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Vietnamese New Women and the Fashioning of Modernity

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In September 1935 a minor scandal erupted in the Saigon area press as a result of a seemingly innocent event at the Gia Định agricultural fair. Throughout the day of the fair excitement had been building, and crowds gathered to witness the Fair's much-vaunted beauty pageant. However, come ten pm, the appointed hour, not one contestant had put herself forward. Only after much cajoling did six reluctant contestants mount the stage before the panel of judges, which included two Frenchmen and a majority of Vietnamese. The panel voted unanimously for one contestant (it having been decided to award only a first prize under the circumstances of such limited participation.) Shortly after, a rowdy discussion erupted and the verdict was challenged, with the result that a second round of voting was demanded. "Did we have to adopt the electoral rules of the French colonial council?" asked a journalist sarcastically, referring to the complicated multiple balloting of the colonial electoral system. The second round of voting pronounced a different contestant as winner, Miss Mai Huỳnh Hoa. This reversal surprised the audience, which was left in confused anger and muttering that this second choice was not even remotely beautiful.

The events of the Gia Định fair appeared in the Saigon semi-daily *Dân Quyền* (*Human Rights*), which sent a young female journalist, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, to cover the story. According to French Surêté reports, *Dân Quyền* was the brainchild of Marxist intellectual Nguyễn An Ninh, and operated under the direction of the veter-

an leftist publicist Jehan Cendrieux. By sending a reporter to cover the story, *Dân Quyền*'s editors clearly intended to raise awareness of women's issues and question the value of the beauty pageant. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm's article paid little attention to the aesthetics of the event, with only passing reference to each woman's outfit, but it concluded by musing on the comparative meaning of physical and moral beauty, and the questionable place of beauty in the political arena.¹ The report provoked response from a conservative commentator² who wrote a disquisition on the moral decline exhibited by the women participating in this affair, who, he claimed, could only have got up on the stage if they were under the influence of decadent American-European ideas. Men would never do such a thing. Unfortunately for Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, Mai Huỳnh Hoa turned out to be an unlikely target for her moralizing narrative. The daughter of Indochina Communist Party (ICP) operative Mai Văn Ngọc, who died in prison in Laos in 1933, having been arrested on his way to Thailand on the orders of the party, and granddaughter of Cochinchina's first acclaimed patriotic poet, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, she was herself a poet and former political prisoner who had spent several months in Saigon's notorious Maison Centrale prison for her activism. Perhaps equally importantly, she was at the time the lover, later to become the second wife, of Trotskyite intellectual Phan Văn Hùm.³ The Gia Định affair led to the publication of a rebuttal by Mai Huỳnh Hoa herself, in which she countered the narrow categorizations of the conservative commentator's letter and their class-based assumptions,⁴ and to a rather uncharacteristically touching defense by Hùm in which he evoked both her ancestry from a good patriotic family and her moral standing as a revolutionary heroine. He also questioned conceptions of beauty as an aesthetic marker of cultural alterity and class-based sensitivities.

This story exemplifies the complexity of the multiple interpretations of modernity that influenced the lives and representations of women in 1930s Vietnam. It also demonstrates the restrictions under which the press operated at the time; the researcher is left with much to ponder about this incident. Its discordant outcome points to the fluidity of social and political categories of which modern women felt that they should be part. It indicates the willingness on the part of women to engage in this act of unquestionable modernity, even though its significations were still ill-defined and little understood. Could Nguyễn Thị Kiêm's story have been crafted as an allegory for the political process itself, with its contested votes and discontented audience? Did the divisions in the panel of judges break down along racial lines? As for Mai Huỳnh Hoa's participation: why would an educated and "enlightened"⁵ Stalinist participate in such a pageant? Did she participate out of mockery for the event? Unfortunately her written testaments to the newspaper do not tell us much about her motives, only that she refuses to be bound by the narrow constraints imposed by conservative and prejudiced interpretations of feminine modernity. Nonetheless, women's participation in this self-consciously modern performance does beg those very questions raised in the polemic: questions about the meaning of

beauty (*sắc đẹp*) in traditional and nationalist discourses of the racialized and gendered body, and its role in sustaining a commodified bourgeois aesthetic that emerged in the 1930s. At the same time the affair exposes the vulnerability of women as autonomous actors in the public sphere, where they may be objectified in various media interpretations as potentially or already decadent; either as vulgar mimics of Western culture, or dangerous purveyors of exotic sexuality.

This essay explores some of the complexities demonstrated by this story of modernity, with its multiple and contradictory valences of hesitation, self-confidence, and confusion. This anxiety and uncertainty, which I see as axiomatic of this period of rapid transition, pervades media images throughout the 1930s. I explore here ways in which this anxiety might be read as a tension between common media tropes naturalizing a positivist teleology of aesthetics and technology—co-opted by bourgeois commercialism as what might be called a “fetish of modernity”—and “realist” and “surrealist” images that emerge in the 1930s press to counter these tropes. Debates about culture and society, including understandings of beauty, desire and coercion, reflected an intellectual world in which bustling urban modernity was exemplified by French ideas, lifestyles, empirical sciences and technology. These attributes of “Western” progress were tempered by understandings of loss and alienation brought about by urbanization, industrialization and fast-changing technologies of transport and communications. I use the writings of commentators such as Nguyễn An Ninh, Phan Văn Hùm and Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, as well as non-textual representations made possible by new graphic and photographic technologies, to demonstrate how women in particular were implicated by media images, advertising and bourgeois fashion.

Nguyễn An Ninh, who graduated as a lawyer from the Sorbonne in the early 1920s, became a brilliant polemicist in the French language Vietnamese press, and the focus of a youth cult that inspired a generation of young Vietnamese men and women toward revolutionary political engagement. An eloquent orator, and an early devotee of Nietzsche, he was adept at manipulating the emerging mass media of the 1920s and 1930s. He was arguably the first to recognize “culture”⁶ as a pliable category in the service of colonial power and bourgeois capitalism, and relentlessly satirized the shallow trappings of Western civilization cultivated by fashionable élites. Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm, trained as a philosopher at the Sorbonne in the early 1930s, seem to be at the forefront of a struggle against what they recognized as new forms of colonial cultural hegemony, enabled and staged through mass media advertising, and the bourgeois cooptation of ideas of beauty and desire.

Phan Văn Hùm’s contribution to the Gia Định beauty contest polemic addressed the primary critique of the conservative commentator mentioned above: whether or not the panel of judges was qualified to evaluate beauty. Since the contestants neither claimed to represent a traditional Vietnamese form of aesthetic, nor to aspire to Western understandings of beauty, what criteria could be used to assess

such beauty? Hùm's letter predates his most important contributions to a Marxist discourse on aesthetics, delivered as part of his prolonged polemic against the Art for Art's Sake movement throughout 1936. In his well-publicized debate with Hoài Thanh,⁷ Hùm argues for a Marxist popular aesthetic which the masses may understand and attain.⁸ According to this view, artistic dress and style cannot be considered to define beauty, since only the upper classes have access to these luxuries.⁹ His critique of bourgeois capitalist use of aesthetic tropes to engender desire and false notions of freedom and choice is paralleled by his assault on literary romanticism, which he sees as being supported by a bourgeois complacency born of such quasi-philosophical and pseudo-scientific mystical fads as Theosophy and sociology.¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere that it is the "re-theologization" and mystification of the post-enlightenment subject, which Hùm finds in the transcendental elements of Idealism, that are at the heart of his assault on the Art for Art's Sake movement and the fetishization of culture, which has as one of its primary objects the bourgeois woman.¹¹

It was often around the question of women that the contradictions of modernity crystallized. As elsewhere in the world, women symbolized the nation.¹² Narratives of the state essentialized women as guardians of the nation's future and family tradition. At the same time, women's concerns seem easily co-opted by modernity's commodifications and mystifications: concerns for the health and welfare of the family exposed them to an array of pharmaceutical potions and quasi-medical theories which placed them at the fulcrum of traditional beliefs and little understood scientific technologies. Such enslavement to the scientifically modern even extended to the use of radium skin whitening treatments. Women became objects of alluring advertising valorizing scientific technology as quintessentially modern. Recognizing the importance of women's influence over the modern family, the French established a journal for women in 1918 (edited by Mai Huỳnh Hoa's aunt), which promoted family welfare and included the popularization of ideas of science, medicine and hygiene. This project was closely related to that of the controversial "collaborator" intellectual Phạm Quỳnh. His state-sponsored literary journal, *Nam Phong*, which sought to popularize the romanized Vietnamese *quốc ngữ* script, also introduced key French literary and philosophical texts to a Vietnamese audience. "Vulgarization" of science and medical practices remained a dominant theme in the *quốc ngữ* press throughout the 1920s and 30s; much of this production targeted a female audience.

Women in the Public Sphere

Although lacking the foreign educational opportunities of men such as Ninh and Hùm, young women were quick to engage in the radical fervor of the early 1920s. While still regarded with suspicion and some condescension by the male leaders of

the radical movements of the early 1920s, by the time Ninh was arrested for the first time in March 1926, it was the female students in the Saigon high schools who shamed their male compatriots at the elite Chassaloup Laubert lycée to walk out of classes.¹³ Many female students in Saigon and Hue were expelled from school for their actions; some from the Hue schools subsequently lived with Hùm's family during the time he was a clerk with the Public Works authority in Hue. On the other hand, it seems that many women, like the men, were drawn to the revolutionary movement for its excitement and romanticism. Nguyễn An Ninh's second wife, Trùng Thị Sáu, describes her first meeting with Ninh in her recollections, as reported by her daughter.¹⁴ This memoir, which is clearly a work designed to bring her father's eclectic intellectual biography into conformity with state hagiography, describes how it was not unusual for young women to spend time helping at the offices of Ninh's radical newspaper, the *Cloche Fêlée*. Many of the young radicals returning from France in the early 1920s were still seen as good marriage prospects by fashionable families, who were seeking to secure their daughters' futures with the expectations associated with lofty French qualifications. They soon changed their minds, however, when many of those men refused the administrative positions with the colonial authorities that were expected of them.

Reports from the male participants in the radical movement include comments on how charming the ladies are.¹⁵ Throughout the 1920s this ambivalence towards women in the public sphere is openly expressed. Following the unsettling events of Spring 1926, however, with the arrest of Ninh and many other young leaders for contravention of press and public security laws, as well as the death of patriotic hero Phan Chu Trinh, the stakes changed for women. French propaganda, together with merciless criticism and satire from nationalists, served to undermine Confucian familial propriety, forcing many young women to make a choice between the safety but oppression of family tradition and an uncertain future with a husband who may well spend much of his life in jail.¹⁶ Rejecting conventional marital arrangements,¹⁷ and with their employment options limited by their anti-government activities, many educated young women, like men, were driven to teaching in private institutions or to journalism, where their influence was considerable.

It seems that entry into the public sphere was something young Vietnamese women saw as a natural act of emancipation, partly as a result of European role models. From the mid-1920s on, the lawyer Paul Monin, a member of the Ligue pour le Droit de l'Homme and co-editor with André Malraux of two Saigon opposition newspapers in 1925-6, *Indochine* and *Indochine Enchaînée*, had considerable influence among radical circles. His wife, who was involved in international anti-imperial and human rights activities, was regarded in Sûreté reports with no less suspicion for her influence on young women. Such external role models were reinforced throughout the 1920s, with the delegations of the Misses Pye and Drevet of the Ligue Internationale des Femmes pour la Paix et la Liberté in 1927.¹⁸ A delega-

tion of women and girls was formed in 1927 to greet the Comité International des femmes, supported by the wives of such moderate nationalist politicians as Đurong Văn Giáo.¹⁹ While Monin and Malraux were considered dangerous, particularly for their associations with Chinese revolutionaries, the international women's movement appeared to be less threatening to the colonial administration, and was regarded with some quizzical amusement. Women's rights held a privileged position within the register of radical discourses, and were quickly adopted by male leaders as effective subterfuge for a more dangerous political rhetoric which could have led to arrest under the prevailing oppressive press laws. This cooptation by men of the question of women's rights soon resulted in women themselves demanding a more dominant role in public discourse.

1928 saw the beginning of a proliferation of women's journals, including the influential *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (*Ladies Journal*), which began publication in February 1929; many other requests for publishing authorization were denied. The propagandizing efforts of illegal radical publications and the establishment of the Indochinese Communist Party in February 1930 certainly changed the stakes yet again for men and women hoping to be active in the public sphere. In a 1976 article, David Marr has written of the submissive nature of Vietnamese women, "Women internalized submissive norms almost to the point of believing them to be natural law; only some disputatious folk songs and risqué poetry gave evidence of alternate values."²⁰ He argues that the establishment of the Party in February 1930, and its proclamation of the "struggle for the equality of the sexes" as one of its ten principles, was most important in promoting this issue as a popular, rather than an élite pre-occupation.²¹

Revolutionaries were not alone in their attempts to engage women in national discourse, and to do so by invoking heroic and epic narratives of struggle: the conservative Phạm Quỳnh, in his effort to establish a national literary canon, promoted Nguyễn Du's late eighteenth-century epic poem, the *Tale of Kiều*, as a foundational text. Many traditional Confucian literati argued that the poem, by extolling the virtue of Kiều, the victim-turned-prostitute, destabilized Confucian morality and chastity. Local performances of a play by Phan Bội Châu (first published in 1911), showed the heroic Trung sisters' resistance to Chinese authority and emphasized parallels between the Chinese occupation and French colonial authority. Phan Bội Châu's work inspired a play on the same theme by Nguyễn An Ninh in 1927.²² This seditious work evoked well-known instances of humiliations suffered by nationalists at the hands of colonial authorities, and contributed to the consciousness of women as historical actors in the public sphere of the nascent nation state. History itself had become an arena of political contestation, as its events were subject to manipulation and nuanced interpretation in the pages of various newspapers and journals. The prominent positioning of historical narrative in the press, and understandings of Social Darwinism promoted both by the media and by the imperial

enterprise itself, reinforced the naturalization of this historicization. Historical positivism was thus encoded in the semiotics of the mass media.

Andrée Viollis' shocking revelations of colonial abuse in her work *Indochine SOS*, published in 1935, was covered extensively in Vietnamese vernacular publications, including the women's journal *Đàn Bà Mới* (*New Women*), and reinforced the idea of women as important contributors to the international movement for equality and justice. The call in 1936 by Nguyễn An Ninh to take up the Popular Front government's promise of a commission of inquiry into colonial conditions led to another wave of radicalization in society, with the formation of networks of political action committees under the auspices of the Indochina Congress. These committees propelled many women into the political arena, as activists in the women's sections of the village and province level committees associated with the Congress, and greatly reinforced the clandestine networks of the communist party. Interestingly, only a year after the exchange of letters between Mai Huỳnh Hoa and Nguyễn Thị Kiêm following the Gia Định fair incident, both were at one of the inaugural meetings of the Indochina Congress in Mỹ Tho arguing for the formation of women's sections.²³

Although few narrative histories of these women in the public sphere have been written in English (or French), their stories are archived in the files of the Sûreté, in their vernacular autobiographies, and on the pages of the numerous journals of the 1920s and 30s. Some vignettes from the lives of a few prominent women illustrate the range of positions held by them and the way in which they were received by society: the poet, journalist and hard-line Stalinist Mai Huỳnh Hoa, mentioned in the opening story, the activist and journalist Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, and the two daughters of the leader of the Constitutionalist party, Bùi Quang Chiêu exemplify this diversity. Of the latter's two daughters, Henriette was the first Vietnamese woman

to graduate in France as a doctor; she returned from Paris in the 1920s and married a fashionable Vietnamese lawyer in a well-publicized media event.²⁴ His second daughter, Madeleine, founded the first beauty parlour in Saigon. Both women were frequent commentators in the Saigon press and obvious objects of curiosity.²⁵



Representations

My objective here, however, is not to trace the biographies of these women, but to draw upon them to explore further the didactic and coercive modes of operation of the historicizing and aestheticizing tropes of the bourgeois media which

*Figure 1: Published in the journal *Sáng* (February 1939).

had the feminine as their referent and implicated women in their forms. Vietnamese modernity of the 1920s and 1930s was defined by a media imaginary of desire and discomfort, as suggested by Figure 1, which shows the modern woman concerned with fashionable pursuits, while society falls apart, a binary common in cartoon images. In Figure 2, a woman and a man take opposite directions for the future, as



represented in the inaugural, auspicious steps from the house on the first day of the New Year. The woman, who is a caricature of the modern woman, is heading west, while the man, who is still wearing the traditional *khăn*, or scarf, worn to hide the hair in the period before men started cutting their hair short, is pulling her east.

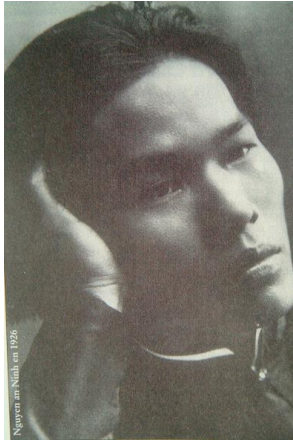
*Figure 2: From the satirical journal *Lao*, no 101 (23 January, 1936).

The late 1920s saw a transformation in the vernacular press, which increasingly adopted to the more sophisticated forms of graphic representation that were previously limited to French language organs. In contrast to David Marr's suggestion that women were quickly influenced by the establishment of the Communist Party, I question its immediate impact on the popular imagination, given the limited, clandestine and inept quality of its print propagandizing efforts prior to the liberalization of press laws under the leadership of the French Popular Front government in 1936. Although, as Hue Tam Ho Tai points out, the clandestine revolutionary publication of the Youth League, *Thanh Niên* (Youth), smuggled into Vietnam from Canton, carried radical articles on women's issues which did embolden the legal Vietnamese press to mimic the more daring discussions of these issues.²⁶ While modernizing narratives and depictions of women as partners in progress—either as activists in a socialist/Marxist agenda which circulated through the colonial territories from the beginning of the 1920s, or as consumers in a bourgeois capitalist modernity—were powerful agents eroding the Confucian family, the ICP was tightly circumscribed in its propagandizing efforts.

As elite and aspiring middle class women increasingly became targets of bourgeois advertising, the “legal”²⁷ communist and other nationalist publicists challenged the hegemony of French colonialism over this media imaginary of modernity. By adopting the same alluring media tropes of photographs, cartoons and graphics, a more subtle counter discourse exposing the materialist base of this modernity emerged. Unlike the “legal” press, with its professional type-setting, layout, and skillful journalism, the clandestine press of the party consisted of informally duplicated newsletters, whose didactic texts were aimed primarily at a peasant or

worker audience.²⁸ French officials may have been justified in their claims that the recipients of these texts often found the ideas contained there alienating.

Little or no work has been done on the semiotics of the visual forms of representation included in these Vietnamese texts; consequently, my investigations of form and style are cautious. Images of bourgeois domesticity created through studio portraiture and photographic representations were much influenced by the French-trained photographer Khánh Ký.²⁹ Although histories of photography show that its association with representations of the dead is widespread, a “reading” of photographic representation in Vietnam is surely complicated by the ritual value of portraiture on the family altar. The introduction of coy attitudes and the frank and direct engagement with the camera of modern photographic poses were possibly seen as a way of freeing photographic representation from these confines. Nguyễn An Ninh, seen in Figure 3, supported his education at the Sorbonne by working as an artist’s model. This photograph, taken by Khánh Ký—a friend of both Ninh and Nguyễn Ái Quốc from the time of their sojourn in Paris together—became a symbol to the youth generation for whom he was an idol. It sold to the throngs of supporters outside the courtroom during his trial in 1926, and could be found adorning the living rooms of houses throughout the South in this period.³⁰



*Figure 3: Nguyễn An Ninh. Portrait by Khánh Ký, 1926. CAOM. Courtesy of CAOM and Daniel Hémery.

*Figure 4: Trường Thị Sáu. From the cover of her republished memoir, *Cùng anh đi suốt cuộc đời: hồi ký của bà Nguyễn An Ninh*. (With him throughout his life: memoir of Madam Nguyễn An Ninh. HCM NXB Trẻ, 1999.

Figure 4 shows a portrait of Ninh’s second wife, Trường Thị Sáu, also taken by Khánh Ký, that is clearly a studio production. Museums in the Saigon area displaying photographs of heroic mothers who lost sons in the independence wars routinely included two or three photographs of women in exactly this pose of bourgeois domesticity; in these clothes, at this

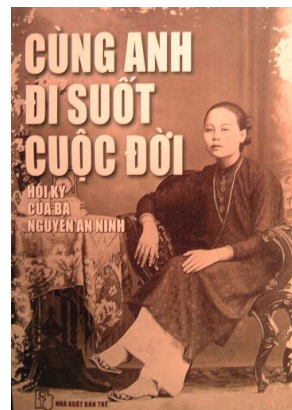


table. Although arrested twice for subversive activities, Khánh Ký astutely capitalized on colonial representations, not only of a bourgeois urban elegance he sought to capture in his portraiture, but through his guided tours to the Paris Colonial Exposition, which he advertised in the Saigon newspapers throughout early 1931.³¹ Trường Thị Sáu was indeed a woman of some means and obvious elegance. Her daughter's biography of Ninh, however, describes how Ninh's father demanded soon after their marriage that Trường Thị Sáu drop her fineries, as they were inappropriate attire for the wife of a revolutionary family.³² In fact, she was to sell all her assets, including her jewelry, in order to finance her husband's revolutionary activities. A photograph taken during her husband's imprisonment in 1939, for a journal article on how the wives of the political prisoners were coping, clearly intends to project a very different image, that of the oppressed and hard-working mother.

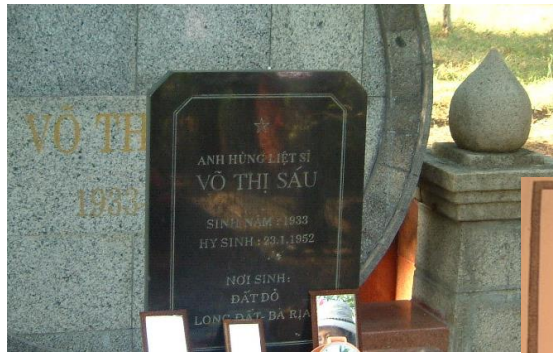
While European ideas of form and pose, which helped construct women's images in photographic compositions, may have had an impact on their audiences in Indochina, photographic and literary representations of women aimed at a metropolitan audience without doubt also influenced self-perceptions of women within the colonial territories. Orientalist literary and cinematographic discourses on Indochina were subjects of discussion and critique in Vietnam. Representations of the colonial expositions have been explored by Timothy Mitchell in his work on the colonial "exhibitionary order." Building on Mitchell's ideas, Panivong Norindr has examined representations of Indochina at the colonial expositions. He describes Indochinese women as being ambiguously signified as "primitive natives" and as elegant dancing girls, transported and domesticated within the safe confines of a miniaturized and disrupted geography.³³ Indeed, the archives pertaining to the staging of the colonial expositions abound with expressions of a policy aimed to domesticate women and limit them within the normative roles of weaver, basket-maker and embroiderer.

Reflections on Stillness and Motion

Attempts by Paris authorities to persuade the Indochina administration to submit examples of women's art for a colonial art exhibition failed to produce any works that the local administration considered to be of sufficient originality, women's work being only repetitive mimicry of long-established traditions.³⁴ It is notable that the 1932 women's fair staged by the Saigon women's journal, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, used the same limiting techniques as the expositions, depicting women's work as a series of handicraft categories. The categorization of women's production as stagnant contrasts with the unlimited possibilities of progress depicted in ever-changing commercial fashions. The dual tropes of aestheticization and historicism were visually set in motion on the pages of the popular media: progress was represented by

the movements of people from village to town, by the decisive and practiced motion of sport and Western dance, and the increasing speed of travel, most particularly the private car, which was ubiquitous in advertising images in the 1930s. Both advertising and literary representations of the car posit it as an icon of a kinetic modernity and an object of women's desire.

Like the photograph, that other aesthetic artifice which enabled self-reflection—the mirror itself—is a nexus of signification in Vietnamese tradition and in modern femininity. Again like the photograph, its use is ritualized in memorialization of the dead, on family altars and shrines. Discourses on the mirror in Chinese aesthetics, ritual and mysticism are wide-ranging,³⁵ though interpretations of the mirror in the Vietnamese context are lacking. The Vietnamese word for mirror, *gwong*, is also used to mean an example, or model, invoking notions of faithful repetition, or mimesis, and a teleology of truth, redemption or enlightenment, which is positioned in tension with historicism. However, use of this term to signify historical texts also implies a positivist historical trajectory, a link between the present and the past through the mediation of this optical instrument that connotes a temporal and historicizing dimension.³⁶



(28 November 1935).

Placed on the family altar, or on a grave, the mirror is seen as a means of deflecting evil spirits, but also as a device representing a liminal space between past, present and future. Its cooptation as a modern fashion accessory and aesthetic trope complicates this role, as can be seen in Figure 5, which shows the grave of revolutionary heroine Võ Thị Sáu on the prison island of Côn Đảo.

*Figure 5: Võ Thị Sáu's Grave. Author's photograph (February 2002).

*Figure 6: Back Cover Illustration, from *Loa*, no 93





*Figure 7: This cartoon, entitled, “Topsy Turvy Life” is from the journal of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn literary group. *Phong Hóa*, no 79 (29 December, 1933).

Here the traditional ritual mirror is replaced with a fashionable powder compact, accompanied by other trappings of modern beauty that are not the traditional items of devotion to be found on the family altar. The mirror’s use as an object of decorative art also seems to be adopted from an aesthetic not uncommon in late nineteenth-century Chinese portraiture. The example in Figure 6 incorporates not only the reflection of a reflection extending from an historical infinity, but a photograph of the same

image miniaturized on the adjacent chest, as if the instability of this historical framing has to be countered by the permanent impression of the photographic representation. Like the photograph, the mirror is a site of excess signification shifting from ritual object on the family altar to cosmetic utility. Moreover, the newspapers of the 1930s began to show design elements and cartoon images which play with ideas of both enframing and reflection, often using contrasting black and white patterns and even negative images, as if in the photographic negative that Homi Bhabha has associated with the double inscription of colonial mimesis.³⁷ Figure 7 shows a cartoon entitled, “Topsy Turvy Life”; in the first caption the photographic editor calls out: “Hey, she’s *white*?” The mirror image of the paper’s masthead is visible in the second image, while the bemused type-setter remarks: “Even the N is back-to-front.” The ironical use of this transposition in the case of skin color was not lost on the Vietnamese, at a time when racial coding, including the common use of the term *người da vàng* (“yellow-skinned people”), is being variously inscribed in terms of national particularism and a pan-Asian consciousness.

In Homi Bhabha’s double inscription of mimesis, the native other is always lacking, like the refracted void of the photographic negative. The graphic tropes discussed here, however, may operate in Vietnamese imaginaries as instruments of recuperation, empowering their audience through their ironic and mocking gestures. The excess of signification of photographic images, introduced to Indochina within a matter of ten years, included representations which allowed for a new form of self-contemplation by Vietnamese subjects, as well as bringing an array of imported knowledge. These complex representations, however, are augmented in the press by simple and didactic forms, using minimalist line drawings to better display the

forms of fashion items, and beauty techniques. Removing the technical form of production from the object of desire can perhaps make it seem more attainable. While the reader is captivated by the allure of the photographic representation, the form of the object is re-inscribed in less complex forms; the publication of fashion designs as sewing patterns implies the ease with which even those of limited means could understand and aspire to the luxury of fashion.

New Media Women

While many media images sought to domesticate the bourgeois woman as passive consumer, her image was exploited as evoking a world of transgression and transition, becoming an icon of modernism's complexities. As a metonymic for an orientalized and colonized geography, the new woman retained her exotic charm, but was domesticated and contained within the limits of transgression that served to define a position of moral purity befitting the "mission civilisatrice," and in contrast to which the rhetorical discourse of moral decadence and decline could be posited. This *errance* placed the new woman outside traditional mores and made her a putative danger to male sobriety and a challenge to Confucian morality. Like the poor French girl of Marguerite Duras's novels, she not only transgressed social categories, but challenged racial ones. She was Europeanized, took a French official as a lover, and entered the bourgeois class as an unequal mimetic of her European sisters. The dangerous and exotic femininity projected by these media images was affirmed in official reports as an object of French male desire. The endlessly debated phenomenon of prostitution hid a register of social behaviors, real and imagined, which situated the modern woman within society in ways which exposed the fragile boundary between women as public actors in a contentious "liberated" domain, and the various real and constructed images of women as vulgar imitations of Western custom. This register ranged from the common prostitutes of the *maisons de tolérance*, to *ca trù* singers—a highly specialized and difficult form of professional singing involving a female singer and two male instrumentalists—and extending to women who marry or are lovers of Western men.³⁸

In this complex matrix of gender-indexed interpretations, a phenomenon that the French soon came to call the social "malaise" came to the fore. This condition referred to the superficiality of the "new" life and the *ennui* that it engendered in the bourgeois class. It was a phenomenon which crossed gender lines; it may well have had its real roots in the unemployment crisis of the depression, but was symbolically associated with young women and their suicidal tendencies. French analysts defined the "malaise" as a lack of moral substance, sometimes admitted by officials as having resulted from a French policy of undermining traditional institutions and learning and replacing them with nothing: very low educational enrollments, few opportunities for bright children in French language schools, and high unemployment

even for those who did have an education. This psychological state was soon adopted by local commentators as the basis of a discussion of immorality, which many blamed on the decadent state of Confucian learning. Suicide became the focus of media debate and cartoon representation, and was quickly linked by revolutionaries, and proponents of Art for Life, with the dominance of literary romanticism, as well as economic conditions.³⁹

The evolution of the “Annamite legal code,” and its relationship to a growing understanding of personal and community “rights,” further heightened awareness of women as a distinct social group. Slander and libel laws, imported by French decree, became powerful political tools, particularly within the world of the press, as a means to control or silence opponents.⁴⁰ While cartoons abounded with wives threatening to sue their husbands for failing to meet their expectations of bourgeois luxury, it is not clear to what extent women were actually able to better their social position through such juridical means. This new media woman is likely to have cut her hair short, have worn shorts for tennis and cycling, and to have swam shamelessly in scanty costume in the seas off the fashionable Đồ Sơn beach. She would have flaunted a daring outfit from the fashion house of Nguyễn Cát Tường, the designer of the Vietnamese *áo dài* who was popularly known by the literal French translation of his name, Lemur. This putative “traditional” costume was created as a result of a competition in around 1931, probably promoted by the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, self-strengthening literature group, through its popular paper *Phong Hóa* (*Morals*). Interestingly, just as the fateful *Tale of Kiều* was adopted as a national narrative, so the first atavistic claim to a national aesthetic, in the form of a national costume, was one to be displayed by women. Lemur wrote regularly about fashion for *Phong Hóa*,⁴¹ its successor, *Ngày Nay* (Today), and *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Ladies Journal). The fact that Lemur not only promoted fashion as an index of moral progress, but also used his basic *áo dài* design for a range of fashion embellishments, again suggests the conflation of the aestheticization of “culture” with a positivism which served to naturalize material fashion as a register of progress.

The common depiction of feminine modernity is critiqued by male revolutionaries and satirized by several novelists of the 1930s, most notably Vũ Trọng Phụng and Nguyễn Công Hoàn. Lemur is mercilessly lampooned in Vũ Trọng Phụng’s novel *Số Đốt*.⁴² His tailor’s shop is one fulcrum around which this satirical depiction of modernity as fetish is enacted. Lemur’s diaphanous creations, ever more daring and appropriate for the modern woman’s varied life style, range from the seductive lingerie essential for affairs, to the latest in funeral attire. However, the phantasmatic sexual nomenclature assigned by Vũ Trọng Phụng to the fictive Lemur designs could easily be read to disrupt this historicist teleology, with its reference to the tragic trajectory of colonial conquest: *Innocence, Conquest, Hesitation, Wait-a-Minute, Coquette, Stop-Those-Hands*.⁴³ The family at the center of this drama cannot wait for the patriarch to die, not only because they covet his money, but because

the women want to display the latest in funeral attire to the admiring observers of Hanoi society. Vũ Trọng Phụng's novels and reportage target not only the bourgeois deceits of the *élite* class and its *nouveau riche* aspirants, but the equally superficial understandings of the new political aristocracy, including revolutionaries of all stripes. They provide vivid insights into the lives of women which were much too explicit for French press censors, often focusing on women involved in the indistinct realms of commerce, performance and leisure, which were closely associated with prostitution and opium smoking.

Conclusion

This essay does not claim to provide any answers to the questions arising from the beauty pageant at the 1935 Gia Định fair, but it does suggest different ways of viewing them. It shows the complexity of negotiating womens' subjectivities in the public sphere. It also argues that women were promoted in bourgeois media as vehicles for the transmission of an image of normative progress which sought to naturalize technological complexity and material commodification. I have attempted here to explore the modes of operation of a media semiotics which historicized commercial aesthetics by conflating progress and fashion. I also show how this semiotics was disrupted not only by expressions of anxiety that permeated the press and its cartoon pages, but by revolutionary intellectuals, who by the 1930s were well aware of the importance of this representational dimension to class struggle, and were as adept at manipulating it as the capitalist press barons. I demonstrate ways in which political discourses, and a broader media imaginary of resistance, implicated women as performers through whom modernity's anxieties and disjunctures were enacted. While this paper takes a very broad approach to the questions raised by the textures and fabrics of a Vietnamese modernity, clearly much work is still to be done on the fashions and fads that both upheld and subverted the materialist colonial order.

Notes

1. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm states that while beauty has no value, plainness ensures a woman's morality and worth in society. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "Đêm bế mạc cuộc đấu xảo canh nông Gia Định: cuộc thi sắc đẹp," *Dân Quyền* (9 September, 1935).

2. Diêu Hoa, "Xin hiện cho ban giám khảo thìn sắc đẹp đêm 8 sept 1935 ở GiaĐịnh," *Dân Quyền* (11 September 1935).

3. See note 18.

4. In her attack, Mai Huỳnh Hoa asks: "Am I a person who emulates Euro-American civilization? I plead ignorance, because I don't even know what you mean by the phrase. Do you actually know yourself what you mean?" "Đáp lời Diêu Hoa Tiên-sinh," *Dân Quyền* (9 Sep-

tember 1935 *sic*) [The date on this issue is incorrectly printed as 9 September. It has to be after the 11 September and may be the 19 September.]

5. The Buddhist term for enlightenment, *giác ngộ* was regularly used to describe political and class, awareness.

6. His first public speech on returning from France, in February 1923, was “Une Culture pour les Annamites: Conférence faite par M. Ng An Ninh, Licencié en droit à la Société d’Enseignement Mutuel de Cochinchine.” *La Voix Annamite*, no 4 (2 February 1923).

7. Ironically, Hoài Thanh became one of the leading proponents of the principles of Art for Life enshrined in the post 1943 cultural policies of the Việt Minh. See Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: the Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2002), 23.

8. Phan Văn Hùm, “Chủ nghĩa và chủ nghĩa nghệ thuật,” *Trang An* (6 January 1936).

9. In his polemic with Hoài Thanh he argues that André Gide is not yet “enlightened” to Marxist doctrine, since he believes that the average worker could understand the beauty of the Mona Lisa. Hùm contends that in a society which provides no aesthetic training to the proletariat such an élite concept of beauty cannot be accepted.

10. Phan Văn Hùm, “Phương pháp Xã Hội học của Durkheim.” *Tiến Bộ* (23 February 1936).

11. Judith Henchy, “The selling of psychic balm.” In “Performing Modernity in the writings of Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm.” PhD. Diss., University of Washington, 2005, 170-196.

12. Lynn Hunt explores symbolic connections between family and the iconography of the French state in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992). Hue Tam Ho Tai discusses this phenomenon in Vietnam: “The language of family has so often been invoked by revolutionaries as to seem the natural idiom of revolutionary rhetoric.” *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 197.

13. Grèves scolaires. Service de Sûreté, 1924-26. CAOM. GGI 65475

14. Nguyễn Thị Minh. *Nguyễn An Ninh: Tôi chỉ làm con gió thổi*. HCM: NXB Trẻ, 2001. This work includes much that was first published as Trường Thị Sáu’s own biography: “Hồi ký.” (*Memoir*) In *Con đường giải phóng*. Vol 2. Hanoi: NXB Phụ Nữ, 1976; republished as: Trường Thị Sáu. *Cùng anh đi suốt cuộc đời: hồi ký của bà Nguyễn An Ninh*. (*With him throughout his life: memoir of Madam Nguyễn An Ninh*). HCM NXB Trẻ, 1999.

15. Ninh himself speaks of his own foolish romanticism regarding the ladies in his early writings. After some 5 years in prison, the father of three children, with a wife struggling to survive in his absence, his attitudes were much changed. “Phái duy tâm với phụ nữ giải phóng,” (“The Idealism Faction and Women’s Liberation”) *Trung Lập Báo* (30 March 1933).

16. Discourses on the family proliferated in the early 1930s. Ninh wrote a series of articles in the Saigon papers defending the position of revolutionaries who advocated the destruction of Confucian patriarchy. He argued that re-establishing the family based on gender and economic equality and loving partnerships would strengthen the nation. Nguyễn An Ninh, “Gia đình và phụ nữ giải phóng” (“The family and the liberation of women”), *Trung Lập Báo* (30 March 1933).

17. Many of this generation of radical men did not marry their partners. Although Trường Thị Sáu claims to have married Ninh in 1924, archival records show that they did not legally

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marry until 1928, just before the birth of their second child (CAOM. SPCE 381). I understand this as a refusal to recognize the legal authority of the state. Phan Văn Hùm openly referred to his commitment to free love as a principle. Despite this, he took advantage of the French legal system's acceptance of bigamy to marry Mai Huỳnh Hoa as a secondary wife, probably some time in 1936.

18. "Retour de M. Dương Văn Giáo en Cochinchine avec la Mission Mme Drevet et Miss Pye de la Ligue Internationale de Femmes pour la Paix et la Liberté." LT2: IIA.45/233 (2). A "Section Cochinchinoise du Comité Mondial de Lutte Contre la Guerre" was constituted in Saigon. Note périodique no 35 de la Direction de la Sûreté Générale Indochinoise (2ème trimestre 1935), 25. LTII: II.45/312 (1)

19. *Tribune Indochinoise* (23 November 1927).

20. Marr, David. "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 35: 3 (May 1976), 371. Marr argues that the women's rights issues of the 1920s show the extent to which the French exploited the oppressive doctrines of Confucianism in regard to the family. This oppression is based on the three submissions: to father, husband and son.

21. The question of women's suffrage remained contested into the 1930s, with even those committed to equality believing that suffrage was an elite distraction from the urgent economic issues of most women.

22. Sûreté reports claimed that Ninh's text was a call to arms for his partisans, but no evidence was presented at his trial to show that the texts were found in the possession of those partisans arrested.

23. Assemblée Générale du douze Sept 1936 (My Tho). Procès Verbal. LT2: IIA.45/273(2)

24. Tran Thi Lien. "Henriette Bui; The Narrative of Vietnam's First Woman Doctor." In *Việt-Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, edited by Gisele Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Ann Arbor, Michigan University Press, 2002): 278-309.

25. One discussion in the press contrasts the life of Henriette Bui with that of ICP activist Nguyễn Thị Lữ. Henriette Bui is criticized for considering the expectations of her family over those of the state, while Nguyễn Thị Lữ, a committed political activist, lacks the education and skills to be a role model for women or a leader in society. Nguyễn Thị Hường. "Từ cô Nguyễn Thị Lữ cho đến bà Henriette Bui Quang Chiêu," *Nữ công tạp chí* (July 1937).

26. Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 198-213.

27. The French defined the "legal" communists as those who consciously operated within the law, meaning mostly the press laws and the laws of association.

28. Many of the regional committees of the ICP distributed illegal tracts. See Shawn McHale. "Printing Revolution, Spreading Communism." In *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*: 102-142.

29. Khánh Ký had studios in Hanoi, Saigon and Paris at the height of his commercial success in the 1920s and early 1930s. Because of his German business connection he was under suspicion from French authorities and was implicated in the "Trotskyite plot" of 1932. CAOM: 3Slotfom/42; LT II: IIA.45/276 (3)

30. Peycam, Philippe. *Intellectuals and political commitment in Vietnam : the emergence of a public sphere in colonial Saigon (1916-1928)*. Ph.D. thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999.

31. For instance, *Trung Lập Báo* (27 March 1931).

32. Nguyễn Thị Minh, *Nguyễn An Ninh*.

33. Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1996), 22-23.

34. "Participation du Tonkin à l'Exposition de la société des artistes français à Paris, 1928-9." LTI : RS Tonkin, R72647.

35. Julia Ch'ing, "The mirror symbol revisited: Confucian and Taoist mysticism." In *Mysticism and religious traditions*, edited by Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 226-246.

36. The connection between history and a reflecting crystal is contemplated by Hoài Thanh in his discussion of the fad for historical fiction in "Phong trào xem chuyện lịch sử," *Tràng neAn* (8 June 1935).

37. Homi Bhabha, "Signs taken for wonders." In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995): 29-35.

38. Phan Văn Hùm stated in an interview that the causes of prostitution are economic, and the traditional first wife in a marriage is often no more than a prostitute herself, since she engages in a relationship for money and status, not desire. His statement captures some of the difficulty of defining women's roles at a time of shifting values. "Vấn đề mại dâm" *Việt Dân* (7 April 1934).

³⁹ For further discussion of these questions, see Nguyễn Văn Ký's *Indochine face à la modernité : le Tonkin de la fin du XIXe siècle à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 1995.

40. Even Mai Huỳnh Hoa in her attack on her assailant in *Dân Quyền* states that she would be happy to sue him for defamation, but that she would be equally happy to have him understand her position. Journalistic polemics in this period often resulted in court cases, as did many accusations of fiduciary mismanagement; both served as a means of silencing opposition.

41. *Phong Hóa*, which published its first issue in June 1932 and was suspended in June 1935, is compared by French Sûreté officials to a metropolitan political review, the *Canard Enchaîné*.

42. Translated as *Dumb Luck* by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm and Peter Zinoman (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002). See Zinoman's "Introduction" for further discussion of Vũ Trọng Phụng's class perceptions.

43. Translation from Peter Zinoman and Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm, *Dumb Luck*, 68.