by editors and publishers, did undoubtedly play a role. However, the main reason writers and journalists did not focus on overt political issues was because such stories did not sell papers. The ‘literary’ periodicals favored by the largest segment of the literate public (the under-educated masses) combined entertainment with social commentary, making diffuse a wide variety of politically-charged opinion.

The label ‘literary journal’ is too narrow to accurately reflect the content of those periodicals. While they did publish serialized novels, stories, and poetry, they also offered current events, diaristic travel-logs, tabloid-like news, and somewhat sensationalized exposés on contemporary Vietnamese society. This was not simply frivolous, lowbrow entertainment (although it certainly could be). Rather, much of the prose found in such journals addressed contemporary social, cultural, and political issues. This format was chosen both because it sold and because it had the potential to reach the largest number. Indeed, the ‘literary journal’ represented a significant space of Vietnamese power, which had a profound impact on late colonial and postcolonial Vietnamese society and culture.

Tân Dân and *Đời nay* published the most widely read journals and books from the early-mid 1930s to the Revolution. Examining these publishing houses offers a portrait of the

evolution of the public sphere and illustrates the type of content that drew readers. The journals and books these houses published in Hà Nội were read widely in all three predominately Vietnamese regions of the colony. *Tân Dân* and *Đời nay* represent two distinct publishing models. Vũ Đình Long, a private individual who depended on a relatively loose coterie of contributors, established *Tân Dân*. Publishers like Vũ Đình Long and Lê Cường jockeyed to attract the most popular writers and new talent. Most writers sold their work to publishing houses and received a percentage of its the value, which could be quite small. Only the most popular and prolific writers were able to make a decent living. Most lived from ‘story to story’ (i.e. paycheck to paycheck) and were constantly in debt. This was a result of both low wages and lifestyle choices, which were often filled with opium, liquor, and prostitutes. The *Tự lực văn đoàn* (*Independent Literary Group*, which established *Đời nay*) was partly a result of the business model noted above. Rather than pay a publisher to print and distribute their work, they bore the cost themselves, ensuring all profit went into the group’s coffers.^{ix}

Vũ Đình Long worked as an official in the Service of Education in *Tonkin* in Hà Đông province, just outside the municipality of Hà Nội. In the early 1920s he also wrote some of the first Western-style dramas in the Vietnamese language. Many of his plays were serialized in periodicals like *Southern Spirit* and *Hữu Thanh*. Some were also performed at the beautiful opera houses in Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Sài Gòn. However, writing was a part-time profession for the full-time official throughout the 1920s. Late in that decade, Vũ Đình Long opened a bookstore, *Tân Dân thư quán* (*Tân Dân bookstore*), in Hà Đông, which was operated by his wife, Nguyễn Thị Hội. Initially, they sold school supplies to students. In time, Vũ Đình Long became more involved and the bookstore began to publish cheap books. Partly as a result of his literary reputation, the inexpensive volumes became popular. Vũ Đình Long directed this attention toward literary contests open to the public: aspiring writers sent compositions to the store, which selected three and published them in a volume called *Tập truyện hay của các nhà văn trúng giải văn chương của nhà sách Tân Dân* (*Prize-winning Stories from the Tân Dân Bookstore*).²⁹ The publication of cheap *quốc ngữ* volumes and public to participation (generating free content) were generally novel in the late 1920s. The books sold very quickly.

^{ix} Note: This was the reason they adopted the name *Tự lực văn đoàn*. ‘Self-reliant’ is an improper translation because it does not contextualize the meaning of the words. ‘Independent’ is more accurate due to the fact that it connotes the meaning and *raison d’être* of the group, as I have defined it above.

At around the same time, the *Tân Dân Bookstore* also began publishing small volumes by writers who were known, but not famous.^x Buoyed by the success of their bookstore in Hà Đông, Vũ Đình Long purchased a three-story building on Hàng Bông Street, in the heart of Hà Nội's 'publishing district'^{xi}, and established the *Tân Dân Publishing House*. At the same time he bought the building in Hà Nội, Vũ Đình Long imported a *Marron-Rouchat* printing press from the metropole. Because of the competitive environment of the 1930s, the quality of printing and layout were paramount to success. Owning a printing press allowed a publisher to both dictate layout and ensure quality. Soon after moving the business to Hà Nội, Vũ Đình Long established his first periodical, *Saturday Novel*.

The primary purpose of *Saturday Novel* was to provide entertainment to readers.³⁰ The paper was to publish original novels and short stories as well as French and Chinese translations. The journal's varied content ensured there would be something of interest to readers from all walks of life, as Nguyễn Công Hoan, one of the paper's most successful contributors recalled.³¹ Vũ Đình Long's model was a beautifully printed, carefully edited journal that provided variegated entertainment and could be sold cheaply.³² Almost immediately, *Saturday Novel* was smashing success throughout the Vietnamese regions of Indochina. Its model was widely replicated in Hà Nội, Huế, and Sài Gòn. This success led *Tân Dân* to establish a several other journals, also primarily driven by prose. Of these, only *Popular Literature*, which almost exclusively published novels and short stories, met with success similar to that of *Saturday Novel*. While popular, the more diverse and sophisticated content of journals like *Ích Hữu* and *Tao Đàn* likely contributed to their relative brevity, because they were less accessible.

Periodicals like *Saturday Novel*, *Customs*, and *Contemporary* flourished because they appealed to the single largest audience for *quốc ngữ* print from the early 1930s – homebound literate girls and women. As Vũ Bằng, a contributor and deputy-editor of *Saturday Novel* said: “*Saturday Novel* made money off the ‘average’ reader... women and girls liked to read the sob

^x Tam Lang – Vũ Đình Chi is a good example.

^{xi} Many other publishing houses and printers were located on Hàng Bông Street, among them were: Imprimerie (Imp.) Les Publications Annamites, Imp. Phu Van Duong, Imp. Tonkinois, Imp. Thuy Ky, Imp.-Librairie Nhat Nam thu quan, Imp. Trung Bac tan van, Imp. Dong Phap, Imp. Long Quang, Imp. Tan Dan, Imp. Le Van Thanh, Imp. Au-Thinh, Imp. Dong Tay an quan, Imp. Bich Hanh, and Imp. Tan Tien.

stories – those that were moving, but also a bit sensational. Stories considered very ‘Western’ – those that were dry and not memorable, which one could not cry with, did not sell well.”³³ A small portion of this audience had been educated in colonial schools at any level. The remainder became *quốc ngữ*-literate ‘informally’ via relatives and friends. As I argued in Chapter 3, the spread of literacy was much more common than has heretofore been recognized. *Quốc ngữ* was both relatively easy and fast to learn. While the lives of girls and women in Việt Nam have always been onerous, even those in the vast and populated countryside likely had considerable ‘down time’ due to the rhythm of the seasons, if for no other reason (in the North there were one to two rice harvests per year during this epoch, in the South two, possibly three). Prior to the diffusion of *quốc ngữ* and print culture, women often spent this time reciting stories for purposes of both education and entertainment. Mothers spent hours passing oral traditions to their daughters, who spent hours memorizing epics in verse, proverbs, and allegories. Thus, a tradition of ‘literary entertainment’^{xii} was well established. The time to learn *quốc ngữ* was also available. The only major barriers to female literacy were the men in their lives (husbands, fathers, brothers and male relatives). I would postulate stories like Nguyễn Thị Minh’s (examined in Chapter 3) grew more common from the late 1920s. As more women became literate, they would have likely taken the process into their own hands, eliminating male-intermediaries altogether.

While social norms like those governing expectations of female literacy evolved, basic socio-cultural expectations for girls and women remained largely stagnant. The vast majority of girls in 1945 faced a future their mothers or grandmothers would have recognized – that of daughter – wife/daughter-in-law – mother. Those expectations remained constant partially due to the fact that there were few professions outside the market or family by which a woman could become economically independent (teaching might have been one of the few). These trends – the development of *quốc ngữ* and the periodical and increased literacy among both



Photograph 26. Illustration of three ‘modern’ women, *Loa* (2/7/1935)

^{xii} Again, I use the term ‘literary’ in the larger sense that encompasses prose that might not conventionally be considered ‘literature’.

urban and rural family-bound women – coincided in the success of ‘literary periodicals’, which drove much of the narrative that became the foundation of modern Vietnamese literature. *Quốc ngữ* prose and verse came to rest beside and then surpassed oral tradition as the primary source of entertainment for girls and women. The novels and short stories published in periodicals allowed them to explore new worlds and ways of being from within the confines of their homes. Thiều Sơn, the literary critic we met above, noted another reason popular literature appealed to girls and women: “Many people think of writers as priests to whom they can confess their sins. They think that writers understand the mysteries of their souls and that they can fix society’s problems. Most such readers are women who read with their hearts and scour books for the solutions to the problems in their lives.”³⁴ While (Mr.) Thiều Sơn’s analysis might seem a bit presumptuous and perhaps chauvinistic, it was not far off, as (Ms.) Bạch Liên explained: “Like many other youth, I loved reading the novels of the period. I read *Đời mưa gió* (*A time of wind and rain*) and *Gánh hàng hoa* (*The flower seller’s burden*) over and over again. I also read chivalrous novels and detective stories. Characters like Đoàn Hùng and Lê Hằng were strong and brave. They defended themselves and rescued their lovers. To the generation of girls coming of age at that time, they were ideal men. I often dreamt that I would meet a man who was noble, good at martial arts, and knew how to love like Đoàn Hùng.”³⁵

Women not only drove romantic tales, but also were chiefly responsible for some of the bawdier tales of the era. Exposés on the lives and activities of prostitutes, *cô đầu* (see definition above), and ‘*me tây*’ (women who married, co-habitated with, or had sexual relationships with Westerners) appeared repeatedly. Women were attracted to these often times intimate, first person narratives because they provided vicarious access to prohibited spaces. Exposés that romanticized prostitutes and *cô đầu* as women forsaken by destiny were also appealing. As the anti-thesis of Vietnamese womanhood, prostitutes and *me tây* were ostracised to the far reaches of society. This position gave them liberties most Vietnamese women, even those educated in Western schools, could scarcely imagine. They could talk differently, behave differently, and dress differently. One group in particular, *me tây* (as those closest to ‘the West’) became the cultural bridge whereby Western forms of physicality penetrated Vietnamese society. Prostitutes, *cô đầu*, and ‘dancing girls’ also adopted ‘modern’ ways of dress. Gradually, some of physical characteristics of *me tây*, such as make-up (powder, rouge, and lipstick), accessories (handbags and personal mirrors), and clothing (white pants) became accepted norms in society

at-large. The sometimes-lurid accounts were also appealing because they described the appearance and mannerisms of girls who represented the *avant-garde* of fashion and physicality. For example, the writer J. Leiba detailed the preparations of a ‘dancing girl’^{xiii} in the exposé *A girl in Hà Nội*: “... Holding a mirror, she opened the container of foundation and rubbed the creme over her face very carefully. Thúy then applied *Rouge palpitation Saint-Ange* to her cheekbones. The lipstick she used made her lips appear as fresh as a ripe apple. She tilted her head slightly to the left and wiped some excess foundation from the nape of her neck with an embroidered handkerchief. Thúy stood up, opened her closet, and selected her most beautiful blue Bombay tunic... She put on snow-white satin pants and slipped into a pair of high-heels. Thúy then walked around the room striking poses at the mirror in her hand and trying to smile...”³⁶

The periodicals of the *Independent Literary Group* likely garnered an even larger audience among girls and women than those of *Tân Dân*. In 1932, Nguyễn Xuân Mai and Nguyễn Hữu Ninh (the founder of the Thăng Long private school, one of the largest in Hà Nội), established a *quốc ngữ* periodical called *Customs*. As manager of the new journal, Nguyễn Hữu Ninh made a teacher at his school, Trần Khánh Giu (1896-1947, better known by his penname Khái Hưng), the paper’s editor. One of Khái Hưng’s Hà Nội friends, an ideological soul mate ten years his junior called Nguyễn Tường Tam (1906-1963, Nhất Linh), saw promise in *Customs*. Nhất Linh was one of the very few writers and journalists during the late colonial period to have studied in France. Upon returning to Hà Nội, he published a short-lived *quốc ngữ* journal by the name of *Cười* (*Humor*) in 1930. In the summer of 1932, Nhất Linh effectively assumed editorship of *Customs*. He transformed it into a satirical paper based on realistic literature and social commentary modeled on the French periodicals *Le Rire* and *Le Canard Enchaîné*. The first issue of *Customs* under its new guise was published in September 1932. At the time, the journal printed 3,000 copies per issue. Within a few months its readership had more than tripled – it was soon printing 10,000 copies per issue. In early 1933, Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng,

^{xiii} A ‘dancing girl’ (*gái nháy*) was a young woman who worked in one of the burgeoning dance halls in and around urban spaces like Hà Nội and Sài Gòn. Their primary duty was to entertain and dance with customers. They were also often sexually available to their clientele.

and a group of other young men (including Nhất Linh's two younger brothers), established the *Independent Literary Group*, which would provide the periodical's content.

In many ways, *Customs* provided subsequent periodicals a template of how to reach the under-educated. Readers were instantly attracted to the journal as a source of entertainment that made them both laugh and cry. Indeed, as Nguyễn Vỹ recalled: "... Everyone wanted a copy of the paper that 'sold like hotcakes'^{xiv}, because *Customs* published lots of illustrations and stories that made fun of 'Annamese customs' ... Everyone, from household servants to students and officials, bent over laughing at the paper's mischievous stories and the cartoons, like those that mocked Mr. Lý Toét Đình Dù (*an old official from the countryside who goes to the city and is stupefied before its 'modernity'*), mistook people from the countryside packed into a ferry like sardines for pigs and chickens, and poked fun of the blind through images of them falling into the sewer through a man-hole at the side of the road, etc..."³⁷ The *Independent Literary Group's* ability to speak the language of the masses separated it from the pack and engendered its success. The intellectual peers of the men who formed the *Group* were initially scornful of the journal and its content: "The first issues were most popular amongst women and children. Little by little... the drawings and satire of intellectuals, the middle class, and the upper class caused a stir and got those groups to buy *Customs* to see what it was all about."³⁸ The *Group* built on their success by establishing a second literary-based satirical periodical called *Contemporary* in 1935. Though often more sophisticated than *Customs*, *Contemporary* maintained the same accessibility. It was more colorful and contained lots of photographs and pictures. It also added more current events and articles on the political and social issues of the day, especially during the Popular Front period. Be this as it may, *Contemporary*, like *Customs*, *Saturday Novel*, and *Popular Literature* found success by appealing to the largest segments of the literate population.

In order to more fully understand the evolution of the Vietnamese-language public sphere, it is imperative to examine the content of some of the most successful journals of the period. Below I have summarized selected works published in the periodicals of the *Independent Literary Group* and *Tân Dân*. Some of the summaries are brief, while others go into greater depth. The works selected are indicative of a much larger swath of discourse. They were widely read and known – each novel and *reportage* summarized below was serialized in a *quốc ngữ* periodical and subsequently published as an individual volume (due to its popularity). This brief

^{xiv} Lit. "bán chạy như tôm tươi" ("sold like fresh shrimp").

review does not intend to represent a comprehensive analysis of the variegated and vibrant realm of *quốc ngữ* prose during the years 1932-1945 in any way. My goal is simply to acquaint the reader with some of this content in the hope of illustrating literary periodical's importance to both the public realm and socio-cultural transformation that took place in late colonial Việt Nam.

Literature and Pig Fat

... Most of the books published are novels because people are crazy about them. It's not just the average Joe with little education that loves novels; intellectuals and the upper classes also can't get enough. It's almost as though this passion for the novel were one of our inherent characteristics. – Thiếu Sơn³⁹

Nửa chừng xuân by Khải Hưng was one of the first novels serialized by the *Independent Literary Group in Customs*.⁴⁰ It is the story of the casualties that result from the collision of well-established Vietnamese socio-cultural norms and those born under French colonialism. Mai was a beautiful young girl from a family with a history of education. After her father, a former classical scholar by the name of Tú Lãm passed away, Mai decided to sell the family home to pay for her younger brother Huy's education. On the train from Hà Nội to her hometown Mai met Lộc, the son of one of her father's former students, who was immediately smitten with the beautiful young woman. When Lộc heard that Mai was unable to sell her family home, he offered to help support the young woman and her brother during the latter's studies in Hà Nội. Mai and Lộc subsequently fell in love and decided to marry.

Lộc's mother, bà Án, opposed her son's plan to wed the father-less girl, as such a pairing would provide no dowry. Instead Mrs. Án arranged for Lộc to marry the daughter of cụ Tuấn, which she considered a more advantageous match. Lộc refused and begged his mother to reconsider when Mai became pregnant. She would not. Lộc ignored his mother's wishes and secretly remained with Mai. When Mrs. Án discovered his deception, she was furious and set about sabotaging their love. Mrs. Án wrote a letter to her son pretending to be a lover Mai did not have. At the same time, she told Mai that Lộc was going to marry cụ Tuấn's daughter and that if she wanted to remain with Lộc, the only way she could do so was as his concubine. Heartbroken at 'discovering' Lộc cheated her and sent his mother to break the news, Mai left while Lộc was away. Lộc assumed Mai ran off with her lover and married cụ Tuấn's daughter.

Mai and Huy moved to a poor neighborhood, where she scraped enough money together to take care of her brother and infant. Though near destitution, Mai rebuffed the advances of multiple suitors and remained faithful to Lộc. When Lộc heard of Mai's fidelity he longed for her and regretted their parting. Lộc had become a rich and successful official, but was unhappy, in part because his wife could not bear children. When Mrs. Án discovered Mai bore her grandson, she asked her to be Lộc's concubine, but Mai refused. Lộc went to Mai and repeated his mother's request. Despite their mutual love, Mai refused to replace Lộc's wife as his childbearing concubine.

Nửa chừng xuân is a story of the heartbreak caused by the collision of two distinct ways of thinking and being. Mrs. Án was not necessarily the 'villain' of the story. She loved her son and wanted what was best for him. The problem was that she tried to ensure Lộc's prosperity and happiness in ways that were fast becoming redundant – the world in which Mrs. Án was living was no longer the world in which she grew up. That was not her fault, but was a product of the socio-cultural transition of the late colonial era. Nhất Linh explored a similar theme in his novel *Đoạn tuyệt*, serialized in *Customs* later that year.⁴¹ However, unlike Khái Hưng, Nhất Linh contrasted the pernicious evils of the 'traditional' Vietnamese social order with the 'light' of modernity and Westernization and pronounced the two mutually incompatible.

Loan, a Europeanized girl who went to the School of Pedagogy in Hà Nội, represented that light. Loan's parents arranged for her to marry Thân, a young man with a lower degree of education, as a means to repay a debt they owed Thân's family. Initially Loan, who was in love with Dũng, the adventurous son of a provincial official, refused to marry a man she did not know. However, the filial daughter later accepted her parent's wishes. Following an emotionless wedding, Loan went to live with her in-laws. Loan tried to be a good wife and daughter-in-law, which proved difficult in the face the poor treatment she endured at the hands of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

Soon after giving birth, Loan's son became seriously ill. She begged her mother-in-law, Mrs. Phán Lợi, to allow her to give Western medicine to the child. In spite of her daughter-in-law's pleas, Mrs. Phán Lợi took the advice of the local quack. As a consequence, the child died. When it was determined that Loan could not have any more children, Thân took a concubine, who promptly gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Loan was relegated to the status of a servant.

One evening, Thân got angry at Loan and threatened to beat her, much to Mrs. Phan Lợi's delight. As Thân went to attack Loan, he tripped, fell on the knife Loan was holding, and died. Loan was brought to trial for murdering her husband. While one of the magistrates at the provincial court tried to hold Loan accountable for her husband's death, the other exclaimed that Loan's only crime was going to a modern school and then returning to live with a family that followed the 'old ways'. Loan was subsequently freed. Ever filial, Loan returned to her parent's home to help her mother. When her mother died, Loan became a teacher and then a journalist. Meanwhile, Dũng, Loan's 'true love', had followed Loan's fate. At the story's end the stage was set for modernity and true love to triumph via their reunion.

Loan obeyed traditional socio-cultural norms by being a good daughter, daughter-in-law, and wife. However, Loan's happiness in a 'traditional' family was impossible because of her modern education. Nguyễn Công Hoan wrote a story called *Cô giáo Minh*, serialized in *Saturday Novel*, in response to *Đoạn tuyệt*.⁴² The protagonist, Minh, was a schoolteacher educated in colonial schools. Worried that her illness would leave Minh without a family, Minh's mother, arranged for her to marry Sanh, the son of a friend of her father's. While Minh was in love with Nhã (a friend's older brother), like Loan she acquiesced to her mother's wishes. Following their marriage, Minh went to live with Sanh's family. There, Minh was subjected to inhumane treatment at the hands of her mother-in-law (who did not even allow her to properly mourn her own mother, who passed away just before the marriage). Minh could not take the evil treatment and requested a transfer to another school so that she could leave her in-law's home. Her mother-in-law thwarted her plan by having Sanh sign papers effectively terminating Minh's employment as a schoolteacher. Thereafter, Minh was a prisoner in her husband's home where she was terribly abused by her in-laws. Minh decided to leave her husband and his family. However, when Nhã, her old love, arrived to pick her up, she decided to stay. Unlike Loan, who was wedded to her own, new way of doing things, Minh persevered by patiently allowing the new to eclipse the old where it was better, and let established customs remain where it was not. Little by little, her plan worked. She became a respected and then loved member of her husband's family.

Another of Nguyễn Công Hoan's novels, *Lá ngọc cành vàng*, was serialized in *Saturday Novel* in 1935 and then printed in *Popular Literature* in 1939.⁴³ Nga, like Loan and Minh, was a beautiful young girl with a Western education. While Nga spent most of the year in Hà Nội

attending classes, she returned to her hometown during a break for *Tết*. She found the countryside an endless bore. One day she decided to walk around the small town because there was nothing else to do. On her walk, she noticed a young student, whose mother was selling sticky rice and tea on the side of the road. The genuine happiness the poor young student seemed to enjoy despite his modest means surprised her. The young man fascinated Nga, because despite her urban lifestyle and wealth (her father was a provincial official), she was not happy. Following a couple encounters with the young man, Chi, Nga could not stop thinking of him. After repeated requests, Chi agreed to visit Nga's house. Her rich, but uncultured parents could not believe their daughter was fraternizing with a poor country boy and treated the young man horribly. Nga's love for a boy her parents did not approve of caused her to become ill. Nga confided her love for Chi to a favorite uncle, who advised her parents that the illness was psychological and could not be cured by traditional medicine. While Nga's parents treated her with traditional medicine, her condition improved because her uncle arranged secret meetings with Chi, which resulted in her pregnancy. Nga's parents refused to let her marry a poor man and demanded she abort the child. When Nga refused, her father called Chi to the house and threatened to shoot and kill him. Nga then drank the poisonous medicine, which caused her to become seriously ill. Meanwhile, Nga's father had Chi and his mother arrested. Nga voluntarily joined them in prison and was caned beside Chi and his mother. Shortly after, Nga died as a result of the beating and the medicine her parents made her drink. Despite causing her death, Nga's parents remained obstinate and thought it better to lose a daughter than gain a poor son-in-law.

With the possible exception of Nguyễn Công Hoan, Lê Văn Trương was the most prolific, and perhaps popular, writer from 1935 to 1945. His work most often appeared in the periodicals of *Tân Dân*, although he did publish in other journals as well. In January 1937, his novel *Cô Tư Thung* was published in the second issue of *Popular Literature*.⁴⁴ *Cô Tư Thung* was the story of an earnest young man, Đoàn Hữu, and the shallow, materialistic young woman he fell in love with, Tư Thung. The pair met through a rich Frenchman, who was Tư Thung's husband and Đoàn Hữu's employer. They soon embarked on a passionate affair and ran off to Phnom Penh to be together. When Tư Thung discovered that Đoàn Hữu was incapable of providing her the kind of lifestyle to which she had grown accustomed, she left him and married another wealthy man. Đoàn Hữu was heartbroken and resolved to win back his love by whatever

means necessary. His search for riches took him to France, where he remained faithful to Tu Thung, despite the love of a good French girl. Meanwhile, Tu Thung hopped between wealthy lovers in Sài Gòn. She eventually became wealthy in her own right and opened a high-class opium den. Đoàn Hữu returned to Sài Gòn to discover that Tu Thung was engaged to yet another rich man. He established a friendship with the young woman in the secret hope of rekindling their love. When Tu Thung's fiancé betrayed her by informing authorities of her illegal activities with opium she was arrested. While in prison, Tu Thung realized that she had only been living for money and knew nothing of love. She recognized that only Đoàn Hữu had ever truly loved her. Đoàn Hữu visited her everyday, took care of her, and waited for her to be released. After Tu Thung contracted tuberculosis, Đoàn Hữu nursed her back to health. In the end, Tu Thung realized she could not be with her true love, Đoàn Hữu, and bid him farewell.

Tôi là mẹ (I'm a mother) was another of Lê Văn Trương's novels published in *Popular Literature*.⁴⁵ *I'm a mother* was initially the story of a young man, Vĩnh, who returned to Việt Nam from his studies in France in the mid 1920s. Vĩnh had a strained relationship with his mother and father due to the fact that they gave his siblings preferential treatment. He made a vow to himself that when he had a family of his own, he would not do the same. Rather than return to the North, Vĩnh traveled to Cambodia and eventually settled in Siem Reap. Just after he arrived, Vĩnh met Nam Phát, a wealthy business owner, who was also from Nam Định province. Because of the connection they shared as two men from the same place in a foreign country, Nam Phát invited Vĩnh to stay with his family. Nam Phát's was the family that Vĩnh never knew. When Nam Phát's daughter Vân returned from her studies in Sài Gòn for the summer, she fell in love with the young man. Vĩnh remained clueless of Vân's love and considered her his younger sister. It was not until Vĩnh fell ill and Vân cared for him that he discovered her love. The two were soon married. While Vĩnh made a success of himself in Cambodia, he had always harbored dreams of returning to France. Despite Vân's objections, they moved to France and both established successful businesses. After five years and three sons, Vĩnh found himself in debt and decided the solution to his problems was opium smuggling. Following a couple of successful runs, robbers killed Vĩnh. Before he died, Vĩnh told Vân of his harsh upbringing and that she must always treat their three sons equally. Vân sold her business and house in France and returned to Battambang (Cambodia) where she opened a small business. Tùng, a young doctor who had treated one of her sons, fell in love with the widow, who

repeatedly denied his advances. While Vân was very touched by Tùng's love for her and her boys, she told him "I'm a mother whose sole duty is to fulfill my obligations as a mother."

Reportage, exposés on various aspects of contemporary Vietnamese society, were also commonly published in the 'literary' periodicals of the period. As noted above, exposés on prostitutes, *cô đầu*, *me tây*, and 'dancing girls' constantly ran in journals throughout the period. That this material was so common is indicative of the fact that it remained popular and continued to sell. There were of course many deeper issues under investigation in these exposés – the consequences of urbanization, the perceived degradation of Vietnamese society, the abhorrent manner Vietnamese often treated each other, the cheapening of art and culture, endemic venereal disease... However, it seems these bawdy stories of life's 'forbidden spaces' remained popular for the same reason there remains so much sex in all forms of media today – it sells.

Hà Nội Ban Đêm (Hà Nội by night), is a wonderful exposé on the complex world of prostitution in the Hà Nội of the 1930s by Nhất Linh's youngest brother, Thạch Lam.⁴⁶ The first person account takes us through various types and classes of prostitution, of which I will only summarize a couple. Thạch Lam began his serialized investigation with the 'modern', high-class call girl. He explained that these girls serviced a select clientele of rich and modern young men who gained entry into their rarefied space by introduction. After a few meetings, a young man was expected to 'declare' his love for the young woman and provide her financial assistance, eventually (presumably) in exchange for sexual favors. Educated in part at the French *Lycee* Albert Sarraut in Hà Nội, Thạch Lam found his way into this exclusive world through a friend who was a student at the School of Pedagogy and had fallen in love with one of the girls. Thạch Lam accompanied this friend to a large house just outside the municipality. Once inside, a small parade of Vietnamese girls in Western dress greeted him very politely by standing erect and bowing their heads slightly. Each girl was young, beautiful, and immaculately dressed in the latest fashions. Their teeth were also glistening white, a sign of modern sophistication.⁴⁷ A girl in a moss-green shirt invited Thạch Lam to sit in perfect French. Thạch Lam commented that all the girls were educated and polite, but they lived completely outside of socio-cultural norms (as the author put it, they were very "free"). One of the young women was playing billiards with Thạch Lam's friend. Another was playing a French tune on the mandolin. A third was sitting beside him sharing stories of the beaches at Đồ Sơn and Sầm Sơn.⁴⁸ Thạch Lam explained that

the girls “worked for”, ‘Mrs. R.’, a portly woman of around forty who had married well and been widowed. It was Mrs. R. who had trained and educated the girls – they were fluent French speakers, could play French and Vietnamese instruments, converse on a wide variety of topics, and even dance – to appeal to the colony’s young, Western educated clientele just coming of age. Thạch Lam went on to explain that women of this caliber had recently become quite popular and that there were between two and three hundred such houses in the city.

At the other end of the spectrum, Thạch Lam investigated the women who populated Hà Nội’s legal brothels. These documented prostitutes were a tiny minority of sex workers in the Hà Nội of the 1930s. The fact that the state (municipal government) documented them as ‘prostitutes’ virtually relegated them to a life of prostitution and to these houses, the only places prostitution was legal. Thạch Lam described these women as a class in and of themselves, which was very different from the majority of (undocumented – ‘illegal’) prostitutes in Hà Nội.⁴⁹ While he showed sympathy for the women in his writing, and exhorted others to do the same, he used raw, vivid language to describe them: “Legal prostitutes have a special look that cannot be mistaken. Though these women often dress formally and speak very politely, the observant will recognize their station immediately. They always have dark circles around their sluggish eyes which seem devoid of spirit... They have a peculiar odor. Their sweat and breath is acrid, probably because they have to endure injections that contain arsenic and mercury...”⁵⁰ This type of description certainly caused some to cast aside their copy of *Customs*. However, graphic language on such topics became increasingly common and attractive, in part because of its sensational repugnance. Many similar exposés on the lives and travails of various types of prostitutes filled news print well into the 1940s (and beyond). One of the most well known was Vũ Trọng Phụng’s 1937 study, which detailed the world of prostitution in Hà Nội and lifted the veil on the clinic where legal prostitutes were documented and treated.

Another very popular exposé was Nguyễn Đình Lạp’s *Thanh niên truy lạc (Debauched Youth)*, which was serialized in *Tân Dân*’s periodical *Ích hữu* in 1937 before being published as an individual volume.⁵¹ The account opened in a classroom with a young man hitting his teacher who had attempted to verbally discipline him. Nguyễn Đình Lạp then followed the adventures of that particular youth, named Kinh, to a seedy guesthouse where he and a friend were trying to determine whether the prostitute they were with had venereal disease. One said to the other: “I’ve hear that if she screams when you hit her really hard on the hand, then she has VD.”⁵²

Following a scene in which the two young men verbally and physically abused the young woman, Nguyễn Đình Lạp pronounced Kinh a more or less an average youth – like most other people of his (later revolutionary) generation, all he cared about was money, material possessions, and himself.⁵³

Later, the audience was invited into a dance club in the Kham Thiên District, just outside the municipality. Nguyễn Đình Lạp painted the scene: “A dancing hall painted light green, illuminated by five or six blue electric lights. Tens of couples hold each other tight as they sway



Photograph 27. *Cô đầu*, Kham Thiên District, 1930s.

to the music.”⁵⁴ The reader is transported into a private room where four young men were seated with three or four young women from the club. The young men and women drank heavily, played drinking games, and gambled for three or so hours. Amidst the drinking, touching, and groping, an opium pipe appeared, of which they all partook.

There followed something of an orgy. The young men paid the young women \$800 (a

very large sum) and then (violently) robbed the girls of the money before taking their leave of the establishment.⁵⁵

In the first few tales of his generation’s ‘debauchery’, it is not clear whether the author was present or had heard the tales he penned vicariously. He later included himself in many of the narratives.^{xv} In one, a friend joined him at one of the many *cô đầu* houses in Kham Thiên. The friend was ecstatic because his wife just left the city for her hometown, meaning he was free to spend all night “camping” at the *cô đầu* house (which meant drinking, smoking opium, sleeping with one of the girls, and perhaps taking part in a performance or two). At the end of the night, the friend realized that he did not have money to pay the girls (quite common, actually). He and his temporary paramour jumped into a Ford V (which we are told had room

^{xv} Note: We know from Bạch Liên, Nguyễn Đình Lạp’s wife, that he did have such adventures (while she had many sleepless nights, or weeks wondering where her husband was, most often with Nguyễn Tuân). We also have the dedicated efforts of Mrs. Bạch Liên to thank access to her husband’s work, much of which was lost or misplaced during the 30 years of conflict after the Revolution. In the 1980s and 1990s, Mrs. Bạch Liên systematically searched for and discovered Nguyễn Đình Lạp’s ‘lost’ manuscripts.

enough for eight) and made for Nam Định to get money, presumably from his parents. They arrived back on the border of the municipality that same evening, an ultra-modern feat of incredible mobility (almost like going to the moon).

On the Road Again

The brief overview above illustrates two of the most common types of literature that drove popular periodicals. My contention is not that soap opera-like literature and sensational exposés on society's underbelly represented the totality of public discourse or its apex. However, I do believe that the periodicals that contained such prose were some of the most powerful tools of socio-cultural transformation and creation during the late colonial period. The institutionalization of *quốc ngữ* instruction in elementary schools along with its development in periodicals rendered *quốc ngữ* a kind of 'lingua franca', effectively eliminating the possibility of linguistic dislocation from one region to another. In other words, *quốc ngữ* was a language of mutual intelligibility and utility across Vietnamese space. It was this mutual intelligibility, in unison with colonial infrastructure and market demand that made diffuse periodicals. It was through newspapers and journals – inexpensive print – that Western education and thought filtered through the minds of those educated in the colony's schools and penetrated society at large. Homogenous and heterogeneous notions of the past and the present seeped into Vietnamese society through popular literary periodicals, which could be found in every corner of the colony.

Periodicals based on various types of literature were not dependent on time, as were journals that concentrated on current events. This was one reason Vũ Đình Long favored literary periodicals. Serialized novels, short stories, poetry, and exposés could be organized into an edition and printed well before a paper's date of publication. This allowed Vũ Đình Long to publish the same edition all over Indochina on the same day with no delay. For example, an edition of *Saturday Novel* dated the 15th of the month would be sent to the Center and the South on the 10th. It would be sent to provinces in the North on the 12th. On the afternoon of the 14th, *Tân Dân* would release the paper in Hà Nội.⁵⁶ Many periodicals, like *Saturday Novel*, were sold in all three regions. Vũ Đình Long believed his writers should produce content that appealed to

audiences in both urban and rural areas of all three regions. Indeed, Vũ Bằng recalled that both *Saturday Novel* and *Popular Literature* sold better in the South than they did in the North.⁵⁷

Most of the popular periodicals published in Hà Nội were sent to all regions. Likewise, those published in Sài Gòn were sent to the Center and the North. In fact, *quốc ngữ* periodicals courted customers throughout the predominately rural colony. Journals often employed agents to distribute their papers. Once a periodical was printed, it was sent to vendors in both urban and rural areas. Every three months, vendors determined how many papers they had received and how many they sold in the previous quarter. A periodical calibrated the number of copies to be printed and their distribution based on those numbers. A successful periodical obviously increased the number of issues printed. Not wanting to accrue greater debt, the manager of a failing periodical often shuttered the journal and halted printing. Nguyễn Công Hoan outlined a second option for such a newspaperman – to ask the “idiot son of a rich family” to take over the journal by paying its debts, a scheme apparently so common he wrote a short story about it.⁵⁸ Customers could also subscribe to a distant journal through the post by money order (which were available at the diffuse branches of the Indochinese Post Office). They would be sent the periodical for the duration of their subscription.⁵⁹

Periodicals were sent through the post throughout the interwar period. The same networks of road and rail that transported students, and then writers, all over the colony also shipped journals. Periodicals enjoyed special status amongst printed matter because they could be sent through the colony’s efficient network of post offices. Books, on the other hand, could not be shipped en mass through the post. Each issue of Vũ Đình Long’s journal *Popular Literature* contained an entire novel or volume of short stories. As Nguyễn Công Hoan recalled, publishing what was effectively a book as a ‘periodical’ allowed Vũ Đình Long to keep prices low and distribute it through the post office, due to the fact that the paper used for printing periodicals was less expensive than that used for books. It was in this way that Vũ Đình Long was able to undercut the competition, especially *Đời nay*, which complained that *Popular Literature* was not a periodical and thus should not be printed on the same paper as were journals (paper with *lignes d’eau*) and sent through the post office.⁶⁰ In response, Vũ Đình Long inserted an exposé or article on literature into each edition of *Popular Literature* to make it look less like a book.⁶¹

The mobility of print impacted and enriched the lives of many. People writing in and about distant and unfamiliar places profoundly influenced the adolescence of Bạch Vân, whom we have met throughout this work numerous times (perhaps most memorably as she took the elementary school examination in Chapter 1). While growing up in Bình Định province in the Center in the 1920s, Bạch Vân recalled journals from both the North and the South were sent to her father: “My father bought periodicals from both the North and the South. He got Phạm Quỳnh’s *Southern Spirit* and Tản Đà’s *Hữu Thanh* as well as dailies such as *The News of the Center and the North* and *The News of the South*...”⁶² It was through such journals that Bạch Vân’s father taught her to read *quốc ngữ* before she set foot in a classroom. At times, reading those journals left Bạch Vân so captivated that she did not realize her skin was darkening^{xvi} under the hot sun.⁶³ When her family moved to Sài Gòn in the 1930s, Bạch Vân was able to get her hands on the work of the most popular authors of the day, published in periodicals like *Saturday Novel* and *Customs*: “...For a long time I nursed dreams of being able to write like the guys in the *Independent Literary Group*. I was a faithful reader of their journals and books. I also did not miss anything written by Nguyễn Công Hoan, Thanh Châu, Lê Văn Trương or any of the *Saturday Novel* group. All those writers in the North profoundly influenced me. Writers like Ngô Tất Tố, Chu Thiên, Tản Đà, and Thế Lữ were also influential. Oh! I read them all!”⁶⁴ Bạch Vân was also a writer and journalist.^{xvii} She and countless other budding writers in Sài Gòn and Cần Thơ, Qui Nhơn and Huế, Lạng Sơn and Nam Định were deeply influenced by what they read in periodicals published in both Hà Nội and Sài Gòn.

The ease with which periodicals moved around the colony did not lessen their value. Periodicals were cherished objects, which were kept, maintained, and shared. There was no concept of disposable culture in Việt Nam during the early 20th century. Despite the fact that periodicals were printed on flimsy paper, they were never considered disposable and were treasured as volumes copied by hand or printed by woodblocks had been in the past. Bạch Vân recalled the meticulous care she and her mother took of her father’s prized collection: “My father bought so many periodicals and books that they filled all our shelves and cabinets. My mother

^{xvi} Note: This humorous exclamation makes light of the fact Vietnamese perceive dark skin, or a ‘tan’, as unattractive partly because it connotes a low socio-economic status (one that has to work in the fields): She must have really enjoyed reading those journals, because she did not even care that her skin was darkening.

^{xvii} Note: Bạch Vân worked for the periodical *Tân Thời* published in Sài Gòn. Her husband was the editor.

and I were responsible for caring for those books and journals. We did not let a single weevil gnaw at them.”⁶⁵ Bạch Vân’s father cutout each part of serialized novels and grouped them together in one book.⁶⁶ Huy Cận recalled similar behavior at the *Quốc Học* in Huế in the mid 1930s. His friend Ninh kept a small book for cutouts of his favorite poetry and serialized novels.⁶⁷ Periodicals were more than entertainment or knowledge, they engendered an intimacy that erased distance and time: “... I fell in love with poetry after reading *Giọt lệ thu* by the poetess Trương Phố in *Southern Spirit*. In the introduction, Phạm Quỳnh called her ‘Lady Trương Phố’. He said she had graduated from the School of Pedagogy in Hà Nội and was teaching at a primary school in the Mộ Đức district of Quảng Ngãi province. I was an 11-year-old primary school student in the same province – she could have been my teacher! As a pupil in the countryside of the Center, I found my ability to read the poetry of a ‘Lady’ printed in *Southern Spirit* of Hà Nội incredible. It was as if I was reading the verse of a modern-day Huyện Thanh Quan or Đoàn Thị Điểm, the famous female poets of yesteryear I read about in school.”⁶⁸ This closeness was something that was shared. One edition might change hands countless times, meeting myriad eyes *and* ears. Another of Huy Cận’s *Quốc Học* friends cut articles from *Ngô Báo* and *Customs* (both sent from Hà Nội to Huế), pasted them in a big notebook, and read them to his friends.⁶⁹ Similarly, Bạch Vân read her illiterate mother the novels her husband clipped and collected, while the elder woman was immersed in household duties.⁷⁰

The socio-cultural impact of periodicals was greatly enhanced by the way people cared for and used them. Periodicals were not simply tools of entertainment and expression for the urban elite. They penetrated all areas of the colony, where their tales in print were eagerly devoured in written and oral form. Literary periodicals presented Vietnamese a way to see themselves, their space, and their place in the world. Thiều Sơn said as much in 1933 while commenting on the work of the popular southern novelist (and official) Hồ Biểu Chánh^{xviii}: “... We (*readers*) see the people, the author, and ourselves in his novels. We see our country – the abundant rice fields, the forests, and the mountains. We hear the noise and bustle of the city and feel the quiet coolness of the countryside. We are beside the story’s characters as they see the moon rise and feel the cool wind blow over the landscapes of our country. The character’s behavior, mannerisms, and actions reflect the customs and ethics of Annamese society. Because

^{xviii} Note: His real name was Hồ Văn Trung. He was a district official in the Mekong Delta.

of this, we know that the author is a fellow countryman and that his literary labors are of great use to both our intellect and our sentiment.”⁷¹ The profundity of this should not be underestimated. No socio-cultural force with power and influence analogous to the literary periodical had ever existed in what once was and would become again a predominately *Kinh* (Vietnamese) state running North-South along the eastern lateral of the Indochinese peninsula. Periodicals offered Vietnamese visions of themselves, their society, and their space in a homogenous manner (cheap *quốc ngữ* print) made diffuse throughout the colony at a key historical moment of rupture and re-imagination.

It is beyond the scope of this work to due justice to the myriad ways journals and the literature they contained impacted and shaped both late colonial and postcolonial Vietnamese culture and society. The primary purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how both those journals and their impact became possible. Be this as it may, a few brief illustrations might acquaint the reader with their importance. Stories and exposés like those examined above institutionalized stereotypical character-types in the Vietnamese imagination, many of which had long pre-colonial roots. The ‘evil mother-in-law’ is an excellent example. The most significant event in a woman’s life, below childbearing, was getting married and moving into her husband’s home. The unknown mother-in-law, whose familial position gave her power over her new daughter-in-law, made this time of change even more frightening. While many mothers-in-law undoubtedly treated their daughters-in-law well (Mrs. Án in *Nửa chừng xuân* is actually a good example – while she treated Mai poorly, she was kind to Lộc’s wife), those who mistreated their son’s wives made for much better stories. The cruel Mrs. Phán Lợi in *Đoạn tuyệt*, who intimidated her son and treated her daughter-in-law like a slave, became much more common in print and in imagination.

Another of Mrs. Phán Lợi’s characteristics was replete throughout the literature of the period, that of the person from the countryside completely ignorant of Western/modern/urban ‘enlightenment’. In Mrs. Phán Lợi’s case, her intransigent ignorance carried tragic consequences in the death of her grandson (who she refused to treat with Western medicine because she was “so scared” of it). In other cases, the stereotype of the ignorant, unworldly country-bumpkin was much more comical, particularly when transplanting that character to the city. Lý Toét, a cartoon character serialized in *Customs* and *Contemporary*, is perhaps the best-known example of this juxtaposition. In the cartoons, Lý Toét (an arrogant and self-assured village official), comically

misunderstands and/or misinterprets various forms of modernity, especially in urban settings. While readers/seers were fully aware of his ignorance, backwardness, and ‘traditional’-mindedness (and thus ‘in on’ the joke), Lý Toét was completely oblivious of his buffoonery. Such images became so common that they were enshrined in language. The term ‘*nhà quê*’ meaning ‘one from the countryside (negative connotation); a hick’ (*provincial*) was (and still is) considered an insult (just below calling someone a ‘dog’, but not approaching the level of insulting one’s mother). The term was so prevalent and popular during the late colonial period that the French borrowed it – ‘*le nhaque*’.^{xix}

The image of the countryside and its people (more than 90% of the Vietnamese population throughout the era) as backward and ignorant owed much to writers’ and journalists’ French education in colonial schools and societal changes. Urbanization exponentially grew the previously modest regional political and economic centers of Hà Nội and Sài Gòn. This growth



Photograph 28. A view of the countryside.

was accompanied by the socio-cultural dynamism and vice common to modern urban spaces. Periodicals were replete with diametrically opposed and contradictory visions of (new) urban and (changing) rural landscapes, which were used to define both space and identity. The city could be the seat of sophistication, ‘modernity’

(electricity, science, technology, sanitation, *Tây*/French), and knowledge. It was the center of culture, excitement and independence. Indeed, as Nguyễn Tuân, perhaps the most brilliant of modern Vietnamese writers, put it: “... Oh, Hà Nội is beautiful. It is the place intellectuals and the youth congregate. It is the origin of literature and the place where we can develop and display our individuality. Hà Nội is the place where we can live by the dictates of our own opinions and not worry about what the neighbors think, like we have to everywhere else...”⁷²

^{xix} Note: The French pronunciation of this word is drastically different from the Vietnamese. In a comical attempt to demonstrate sophistication, some Vietnamese adopted the French pronunciation. This was comical partly because they often did so poorly and unintelligibly.

Against this backdrop was the backward, dirty countryside, which convention and tradition shackled to an imaginary past of darkness. The city could also be a stifling place that was crowded and impersonal – a home to no one, but a residence to many. Nguyễn Tuân felt this peril, and the dream of the countryside with the same acuteness with which he loved the city and its illuminated nights: “Living in the middle of the city, where the houses are piled one on top of another, one can only see a small patch of the sky... This afternoon, I stood outside beneath the clouds and as the wind touched my face, I imagined that I was standing in the middle of a large field. The wind was not blowing too hard and for a moment there was silence – the only thing I could hear was the air mingling with itself...”⁷³ While the dream of rural space became more pronounced toward the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s, images of the idyllic countryside were quite common throughout the late colonial period. For Khái Hưng, and many others, the countryside was the warm embrace of home and the hearth of Vietnamese culture and identity. In his novel *Hồn bướm mơ tiên* (serialized in *Customs*) a group of country girls, fresh from the rice fields, welcome a city-student back home with song: “My dear traveling down the highway, Stop for a moment and let me recite a line or two. Where are you going in such a hurry? My sister is taking care of the work at home.”^{74xx} When the girls finished they all laughed and clapped. The same hues with which graduates of the School of Art in Hà Nội represented a view of the Vietnamese countryside somewhere between the Red River Delta and the south of France, were also used by authors like Khái Hưng: “To the southeast, the setting sun bathes a few fruit tree-covered hills in shades of orange. Pink clouds dance in the light blue sky. A white crane emerges from the ripe rice fields, a sea of golden brown, and flies off to the west. His great wings alternate between eclipsing and revealing the sun. Closer to the village, a mass of trees grows through the bricks of a ruin. In the lane, a parade of boys singing atop water-buffalo makes its way home.”⁷⁵

Periodicals not only defined portraits of amorphous locations like the city and the countryside in popular perception, they also gave meaning to new or existing locations. Đồ Sơn, a beach just south of Hải Phòng, is a perfect example. It became known and understood in the Vietnamese imagination through Hoàng Ngọc Phách’s novel *Tố Tâm* (published in 1925). In the novel, Đạm Thủy, his ill-fated Juliet (*Tố Tâm*), and her younger brother travel from Hà Nội to

^{xx} Note: This flirtatious poem implies that if the young man stops he will enjoy the company of the young woman.

the coast for some sea air. The scene is something one might imagine in the Miami or Marseilles of the 1920s: “The immense sea ripples with waves. The blue of the sea mingles with the white of the foam as the waves rush to the shore. Yellow, red, white, and blue shirts flutter like butterflies on the long beach. Children shouting and waves crashing on the sand are as noisy as a crowded market. The daughters of the rich and famous show some thigh as they giggle and joke with one another, just like Western girls.”⁷⁶ The colors and the girls and the sand defined that *Vietnamese* space. For a generation or more, youth dreamed of taking that same train from Hà Nội to Hải Phòng and then going south to the beach.

Tố Tâm also created an identity for *Cổ ngư Street*, which ran along the border of the municipality of Hà Nội during the late colonial period, separating the smaller Trúc Bạch Lake (in Hà Nội) from the much larger West Lake (in Hà Đông province). *Tố Tâm* told *Đạm Thủy* goodbye for the last time on that street between the lakes. The tragic and romantic scene was so well known that it became cliché. In his exposé *Com thầy, com cô*, *Vũ Trọng Phụng* made light of the romantic innocence with which *Tố Tâm* and *Đạm Thủy* strolled down *Cổ ngư Street* by juxtaposing it with his own ‘romantic’ encounter with ‘*Đũi*’, a girl from the countryside and one-time household servant who dreamt of becoming a *cô đầu*.⁷⁷ About a decade ago, I read an article by *Võ Nguyên Giáp* in which he recounted his final goodbye with his young wife, *Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái*, in the late 1930s. General *Giáp*’s recollection literally read like a scene from a revolutionary *Tố Tâm*: The two strolled along the promenade by the lakes as he explained to her that he was going into hiding to carry out anti-colonial activities. He bid her farewell along that street, never to see her again.^{xxi}



Photograph 29. Advertisement for rail service between Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, 1930s.

This duration of memory is indicative of how periodicals were used. The *Independent Literary Group* perceived the printed word’s power to transport the reader: “... we are going to take you from the forest to the sea and from the city to the countryside to witness every facet of

^{xxi} Note: *Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái* was later arrested and sent to Hà Nội’s central prison where she contracted typhus, which she succumbed to in 1944.

modern society. We will report the truth and take lots of pictures to make our articles more clear. That way, you can travel all over without leaving home.”⁷⁸ Widely read periodicals did indeed transport readers and listeners around Vietnamese space. Traversing them delineated boundaries. Exposés on the Northern and Central highlands as well as Cambodia, and Laos verified and validated common Vietnamese identity vis-a-vis the proximate ‘other’. They also sculpted the mirrors with which society perceived itself, its past, and present, and possible futures. Like the memories of the Great General, the knowledge and creativity transmitted through the literature and periodicals of the era have enjoyed longevity much greater than that of the doctrine and ideology he left his young bride on that tragic and romantic road to pursue.

- ¹ McHale, Shawn. *Print and Power*, p. 19.
- ² Huỳnh Văn Tông. *Báo chí Việt Nam từ khởi thủy đến 1945*, p. 131.
- ³ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 56.
- ⁴ *Đông dương tạp chí*, no. 121, 1915. See Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 108.
- ⁵ Thiều Sơn, *Báo giới và văn học quốc ngữ* (Bài diễn thuyết đọc ở Hội Nam kì Khuyến học Sài Gòn, 19 July 1933). In *Nghệ thuật và nhân sinh*, p. 95. Meaning that they turned from Classical Chinese to *quốc ngữ*.
- ⁶ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 59.
- ⁷ For example: *Khổng Tử gia ngữ* and *Khổng Tử tập ngữ*.
- ⁸ Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 133.
- ⁹ *ibid.* p. 135.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 280. For example, he addressed the debate as to whether Nguyễn Công Trữ or one of the Phan Huy clan was actually responsible for translating *Tỳ bà hành* from Classical Chinese into *Nôm* (see p. 286-288). Most believed Nguyễn Công Trữ composed the translation.
- ¹¹ *ibid.* p. 119-120.
- ¹² This juxtaposition is particularly apt and darkly ironic because both Curie and Quỳnh met their demise at least partially as a result of their professional excellence.
- ¹³ *Tục ngữ cao dao*. See Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 102.
- ¹⁴ Questions like these were addressed in articles called *Khảo-luận về ...*. The over-arching questions cited above were supplemented with other questions. For example, “What is a political party?” was followed by “... *địa vị, tính cách của chính đảng thế nào; chính đảng ở các nước thành lập duyên cách ra làm sao?...*” (in *Nam Phong* 102, Jan-Feb. 1926, p. 5)
- ¹⁵ Phạm Quỳnh. “Khảo về tiểu thuyết” in *Nam Phong*, no. 43, Jan. 1921.
- ¹⁶ Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 36-37. This represents a partial list of the literature Nguyễn Văn Vinh translated from French to Vietnamese. Most of Vinh’s translations were printed in *Đông dương tạp chí* from 1913-1917 prior to being published as volumes by the *Trung Bắc tân văn* publishing house during the period 1928-1936.
- ¹⁷ See for example *The bourgeois gentleman*, which Woodside cited in *Community and Revolution*.
- ¹⁸ Thiều Sơn. *Phê bình và cáo luận*. Hà Nội, 1933. In *Nghệ thuật và nhân sinh*, p. 51.
- ¹⁹ Nguyễn Văn Vinh quoted in *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 49.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Nhà văn hiện đại (tập 1)*, p. 49.
- ²¹ *ibid.* p. 50-52.
- ²² Nguyễn Bá Học. “Chuyện cô Chiêu Nhi” in *Nam Phong* no. 43, Jan. 1921.
- ²³ Nguyễn Bá Học, *Dư sinh lịch hiểm ký*, in *Nam Phong* no. 35, May 1920.
- ²⁴ Phạm Duy Tồn, “Sống chết mặc bay!”, in *Nam Phong* no. 18, Dec. 1918.
- ²⁵ For an interesting discussion on social classes in Vietnamese society during the colonial period, see Vũ Ngọc Khánh, *Tự truyện: Cửa riêng không khép*, p. 326-336.
- ²⁶ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến*, p. 546 and 522-523.
- ²⁷ Thiều Sơn, *Báo giới và văn học quốc ngữ* (Bài diễn thuyết đọc ở Hội Nam kì Khuyến học Sài Gòn, 19 July 1933), p. 110.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*
- ²⁹ See: Vũ Bằng. *Mười bốn gương mặt nhà văn đồng nghiệp*, p. 1-7. Also see Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 170-200 for information on Tân Dân and Vũ Đình Long.
- ³⁰ To allow readers to “purchase pleasure”, lit. *mua vui*. See Vũ Bằng. *Mười bốn gương mặt nhà văn đồng nghiệp*, p. 100.
- ³¹ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 178-179.
- ³² Vũ Bằng. *Mười bốn gương mặt nhà văn đồng nghiệp*, p. 103.
- ³³ *ibid.* p. 218. Also see Vũ Bằng. *Bốn mươi năm nói láo*, p. 151.
- ³⁴ *Câu chuyện văn học*, Thiều Sơn, 1943, p. 158-159.
- ³⁵ Bạch Liên. *Làm vợ một nhà văn (hồi kí của bà Bạch Liên)* in *Nguyễn Đình Lạp, Tác phẩm*, p. 882.
- ³⁶ J. Leiba. “Một thiếu nữ ở Hà Thành (Đời thực của một cô gái sống một mình giữa cánh phồn hoa gió bụi)” in *Ích Hữu*, no. 8, Oct. 1936.
- ³⁷ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến*, p. 152.
- ³⁸ *ibid.*
- ³⁹ Thiều Sơn. *Phê bình và cáo luận*, p. 87.
- ⁴⁰ Khải Hưng. *Nửa chừng xuân. Phong hóa*, 1933. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đời Nay, 1934.
- ⁴¹ Nhất Linh. *Đoạn tuyệt*. In *Phóng hóa*, 1934. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đời Nay, 1935.

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- ⁴² Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Cô giáo Minh*. Hà Nội, Nhà xuất bản Tân Dân, 1936.
- ⁴³ Nguyễn Công Hoan. “Lá ngọc cành vàng” in *Phổ thông bán nguyệt san*, no. 34, 1 May 1939.
- ⁴⁴ Lê Văn Trương. “Cô Tư Thung” in *Phổ thông bán nguyệt san*, no. 2, 1 Jan. 1937.
- ⁴⁵ Lê Văn Trương. “Tôi là mẹ” in *Phổ thông bán nguyệt san*, no. 43 and 44, 16 Sept. 1939 và 1 Oct. 1939.
- ⁴⁶ Thạch Lam. “Hà Nội ban đêm” in *Phong hóa*, số 44, 50-55, 59 1933 in *Trẻ con lấy vợ*.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.* p. 24-25.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ See *ibid.* p. 33, for example.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 34
- ⁵¹ Nguyễn Đình Lạp, *Thanh niên truy lạc* (in *Ích hữu*, from no. 94, 8 Dec. 1937) in *Ngoại ô*.
- ⁵² *ibid.* p. 9
- ⁵³ *ibid.* p. 13
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 18.
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 35-39.
- ⁵⁶ Vũ Bằng. *Mười bốn gương mặt nhà văn đồng nghiệp*, p. 104.
- ⁵⁷ *ibid.* p. 110.
- ⁵⁸ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời viết văn của tôi*, p. 170. Apparently this was somewhat common. Nguyễn Công Hoan even wrote a short story about such an incident titled “Tôi chủ báo, anh chủ báo, nó chủ báo”.
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 161. This was ideally the outcome. If a periodical closed, customers often experienced difficulty retrieving their money. It was also common for customers to have to go into the nearest town or urban center to receive their subscription at the Post Office.
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 197.
- ⁶¹ Vũ Bằng. *Mười bốn gương mặt nhà văn đồng nghiệp*, p. 105.
- ⁶² Tùng Long - Lê Thị Bạch Vân. *Hồi ký Bà Tùng Long*, p. 30.
- ⁶³ *ibid.* p. 26.
- ⁶⁴ *ibid.* p. 77-78.
- ⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 26.
- ⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 30.
- ⁶⁷ Huy Cận. *Hồi ký song đôi: Tình bạn trong sáng*, p. 212.
- ⁶⁸ Nguyễn Vỹ. *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến*, p. 344.
- ⁶⁹ Huy Cận. *Hồi ký song đôi: Tình bạn trong sáng*, p. 212.
- ⁷⁰ Tùng Long - Lê Thị Bạch Vân. *Hồi ký Bà Tùng Long*, p. 27.
- ⁷¹ Thiều Sơn. *Phê bình và cáo luận*, p. 56.
- ⁷² Nguyễn Tuân. “Thế là mất một nơi nghỉ mát” in *Trung bắc tân văn*, 2 June 1940. In Nguyễn Tuân. *Toàn tập* (tập 2), p. 200.
- ⁷³ Nguyễn Tuân. “Những ngày nhạt nhẽo” in *Tiểu thuyết thứ bảy*, no. 239, 24 Dec. 1938. In Nguyễn Tuân. *Toàn tập* (tập 1), p. 404.
- ⁷⁴ Khải Hưng. *Hồn bướm mơ tiên*, p. 8.
- ⁷⁵ *ibid.* p. 38
- ⁷⁶ Hoàng Ngọc Phách. *Tố Tâm*, p. 64.
- ⁷⁷ See: Vũ Trọng Phụng. “Com thầy com cô” in *Hà Nội báo*, no. 12-18, March-May, 1936.
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