

Drowned in Romances, Tears, and Rivers

Young Women's Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Vietnam

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In the summer we take pleasure in visiting the deep lake.

In the autumn we drink the toxic brew.

In the winter we recite poems about leaving this life.¹

These lines, illustrated by a four-panel cartoon, appeared on the front cover of *Phong Hoa* (Customs), a weekly newspaper published in Hanoi, in January 1936 (see Figure 1). *Phong Hoa* was founded by Nguyen Tuong Tam,² who is better known as Nhat Linh, the leader of an organization of Vietnamese literati called the *Tu Luc Van Doan* (Self-Reliant Literary Group). The newspaper openly and critically reflected Vietnam's contemporary social issues with a sense of acerbic humor. These four verses parody a classic poem about the joys one can experience during the four seasons. Its author, cleverly imitating classical structure and language, disparaged a phenomenon in Vietnamese society: suicide, which seemed to alarmingly have become a "fad" or pastime that people enjoyed partaking in all year.

Many Vietnamese newspapers in the late 1920s and early 1930s reported a very serious "plague" devastating the young people and particularly young women. Among them was *Phong Hoa's* portrayal of this sickness in pseudo-scientific style: "It mostly

involves young women. Their bodies become weak and fragile, while eyes are dreamy and always full of tears. They like to wallow in shallow water. This disease is a natural consequence of the 'novel' [*tiêu thụ* in Vietnamese, a transliteration of Chinese *xiaoshuo* 小说] craze ... which manifests itself in the form of young people's fanatical devotion to mass producing and devouring romances."³ Such an ironic description refers to several key facts that contemporary Vietnamese people thought about the epidemic: the majority of reported suicide cases were women, many of whom sought death by jumping into bodies of water, which were common features of Vietnam's topography; and they seemed to be always daydreaming and hypersensitive to the tragedies they read in popular romances, whose characters' tragic ending allegedly drove them to self-destruction.

Certainly, the above descriptions do not represent all cases of women's suicides during that time; in fact, many of them chose voluntary death because of social, economic, and ideological changes while others did so due to their own or their husbands' gambling debts. While a number of women chose jumping into lakes or rivers, there were many cases of hanging, self-mutilation, shooting oneself with a gun, or overdosing on opium mixed with vinegar or taking a poisonous potion. Nevertheless, there must have been a certain amount of truth in the above mentioned description,

and this paper aims at finding a connection between the “typical” description of women’s suicide and the reality. Romance novels could not have had significant influence among young women unless they had attained a certain level of education as well as knowledge of literature. Therefore, we will begin by investigating education opportunities and accessibility to reading materials for Vietnamese women in the early twentieth century. After that, we will discuss two representative works of Vietnamese popular literature in the 1920s to see how romances actually impacted young female readers. I suggest that a review of popular novels and a discussion of women’s issues will demonstrate that a higher level of women’s education, together with the influence of the new reading culture and romantic literature, played a role in this sudden increase in suicides. I maintain that there was a relationship between the development of the printed word and higher suicide rates, but this connection was not ultimate or proportional because it is impossible to pinpoint all relevant social and inherent factors that determine the suicide rate of a community. We should lay more emphasis on the metamorphosis of Vietnamese society at the turn of the twentieth century, while carrying out a search for the answer to the suicide epidemic. But before we explore the impact of the printed word on Vietnamese women’s lives, let us look at some factual details of the suicide epidemic to see how serious it really was.

The Suicide Epidemic

Statistics on numbers of suicides in early twentieth-century Indochina were scanty and incomplete. From my research of newspaper reports, there were at least 191 cases of suicide throughout the country from 1925 to 1935, among which women accounted for approximately 64%. This percentage reflects actual cases of suicide; failed suicide attempts were likely to drive it far higher. However, an article in *Phong Hoa* mentions that over 250 people committed suicide in 1933 alone.⁴ According to Nguyen Van Ky (whose source is unknown), there were 2.7 suicides per 100,000 people in Vietnam, in comparison to 20.2 in France.⁵ A 1949 article by T. Smolski that addresses the issue of suicide provides some figures obtained from the criminal court: 7.5 suicides per 100,000 in the south.⁶ The author also claimed that urban agglomerations in the north led to too much confusion

and cross-listing so that the number of suicides could not be accurately determined. Extrapolating Smolski’s figures, there must have been about 540 suicide cases per year if we use this number and take the population of Vietnam during the 1920s-1930s to be approximately 20 million. Hou Yanxing in his research about women’s suicide in Shanghai, during the same period and when the population was approximately 28 million, reported an average of 2195.5 cases per year from 1929 to 1935, among which women accounted for 1158.7 or 52.8 percent.⁷ As far as we can conclude from these figures, even during the height of the suicide epidemic, Vietnam’s suicide rate was about seven to eight times lower than France and Shanghai.⁸

How could such a low suicide rate cause such a great deal of coverage and discussion in newspapers and periodicals? One of the reasons is that unlike cultures such as Japan’s, which considered suicide an honorable death,⁹ the Vietnamese did not think highly of self-inflicted death. For the Vietnamese, giving up one’s life voluntarily was usually seen as weakness of the mind and unfiliality towards ones’ parents. This view was obviously influenced by Confucian ethics, which recognize the possibility of a righteous suicide, yet, in general, vigorously condemn self-destruction, for one must not harm the flesh and blood with which one is

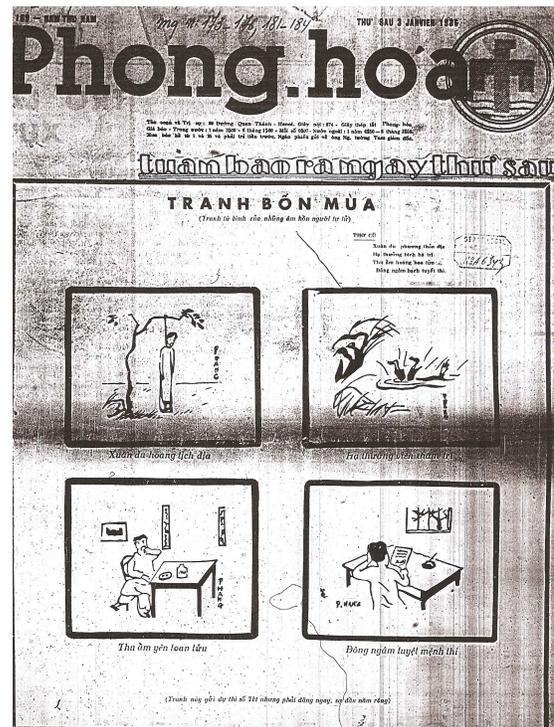


Figure 1 (right).
Cover of *Phong Hoa*
(Customs),
January 1936

endowed by parents.¹⁰ Even cutting hair was viewed as a violation of traditional values of moral debt (*on*) and filial piety (*hiếu*) because one was not allowed to “sully the body one possessed as a gift from one’s parents and ancestors.”¹¹ People who committed suicide also infringe on principles of filial piety in the sense that they failed to continue their ancestral lines or serve their parents.¹² Besides, Confucian followers maintained that the ultimate purpose of life is constant self-betterment;¹³ therefore, untimely death prevented humans from fulfilling this aim. However, the introduction of new forms of knowledge caused the decline of Confucian ethics as the sole source for moral guidance. In the next section, we will look into how this process unfolded.

Education and Suicide

“A daughter without talent is a good fortune.”

Vietnamese Proverb

Educational opportunities for women in early twentieth-century Vietnam led to a great transformation of society. Prior to this time, very few Vietnamese had been able to obtain any formal education and the number was even lower for women. Sending a child to school meant the family had one fewer toiler to work the land and more expenses to worry about. Moreover, girls were usually considered as temporary tenants at their parents’ houses, and when they got married, usually at young ages, they would belong entirely to their in-law’s households. This practice is reflected in the common saying: “Having a daughter in the house is like having a fish sauce vat hanging in the kitchen. One never knows when it will ferment so she should be married off as soon as possible.”¹⁴ Therefore, there was little rationale for a girl’s parents to sponsor her education, as she would eventually leave them for her husband’s family. Furthermore, women in the past were discouraged from learning, as a familiar proverb goes: “A daughter without talent is a good fortune.”¹⁵ A few daughters of scholar-gentry or affluent families could benefit from the tutorship of their fathers or join their brothers in class.¹⁶ Even though some notable Vietnamese women such as Doan Thi Diem (1705-1748) and Ho Xuan Huong (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) produced outstanding

literary works that attested to the literary accomplishments of Vietnamese women, these exceptions were very few and did not represent the overall female population.¹⁷

The situation improved greatly when many young women were able to attend school and obtain degrees thanks to the adoption of a Latinized script (*quốc ngữ*) and the establishment of the Franco-Vietnamese educational system in the 1920s, especially schools for women (*trường nữ học*).¹⁸ But an even more important factor was the change in men’s opinions about women’s education, because in Vietnamese society the former had been exerting great influence on the lives of the latter throughout history. Starting in the period from 1905-1910, women were encouraged by Vietnam’s male scholars to educate themselves by attending public lectures.¹⁹ In 1918, Mr. Nguyen Hong Nguyen, a major contributor of *Nam Phong* (*Southern Ethos*), even modestly and honestly asserted that: “I regret that I did not have much education; therefore, I wish each of our women could learn ten times more than I did.”²⁰ The reader should know that the article was published in one of most influential journals in Vietnam at that time. The monthly magazine *Nam Phong* was founded under the guardianship of Albert Sarraut, French governor-general of Indochina (1911-1914 and 1917-1919), and the directorship of Pham Quynh, a classically-trained and pro-French scholar who was later appointed as head of the cabinet and minister of education in the constitutional monarchy government set up by the French in 1933.²¹ Another *Nam Phong* article in 1919 by Thieu Son, a male teacher and prominent contributor, criticized rather harshly some outdated notions still existing among the Vietnamese that prevented women from getting a proper education.²² The author argued that because both men and women undertook employment in society, women needed the same education as men, including ethics studies, geography, mathematics, hygiene, rulership [*cai trị*], history, philosophy, and customs. After such in-depth training, girls could take courses on cooking, sewing, knitting, and other practical household skills. In terms of difficult topics such as Classical Chinese (*chữ Nho*) and French language, if one had intelligence, then it would not be harmful for her to learn some more; but if not, she should not waste her time. In short, looking at such arguments, we can conclude that many Vietnamese

intellectuals did not impose any restriction on women's education as long as their learning could benefit the country. The persistent fear among traditional scholars that women outsmarting men would lead to domestic disorder and social upheaval was entirely absent in these writings.

Before we reach a conclusion about the attitudinal change towards women's education, let us look at another prominent newspaper, the weekly *Phu Nu Tan Van* (*Women's News*). Though focusing more on women's issues, this paper attracted thousands of readers from all walks of life and from all over Vietnam, not just in the south where it was published. The newspaper not only contained many articles concerning women's emancipation, rights to education, health, and family-related problems, but it also established funds for students in need, organized an exposition of women's crafts in 1932, and built dining halls for the poor and unemployed.²³ An article published in 1933 by Thieu Son, a male author, journalist, and critic who was a major contributor to *Phu Nu Tan Van*, also attacked as obsolete the notion that girls' literacy would be dangerously employed in debauched acts, and thus corrupt young women's minds.²⁴ In fact, the author argued, "education is the key to open up the soul. Only when the soul is open can one take a grasp of one's self and direct it towards the morally upright [*chanh dai quang minh*] way."²⁵ The author argued that whether women collaborated with men or took men's jobs, they must be educated. If Vietnamese people continued to uphold such harmful thoughts and deprive women of education opportunities, humanity would lose a large number of competent workers because "the result of women's education in the world has proved that women do not lose to men in any field."²⁶ Thieu Son showed both abstract and concrete benefits from educating women in his arguments: knowledge not only makes women morally upright, but also allows women to contribute to the nation's welfare. Such a dramatic change in position on girls' schooling opened up the school gate to many young women. In the 1920s-1930s, more than 40,000 girls were able to attend public or private institutions, which was about 10 percent of the total elementary students, and at least an equal number received some kind of basic reading instructions at home.²⁷

We have looked at the evidence of an increase in the level of women's education in early twentieth-century Vietnam. Let us turn our attention to possible impacts of this progress. I suggest that a considerable number of suicides by educated Vietnamese women in the early twentieth century demonstrate the connection between their educational level and their predisposition to self-destruction. While most of the suicides were usually reported in a hundred words or less, there were a few extraordinary cases that received extensive coverage. For example, in January 1932, *Duoc Nha Nam* (*Southern Torch*), a daily that focused on reporting the latest international and domestic events, and *Phu Nu Tan Van* both reported extensively on the case of Ms. Nguyen Thanh Van, a twenty-something woman who attempted suicide several times.²⁸ Abandoned by her father who remarried after her mother had passed away, Thanh Van lived with her brother and sister-in-law, with whom she often had disagreements. Because of a minor dispute with her sister-in-law, she tried to burn herself to death with gasoline, but was discovered in time by relatives. In the hospital, a doctor, moved by her good looks, took good care of her. Thanh Van, an orphan without much familial love, soon consented to marry the doctor without knowing that he already had a wife. Thanh Van became his second wife and suffered from the inferior treatment reserved for concubines, which was manifested in a popular saying: "eating leftovers and sleeping in the outer quarter" (*an com nguoi, ngu nha ngoai*).²⁹ Unable to get a divorce and start a new life, she drank a bottle of iodine on the way back from the pharmacy where she had just obtained it. She then hired a rickshaw in order to sit down upon feeling the effects of the drug. Thanh Van was, however, rescued by the rickshaw puller, who saw her fading away in his vehicle and took her to the hospital in time. Too determined to die, a few days later the young woman jumped from the second floor of a hostel and injured her legs. She was again brought to the hospital where they had to cut off one of her legs in order to save her life, but the extreme pain finally got to her. She left behind a note lamenting how in the modern world money corrupted people's minds and pushed young women to despair, which, according to the article, "shows that although having been born into a poor family, she had significant formal instruction and an intellect higher than that of the common people."³⁰ Nam Chuc, a prominent contributor to *Duoc Nha Nam*, wrote a eulogy for Ms. Nguyen Thanh

Van, lamenting the waste of a resolute and attractive woman who, because of chronic poverty and excessive affection, met an unfortunate end (*bac menh*).³¹

Six months later, *Phu Nu Tan Van* reported two other women committing suicide: one was a female teacher from Cao Bang, a northern province, who had been living happily with her husband (also a teacher), her in-laws, and their five children. On Saturday, May 7, 1932, Mrs. My went home early from school, ate lunch, and got into bed pretending to sleep.³² Under the covers, she cut her nipples and throat, which caused her to bleed profusely, soaking the shirt she was wearing. Probably affected by the extreme loss of blood, she then called out to her mother-in-law to help her change into another shirt. When the mother-in-law walked in and uncovered the blanket, she saw that woman's throat had been severed halfway through, her head and body were also separated, and blood from an artery kept flooding out. The old woman was extremely terrified and called for Mrs. My's husband, who unbuttoned her shirt to discover that her nipples were missing. It turned out that she tried to commit suicide by cutting off her nipples, but she soon found out she could not die from such wounds so she slit her throat as well. Mrs. My finally died after the mother-in-law had finished changing her in a clean shirt.

The other woman from the same report was Mrs. Ty, a secretary (*ki luc*) and schoolteacher from Lai Thieu, a southern province, who left her job and family without a word. Later, her husband heard that she had jumped into the Binh Loi River. Her body mysteriously floated back to Lai Thieu province where her mother lived. There were rumors that she might have chosen death because of a huge gambling debt, rather than an unrequited love or a family dispute. The anonymous author of this article criticized her thus: "for those who are country bumpkins with little education, it is understandable if they commit suicide because of pent-up feeling about something; however, for those who have some education and even have attained the position of a teacher, it is inexplicable and blameworthy if they commit suicide just because of some minor discontent."³³ Incidents like these clearly show the pervasive presence of educated, young, urban women among the victims of the suicide epidemic.

While educational opportunities and textbooks were still limited to the wealthy, newspapers and journals were more accessible to everyone because of their low

cost, availability, and coverage of social issues that concerned people from all walks of life. Publishing houses tried to meet the demand for more reading materials as the number of literate people rose. Hence, the changes in terms of printed materials in fact had an even greater influence than the increase in educational opportunities in Vietnamese society. In the next section, we will examine the role of newspapers and journals in shaping the life of women in twentieth-century Vietnam.

Reading Culture

"If daughters are allowed to learn how to read and write, they will just use such skills to exchange love letters with lousy men."

Vietnamese Saying

The educational system in Vietnam was "solely a machine for producing scholars imbued with Confucian doctrine"³⁴ for more than a thousand years, and "[the] influence of the Confucian pedagogue ran from the top to the bottom of nineteenth-century Vietnamese society."³⁵ Therefore, reading anything other than Confucianism-instilled works was frowned upon and even restricted by the government.³⁶ Furthermore, if a woman was caught trying to learn in secret, she would be labeled "rebellious" and her books torn apart.³⁷ What really bothered parents was that if their daughter could read and write, she might exchange love letters with a young man, which meant she was trying to escape from their control in the matter of marriage.³⁸ In the early twentieth century, this long-established fear was increasingly realized, much to the horror of traditional parents, when many young women who became exposed to ideals of romantic love, self-independence, and individualism, "rebelled" against Confucian-influenced customs. Newspapers and journals published many articles promoting the habit of reading and a culture of self-education. Nguyen Hong Nguyen (who, as we have seen earlier in this essay, strongly urged women to educate themselves in an abovementioned article) exhorted: "I have a few words for my fellows: if you want to be smart, please don't hesitate to spend money on newspapers. One day you will eradicate stupidity and humiliation and become intellectual [*tri thuc*] enough to compete with the world."³⁹ This article,

published in 1918, also advocated absorbing beneficial ideas and practices from different cultures, rather than limiting oneself to the Sino-Chinese tradition: “Our country in the past was influenced by the morals of Confucianism and Daoism which lack elements for intellectual enhancement; therefore, our country is weak, our people are poor, and our nature is unconfident.”⁴⁰ Lacking a healthy reading culture was detrimental to the very existence and status of the Vietnamese in the modern world.

The bloom of the Vietnamese press in the early twentieth century in terms of both quantity and quality aided the development of a good reading culture. Quite a few newspapers catered to a female audience. For instance, *Nu Gioi Chung* (*Women’s Bell*, published in Saigon in 1918), *Phu Nu Tan Van* (*Women’s News*, published in Saigon from 1929-1935), *Phu Nu Thoi Dam* (*Women’s Contemporary Discussion*, published in Hanoi from 1930-1934), *Dan Ba Moi* (*New Women*, published in Saigon from 1934-1936), and many others which did not last for more than a year because of censorship or lack of funds.⁴¹ Many other creditable newspapers and magazines contained various discussions about women’s affairs such as *Nam Phong* (*Southern Ethos*, published in Saigon from 1917-1933) and *Phong Hoa* (*Customs*, published in Hanoi from 1932-1936), whose articles this paper draws heavily from.

Such material changes led to mental transformations. Newspapers produced for women and discussing particular women’s issues gave female Vietnamese the feeling that they, for the first time, were the center of attention. Many early twentieth-century Vietnamese women came to feel that they could live for themselves, not their husbands, children, or in-law families.⁴² More importantly, periodicals at the time did not stop at reporting news and advocating for social reforms, they also published novels in serial form, which became very popular among readers. Such literary works contained multiple layers of meanings that led to different opinions about their influence in Vietnamese society. While education allowed people to benefit from the written word, the new reading culture allowed people to access various materials that would have previously been banned for their potential harm to social well-being.

Romances and Suicide

This brings us to the “novel craze” mentioned in the introduction. This craze was caused by an increase in the number of writers producing romances. Duoc Nha Nam’s article in 1932 voiced concern about an unchecked boom in the production of romances: “In our society, an uncountable number of novels have been published recently; valuable ones are few while the valueless are far too many... because even those who know only a few words want to be writers and publish their writings,” and proposed to establish a literature committee to control the quality of published works.⁴³ Such concern reflected a rise in quantity and, to a lesser extent, quality of fiction during the late 1920s and early 1930s due to better printing technology and, more importantly, a larger audience.

According to the speculation of newspaper reporters, those women who killed themselves were rumored to be “modern” (*tan thoi*) daughters of bourgeoisie families who spent their days reading romantic novels and ultimately copying the heroine’s actions. Such perceptions were grounded in the fact that novels by Hoang Ngoc Phach and in the *Tu Luc Van Doan*—led by Nhat Linh, Khai Hung, and Thanh Lam—and the “new poetry” by Xuan Dieu and Che Lan Vien, which often depicted the passionate, and usually unrequited, love between talented men and beautiful women—were very popular among young urban readers.

Pure Heart (To Tam) by Hoang Ngoc Phach, published in 1922, was frequently singled out by critics as the prototype for popular romances, and thus a cause of many young women’s melancholy and their tragic ends. An editorial in *Phu Nu Tan Van* claimed: “Recently Thuy Kieu and Ms. Pure Heart have trained many girl friends to be ultra-romantic, suspicious and fatalistic, and especially believers of the theory of “taking chances, closing eyes, and stepping forward.”⁴⁴ The novel is about a young woman, named Pure Heart, endowed with extraordinary beauty and a sensitive soul, but living in a traditional family. She falls in love with a schoolteacher whose romantic verses move her heart, but ends up marrying another man whom her family picks for her. Both of the characters belong to the generation of young educated people who are still reluctant to resist arranged marriages because their mindset is still steeped in traditional customs. They do not make their love known for fear of

transgressing the Confucian tradition, which commands children to obey their parents' decisions unconditionally.⁴⁵ The young female protagonist finally dies from increasing melancholy and deteriorating health, and the schoolteacher can only treasure all their correspondence and later tells this heartrending story to the author who writes it down.

Another novel that received a lot of blame for corrupting the mind of the female youth is *Nhat Linh's Severance (Doan Tuyet)*, which begins with a conversation about a woman committing suicide because of her family's extremely cruel treatment of her. The novel's female protagonist, Loan, a young "modern woman," is forced by her parents to marry into a rich, ultra-traditional family against her wishes. She is already in love with a good-looking political activist who, however, cannot pay his rent and has to leave Hanoi to make a living elsewhere (while allegedly conducting revolutionary activities). In her new family, Loan is mistreated by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, her own husband, and even his concubine. Their lack of education and culture turns them into malicious and hateful people.⁴⁶

Many contemporary intellectuals criticized the negative impact of such romances on young adults. Dinh Tan Vien wrote in a 1929 article, titled "The Harm of Reading Novels," that a young woman reading a novel about a female character of great beauty having affairs with young men in sentimental language cannot help but "become muddled, and day and night dream about coital affairs (*mong Vu Son*)." He proclaimed, "Alas! This is definitely the seedling of corrupted morals, degenerated customs, shattered families, and a destabilized nation."⁴⁷ Phu Nu Tan Van's article by a female contributor in 1930, titled "Why Does One Commit Suicide?" also emphasized the problem of reading novels: "I saw many girls, only seventeen or eighteen years old, day and night wallowing in rubbish romantic novels, weeping and commiserating with the characters, and letting their minds wander in that airy-fairy world. There comes the feeling of world-weariness. And when they come into contact with the society, seeing that life is hard and full of troubles, they immediately think about death."⁴⁸

Interestingly, a few years earlier when *Pure Heart's* author, Hoang Ngoc Phach, was still a university student, he published an article voicing his concern about the harmful effects of sensational literature on

young women.⁴⁹ Hoang noted that romances had previously existed in Vietnamese culture, such as *Lamentations of a Concubine (Cung Oan Ngam Khuc)*, *The Song of a Soldier's Wife (Chinh Phu Ngam)*, and *The Tale of Kieu (Kim Van Kieu)*, yet the creation and appreciation of such works were restricted to a few writers and a select audience while nowadays sentimental romances were overly profuse.⁵⁰ The author claimed that he did not want to either criticize female students who enjoyed romantic novels or condemn the flood of "sentimental" literature, he was just concerned that "nowadays, living in a world of hopeless dreams is like the sun in the late afternoon. Practical life is a widespread trend. For a country that is still underdeveloped like ours and in this extremely competitive world, being practical [*thiet thuc*] should be more valued than being refined [*hoa my*]."⁵¹ This pragmatic viewpoint, written in poetic style, reflected the advocacy of many young radicals in the 1920s, who stressed the necessity of incorporating Western utilitarian values into the Vietnamese society without abandoning traditional values.⁵²

That being said, the last chapter of *Pure Heart* proves widespread criticism of its harmful emotional stimulation wrong. This chapter carries the author's true intention. Hoang Ngoc Phach perhaps wanted to present his agenda discretely in the conventional form of romance. Yet, he used the concluding chapter to breakaway from the majority of tear-jerk novels, and that misled many readers who were too deeply impressed by *Miss Pure Heart's* tragedy to bother with the "live-strong" message. The author attributed the tragedy to the young girl's obsession with romantic love and sentimental literature, which develops to the point that she loses contact with the real world, and described how the schoolteacher turns his back to such lachrymose literature, tries to motivate himself with pictures of Napoleon and the like, and puts his mind to his teaching job.⁵³ The whole novel criticizes the weaknesses of young people who are so strongly bound by cruel traditions that they dare not fight for their own happiness. *Pure Heart* "obviously conveyed a message not completely congruent with the conscious intent of its author."⁵⁴

While Nhat Linh, the author of *Severance*, was criticized for contributing to the suicide fever among young women, he meant to encourage women to stand on their own feet and fight against the evils in the

society. Nhat Linh, though better known as a novelist of Vietnam's romance movement, was also a radical scholar and politician. We know, for example, that he was the founder of the newspaper *Phong Hoa* and its supplement *Ngay Nay (Today)*, which covered controversial social issues, challenged preordained customs, and promoted progressive ideas. In addition to fighting the colonial government with the pen, Nhat Linh was also involved in many nationalist movements over the course of his life. The message of *Severance* is in fact contrary to the criticism about its contribution to the high rate of female suicides. The protagonist, Loan, marries a "wimpy" man of a "regressive" family because her parents owe them a large amount of money. This motive bears resemblance to Thuy Kieu from *The Tale of Kieu*—a daughter sells herself into a brothel in order to rescue her father from imprisonment, which was at the time still considered a paradigm of filial behavior. Loan does not choose to commit suicide. Instead, she tries to reconcile with her husband's family and make the best out of her miserable situation. Even though the thought of suicide often crosses her mind, she tries to brace herself for difficulties and listens to encouraging words from close friends. The protagonist takes every insult and abuse with the grace and dignity of a strong and educated woman. However, in a fight with her husband and mother-in-law, she accidentally stabs him to death. At court, she calmly defends herself in perfect French, the language of educated Vietnamese during that time, and is acquitted. Afterwards, she builds a small school to support herself and finally reunites with her lover. The novel criticizes the obsolete traditions that allow and even encourage in-laws to treat daughters-in-law cruelly, exploit their labor, and turn them into breeding machines with the sole purpose of producing male heirs. It triumphs the figure of the modern girl who has an education and yet is not at all wrapped up in the romantic world. Loan is determined to overcome countless difficulties in life rather than give up. *Severance's* message is to encourage young women to fight against cruel traditions and to educate themselves in order to become independent from their families and husbands.

Although Hoang Ngoc Phach and Nhat Linh did not share the same viewpoints, their novels did not contain the "harmful" (*hau*) elements that many traditional-minded critics suggested they did. Hoang Ngoc Phach

was a conservative who held on to traditional values and was an elitist who wanted to take away materials that could possibly give people wrong ideas. Nhat Linh, on the contrary, wanted to do away with traditional mores that held Vietnamese women back and celebrated women's drive for knowledge and empowerment. Both of them identified contemporary social issues that deprived the Vietnamese from happiness, self-empowerment, and status. Their works particularly addressed the tragic situation of all too many young, urban, and educated women who were married to men for whom they did not have affection and into families that demanded them to slave away and give birth as frequently as possible. These women were not appreciated for their intellectual capabilities due to the residual beliefs of their traditional society in which women were not allowed to advance in the examination-based bureaucratic system. Because of their familiar settings and straightforward but carefully chiseled prose, such novels appealed to a large audience. Those who suffered from relationship or family problems, however, might not have picked up on the self-empowerment agenda, but rather the romances' melancholic sentiments.

Conclusion

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese women were able to enjoy better education opportunities and a wider range of reading materials than ever before. Both the French authorities and Vietnamese nationalists saw the importance of women's roles in the new era. They advocated women's rights and provided women with schools, periodicals, talks, novels, discussions, exhibitions, and fairs, enabling the female sex for the first time to actively participate in the social sphere outside the homes of their families or husbands' families. While the same description cannot be applied to the rural female population, women in big cities attended classes and lectures, traveled and explored attractions, exercised and took up hobbies, read and submitted their writings to publishers, attended and organized fairs, and voiced their concerns at conferences and social clubs.

Reformation in the educational system and the growth of the printed world produced a number of young, urban and educated women. They became greatly desirable as candidates for marriage, as the Vietnamese, like many Confucian-influenced Asian

communities, highly valued education. In these Asian countries, where wealthy merchants were still looked down upon by society unless they sent at least one of their sons to school and donated money to local schools, an education was the ultimate source of a family's pride. Hence, affluent and powerful families sought out educated girls who would improve their fame and social status. Even married men with wealth and high positions preferred taking second wives or concubines who had both beauty and intelligence. An influential novel published right after the height of the suicide craze, *Dumb Luck*, by Vu Trong Phung, an author who portrayed the contemporary society with a sense of dark humor, satirically reflects how many wealthy Vietnamese came to embrace modernity, or *tan thoi* in Vietnamese, to the extreme. Everyone in the novel wants to look modern by wearing extremely revealing clothes (women) and putting on cosmetics (men), and behave in a modern way by taking up tennis, and adopting "free love" and a "proletariat" attitude. Therefore, for many of the nouveau riche, having a modern daughter-in-law in the family was a fad and the young girl became a precious piece of property that they could show off to neighbors and friends as a testimony to their class, status, and wealth.

These young brides, however, were expected to entirely devote themselves to their in-laws. They were expected to accept the fact that their education, which helped raise the bride price paid to their parent, should remain as an adornment after marriage and not an interference with the well-established daughters-in-law's duties as "corvée" laborers and bearers of male heirs. And there was the irresolvable conflict between the woman and her new family, which had been in existence since the invention of the institution of marriage. In the early twentieth century, with the prevalence of Western ideals, this conflict was further intensified by the tension between the modern and traditional generations.

Interestingly, the methods that Ms. Thanh Van chose to destroy herself proved another link between the modern world and suicides, i.e., gasoline, iodine, and tall buildings were modern inventions. Furthermore, while it cannot be proved that popular romances gave such women the idea of self-destruction, they might have reflected the life and mentality of many urban young women who were compelled by their parents or circumstances to marry against their wishes and chose

to resolve their familial conflicts with their own deaths. Gambling, unemployment, alcoholism, prostitution, and opium addiction raged among urban dwellers, sending many of them into despair, and suicide was just another increasingly pervasive problem in this transitional period in Vietnamese history.

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End Notes

- 1 [Front Page], *Phong Hoa* 159 (3 January 1936): 1.
- 2 In this essay, Vietnamese names are written in the order of last name, middle name, and first name.
- 3 Viet Sinh, "Cac Thu Dich Trong May Nam Nay" [Recent Epidemics], *Phong Hoa* 39 (22 September 1933): 4.
- 4 P.K., "Ro Kheo Lan Than" [Silly Thoughts], *Phong Hoa* 74 (18 May 1934): 5.
- 5 Nguyen Van Ky, "Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History," in *Viet-Nam Expose - French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, ed. Gisele L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
- 6 T. Smolski, "Quelques Donnes Statistiques sur le Suicide au Vietnam" [Some Statistical Data on Suicide in Vietnam], *Le Peuple Vietnamien [Dan Viet Nam]*, no. 3 (August 1949): 55-59.
- 7 Hou Yan-Xing 侯艳兴, "20 shiji er, sanshi niandai Shanghai nuxing zisha tanxi" 20世纪二、三十年代上海女性自杀探析 [Women's Suicide in Shanghai from 1920s to 1930s], *Funu yanjiu luncong 妇女研究论丛*, no. 4 (2006): 52.
- 8 The distribution of suicides according to time, age, gender, and methods of suicide was also researched at that time though not thoroughly. For example, according to the medical study of Vu Cong Hoe completed in 1937, the city of Hanoi had a sudden rise of 11.32 cases per 100,000 inhabitants each year from 1927 to 1930, a peak of 30.75 cases in each 1933 and 1934, and a slight drop of 20 cases in each 1935 and 1936. These statistics were obtained from official records kept by municipal bureaus in the city of Hanoi, such as The Statistical Annual of Indo-China, Prosecutor's Office, and Office of Public Health, which the author, a doctoral medical student working on his dissertation at the time, admitted to be incomplete. Vu Cong Hoe, *Du Suicide dans la Société Annamite [Suicide in Annamese society]*, trans. Charles A. Messner (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1972, c1937), Table II, 5. T. Smolski presented some of the abnormalities in suicide patterns of Vietnam and European countries. While in Europe, the majority of suicide cases were people age 50 and over, in Vietnam, people from 20 to 40 years of age were most likely to commit voluntary deaths.

9 See Jerome Young, "Morals, Suicide, and Psychiatry: A View from Japan," *Bioethics* 16, no. 5 (September 2002): 412-424.

10 See The Analects VIII.3 in James Legge, *English Translation of the Four Books* (Taipei: The Council of Chinese Cultural Renaissance, 1979), 65-66. In this section, Zengzi, on his deathbed, showed his disciples how well he had preserved his body through life and that only by having taken good care of his body, was he "free from all blame."

11 Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 60.

12 The Analects II.5-II.8 in Legge, 42.

13 See The Analects VIII.7 in Legge, 66. Zengzi said, "An educated gentleman may not be without strength and resoluteness of character. His responsibility to life is a heavy one, and the way is long..."

14 Nguyen Thi Kiem, "Co Nen Tu Do Ket Hon Khong?" [Should Marriage Be a Matter of Free Choice?], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 269 (22 November 1934): 17-21.

15 Nguyen Dinh Ty, "Ban Su Hoc Con Gai Bay Gio, Nen The Nao?" [Discussing Women's Education Nowadays, What Should Be Done?], *Nam Phong* 23 (May 1919): 10-12.

16 Nguyen Hong Nguyen, "Luan Ve Dan Da Con Gai Nuoc Ta Doi Voi Su Hoc Va Su Van Chuong" [Discussion of Our Country's Women, Education, and Literature], *Nam Phong* 11 (May 1818): 319-320.

17 Doan Thi Diem is best known for her translation of Chinese poetry into the Vietnamese language (Chu Nom). Ho Xuan Huong is a celebrated female poet whose verses were strident, humorous, and exquisite at the same time.

18 See Gail P. Kelly, *Franco-Vietnamese Schools, 1918 to 1938*, Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975.

19 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 200.

20 Nguyen Hong Nguyen, "Discussion of Our Country's Women, Education, and Literature," 319.

21 Huynh Van Tong, *Bao Chi Viet Nam Tu Khoi Thuy Den 1945 [Vietnamese Periodicals From the Beginning to 1945]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publication House, 2000), 124-133; Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in The Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 84; and Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 102. *Nam Phong* was published in romanized Vietnamese and had a Chinese supplement. Its articles were mostly concerned with philosophy, history, and literature of both Western and Asian traditions.

22 Nguyen Dinh Ty, 10-12.

23 See the long discussion of Phu Nu Tan Van in Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 220-228.

24 Thieu Son, "Su Hoc voi Dan-ba" [Education and Women], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 215 (7 September 1933): 8-9.

25 *Ibid.*, 8.

26 *Ibid.*, 9.

27 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 206.

28 Duoc Nha Nam's editor-in-chief was Duong Van Giao, a southerner who graduated from Université de Paris with doctoral degrees in law and political science. The paper's content focused on lives of the working class and promoted Vietnamese independence from French rule. Because of its strong political stance, the paper was banned from circulation in the north in 1929, less than a year after its foundation, but survived underground in the south until 1937 thanks to the support of Indochinese Constitutionalist Party. Huynh Van Tong, 192-195.

- 29 The outer quarter is usually for guests, not for husbands and wives. Here, the second wife has to sleep alone in the outer quarter as a guest while the husband and first wife sleep in the inner quarter together. According to Lustéguy's observation of Tonkinese society from 1925 to 1932, the secondary wife was usually considered a servant. See Pierre Lustéguy, *The Role of Women in Tonkinese Religion and Property* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1954, c1935), 100.
- 30 P.K., "Trong Mot Tuan Le Hai Cai An Phu Nu Tu Sat: Nguoi Pham, Co Le Deu La Dan Ong" [Two Women's Suicide Cases in A Week: The Accused Are Probably Men], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 117 (21 January 1932): 5-7; "Ve Chuyen Nguoi Dan Ba Tren Lau Nhay Xuong Duong" [About the Woman Who Jumped from a Building], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 4 January 1932, 2; "Vi Sao Co Nguyen Thanh Van Vot Tu Tren Lau Dao Nguyen Xuong?" [Why Did Ms. Nguyen Thanh Van Jump from Dao Nguyen Hostel?], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 5 January 1932, 1; and "Co Nguyen Thanh Van Da Chet Roi" [Ms. Nguyen Thanh Van is Dead], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 6 January 1932, 1.
- 31 Nam Chuc, "Cau Chuyen Thi Phi: Khoc Co Thanh Van" [Popular Stories: Eulogy for Ms. Thanh Van], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 7 January 1932, 1.
- 32 She was called Mrs. My after her husband's name.
- 33 "Cung Lai Phu Nu Tu Sat! Hai Co Giao Quyen Sinh" [Women's Suicides Again! Two Female Teachers Committed Suicide], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 136 (2 June 1932): 9.
- 34 Boudarel and Nguyen, 40.
- 35 Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model - A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 181. Woodside argues that students in traditional Vietnamese society were trained to take the examinations to enter the bureaucratic ranks and only allowed to read Confucian classics. The lack of reading materials especially in provincial areas was compensated by oral circulation of folktales, history, and poems of all kinds. See Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 169-233.
- 36 For example, the Le dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries forbid villagers from cutting printing blocks, as well as engraving and printing Buddhist and Taoist books and heterodox writings and "various national chronicles," which were associated with "profligacy." Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 186.
- 37 Boudarel and Nguyen, 40-41.
- 38 Ibid., 41.
- 39 Nguyen Hong Nguyen, "Khuyen Nguoi Ta Nen Xem Bao" [Advising People to Read Newspapers], *Nam Phong* 11 (May 1918): 320-321.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 David G Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (May 1976): 371-389. Also see Nguyen Van Ky, "Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History," in *Viet-Nam Expose - French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, ed. Gisele L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 101; and Huynh Van Tong, *Bao Chi Viet Nam: Tu Khoi Thuy Den 1945 [Vietnamese Periodicals: From the Beginning to 1945]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 2000).
- 42 *Phu Nu Tan Van* 136 (2 June 1932): 9.
- 43 "Hoi Tieu Thuyet" [The Novel Association], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 20 July 1932, 1,6.
- 44 [Editorial], "Anh Huong Tieu Thuyet Trong Nu Gioi" [The Impact of Novels among Women], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 25 (30 August 1934): 1-2. These are lines from the Tale of Kieu, a story about a beautiful and talented girl named Thuy Kieu who undergoes overwhelming difficulties in life.
- 45 This point in Confucian ethics is manifested in various passages on filial piety, for instance, "A person... in his duties to his parents is ready to do his utmost..." The Analects I. 7 (James Legge, 40). Neil L. Jamieson, in *Understanding Vietnam*, claims that "A child [in traditional Vietnamese society] was supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small." Jameison, 16-17.
- 46 Nhat Linh (Nguyen Tuong Tam), *Doan Tuyet [Severance]* (Ha Noi: Van Hoc, 1997, c1935).
- 47 Dinh Tan Yen, "Cai Hai Doc Tieu Thuyet" [*The Harm in Reading Novels*], *Duoc Nha Nam*, 25 July 1929, 1.
- 48 Thanh Ha, "Viec Gi Ma Tu Van?" [Why Does One Commit Suicide?], *Phu Nu Tan Van* 75 (23 October 1930): 1, 6.
- 49 Hoang Ngoc Phach, "Van Chuong Voi Nu Gioi: Cai Hai Van Cam Doi Voi Nu Hoc Sinh" [Literature and Women: The Harmful Impact of Sensational Literature on Female Students], *Nam Phong* 41 (November 1920): 379-383. An anonymous female student of Dong Khanh girls' school replied to this article. See: "Van Chuong Voi Nu Gioi" [Literature and Women], *Nam Phong* 42 (December 1920): 506-510.
- 50 Hoang Ngoc Phach, "Literature and Women," 379.
- 51 Ibid., 382.
- 52 See Jamieson, 84-97.
- 53 Hoang Ngoc Phach (Song An), To Tam [Pure Heart] (*Sai Gon: Thanh Xuan*, 1963, c1922), 100-103.
- 54 Cao Thi Nhu-Quynh and John C. Schafer, "From Verse Narrative to Novel: The Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (November, 1988): 757.