

## Women, Westernization and the Origins of Modern Vietnamese Theatre

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*Modern spoken theatre emerged in Vietnam in the context of the intellectual and social upheaval of the 1920s and 1930s. Plays in this period focused on the status of women, the effects of Westernization and the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism. In Nam Xương's 1930 play Ông Tây An-nam, women became conduits through which men expressed their Westernized or nationalist identities.*

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, magazines, newspapers and novels burst off the presses in Vietnamese cities at extraordinary rates.<sup>1</sup> As cities expanded and a small but not insignificant urban Vietnamese middle class emerged, city dwellers had to cope with class distinctions and discrimination, new forms of knowledge and population increases. A new Vietnamese middle class rushed to consider, and sometimes embrace, a sea of new fashions, goods, tastes and ideologies that were being introduced.<sup>2</sup> At first, these developments seem to have offered Vietnamese urbanites an inchoate and disjointed series of choices. By looking at even one page from two newspapers, for example, one could find advertisements for sausages, trains and diamonds among announcements of ship timetables, essays on colonial life and commentaries on the role of women in the family.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in the midst of all these new products and issues, three related themes emerged with greater frequency and greater consistency than the others: the changing status of Vietnamese women, Westernization and the meaning of being Vietnamese. Political debates over the status of women were important enough to become the focus of one

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1 A 1934 issue of *Phụ nữ Tân văn* lists 155 newspapers published in Vietnam up until that date, mostly since the 1920s; Shawn McHale, 'Printing and power: Vietnamese debates over women's place in society, 1918–1934', in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995), p. 175.

2 On the consequences of urbanization see Alexander Woodside, 'The development of social organizations in Vietnamese cities in the late colonial period', *Pacific Affairs*, 44, 1 (1971): 39. Accounts of these changes can be found in Neil Jameson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3 Although these examples have been drawn at random from the pages of two mid-1930s newspapers, they seem to be representative of the typical content of many middle-class-oriented periodicals in this era. See 'La femme française et la vie coloniale', *La tribune indochinoise*, 23 Jan. 1931, p. 6; and *Ngày Nay*, 2 (June 1937).

significant and influential newspaper, *Phụ nữ Tân văn* (Women's news), which ran continuously from 1929 to 1934.<sup>4</sup> In addition, debates on the changing role of women in newspapers dates as far back as commentator Phạm Quỳnh's 1917 essay on the status of women, in which he warned of the moral degradation of women: 'when men lack virtue, it is harmful to society; but not so harmful as when women become unsound, because unsound women damage the very roots of society'.<sup>5</sup> Although *Phụ nữ Tân văn* ran articles on any number of political and apolitical topics, they frequently debated and discussed the 'new girl', a Westernized elite Vietnamese woman who spent time playing tennis and ping-pong and shirking her Confucian responsibilities. The 'new girl' and the issues surrounding her were controversial enough in the pages of *Phụ nữ Tân văn* that some editors and writers tempered the paper's progressive approach to the question of women by introducing exemplary characters from the Vietnamese past such as the Trưng Sisters, who served as examples of assertive women that appeared to be consistent with a certain notion of the Vietnamese past.<sup>6</sup>

This article will consider these changes in detail as they relate to the development of Vietnamese theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. First, it will examine the development of concerns about Westernization and the status of women in Vietnam during this period. Next, it will examine how these two developments in early twentieth-century Vietnamese social history affected the development in the same time period of a modern Vietnamese spoken theatre, and will demonstrate how these two themes influenced both the form and the content of the first spoken dramas. Finally, the study will examine in detail one particularly significant play that highlights the concerns about Westernization and the status of Vietnamese women: Nam Xương's *Ông Tây An-nam* (The Frenchman from Annam) (1930).

### Women, the West and the nation: The concerns of the new Vietnamese literature

The new concerns about the status of women given the chaotic world of the 1920s and 1930s in Vietnam also formed a central theme in the newly emerging genre of the Vietnamese novel. In Nguyễn Bá Học's *Cô Chiêu Nhị* (Miss Chiêu Nhị), for example, a young girl from a rich family, tempted by Western goods, squanders her money and becomes a beggar.<sup>7</sup> Similar themes dominate perhaps the most popular novel of the 1920s, Hoàng Ngọc Phách's *Tố tâm* (Pure heart). In this tragic story, a young woman who has recently graduated from a French school is forced by her parents to marry a man she does not love instead of the love of her life. In *Tố tâm*, the perceived modern individualism of the increasingly Francophile urban elite comes into conflict with the 'traditional'

4 Another newspaper, *Nữ giới Chung* [Women's bell], enjoyed a brief serial run in 1918 (McHale, 'Printing and power', p. 182).

5 Phạm Quỳnh, *Nam Phong* [Southern wind], 1, 4 (1917): 207–17 (quoted in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 87).

6 Sarah Womack, 'The remaking of a legend: Women and patriotism in the hagiography of the Trưng Sisters', *Crossroads*, 9, 2 (1996): 40–1.

7 Nguyễn Bá Học, 'Cô Chiêu Nhị', *Nam Phong*, 43 (1921); Hoàng Ngọc Thanh, 'The social and political development of Vietnam as seen through the modern novel' (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1971), pp. 124–5.

bonds of the family. The novel's message was powerful; at the time of its release, newspapers reported that young girls, stirred by the emotions of the book and the desperation of their own romantic situations, were flinging themselves into West Lake in Hanoi.<sup>8</sup> On a more humorous note, Vũ Trọng Phụng's rags-to-riches comedy *Số đờ* (Dumb luck) is in part a satire of the superficial world of women's fashion and Westernization in Hanoi.<sup>9</sup>

Why, in all of these literary works of the 1920s and 1930s, do the status and nature of women become so intertwined with debates about Westernization and Vietnamese-ness? The answer may lie in the common connection perceived between the purity of a nation and the purity of its women, which results in a 'depiction of the homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizens and allies to rush to her defence'.<sup>10</sup> As Nhung Tuyet Tran has shown, some scholars of Vietnamese history and culture have also perceived this connection between the status of women and the status of Vietnam. Because of this, much of the scholarship has understood 'Vietnamese womanhood as carrier of an indigenous national essence'.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the reformist Vietnamese literature of the 1920s and 1930s attacks what is perceived as traditional and corrupt values by introducing a supposedly pure and idealistic young female character. Sometimes the author exposes the unjust mores of Vietnamese society by showing how Vietnamese values force these pure women into bad marriages, leading to their tragic suicides. In other stories the pure woman stands up to societal injustices and champions new values; this is often the case in novels written by members of *Tự lực Văn đoàn* (Self-strength literary group), an influential group of young writers of the early 1930s who advocated the rejection of Confucianism and other 'traditional values' and the championing of women's rights and European culture.

In Khải Hưng's *Nửa chùng xuân* (The middle of spring), for example, the main character Mai is an incorruptible champion of the kind of individualism that the group's writers wanted to promote in Vietnamese society. The novel tells the story of Mai, a young woman who falls in love with a childhood friend named Lộc and marries him without his parents' permission. When Lộc's mother finds out, she separates them and forces him to marry a woman of her choice who shares his higher class status. When Lộc and Mai meet years later, Mai makes the difficult choice not to break up his new marriage, and they agree to be together only on a platonic level. Neil Jamieson has aptly described Mai as 'an individualist who is not strictly bound by tradition; hers is a moral individualism, concerned with personal integrity rather than self-gratification'. In other words, in *Mai* Khải Hưng creates a character that expresses in an ideal way the moral he wants to convey, and in so doing he creates 'a character far too idealized to

8 John C. Schaefer and Cao Thi Nhu-Quynh, 'From verse narrative to novel: The development of prose fiction in Vietnam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 87, 4 (1988): 756; a discussion of this novel is in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, pp. 106–7.

9 Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb luck: A novel*, tr. Peter Zinoman and Nguyen Nguyet Cam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

10 Andrew Parker *et al.*, 'Introduction', in *Nationalisms and sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker *et al.* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

11 Nhung Tuyet Tran, 'Vietnamese women at the crossroads: Gender and society in early modern Đại Việt' (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2004), p. 9.

be believable'.<sup>12</sup> The character of the beautiful young woman becomes the moral compass of the novel, the idealized figure that is able to meld individualism with the idea that one must sacrifice for love.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in perhaps the best known *Tự lực Văn đoàn* novel, *Đoạn tuyệt* (Breaking off), novelist and group leader Nhất Linh tells the story of a 'new woman' from a traditional family who fights against the oppression of the traditional family in a well-publicized trial. In *Breaking off*, a young woman named Loan is forced into a traditional marriage against her will and is treated with contempt by her husband and in-laws. When she accidentally kills her husband in a fight, she is put on trial for murder, but when her lawyer makes an impassioned speech urging women to 'cut all ties with the big family if they want to live happily with their husbands and children', she is acquitted.<sup>14</sup> In many ways, Mai and Loan are typical main characters of Vietnamese novels of the 1930s, particularly novels from the *Tự lực Văn đoàn*. These novels typically involve such untainted young female characters, modern women who go to elite private schools and are thoroughly versed in the new, more Europeanized culture.<sup>15</sup> In addition, these characters, like Mai, retain a certain sense of morality and are capable of loving decent Vietnamese men.

In other words, in Vietnamese literature from the 1920s and 1930s, predominately male authors portray women as idealized characters. Rather than having character depth or identity, these female characters are used as moral exemplars, instruments intended to convey a particular message. Similar to debates held in newspapers about women's rights in the 1920s, women could be used to gloss over 'a barely concealed subtext' of 'the question of political maturity and national independence'. These authors were in most cases genuinely interested in promoting social reform and women's rights, but this did not stop them from using issues involving women to make other cultural and political arguments.<sup>16</sup> In novels and plays of the 1920s and 1930s that focused on women, authors were often also trying to make a point about Vietnamese national identity. In a climate of both anti-colonial political agitation and increasing Europeanization of culture in

12 Cong Huyen Ton Nu Nha Trang, 'Women and self-sacrifice: Khai Hung's *Nua chung xuan* (In the midst of spring, 1934)', cited 3 July 2005. Available from [http://www.geocities.com/chtn\\_nhatrang/nuachungxuan.html](http://www.geocities.com/chtn_nhatrang/nuachungxuan.html). See also Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 252. Jamieson's comment is in *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 118.

13 Phạm Thế Ngũ, *Việt Nam văn học sử: Giản ước tân biên. Tập III: Văn học hiện đại 1862–1945* [New concise Vietnamese literary history. Volume III: Modern literature, 1862–1945] (Saigon: Quốc học Tùng thư, 1965), pp. 464–5.

14 Hoang Ngọc Thanh, *Vietnam's social and political development as seen through the modern novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 125. See also Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins*, pp. 252–3; Phạm Thế Ngũ, *Việt Nam văn học sử*, p. 453; and Nhất Linh, *Breaking off*, tr. James Banerian (*s.i.*, James Banerian, 1997).

15 Lê Thị Dục Tú, *Quan niệm về con người trong tiểu thuyết Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* [Concepts of humanity in the Self-Strength Literary Group novels] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1997), pp. 34–5.

16 The quotation is from Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins*, p. 101. That male authors increasingly used young female characters to assert their preferred versions of Vietnamese moral identity does not necessarily mean that these authors were unconcerned about women's rights. Indeed, given the amount of material that major literary figures such as Phạm Quỳnh or Nhất Linh wrote about the issue, it seems illogical to dismiss the idea that they were actually concerned with the status of women. This does not mean, however, that the status of women could not be profitably used as a symbolic springboard from which these authors could discuss questions of national or political identity.

urban areas, these were not trivial issues; authors often used female characters to assert both their own nationalist credentials and the correctness of their own interpretation of nationalism.

The nature of the nationalism being discussed through female characters could vary. The spectrum of political thought available to elite Vietnamese in cities like Hanoi in the 1930s was quite wide, as pointed out satirically by the character Joseph Thiét in *Số đố*, whom author Vũ Trọng Phụng's describes as a champion of monarchical restoration, but one who wanted to restore the power of the House of Orléans in France rather than the Nguyễn monarch in Huế.<sup>17</sup> Patriotism and nationalism were not just the concerns of Vietnamese radicals or anti-colonialists. Commentators from a remarkably wide range of political positions in the 1920s and 1930s, including conservative collaborationists like Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Bá Học, could talk with concern about the state of the Vietnamese 'national essence' or be concerned with the possibility that Europeanization of the Vietnamese elite would lead to the destruction of Vietnam's uniqueness.<sup>18</sup> Though these nationalist concerns certainly had a political element, they were ultimately about Vietnamese cultural nationalism.

In short, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese elite was being uprooted from the literati intellectual world in which what mattered was the ability to identify one's geographical area as – in the words of Liam Kelley – a 'domain of manifest civility' in which talented people could participate in a purportedly universal world by mastering the Chinese classics.<sup>19</sup> They were being moved from a classical education into a French colonial school curriculum that incessantly compared Vietnamese life and French ways (and often found Vietnamese customs lacking).<sup>20</sup> The elite of the 1920s and 1930s, regardless of their political leanings, increasingly saw a particularistic world of nations rather than a universalistic world in which the distinctions made between people had to do with their ability to acquire, understand and be well versed in various classical Chinese ideologies.<sup>21</sup> Faced with a changing metropolitan world in which traditionalists clashed with modernists, male authors used pure young women characters as vehicles to assert their credentials as nationalists.

The theme of women as national essence is expressed in what may be its most poignant – and certainly its most humorous – form in the play that Hà Minh Đức has called 'perhaps the most successful popular comedy of its era': Nam Xương's *Ông Tây An-Nam*.<sup>22</sup> The themes and ideas of this play are particularly significant because the play was a model for the satirical spoken dramas that came after it, and its progressive criticism of both the old mandarin elite and the excesses of Vietnamese elites embracing

17 Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Số đố* (Dumb luck) (Hanoi: Văn học, 2003), p. 74.

18 Phạm Quỳnh, *Việt-nam: L'âme et l'essence* (Yerres, France: Ý Việt, 1997), pp. 139–40; David Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 331–2.

19 Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the bronze pillars: Envoy poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), pp. 29–34.

20 Gail Paradise Kelly, *French colonial education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press, 2000), pp. 14–15.

21 K. W. Taylor, 'On being Mươngng', *Asian Ethnicity*, 2, 1 (2001): 25–34.

22 Hà Minh Đức, 'Lời giới thiệu' [Introduction], in *Kịch nói Việt Nam nửa đầu thế kỷ XX* [Modern Vietnamese theatre in the first half of the twentieth century] (Hanoi: Sân khấu, 1997), pp. 12–13.

French culture set the stage for later Vietnamese spoken dramas.<sup>23</sup> *Ông Tây An-Nam* is exemplary of one of the general literary trends of the 1920s and 1930s in that it focuses on Westernization and the status of women in relation to changing definitions of Vietnamese identity. This question was a source of uneasiness particularly for elite Vietnamese men, who expressed their consternation with their status in the present by finding in the past a stable tradition that they insisted was always there and by locating its essence in a pure and traditional Vietnamese woman. Cosmopolitan males attempted to shore up their claims to being Vietnamese and eliminated their uncertainty about their identity through the image of a desirable and pure Vietnamese woman. To understand how these themes operate, however, we should first consider the way in which Europeanized spoken drama came to be popular in metropolitan Vietnam.

### The origins of modern Vietnamese spoken drama

The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed tremendous cultural changes in Vietnam, and these changes were particularly profound for the educated urban elite. The rising use of French and Romanised Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*), the increasingly Europeanized education and cultural tastes of the metropolitan elite, and the political realities of colonialism in Vietnam all played a role in creating a demand for new forms of theatre.<sup>24</sup> Though issues relating to the French presence began to appear in Vietnamese plays at the turn of the twentieth century, these plays were still in the classical dramatic forms. Some were *tuồng*, a form of styled highbrow dramatization particularly favoured in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in the 1800s, *tuồng* expressing various scholarly virtues were often staged for the Nguyễn court.<sup>25</sup> Since most *tuồng* flattered their intended imperial audience by praising the virtues of maintaining loyalty to the emperor, they were increasingly perceived by audiences outside of the court as being hackneyed and irrelevant to the realities of colonized society. Though there were attempts to stage *tuồng* with implicit messages critical of the Nguyễn dynasty's corruption, these more critical plays do not seem to have succeeded in capturing the attention of the new urban elite.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to *tuồng*, the other traditional dramatic art form performed at the turn of the twentieth century was *chèo*, a kind of folk operetta with a loose plot upon which performers often extemporized and added their own unique elements. *Chèo* was typically performed in the village during Buddhist festivals or in communal houses, particularly in northern Vietnam. Though *chèo* remained popular, its reputation as a simplistic and

23 Trần Mạnh Thường, *Từ điển tác giả văn học Việt Nam thế kỷ XX* [Dictionary of twentieth-century Vietnamese authors] (Hanoi: Hội Nhà văn, 2003), p. 536.

24 Phan Trọng Thường, *Những vấn đề lịch sử văn học kịch Việt Nam (từ đầu thế kỷ XX)* [Issues in the history of Vietnamese theatre from the beginning of the twentieth century] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1996), pp. 35–9.

25 This dramatic form reached its height during the reign of the Tự Đức Emperor (1847–83); Phan Kế Hoành and Huỳnh Lý, *Bước đầu tìm hiểu lịch sử kịch nói Việt Nam (trước Cách Mạng Tháng Tám)* [A preliminary investigation of the history of modern theatre in Vietnam before the August Revolution] (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1978), p. 10.

26 Hà Minh Đức, 'Lời giới thiệu', pp. 7–8, comments on the negative perceptions of these plays. The *tuồng* play *Trầm hương các* [The sandalwood pavilion] contains an implied criticism of the court of Emperor Thành Thái (1889–1907); Đình Quang et al., *Vietnamese theatre* (Hanoi: Thế giới, 1999), p. 19.



rural form of drama rendered it incapable of satisfying the taste of elite, urban theatre patrons.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, as the Vietnamese metropolitan middle class emerged in the early 1900s, European forms of theatrical performance became more visible. One of the earliest fruits of this cultural cross-pollination was the creation in 1907 of what was originally known as the ‘civilized *chèo*’ (*chèo văn minh*), whereby traditional forms were altered to be more appealing to modern tastes. Originally, however, even this was regarded by some urban audiences as largely a cosmetic change, since the major difference between the ‘uncivilized’ and presumably ‘civilized’ versions of *chèo* was that the costumes used in the latter were more cosmopolitan and less provincial.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, in southern Vietnam a new form of theatre grew out of the *đi phong dịch tục* (changing customs and habits) campaign, which aimed at simplifying rituals to make them more in tune with modern sensibilities. As part of simplifying rituals, a performance troupe was established by the dramatic arts master Năm Tú in 1918 to perform plays that blended folk songs and music with spoken dialogue, which they called ‘reformed’ or *cải lương* theatre.<sup>29</sup> This new genre increased in popularity through the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in southern Vietnam.

By the 1920s, however, these forms increasingly coexisted with Western-influenced spoken dramas. Modern spoken drama in Vietnam is the result of three trends: first, the rise of printed serials, particularly in Hanoi and Saigon; second, the translation of many works of European literature into Vietnamese; and third, the performance of an increasing number of European plays in Hanoi and Saigon. All of these are related to changes in language. Since an increasing number of Vietnamese elites were able to study French and participate in the translation and production of French works, more French literature was available to the reading public. By the 1920s, there were many more people who were able to participate in a Francophone high society.<sup>30</sup>

The French colonial government and those moderate Vietnamese ‘collaborationists’ who supported it realized the importance of steering newly educated youth away from anti-colonial activities and towards cultural attitudes that were not threatening to French rule. In 1913, French authorities authorized the publication of *Đông Dương Tạp chí* (Indochina Review), which the founder and the editorial staff hoped to use ‘for propaganda, to make the situation less tense, to defend their colonial rule, to disseminate French culture, and to discredit revolutionary writings and activities’.<sup>31</sup> Part of popularizing French culture involved translating plays into *quốc ngữ* and explaining the nature of French theatre. In 1915, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh – the editor of *Đông Dương Tạp chí*, best known for his translation of *The Tale of Kiều* – began translating several of Molière’s

27 On *chèo* see *ibid.*, p. 46; Phan Kế Hoành and Huỳnh Lý, *Bước đầu*, p. 11; and Hà Diệp, *Sân khấu kịch nói tiếp thu sân khấu truyền thống* [The progression of modern theatre from traditional theatre] (Hanoi: Sân khấu, 1996), p. 20.

28 Phan Kế Hoành and Huỳnh Lý, *Bước đầu*, p. 11.

29 Đinh Quang *et al.*, *Vietnamese theatre*, pp. 69–70.

30 Phan Trọng Thường, *Những vấn đề lịch sử*, pp. 43–4. Also see Shawn McHale, *Print and power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the making of modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

31 Hoàng Ngọc Thành, ‘*Quốc ngữ* and the development of modern Vietnamese literature’, in *Aspects of Vietnamese history*, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 205.

plays.<sup>32</sup> By 1920, Phạm Quỳnh was serializing and translating enough plays from France in his Saigon journal *Nam Phong* (Southern wind) that he included a piece on defining a ‘play’ in a series of short essays explaining new cultural forms.<sup>33</sup> That same year also saw the first major performance by Vietnamese players of Molière on the Hanoi stage, in the form of a highly successful performance of *Le malade imaginaire* (The imaginary invalid).

In promoting modern French cultural forms, collaborationists such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phạm Quỳnh were caught in a paradox. On the one hand, they were dedicated to introducing – and in some cases to promoting – French values and culture; but on the other, their mission involved ensuring that Western-educated people did not take too much to heart those aspects of French culture and philosophy which might be detrimental to the colonial mission (such as the Revolution and French nationalist sentiment). The result was that pro-French publications such as *Nam Phong* and *Đông Dương Tạp chí* often ended up promoting French cultural forms with putatively Vietnamese, traditional and Confucian content.

As Keith Taylor has pointed out, Francophone intellectuals such as Phạm Quỳnh thus attempted to enable ‘modernity to enter Vietnamese cultural discourse through the search for and assertion of tradition’. Part of the way in which such collaborationists got their message across was by praising the traditional virtues of Vietnamese women and turning literature that was seen as promoting these values in some way, such as the *Tale of Kiều*, into canonical texts. Thus, Taylor notes, these collaborators turned classical texts into tales of ‘duty and group ethics’ to encourage newly forming educated Vietnamese elites ‘toward attitudes of male authority and female submission, toward a vision of orderliness and excellence that is gendered with females or female-like beings representing disorder and corruption’.<sup>34</sup>

Because modern theatre was introduced to Vietnam through translations by these same collaborationists, it is not surprising that the first spoken theatre often focused on the importance of maintaining traditional family values in the face of the temptations of the modern city. Just as with other forms of literature at the time, Vietnamese plays advocated the maintenance of traditional mores by positing that the purity of Vietnamese women was under threat. In 1920, two short plays in Vietnamese were presented, representing a first tentative step in the direction of creating theatre. Tô Giang’s *Ai giết người* (Who was the killer?), presented in the Quảng Lạc Theatre in April 1920, is a morality play that contrasts greedy and ungrateful people with an idealized family in which a virtuous stepmother unites a family by loving her stepchildren.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the second modern theatre production, Phạm Ngọc Kôi’s June 1920 production of his play *Già kén kẹn hom* (The consequences of choosiness), is a look into the dangers of losing traditional moral values and tells the tale of a heroine who marries a philanderer and

32 Maurice M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *An introduction to Vietnamese literature*, tr. D. M. Hawke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 118.

33 Phạm Quỳnh, ‘Thế nào gọi là kịch?’ [What is a play?], in *Tuyển tập phê bình, nghiên cứu văn học Việt Nam (1900–1945)* [Selected works of Vietnamese literary research and criticism 1900–1945], ed. Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, Nguyễn Thị Kiều Anh and Phạm Hồng Toàn (Hanoi: Văn học, 1997), pp. 224–5.

34 Keith W. Taylor, ‘In search of Vietnamese classical moments’, in *The classical moment: Views from seven literatures*, ed. Gail Holst-Warhaft and David R. McCann (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 123.

35 Hà Diệp, *Sân khấu kịch nói*, p. 25.



descends into prostitution.<sup>36</sup> Both of these plays are regarded by Vietnamese theatre scholars as incomplete and unpolished works.

Theatre historians usually mark 1921 as the birth of modern Vietnamese spoken drama.<sup>37</sup> In May of that year, a number of writers formed a drama association devoted to condemning corruption among Vietnamese officials through theatre. In that same year, in part through the efforts of that association, the first Vietnamese-language modern play, *Chén thuốc độc* (The cup of poison) by Vũ Đình Long (1896–1960), opened at the Hanoi Opera House to the delight of audiences. Since the Opera House had previously been reserved only for European dramas being staged by French citizens, this was a momentous event, but also one that could not come about without a script that would be acceptable to strict French censors.<sup>38</sup>

*Chén thuốc độc* is about the importance of maintaining traditional values in the debauched atmosphere of the Vietnamese city, and it stresses the important role men play in maintaining the purity of Vietnamese women. In this moralistic tragicomedy, a middle-class teacher named Thu and his family are degraded by immoral temptations. Thu becomes interested in prostitutes and money and does not maintain discipline in his family; as a result, his parents become increasingly obsessed with sorcery, and his younger sister gets pregnant out of wedlock. Realizing that he and his family have been ruined by his behaviour, Thu is on the verge of drinking poison when his brother sends money and advice from Laos, causing him to repent and to live a moral life and rescue his parents and sister. Though Thu's family has been engaging in putatively morally questionable behaviour from the start of the play, the event that nearly drives him to suicide is the revelation of his sister's 'despoiling'.<sup>39</sup> The key element of *Chén thuốc độc*, then, is the concern of men about the moral behaviour of women. Accordingly, it is up to the 'man of the family', Thu, to reverse the parasitic influence of modern life and to return the family to traditional mores; the key to this return lies in protecting the family's women.

Throughout the 1920s, Vietnamese modern spoken theatre was bogged down by the moralistic purpose for which it was formed, and the major plays performed – such as Vũ Đình Long's *Toà án lương tâm* (The court of conscience) (1923), Vi Huyền Đắc's *Uyên ương* (The inseparable couple) (1927) and Nguyễn Hữu Kim's *Bạn và vợ* (Friends and wives) – all took as their major theme the need for Vietnam to return to idealized Confucian moral values that were supposedly located in the past.<sup>40</sup> In doing so, these authors paradoxically advocated a return to a putative Vietnamese tradition by using

36 Đình Quang *et al.*, *Vietnamese theatre*, p. 106.

37 Phan Trọng Thường, 'Sự hình thành thể loại kịch nói trong tương quan lịch sử và văn hóa Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX' [The formation of spoken theatre in the context of Vietnamese history and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century], *Tap chí Văn học* [Literary digest], 4 (1994): 29.

38 Hà Minh Đức, 'Lời giới thiệu', pp. 11–12; the play is discussed in Phan Trọng Thường, *Những vấn đề lịch sử*, pp. 60–1 and Đình Quang *et al.*, *Vietnamese theatre*, p. 107.

39 Vũ Đình Long, 'Chén thuốc độc' [The cup of poison], in *Kịch nói Việt Nam nửa đầu thế kỷ XX*, pp. 100–5. For discussion of the play see Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà văn hiện đại: Phê bình văn học quyển III* [Modern writers: Literary criticism, vol. III] (Saigon: Thăng Long, 1960), pp. 667–70; Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc, *Anthologie de la littérature vietnamienne vol. III* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975), pp. 274–85; Đình Quang *et al.*, *Vietnamese theatre*, p. 107.

40 Hà Minh Đức, 'Lời giới thiệu', p. 11.

French literary models and through a French-based literary medium. For example, Long's tragicomic approach and his advocacy of a new bourgeois morality in the face of corruption were borrowed directly from the eighteenth-century French playwright Nivelde de la Chaussée.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, as translations and productions of famous French playwrights (most notably Molière, Corneille and Racine) continued throughout the 1920s, Vietnamese plays became increasingly influenced by them. The satirizing of Buddhist soothsayers' medicinal prescriptions in *Chén thuốc độc*, for example, seems to be drawn at least in part from the first play performed in Vietnam, Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*, in which a hypochondriac is consistently given misdiagnoses and other bad advice from a series of doctors. Certainly the farcical nature and focus on characters with delusions of grandeur in many early Vietnamese plays can be seen as drawn from themes from Molière.<sup>42</sup>

In Vietnamese plays from the 1920s intellectuals constructed a purported traditional culture through their perception of what is outside that culture. It is understood as 'traditional' only by those who can no longer be traditional: those who imagine 'Vietnamese culture' not as a subset of a universal civilization with the Confucian *Four Books* and *Five Classics* (*Tứ thư Ngũ kinh*) at its centre, but a possible choice of cultures among many discrete options.<sup>43</sup> This description applies well to Nam Xương, the playwright whom the rest of this essay will consider. Nam Xương is strikingly similar to the Europeanized characters he satirizes in his plays. Born Nguyễn Cát Ngạc in Bắc Ninh province in 1905, he attended a French civil engineering school and took a position in an engineering firm; he was known for not only writing, but also participating in his plays. His mastery of a variety of subjects relating to languages and cultures is evidenced by his non-fiction essays, such as 'Thư gửi cho bạn về văn pháp Việt Nam' (A letter written to friends regarding Vietnamese grammar), a series of articles published in 1932 in the magazine *An Nam tạp chí* (The Annam review). After participating in the August Revolution in 1945, Nam Xương joined the Indochinese Communist Party in 1948, and actively participated in Party activities in Hanoi; although he lived in South Vietnam after the 1954 partition, he apparently continued to be involved with covert Party work in Saigon, where he died in 1958.<sup>44</sup>

The production of *Ông Tây An-nam* in 1930 was an advance over the morality plays of the 1920s, not only in the sense that the characters in the play were far more developed,

41 Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà văn hiện đại*, III, p. 667; Caroline Webber, 'Overcoming excess: *Jouissance* and justice in Nivelde de la Chaussée's *École des mères*', *MLN*, 114, 4 (1999): 719.

42 On Molière's use of farce and the theme of illusion, see David Bancroft, *Molière and the comedy of the imagination: Some comments on Le malade imaginaire* (Sydney: Macquarie University School of Modern Languages, Monographs for Teachers of French, 1972), pp. 42–5; On his attack on superstitions, see Monique Wagner, *Molière and the Age of Enlightenment* (Banbury, UK: Voltaire Foundation, 1973), p. 224.

43 For an analogous situation, see Lionel Jensen's treatment of Hu Shi's analysis of Confucianism in *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese tradition and universal civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

44 *Kịch nói Việt Nam nửa đầu thế kỷ XX*, p. 116; Phan Kê Hoàn and Huỳnh Lý, *Bước đầu tìm hiểu*, p. 109; *Lược truyện các tác giả Việt Nam* [Summaries of Vietnamese writers], ed. Trần Văn Giáp et al. (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1972), vol. II, p. 175; Nguyễn Q. Thắng, *Từ điển tác giả văn học Việt Nam* [Dictionary of Vietnamese cultural writers] (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1999), p. 724; Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, Bùi Duy Tân and Nguyễn Như Ý, *Từ điển tác giả tác phẩm văn học Việt Nam dùng cho nhà trường* [A dictionary of writers of Vietnamese literary works for use in schools] (Hà Chí Minh City: Đại học Sư phạm, 2004), p. 276.

but more significantly because it directly questioned the value of Westernization and implicitly called into question the nationalism of Europeanized Vietnamese.<sup>45</sup> Nam Xương added a major element to the theme of returning to the pure woman and the traditional culture: in *Ông Tây An-nam*, the traditional culture being invented was a Vietnamese nationalist culture as well. However, *Ông Tây An-nam* is consistent with the plays of the 1920s in its appeal to the symbol of the pure woman. The Vietnamese woman in these plays is supposedly untainted by either the Chinese-dominated Confucian propaganda of the pre-colonial elite or the decadent French culture of the colonial elite. She represents to elite males the pure, stable and traditional Vietnamese identity that they want to find in themselves. *Ông Tây An-nam* demonstrates one case of how cosmopolitan males attempted to shore up their claims to being Vietnamese and eliminate their uncertainty or uneasiness about their identity through the image of a desirable and pure woman.<sup>46</sup>

### The pure woman of *Ông Tây An-nam*

*Ông Tây An-nam* was first performed in Hanoi in August 1930. The comedy centres on a wealthy young man named Lân who returns from France.<sup>47</sup> Though born into a scholar-official's family in Hanoi, he was sent to France by his family to study for many years and is returning after successfully graduating from a school in Paris. When his mother and father greet him upon his return, however, they are shocked to find that he is unable to recognize them or to speak Vietnamese. When his surprised father nonetheless embraces him, Lân exclaims through his servant who is forced to act as a translator: 'Eww! I'm being suffocated by your primitive stench! I beg you; please tell him not to hug me again!' Then Lân proceeds to do everything conceivable to offend his scholar-official father, from calling Confucius a lunatic to insisting that his father's body odour can be smelled for a 20-kilometre radius. Finally, much to his father's astonishment, Lân insists that he is in fact a European, and since he cannot have a Vietnamese father, his father must also be made European.<sup>48</sup>

45 Hà Minh Đức, 'Lời giới thiệu', pp. 11–12.

46 Because satire is a literary medium bent on debunking societal claims, it often strikes at the heart of controversial moral issues by attacking the very root of societal values and conventions. Ultimately, however, it only works if there is substantial agreement between the audience and the satirist about what standards exist. Thus satire, like comedy, may end up reassuring the intended audience of their values by attacking an assumed traditional enemy. See *Satire: A critical anthology*, ed. John Russell and Ashley Brown (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967), pp. xxxi–xxxiv; and Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 223–39. In this sense, despite their purportedly transformative nature, satires are often tamer than they originally seem, since they usually ridicule the social standards without asserting any new standards to replace them, preferring to reflect the idea that the more things change, the more they stay the same; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination of nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 67–8. Thus, the satire of *Ông Tây An-Nam* can be seen as reassuring Vietnamese men that Vietnamese women will not prefer French men or more Francophile Vietnamese men to them, thus making this satire a way to resolve uneasiness or anxiety stemming from perceived competition from these other categories of men.

47 A thorough summary of the plot and implications of this comedy can be found in Phan Kế Hoành and Huỳnh Lý, *Bước đầu tìm hiểu*, pp. 108–9.

48 Nam Xương, *Ông Tây An-Nam: Hai kịch ba hồi* [The Frenchman from Annam: A comedy in three scenes] (Hanoi: Librairie Nam-Ký, 1931) (henceforth OTAN), pp. 12 (quotation), 17–19 (offence), 20 (European).

The discussion that ensues reveals much about the identity politics of the play. While to his father, and presumably to the audience, becoming European is an absurdity, Lân insists that European-ness can be attained through a few simple steps:

Get rid of your miserable clothing and put on European clothes, cut your beard short, cut off your hair, apply makeup around your eyes to make your eyes look bigger, press cream and powder abundantly to your face. This is what you should do . . . . Then effectuate a total detestation for all that is Vietnamese; and also for that most Vietnamese thing of Vietnam – the thing that is stupidly called the ‘mother tongue’ . . . . And finally, stop associating with the peasant masses, who dishonour you when you refer to yourself as having the same race as they do, sell all of your goods, and follow me in going to France: at that point, how have you not become a Westerner just like I am?<sup>49</sup>

That this passage is told in such a farcical manner is evidence that the audience is supposed to react to this passage as a ridiculous or impossible proposition. Rather than Lân’s suggestion to his father being a genuine (if farfetched) possibility, this passage is contrary to the climax of the series of cultural offences that he has foisted on his father: not only does Lân deny his father’s values, but he even asks him to abandon his wife, family and values to enjoy, as he says at one point, the ‘exceptionally cute women’ of France and the ‘town of pleasures’ in Montmartre.<sup>50</sup>

After insulting his mother and refusing to converse with his best friend from school in Vietnamese, we learn in a conversation between Lân and his servant that he actually has not forgotten how to speak Vietnamese. Rather, since ‘the French language is the language of civilization’, he has refused to speak Vietnamese in order to affirm his European identity. Subsequently, Lân enters into a conversation with a close friend and distant relative of the family, Cù Huấn, a Vietnamese nationalist who argues that Lân’s repudiation of all things Vietnamese makes him an unpatriotic collaborator. His answers, interestingly enough, contradict one another. First, Lân claims that he is indeed a patriot; but as a Frenchman, his patriotism lies with France and not with Annam. Then, reflecting on this sentiment, he changes his mind, arguing instead for the tenuousness and destructiveness of national identity:

Love thy fatherland! These seductive words seem to say a grand thing. In reality, they reflect a much debased sentiment, a very mean emotion in the human soul. They divide humanity; they pit each race against the other, races that were originally sisters, since they all are born from the same father, Adam. They prevent us from uniting in the conquest of the great Universe that consists not only of the earth but also of Mars, Venus, Mercury and the other planets of infinite other solar systems. It is therefore humanity that we should love, and to love humanity is to love one’s self, because the principle of humanity is nothing but man.<sup>51</sup>

In the context of the play, however, Lân’s sentiment is proven to be false. We learn very soon afterwards that the purpose of this philosophical soliloquy is not to convince

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–3.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1 (French language), 49 (patriotism), 50–1 (long quotation).

his uncle of the importance of humanism and the evils of patriotism, but simply to persuade his uncle not to reveal what he has already heard: Lân's greatest secret, that he is still able to speak Vietnamese. In the context of the play, Lân's universalist humanism becomes a ruse for a particularistic French nationalism hidden below it, since, as Lân's uncle points out, the language and culture of his universalism can only be French and cannot include the Vietnamese language and cultural attributes.<sup>52</sup>

At this point in the play, we have established the main social criticism inherent in the comedy; Lân's character is funny precisely because he has been tainted by his experience in France, deluded into thinking that a French identity is the identity of universal humanity and that a superior civilized person cannot truly be Vietnamese. Lân's attitude may be a peculiar displacement of his scholar-official family's Sinocentrism, as they still measured 'civilization' by the attainment of a certain level of Confucian classical education; in their eyes the 'civilization' of universal humanity is assumed to be Chinese.<sup>53</sup> Thus, by being shocked by Lân's behaviour, his family (and perhaps the class of people most likely to be watching the play at its opening in Hanoi as well) deflect nationalist criticism from themselves and onto a new Francophone class of Vietnamese.

When Lân meets Cù Huấn's beautiful daughter Kim Ninh in the next scene, however, he is forced to rethink many of his positions. He refuses to believe that a debased Vietnamese woman could actually be civilized and beautiful like Kim Ninh; moreover, she is able to play tennis and speak French. Thus, his first reaction is to insist that she must not really be Vietnamese. However, when she refuses to speak French with him any further, Lân is so enamoured he decides to overlook her savage and native Vietnamese nature. He cannot help but fall madly in love with her as a 'worldly woman'. He instantly professes his undying love and insists that they should marry. From that point on, Lân decides to sacrifice his insistence on his Frenchness, and even assents to speaking Vietnamese with her. He is forced to accede to whatever stringent requirements she requests, to the point that he shouts: 'Perhaps God made her as a way to injure me! She is civilized like me, has white skin like me, and perhaps for her I will become a barbarian.'<sup>54</sup>

Although Kim Ninh's father Cù Huấn is disgusted by Lân's Eurocentric behaviour, he finally feels compelled by his friendship with the young man's parents to consent to the marriage. Kim Ninh, however, decides that Lân's European elitism is more than she can stand. She is being wooed by another suitor, Lân's friend from school. In a final scene, she declares to her father and Lân's parents that she does not wish to marry Lân. Instead, we learn that she wants to marry his friend, Tham Tứ:

Sir, in the presence of these two elders and while having [Lân and] the whole family here for a discussion, I am here to ask permission from you to be wed. In truth, though I will obey your decision for me to wed Mr. Cừ,<sup>55</sup> I am still very worried about his Westernized

52 Ibid., pp. 55–6. Dan Duffy (personal communication) has suggested that this passage also indicates a possible acquaintance with Christianity on Lân's part.

53 For the analogous process of the Chinese elite becoming attached to particular values rather than a traditional history that they regarded as universal, see Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its modern fate Vol. I: The problem of intellectual continuity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958).

54 OTAN, pp. 58–60 (language issue, 'worldly woman'), 74–5 (speaking Vietnamese), 110 (quotation).

55 'Cừ' is short for *cử nhân* ('recommended person', Chinese *ju ren*), the official term given to someone who had passed the first level of the traditional examinations system held in Vietnam until 1917. In this case, it is a term of respect that refers to Lân's having received a baccalaureate degree in France.

personality. Sir, you haven't seen how many men behave when they return from the West. If they don't have a wife, then they stay that way, and if they do, then they get rid of her; and when they get rid of their wives, they also shun the 'welcome home feast' given by their families. Sure, they come back; but isn't it true that they only do so in order to preserve their free time and their bodily pleasure and not to sacrifice for their country and society at all? They enjoy themselves and satiate themselves: what a disgrace! They have fun until all hours of the night and live it up whenever they want, and they will squander their money with their endless partying and picking up of prostitutes until they kill themselves! Since this is the case, one man will kill himself on opium, and the next will kill himself by having too much sex, extracting himself only because his sexual desires haven't been satisfied, or because they have been satisfied too much.

While both parents sit flabbergasted, Lân concludes that Kim Ninh has duped him into loving her all along. Seeing her 'Annamite character' now exposed, Lân disgustedly calls his servant, wanting to return to France so he can live as a European.<sup>56</sup>

### **Kim Ninh as national signifier: The gender politics of *Ông Tây An-nam***

The plot of *Ông Tây An-nam* is structured around two key elements: the cultural politics of the play and the transactional and gendered nature of Kim Ninh's character. Although these two elements are inextricable, for purely heuristic purposes it is useful to consider Kim Ninh's role first. At first glance, she appears in many ways as an independent, nationalist woman who stands up to a number of influential men in her life and makes her own choice with regard to marriage. After all, much to the dismay of her father, she initially takes a fancy to Lân, but then makes the decision to shun him. Moreover, Kim Ninh is even more independent when she seems to take that decision into her own hands, rather than allowing her father or Lân to make it.

In terms of the narrative of the play, however, these impressions belie the reality that Kim Ninh's function is mainly as a mirror, as a way to represent the needs of the male characters to themselves. Thus, when Lân falls in love with her, he does not woo her for any of her unique features. Quite the contrary – Lân in fact falls in love with an image of Kim Ninh that he has created, one that is a reflection of his own image. She becomes someone who, in Lân's mind, suffered from the same accidental Vietnamese birth that he does. She is a 'worldly woman' who possesses all the cultural capital he does, from a familiarity with the Parisian club scene to being an avid tennis player. She is, to him, every bit as white in complexion as he is; he loves her because he is projecting onto her his love for an ideal image of himself.

Initially, rather than objecting to this role, Kim Ninh plays into it. Upon first meeting him, her first response is to make reference to their previous meeting at the 'Bouc d'Or'. Though she insists upon being Vietnamese, she does nothing to contradict his impression that they must have met before at the 'Paris Dancing' club.<sup>57</sup> Although she insists on speaking Vietnamese to him, the exoticness of a Vietnamese-speaking tennis player who knows the Paris clubs only seems to increase his attraction to her. One could argue that the function of her insistence on speaking Vietnamese, revealing the shame

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 124 (quotation), 128.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 59.



Lân feels because he actually speaks the language, is in fact misplaced since her behaviour is an indication that culturally French people can still be Vietnamese speakers. Her function in the comedy (and this is in part what makes comedy funny) is to represent Lân to himself, and this is why he 'loves her'. She fulfils his desire to be European.

Although Kim Ninh genuinely changes her mind about Lân by the end of the play, and rejects his marriage proposal in a moralistic speech that affirms the importance of a pure Vietnamese identity, her main narrative purpose is to represent the ideal image of certain men in her life to themselves. The only difference between Kim Ninh's acceptance of Lân and her final rejection of him is that, rather than operating as a mirror for his cosmopolitan and Eurocentric identity, she switches to operating as a mirror for the pure nationalist identity craved by her father Cù Huấn and her new love interest, Tham Tứ.

Kim Ninh does not change her mind about Lân on her own, nor do we get any special insights into characteristics of her personality. Rather, she changes her mind in the context of conversations with her father and Tham Tứ about the debased nature of Lân's European identity. Her father and Tham Tứ consider themselves powerless to stop her impending marriage. Her father, a distant relative and very close friend of Lân's family, feels obligated by his bonds with Lân's father to assent to the marriage; Tham Tứ feels obligated by his friendship to Lân not to step into his courtship with Kim Ninh. Cù Huấn and Tham Tứ are thus both prevented by prevailing social custom from expressing their true Vietnamese nationalist desires. Yet, because Kim Ninh can speak to Lân's immorality while still putting up the façade of deferring to her father's opinion, she alone can act as a mirror to Cù Huấn and Tham Tứ's ideal selves. By speaking out against the evils of returning Westernized Vietnamese students, and by decrying the effects of opium smoking and prostitution on the Vietnamese national body, Kim Ninh acts as a representative who speaks for the feelings that Cù Huấn and Tham Tứ are not able to express on their own.

When looked at directly, then, Kim Ninh's identity appears as a void: her character acquires meaning solely through her function as a conduit through which Cù Huấn and Tham Tứ can project their desires to be good 'nationalist' Vietnamese.<sup>58</sup> The conclusion of the play resolves the comedy and attempts to secure the stability and separation of French and Vietnamese identities by sending Lân back to France to be a Frenchman and keeping Kim Ninh and Tham Tứ together. From this we can surmise that the play likely confirms the nationalist credentials of the audience in 1930s Hanoi as well. Though they have been invited to laugh heartily from the first act at Lân's pretensions and ludicrousness in believing himself to be a Frenchman, the audience paradoxically certifies in the end that Lân is not in fact a 'real' Vietnamese. Just as Kim Ninh confirms Tham Tứ's and Cù Huấn's nationalist credentials despite their knowledge of European things and their elitist scholar-official status, so she also confers this status upon the audience.

The central irony of *Ông Tây An-nam* is that Kim Ninh reaffirms to Tham Tứ, Cù Huấn and the audience their status as exemplars of a pure Vietnamese nationalism that

58 See Slavoj Žižek, *The metastases of enjoyment: Six essays on women and causality* (London: Verso, 1994), and Žižek, 'Class struggle or postmodernism? Yes, please!' in *Contingency, hegemony, universality: Contemporary dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 110–11.

they cannot possibly possess. For in order to participate in the play, in order to laugh at the jokes, in order to understand the French things to which it constantly refers, one cannot possess the non-French identity that it seems to embrace. Indeed, to even begin to understand the play, much less think that it is funny, one must understand both French and Vietnamese. One must know what the Eiffel Tower is and what happens at Montmartre, and be able to grasp a whole slew of bilingual puns scattered throughout the text. The character of Kim Ninh invites the audience of the play to affirm their Vietnamese nationalism in precisely the same way as Cù Huấn and Tham Tứ. They can enjoy the cultural knowledge produced by their shared Francophone cultural hybridity while ultimately denying its collaborationist implications and affirming, through the figure of Kim Ninh, their credentials as Vietnamese nationalists who reject the decadence, immorality and colonial implications of French culture.

In literature as in history, elite Francophone Vietnamese constructed a particularistic nationalism through the figure of a pure woman. This Vietnamese woman, as both Patricia Pelley and Sarah Womack have noted, could take the guise of the first-century heroines Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị or the third-century warrior Lady Triệu, or she could be melded onto Lê Ngọc Hân (a princess in the 1700s) or even the nineteenth-century poetess Hồ Xuân Hương.<sup>59</sup> In the case of most historical figures onto which this image is grafted, the Vietnamese women in question are posited as having fewer collaborationist connections to Chinese ideas than most of their counterparts; in *Ông Tây An-nam*, Kim Ninh is absolved of both the Confucian taint of her scholar-official father and the European taint of Lân. In either case, women served as canvasses onto which authors and historians of the 1930s could paint their own ideas of what it meant to be truly Vietnamese and to understand Vietnamese 'tradition'. Yet the fact that these authors and historians even perceived such a nationalist Vietnamese tradition is in itself paradoxical because it could only be articulated through the rubric of a hybrid culture. It could, in other words, only be asserted once such a culture no longer existed, since only a tradition under threat could possibly recognize itself as a tradition.

### **Cultural hybridity and the production of *Ông Tây An-nam***

If the ultimate message of *Ông Tây An-nam* is that decadent and Eurocentric Vietnamese like Lân should go back to France to live as Europeans, the medium for this message is, paradoxically, a decadent and Francocentric elite Vietnamese culture. The history of modern spoken dramatic theatre in Vietnam in general, and of *Ông Tây An-nam* in particular, is itself a European mix, an 'ambivalent' creation of the interaction between Vietnamese and European theatrical technique. In many ways, as Homi Bhabha has predicted, the 'in-betweenness' of the genre of modern spoken theatre was liberating, as it offered a tradition of social and nationalist criticism from Europe.<sup>60</sup> Once such a cultural hybridity was enunciated, however, it had to be immediately disavowed,

59 Sarah Womack, 'Remaking of a legend', pp. 31–50, and Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New histories of the national past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 179–82; Wynn Wilcox, 'Women and mythology in Vietnamese history: Lê Ngọc Hân, Hồ Xuân Hương, and the production of historical continuity in Vietnam', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 13, 2 (2005): 411–39.

60 Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), esp. pp. 40–3.

since the nationalist criticism of many of the writers of the 1920s and 1930s posited as a message an anti-French culturalism that the Eurocentrism of their medium rejected.

The development of the genre of the modern play, then, is a consequence of the existence of a mixed French and Vietnamese elite identity in the 1920s. It is no accident that the very elites who were translating French plays were often the authors of Francophone books about the 'soul' and the 'essence' of Vietnamese culture.<sup>61</sup> It is a function of the establishment of newspapers and the mass translation of French literature by members of the elite such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phạm Quỳnh, and of the existence of a canonical French corpus to imitate. This development of the modern play in Vietnam was a curiously selective Westernization. Since writers like Nam Xương were far more exposed to Molière than to any other French playwright, their plays were quite naturally Westernized in a very particular way; many Vietnamese playwrights, like Molière, wrote social criticism through satirical or farcical plays.<sup>62</sup> Thus Vietnamese plays in the 1920s were more characteristic of seventeenth-century Paris than they were of the Paris of the 1920s. It is true, of course, that the development of modern theatre in Vietnam was influenced by more traditional styles of Vietnamese opera and water puppetry, but there was unquestionably a hybrid mix.

Nam Xương was no exception to this rule. As he notes in the preface, *Ông Tây An-nam* was written with the specific intent of imitating Molière's tactic of creating social criticism through an emphasis on follies and the ridiculous.<sup>63</sup> The play itself is in fact based loosely on an 1899 French play, Tristan Bernard's *L'anglais tel qu'on le parle* (Good spoken English), which highlights a comedy of errors caused by misunderstandings between English and French speakers in Paris.<sup>64</sup> Having been raised in a scholar-official family and being fluent in French, Nam Xương had much in common with the Francophone characters in his plays. He appears in many ways to be a facsimile of Lân, the main character of *Ông Tây An-Nam* – a Western-educated, Francophone intellectual. The only difference is that unlike Lân and many cosmopolitan intellectuals of the 1930s, Nam Xương was a Vietnamese cultural nationalist who shored up his own credentials by displacing them onto the figure of a woman.

### Conclusion

In the 1920s and 1930s many reformers fervently believed that Vietnamese modernity could be brought about through a thorough abandonment of 'the old' in favour of a new culture, which would be influenced by European political and social ideas and

61 For example, see Phạm Quỳnh, *Việt-nam: l'âme et l'essence* (Hanoi: Đông Kinh Ấn-quán, 1928) and Phạm Quỳnh, *L'idéal du sage dans la philosophie confucéenne* (Hanoi: Đông Kinh Ấn-quán, 1928).

62 This phenomenon is directly analogous to the reception of Western literature in China, where Yan Fu's emphasis on translating works relating to his own interests in Social Darwinism and Anglo-American economic philosophy was inextricably connected with the formation of Chinese intellectuals such as Hu Shi; Jerome Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

63 For an explanation of Molière's use of folly and his general comic technique, see Andrew Calder, *Molière: The theory and practice of comedy* (London: Athlone, 1993), pp. 41–54.

64 Tristan Bernard, 'L'anglais tel qu'on le parle', in *Le théâtre de Tristan Bernard*, vol. I, ed. Paul Bernard (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1909), pp. 1–35. Commenting that *Ông Tây An-Nam* is similar to this play, Phan Kế Hoành and Huỳnh Lý (*Bước đầu tìm hiểu*, p. 42) mistakenly identify the playwright as Eugène Labiche.

would depart from the sentimental attachment to Vietnamese values.<sup>65</sup> Those advocating the importation of social and political systems from Europe ran the ideological gamut from those now frequently and disparagingly called collaborators, such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phạm Quỳnh, to anarchists, socialists and communists. The vast majority, however, had a common agenda of importing modern nationalism in one form or another, though this nationalism might be royalist, constitutionalist, collaborationist or socialist. One of the more dominant guises of modern nationalism, though, is that of national uniqueness. Based on early forms of European nationalism, national uniqueness is found in the timeless and misty origins of a cohesive and unique Vietnamese people.<sup>66</sup> In order to be properly nationalistic, then, modern Vietnamese writers had to find the origins of their nationalism in precisely the traditional culture that they were invested in disavowing, for one of the requirements of this brand new Vietnamese culture was that it also be ancient.

In other words, modern Vietnamese writers had to find their bearings in an increasingly complex world. They were, as Lisa Lowe has suggested, literary ‘nomads’ who did not want to merely reinforce ‘the structure of colonial domination’ but could no longer resort to a nostalgic call to return to ‘an essentialized pre-colonial order’.<sup>67</sup> As a corollary of their finding a nationalist tradition on which to build a new culture, the purveyors of this culture needed to shore up their own nationalist credentials. They had to locate themselves as Vietnamese, and to do so, they had to posit themselves as members of the very Vietnamese culture that the movement for a ‘new culture’ had written off as sentimental and dangerous.

Nationalists thus crafted a particular idea of Vietnamese tradition – a tradition which included certain moral precepts, among them the opposition to certain ‘social evils’ brought by colonialism such as opium and prostitution, and a belief in the uniqueness of Vietnamese culture.<sup>68</sup> However, the entire class of French-educated Vietnamese of the 1920s or 1930s, whether considered ‘collaborators’ or ‘nationalists’, were already foreign as they were influenced by European ideas. Some of those who made only

65 Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 1; Shawn McHale, ‘Vietnamese Marxism, dissent, and the politics of postcolonial memory: Trần Đức Thảo, 1946–1993’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61, 1 (2002): 7–31.

66 Ernest Renan, ‘What is a nation?’, in *Nation and narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990); Tom Nairn, *The faces of nationalism: Janus revisited* (New York: Verso, 1997); Naoki Sakai, *Translation and subjectivity: On ‘Japan’ and cultural nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

67 Lisa Lowe, ‘Literary nomadics in Francophone allegories of postcolonialism: Pham Van Ky and Tahar Ben Jelloun’, *Yale French Studies*, 82, 1 (1993): 44–5.

68 A central characteristic of these new forms of nationalism came to be the idea of the Vietnamese will to resist foreign aggression. Though this theme is more closely identified with the Marxist Hanoi ‘new history’ of the 1950s and 1960s, in many ways it originated with the increasingly independent Vietnamese historiography of the 1930s. One can see the idea of resistance to foreign aggression emerging in this period in Trần Trọng Kim’s masterful *Việt Nam sử lược* [Outline history of Vietnam] with his discussion of Chinese rule as ‘northern colonization’ (*Bắc thuộc*) and his emphasis on fundamental geographic and intellectual differences between Vietnamese and Chinese inexorably leading to the end of Chinese rule in Vietnam in 939; Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam sử lược*, vol. I (Saigon: Bộ Giáo Dục, 1971), pp. 77–8. The problem with the construction of an identity around resistance to foreign aggression lies in its non-uniqueness; clearly, all nations, in order to define themselves as nations, must consider themselves as having survived some kind of foreign aggression. A nation could not be defined without some idea of unification, aggression or conquest from outsiders.

minimal efforts to assert their essential difference from Europeans, such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, were retrospectively labelled collaborators by those who did make such an effort, and they largely continue to be labelled this way, regardless of the actual ideological diversity of this group of people.<sup>69</sup> Many who did try to assert a Vietnamese identity did so by selectively asserting the values they believed to be traditional; one might find this in Hồ Chí Minh's grandfatherly tendency in the 1950s and 1960s to cite ancient Vietnamese adages, something absent from his writings and speeches when he was known as Nguyễn Ái Quốc in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>70</sup>

A prevalent literary tactic to deal with issues related to the joint emergence of Europeanization and new forms of national identity appears to have been the one taken in *Ông Tây An-nam*: to assert one's Vietnamese identity by appealing to, and approving of, the decisions made by a fictional woman who is Europeanized yet still somehow morally pure. Writers like Nam Xương asserted their Vietnameseness by inventing a desirable woman and making her modern and while still affirming what they believed were essential non-French and Vietnamese values, thus clearly demonstrating their modern nationalism. But why is this role gendered? Desirable women were chosen for this task, I would argue, for two main reasons. First, as with Kim Ninh's character in *Ông Tây An-nam*, women were thought to be less implicated in both the 'bad traditionalism' – the so-called 'Confucian straightjacket' of the scholar-officials – and in the 'bad cosmopolitanism' – the decadent Europeaness of collaborators like Lân.<sup>71</sup> Since women left few historical records in both history and literature, they can be pressed more easily into service in oppositional roles, as representatives of the 'unique Vietnameseness' bubbling just under the surface of a Confucian orthodoxy and, later, an elite French cosmopolitanism.

Secondly, for elite male Vietnamese of the 1920s and 1930s, women operated as ideal types. In literature much as in poetry, Kim Ninh's character becomes archetypal of a new character of Vietnamese tradition: the nationalist woman who is made to stand up against Chinese-dominated Confucianism and European-dominated cultural excess. Eventually, though, she loses 'her concrete features' in a way reminiscent of Lacan's analysis of the 'Lady' in European courtly love poems:

The Lady is never characterized for any her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is only because she embodies an immaterial wisdom or because she represents its functions more than she exercises them.<sup>72</sup>

Since elite male Vietnamese of the 1920s and 1930s did not appreciate these women for their concrete features, they come to be vehicles for the exploration of social and cultural status among men. Their value, as is the case in marriage practices such as the dowry,

69 Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, pp. 102–4.

70 Wynn Wilcox, 'Hybridity, colonialism, and national subjectivity in Vietnamese historiography', in *Travelling concepts: Text, subjectivity, hybridity*, ed. Joyce Goggin and Sonja Neef (Amsterdam: ASCA Press, 2001), pp. 208–9.

71 For the idea of the 'drab conformity' and the 'stern discipline' of the 'Confucian straightjacket', see Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *The heritage of Vietnamese poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. xlv and 41–67.

72 Jacques Lacan, *The ethics of psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 149–50; quoted in Žižek, *Metastases of enjoyment*, p. 90.

comes in their ability to serve as a means for men to articulate their prestige. Just as Lân's 'love' for Kim Ninh is a function of his seeing his own Europeaness in her, so too do the 'nationalist' choices of women like her act as a reflection of the nationalist aspirations of their elite Vietnamese fathers and love interests.

Women provide a mirror for figures like Tham Tứ to assert and confirm their status as Vietnamese nationalists. They become figures onto which Vietnamese nationalism is projected so that thoroughly Eurocentric figures like Nam Xương can still appear to support the concept of a Vietnamese cultural essence. In *Ông Tây An-nam*, as in much of Vietnamese literature of the 1920s and 1930s, a nationalist message is offered through the medium of an already hybridized urban, elite culture, one which invents traditional Vietnamese values that paradoxically are already Eurocentric. Thus, in literature such as this play, putatively traditional Vietnamese values were created by Francophone intellectuals in order to support a particularistic form of nationalism that paradoxically would not have existed but for the elite's adoption of certain kinds of European literature and philosophy.